

NEGOTIATED ISLAMIC AUTHORITY AND RATIONAL VOTING: Religious Leadership, Voter Typologies, and Local Democracy in Madura

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Abstract

*This article seeks to discuss the influence of Islamic religious authorities on local electoral politics within the context of ongoing democratization in Indonesia. Although local elections are often portrayed as arenas of rational, performance-based democratic decision-making, evidence from several regions—particularly Madura—suggests that religious leaders continue to play a decisive role. Existing studies of Madurese politics consistently highlight the centrality of *keiai* and *pesantren*, yet few have systematically analyzed how religious authority interacts with rational voting considerations across different social groups and geographic contexts. To address this gap, this study presents a qualitative case analysis of local elections in Madura, drawing on in-depth interviews and participant observation involving *santri*, students, and community across four districts. This article argue that religious authorities remain influential in shaping voter preferences through processes of conditional negotiation, resulting in variations in electoral behavior across rural–urban settings and social categories. Based on these patterns, the article proposes four voter typologies: traditional, rational, critical, and skeptical. Importantly, the observed rationalization of political behavior does not*



correspond with secularization; instead, it unfolds within—and remains conditioned by—the enduring authority of religious leadership.

[Artikel ini berangkat dari asumsi tentang adanya pengaruh otoritas keagamaan Islam dalam konteks pemilihan umum tingkat lokal yang sedang mengalami proses demokratisasi. Meskipun pemilihan umum lokal sering dianggap mencerminkan proses demokrasi yang rasional dan berorientasi pada kinerja, tapi ternyata di beberapa wilayah Indonesia terutama Madura, para pemuka agama tetap memiliki andil penting dalam proses ini. Kajian mutakhir tentang politik Madura sebagian besar menggambarkan pengaruh kiai dan pesantren sebagai hal yang konsisten dan utama. Sayangnya, jarang ada yang benar-benar fokus pada interaksi antara otoritas keagamaan dan pertimbangan pemungutan suara yang rasional di berbagai kelompok sosial dan lokasi geografis. Maka artikel ini hadir untuk mengisi kesenjangan studi tersebut dengan melakukan studi kasus tentang pemilihan umum tingkat lokal di Madura. Dengan menggunakan wawancara komprehensif dan observasi partisipan kepada santri, mahasiswa, dan warga masyarakat di empat wilayah di Madura, artikel ini berargumen bahwa otoritas keagamaan Islam tetap memberikan andil penting dalam pesta demokrasi tersebut. Dengan cara negosiasi bersyarat, perilaku pemilih memiliki tipologi yang berbeda tergantung kelas sosial, aspek geografis pedesaan dan perkotaan. Hasilnya, artikel ini menguraikan empat tipologi pemilih: tradisional, rasional, kritis, dan skeptis. Menariknya, proses rasionalisasi yang terjadi di wilayah ini tidak menimbulkan gejala sekularisasi, melainkan tetap berada di bawah bayang-bayang otoritas keagamaan.]

Keywords: *Islamic Authority; Voting Behavior; Local elections; Madura; Democratization*

Introduction

The introduction of direct local elections is widely regarded as a crucial mechanism for democratic deepening, particularly in post-authoritarian and decentralized political systems. Since the enactment of Law No. 32 of 2004, the election system has undergone a significant transformation from indirect elections conducted by the Regional

Representative Council (DPRD) to direct elections by the people.¹ Local elections are anticipated to increase political responsibility, improve responsiveness, and motivate voters to assess candidates on the basis of policy programs, administrative skill, and performance by allowing citizens to directly choose subnational leaders. According to this viewpoint, electoral rivalry should encourage more rational and programmatic forms of political engagement, particularly when educational attainment increases and political knowledge becomes more widely available.

Comparative research demonstrate that there is neither a constant nor linear relationship between democratization and voter rationale.² In competitive electoral contexts, religious authority persists in shaping political behavior in numerous nations where religion remains deeply embedded in social and political life. In Muslim-majority contexts, religious leaders—such as *ulama*, clerics, and Islamic scholars—often function not only as spiritual guides but also as moral authorities, community brokers, and political intermediaries.³ Consequently, religious legitimacy frequently transforms into power that adapts to political dynamics, influencing voter preferences through moral endorsement, symbolic legitimacy, and extensive social networks instead of being supplanted by democratic institutions.⁴ These studies demonstrate that

¹ Sekneg, Undang-Undang (UU) Nomor 32 Tahun 2004 Tentang Pemerintahan Daerah, 2004.

² Edward J. López, “Understanding Democracy: An Introduction to Public Choice,” *Public Choice* 130, no. 1-2 (2006); Tiffany J. Henley et al., “In Search of the Rational Voter in the 2020 Presidential Election: Understanding the Impact of Voter Costs and Benefits on Turnout,” (2024); Dede Sri Kartini, Made Mahaguna Putra, and A. Zainudin, “Decision-Making Process in Voting During the 2024 Election in Indonesia (a Study in Bandung Regency),” *Frontiers in Political Science* 7 (2025).

