

DEMOCRACY WITHOUT ALTERNATIVES: ELECTORAL HEGEMONY, VOTER RESISTANCE, AND THE REPRESENTATION CRISIS IN THE SINGLE-CANDIDATE ELECTION OF MAROS REGENCY

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Abstract. *This study analyzes the 2024 local election (Pilkada) in Maros Regency, which featured only a single candidate pair, as a critical case reflecting the crisis of local democracy in Indonesia. Utilizing a transcendental phenomenological approach and thematic analysis of qualitative data, this research explores the formation of electoral hegemony, manifestations of voter resistance, and the crisis of representation in a non-competitive political setting. The total consolidation of political parties in support of the incumbent, absence of leadership regeneration, and high rates of blank votes and abstention reflect a weakening of pluralism and a substantive democratic deficit. Findings reveal that voters are not apathetic, but instead engage in symbolic political expression by supporting the blank column and forming independent volunteer movements. The blank column functions as a channel of resistance against a system lacking representative options, while grassroots movements embody alternative forms of civic engagement in constrained democratic spaces. This study evaluates minimalist, maximalist, classical, and institutional theories of democracy to understand the tension between procedural legality and substantive legitimacy. While the election complied with legal frameworks, the absence of competition and declining participation undermines political representation and electoral credibility. The key implication of this study is the urgent need for systemic reform of local political institutions, including nomination rules, party internal democratization, and civic education focused on empowerment. The Maros case illustrates not only a stagnation of local democracy but also the transformative potential of civil resistance. Institutional reform and the revitalization of representative channels are essential to restore democratic integrity and legitimacy at the subnational level in Indonesia.*

Keywords: *Blank vote, Electoral hegemony, Local democracy, Representation crisis, Voter resistance*

1. INTRODUCTION

Direct regional head elections constitute a fundamental pillar in constructing the architecture of local democracy in Indonesia. Ideally, this electoral mechanism is intended to ensure authentic political representation, provide a fair competitive arena among candidates, and reinforce public accountability. However, the 2024 simultaneous local election (Pilkada) in Maros Regency reveals a significant deviation from these democratic ideals. For the first time since the system's inception in 2005, the election featured only a single candidate pair. This phenomenon raises critical questions concerning the effectiveness of local democracy, particularly regarding representation, citizen participation, and the legitimacy of the resulting government.

The absence of alternative candidates in this election was a direct consequence of a political configuration dominated by elite interests. All political parties with seats in the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) of Maros declared unanimous support for the incumbent, thereby eliminating the possibility of any meaningful political alternatives for the electorate. On one hand, this reflects the success of elite consolidation; on the other, it reveals a structural failure in facilitating political pluralism and open leadership recruitment. As a result, the electoral mechanism lost its essential function as a space for testing competing ideas and policy alternatives—an indispensable element of democratic contests.

In the absence of competitive political choices, the public exhibited unconventional forms of resistance. One notable expression was the significant increase in votes for the blank box, reaching 35.99% of valid ballots, alongside a voter abstention rate of 30.36%. These figures indicate a deepening crisis of representation, triggered by a declining public trust in a political system perceived as exclusive and unresponsive to citizen aspirations. Thus, electoral participation was no longer understood merely as physical attendance at polling stations, but rather as a symbolic act of rejecting hegemonic political domination.

The blank box phenomenon in the Maros election should not be interpreted as an expression of passive political apathy. Rather, it represents a form of lawful and collective political consciousness. The blank box served as an institutionalized channel through which voters articulated disapproval of the absence of electoral alternatives and the consolidation of uncontested power. In this context, the blank box functions as a mode of political resistance, reflecting grassroots discontent with an unfair electoral design, while simultaneously acting as a crucial parameter for assessing the substantive quality of local democracy.

Previous studies have noted that the presence of a single-candidate election signals a democratic deficit that undermines the core principles of competition and accountability. Such conditions typically arise from pragmatic political strategies, weak internal party regeneration mechanisms, and institutional barriers such as high nomination thresholds. Nevertheless, there remains a dearth of empirical research that investigates how voter resistance manifests during elections and how such expressions reflect the failures of representative democracy.

