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Religious Framing and Social Identity in Religion-Based Political Communication at Local Election

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Abstract	This study examines how religion-based political communication is constructed, disseminated, and interpreted in the Regional Head Election (Pilkada) of North Padang Lawas Regency, a region characterized by strong religious authority and dense religious networks. Moving beyond descriptive accounts, this research offers an analytical contribution by demonstrating how religious symbols, narratives, and actors operate simultaneously as framing devices, sources of social identity, and instruments of political legitimacy within local electoral contestation. Employing a qualitative political communication approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with key religious institutions—Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI), Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Muhammadiyah, and Al Washliyah—supported by document analysis and campaign material review. The findings reveal three main patterns: (1) religious narratives are strategically framed to construct candidates' moral legitimacy; (2) religious leaders and networks function as opinion leaders who translate political messages into normative religious values; and (3) hybrid communication patterns combining face-to-face religious forums and digital media amplify emotional resonance while narrowing spaces for critical political deliberation. The integration of framing theory and social identity theory demonstrates that religion-based communication not only mobilizes voter participation but also shapes collective political preferences grounded in socio-religious identity rather than programmatic evaluation. North Padang Lawas serves as a critical case illustrating how local religious authority intensifies both the effectiveness and ethical risks of religion-based political communication. This study contributes to political communication scholarship by highlighting the dual role of religion as a mobilizing resource and a potential source of social polarization, offering implications for ethical campaign practices and the preservation of social cohesion in local democracies.
Keywords	political communication; religion; local election; social cohesion

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1. INTRODUCTION

Religion has long served as a powerful symbolic resource in political communication, particularly in democratic societies where identity, morality, and collective belonging play central roles in electoral mobilization. In many contemporary electoral contexts, religious symbols, narratives, and authorities are increasingly integrated into political campaigns to frame candidates as morally legitimate and

culturally authentic representatives of the electorate. While religion-based political communication can enhance political participation by resonating with voters' normative values, scholars have also warned that its instrumentalization may intensify identity politics, narrow deliberative space, and reinforce social polarization. This dual character positions religion not merely as a cultural backdrop to political competition, but as an active communicative force that shapes how political messages are produced, interpreted, and contested in the public sphere (Electoral, 2019).

Existing scholarship on religion and political communication has largely focused on three interconnected themes: the use of religious symbolism as a political marketing strategy, the role of religious leaders as opinion leaders in electoral mobilization, and the relationship between identity-based campaigning and social polarization. Studies have demonstrated that religious narratives often function as framing devices that link political actors to moral authority and collective identity, thereby strengthening voter loyalty (Wibisono, 2018). Other research emphasizes the mobilizing capacity of religious leaders and networks, particularly in societies with strong religious traditions, where political messages conveyed through religious forums tend to carry heightened legitimacy. However, much of this literature remains either normatively oriented or focused on national-level contests, leaving limited empirical insight into how these dynamics operate at the local level and through what specific communicative mechanisms religion simultaneously mobilizes participation and constrains critical political deliberation.

To address this gap, this study integrates framing theory and social identity theory within a political communication perspective. Framing theory is employed to analyze how religious symbols and narratives are selectively constructed and emphasized to define political reality, legitimize candidates, and prioritize certain moral interpretations over others. Social identity theory complements this approach by explaining why such frames resonate strongly with voters: religious identity functions as a salient social category through which individuals interpret political messages and align their preferences with perceived in-group representatives. Rather than treating these theories as separate lenses, this study combines them analytically to examine how framed religious messages activate socio-religious identities, transform political communication into moral discourse, and shape collective voting behavior beyond programmatic evaluation (Religion & Sampang, nd).