³ Zeynep Taydaş, Yasemin Akbaba, and Minion K. C. Morrison, “Did Secularism Fail? The Rise of Religion in Turkish Politics,” *Politics and Religion* 5, no. 3 (2012); Auliya Ridwan, “The Dynamics of Pesantren Leadership from the Dutch Ethical Policy to the Reformation Periods,” *Epistemé: Jurnal Pengembangan Ilmu Keislaman* 15, no. 02 (2020).

⁴ Yanwar Priyadi, “Islam and Politics in Madura: *Ulama* and Other Local Leaders in Search of Influence (1990-2010)” (Institute for Area Studies (LIAS), Faculty of the Humanities, Leiden University, 2013), Endang Turmudi, “Struggling for the Umma:

when religious leaders engage in politics, they can transform their cultural and symbolic capital into influence.

Madura provides a particularly strategic case for examining these dynamics. As a region known for its strong Islamic culture, Madura is characterized by the central role of *kiai* and *pesantren* in shaping social, moral, and political life. The preeminence of *kiai* in influencing electoral outcomes across Madura's districts has remained a persistent phenomena since the 1998 Reformation.⁵ The authority of *kiai* has served as a significant source of political legitimacy, galvanizing supporters through moral endorsement and enduring patron–client relationships. Consequently, Madurese municipal politics is frequently depicted as a manifestation of persistent religious supremacy within a democratic context.

At the same time, Madura has experienced a growing tension between religious authority and democratic expectations. Several high-profile corruption cases involving *kiai*-politicians have raised questions about moral credibility and political competence, creating what can be described as a legitimacy paradox: religious authority remains influential, yet its political integrity is increasingly contested.⁶ This tension is further complicated by rising levels of education, urbanization, and access to information, particularly among younger and urban voters. Together, these conditions make Madura a critical case for analyzing how Islamic authority is maintained, challenged, and reconfigured under democratic competition.

Changing Leadership Roles of *Kiai* in Jombang, East Java" (Department of Sociology Faculty of the Arts, Australian National University, 1996).

⁵ Abdul Gaffar Karim, "'Pesantren' in Power: Religious Institutions and Political Recruitment in Sumenep, Madura," *RIMA: Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 42, no. 1 (2008); Muhammad Endy Saputro, "Muslim Localizing Democracy: A Non-Pesantren Village in Madura as a Preliminary Study," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 1, no. 2 (2011); Yanwar Pribadi, "The Klebun, the *Kiai* and the Blater: Notes from Western Madura, Indonesia," *South East Asia Research* 23, no. 3 (2015).

⁶ Pribadi, "Islam and Politics in Madura: *Ulama* and Other Local Leaders in Search of Influence (1990-2010).", Pribadi, "The Klebun, the *Kiai* and the Blater: Notes from Western Madura, Indonesia."

Despite a rich literature on religion and politics in Madura and Indonesia, most studies focus on *kiai* and *pesantren*'s seemingly monolithic dominance in local electoral politics.⁷ In modern local elections, how religious power interacts with rational voting is unknown. Variation among social groups—*santri*, university students, and the general community members—or between rural and urban locations has received little research. So, present explanations tend to hide internal electorate heterogeneity and neglect evolving political evaluations that coexist with religious loyalty. This gap obscures how democratization changes religious power from within, not just reinforces or weakens it.

This research examines how Islamic religious authority and rational voting influence municipal elections in Madura, taking into account diverse social groupings and rural-urban dynamics. The research encompasses four objectives. The initial segment examines the perceptions of *santri*, university students, and the general populace regarding local election candidates. Secondly, it illustrates the influence of spatial context on political cognition by contrasting the voting rationale of rural and urban populations. Third, it establishes an empirical voter typology grounded in electoral behavior. Ultimately, it asserts that democratic conditions modify Islamic authority, rather than assuming its continuity or extinction.

This field-based case study investigates voting behavior in Madura's local elections by comparing *santri*, educated voters, and general community members across four districts historically shaped by *kiai* leadership. Using purposive and snowball sampling, the study collected data from twenty-four culturally embedded informants through

⁷ Anies Baswedan, "Political Islam in Indonesia: Present and Future Trajectory," *Asian Survey* 44, no. 5 (2004); Moch Nur Ichwan, "'Ulamā', State and Politics: Majelis Ulama Indonesia after Suharto," *Islamic law and society* 12, no. 1 (2005); Greg Barton, İhsan Yılmaz, and Nicholas Morieson, "Authoritarianism, Democracy, Islamic Movements and Contestations of Islamic Religious Ideas in Indonesia," *Religions* 12, no. 8 (2021); Muhammad Turhan Yani et al., "Advancing the Discourse of Muslim Politics in Indonesia: A Study on Political Orientation of *Kiai* as Religious Elites in Nahdlatul Ulama," *Heliyon* 8, no. 12 (2022).

observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, focusing on satisfaction with local governance (2013–2018). The findings are designed to explain how religious authority, social hierarchy, and traditional norms systematically shape electoral preferences, demonstrating that political choices in Madura are structurally embedded in local cultural and religious power relations rather than driven solely by individual rational considerations.

