

Negotiating Islamic Symbols in Politics: Organisational Communication and Voter Attachment in Indonesia's United Development Party

Sadikin Bintang, Zainal Arifin, Ali Akbar

Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

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Abstract

Political ideology in electoral democracies increasingly functions as a communicative resource shaped by organisational practice rather than as a fixed doctrinal system. This study examines how the United Development Party (Partai Persatuan Pembangunan, PPP) in North Sumatra constructs and deploys Islamic symbols and narratives in its political communication, and how these practices relate to fluctuating electoral outcomes between 2014 and 2024. Using a qualitative interpretive design, the study draws on in-depth interviews with seven party actors involved in campaign coordination and message production, supported by field observations, internal party documents, and official electoral data. Empirically, ideological negotiation is identified through patterns of message centralisation, reliance on individual religious figures, and the presence or absence of sustained interaction with voters beyond campaign periods. The findings show that PPP's communication generates strong symbolic recognition through Islamic imagery and moral language, yet fails to produce stable electoral attachment due to centralised message control, personalised narrative delivery, and episodic rather than continuous engagement with constituencies. Theoretically, the study reconceptualises Islamic ideology not as a symbolic style or rhetorical resource, but as an organisationally mediated communicative practice whose effectiveness depends on how meaning is institutionally produced, circulated, and maintained over time. By integrating Strategic Political Communication with Islamic communication principles, the study advances existing models by explaining why high ideological visibility does not necessarily translate into durable electoral support in local democratic contexts.

Keywords

Islamic Political Communication; Political Ideology; Campaign; Strategic Political Communication; United Development Party (PPP)

Corresponding Author

Sadikin Bintang

Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Indonesia; sadikin4004223026@uinsu.ac.id

1. INTRODUCTION

Political ideology never operates in a sterile space; rather, it is constantly negotiated with the realities of power, electoral interests, and changing voter behavior. In the practice of political communication, ideology no longer appears as a coherent doctrine, but as a symbolic resource that is continuously reinterpreted to remain relevant and communicative. This tension between values and strategy shapes the face of party political communication in an increasingly fluid era of electoral democracy (DePaula 2023; Weng and Yang 2024).

Islamic-based political parties face a more complex form of dual pressure. On the one hand,



Islamic identity demands consistency with normative values, while on the other hand, electoral competition requires strategic flexibility (Gupta, Dhungana, and Lamsal 2025; Subekti, Mutiarin, and Nurmandi 2023). This situation encourages Islamic parties not only to deliver political messages, but also to manage symbols, narratives, and communicative language capable of bridging ideology with an increasingly pragmatic electorate. Ideology, therefore, is not merely inherited, but negotiated through continuously evolving communicative practices.

The United Development Party represents this dynamic in concrete terms. As an Islamic political party with a long history in national politics, PPP carries a strong ideological identity while simultaneously facing high demands for local-level adaptation. PPP's political communication functions not only as a persuasive tool, but also as an arena in which Islamic values, electoral interests, and organizational calculations intersect and exert mutual pressure (Rohid et al. 2025; Shiddieqy, Simamora, and Madina 2024).

This condition is clearly reflected in the dynamics of PPP's vote share and seat acquisition in North Sumatra. In the 2014 General Election, PPP obtained 40,311 votes in the North Sumatra-1 Medan electoral district and successfully placed four of its cadres in the North Sumatra Provincial Parliament through a joint faction, indicating a relatively stable party position in which ideology and symbols were still effectively translated into electoral support. The 2019 election presented a paradox, as PPP's votes surged to 572,114 in the same district, yet its number of seats declined to two, signaling a failure in consolidating political communication at the level of representation. The crisis reached its sharpest point in the 2024 election, when PPP's votes plummeted to 8,173 and left the party with only one seat, indicating a weakening bargaining power of ideology, symbols, and party narratives in an increasingly competitive local political arena. North Sumatra provides a theoretically instructive case because it combines strong Islamic sociocultural bases with highly fragmented and competitive local electoral arenas, creating a setting where ideological communication is constantly tested against pragmatic political pressures.

Between 2014 and 2024, PPP in North Sumatra experienced sharp fluctuations in vote share and parliamentary representation, including periods in which rising votes coincided with declining seat acquisition under a proportional electoral system with district magnitude and factional arrangements. This misalignment between electoral support and representation creates a puzzle that cannot be explained by visibility or mobilization alone and therefore invites closer examination of how party messages, symbols, and narratives are constructed and received.

These fluctuations cannot be understood solely as a matter of electability, but rather as a reflection of deeper problems in political communication (Di Guilmi, Galanis, and Proaño 2023; Sun et al. 2024). The misalignment between vote share and seat allocation suggests shortcomings in message design, symbol management, and communication strategies implemented by party actors. Political messages may appear in the public sphere, but they do not fully succeed in building sustained meaning and attachment among voters. Accordingly, this study does not treat electoral decline as a direct outcome of communication alone, but examines political communication as one key arena in which organizational constraints, ideological framing, and voter engagement are negotiated.