North Padang Lawas Regency constitutes a theoretically significant case for examining religion-based political communication due to its dense religious networks, strong authority of religious leaders, and socio-cultural context in which religion plays a central role in everyday social life. This case is not selected merely for convenience, but as a critical local setting where the influence of religious framing on political communication is likely to be particularly pronounced. In such a context, religious legitimacy becomes a key communicative resource for political actors, while the potential consequences, both mobilizing and polarizing, are more visible. Studying North Padang Lawas, therefore, allows this research to illuminate how religion-based political communication operates in a setting where its effects are intensified, offering insights analytically relevant to understanding similar local democracies across Indonesia and other religiously oriented societies.

North Padang Lawas Regency (Kabupaten Padang Lawas Utara), located in North Sumatra Province, is characterized by a socio-political environment in which religion and community networks strongly shape public life. The regency has a population of approximately 260,000 residents, distributed across predominantly rural districts, with Islam as the majority religion and the central basis of social organization. Religious institutions such as mosques, majelis taklim, and Islamic organizations play an important role not only in spiritual life but also in community decision-making and social leadership.

Historically, local political dynamics in the region have been closely intertwined with religious authority and kinship networks, where community leaders, religious scholars (ulama), and organizational figures often serve as influential intermediaries between political elites and voters. Electoral competition in several regional elections has demonstrated that candidates frequently seek symbolic endorsement or proximity to religious figures to strengthen moral legitimacy and social trust. These demographic and socio-political characteristics distinguish North Padang Lawas from more urbanized regions and make it a particularly relevant context for examining how religion-based political communication operates within local democratic processes.

This study contributes to understanding the connection between religion, communication, politics, and voter behavior in the context area; in a practical sense, findings can yield actionable recommendations for organizers, religious figures, and political actors. For design practice, ethical and non-fraudulent campaigns damage social harmony. In addition, the results of the study are relevant for development policy communication to the public at the local level (Wibisono, 2018).

2. METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive design to examine religion-based political communication as a meaning-making process rather than a measurable behavioral variable. Electoral influence in religious societies rarely operates through explicit persuasion; instead, it is embedded in symbolic authority, moral narratives, and shared identity boundaries. A qualitative approach is therefore necessary to capture how political messages are transformed into moral guidance and subsequently interpreted as a socially legitimate political orientation.

This study employs a qualitative research design within a political communication framework to examine the construction, circulation, and interpretation of religion-based political communication in the Regional Head Election of North Padang Lawas Regency. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for this study because it seeks to uncover meaning-making processes, symbolic framing, and identity-based interpretations that cannot be adequately captured by quantitative indicators or survey-based measures. Religion-based political communication operates through narratives, symbols, moral authority, and social relationships; therefore, understanding how messages are framed and how they resonate with socio-religious identities requires in-depth, context-sensitive analysis rather than numerical generalization. Informants were not selected to represent statistical variation but rather to reflect communicative positions within the local political communication structure. Religious leaders, campaign actors, voters, and electoral stakeholders occupy different roles in the circulation, translation, and reception of political messages.

The objective of sampling was therefore analytical saturation rather than demographic representation, ensuring that recurring interpretive patterns could be identified across communicative levels. The study applies purposive sampling to capture diverse actors involved in the local political communication ecosystem. Informants were selected based on three criteria: (1) their institutional or functional role in political communication during the regional election; (2) their capacity to shape, transmit, or interpret religion-based political messages; and (3) their active involvement in the 2024 regional election process in North Padang Lawas. To reduce elite and institutional bias, the informant pool was deliberately diversified and included: religious leaders and organizational representatives from MUI, NU, Muhammadiyah, and AlWashliyah; members of local campaign teams and political party cadres; community leaders and voters from different socio-religious backgrounds; and election stakeholders, including local election officials and media practitioners.

