

Local Democracy and the Challenge of Legitimacy: The Study of Voter Participation in the 2024 Merangin Regional Election in Rantau Limau Manis Village, Tabir Ilir District

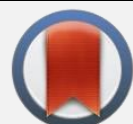
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Abstrak

Abstract The phenomenon of low voter result in the 2024 Merangin Regional Election is examined in this paper, with particular attention to Rantau Limau Manis Village in Tabir Ilir District, which had a turnout rate of just 33.99%. Examining voter apathy's social, political, and structural causes as well as its effects on the legitimacy of local democratic governance are the goals of the study. Using a qualitative descriptive methodology, information was gathered by means of documentation, observation, and interviews with local voters, village authorities, and community leaders. This study employs the theories of political participation, rational choice, and legitimacy. The results show that political disillusionment, poor candidate-voter relationships, and a lack of political knowledge are the main causes of low involvement. According to KPU laws, the election results are still legally valid, but they don't have much social validity in practice. The study demonstrates that substantive representation is not necessarily a direct result of local procedural democracy. By highlighting the fact that local political participation is influenced more by cultural engagement and communal trust than by national-level political structures, this micro-level analysis offers a fresh perspective on electoral studies in Indonesia. In order to restore confidence in electoral institutions, contextualized political education including community, religious, and traditional leaders is necessary to strengthen participatory democracy in rural areas.

Abstrak fenomena rendahnya partisipasi pemilih dalam Pemilihan Kepala Daerah (Pilkada) Merangin tahun 2024, dengan fokus khusus pada Desa Rantau Limau Manis di Kecamatan Tabir Ilir yang mencatat tingkat partisipasi hanya sebesar 33,99%. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk menganalisis penyebab sosial, politik, dan struktural dari sikap apatis pemilih serta dampaknya terhadap legitimasi tata kelola demokrasi lokal. Dengan menggunakan metodologi deskriptif kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui studi dokumentasi, observasi, dan wawancara dengan pemilih setempat, perangkat desa, serta tokoh masyarakat. Penelitian ini menggunakan teori partisipasi politik, pilihan rasional, dan legitimasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kekecewaan politik, hubungan yang kurang baik antara kandidat dan pemilih, serta minimnya pengetahuan politik menjadi penyebab utama rendahnya partisipasi. Meskipun secara hukum hasil pemilihan tetap sah menurut aturan KPU, tetapi secara praktis hasil tersebut kurang memiliki legitimasi sosial. Studi ini membuktikan bahwa representasi substantif tidak serta-merta menjadi hasil langsung dari demokrasi prosedural di tingkat lokal. Dengan menyoroti fakta bahwa partisipasi politik lokal lebih dipengaruhi oleh keterlibatan budaya dan kepercayaan komunal dibandingkan struktur politik tingkat nasional, analisis pada tingkat mikro ini menawarkan perspektif baru dalam studi pemilu di Indonesia. Guna memulihkan kepercayaan terhadap lembaga penyelenggara pemilu dan memperkuat demokrasi partisipatif di wilayah pedesaan, diperlukan pendidikan politik yang kontekstual dengan melibatkan tokoh masyarakat, tokoh agama, dan tokoh adat.

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Introduction

One of the main pillars of Indonesia's constitutional democratic system, a result of the 1998 reforms, is the election of regional heads (Pilkada). The principle of popular sovereignty, outlined in Pasal 1, Ayat 2 UUD 1945, is implemented at the local level through Pilkada, in which the people directly elect who will manage public affairs in their region ([Constitutional Court of the Republic of Indonesia, 1945](#)). The belief that "sovereignty rests with the people" underpins the implementation of direct Pilkada as a means of distributing political power after the reforms.

Legally, the mechanism for implementing the Regional Elections is regulated in Law Number 1 of 2015 concerning the Stipulation of Government Regulation in Lieu of Law Number 1 of 2014, as last amended by Law Number 6 of 2020, and Law Number 10 of 2016. This regulation establishes the principles of holding elections that are democratic, honest, fair, effective, efficient, and accountable ([Ministry of State Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, 2016, 2020](#)). Through PKPU No. 2 of 2024, the General Elections Commission (KPU) determined the stages and schedule for the 2024 Simultaneous Regional Elections, including the principle of LUBER JURDIL, the principle of organizer independence, and the voting schedule for Wednesday, November 27, 2024 ([KPU RI, 2024](#)).