Given this context, the present article seeks to provide a critical and empirically grounded analysis of how electoral hegemony emerged in the single-candidate election of Maros Regency, how citizens expressed political dissent through blank box voting and abstention, and how these dynamics intensified the crisis of representation in local democracy. By exploring the tension between procedural and substantive democracy, this study aims to contribute both theoretically and practically to the literature on local political dynamics in elections devoid of alternatives, while also proposing a more inclusive, competitive, and representative model of local democratic governance.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Electoral Hegemony and the Crisis of Representation in Local Democracy

Within the framework of procedural democracy, elections are commonly regarded as the principal mechanism for ensuring accountability and legitimizing authority. However, in the context of a single-candidate election, procedural legality does not necessarily align with substantive legitimacy. The 2024 Maros election serves as a critical illustration of how political dominance can manifest through grand coalitions of political parties, effectively resulting in an uncontested candidacy. This phenomenon exemplifies the operation of electoral hegemony, wherein the electoral process becomes a symbolic exercise that merely ratifies a predetermined institutional power structure (Sufirman, 2024). Under such circumstances, the competitive space is obstructed, and the representative function of elections is systematically eroded.

The crisis of representation becomes increasingly evident when voters are forced to choose between a sole candidate or the "black box" option. Theoretically, the blank box may serve as a formal mechanism for expressing dissent. However, the absence of alternative candidates eliminates the deliberative and responsive dimensions of the political process (Dahl, 1971; Levitsky & Way, 2010). This condition highlights a failure of procedural democracy to equitably represent public interests. In many instances, the root cause lies in the strategic pragmatism of political parties, which prefer to form broad, non-competitive coalitions rather than enabling genuine electoral contests—thus engineering representational outcomes through so-called "party capture" (Rahman et al., 2022).

2.2 Voter Resistance and the Synthesis of Democratic Theories

When conventional pathways of political participation are obstructed, voter resistance emerges as a form of articulate political agency. Support for the blank box, declining voter turnout, and grassroots campaigns against hegemonic power structures serve as clear expressions of dissatisfaction with an electoral system perceived as undemocratic. This resistance demonstrates that voters are not politically apathetic; rather, they are engaging in symbolic strategies to voice discontent with elite dominance and the absence of electoral competition (Sufirman, 2024; Henry & Loupias, 2025). Such phenomena necessitate a reassessment of the indicators used to evaluate democracy—moving beyond formal participation metrics to incorporate citizens' autonomous capacity to influence political direction.

Theoretically, these dynamics may be interpreted through an integrated approach that combines minimalist and maximalist conceptions of democracy. Schumpeter's (1942) perspective underscores competition as the core of democratic practice, while Held (2006), Mill (1861), and Rousseau (1762) emphasize active public engagement in deliberation and decision-making. Furthermore, the new institutionalist approach (March & Olsen, 1984) posits that institutional configurations are not neutral; rather, they shape and constrain political outcomes. Hence, the dominance of a single candidate does not merely signify a failure of electoral politics but reflects a deeper, structured institutional crisis.

By synthesizing these theoretical perspectives, this study contributes to a nuanced understanding of how local democracy can become trapped in representational stagnation. It also illuminates how voters articulate resistance within increasingly constrained democratic spaces, transforming passive dissatisfaction into forms of active, symbolic dissent.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in transcendental phenomenology, as developed by Moustakas (1994). The primary aim of this methodology is to uncover the essence of participants' subjective experiences by bracketing the researcher's prior assumptions and biases. This approach is particularly suited to exploring the deeper meanings constructed by individuals in the context of a non-competitive electoral process, as exemplified by the single-candidate regional election (Pilkada) in Maros Regency.

The research was conducted in Maros Regency, South Sulawesi, over a twelve-month period from January to December 2024, coinciding with the official stages of Indonesia's simultaneous local elections. The timing was selected to align with the ongoing socio-political dynamics, ensuring a direct connection between participants' experiences and the contemporaneous electoral context. Maros was purposefully chosen as the field site due to its exceptional case of an uncontested election, offering a rich empirical setting for inquiry.