This situation demonstrates that party political communication operates within a field marked by organizational limitations, internal dynamics, and contextual pressures at the local level. Party structure, inter-actor relations, campaign resources, and voter fragmentation shape the space of negotiation that determines how political messages are constructed and conveyed (Ackland et al. 2024; Subekti et al. 2023). In this context, the effectiveness of political marketing is determined not only by

formal strategies, but also by the party's ability to read the social and cultural conditions of its electorate.

From a political communication perspective, campaign messages, symbols, and narratives are never neutral. Their meanings are formed through interactions between party actors and voters, influenced by social experiences, cultural values, and evolving political expectations within society. For Islamic parties, this process becomes even more complex, as Islamic symbols and narratives carry sensitive value-laden meanings that are prone to shifts when confronted with strategic political interests.

The context of Islamic communication provides both a normative and critical framework for examining these dynamics. Political communication is not measured solely by persuasive effectiveness, but also by how values, ethics, and ideological meanings are negotiated in practice (Hamrak, Simonovits, and Szucs 2024; Theocharis and Jungherr 2021). The tension between Islamic idealism and political pragmatism becomes a crucial arena that determines whether party political communication is able to build trust or instead widens the distance between the party and its voters.

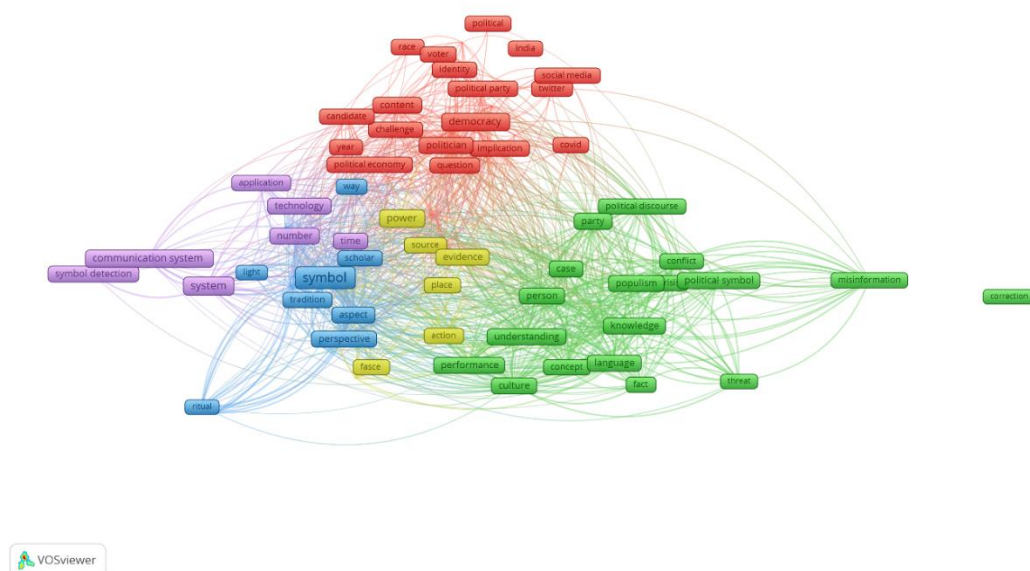


Figure 1. Network Analysis of Previous Research (Source: VosViewer, 2025)

Based on the network visualization in Figure 1, the structure of political communication that emerges shows layered and interconnected conceptual relations, with key nodes such as democracy, symbol, political party, and political discourse occupying central positions within the network. The dense interconnections among symbols, ideology, language, and political performativity indicate that political communication does not operate linearly, but rather through continuous negotiations of meaning among actors, messages, and social contexts. Clusters of symbols and rituals are strongly connected to aspects of culture, tradition, and identity, affirming that political symbols function not merely as visual markers, but as ideological media that construct political understanding and legitimacy. From an Islamic communication perspective, this network pattern shows that religious symbols and ideological narratives possess significant potential as instruments for collective meaning-making, yet their effectiveness depends heavily on how these symbols are articulated within living social and discursive relations.