From a constitutional perspective, regional elections (Pilkada) are closely linked to regional autonomy policies, as stipulated in Law Number 23 of 2014 concerning Regional Government. Political decentralization allows communities to strengthen social control over public policy at the regional level and brings government accountability closer ([Ministry of State Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, 2014](#)). Therefore, regional elections are not only an election process but also a tool to encourage the democratization of local government and policy.

From an empirical perspective, public participation plays a crucial role in determining the quality of regional elections. Voter participation is a crucial means of demonstrating the legitimacy of the government's electoral and regional election results (Norris, 2011). Low participation can indicate distrust in election organizers and the political system, while high participation can reflect political apathy, distrust in candidates, or weak political socialization ([Lijphart, 1997](#); [Supriatna, 2017](#)). As demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic, voter

participation in the 2020 Simultaneous Regional Elections reached 76.09%, indicating a commitment by organizers and citizens to electoral democracy (KPU RI, 2020).

However, in some regions, the phenomenon of declining voter participation remains a serious issue that requires attention. A study by Putra (2017) showed that factors such as political education, the effectiveness of KPU (General Elections Commission) outreach, levels of trust in candidates, and local socio-economic contexts significantly influence differences in participation levels across regions. Furthermore, citizens' decisions to exercise their right to vote are also influenced by structural factors such as geography, distance from polling stations (TPS), and weather (Blais, 2000; Raharusun, 2017).

The 2024 Regent and Vice Regent Election is an important opportunity for Merangin Regency, Jambi Province, to determine its five-year development goals. Therefore, community participation in each village is crucial for the quality of the implementation and legitimacy of the results of the 2024 Merangin Pilkada. Rantau Limau Manis Village in Tabir Ilir District is one of the areas that is taken into account because it has unique socio-economic and geographical characteristics: the majority of its population are farmers, have different levels of education, and have access to political information. Because of these circumstances, Rantau Limau Manis Village is representative for observing the level of voter participation in the 2024 Pilkada. A previous study by Ahmad et. al. (2023) in the Jambi region showed that political participation in rural areas tends to vary depending on how close the candidate is to the local community and how intensive the face-to-face campaign is conducted.

In addition to internal voter factors, the dynamics of candidates and political parties also influence public participation. A study by Asrifai (2020) found that clientelistic networks and kinship politics often influence local politics in the regions. This can shift voter orientation from rational to emotional, resulting in more personalistic rather than programmatic participation patterns. From an institutional perspective, the performance of election organizers is also crucial and decisive. The level of public trust is directly influenced by the results of outreach, voter education, and oversight conducted by the General Elections Commission (KPU) and Elections Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu RI, 2024; KPU RI, 2024). Maintaining the integrity of the electoral process is greatly influenced by the implementation of rules regarding civil servant neutrality, money politics, and the use of state facilities (Al Izzati et al., 2024).

Therefore, research on voter participation in the 2024 Merangin regional elections, particularly in Rantau Limau Manis Village, holds strategic value because it allows us to evaluate the progress of local democracy. This analysis can help strengthen election governance, improve public political education, and develop participatory strategies for future regional elections. It is hoped that the results of this study can serve as an empirical reference for improving local democracy policies in Indonesia by understanding the factors that drive and inhibit participation.

Theoretically, this research stems from a research gap in the study of voter participation in Indonesia. Previous research has focused on analyzing macro-structural factors such as party behavior, the national electoral system, and other institutional factors (Surbakti, 2010; Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). This method often ignores the micro-realities at the village level, where social structures, patronage relationships, and community political education significantly influence electoral behavior. However, as De Sousa et al. (2021) notes, basic political engagement and the community's ability to understand and evaluate the electoral process are two factors that determine the quality of local democracy.

This research is strategically positioned to bridge this gap by offering a micro-local perspective that highlights the dynamics of voter participation in the context of a rural village in Jambi. Rantau Limau Manis Village in Tabir Ilir District provides a space to study the social, economic, and psychological factors that led to low community participation (33.99%) in the 2024 Merangin Regional Election. This method aligns with the idea of Verba, Nie, and Kim (1978) that political participation depends on the surrounding social context. This method also

strengthens Norris's (2013) argument that micro-electoral analysis is crucial for determining the quality of substantive democracy.

