The Effectiveness of Cultural Identity and Social Capital in Shaping Voter Behavior (Case Study: Political Campaign Communication By Herman Deru in the 2018 South Sumatra Gubernatorial Election)

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Abstract: *This study aims to analyze the effectiveness of political campaign communication that leverages cultural identity and social capital in shaping voter behavior, using the case of Herman Deru's campaign in the 2018 South Sumatra gubernatorial election. Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and campaign media documentation. The findings show that Herman Deru strategically constructed an ethnic Komering identity narrative using local symbols such as the slogan "Putra Asli Komering" and regional language, which fostered emotional closeness with voters. In addition, the mobilization of social capital through bonding (ethnic solidarity), bridging (inter-group relations), and linking (access to political and economic elites) expanded campaign outreach and strengthened public trust. The integration of identity-based political communication with structured social networks proved effective in influencing voter behavior, particularly in a multicultural society like South Sumatra. This study concludes that political communication combining symbolic and structural elements can serve as a powerful electoral strategy in local political contests.*

Keywords: *Political communication, campaign, cultural identity, social capital, voter behavior, South Sumatra election.*

Abstrak: *Studi ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis efektivitas komunikasi kampanye politik yang memanfaatkan identitas budaya dan modal sosial dalam membentuk perilaku pemilih, dengan menggunakan kasus kampanye Herman Deru pada pemilihan gubernur Sumatera Selatan 2018. Menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi, dan dokumentasi media kampanye. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa Herman Deru secara strategis membangun narasi identitas etnis Komering menggunakan simbol-simbol lokal seperti slogan "Putra Asli Komering" dan bahasa daerah, yang mendorong kedekatan emosional dengan pemilih. Selain itu, mobilisasi modal sosial melalui penguatan (solidaritas etnis), jembatan (hubungan antar kelompok), dan keterkaitan (akses ke elit politik dan ekonomi) memperluas jangkauan kampanye dan memperkuat kepercayaan publik. Integrasi komunikasi politik berbasis identitas dengan jaringan sosial terstruktur terbukti efektif dalam mempengaruhi perilaku pemilih.*

Kata kunci: *Komunikasi politik, kampanye, identitas budaya, modal sosial, perilaku pemilih, pemilihan di Sumatera Selatan.*

Introduction

Regional elections in Indonesia are not merely an arena for contesting programs and ideas, but also a battleground where cultural identity and social capital play a crucial role in shaping voter behavior. In local politics, particularly in regions that still have strong sociocultural ties to communitarian values and ethnic symbols, campaign strategies that emphasize identity aspects often prove more effective than purely rational approaches. This becomes increasingly relevant when linked to the phenomenon of the 2018 South Sumatra gubernatorial election, which serves as the empirical case study in this research.

Herman Deru, one of the candidates in the election, employed a campaign strategy that combined the power of cultural identity and social capital networks. He explicitly positioned himself as the "Native Son of Komering" and used the local slogan "Jolma Sikam Pay" (meaning "Our People First") across various campaign media. This identity was not merely presented as a symbol but as a political mobilization strategy built on shared origins, language, and ethnic values of the Komering people. According to data from the South Sumatra Statistics Agency (BPS Sumsel), the Komering ethnic group is one of the largest ethnic groups in the province, with the highest concentration in the regions of OKU, OKU Timur, OKU Selatan, and OKI. This served as the primary foundation for building voter loyalty.

Furthermore, Herman Deru successfully integrated social capital into his campaign. He leveraged the social networks he had built during his two terms as Regent of OKU Timur, including traditional leaders, local elites, village heads, and religious networks such as ISNU (Nahdlatul Ulama Scholars Association). Deru's campaign communication strategy actualized the concept of social capital in three forms: bonding (strengthening solidarity within the Komering ethnic community), bridging (building relationships across social groups such as the Malay, Lahat, and Javanese ethnic groups), and linking (vertical relationships with political elites, supporting parties such as PAN, Hanura, and NasDem, as well as religious leaders).