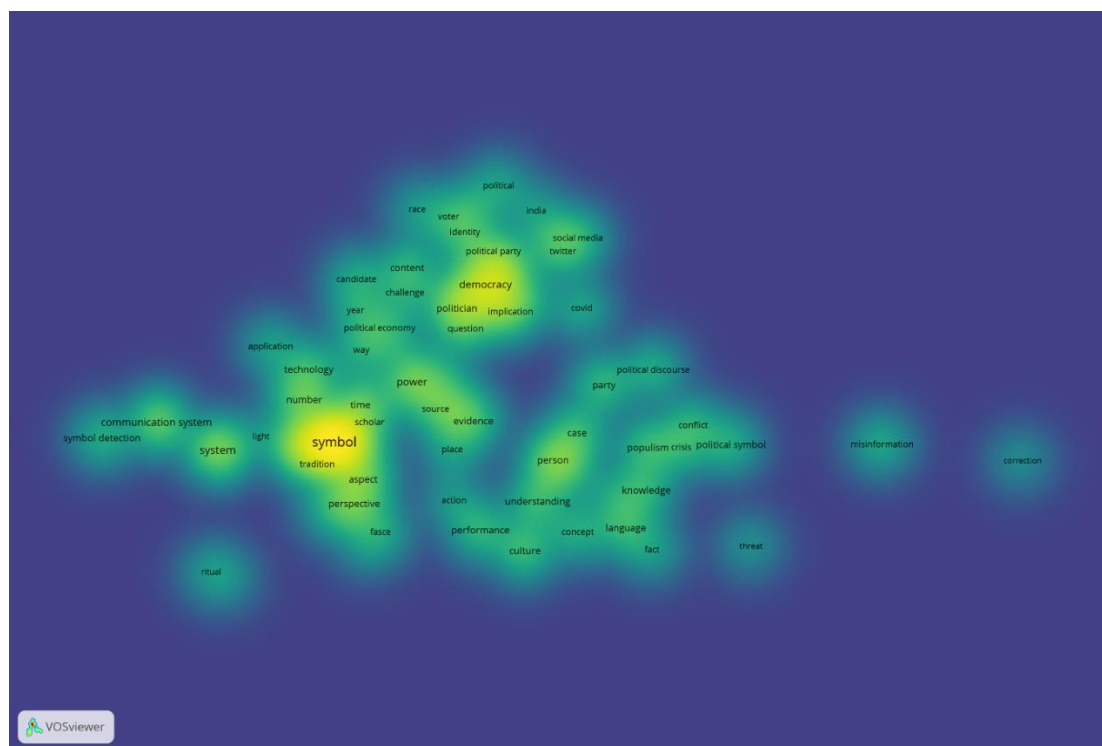


Figure 2. Density Analysis of Previous Research (Source: VosViewer, 2025)

Meanwhile, the density analysis in Figure 2 shows that although there are dense centers of meaning around the nodes of symbol and democracy, this density is unevenly distributed across the network. Several important concepts such as misinformation, correction, and digital interaction appear in areas of low density, indicating weak integration between ideological symbols and contemporary dynamics of digital-based communication. This condition reveals a significant research gap. Most previous studies have focused on the strength of symbols or the quantitative intensity of political communication, but have paid limited attention to how these imbalances in meaning density affect the failure to transform ideology into sustainable political trust. This study addresses this gap by positioning network density not merely as a technical indicator, but as a reflection of ideological communication problems, particularly regarding how Islamic values have not yet been fully integrated in a dialogical and adaptive manner within an increasingly digital and fragmented political communication ecosystem.

The studies by Bobba and Seddone (Bobba and Seddone 2022), and Casiraghi et al. (2022) both employ quantitative comparative approaches and content analysis to examine the relationship between ideology and party political communication. Bobba and Seddone map hard and soft populism in France and Italy by positioning communication as a manifestation of ideological style, while Casiraghi et al. analyze party logos and colors as representations of ideology through the concept of chromatic isomorphism. Their findings show that symbols and communication styles function as relatively stable ideological markers that can be measured across contexts. The difference from this study lies in focus and level of analysis. Those studies treat symbols and communication as representational visual and textual artifacts, whereas this study positions messages, symbols, and narratives as outcomes of negotiated meaning within local political communication practices, particularly in the context of Islamic parties facing simultaneous electoral and cultural pressures.

Meanwhile, Kariryaa et al. (Kariryaa et al. 2022) and Magin et al. (2024), employ computational approaches and digital media analysis to understand the dynamics of political communication in online

spaces. Kariryaa et al. analyze the use of flag emojis in online political communication and find that digital symbols function as reinforcers of identity and political affiliation, while Magin et al. highlight how social media platform characteristics and party attributes influence the adoption of populist communication. Both studies emphasize the importance of media and technological context in shaping political communication strategies. However, this study differs fundamentally because it does not focus solely on symbolic expression in digital spaces, but rather on political communication practices that operate in hybrid, interpersonal, and cultural forms at the local level. In addition, this study does not merely examine the effectiveness of symbols or communication styles, but also traces how Islamic ideology is negotiated, reduced, or maintained through interactions between parties and voters.