Based on a theoretical perspective, this study also contributes to the development of constitutional democracy and political participation theory in Indonesia. First, this study combines the constitutional legal framework, particularly the principle of popular sovereignty as stated in Article 1 paragraph (2) and Article 28D paragraph (3) of the 1945 Constitution, by examining how voters behave at the local level. This method provides a new understanding that low voter participation is a legal and constitutional problem related to the fulfillment of citizens' political rights, as well as a social phenomenon (Asshiddiqie, 2005; Isra, 2020).

Second, this study adapts village democracy—democracy rooted in village social structures and informal leadership styles—to expand classical political participation theory. This method enriches Verba et al.'s (1978) theoretical framework with the political situation in rural Indonesia. This situation is characterized by the strong influence of local elites, low political literacy, and very limited access to political information (Budiardjo, 2008; Aspinall, 2013). Therefore, this study provides a new conceptual understanding of how rural social structures influence the exercise of citizens' constitutional right to elect regional leaders.

Third, the findings of this study have the potential to help strengthen the notion of local democratic legitimacy, where voter participation is seen as the level of public trust in democratic mechanisms and political institutions (Norris, 2011; Norris, 2013). This study, using the 2024 Merangin Pilkada as a case study, demonstrates that citizen involvement and interest in the local political process determine the legitimacy of the election results.

Therefore, this study offers a cross-disciplinary conceptual framework that combines political science, local political sociology, and constitutional law to fill this gap in the literature. It is hoped that this method can serve as a model for future research examining rural citizen political participation in Indonesia's constitutional democracy.

Theory Framework

A multifaceted theoretical framework in this study covering political behavior, legitimacy, and democratic involvement is necessary for the examination of voter turnout in municipal elections. Political participation theory, rational choice and political efficacy theory, and legitimacy theory in democratic governance are the three main theoretical stances that are integrated in this study.

Political participation is defined as the activities of citizens intended to influence political decision-making or government action (Verba, Nie, & Kim, 1978). Participation, particularly through voting, is a key component of political representation in democracies. According to Almond and Verba (1963) in *The Civic Culture*, political modernization and social structure have an impact on participation culture. As a result, rural communities may exhibit lower levels of involvement because they have less access to political indoctrination and institutional resources. Additionally, Verba et al. (1978) suggest that mobilization networks, psychological engagement, and resources all have an impact on participation. Participation drops when local populations don't have access to political resources or think elections aren't relevant to their daily issues. This framework is necessary to comprehend why, in spite of being a part of an otherwise competitive regional election, communities like Rantau Limau Manis show disproportionately low voter turnout.

According to Blais (2000) and Downs (1957), rational choice theory explains voter turnout by stating that people only cast ballots when they believe the advantages exceed the disadvantages. The perceived value of voting may decline in rural areas like Tabir Ilir District since there is little correlation between the welfare of citizens and the results of policies.

One important factor is political efficacy, or the belief that one's vote may affect political results (Campbell et al., 1960). People believe their engagement is pointless when efficacy is poor. According to Norris (2011), this problem is linked to the "democratic deficit," in which

there are legal electoral procedures in place but voters feel alienated as a result of ineffective government. Historical clientelism and a lack of political education may contribute to this logical detachment in the Merangin context (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019).

In democratic government, legitimacy encompasses social and moral approval in addition to legal validity. Habermas (1997) makes a distinction between communicative legitimacy (public acceptance and justification) and procedural legitimacy (following the rules). Similarly, Asshiddiqie (2006) contends that in order to maintain public trust, Indonesian constitutional legitimacy must incorporate both procedural and substantive elements. This balance is challenged by low voter turnout. According to Lijphart (1997), the moral underpinnings of democracy are threatened by unequal involvement, which erodes representativeness and inclusivity. The resulting government finds it difficult to assert complete democratic legitimacy when elections are decided by a minority of voters. As a result, low turnout in Rantau Limau Manis suggests a possible lack of legitimacy that could undermine local government in addition to reflecting political indifference.

This study develops an integrated analytical model that places voter behavior within its sociopolitical context by fusing the theories of legitimacy, rational choice, and participation. Participation is seen as a sign of perceived legitimacy, political effectiveness, and community trust rather than just an individual choice. The strength of democracy at the local level is dependent on voters' subjective perceptions of the fairness and applicability of political institutions, as Heller (2001) highlights through micro-level election study.