The effectiveness of this strategy is reflected in field testimonies. Komering traditional leader H. Maramis noted that the slogan "Jolma Sikam Pay" evokes a sense of security and trust that their cultural interests will be protected. Meanwhile, Romi Erwanda, Chairman of the OKU/OKI Campaign Team, stated that informal networks such as religious leaders and traditional figures are key channels used by Deru to reach voters:

"If a leader has proven to be on their side, the community no longer needs promises. It's enough to remember what he has already done." Interestingly, Herman Deru's campaign does

not solely emphasize primordial identity. He combines this symbolic approach with concrete development programs, such as infrastructure improvements, strengthening the agricultural sector, and poverty alleviation. This demonstrates that his political communication does not rely solely on emotional bonds but also prioritizes electoral rationality based on track record and the needs of the people of Tesis Anggun.

Thus, the use of cultural identity and social capital in Herman Deru's campaign is not merely a response to local cultural structures but part of a systematic political strategy. This shows how identity politics, when combined with a well-planned and widely networked political communication strategy, can significantly shape voter behavior.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze the effectiveness of Herman Deru's political communication campaign, which combines cultural identity and social capital in shaping voter behavior in the 2018 South Sumatra gubernatorial election. Using a qualitative approach, this study will explore how cultural narratives and social networks are mobilized in a structured manner to create electoral loyalty in a pluralistic local community.

Theoretical Basis

Political communication is a crucial aspect of the electoral democratic process, especially during campaigns. Political communication is a communication activity that has actual or potential political consequences for the functioning of the political system.[1] This means that not all messages must be explicitly political, but if they have an effect on political behavior or political decisions, then they fall within the domain of political communication.

Furthermore, emphasizes that political communication is carried out with the aim of getting the message recipient to act in accordance with the sender's expectations, which in this case is often the candidate or campaign team.[2] This communication process involves who is communicating (the communicator), what is being communicated (the message), to whom (the audience/voters), through what medium, and with what effect.[3] In the context of political campaigns, these elements are strategically arranged to shape voter preferences.

One form of strategic political communication that has grown rapidly in Indonesia is identity politics. Based on a study, identity politics in campaigns refers to the use of symbols,

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[1]Subiakto, *Komunikasi Politik, Media dan Demokrasi* (Jakarta: Kencana Prenada, 2012)
[2]Windlesham, *Communication and Political Power*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1966)
[3]Lasswell's, *The Structure and Function of Communication in Society*, (New York: Institute for Religious and Social Studies, 1948)

language, slogans, and narratives that emphasize ethnic, religious, or cultural similarities between candidates and constituents.[4] This strategy has proven effective in attracting voter sympathy, as seen in various local contests such as the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election and the 2015 South Kalimantan gubernatorial election. However, this approach also carries risks, such as social polarization and a decline in the quality of deliberative democracy when political messages emphasize SARA elements over vision and work programs.

In the context of Herman Deru's campaign, his political communication strategy contains strong elements of identity politics. The narrative of "Putra Asli Komering" (Son of Komering) and the use of the slogan "Jolma Sikam Pay" are forms of cultural identity representation that are conveyed systematically and deliberately through various political communication media, both verbal and non-verbal. This aligns argument that identity messages in campaigns are often conveyed not only by candidates but also by campaign teams, traditional leaders, volunteers, and community groups with shared political objectives.[5]

However, identity-based political communication must be used proportionally. If used excessively and without social sensitivity, this strategy can give rise to exclusivism and deepen segregation between groups.[6] Therefore, in this study, cultural identity is seen not merely as a symbolic tool, but also as part of a political communication strategy that is integrated with social networks (social capital) and responses to local electoral dynamics.

In this context, it cannot be ignored that the effectiveness of campaign political communication is also greatly influenced by the strength of the social networks possessed by political actors. Therefore, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of social capital is important to complement the theoretical framework of this study.

Social capital is the accumulation of actual and potential resources derived from social networks based on mutual acquaintance, recognition, and trust.[7] Social capital does not stand alone but works alongside economic and cultural capital in influencing an individual's or group's position in the socio-political field. In the context of political campaigns, social capital

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[4]Dhani, "Komunikasi Politik Berbasis Identitas dalam Kampanye Pilkada, MetaCommunication: Journal of Communication Studies," (2019): 143-157.