The Cultural Aspects Beyond Voting Trends in Madura

This section examines Madurese culture and religious authority, elucidating their impact on voting behavior in Madura. The extensive availability of education on the island has led the younger generation to attain more academic success, which indirectly influences their voting behavior to become more sensible and logical.

Furthermore, conventional and contemporary electoral behavior are primarily differentiated by the foundations of voter considerations and political relationship dynamics: conventional electoral behavior relies on entrenched social identities such as religion, ethnicity, kinship, region, and historical allegiance to individuals or parties, characterized by personalistic and patronage-oriented voter-elite relationships. Conversely, contemporary electoral behavior is increasingly grounded in rational-instrumental factors, including programs, policy matters, and candidates' histories, facilitated by extensive information access and more impersonal, evaluative political interactions. Nonetheless, these two categories do not contradict one another; rather, they frequently coexist in electoral practice, particularly in cultures experiencing social and political transformation.

Islamic religious authority has traditionally shaped Muslim political behavior, especially at the local level where social ties are strong and leadership is individualized. Indonesian *kiai* and *ulama* affect communal norms and politics as spiritual advisors and moral guardians.⁸ Their

⁸ Hans Antlov, and Sven Cederroth, *Leadership on Java: Gentle Hints, Authoritarian Rule, Studies in Asian Topics*, vol. no 16 (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1994).

authority comes from religious knowledge, charisma, *pesantren* affiliation, and long-standing community links.⁹ In electoral politics, numerous instances demonstrate that religious leaders support politicians, mobilize people, and provide symbolic legitimacy through moral mediation.¹⁰ These research illustrate that *kiai* exert considerable influence outside the confines of *pesantren* and may impact areas outside the religious domain.

Several literature discusses patron–client networks in religiously entrenched political systems. Religious leaders connect voters with political elites, exchanging moral support and electoral support for resources, protection, and policy influence.¹¹ In Madura context, electoral action is frequently regarded as a societal obligation rather than a personal decision, owing to the followers’ subservience to the *kiai*.¹² Research on municipal elections in Indonesia, particularly in Java and Madura, indicates that the networks of *kiai* and their followers’ allegiance to them permeate political affairs and persist despite democratic reforms.

In the anthropology of the Madura community, *kiai* have a highly respected social and religious position, often serving as political protectors who significantly influence the direction of public support.¹³ The local adage “*Bhuppa, Bhappu, Ghuru, Rato*” (Father, Mother, Teacher, and Ruler) illustrates the hierarchical value system in Madura society, wherein teachers, particularly *kiai*, are accorded respect following that of parents.

⁹ Greg Fealy, and R. Mitchell Bush, “The Political Decline of Traditional *Ulama* in Indonesia,” *Asian Journal of Social Science* 42, no. 5 (2014).

¹⁰ Abdul Chalik, and Ahmad Zainul Hamdi, “New Trajectory of *Kyai*’s Political Participation in Contemporary Indonesia: Rises, Challenges, and Opportunities,” *Indonesian Journal of Political Studies (Ijps)* 2, no. 2 (2022).

¹¹ Susan Banducci, and Jeffrey A. Karp, “How Elections Change the Way Citizens View the Political System: Campaigns, Media Effects and Electoral Outcomes in Comparative Perspective,” *British Journal of Political Science* 33, no. 3 (2003).

¹² Ach Nurholis Majid, and Fitrah Sugiarto, “Socio-Religious Education of the *Tèngka* Tradition in the Madura Community,” *Inferensi Jurnal Penelitian Sosial Keagamaan* 16, no. 1 (2022); Matthew McCaffrey, and Joseph Salerno, “A Theory of Political Entrepreneurship,” *Modern Economy* 02, no. 04 (2011).

¹³ Muhammad Zuhdi, “Challenging Moderate Muslims: Indonesia’s Muslim Schools in the Midst of Religious Conservatism,” *Religions* 9, no. 10 (2018).

Regrettably, the government leader garnered the least legitimacy following the educators. It puts *kiai* at the center of both religious life and political decision-making.¹⁴ As confirmed by one of my respondents from the fieldwork, she expressed her hesitance to defy the *kiai*, as she believes this will result in catastrophe in her life. This implies that the *kiai* may attain complete subservience from their adherents due to his symbolic capital, the status of *kiai*.