In this regard, Rantau Limau Manis's low participation rate (33.99%) is a significant sign of brittle legitimacy and inadequate political socialization rather than merely a statistical oddity. In order to bridge the gap between procedural democracy and true representation, the theoretical framework emphasizes that increasing participation necessitates strengthening both institutional responsiveness and community-based political inclusion.

Methods

This research uses a qualitative approach with descriptive-analytical methods. This approach was chosen because the primary objective of the study was to understand the social and political phenomena underlying low voter participation in the 2024 Merangin Regional Election at the village level in depth and context. Qualitative research allows researchers to explore the meanings, perceptions, and motivations behind citizens' political behavior, rather than simply measuring participation levels quantitatively (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach is also combined with a juridical-normative analysis, given that the issues studied relate to the implementation of citizens' constitutional rights and the legitimacy of local government outcomes resulting from the election. Therefore, this research is interdisciplinary, combining empirical analysis of local political behavior with a normative review of constitutional law governing political participation.

The research was conducted in Rantau Limau Manis Village, Tabir Ilir District, Merangin Regency, Jambi Province. This location was purposively selected due to its very low voter turnout, representing only 33.99% of the total registered voters in the 2024 Merangin Regional Election. This phenomenon indicates structural and cultural issues in the implementation of local democracy that require in-depth examination.

The data used in this study consisted of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews with key informants, such as village officials, community leaders, voters, election organizers (the General Elections Commission (KPU) and the sub-district Election Supervisory Committee (Panwaslu), and representatives of candidate campaign teams. Secondary data was obtained through official documents of the Merangin Regency KPU, Bawaslu reports, related laws and regulations (UUD 1945, Law No. 10 of 2016, Law No. 7 of 2017), as well as previous research results and relevant scientific publications (Surbakti, 2010; Norris, 2011; Isra, 2020).

Data collection techniques were conducted through several methods, namely: interviews, direct observation, and documentation. In-depth interviews were used to gain a deeper understanding of residents' perceptions of the regional elections, the factors influencing their decision not to vote, and their views on the legitimacy of the election results. Direct observation was conducted to understand the socio-political conditions of the village, the residents' political communication networks, and the interactions between the community and the election organizers. Documentation included the collection of regional election archives, voter participation data from the General Elections Commission (KPU), local media reports, and relevant laws and regulations.

Data analysis was conducted qualitatively and interactively, referring to the model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2018), which includes three main stages: Data reduction—the process of selecting, simplifying, and grouping interview and observation data to identify key themes. Data presentation—organizing data in narrative form, tables, and thematic quotations to demonstrate patterns and relationships between variables. Conclusion drawing and verification—interpreting the meaning of the data in depth to answer the research questions and linking it to political participation theory and constitutional legal norms.

For the legal aspects, a statutory approach and a conceptual approach were used, as proposed by Marzuki (2017). These approaches were used to interpret legal provisions governing voting rights and political participation in the context of regional elections. Data validity was strengthened using source and method triangulation techniques. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing data from various informants and official documents, while method triangulation was conducted by combining interviews, observations, and document analysis. This aimed to ensure the consistency and accuracy of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Results and Discussion

Overview of Voter Participation in Rantau Limau Manis Village

Political participation is a key pillar of democracy as it serves as a mechanism for the people to express their political will and determine the direction of regional leadership. In the context of the 2024 Merangin Regional Elections, voter participation was generally relatively stable in most sub-districts, but in Rantau Limau Manis Village, Tabir Ilir District, the participation rate dropped drastically to 33.99%. Of the 1,842 registered permanent voters (DPT), only 626 exercised their right to vote. This data, sourced from the Merangin Regency General Elections Commission (KPU) report (2024), represents a local democratic anomaly, far below the district average of 71.2%. This figure is also lower than the national participation rate in the 2020 Simultaneous Regional Elections, which was 76.09% (KPU RI, 2020).

Empirically, low turnout rates reflect a democratic deficit at the village level—where elections are no longer understood as a space for the actualization of popular sovereignty, but rather as merely a formal ritual with little political significance. This condition aligns with Lijphart's (1997) argument that low turnout is a key indicator of the declining quality of participation in an electoral democracy system.