Data collection continued until analytical saturation was achieved, indicated by the recurrence of themes and the absence of substantively new information across interviews. In total, this study involved 18 informants representing different communicative positions within the local political communication environment. The informants consisted of religious leaders from major Islamic organizations (MUI, NU, Muhammadiyah, and Al Washliyah), members of local campaign teams and political party cadres, community leaders, ordinary voters, and local election stakeholders, including election officials and media practitioners. The diversity of informants allowed the research to capture multiple perspectives on the construction and dissemination of religion-based political messages during the regional election. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide designed to explore key themes, including the use of religious symbols and narratives, communication strategies across offline and online platforms, perceptions of religious authority in political messaging, and perceived impacts on voter behavior and social relations. Non-participant observation was conducted at religious gatherings, campaign events, and community forums where political messages intersected with religious discourse, enabling the researcher to examine communicative practices in their natural settings. Document analysis included campaign materials, public statements, social media content, and official election documents that contained religious references or narratives relevant to the study.

Although framing theory and social identity theory originate from different epistemological traditions, their analytical integration in this study is intentional and methodologically justified. Framing theory is rooted in a constructivist perspective that views political meaning as socially constructed through communicative processes, whereas social identity theory emerges from social-psychological traditions that explain how individuals interpret messages through group-based cognitive identification. Rather than treating these theoretical perspectives as contradictory, this study positions them as complementary analytical lenses. Framing theory examines how political actors construct religious narratives and symbolic meanings in communication, while social identity theory explains how these framed messages resonate with voters through mechanisms of in-group identification and normative alignment. By combining these perspectives, the study bridges the production of political meaning at the communication level with its interpretation at the socio-psychological level.

Fieldwork was conducted over three months, from July to September 2024, during the active phase of the regional election campaign. Observational activities were conducted periodically at religious gatherings, mosque-based forums, community meetings, and campaign-related public events where religious discourse intersected with political messaging. Observations were conducted on a scheduled and opportunistic basis, depending on the occurrence of relevant social and political activities within the community. This observational schedule allowed the researcher to capture communicative interactions in both formal campaign settings and everyday religious forums where political meanings were informally negotiated.

Data analysis followed an iterative qualitative process involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Interview transcripts, observational notes, and documents were coded thematically using an analytical framework derived from political communication theory, framing theory, and social identity theory. Framing analysis focused on identifying dominant frames, symbolic references, and moral narratives used in political communication. Social identity analysis examined how these frames were activated in-group and out-group boundaries and shaped collective political orientations. Political communication analysis connected these findings to communication channels,

actors, and power relations within the local electoral context. The integration of these theoretical perspectives guided the development of analytical categories and ensured conceptual coherence throughout the analysis. Data analysis was conducted through a theory-guided interpretive procedure. First, interview transcripts and field notes were coded to identify recurring communicative patterns. Second, these patterns were interpreted using framing theory to examine how religious symbols structured political meaning. Third, social identity theory was applied to analyze how framed messages activated in-group alignment and normative conformity. Rather than treating theory as a background reference, theoretical concepts functioned as analytical tools that shaped category construction and the interpretation of empirical material.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, this study employed source triangulation by comparing data across different types of informants, communication channels, and documentary sources. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process to minimize researcher bias, particularly given the sensitivity of religion and politics. Ethical considerations included informed consent, anonymity of informants, and careful handling of politically sensitive information to protect participants and maintain academic integrity. This study does not aim to measure electoral outcomes or determine voting causality. The findings are interpretive and context-bound, explaining communicative mechanisms rather than predicting electoral results. Consequently, the contribution of this research lies in analytical explanation rather than generalizable statistical inference.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Forms and Patterns of Communication, Political Religion Based in North Padang Lawas Regional Election

The findings should not be understood merely as evidence of religious influence in elections, but as an indication of how political communication shifts from informational discourse to moral discourse. When political messages are framed in religious language, their persuasive force no longer depends on the strength of the argument but on moral legitimacy. Consequently, political preference becomes socially regulated rather than individually evaluated. The use of religious symbols and narratives in the North Padang Lawas regional election does not merely reflect cultural religiosity but constitutes a deliberate framing strategy through which political actors seek to construct moral legitimacy and symbolic proximity with voters. Drawing on framing theory, religious references in campaign communication function to define candidates not primarily through policy competence or administrative capacity, but through moral categories such as piety, trustworthiness, and communal belonging. In this context, religion serves as a dominant interpretive frame that shapes how political messages are produced and evaluated in the public sphere. (Muhyi & Sipa, 2021)