The centrality of religious authority in Madurese electoral politics is most clearly evidenced by the pervasive reliance on the *fatwa* issued by the *ulama* or *kiai*. For many voters, the decision-making process is fundamentally rooted in their social identity as *santri*, which fosters a perceived moral obligation to adhere strictly to the guidance of their religious mentors. This cultural framework of obedience is further reinforced by a deep-seated reverence for the *kiai* within the broader social hierarchy; such respect often leads community members to refrain from taking independent political action or making significant electoral choices without the legitimizing force of a formal *fatwa*.¹⁵

Kiai dominance in local politics is evident in their repeated participation in regional elections across the four regencies of Bangkalan, Sampang, Pamekasan, and Sumenep. In recent years, however, their integrity as political leaders has come under increasing scrutiny due to involvement in corruption cases, including those associated with Fuad Amin and Ahmad Syafii. These developments raise important questions about whether a shift is occurring from a patronage-based political orientation toward more rational and critical voting behavior, as well as whether there are corresponding changes in the political attitudes and conduct of Madurese voters. Notwithstanding the legal status and significant influence of *kiai*, rural–urban divisions substantially shape

¹⁴ Ahmad Najib Burhani, “Al-Tawassuṭ Wa-L I’tidāl: The NU and Moderatism in Indonesian Islam,” *Asian Journal of Social Science* 40, no. 5-6 (2012).

¹⁵ Interviews conducted in July 2018 with Moh. Ali Makki -a santri from Sumenep- (28/09/2018) and Subairi -a community leader in Pamekasan (15/09/2018).

political behavior. Urbanization is generally associated with higher levels of education, greater access to information, and increased social diversity, factors that may enhance political autonomy. Consequently, urban voters are more likely to question authority, critically evaluate candidates, and prioritize policy considerations over personal or communal ties. This pattern is also increasingly observable among santri communities.¹⁶

Drawing on Giddens, social ties extend across temporal and spatial dimensions. Contemporary societies enable individuals to sustain social connections beyond their immediate physical presence. In traditional communities, societies often exhibit robust social bonds due to the proximity of individuals.¹⁷ Reflecting from Giddens', rural political situations potentially have tighter social networks and stronger hierarchies. Rural religious leaders have a greater direct impact on daily life that encourage reverence and morality. In such environments, patron–client ties are beneficial for political mobilization, and voting behavior reflects social norms rather than individual appraisal.

Recent studies warn against considering rural voters as simply conventional or irrational.¹⁸ Even in rural areas, education, media, and migration can change electoral evaluations. Politics rationalizes as voters mix moral guidance with performance-based assessment. This uneven, context-dependent process produces varied political conduct within the same location.

In the subsequent sections, we examine how *santri*, university students, and the general population in Madura responded to the current political circumstances in Indonesia and their positioning in the elections.

¹⁶ Wahid Abdulrahman, “The *Santri* Networks and the Islamic Political Turn in Indonesia.”

¹⁷ Anthony Giddens, and Christopher Pierson, *Conversations with Anthony Giddens : Making Sense of Modernity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998).

¹⁸ Amalinda Savirani, and Edward Aspinall, “Adversarial Linkages: The Urban Poor and Electoral Politics in Jakarta,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 36, no. 3 (2017).

***Santri*: Moral Authority and Selective Rationality**

This study identifies four voter typologies among *santri*, the educated class, and the general population in Madura: skeptical voters, traditionalists, rationalists, and critical voters. Among *santri* respondents, the rationalist typology is the most prevalent. Of the eight *santri* informants, four demonstrated a clear inclination toward rationalist behavior, citing personal experience as a primary factor in evaluating political candidates. Supporting secondary data further confirm that candidates' track records significantly influence voter preferences; individuals with strong performance histories are more likely to be positively remembered by voters and to possess greater prospects for re-election.

The shift toward more rationalist evaluation among certain *santri* groups is also reflected in the high importance they assign to candidates' administrative credentials. For these voters, a proven record in governance constitutes a paramount qualification, serving as a reliable indicator of a candidate's capacity to understand political and bureaucratic complexities comprehensively. This perspective suggests that the experiential value of prior officeholding is regarded as the most effective preparation for leadership. It indicates that even within traditionally religious constituencies, professional competence and experiential learning are increasingly scrutinized as essential components of political legitimacy.¹⁹

Conversely, two *santri* interviewees categorized within the traditionalist typology expressed the expectation that *kiai* should address prevailing moral issues, particularly those affecting younger generations. The respondents emphasized that *kiai* are widely perceived as trustworthy and honest leaders—qualities they consider lacking in many contemporary political figures. Moreover, *kiai* are highly regarded as spiritual authorities and ethical exemplars within their communities.