Based on this gap, the study employs Strategic Political Communication and Islamic communication as its main analytical frameworks. Strategic Political Communication is chosen because it allows political communication to be understood as a planned process involving messages, actors, contexts, and electoral goals simultaneously, making it relevant for explaining why PPP's communication strategies do not always correspond with electoral outcomes. Islamic communication, meanwhile, provides a normative and critical dimension that has been largely absent in previous studies, by positioning values such as *tabligh*, *amanah*, *hikmah*, and *shura* as ethical standards in political communication practices. Existing studies of Islamic party communication have largely treated ideology as a symbolic or stylistic attribute, leaving underexplored how Islamic meanings are actively negotiated, transformed, and contested within everyday local party practices in Indonesia.

This article is positioned primarily within political communication theory, rather than as an explanation of voter behaviour or a normative evaluation of Islamic politics. The central analytical problem addressed here concerns how Islamic ideology operates as an organisationally mediated communicative practice in local party politics, rather than as a stable doctrinal position or a symbolic campaign style. Electoral fluctuations and vote-seat misalignments are therefore treated as empirical contexts through which communication practices become visible, not as outcomes to be causally explained. Existing scholarship on Islamic parties largely assumes that ideology functions either as a fixed normative framework or as a flexible rhetorical resource deployed during campaigns; this study challenges that assumption by demonstrating that ideological meaning is shaped, constrained, and sometimes diluted through organisational routines, message control, and patterns of interaction between party actors and constituents. On this basis, the analysis does not seek to explain individual voting decisions, but to theorise how ideological communication is produced, circulated, and stabilised within everyday local political practice.

The urgency of this study lies in its effort to unpack how ideology operates not as a slogan, but as a communicative process negotiated within local political practice. Understanding the construction of messages, symbols, and narratives of PPP in North Sumatra is crucial for explaining why political strategies do not always align with electoral outcomes. This study is expected to provide critical insights into Islamic party political communication as a strategic practice laden with meaning, conflict, and consequences within Indonesia's electoral democracy.

2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative design with an interpretative approach to understand political communication practices as processes that are rich in meaning and context. This study analyses party-centred meaning production within PPP's organisational communication practices, rather than communicative negotiation with voters, given that the empirical focus rests on internal party actors

involved in message construction and coordination. This approach is chosen because the focus of the study is not on quantitatively measuring electability, but on examining how political messages, symbols, and narratives are constructed and negotiated within party communication practices. The data sources consist of primary and secondary data (Miles, Huberman, and Saldana 2020). Primary data were obtained through direct interaction with political actors involved in the party's communication processes and strategic activities, while the secondary data in the form of party documents, media archives, and electoral vote and seat results from 2014–2024 were used to trace the consistency between political communication practices and electoral outcomes.

This study was conducted in North Sumatra Province, with the field sites delimited to Medan City, Deli Serdang Regency, and Serdang Bedagai Regency, areas characterised by a dominant Muslim population and significant PPP electoral presence. Fieldwork was carried out from August 2024 to August 2025. The cross-site design was structured across three field sites, with Site 1 located in Medan City, Site 2 in Deli Serdang Regency, and Site 3 in Serdang Bedagai Regency, allowing systematic comparison of PPP political communication practices across different local sociopolitical contexts. The three research sites were selected to reflect distinct organisational and sociopolitical conditions—Medan as an urban and elite-centred party environment, Deli Serdang as a semi-urban mobilisation base, and Serdang Bedagai as a peripheral and figure-dependent context—thereby enabling analytically meaningful comparison beyond administrative boundaries.

The study involved seven informants selected purposively based on their direct involvement in the political communication practices of the United Development Party in North Sumatra (Campbell et al. 2020). Seven informants were purposively selected based on their direct involvement in PPP political communication, including provincial level strategists, district and city campaign coordinators, local branch leaders responsible for grassroots mobilisation, and one religious. Accordingly, informants were not positioned as statistical representatives, but as sources of meaning who understand political communication practices from within the party structure.

Data collection techniques included in-depth interviews, observation of political communication activities, and documentation of campaign materials and internal party documents. Interviews were conducted to explore the perspectives, experiences, and reflections of party actors regarding the communication strategies implemented, while observation enabled the researcher to understand communication practices in real contexts. Documentation served to complement and verify field findings through relevant written and visual evidence, ensuring that the data obtained were comprehensive and contextual.

Data analysis followed the four stages of the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña model. First, data collection consisted of in depth interview transcripts with seven PPP actors, field observation notes from campaign events, party meetings, and religious outreach activities, as well as party documents, media reports, and official electoral vote and seat data from 2014–2024. Second, data condensation involved selecting, coding, and reducing these materials into analytically relevant units such as types of Islamic symbols, forms of moral appeals, patterns of interaction with voters, and organisational control over messages. Third, data display was carried out through tabulation and cross site matrices that organised messages, symbols, narratives, and interaction patterns across Medan, Deli Serdang, and Serdang Bedagai to allow systematic comparison. Fourth, conclusion drawing and verification involved interpreting these patterned displays to identify recurring mechanisms of political communication and continuously checking them against the raw data to ensure consistency and analytical validity (Miles, M.& , Huberman 2016). The principles of *tabligh*, *amanah*, and *shura* are employed as analytical lenses

that guided thematic coding and interpretation, rather than as normative benchmarks for evaluating the ethical correctness of party practices.