Empirical observations and interview data indicate that religious framing is embedded in multiple forms of campaign communication, including candidates' public appearances at religious events, the use of Islamic attire and Qur'anic references in campaign visuals, and the circulation of short religious messages through community networks and social media platforms. These frames selectively highlight religious identity while marginalizing alternative evaluative criteria, such as programmatic agendas or governance track records. This framing mechanism aligns with political communication scholarship that emphasizes how symbolic cues simplify political choices by appealing to shared moral and cultural references rather than deliberative reasoning. (Identitas et al., n.d.). Empirical interview data also illustrate how the community interprets religious symbolism as an indicator of moral legitimacy. One religious leader explained that the presence of political candidates in religious

gatherings is often perceived by the public as a reflection of moral character rather than merely a campaign activity. As stated by one informant: "Ketika calon kepala daerah hadir dalam kegiatan pengajian atau acara keagamaan, masyarakat biasanya melihatnya sebagai tanda bahwa calon tersebut dekat dengan nilai-nilai agama dan memahami kehidupan religius masyarakat." (Informant 4, religious leader).

A similar perception was expressed by a community member who emphasized that religious symbols strengthen emotional trust between candidates and voters. According to the informant: "Simbol agama atau bahasa keagamaan dalam kampanye membuat masyarakat merasa lebih percaya karena dianggap sejalan dengan nilai yang mereka yakini." (Informant 9, community member). From a social identity perspective, religious framing becomes more effective because it activates socio-religious identity as a salient basis for political alignment. In a religiously cohesive society such as North Padang Lawas, religious identity operates as a primary in-group marker, enabling voters to perceive candidates framed as "religiously aligned" as extensions of their collective self. This identity activation transforms political support into an expression of group loyalty rather than an outcome of individual policy evaluation. Consequently, voting behavior becomes embedded within communal norms and expectations, reinforcing collective political orientations grounded in shared religious belonging (Muhyi et al., 2021).

The perspectives of religious organizations MUI, NU, Al Washliyah, and Muhammadiyah reveal differing normative evaluations of this framing process, yet their positions also expose underlying structural tensions. While MUI and NU tend to view the use of religious symbols as culturally appropriate and socially resonant, their acceptance simultaneously legitimizes the continued circulation of religiously framed messages in electoral communication. Muhammadiyah's critical stance highlights concerns over the erosion of political rationality, yet this critique exists within a political environment where religious authority remains a powerful communicative resource. These contrasting positions illustrate a paradox: religious institutions that emphasize ethical restraint nonetheless remain embedded within communication networks that facilitate political mobilization through religious legitimacy. This mechanism operates through moral signaling rather than direct endorsement. Religious leaders rarely instruct voters to support a candidate; instead, they define desirable moral characteristics. Voters then align political choice with these characteristics to maintain social belonging. The communicative power, therefore, lies not in persuasion but in the avoidance of social deviation.

This paradox reflects broader power dynamics in local electoral politics. Religious leaders occupy a structurally advantageous position as moral authorities whose symbolic capital is routinely sought by political actors. Even when religious organizations publicly caution against politicization, informal expectations, social pressures, and the desire to remain relevant in the political arena contribute to their continued involvement. Thus, religion-based political communication persists not merely because of ideological endorsement, but because of reciprocal dependencies between political elites and religious authorities within local power structures. When situated within broader scholarship on religion and politics in Indonesia, these findings both confirm and extend existing arguments. Similar patterns of religious framing and identity activation have been documented in other local elections, where religion functions as a shortcut for political legitimacy and voter mobilization. However, this study adds nuance by demonstrating how religious framing operates simultaneously as a mobilizing force and a constraint on deliberative political communication at the local level. Rather than viewing religion-based political communication as inherently polarizing or purely instrumental, the findings reveal it as a negotiated practice shaped by moral discourse, institutional authority, and electoral pragmatism. (Azhar et al.,

2025). Overall, the forms and patterns of religion-based political communication in North Padang Lawas illustrate how framing processes and social identity mechanisms interact to produce a political environment in which moral symbolism often outweighs programmatic debate. This interaction helps explain why religion-based narratives remain effective despite ongoing ethical critiques, and why their continued use poses both opportunities for political engagement and challenges for democratic quality and social cohesion.