[5]Lasswell's, *The Structure and Function of Communication in Society*, (New York: Institute for Religious and Social Studies 1948).

[6]Dhani, "Komunikasi Politik Berbasis Identitas dalam Kampanye Pilkada, MetaCommunication: Journal of Communication Studies," (2019): 143-157

[7]Bourdieu, *The Forms of Capital*, (New York: Greenwood, 1986).

enables candidates not only to convey political messages but also to distribute them through community networks, local figures, and established social structures.

Bourdieu's argument suggests that political success does not depend solely on the content of the message or symbolic capital but also on who conveys it and through which social networks the message is distributed. The broader and deeper a candidate's social network, the greater their chances of gaining political support. In this case, social capital becomes a "trust distribution machine" that strengthens political communication.

Referring to Herman Deru's campaign in the 2018 South Sumatra gubernatorial election, the social network he built through kinship relations, traditional leaders, local elites, and religious institutions is a concrete form of social capital activation. This enables cultural identity narratives such as "Son of Komering" to not only serve as a symbol but also as an effective political mobilization tool, as it spreads through credible and trusted social channels.

Therefore, the author chose Lasswell's (1948) theory of political communication and Bourdieu's (1986) theory of social capital as the conceptual basis for understanding how Herman Deru's campaign combined cultural symbols and social capital to effectively shape voter behavior in the 2018 South Sumatra gubernatorial election.

Methods

This study uses a descriptive qualitative method. This method aims to gain a deep understanding of social reality based on the perspective of the subjects being studied.[8] The qualitative method is considered appropriate because it allows researchers to comprehensively explore the identity-based political communication strategies and social capital utilized by Herman Deru in his 2018 South Sumatra gubernatorial campaign.

The subjects in this study were selected purposively, namely individuals who were directly involved in the campaign process, had contextual knowledge, and were able to provide in-depth information about the narrative of identity and the practice of social capital in Herman Deru's political strategy.[10]

Data collection techniques were carried out through:

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[8]Moleong, L. J, *Metodologi Penelitian Kualitatif*, (Bandung: Remaja Rosdakarya, 2012).

1. In-depth interviews with three key informants: (1) Herman Deru as the main candidate, (2) Romi Erwanda as the Head of the Campaign Team in the OKU and OKI regions, and (3) H. Maramis, a Komering traditional leader.
2. Documentation, in the form of campaign slogans, social media, and online news.
3. Literature review to support conceptual understanding of political communication, identity politics, and social capital.

Data was analyzed using the interactive analysis technique of Miles and Huberman (1994), namely data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data validity was maintained through source triangulation and member checking techniques with key informants. The research location was centered in the area that is the ethnic base of Komering and the stronghold of Herman Deru, namely OKU Timur, OKI, and OKU Regencies.

Results and Discussion

The 2018 South Sumatra gubernatorial election became a political arena that not only pitted work programs against each other, but also showcased how cultural symbols and social networks could be strategically mobilized in the campaign. Herman Deru, a candidate from the Komering ethnic group, utilized a political communication strategy that combined cultural identity and social capital as the main instruments in influencing voter behavior. This strategy was reflected in public narratives, slogans, campaign visuals, and his involvement in established social networks, particularly in the regions of OKU, OKU Timur, OKI, and Ogan Ilir, which are the main strongholds of the Komering community.

One of the most striking forms of identity-based political communication is the use of billboards and banners featuring the slogans "Putra Asli Komering" (True Son of Komering) and "Jolma Sikam Pay" (Choose Our Own First), which are widely distributed in areas predominantly inhabited by the Komering community.
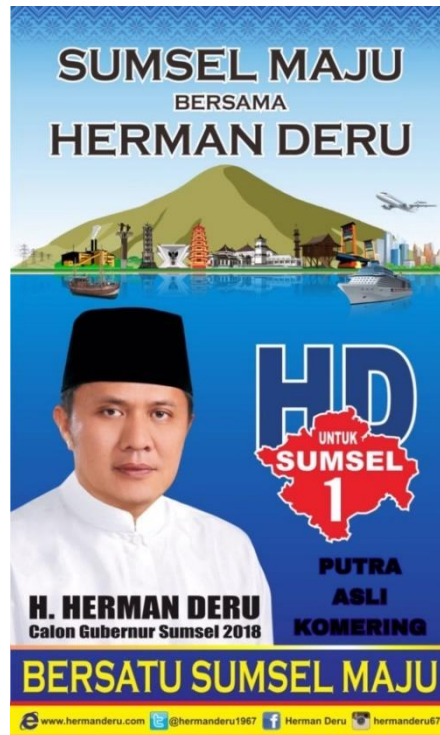
Figure 1. Herman Deru's campaign billboard for the 2018 gubernatorial election in East OKU.