Data trustworthiness was ensured through source triangulation by comparing information obtained from different informants and documents, thereby enhancing the credibility of the research findings. Trustworthiness was ensured through source triangulation by comparing interview data, observations, and documents, complemented by researcher reflexivity and systematic documentation of the analytical process to reduce bias and enhance credibility.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. *Construction and Negotiation of Campaign Messages, Symbols, and Narratives*

In the arena of local political campaigns, messages, symbols, and narratives do not appear as finalized communication products, but rather as the result of ongoing construction and negotiation between party actors and voters (Alhaimer 2025; Syukri et al. 2023). For the United Development Party, this process becomes increasingly complex because political messages not only carry electoral interests, but also embody Islamic values that demand clarity of meaning and ethical consistency. In North Sumatra, the construction of PPP's communication illustrates how Islamic ideology is translated into campaign symbols and narratives that must confront the diverse, rational, and increasingly critical social realities of voters.

Table 1. Construction and Negotiation of PPP Campaign Messages, Symbols, and Narratives (Cross-Site)

Analysis Aspect	Site 1	Site 2	Site 3	Cross-Site Pattern
Political Messages	Normative Islamic messages dominate, with minimal concrete issues	Religious messages linked to social activities	Moral messages not connected to local needs	Ideological messages poorly converted into practical solutions
Islamic Symbols	Strong use of Kaaba symbols and Islamic identity	Religious symbols practiced through community activities	Religious symbols are ceremonial	Symbols are emotionally effective but substantively weak
Campaign Narratives	Narratives of moderate Islam and Muslim unity	Narratives of social closeness and service	Normative and defensive narratives	Narratives not grounded in socio-economic realities
Communication Language	Formal and institutional political language	Interpersonal and familial language	Rigid and elitist campaign language	Communication language insufficiently adaptive across segments
Interaction Patterns	Interaction limited to	Intensive interaction in	One-way and episodic	Minimal sustained

	campaign moments	socio-religious spaces	interaction	dialogue with voters
Role of Figures	Party figures lack broad recognition	Local religious figures are dominant	Figures lack strong social roots	Message personalization weakens institutional identity
Voter Response	Symbol recognition without strong attachment	Emotional loyalty formed in traditional bases	Apathy and distance from the party	Symbolic resonance does not translate into broad support

Source: Researcher Interviews and Observations (2025)

The construction of PPP's political messages across the three sites shows that religious and moral themes dominate campaign talk but are weakly connected to concrete community concerns. Party actors repeatedly described how campaign messages were framed around general Islamic identity rather than practical problem solving, as one campaign coordinator in Medan stated: "What we mostly deliver is religious language and party identity, but when people ask about jobs, prices, or social assistance, we often do not have clear answers ready." Another party official in Deli Serdang similarly acknowledged that "our messages sound good morally, but they are not yet translated into programs that people can feel in their daily lives." These statements illustrate how political communication remains largely symbolic rather than operational for voters.

In terms of Islamic symbols, PPP's visual identity such as the Kaaba logo, green colour, and religious slogans continues to provide immediate recognition among Muslim voters. A local branch leader in Serdang Bedagai explained: "People immediately know PPP from the Kaaba and the green flags; they see it and they know this is the Islamic party." However, several informants also admitted that this symbolic strength does not automatically produce deeper attachment. One campaign volunteer noted: "They recognize the symbol, but that does not mean they feel connected to the party or trust its programs." This indicates that symbols generate visibility without necessarily producing substantive political commitment.

PPP's campaign narratives aim to present the party as the home of moderate Islam and Muslim unity, yet this framing is unevenly grounded across sites. In Medan, some cadres described efforts to link religious identity with social activities, as one organiser put it: "We combine Islamic messages with charity events and community services so people can see our presence." In contrast, in Deli Serdang and Serdang Bedagai, narratives were often described as more abstract, with a party official admitting that "many of our speeches remain normative and ceremonial, not tied to what villagers are actually facing." These differences reveal how narrative coherence varies depending on local organisational capacity.

Communication style also differed markedly across the three sites. Formal, institutional language dominated in Medan, where party elites tended to speak in scripted and official tones, which, according to one observer, made PPP "sound distant from ordinary people." In Deli Serdang, more interpersonal styles were used, with a cadre explaining that "we talk to people like family, using everyday language, especially in religious gatherings." In Serdang Bedagai, however, communication was often described as rigid and elitist, with one campaigner noting that "some candidates speak as if they are lecturing, not listening." These contrasts show that PPP lacks a consistently adaptive communication style across local

contexts.