Data collection was carried out through in-depth interviews with a diverse group of stakeholders, including active voters, election administrators (KPU and Bawaslu officials), blank-box volunteers, and local academics with expertise in regional politics. A purposive sampling technique was employed to recruit participants based on their direct or reflective involvement in the 2024 Pilkada. In addition to interviews, official documents from the KPU—such as voter participation statistics and vote distributions—were analyzed as complementary sources of data.

The primary instrument for data collection was a semi-structured interview guide, designed to allow for exploratory flexibility while maintaining a consistent focus on the research objectives. In-depth interviews were selected to provide participants with the space to articulate meanings, emotions, and reflections freely and substantively. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent, and transcripts were systematically coded for analysis.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2006),

emphasizing the identification of recurring patterns in voter perceptions, political resistance, and institutional configurations affecting local democratic dynamics. The analytical process followed a structured sequence, beginning with horizontalization, followed by clustering of essential meanings, and culminating in the construction of thematic descriptions. The entire research process adhered to social research ethics protocols, including participant consent and data confidentiality.

This methodological approach enabled an in-depth exploration of the meanings, values, and perceptions associated with democracy in contexts characterized by limited political choice. Through this lens, the study not only captures empirical social-political realities but also reveals how citizens interpret and negotiate democratic values amid systemic constraints.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Electoral Domination and Coalition Politics

The 2024 regional election (Pilkada) in Maros Regency revealed a striking case of electoral domination, wherein only one candidate pair, the incumbent Chaidir Syam from the National Mandate Party (PAN) in coalition with Golkar Party, contested the election. This coalition far exceeded the 20% parliamentary threshold stipulated by Law No. 10 of 2016 on Regional Elections. The dominance became more entrenched as all political parties in the local legislature consolidated their support behind the incumbent, forming a grand coalition that effectively monopolized legislative representation and eliminated political alternatives.

This configuration not only underscores the electoral strength of the incumbent but also reflects the fragility of opposition dynamics and an elite consensus that dismisses the political pluralism demanded by constituents. Throughout the nomination period, no alternative candidates emerged—not due to a lack of capable figures, but because parties strategically and pragmatically aligned themselves with the status quo. Consequently, the Maros Pilkada transformed from a competitive contest of ideas and programs into an acclamatory process legitimized by institutional party power.

Such a coalition demonstrates the short-term orientation of political parties, prioritizing access to power over their democratic functions, such as leadership regeneration, policy alternatives, and accountability. In this context, voters were left without meaningful choices, and the electoral process lost its function as an avenue for articulating the public will.

The implications of this domination are profound for local democracy. In a healthy democratic system, electoral competition is vital to ensure accountability, drive policy innovation, and stimulate public engagement. The absence of competition removes any pressure on incumbents to present substantive platforms or be held accountable for prior governance. When all electoral channels are monopolized by a single coalition, democracy loses its character as a competitive and inclusive mechanism.

4.2 Party Cadre Regeneration Failure

The 2024 Maros Pilkada also revealed a critical failure of political parties in fulfilling their role as incubators of democratic leadership. Instead of cultivating and promoting new leadership, all parties converged in support of the incumbent, whom they deemed politically "safe." This strategy, driven by short-term transactional interests, highlights structural weaknesses within party institutions and signifies a declining commitment to democratic pluralism.

One of the core democratic functions of political parties is to recruit, prepare, and nominate competent individuals for public office through fair elections (Diamond & Gunther, 2001). However, in Maros, no party made a genuine effort to nominate alternative candidates. Even parties that could independently meet the nomination threshold chose not to exercise that right. Rather than expanding voters' choices and enhancing electoral competitiveness, they collectively narrowed the democratic space by backing the incumbent.

This failure was not merely due to a lack of qualified figures but also reflected the weak internal mechanisms within parties to identify, mentor, and promote leadership from diverse societal sectors (Scarrow, 2005). Party dependency on incumbents with political capital and resources marginalized other potential candidates. As a result, opportunities for competitive elite circulation—a key principle in democratic renewal—were severely hindered (Michels, 1915).