¹⁹ Interview with Moh. Holil, a *santri* from Sampang (24/08/2018).

Traditionalist voters are generally characterized by a strong ideological orientation and tend not to prioritize political party programs or platforms in their decision-making processes. Instead, their choices are often shaped by socio-cultural proximity, ancestral ties, religious affiliation, and shared values. This group places greater importance on candidates' personal character, historical legacy, and moral integrity than on formal political agendas. Traditionalist voters are also commonly associated with lower levels of formal education and more conservative outlooks, and they can be mobilized effectively during electoral campaigns due to their strong loyalty and devotion.

The hybrid nature of political preferences among the *santri* is further highlighted by the simultaneous prioritization of professional competence and religious pedigree. While many voters within this group emphasize the necessity of a commendable work program as a baseline for selection, their final decision is often deeply influenced by the candidate's personal and spiritual stature. Specifically, a candidate's status within the *kiai* lineage serves as a decisive "solidifier" for the vote; it provides a layer of cultural and moral legitimacy that complements, rather than replaces, the demand for clear administrative goals.²⁰

Among *santri*, voting behavior is strongly shaped by moral guidance from religious authorities. Electoral choices are commonly framed as an extension of religious obedience, with *kiai* endorsements interpreted as moral directives rather than political preferences. Many *santri* described voting as a matter of *barakah* (blessing), and thus, emphasizing the importance of following religious advice to ensure both personal virtue and communal harmony. In this context, political participation is embedded in religious discipline and collective norms cultivated within *pesantren* environments.

Loyalty to *pesantren* networks further reinforces this pattern. Candidates affiliated with respected religious institutions or prominent

²⁰ Interview with Habibullah, a *santri* from Pamekasan (28/09/2018).

kiai are often perceived as morally legitimate, regardless of their party affiliation. However, such adherence is not entirely uncritical. Some *santri* report considering basic indicators of personal integrity or leadership experience, particularly when religious authorities themselves express reservations about certain candidates. When present, performance evaluation tends to remain limited and secondary, mediated through religious endorsement rather than grounded in independent assessment.

Educated Voters: Rational Evaluation and Conditional Religiosity

In this study, two participants were classified as skeptical voters. This category is characterized by the persistence of conventional voting practices among *santri* voters, including a certain degree of tolerance toward vote-buying. This pattern is further supported by accounts from other respondents who emphasized the role of education in shaping electoral behavior. Individuals with higher levels of educational attainment tend to adopt more analytical approaches to decision-making, demonstrating a greater capacity to evaluate, compare, and select candidates whose programs and policy agendas align with the needs and expectations of their communities.

Additional findings concerning the typology of educated voters indicate that five informants can be categorized primarily as rational voters. These respondents identified prior experience in bureaucratic administration and political activity as the principal criteria for candidate selection. Abd. Rahman, a member of the Bangkalan Regional House of Representatives (DPRD) in 2018, supports this pattern, noting that such voters—predominantly university graduates or individuals with advanced educational backgrounds—tend to prioritize candidates' competence and proven governing capacity.²¹ Their decision-making processes extend beyond populist appeal and instead focus on administrative capability and readiness to perform governmental responsibilities effectively.

²¹ Interview with Abd. Rahman—a member of the Bangkalan Regional House of Representatives (DPRD), 24/08/2018.

This tendency reflects a broader shift among educated voters toward performance-based and policy-oriented political engagement.

Theoretically, this voter type is defined by minimal attachment to ideological affiliations with specific political parties or candidates. Although factors such as religious affiliation, cultural background, traditional values, and psychographic characteristics may be taken into account, they do not play a decisive role in shaping electoral choices. Instead, these voters prioritize the demonstrated performance and track record of political parties or candidates over ideological orientation or value-based alignment.

This article also identified two respondents as traditionalist voters, motivated by the belief that religious leaders possess profound knowledge of Islamic teachings, command devoted followings, and exhibit charismatic authority. According to these respondents, such figures gain public support not through monetary incentives or vote-buying practices, but through religious loyalty, often expressed in the principle *sami'a na wa ata'a na* (we hear and we obey) toward the *kiai*.

Ultimately, one respondent was classified as a skeptical voter whose electoral choice was influenced by monetary incentives, specifically a preference for candidates who provided cash rewards. Skeptical voters typically exhibit weak ideological attachment to political parties or candidates and demonstrate limited interest in political participation. Their voting decisions are shaped less by policy platforms or governmental programs than by pragmatic considerations. In many cases, this pragmatism manifests in practices associated with vote-buying, which may extend beyond direct financial payments to include more subtle inducements, such as the distribution of food aid, support for infrastructure projects (e.g., mosque construction), or other tangible benefits that indirectly shape voter preferences without appearing overtly transactional.