Field interviews revealed that several residents admitted to being reluctant to vote because they felt no candidate represented their aspirations. Others believed that "the results were predictable" or that "all the candidates are the same." This apathy indicates a crisis of trust in the political system and local candidates, ultimately reducing the political efficacy of villagers (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960).

The phenomenon of low voter participation in Rantau Limau Manis cannot be explained by a single factor, but rather results from the interaction of structural, cultural, and individual psychological factors. Structurally, limited democratic infrastructure is the primary cause of low voter participation. Rantau Limau Manis Village is approximately 25 km from the main

road and 50 km from Bangko City, with access roads largely dirt and difficult to navigate during the rainy season. This geographical condition makes it difficult for election organizers to distribute logistics and conduct outreach evenly. According to Voting Committee (PPS) officials, outreach activities by the Regency KPU were only conducted at several strategic points in the village and did not reach remote hamlets. As a result, some residents did not know the detailed voting times and locations. Blais (2000) emphasized that accessibility of information and logistics are key determinants of voting behavior; the higher the cost of voting, the less likely residents are to attend polling stations.

Furthermore, weak voter education programs also contributed to low participation. Outreach programs were primarily technical—explaining how to vote—without fostering political awareness about the importance of participation for the future of the village. Norris (2011) calls this the procedural democracy trap, where electoral institutions focus solely on administrative processes rather than strengthening participatory values.

Culturally, Rantau Limau Manis Village has a strong social structure based on kinship and patronage (Pahrudin HM, 2017; Pahrudin HM et. al., 2022). In this political cultural context, the decision to participate often follows the direction of local figures or political patrons who wield socio-economic influence. However, in the 2024 Regional Election, several informal village figures did not actively direct residents to vote due to fragmented support for the candidates. As is known, the 2024 Merangin Regional Election was contested by two candidate pairs: Syukur-Khafid and Nalim-Nilwan. Public figures in Rantau Limau Village were split in support between these two candidate pairs. Sociologically, many figures and residents of Rantau Limau Manis Village felt more emotionally attached to the Nalim-Nilwan pair because Nalim came from the Tabir Raya region, specifically West Tabir. Meanwhile, several other figures and residents supported the Syukur-Khafid pair. This aligns with statements from a number of informants indicating that geographical proximity and ethnicity are important factors influencing the political choices of the villagers. This phenomenon demonstrates what Verba, Nie, and Kim (1978) call the communal-based participation gap, where political mobilization depends on local leadership. When community leadership figures are passive or divided, community participation decreases.

Furthermore, interviews with residents revealed the perception that "politics is a city thing" or that "there are no direct benefits from regional elections." This view underscores the low political awareness of rural communities regarding the function of regional elections as a mechanism for controlling power. Research by Aspinall and Berenschot (2019) found that many rural communities in Indonesia view elections not as a means of representation, but as a means of distributing short-term resources, such as aid and village projects. When material expectations from regional elections are not met, participation declines dramatically. This means that political participation at the local level is determined not only by ideology or democratic commitment, but also by the pragmatic calculations of communities within a limited economic context.

Psychologically, the phenomenon of community participation in Rantau Limau Manis Village plays a significant role in explaining abstention. Based on interviews with several informants, most residents who did not vote admitted to distrusting the election process due to issues of money politics and the neutrality of election organizers. Some informants even stated that "the election results were rigged." This perception indicates a decline in trust in the integrity of election institutions. Norris (2011) argues that the legitimacy of modern democracy rests on trust in institutions—not just election results. When people lack confidence in the neutrality of the committee, candidates, or process, they will withdraw from participation.

Furthermore, low political efficacy—the belief that an individual's voice has an impact on outcomes—is a fundamental cause. Campbell et al. (1960) emphasized that individuals with low political efficacy tend to be passive in public affairs. In Rantau Limau Manis, this feeling of "political powerlessness" stems from past experiences: unfulfilled political promises,

development disparities between hamlets, and minimal communication between the village government and residents. One political promise consistently ignored by the government is the construction of a 25-km connecting road from the main road (Jalan Lintas Barat Sumatera) in Rantau Panjang to Rantau Limau Manis Village. This road remains in poor condition, largely dirt, riddled with potholes, and narrow, despite being the primary access point for the community. This phenomenon indicates a crisis of political representation at the micro-level, where residents feel alienated from local power structures. Within this framework, low participation is not simply an expression of indifference, but rather a silent protest against a political system perceived as unresponsive (Heller, 2001).