Interaction patterns across sites further reinforce this limitation. Party activities intensify around election periods and religious events, but sustained dialogue with voters is rare. A party activist in Medan acknowledged that “after the campaign ends, we rarely come back to the same communities unless there is another election.” Similarly, a cadre in Serdang Bedagai observed that “interaction is mostly one way, we talk, they listen, but there is little space for them to respond.” Such episodic engagement restricts the development of ongoing meaning negotiation between the party and its constituencies.

The role of local figures, especially religious leaders, is central to the effectiveness of PPP’s messages. In many cases, voters respond more to individual personalities than to the party itself. One party official stated openly: “If the ustadz supports us, people follow him, not necessarily the party.” Another informant added: “When that figure is not active, our influence drops.” This dependence on personal authority strengthens communication in the short term but weakens the institutional continuity of the party’s messaging.

Voter responses, as perceived by party actors, suggest that recognition of PPP’s Islamic identity does not automatically translate into electoral loyalty. A campaign coordinator in Deli Serdang reflected: “Many people still say PPP is an Islamic party, but when election day comes, they choose someone else who they think can actually help them.” Another cadre in Medan remarked that “respect for the party does not always become a vote.” These perceptions indicate a persistent gap between how PPP constructs its messages and how those messages are received and acted upon by voters.

3.2. Contextual Constraints and Organizational Dynamics in the Effectiveness of Political Marketing

The effectiveness of political marketing communication never rests solely on the quality of messages, but is strongly shaped by the surrounding social context and organizational dynamics. In local political practice, ideologically strong messages can lose their persuasive power when confronted with structural constraints, limited organizational capacity, and changing voter characteristics (Herzberg, Schneider, and Banse 2023). In the context of the United Development Party in North Sumatra, these constraints form a communicative field that determines how political strategies are implemented, negotiated, and ultimately translated into electoral support.

Table 2. Contextual Constraints and Organizational Dynamics of PPP Political Marketing (Cross-Site)

No	Analytical Aspect	Key Local-Level Findings	Cross-Site Pattern
1	Organizational Structure and Governance	Communication decision-making is top-down and centralized	Centralization limits local message adaptation
2	Capacity of Political Communication Human Resources	Cadres are ideologically loyal but lack strategic communication competence	Professionalization of communication remains underdeveloped
3	Consistency and Continuity of Communication	Communication intensifies before elections and weakens outside electoral periods	Social-political relations are not sustained
4	Utilization of Digital Media	Digital media are used sporadically and not in an integrated manner	Digital transformation is not yet systemic

5	Role of Figures and Social Relations	Communication effectiveness depends on local figures and religious leaders	Personalization weakens party institutions
6	Segmentation and Changing Voter Characteristics	Focus remains on traditional bases, while young and urban voters are neglected	Segmentation is not strategically managed
7	Conversion of Strategy into Electoral Support	Communication activities are not proportional to vote outcomes	A gap exists between strategy and electoral outcomes

Source: Researcher Interviews and Observations (2025)

The first constraint emerging from the organisational structure of PPP is the centralisation of communication authority at the elite level. Across Medan, Deli Serdang, and Serdang Bedagai, informants consistently described how key campaign messages, slogans, and narrative directions were determined by provincial or senior party leaders, while local administrators were primarily tasked with implementing decisions rather than shaping them. A district campaign coordinator explained that “we receive the main narrative from above and our job is to distribute it in the field,” while a local branch leader noted that “there is little room to change the message even if the situation in the community is different.” This pattern helps preserve ideological uniformity but constrains the ability of local cadres to adapt communication to diverse social conditions.

These structural dynamics are closely linked to limitations in human resource capacity for political communication. Although cadres in all three sites expressed strong ideological loyalty, several informants acknowledged that they lacked training in strategic communication, audience analysis, and message evaluation. Communication work was commonly described as relying on “experience,” “habit,” or “intuition,” rather than on systematic voter research or data driven planning, a condition that echoes broader challenges of party cadre professionalisation identified in previous studies (Hendrika and Tajib 2024; Joko Purnomo, Purwana, and Anwar 2023; Lee and Zhang 2024). As a result, campaign activities were often organised reactively rather than within a long term strategic framework.

The organisational effects of this limited capacity are visible in the inconsistency and short term orientation of communication practices. In all three sites, party activities intensified sharply during election periods and declined once campaigns ended. A local organiser in Serdang Bedagai remarked that “after the campaign is over, we do not return to the same communities with regular activities,” while a cadre in Medan stated that “most interactions happen only when we need votes.” This seasonal rhythm restricts the development of sustained socio political relationships between the party and voters.

