



The Dynamics of Policy Communication and Electability: A Case Study of M. Syukur in the 2024 Merangin Regional Elections

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Abstract

This study examines M. Syukur's political communication strategies and their impact on his electability in the 2024 Merangin Regional Election. In an era of increasing demands for transparency, local issue responsiveness, and digital engagement, effective communication plays a key role in electoral success. Using a qualitative case study approach, this research draws on field observations, in-depth interviews, and content analysis of campaign materials, media coverage, and social media activity. The analysis is guided by political communication theory, agenda-setting, and electability models. The findings reveal that M. Syukur applied a hybrid communication strategy combining a strong digital presence—particularly on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok—with populist local narratives. His messaging emphasized accessibility, religious-cultural values, and economic empowerment, appealing to rural communities and young voters. Emotional and visual framing helped construct his image as a “candidate of the people,” while grassroots engagement strengthened voter trust. These strategies significantly influenced public perception and voter support across diverse demographics. The study highlights that multi-channel, culturally sensitive communication can enhance candidate visibility, credibility, and electability in local democratic contexts.

Keywords: political communication, electability, local elections, media, M. Syukur

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INTRODUCTION

The dynamics of local politics have changed dramatically in Indonesia during the decentralization era. The electoral process has emerged as a crucial tool for the local exercise of democratic rights since the introduction of direct regional head elections in 2005. In addition to gaining the support of political parties, candidates now need to use strategic and convincing political communication to win over the general public. The way candidates convey their policy ideas, plans, and programs—known as policy communication—has become a crucial factor in determining their electability in this fiercely competitive political environment (Graber, D. A., and Dunaway 2017b; McNair 2011).

The difference between substantive and symbolic communication is widely known in the literature on political communication. While substantive or policy communication concentrates on the quality and content of messages pertaining to public policy and governance, symbolic communication depends on emotion, identity, and visual symbols (Kaid, L. L., and Holtz-Bacha 2008; Street 2011). Although local politics in Indonesia have traditionally been dominated by the former, a growing portion of the electorate, particularly young people and the urban middle class, responds favorably to messages that are focused on policy (Norris, P., and Inglehart 2019).

The processes through which political information is sent and received between political actors, the media, and the general public are collectively referred to as political communication (Norris 2000). Formal speeches, commercials, press coverage, social media posts, and face-to-face conversations can all be used to convey this message. A fundamental place to start when examining campaign communication is the groundbreaking communication model, "Who says what in which channel to whom with what effect?" (Lasswell 1948).

Political communication is a tool used in electoral campaigns to mobilize, convince, and legitimize political actors in addition to spreading information. Message content (what is being said), medium (how it is being said), audience (who is listening), and expected outcome (how behavior or attitudes are shaped) are all important considerations in effective political communication. Because of this, it is a symbolic and strategic process that calls for meticulous narrative construction and framing (Entman 1993).

Using the political communication framework, this study examines how the campaign of M. Syukur, a regent candidate and three-term member of the Indonesian Legislator (DPD-RI),

developed and disseminated policy messages to various Merangin demographic groups. The emphasis is on how voter responses and, eventually, electability were impacted by message content (substantive vs. symbolic), communication channels (traditional vs. digital), and audience engagement (one-way vs. two-way). This study also heavily relies on the framing and agenda-setting paradigms. Framing is the process of picking out specific elements of a perceived reality and emphasizing them in a communication context (Entman 1993). Frames have an impact on how people perceive issues, place blame, assess potential solutions, and form moral opinions.

Candidates can convey their policy agendas in ways that appeal to the interests and feelings of voters by using framing in electoral politics. For instance, M. Syukur constantly presented himself as a capable and reformist alternative in his policy communication efforts, framing local underdevelopment as the consequence of poor leadership. Syukur played on voters' desire for real change by portraying economic inequality as a result of badly implemented policies.

According to agenda-setting theory, the media has a big impact on what people think about, even though it may not directly influence what people think (McCombs, M., and Shaw 1972). Candidates can take advantage of this by using persistent communication efforts to bring specific issues—like healthcare, education reform, or village infrastructure—to the public's attention. This study examines how Syukur's campaign aimed to establish development-related themes as the main focus of the local agenda in order to make these issues appear to voters as priorities.

Comparing political campaigns to commercial marketing, political marketing theory highlights brand positioning, needs-based messaging, and voter segmentation (Lees-Marshment 2021). Candidates are treated as political "products" in this framework, and voters are treated as "consumers." Understanding voter preferences, adjusting messaging appropriately, and using the most efficient channels are all necessary for successful political marketing.

Numerous political marketing strategies were used in Syukur's campaign, including branding through a unified visual identity and slogans, audience research through informal surveys, and message customization for various community clusters. The strategic cultivation of his image as a policy-oriented leader was bolstered by evidence-based proposals, policy white papers, and community testimonials. This study assesses whether political marketing concepts

had a discernible effect on voter behavior and how well they were implemented in Merangin's 2024 election.