According to informants from the MUI of North Padang Lawas, the use of hybrid communication patterns in local elections is an unavoidable reality in the digital era. MUI regards religious gatherings and forums as the primary channels for political messaging due to their moral legitimacy and emotional closeness to the community. Nevertheless, MUI cautions that the use of social media by religious leaders and religious networks must uphold ethical standards of *dakwah*, avoid provocative rhetoric, and refrain from excessive politicization of religious verses and symbols. Meanwhile, NU and Al Washliyah consider face-to-face communication as the foundational means of fostering political awareness among believers, as direct interaction enables dialogue, clarification, and social control. Digital media is viewed as a complementary tool that can expand message dissemination, but must be carefully managed to prevent polarization and identity-based conflict.

In contrast, Muhammadiyah emphasizes the importance of rationality and political literacy in hybrid communication. Muhammadiyah acknowledges the effectiveness of digital media in rapidly disseminating political information but insists that religious messages should not be reduced to emotionally driven propaganda. Muhammadiyah advocates for directing religious narratives in digital spaces toward enlightening political education that emphasizes justice, trustworthiness, and public welfare. Overall, the four religious organizations concur that hybrid communication patterns can serve as strategic instruments in the North Padang Lawas local election, provided they are managed wisely, inclusively, and ethically to safeguard local democratic quality and prevent reducing religion to a mere tool of pragmatic political mobilization.

The Role of Religious Actors and Networks in the Dissemination of Political Messages

In the North Padang Lawas regional election, religious actors and networks served as strategic intermediaries in disseminating political messages, not primarily through overt campaign endorsements but through subtle forms of moral signaling embedded in everyday religious communication. Rather than acting as explicit campaign agents, religious leaders operated as opinion leaders whose authority allowed political messages to be translated into normative religious language. This intermediary role is empirically evident in the routinized presence of political figures at religious gatherings, the alignment of moral messages with candidate imagery, and the circulation of religiously framed political cues through informal religious networks (Khaz et al., 2026).

Field interviews and observations indicate that political messages were most frequently communicated in religious spaces such as majelis taklim, mosque-based gatherings, and community religious events. In these settings, religious leaders rarely instructed congregants to support specific candidates; instead, they conveyed generalized moral narratives emphasizing leadership qualities such as piety, honesty, and responsibility. From a political communication perspective, this indirect messaging is significant because it allows political content to circulate while preserving the formal neutrality of religious institutions. The effectiveness of this approach lies precisely in its ambiguity: political preferences are shaped without violating explicit ethical norms against partisan campaigning (Hujaimah et al., n.d.).

Interviews with religious leaders confirm that explicit political endorsement is rarely delivered directly within religious forums. Instead, religious figures tend to communicate broader moral principles of leadership that are later interpreted by congregants in political terms. One informant stated: "Kami biasanya tidak secara langsung menyuruh jamaah memilih calon tertentu. Yang disampaikan adalah nilai kepemimpinan yang baik seperti kejujuran, amanah, dan tanggung jawab." (Informant 2, representative of a religious organization). Another community leader also described how political discussions frequently emerge informally after religious gatherings, indicating that religious spaces function as subtle channels for political communication. As the informant explained: "Setelah kegiatan keagamaan sering muncul percakapan tentang calon pemimpin. Dari situ masyarakat saling bertukar pandangan mengenai siapa yang dianggap layak memimpin." (Informant 11, community leader).