Digital media use further illustrates this pattern of discontinuity. Although party actors maintained social media accounts, these platforms were largely used to upload photos of activities or formal statements rather than to sustain interaction with audiences. One campaign team member in Deli Serdang explained that “we usually post when there is an event, but we rarely reply to comments or start conversations.” This sporadic and documentary use of digital platforms limits their function as spaces for engagement, particularly among younger voters for whom digital media represent a primary arena of political communication (Latif, Afandi, and Darmawan 2020; Sazan, Al-Smadi, and Rahman 2024).

In response to weak organisational communication systems, PPP increasingly relies on personal networks and influential figures. Across sites, religious leaders and locally respected personalities were described as the main conduits for political messages. A party official in Medan observed that “people

listen more to the ustadz than to the party logo,” while another informant noted that “when a respected figure supports us, our message spreads much faster.” While this strategy can generate emotional proximity in specific communities, it also makes communication fragile, as its effectiveness depends on individual actors rather than on institutional routines (Dalal et al. 2023; Widyaputri and Sary 2022).

Changing voter characteristics further complicate these organisational dynamics. Informants widely acknowledged that PPP continues to prioritise long standing religious and rural bases, while struggling to engage young voters, women, and urban middle class groups. A campaign coordinator in Medan admitted that “our approach still targets traditional supporters, even though many new voters have different concerns.” These difficulties resonate with broader patterns of social change and shifting voter preferences documented in previous research (Avelino 2021; Lei, Suntikul, and Chen 2023).

Taken together, these organisational and contextual constraints shape how communication efforts translate into electoral outcomes. Party actors described intense campaign activity in terms of meetings, religious gatherings, and outreach events, yet they also noted that these efforts did not always result in corresponding increases in votes. One informant reflected that “we are very active, but activity alone does not guarantee that people will choose us.” This perceived gap highlights the limits of visibility when it is not supported by sustained engagement and targeted communication.

These findings show that the effectiveness of PPP’s political marketing in North Sumatra is conditioned by the interaction of centralised governance, uneven communication capacity, episodic engagement, and shifting voter environments, patterns that are consistent with observations in the political communication literature (Bach, Schmitt, and McGregor 2025; Schuldt 2021; Syahdani et al. 2025). Rather than being abstract deficiencies, these constraints are experienced by party actors in their everyday efforts to plan, deliver, and sustain political messages across diverse local contexts.

Discussion

These findings indicate that ideological negotiation within PPP’s political communication does not operate as an open dialogical process, but as a constrained organisational mechanism shaped by three interrelated dynamics. Centralised message control limits the translation of Islamic ideology into locally meaningful narratives, resulting in messages that are symbolically recognisable but contextually thin. This condition is reinforced by the personalisation of communication through individual religious figures, which temporarily amplifies moral resonance while simultaneously displacing institutional continuity and weakening the party’s capacity to sustain meaning beyond specific actors. The absence of continuous interaction outside electoral cycles further interrupts the circulation and stabilisation of ideological meaning, causing Islamic symbols to function primarily as episodic markers of identity rather than as communicative practices embedded in everyday political relationships. Taken together, these mechanisms explain how ideological visibility can coexist with declining political attachment, demonstrating that the problem lies not in symbolic mobilisation per se, but in how ideology is organisationally mediated, routinised, and disconnected from sustained communicative engagement.

In the global context, the dynamics identified in this study resemble patterns of transformation in the political communication of ideological parties across various electoral democracies. Ideology no longer functions as a single mobilizing force, but instead becomes part of a communication strategy that must be flexibly packaged in order to remain relevant (McGregor et al. 2025). However, this study emphasizes that flexibility without consistency of meaning can ultimately weaken ideological power itself. When Islamic symbols and narratives are used repetitively without substantive renewal, political messages lose their transformative capacity and tend to remain at the level of mere identity recognition.

The North Sumatra case shows that Islamic ideology functions not merely as a stable symbolic resource, but as a locally contingent and organisationally constrained practice whose meaning shifts across Medan, Deli Serdang, and Serdang Bedagai. In PPP North Sumatra, the dominance of elite controlled messaging, reliance on religious figures, and episodic engagement with voters modifies existing theories by demonstrating how ideological communication is filtered through local organisational routines rather than delivered as a coherent party wide strategy.

Another key finding concerns the gap between communication intensity and electoral outcomes. PPP is not entirely absent from the public sphere, whether through socio-religious activities or formal campaign efforts, yet this presence has not been successfully converted into stable and broad political support (Cervi, Tejedor, and Blesa 2023). In the global landscape of political communication, this condition reflects a shift from ideology-based loyalty toward politics grounded in experience, emotional proximity, and long-term trust. Voters evaluate not only what parties say, but also how consistently those values are embodied in actions and social relationships.