Source: Candidate's social media

Figure 2. Billboard with the slogan "Jolma Sikam Pay" used in the Komering tribe's administrative area.

These symbols are not merely political branding tools, but serve as reminders of collective identity and triggers of primordial emotions. Deru himself stated that these symbols were deliberately used to evoke a sense of belonging within his community. In his interview with the author, he emphasized:

"I use the slogan 'Putra Asli Komering' not merely as a reference to origin, but to strengthen the sense of 'us.' This is not just a political campaign; it is about building the trust of the Komering people that those who advance are not outsiders."

The billboards not only display faces and names, but also feature symbols of ethnicity, regional words, and tribal narratives that are able to penetrate electoral rationality and touch the collective affections that have long been established in the ethnic community.

The visual effectiveness of this campaign is also emphasized by H. Maramis, SH., M.Hum., a traditional leader of the Komering, who noted that the community responded positively to messages emphasizing shared identity:

"When people here hear 'Putra Asli Komering,' they immediately feel a sense of trust. It's like feeling protected, because it's not someone from far away who comes just to ask for votes."

The effectiveness of this strategy cannot be separated from the success of political communication that was conducted intensively, consistently, and based on local values deeply rooted in the community. The communication was not one-sided but dialogic and touched on the emotional elements of the community, namely a sense of connection, recognition, and hope for political representation from within their own community. Billboards, slogans, and other visual communication media serve as the initial medium, which is then reinforced by interpersonal communication through traditional networks, religious networks, and extended family networks.

The success of this approach is acknowledged by Herman Deru himself in his interview:

"I cannot work alone. The ones conveying my message are not just billboards, but traditional leaders, village heads, and religious figures. They convey that I am not an outsider; I am part of them."

Romi Erwanda, as the Campaign Team Leader for the OKU and OKI regions, emphasized that political communication is not only conducted through media but also through personal approaches and social relationships built long before the campaign period:

"The community here trusts more when the speaker is someone they know, someone who has been present among them all along. That's why our communication isn't just about putting up billboards, but through social gatherings, religious gatherings, and traditional meetings. That's what makes the community feel confident."

Traditional leader H. Maramis also stated that Herman Deru's communication strategy was successful because it managed to evoke a sense of belonging and ethnic pride among the community:

"Symbols are important, but even more important is who conveys them and how they are present among the community. Mr. Deru is well-known, not just because of billboards, but because he is already considered part of the larger Komering family."

In addition to communication based on identity symbols and traditional relations, the effectiveness of Herman Deru's campaign was also supported by the social capital he had built during his two terms as Regent of OKU Timur. This social capital is not only in the form of cultural relationships but also in the form of access to economic and institutional networks that strengthen his leadership image and capabilities in the eyes of voters.

One concrete example of the social capital leveraged by Herman Deru is the presence of PT Belitang Panen Raya (PT BPR), a rice milling and distribution company widely known in South Sumatra, particularly in OKU Timur. This company has become a symbol of local economic success and a testament to Deru's capacity to develop the region. Local communities identify the company as part of Deru's achievements during his tenure as regent, and this indirectly influences electoral considerations.

The population in the Belitang area, particularly in OKU Timur District, is predominantly engaged in agriculture, primarily rice farming. As one of the largest rice granaries in South Sumatra, the needs and well-being of the community in this region heavily depend on the food agriculture sector. Dependence on agricultural output makes issues related to production facilities, agricultural infrastructure, and market access key concerns for residents. In this context, the existence of PT Belitang Panen Raya, a large rice mill built during Herman Deru's tenure as Regent of East OKU, has become a symbol of concrete policy success that is directly felt by the community.