Educated voters, particularly university students and urban professionals, demonstrated a more evaluative approach to electoral decision-making. Although religious identity remained a relevant consideration, it did not function as an unconditional determinant of political choice. Informants within this group frequently emphasized candidates' policy programs, administrative competence, leadership experience, and perceived integrity when explaining their voting preferences.

Among educated and activist cohorts, the criteria for leadership shifted toward a dual assessment encompassing both strategic planning capacity and interpersonal ethics. For these voters, the clarity of a candidate's vision and mission was regarded as a principal determinant of developmental success and a central reference point for establishing regional priorities. This rational orientation was complemented by careful scrutiny of candidates' ethical dispositions, particularly their public demeanor. Respondents expressed a marked preference for individuals perceived as humble and approachable, whereas candidates viewed as patronizing or condescending were often met with disapproval. Consequently, within this demographic, electoral support appeared contingent upon a synthesis of forward-looking policy agendas and adherence to established norms of social conduct.²²

Religious credentials were considered relevant but conditional. Candidates with religious backgrounds were expected to demonstrate tangible governing capacity rather than rely solely on moral authority. Several respondents expressed skepticism toward religious leaders involved in corruption scandals, indicating declining tolerance for moral claims unsupported by performance. This group also showed a greater willingness to question religious endorsements, particularly when alternative candidates were perceived as more competent, transparent, or administratively capable.

²² Interviews with Ahmadi—a university student from Pamekasan (15/09/2018), and Mathur Husyairi—an activist from Bangkalan (20/07/2018).

Community Members in General: Pragmatism and Transactional Logic

Among members of the general public, the majority of voters were classified as rational voters, with six respondents falling into this category. Their principal consideration was the significance of a candidate's prior experience in government or bureaucratic institutions. Such individuals may be described as calculative rational voters—namely, those who base their political preferences on logical reasoning and careful deliberation.²³ This voter type typically possesses relatively strong educational backgrounds or broad political knowledge, enabling them to make deliberate, systematic, and well-informed electoral decisions.

One respondent was categorized as a skeptical voter, characterized by a preference for material incentives and a tendency to support candidates who offer the greatest financial rewards. Such behavior is more likely to emerge in electoral contexts dominated by familiar or homogeneous candidates, where voters perceive limited or unattractive alternatives. Under these conditions, skeptical voters often express dissatisfaction, as they discern no substantive differences among competing candidates. Consequently, they prioritize immediate tangible benefits, such as food packages or cash assistance, rather than policy platforms or programmatic considerations.

The pragmatism of the broader community is increasingly reflected in a preference for tangible outcomes rather than rhetorical assurances, thereby shifting the basis of political legitimacy toward demonstrable infrastructure achievements. Within this demographic, visible public works—particularly road rehabilitation—function as the principal indicator of a candidate's competence and commitment to local welfare. This orientation is deeply embedded in local political culture, as illustrated by the popular adage *mon tak pernah ngaspal jhelen*

²³ Efriza, *Political Explore: Sebuah Kajian Ilmu Politik* (Bandung: CV. Alfabeta, 2012).

ma'pas ephelayah (“if they have never paved the road, do not expect to be chosen”), which frames prior performance as a non-negotiable condition for electoral support. Nevertheless, this emphasis on material results may also foster transactional reasoning among so-called skeptical voters. In such instances, the electoral process is interpreted through an economic calculus, whereby individuals may accept financial incentives and ultimately cast their votes for the candidate offering the most substantial immediate benefit.²⁴

The final group identified in this study is that of critical voters, represented by one respondent. This voter type prioritizes leadership quality as the primary criterion in candidate selection. For critical voters, effective leadership is closely associated with accountability, integrity, and a strong sense of responsibility in the execution of public duties.

These findings carry important implications for the future of local democracy in Madura. On the one hand, the growing rational orientation among urban voters suggests an improvement in the quality of democratic participation, as individuals increasingly evaluate candidates on the basis of performance, policy platforms, and personal integrity. This trend indicates that the strength of democracy depends not only on voter turnout but also on the depth of political awareness and critical engagement among the electorate. On the other hand, the continued predominance of traditionalist voters in rural areas reflects the persistence of religious patronage structures. In the absence of sufficient political education, such conditions may constrain broader transformation toward a more participatory and deliberative democratic culture.

These dynamics raise an important question: will the rational voting patterns observed in urban settings eventually influence rural communities, or will longstanding historical and cultural ties to religious authorities continue to reinforce traditional political alignments? The

²⁴ Interviews with Ismail—a member of the DPRD Pamekasan (21/09/2018), and Mina—a community member from Sampang (25/07/2018).

central challenge for the future of democracy in Madura lies in fostering critical political awareness while simultaneously respecting deeply rooted social structures. In this regard, the roles of education, media institutions, and political parties are crucial in bridging the political divide between rural and urban populations and in guiding the democratization process toward a more substantive and inclusive trajectory.