From the perspective of maximalist democratic theory, the inability of parties to regenerate leadership undermines not only electoral competitiveness but also the substantive quality of democracy. As Held (2006) asserts, democracy requires more than formal procedures—it demands equitable access to candidacy and representation for all political actors. Addressing this crisis necessitates internal party reforms that institutionalize cadre regeneration and expand inclusive political participation.

4.3 Voter Participation and Abstention

The 2024 Maros Pilkada witnessed a significant decline in voter turnout compared to previous election cycles. Out of 278,930 registered voters, only 194,185 cast ballots, resulting in a turnout rate of 69.64%, a notable drop from 77.94% in 2020. This decline signals rising political apathy and voter disillusionment, likely triggered by the non-competitive nature of a single-candidate election (Lijphart, 1997).

Moreover, 35.99% of valid votes were cast for the blank column (kolom kosong), functioning as a symbolic rejection of electoral monopoly. This choice illustrates active resistance to the lack of alternatives, enabling voters to express dissatisfaction within the formal electoral framework (Schedler, 2002). The abstention rate also remained high, with 84,745 registered voters—equivalent to 30.36%—opting out of participation altogether. From a classical democratic theory perspective, such levels of abstention indicate a failure of the electoral system to meaningfully engage citizens and uphold participatory legitimacy (Held, 2006).

Qualitative interviews reinforced these figures, revealing that many Maros residents felt politically disenfranchised by the absence of electoral competition. The lack of viable candidates fostered perceptions that the outcome was predetermined, diminishing public incentive to engage (Dahl, 1971).

While minimalist democratic theory treats turnout levels as sufficient for legitimacy, this view neglects the qualitative dimensions of political engagement. In contrast, maximalist theory emphasizes meaningful competition, pluralism, and citizen empowerment (Schumpeter, 1942; Barber, 1984). The Maros election illustrates the tension between procedural legality and substantive democratic quality—underscoring that formal compliance does not guarantee democratic legitimacy.

Ultimately, the observed voter behavior in the 2024 Maros Pilkada reveals structural vulnerabilities in local democracy under conditions of electoral absence. Declining turnout, surging blank votes, and high abstention collectively signify a breakdown of democratic integration. Restoring electoral credibility and democratic integrity requires substantial reforms by electoral bodies and political parties to foster meaningful competition, broaden representational choices, and rebuild voter trust.

4.4 The Empty Box as a Form of Political Expression

The significant number of votes cast for the "empty box" in the 2024 single-candidate local election in Maros emerged as a powerful form of political articulation and symbolic resistance. A total of 68,527 valid votes—representing 35.99% of the electorate—were intentionally cast for the empty box, signaling a deliberate collective rejection of the sole candidate. In several subdistricts, such as Turikale and Mandai, this figure approached or even exceeded 40%, indicating the strategic use of the empty box as a vehicle for expressing dissatisfaction with the absence of electoral alternatives (Budiatri, 2013). Far from being apolitical, these voters demonstrated a high level of democratic agency, treating the empty box not as a passive option but as a conscious protest action (Mietzner, 2015).

From the perspective of new institutionalism, the empty box reflects a grassroots adaptation to the structural limitations of formal political institutions. In the absence of credible opposition or meaningful competition, voters innovated informal yet effective mechanisms to voice their dissent. This practice functionally substitutes for institutionalized opposition, highlighting the creative agency of citizens operating within restrictive political conditions (March & Olsen, 2006).

Within the framework of classical democratic theory, which assumes rational and pluralistic electoral choices, voting for an empty box may appear anomalous. However, in a non-competitive electoral context, it becomes the sole formal channel for democratic expression. This phenomenon invites a reevaluation of traditional democratic assumptions to better reflect contemporary electoral realities (Held, 2006). The prominence of the empty box also exposes the political elite's failure to ensure pluralism—an essential component of a healthy democratic society. When all formal channels of representation are blocked, the empty box becomes a potent symbol of resistance against political monopoly and a manifestation of a profound representational crisis (Dahl, 1989).

In essence, the use of the empty box in Maros not only indicates procedural irregularities but also reveals deeper institutional and democratic crises. It underscores the collapse of competitive representation and calls for urgent reforms in candidate nomination processes and internal party democracy to restore pluralism and rebuild public trust in electoral mechanisms (Diamond, 1999).