Numerous contexts have demonstrated the connection between political communication and electoral success. According to (Graber, D. A., and Dunaway 2017b) Developing political legitimacy and voter confidence requires effective communication. Candidates who use credible, consistent, and unambiguous messaging typically perform better in democratic systems than those who only use reactive or symbolic messaging. But in emerging democracies like Indonesia, sociopolitical elements like media access, political literacy, and clientelism act as a mediating factor in the relationship between electability and communication. According to (Mietzner 2015) Patronage and personalism are still effective strategies in local politics and frequently take precedence over meaningful policy discussions. Yet, a growing body of research indicates that people are becoming more interested in policy-based campaigns, particularly in urban and semi-urban areas (Tapsell 2018).

Building on these findings, this study investigates the implementation of a policy-centric communication model in Merangin, a mixed rural-urban area. It aims to ascertain whether entrenched patterns of transactional or personality-based politics can be overcome by substantive messaging. Across the globe, including in Indonesia, digital technology has revolutionized political campaigns. Candidates can speak directly to voters through social media, especially by avoiding the gatekeepers of traditional media. Academics like (Lim 2013; Nugroho, Y., Putri, D. A., and Laksmi 2012) contend that candidates can use digital tools to interact with voters, customize messages, and monitor their responses in real time.

The digital divide offers both opportunities and challenges for local elections. Older and rural voters may rely on traditional media and word-of-mouth, but urban and young voters can be easily reached through platforms like Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok. As a result, campaigns need to use a hybrid approach that blends online and offline communication.

A good example to examine this hybrid model is the campaign of a candidate. The use of mobile-friendly policy content, WhatsApp groups for village coordinators, and digital town halls demonstrated an attempt to update outreach while preserving grassroots connectivity. The relative efficacy of these tactics in various electoral segments is assessed in this study. Analyzing campaign results requires an understanding of how voters make decisions. Voter behavior theories, from rational choice to sociological and psychological models, contend that a mix of

contextual factors, party identification, candidate image, and policy preferences influences voting behavior (Campbell, A., Converse, P. E., Miller, W. E., and Stokes, 1960; Dalton, R. J., and Wattenberg 2000).

According to research, voters in Indonesian regional elections are impacted by a complex interaction of factors such as perceived competence, incumbency, religion, and ethnicity (Aspinall, E., and Berenschot 2019). But issue-based voting is becoming more and more popular, especially in competitive areas where candidates need to stand out from their personal networks. The candidate, who was founded on a programmatic and technocratic platform, questions accepted wisdom regarding the importance of personality in local elections. In order to determine how his policy proposals were received and whether they had an impact on voting decisions, this study looks at voter survey data and interviews.

Traditional culture and contemporary media are strongly intertwined in Indonesian political communication. To appeal to a variety of audiences, political messages frequently use regional idioms, religious allusions, and cultural symbols (Hidayat 2016). The space for logical and thoughtful discussion is also growing as a result of urbanization, education, and media pluralism. Local elections, where candidates must interact with both traditional community leaders and digitally active millennials, are a prime example of this dichotomy. Candidates who can bridge these domains—combining cultural fluency with policy literacy—are more effective, according to research by (Warburton 2020).

The 2024 Merangin Local Election offered a chance to see how voters react to campaign messaging with significant policy content in Merangin, a district in Jambi Province with a population distinguished by rural-urban diversity and growing civic awareness. By carrying the slogan New Merangin, Syukur focuses on improving the quality of life of the Merangin community, including in the fields of health, education, economy, and infrastructure. Village visits, community forums, social media platforms, and local media engagements were some of the ways that each of these policy areas was disseminated.

The dissemination of Syukur's policy messages was greatly aided by the use of digital media. On social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, he methodically posted policy briefs, infographics, brief videos, and testimonies from people who had benefited from his prior government initiatives. The goal of these initiatives was to make complicated issues understandable to regular voters. Additionally, Syukur's team hosted interactive "policy town

halls" where members of the public could speak with the candidate face-to-face, ask questions, and make recommendations. A participatory model that has been commended in the literature for increasing voter trust and political engagement is reflected in such two-way communication (Coleman S., and Blumler 2009; Papacharissi 2009).

Despite Syukur's campaign's strategic sophistication, a key question remains: did this policy-based communication model result in higher electability? To put it another way, did voters find his policy recommendations convincing and credible enough to affect their choice to vote? And if so, which voting blocs were most affected? To answer these questions, it is necessary to look at voter perceptions, media literacy levels, and local political culture in addition to the communication's content and delivery.

According to earlier research, in areas with strong clientelistic or patrimonial traditions, emotional or identity-based appeals frequently outperform logical, policy-based ones, even though the former can increase a candidate's credibility (Mietzner 2015; Tomsa, D., and Ufen 2013). Voters may respond better to concrete incentives or familiarity in these situations than to theoretical policy discussions. However, this dynamic may be changing due to changes in civic engagement, education, and media consumption, making room for more in-depth local political discourse (Maulana 2023; Tselios, V., and Tommasi 2020).