Social identity theory provides a crucial explanatory lens for understanding why such indirect communication remains influential. Messages delivered by in-group religious leaders carry heightened persuasive power because they are interpreted as moral guidance rather than political instruction. Membership in religious networks creates shared identity boundaries that foster conformity pressures, making congregants more receptive to cues originating from trusted religious authorities. In this context, political alignment becomes embedded within religious solidarity, transforming political choices into expressions of collective identity rather than individual policy preferences (Tokoh et al., n.d.).

The role of religious networks further amplifies this mechanism. Majelis taklim, Islamic organizations, and mosque communities operate as dense social networks characterized by frequent interaction, emotional bonds, and moral trust. These networks facilitate the repetitive circulation of religiously framed political messages, both offline and through digital platforms such as WhatsApp groups and social media pages associated with religious communities. Political communication within these networks is rarely contested publicly, as challenging moral messages in religious spaces risks social sanction. Consequently, religious networks function not merely as channels of information but as environments that normalize particular political orientations (Sosial & UIN, n.d.).

The perspectives expressed by MUI, NU, Al Washliyah, and Muhammadiyah reveal a critical tension between organizational rhetoric and communicative practice. While all four organizations publicly emphasize ethical boundaries and reject the politicization of religion, their leaders simultaneously acknowledge that religious spaces inevitably shape political awareness and participation. This contradiction reflects an institutional dilemma: maintaining moral authority and social relevance in a highly politicized environment often requires engagement, even when formal organizational norms discourage explicit political involvement. Rather than representing hypocrisy, this gap between rhetoric and practice illustrates the structural pressures faced by religious institutions embedded within local power relations. Religious networks function less as channels of information and more as environments of normative reinforcement. Repetition of similar messages within trusted networks reduces interpretive uncertainty, producing conformity without coercion. Political orientation thus emerges as a collective expectation rather than an individual decision.

Power dynamics further explain the persistence of religious actors' involvement in political communication. Religious leaders occupy positions of symbolic authority that political elites actively seek to access, while religious institutions benefit from maintaining proximity to political power to safeguard institutional interests and social influence(Hefner,2018). These reciprocal dependencies encourage a form of tacit cooperation, in which religious leaders avoid explicit endorsements while

allowing their authority and networks to be symbolically associated with certain political actors. This dynamic highlights how religion-based political communication is sustained not solely by ideological motives but by strategic considerations rooted in local political structures.

Situated within broader scholarship on religion and politics, these findings both confirm and refine existing arguments regarding the role of religious actors in electoral mobilization. While previous studies from other Indonesian regions emphasize the mobilizing power of religious leaders, this study empirically demonstrates how this influence operates through indirect communication, moral framing, and network-based conformity at the local level. The North Padang Lawas case illustrates that the political role of religious actors is less about explicit persuasion and more about shaping the moral boundaries within which political choices are perceived as legitimate (Hamayotsu,2019).

Religious networks such as *majelis taklim*, Islamic organizations, and mosque-based communities serve as channels of political mobilization due to their strong, sustainable social structures. Routine interactions within these networks facilitate the informal and repetitive dissemination of political messages. Emotional bonds and cultural proximity make messages more readily accepted by community members. Through religious networks, political preferences are shaped not only at the individual level but also collectively, contributing to increased political participation in electoral processes (Sosial & UIN, n.d.).

Religious networks play a strategic role in political mobilization because they possess established social structures that are trusted by the community. *Majelis taklim*, Islamic organizations, and mosque communities serve as spaces for regular interaction that ease the dissemination of political messages. Emotional bonds and cultural closeness within these networks make messages more easily accepted and followed. Beyond shaping political preferences, religious networks also encourage active participation in elections, positioning them as vital social infrastructure within local political dynamics (Hisan & Azhar, 2020).