The voting behavior of the general public members reflected a more pragmatic and heterogeneous logic. Many voters combined respect for religious authority with practical considerations such as personal benefit, social pressure, and short-term incentives. Religious endorsements were acknowledged as influential, particularly in shaping initial preferences, but they did not always translate into final voting decisions.

Transactional practices, including money politics and material inducements, were frequently mentioned as part of the electoral landscape. For some voters, especially those in economically vulnerable positions, immediate material benefits outweighed both religious guidance and programmatic considerations. This group demonstrated flexible electoral behavior, shifting support depending on situational factors rather than sustained ideological or moral commitments.

Rural–Urban Differentiation

This section analyzes voter typologies across rural and urban clusters following an assessment of variations in voting behavior among the santri cluster, university-educated populations, and members of the general public. Differences in electoral behavior between rural and urban areas have long constituted a central concern in electoral studies. Urban voters typically benefit from greater access to information, higher levels of formal education, and broader exposure to diverse political discourse. These conditions tend to foster the development of more rational and issue-oriented approaches to electoral decision-making.

In contrast, voters in rural areas, including many parts of Madura, tend to adhere to traditional voting patterns rooted in loyalty to local figures and socio-religious networks. Traditional voters, more prevalent in rural settings, typically prioritize cultural and religious proximity and are often influenced by charismatic leaders such as *kiai*. This pattern reflects the enduring role of communal and identity-based considerations in electoral decision-making, particularly in regions where religious authority remains influential.

In these rural contexts, voters generally place limited importance on politicians' policy agendas or proposed initiatives. Their political choices are predominantly shaped by social ties and established authority figures. By contrast, urban voters demonstrate greater rationality and critical evaluation, considering contemporary issues, candidates' past performance, and the feasibility of proposed policies in meeting societal needs. This trend aligns with rational choice theory, which conceptualizes voting behavior as the outcome of individual cost-benefit analyses, with decisions driven by perceived personal or communal advantages.

These disparities indicate a gradual shift from identity-based voting toward performance- and program-based decision-making, particularly in increasingly urbanized areas. Consequently, analyses of voting behavior in Indonesia must rigorously account for social and cultural influences. The divergent dynamics between rural and urban populations produce distinct patterns of political engagement, shaped by local culture, access to information, and exposure to political discourse.

In Madura, these contrasts are especially pronounced. In rural regions, allegiance to *kiai* and adherence to traditional values remain the primary determinants of electoral choice. Emotional attachment and religious identity often lead voters in these areas to rely on non-rational factors. Conversely, urban populations have experienced a marked shift toward more deliberative voting behavior. University students and other educated communities typically evaluate candidates based on personal

qualities, the practicality of policy proposals, and demonstrated leadership credentials. A typology of discerning voters is emerging in these urban environments—individuals who weigh both religious symbolism and the substantive merits of policy ideas and ethical leadership. Nevertheless, Islam continues to shape political behavior as a value system, even as it no longer functions as the sole source of political authority.

In summary, major disparities were seen between rural and urban voting environments. In rural regions, voting behavior was predominantly authority-centered, with religious leaders having direct influence via intimate social connections and regular interactions. Voting decisions were frequently communal, influenced by societal norms and expectations of compliance.

Urban environments exhibited a heightened focus on performance-oriented assessment. Urban voters indicated increased exposure to political knowledge, enhanced independence from religious networks, and a heightened focus on candidate competency and policy objectives. Although religious identity was prominent, it served as one of several considerations rather than a determining element.

Four Identified Voter Typologies from the Field

Typology	Core Logic	Social Context
Traditional	Religious obedience	Rural santri
Rational	Performance-based evaluation	Urban educated voters
Critical	Party and policy scrutiny	University students
Skeptical	Material incentives	Marginal and economically vulnerable voters

Conditional Transformation of Islamic Authority

The findings show that democratic competition in Madura has not weakened Islamic authority; rather, it has transformed it conditionally. Instead of exerting unconditional control over voter behavior, religious leaders now adapt and negotiate to maintain influence. Traditionally, *kiai*

earned respect as Islamic leaders and preachers through extensive religious study and recognized credentials, which provided the cultural capital needed to secure prominent roles within Indonesia's Islamic community.²⁵

Today, *kiai* continue to serve as moral and spiritual reference points, but voters increasingly base their support on the leaders' perceived integrity, administrative competence, and adherence to democratic norms. Thus, religious authority no longer stems solely from status or institutional affiliation; leaders maintain influence by combining moral legitimacy with effective, demonstrable leadership.