When read together, Strategic Political Communication and Islamic communication principles illuminate the same organisational mechanism from complementary angles. Strategic Political Communication explains how PPP's communication becomes fragmented through centralised control, figure dependency, and episodic engagement that prevent the alignment of messages, actors, and contexts into a sustainable strategy (Sazali et al. 2023). Islamic communication principles, in turn, clarify why these strategic failures matter at the level of meaning production, as the absence of *tabligh*, *amanah*, and *shura* reflects not moral deficiency but the breakdown of clarity, consistency, and dialogical circulation required to stabilise ideological meaning. In this sense, ethical principles do not function as external normative standards, but as analytical lenses that reveal how organisationally constrained communication undermines both strategic coherence and the capacity of Islamic ideology to operate as a durable communicative practice.

Compared with the study by Bobba and Seddone (Bobba and Seddone 2022), the fundamental difference of this research lies in its conceptualization of ideology. While Bobba and Seddone treat ideology as a communicative style that can be categorized as hard or soft, this study shows that in the context of local Islamic parties, ideology functions instead as a fluid and often inconsistent arena of negotiation. Ideology does not merely appear as a communication style, but as a site of tension between Islamic normative values and pragmatic electoral demands.

This study also complements the findings of Casiraghi et al. (Brandenberger et al. 2022), who emphasize the stability of party visual symbols as representations of ideology. In contrast to this assumption of stability, the present study demonstrates that while PPP's Islamic symbols are relatively consistent at the visual level, their meanings are not necessarily stable in voters' perceptions. The same symbols can be interpreted differently depending on social context, the figures conveying the messages, and the continuity of party interaction with society. Symbols, therefore, are not static entities, but highly contextual arenas of interpretation.

Meanwhile, in comparison with Kariryaa et al. (Kariryaa et al. 2022), this study broadens the understanding of political symbols by showing that their strength is not determined solely by intensity or frequency of appearance, but by the depth of the social relationships that surround them. Whereas Kariryaa et al. highlight the effectiveness of digital symbols in reinforcing online political identity, this study shows that at the local level, Islamic symbols are more effective when embedded in interpersonal relationships and social practices, rather than functioning merely as visual representations or campaign narratives.

Magin et al. (Bene et al. 2024), emphasize the role of platforms and party characteristics in shaping populist communication, while this study demonstrates that in the context of PPP, the core problem lies not primarily in platform choice, but in the absence of integrated communication strategies across channels and contexts. Digital media do not fail because of technological limitations, but because they are not accompanied by a shift toward dialogical, participatory, and voter-oriented communication mindsets that reflect diverse audience needs. The principles of *tabligh*, *amanah*, and *shura* are used analytically to examine clarity of messaging, consistency between claims and practices, and the degree of two way engagement observable in PPP's communication, rather than to normatively judge the party.

The main novelty of this study lies in its understanding of Islamic party political communication as a process of ideological negotiation that is not only strategic, but also ethical. Rather than merely showing that PPP's communication strategy has been ineffective, this study reveals that such failure is rooted in unresolved tensions between political pragmatism and Islamic communication ethics. By integrating Strategic Political Communication and Islamic communication frameworks, this study offers a new perspective: that the success of Islamic party political communication at the local level is determined not only by strategic adaptability, but by the extent to which Islamic values are communicated meaningfully, dialogically, and in ways oriented toward public benefit within everyday political practice. What distinguishes the North Sumatra case is not the presence of symbolic or elite-centred Islamic party communication, which has been widely noted in existing studies, but the empirical demonstration of how Islamic ideology is systematically weakened through local organisational mediation and figure-dependent communication routines, rather than through ideological rejection by voters themselves.

4. CONCLUSION

This study advances political communication theory by challenging the dominant assumption that ideology functions primarily as a stable symbolic resource or a flexible campaign style. The findings demonstrate that, in the context of Islamic party politics, ideology operates as an organisationally mediated communicative process whose effectiveness depends on how meaning is produced, routinised, and sustained within party structures. Rather than being weakened by voter rejection or declining religious relevance, Islamic ideology in the North Sumatra case is shown to be constrained by centralised message control, personalised authority, and episodic engagement, which interrupt the circulation and stabilisation of meaning over time. This reconceptualisation shifts analytical attention away from ideological content alone toward the organisational conditions under which ideological communication becomes durable or fragile.

From this perspective, the gap between symbolic visibility and political attachment reflects a structural problem in meaning production rather than a failure of ideological appeal. Integrating Strategic Political Communication with Islamic communication principles enables a theoretical synthesis in which strategic fragmentation explains how communication fails, while ethical lenses clarify why such failures undermine ideological coherence without reducing them to moral shortcomings. Practical implications for Islamic parties follow from this analysis, particularly regarding decentralisation, professionalisation, and sustained engagement, yet these are secondary to the article's broader contribution to rethinking ideology as a communicative practice embedded in organisational routines. Future research can extend this framework by examining how different organisational configurations and audience positions reshape ideological communication across comparative political settings.

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