4.5 Volunteer Movements and Grassroots Resistance

The 2024 Maros election also witnessed the spontaneous emergence of volunteer movements supporting the empty box, particularly in areas like Baji Pamai' and Moncongloe. These citizen-led initiatives operated independently of formal political parties or organizations and exemplified genuine grassroots mobilization driven by civic consciousness (Scott, 1990). Such movements affirm that political resistance can organically arise from the community, serving as alternative democratic expressions amid entrenched electoral dominance.

Viewed through the lens of new institutionalism, these movements can be considered "shadow institutions"—informal structures that fill the void left by the formal political system (March & Olsen, 1984). Rather than reflecting apathy or withdrawal, these campaigns signify a high level of political awareness and deliberate civic engagement aimed at reasserting democratic voice (Tarrow, 1998). In the absence of viable candidates, the volunteer network offered a channel for voters to express discontent and demand more inclusive political representation.

It is essential to highlight that this grassroots resistance was non-confrontational and symbolic. By casting votes for the empty box, citizens expressed peaceful yet assertive protest, rejecting an electoral process perceived as closed and uncompetitive. This aligns with maximalist democratic theory, which values diverse forms of political participation beyond conventional candidate selection (Held, 2006).

However, the lack of clear guidance—particularly from electoral authorities like the KPU—regarding the function of the empty box created confusion among some voters. Many misunderstood the empty box as representing an actual candidate, rather than as an instrument of protest. This misunderstanding underscores the urgent need for comprehensive and participatory civic education to enhance electoral literacy and engagement (Norris, 2011).

Ultimately, the emergence of empty box volunteer movements reveals a reservoir of untapped civic energy that could drive democratic reform. These grassroots initiatives not only compensate for the absence of institutional opposition but also serve as informal oversight of unchecked political power. Nonetheless, their long-term impact depends heavily on how state institutions and political elites respond to the demands for pluralism and democratic accountability articulated through such symbolic acts (Putnam, 2000).

4.6 Electoral Legitimacy and Democratic Challenges

Although the single-candidate pair in the 2024 Maros election secured a procedural victory by garnering 64.01% of valid votes, substantial concerns regarding the substantive legitimacy of the election remain. This result emerged in a context where 35.99% of voters intentionally chose the empty box, and another 30.36% abstained altogether—together representing a significant level of public disillusionment. These figures suggest that the apparent electoral majority is fragile and lacks the cohesion typically associated with a legitimate democratic mandate (Komisi Pemilihan Umum, 2024).

From a minimalist democratic perspective, the election met basic procedural standards of legality and compliance (Schumpeter, 1942). However, when assessed substantively, the results reflect a deficit in democratic legitimacy, as a significant portion of the electorate evidently felt unrepresented by the only available choice. As Dahl (1971) emphasized, democracy is not solely determined by adherence to formal procedures but also by broad public acceptance and inclusion in decision-making processes.

Therefore, electoral legitimacy must be evaluated not only by vote count but also by the integrity and inclusivity of the electoral process—whether it offers real choices, encourages meaningful participation, and is perceived as reflective of the public will (Beetham, 1991). In the Maros context, high abstention rates and empty box votes indicate a representational void that undermines the social foundations of the elected leadership's mandate.

This situation poses a serious post-election governance dilemma. While the results are legally binding, a political mandate formed without genuine competition and active voter engagement is unlikely to foster public trust or ensure accountability. As Lipset (1981) warned, such a legitimacy deficit can hinder effective governance and threaten the long-term stability of democratic institutions at the local level.

Classical theories of legitimacy, particularly those of Rousseau (1762) and Locke (1689), stress the importance of the “consent of the governed”—a principle that appears weakened in this electoral context. The low political participation and limited voter choice in Maros suggest that this foundational consent has been eroded. Restoring legitimacy will require inclusive political reconciliation and participatory policy-making that reflects the diverse interests of constituents.

Looking ahead, the central challenge is to ensure that elections in Indonesia are not only legally valid but also socially and politically legitimate. This calls for comprehensive reforms to the nomination system, revitalization of opposition roles, and sustained institutionalization of civic education to rebuild democratic engagement and trust (Diamond & Morlino, 2005).