During his campaign, Herman Deru not only promoted his identity as a "native son of Komering," but also linked it to his track record in developing the local food and agriculture sector. His success in building food production facilities became a source of socioeconomic capital that strengthened the trust of the farming community. They saw Deru not only as part of their ethnic identity, but also as a leader who understood their basic needs.
As Romi Erwanda explained:

"The people of Belitang depend on rice for their livelihood. When Mr. Deru built a rice mill, the community felt a sense of dignity. They no longer had to sell their rice cheaply outside the area. This is the main reason why they remain loyal."

This context explains that Herman Deru's political communication does not solely rely on ethnic symbols but is accompanied by concrete proof of addressing the community's economic needs. Thus, Herman Deru's campaign strategy successfully appeals to two layers of voter consciousness: cultural identity and economic interests.

Figure 3. Herman Deru, while serving as Regent of East OKU, visited PT Belitang Panen Raya in East OKU as a symbol of the success of food sector development.

In addition, Deru also activated a network through the support of ISNU (Nahdlatul Ulama Scholars Association) and local religious leaders. ISNU serves as a strategic channel to reach out to groups of religious students, Quran teachers, and grassroots religious communities. In the context of South Sumatra, where the influence of religious leaders and clerics remains highly dominant in social life, the support of organizations like ISNU plays a crucial role in building legitimacy and expanding the reach of campaign messages.

Herman Deru emphasized:

"I do not only rely on traditional leaders, but also religious leaders. We build communication with NU scholars, we invite them to dialogue, provide input, and convey programs to the community."

Figure 4. Herman Deru with NU cadres as a strategy to strengthen religious social capital

The combination of economic development track record and religious networks strengthens the political communication structure implemented by Herman Deru. Social capital not only functions as a tool to connect individuals and groups but also as a mechanism for distributing trust and legitimacy, thereby expanding the effectiveness of political campaigns.

From this testimony, it is evident that the effectiveness of political communication in Herman Deru's campaign is not only determined by the strength of identity symbols but also by the social capital that has been built and maintained over the long term. This strategy fosters a reciprocal relationship between the candidate and voters, where trust is built through identity representation and sustained through real and ongoing social connections. Thus, Herman Deru's political communication was successful because it combined symbolic, affective, and structural elements into a cohesive campaign strategy.

More than just visual communication, this strategy was reinforced by the mobilization of social capital networks that Deru had built during his two terms as Regent of East OKU. Deru does not only convey messages through the mass media but also through social intermediaries such as traditional leaders, village heads, and religious leaders trusted by the community. This aligns with Pierre Bourdieu's concept of social capital, which emphasizes the importance of organized relational networks and social legitimacy in the process of accumulating political support.

By combining identity symbols and strengthening social networks, Herman Deru's campaign does not only focus on a rational approach based on work programs but also relies

on an affective strategy that positions identity as a political strength. In the following section, the research findings will be examined in greater detail based on five main aspects: (1) the influence of identity politics on voter preferences, (2) the role of cultural symbols in visual campaign communication, (3) the form and effectiveness of social capital, (4) ethnic loyalty in electoral behavior, and (5) the implications of identity politics for inclusive local democracy.

Conclusion

This study shows that Herman Deru's political communication strategy in the 2018 South Sumatra gubernatorial election successfully shaped voter behavior through the integration of cultural identity symbols and the strengthening of social capital. His identity as a "native son of Komering" and the use of the slogan "Jolma Sikam Pay" played an important role in building emotional closeness and electoral loyalty, especially in areas with a Komering ethnic base. The political communication employed was not merely symbolic but was reinforced by the social structures Deru had built during his tenure as Regent of OKU Timur. Social capital in the form of bonding, bridging, and linking served as a strong foundation for disseminating campaign messages and building public trust. Traditional networks, religious networks (ISNU), and local economic successes such as PT Belitang Panen Raya demonstrate that effective political communication depends on social connections that have been consistently formed and maintained. Thus, political communication based on cultural identity and social capital has proven effective in shaping voter behavior in local contests. This study confirms that the power of symbols and social networks, when implemented strategically and continuously, can become a political victory instrument that is not only populist but also deeply rooted in the social life of the community.

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