Historical Memory and the Social Construction of Threat

Low voter turnout has consequences far beyond mere attendance figures at polling stations. This phenomenon touches on the very heart of local democracy—the question of the legitimacy of the elected government. In the context of the 2024 Merangin Regional Election, specifically in Rantau Limau Manis Village, the turnout rate reached only 33.99%, meaning more than two-thirds of village residents did not exercise their right to vote. This situation not only raises questions about the effectiveness of the election administration but also shakes the foundations of the political, legal, and social legitimacy of the established regional government.

From a constitutional law perspective, regional elections held in compliance with all administrative and procedural requirements are still considered legally valid (*de jure*). This is in accordance with the principle of legality stipulated in Law Number 10 of 2016 concerning Regional Head Elections, which states that election results are recognized as long as the process meets the principles of directness, generality, freedom, confidentiality, honesty, and fairness (LUBER and JURDIL). However, the procedural validity of election results does not automatically guarantee the substantive legitimacy of the resulting government.

As explained by Asshiddiqie (2006), legitimacy in Indonesia's constitutional legal system has two main dimensions: formal-legal legitimacy and social legitimacy. Formal legitimacy is derived from compliance with applicable laws and regulations, while social legitimacy is derived from public recognition, trust, and acceptance of the established government. A local government with substantive support from only one-third of its citizens faces difficulties in claiming to be a true representation of the people's will.

Thus, low voter turnout indicates a gap between legality and legitimacy—a government that is legally legitimate but morally and socially weak. This situation can lead to a crisis of public trust in the authority of elected regional heads. As Habermas (1997) explained in his theory of communicative legitimacy, political power can only be considered legitimate if it arises from a participatory and rational process accepted by the citizens. If this participatory process does not occur, the government loses its moral basis as a public representative.

Furthermore, low turnout can have indirect legal consequences, such as an increased potential for election result disputes due to weak political support for the winner. In the context of state administrative law, this phenomenon can also impact government stability and the effectiveness of public policy implementation, as a government lacking strong support will struggle to implement programs without social resistance.

From a political perspective, voter turnout is a key indicator of the quality of democratic representation. Low turnout at polling stations reflects a diminished connection between citizens and competing candidates. In the case of Rantau Limau Manis, most citizens perceived that the competing candidates lacked significant program differences and had no tangible impact on their lives.

This phenomenon indicates a crisis of political representation, where the public no longer sees candidates as representing local aspirations, but rather as part of an elite distanced from the realities of the people. Lijphart (1997) asserts that low voter turnout has the potential to "erode the principle of representativeness, reduce political inclusiveness, and ultimately

threaten the moral foundations of democracy." In this context, the 2024 Merangin Regional Election in Rantau Limau Manis Village serves as a clear example of how democratic fatigue at the local level can weaken the relationship between citizens and power structures.

This crisis of political legitimacy directly impacts the ability of regional heads to implement policies effectively. Without strong political support from the public, every public policy—including those related to village infrastructure development, the distribution of social assistance, or the allocation of village funds—has the potential to face resistance. Low political support also makes it difficult for local governments to establish productive two-way communication with their constituents, creating a psychological and social distance between the government and citizens.

Norris (2011) calls this phenomenon a democratic deficit—a condition in which democratic institutions lose public trust due to a lack of meaningful participation. When citizens feel their votes have no impact, they withdraw from politics, creating a vicious cycle of apathy that ultimately leads to a decline in the quality of local democracy. Beyond the legal and political dimensions, low voter participation also has deeper social implications. Interviews in Rantau Limau Manis showed that most residents felt the regional elections "didn't bring change." For them, whoever wins the 2024 Merangin regional elections, their situation will remain unchanged. This view demonstrates a decline in social trust in local political institutions and election organizers.

Hemafitria et al. (2021) emphasized that low political participation at the village level reflects a decline in public trust in local government. When citizens feel unheard, they stop participating, and when they don't participate, government policies increasingly lose social legitimacy. This cycle is known as the cycle of apathy—distrust breeds disparticipation, and disparticipation reinforces distrust. Sociologically, this condition can also weaken social cohesion at the village level. Regional elections should be a space for consolidating citizen aspirations and a means of social integration. However, when citizens feel alienated from the political process, elections actually deepen the gap between participating and apathetic groups. In the long term, this can create social segregation that has the potential to hinder citizen cooperation in village development programs.