4.7 Evaluating Democratic Theories

The 2024 local election in Maros presents a valuable case for evaluating democratic quality through multiple theoretical lenses. From a minimalist perspective, as proposed by Schumpeter (1942), democracy is primarily a procedural system in which political elites compete for power through legally sanctioned elections. Within this framework, the Maros election fulfilled the minimal democratic threshold: it was legally conducted, involved registered voters, and produced an officially recognized winner.

However, this procedural legitimacy becomes problematic when assessed through more expansive democratic theories. Maximalist conceptions of democracy, such as those articulated by Held (2006), go beyond electoral mechanics to encompass equal participation, pluralistic choices, and active civic engagement. From this vantage point, the Maros election reveals a serious democratic deficit: the presence of a single candidate and significant voter disengagement reflect the erosion of substantive democratic content.

Classical democratic theorists like Rousseau (1762) and Mill (1859) emphasize the importance of public deliberation, political competition, and popular sovereignty as foundations of democratic governance. The absence of open contestation and rational

electoral choice in Maros demonstrates a clear departure from these ideals, wherein elections should serve as arenas for dialogue, dissent, and diverse representation.

Further insight is gained through the lens of new institutionalism as outlined by March and Olsen (1984). This approach underscores that democratic stagnation is not solely the result of elite behavior but is also structurally embedded in institutional constraints. Rigid nomination thresholds, the dominance of major parties, and the systemic marginalization of opposition forces have collectively restricted electoral competition. These institutional limitations have narrowed democratic space and undermined the representative integrity of the electoral process.

From an institutional reform standpoint, the solution does not lie merely in replacing political elites but in enacting systemic restructuring. Improving the quality of local democracy requires revising nomination regulations, recalibrating party incentives, and establishing effective checks and balances to restore political pluralism and rebuild public trust (North, 1990).

In sum, although the 2024 Maros election met the formal prerequisites of a democratic process, it failed to deliver on democracy's substantive and institutional promises. The convergence of minimalist, maximalist, classical, and institutionalist theories reveals a common theme: the fading of meaningful competition, deliberation, and voter empowerment. This case underscores the urgent need for comprehensive democratic reform—one that not only focuses on procedural legality but also ensures genuine inclusion, equitable representation, and local accountability.

CONCLUSION

The 2024 local election in Maros Regency reveals that formal legitimacy in electoral democracy does not necessarily equate to substantive legitimacy. While the election was legally valid and yielded a procedurally recognized winner, the absence of competition, the failure of party regeneration, and the widespread resort to the empty box vote all point to a deep crisis of representation. This phenomenon reflects an erosion of local democracy, characterized by the closure of participatory space, the weakening of political pluralism, and the deterioration of civic oversight over power.

The declining voter turnout, high abstention rates, and growing symbolic resistance through protest voting indicate that procedural democracy alone is insufficient to meet the political aspirations of citizens. These dynamics signal the need for a broader evaluative approach to democratic quality—one that extends beyond adherence to electoral rules and considers meaningful public engagement and the availability of genuine representative choices.

This study emphasizes that electoral dominance and elite consensus that silence opposition are not merely local technical issues but symptoms of a broader systemic weakness in democratic institutions. Without robust leadership recruitment mechanisms and fair electoral competition, local democracy risks stagnation in representation and deepening political apathy.

The rise of the empty box as a site of protest and the emergence of non-partisan volunteer movements demonstrate that citizens are not entirely passive. Rather, in the face of institutional constraints, civil society has discovered alternative ways to express political will. This reflects the enduring presence of democratic energy, even if it remains unfacilitated by the existing system.

Addressing these issues requires structural reforms that include revising nomination procedures, institutionalizing political opposition, and revitalizing the role of parties as democratic intermediaries. Furthermore, citizenship education oriented toward civic empowerment must be intensified to rebuild public confidence in political processes.

The Maros case is not only relevant to studies of local democracy in Indonesia but also offers critical lessons on how democracy can function without alternatives—and what must be done to ensure that democracy remains meaningful. A democratic election requires not only fair procedural rules but also actors willing to compete and citizens capable of making informed and genuine choices.

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