Overall, the role of religious actors and networks in disseminating political messages at the local level demonstrates a significant influence derived from moral legitimacy, social trust, and strong cultural bonds within religious communities. Religious leaders function as opinion leaders, shaping public opinion, political preferences, and participation through religious forums and digital media, while religious networks such as *majelis taklim*, Islamic organizations, and mosque communities serve as effective social infrastructure for collective political mobilization. However, empirical findings and the perspectives of informants from MUI, NU, Muhammadiyah, and Al Washliyah emphasize that such influence must be managed ethically and proportionally to prevent the politicization of religion and the reinforcement of exclusive identity politics. All four religious organizations agree that religion should be positioned as a source of enlightening public ethics, promoting rational, inclusive, and public-interest-oriented political education, thereby enabling religious actors and networks to contribute positively to democratic quality and social cohesion at the local level (MQuil,2020).

Implications of Religion-Based Political Communication for Voter Behavior and Social Cohesion

The implications of religion-based political communication in the North Padang Lawas regional election are best understood not as measurable electoral outcomes, but as observable social and communicative processes through which political preferences, participation, and social relations are shaped. Based on interview data and field observations, this study identifies a set of perceived and experienced effects articulated by local actors regarding how religious framing and authority influence voter behavior and communal dynamics. These implications emerge at the level of meaning

construction, moral interpretation, and social interaction rather than through quantifiable voting statistics (Azhar et al., 2025). From the perspective of voter behavior, religion-based political communication primarily influences how voters interpret political choices rather than dictating specific electoral outcomes. Informants consistently indicated that religiously framed messages affect voters' evaluative criteria by foregrounding moral qualities such as piety, trustworthiness, and religious commitment over programmatic considerations (Subiakto,2017). In this sense, religion does not function as a direct instruction to vote for particular candidates, but as a cognitive and normative filter through which political information is assessed (Mujani,2018). This mechanism helps explain why political preferences in religious communities tend to be embedded within shared moral frameworks rather than individual policy analysis (Ilmu, 2025). Several voters interviewed during the fieldwork also indicated that religious values shape their evaluation of political candidates. One voter explained that moral character is often considered more important than campaign promises. The informant stated: "Bagi kami yang penting pemimpin itu punya akhlak baik dan dekat dengan agama. Program memang penting, tetapi karakter religius biasanya menjadi pertimbangan pertama." (Informant 15, voter). Another participant highlighted that religious appeals can also increase motivation to participate in elections. According to the informant: "Ketika memilih pemimpin dikaitkan dengan tanggung jawab moral sebagai warga dan sebagai umat, masyarakat biasanya merasa lebih terdorong untuk datang ke tempat pemungutan suara." (Informant 17, voter).

Social identity theory helps clarify this process by demonstrating how religious belonging shapes political orientation through in-group identification. In North Padang Lawas, religious identity serves as a primary social reference point, making messages from religious authorities more persuasive and socially binding. Interview data suggest that voters often perceive alignment with religiously framed candidates as an extension of communal loyalty, creating subtle conformity pressures within religious networks. As a result, political choices become socially embedded, reducing the salience of individual dissent while reinforcing collective orientations within religious communities (Yunus, 2023).

In terms of political participation, religion-based communication is perceived by local actors as an effective mobilizing mechanism. Informants from religious organizations emphasized that calls to participate in elections, when articulated within religious discourse, are often interpreted as moral obligations rather than mere civic duties (Permata,2017). This perception contributes to heightened willingness to engage in electoral processes, including attending campaign-related events and exercising voting rights. Importantly, this study does not claim that religion-based communication universally increases participation rates, but rather that it redefines participation as a morally meaningful act within religious communities (Wardani, 2025).

However, the same mechanisms that enhance participation also generate ambivalent consequences for political rationality (Tapsell,2020). Several informants, particularly from Muhammadiyah and Al Washliyah, expressed concern that moralized political messaging may discourage critical evaluation by framing political choices as ethically self-evident. When political preferences are presented as extensions of religious virtue, questioning those preferences risks being interpreted as moral deviance. This dynamic illustrates how religion-based political communication can simultaneously mobilize participation and constrain deliberative political reasoning (Ufen,2018).