This change undermines existing narratives that depict Islamic power in local Indonesian politics as either consistently strong or progressively diminishing. The Madura situation indicates a reconfiguration where religious authority retains its influence yet is open to assessment and challenge. Corruption scandals involving *kiai*-politicians vividly highlight this shift: although religious credentials still command respect, they no longer ensure electoral support. Authority persists not by isolating itself from democratic principles, but by selectively adapting to them. This conditionality is a notable shift from previous kinds of religious brokerage based on uncritical compliance.

The primary theoretical contribution of this study lies in identifying a process of rationalization that occurs independently of secularization. The findings show that voters' increasing reliance on rational criteria—such as performance, competence, and policy evaluation—does not inherently marginalize Islam in electoral politics. Instead, religious factors coexist with analytical political reasoning, integrating into voters' moral frameworks while informing their deliberations.

This trend challenges linear models of political modernization that assume a zero-sum relationship between religion and rationality. Neo-modernist Islam in Indonesia affirms modernity and social pluralism

²⁵ Martin Sláma, "A Subtle Economy of Time: Social Media and the Transformation of Indonesia's Islamic Preacher Economy," *Economic Anthropology* 4, no. 1 (2017).

while supporting democratic reform, thereby refuting claims that Islam is inherently incompatible with rational political engagement. In Madura, voters retain respect for religious authority even as they develop political rationality; they reinterpret religious guidance to align with democratic expectations. Islam provides ethical direction and moral boundaries, while rational evaluation shapes the selection of candidates. The coexistence of multiple decision-making logics highlights the inadequacy of secularization-based explanations for voter behavior in Muslim democracies and underscores the need for more nuanced frameworks of political reasoning.

Urbanization and enhanced educational access are essential elements reshaping power relations and electoral behavior. In Indonesia, increased access to education causally decreases religiosity and lessens the impact of religious factors on voting behavior; however, the findings presented does not account for urbanization or wider shifts in authority.²⁶ Educated and urban voters in Madura demonstrate an enhanced capacity to acquire political knowledge, assess candidates, and question traditional sources of authority. This does not indicate a rejection of religious leadership, but rather a reconfiguration of its role in political decision-making. Religious authority is increasingly expected to adhere to principles of accountability, transparency, and competence.

This transition represents a broader process of democratic education, in which continuous electoral engagement and exposure to political competition cultivate critical citizenship. Voters increasingly evaluate candidates based on ethical conduct and administrative competence, prioritizing individual discernment over communal loyalty. The process proceeds unevenly across social and geographic contexts, producing differences between rural and urban areas and among social groups. Democratic learning, therefore, reconfigures rather than

²⁶ Kazuya Masuda, and Muhammad Halley Yudhistira, "Does Education Secularize the Islamic Population? The Effect of Years of Schooling on Religiosity, Voting, and Pluralism in Indonesia," *World Development* 130 (2020).

replaces established authority structures.

The case of Madura carries broader implications for the study of Islam and politics. First, it challenges binary frameworks that depict Islam and democracy as inherently incompatible or oppositional. The findings indicate that Islamic authority can adapt to democratic institutions while retaining social significance. Second, this study contributes to Islamic political sociology by highlighting the emergence of hybrid political rationality, in which moral-religious considerations and rational evaluation operate as mutually constitutive rather than mutually exclusive factors.

This perspective calls for a reevaluation of how scholars conceptualize religious power in electoral contexts. Islamic influence should be understood as dynamic and contextually adaptive rather than residual or obstructive. The study further shows that Muslim electorates are internally diverse, shaped by intersecting influences of authority, reason, and pragmatism that drive political behavior. These insights extend beyond Madura, offering analytical tools for understanding electoral politics in other Muslim-majority societies undergoing democratic consolidation.

Conclusion

The article reveals that religious authority does not exclusively shape voter behavior in Madura's municipal elections. Instead, voters make decisions by balancing multiple social and spatial considerations. While Islamic leaders continue to exert influence, their guidance is no longer absolute. Voters increasingly weigh religious advice alongside candidates' competence, integrity, and track record. This pattern demonstrates that democratic engagement in Madura reflects a synthesis of traditional authority and rational deliberation.

In the broader discourse on religion and democracy, the findings introduce the notion of conditional Islamic authority, illustrating how religious power adapts to democratic contexts rather than diminishing.

By highlighting a process of rationalization that operates independently of secularization, the study challenges linear modernization theories that assume democratic development inevitably undermines religious influence. These insights extend beyond Madura, offering a framework to understand how religious authority interacts with competitive local politics in other Muslim-majority settings.

The results also carry significant policy implications. Political parties should prioritize candidate qualifications, integrity, and policy proposals over symbolic religious endorsements. Civic education programs can strengthen voters' analytical abilities without undermining religious values. Furthermore, institutional reforms and enforcement measures that reduce the appeal of transactional voting—especially among economically disadvantaged groups—are essential for curbing clientelism and minimizing the influence of money politics.

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