This phenomenon confirms Almond and Verba's (1963) view that political participation serves not only to elect leaders but also to build a sense of belonging to the political system itself. When citizens stop participating, they also stop identifying themselves as part of the system. As a result, politics loses its social dimension, and government loses its moral basis in society. Norris (2013) emphasizes the importance of micro-level electoral analysis to understand phenomena such as those in Rantau Limau Manis. Micro-level analysis allows researchers to see that low participation is not simply a technical issue but also reflects the social dynamics unique to rural communities. In many villages like Rantau Limau Manis, political participation tends to be instrumental—where residents only participate when there are strong material or symbolic incentives, such as proximity to a candidate, social assistance, or the prospect of a development project.

Residents have yet to view the regional elections as a substantive mechanism for determining the direction of their collective future. The democratic process here resembles a social ritual repeated every five years without any transformation of political awareness. This aligns with the theory of Verba, Nie, and Kim (1978) that community-level participation is more influenced by local social structures and community networks, rather than by national policies or institutional factors alone.

Therefore, to increase participation, national policies that merely provide procedural socialization from the General Elections Commission (KPU) are insufficient. A community-based sociocultural approach is needed, such as involving traditional leaders, religious leaders, teachers, and youth groups in ongoing political education. Such programs not only foster

political awareness but also strengthen residents' sense of ownership of the democratic process in their villages.

The low voter turnout in Rantau Limau Manis has three important implications. First, it impacts the quality of local democracy. Local democracy loses its substantive meaning when citizens no longer see the value in political participation. This situation has the potential to create elitist and non-inclusive local governments. Second, it impacts the legitimacy of local government. Governments born from low participation face challenges to social legitimacy, which can impact policy acceptance and the effectiveness of village development. Third, it impacts participation policy strategies. The General Elections Commission (KPU) and local governments need to adopt a community-based electoral education strategy, strengthening local social and cultural networks as instruments of political mobilization. In general, this research shows that increasing political participation at the village level cannot be achieved simply with a top-down approach; it must be rooted in local social structures, community trust, and ongoing political education.

Conclusion

The low voter turnout in the 2024 Merangin Regional Election in Rantau Limau Manis Village—which reached only 33.99%—indicates that electoral democracy at the local level is not yet fully functioning substantively. Although the election results remain legally valid under statutory provisions, from a political and social perspective, the resulting government's legitimacy is weakened. Local governments supported by only a small portion of the population face difficulties in claiming full political representation and building public trust.

From a constitutional law perspective, legitimacy stems not only from formal procedures but also from social acceptance by the community (Asshiddiqie, 2005). When a large proportion of citizens do not participate, social acceptance of the election results declines. This impacts government effectiveness, particularly in the formulation and implementation of policies at the village and regional levels. From a political perspective, these findings confirm Lijphart's (1997) thesis that low voter participation can erode representativeness and threaten the moral foundations of democracy. Citizens who do not participate in elections tend to feel marginalized, thus diminishing their trust in candidates and political institutions. As a result, regional elections lose their function as an instrument of popular sovereignty and become merely an administrative electoral ritual. From a social perspective, low participation indicates a distance between citizens and the local political process. As Hemafitria et al. (2021) noted, political apathy in villages often stems from disappointment over the minimal tangible impact of election results on community well-being. When regional elections are no longer perceived as a means of change, residents choose not to participate.

This research contributes novelty through a micro-local approach to village voter behavior. The analysis shows that the determinants of political participation in rural areas are more influenced by community factors—such as social structure, the role of local leaders, and village political culture—than by national variables (Verba, Nie, & Kim, 1978). Therefore, efforts to increase voter participation at the local level are not sufficient with national socialization policies alone but must be based on a socio-cultural approach involving community leaders, traditional institutions, and religious actors. Therefore, the success of local democracy is measured not only by the procedural and orderly implementation of regional elections, but also by the extent to which the community feels part of the political process. Voter participation is a key indicator of the legitimacy of local government. Therefore, increasing participation is not merely a technical issue of election administration but also part of a broader agenda of strengthening public trust, community-based political education, and revitalizing democratic culture at the grassroots level

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