The implications for social cohesion are similarly ambivalent. On one hand, religious framing fosters internal solidarity by reinforcing shared values and collective identity within religious communities. Informants noted that religious discourse often emphasizes harmony, brotherhood, and social responsibility, thereby mitigating overt conflict during electoral competition. On the other hand,

the implicit boundary-making inherent in identity-based communication carries the risk of social segmentation. While no large-scale conflicts were reported in North Padang Lawas, interview data reveal persistent concerns that excessive reliance on religious identity in political messaging may cultivate latent divisions, particularly when political competition intensifies.

These concerns point to a broader structural implication: religion-based political communication reshapes the moral boundaries of political discourse. Rather than producing immediate polarization, it normalizes a political environment in which legitimacy is increasingly defined through religious symbolism and authority (Aspinal, 2019). This normalization does not necessarily result in overt social conflict, but it subtly narrows the space for pluralistic dialogue by privileging certain moral identities over others. As such, the implications of religion-based political communication should be understood as cumulative and long-term, influencing how political disagreement is perceived and managed within society (Aspinal, 2016).

Overall, the findings suggest that the implications of religion-based political communication in North Padang Lawas are neither uniformly positive nor inherently destabilizing. Instead, they reflect a complex interaction between moral legitimacy, social identity, and political engagement. Religion-based communication enhances political participation and reinforces communal solidarity, while simultaneously introducing constraints on critical deliberation and posing latent risks to social cohesion. These implications underscore the need to approach religion-based political communication not merely as an electoral strategy, but as a social process with enduring consequences for democratic quality and communal relations in local contexts. This study contributes to political communication scholarship by demonstrating that religion-based political communication operates primarily through indirect moral alignment rather than explicit political persuasion. Previous studies largely describe religious mobilization as an endorsement or a campaign strategy; however, the present findings reveal a subtler mechanism in which political legitimacy is constructed through everyday moral discourse. The electoral effect, therefore, emerges from social identity maintenance rather than campaign messaging itself.

CONCLUSION

This study explains religion-based political communication not as a direct instrument of electoral persuasion but as a process of moral interpretation through which political meaning becomes socially regulated within the local electoral context of North Padang Lawas. Political messages gain legitimacy when translated into recognizable moral categories such as piety, trustworthiness, and communal responsibility, leading political preference to emerge less from programmatic evaluation than from alignment with shared moral expectations. Religious leaders and networks therefore operate not primarily as campaign agents but as mediators who convert political information into normative guidance, enabling voters to interpret political choices as expressions of collective belonging. The findings show that influence operates through indirect mechanisms—moral signaling, identity activation, and network reinforcement—that embed political orientation in everyday social interaction and produce conformity without explicit coercion. The persistence of religion-based political communication thus derives from its capacity to stabilize social legitimacy rather than compel electoral obedience, indicating that political authority is accepted insofar as it resonates with moral identity. Its implications are ambivalent: moral framing encourages participation by presenting voting as a meaningful social act, yet simultaneously narrows deliberative space by redefining disagreement as moral deviation, not through immediate polarization but through the gradual normalization of identity-

based legitimacy over evaluative reasoning. Accordingly, the study contributes to political communication scholarship by demonstrating that religion shapes the conditions of political judgment rather than the direction of political choice, positioning religion-based political communication as a social process that organizes how politics is interpreted, negotiated, and legitimized within community life rather than merely a campaign strategy to secure votes. Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research focuses on a single local electoral context, namely North Padang Lawas Regency, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions with different socio-political and religious characteristics. Second, the qualitative design and relatively limited number of informants mean that the study emphasizes interpretive depth rather than broad representativeness. Future research could address these limitations by conducting comparative studies across multiple regions to examine whether similar patterns of religion-based political communication emerge in different local political environments. Additionally, future studies may combine qualitative analysis with quantitative methods, such as surveys or experimental designs, to systematically measure how religious framing influences voter attitudes, political participation, and perceptions of social cohesion.

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