Through an empirical evaluation of the connection between candidate electability and policy communication patterns in a regional electoral context, this study seeks to add to this developing conversation. The importance of this study is found in both its practical applicability for political actors and campaign teams as well as its scholarly contribution to political communication and local governance studies. More moral, open, and successful campaign tactics can be developed by taking into account how voters react to policy messaging. Additionally, the results might provide information about how to improve electoral policy literacy and promote a more substantive kind of democracy.

M. Syukur, a candidate in the 2024 Merangin regional election, is the subject of this study. During his campaign, he employed a policy-based communication strategy. Syukur positioned himself as a technocratic figure who offered comprehensive and data-driven policy solutions to the issues facing Merangin Regency, in contrast to many local candidates who mainly rely on symbolic gestures, personal charisma, or patronage networks. His communication

approach focused on transparency, clarity, and relevance to local needs in an effort to win over voters by presenting tangible solutions to pressing problems.

The study concludes by stating that although policy communication by itself does not ensure electoral success, it does have a major impact on how candidates are perceived, particularly when combined with inclusive engagement and credible delivery. Examining how substantive political discourse can be operationalized in local elections and what it means for Indonesia's participatory democracy going forward is made easier by M. Syukur's campaign. In conclusion, this study places itself in the larger framework of Indonesia's democratic development, where there is growing concern about the caliber of electoral discourse. In order to engage voters and improve democratic accountability, policy-based communication is not only feasible but also has the potential to be successful, as the case of M. Syukur shows. This study aims to clarify the changing relationship between political communication and grassroots voter behavior by analyzing the tactics, content, and results of Syukur's campaign.

METHODS

With an emphasis on M. Syukur's candidacy, this study uses a qualitative case study methodology to investigate the connection between electability and political communication patterns in the 2024 Merangin regional election. Because it enables a comprehensive, in-depth examination of a current phenomenon within its actual context, the case study method was selected (Yin 2018). In particular, this method aids in dissecting how various stakeholder groups viewed, developed, and applied communication strategies to influence voting behavior. Because it promotes interpretive understanding and highlights the meanings that actors—candidates, voters, campaigners, and the media—create in relation to political communication, the qualitative paradigm is suitable for this study (Creswell, J. W., and Poth 2018).

The study focuses on two primary variables: voter perception and electability outcomes are the dependent variables, and M. Syukur's political communication patterns are the independent variables. What communication strategies did M. Syukur use during the 2024 Merangin regional election? These are the main research questions. What effects did these trends have on voter behavior and public opinion? What connection is there between electability

outcomes and communication methods? In order to comprehend causal and correlative insights without extrapolating beyond the particular case, these inquiries are exploratory in nature.

The research is supported by multiple theoretical frameworks: 1. Political Communication Theory (McNair, 2011): Provides a framework for examining the ways in which political actors communicate with the public by disseminating information and using symbolic messaging. 2. Agenda-Setting and Framing Theories (Entman 1993; McCombs, M., and Shaw 1972): offer analytical instruments to investigate the prioritization and interpretation of specific messages. 3. Electability Theory (Norris 2000): assists in evaluating how communication affects voting decisions, candidate familiarity, and public trust. Indicators for data collection and analysis were developed based on these theories.

Triangulation was used in the study to improve validity by utilizing data from several sources (Denzin, 1978): 1. Participants in in-depth interviews included M. Syukur and important campaign personnel (4 individuals), voters from various demographic groups (young, old, urban, and rural—12 individuals), and political observers and journalists (3 individuals). 2. Tool: A semi-structured interview guide that addresses voter reaction, message design, distribution channels, and effectiveness perceptions. 3. Methods: 45–90 minute in-person and video call interviews were performed.

Pamphlets, speech transcripts, and social media content (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp) are the research campaign materials. Internal campaign strategy notes and articles from mainstream and local news portals are examples of media coverage (with permission). The researcher documented communication style, crowd response, and thematic patterns while attending debates and campaign events. Using manual logging and keyword searches, social media analytics were gathered from public Facebook and TikTok pages in order to calculate engagement metrics (likes, shares, and comments). Included were important hashtags and keywords: #MeranginBaru #Syukur #Syukur-Khafid, #Suka #PilkadaMerangin2024.

Purposive sampling was used in this study to choose participants and data sources according to their applicability to the goals of the investigation (Patton 2002). The following were the requirements for inclusion: Voters must be of legal voting age, gender, and occupation in Merangin in 2024. Campaign employees need to be directly involved in creating or delivering messages. Additionally, observers are people who have experience reporting or doing political

analysis in Jambi. 19 participants in all were interviewed, and more information was obtained from 12 campaign events and more than 40 social media posts.

The six-step method developed by (Braun, V., and Clarke 2006) was followed in the thematic analysis of qualitative data: 1). Data familiarization: materials and transcripts were read several times. 2). Creating initial codes: NVivo 12 software was used to code keywords, phrases, and patterns. 3). Looking for themes: codes were categorized under more general headings like "youth engagement," "local identity framing," "religious discourse," etc. 4). Examining themes: Themes were examined for internal consistency and uniqueness. 5) Defining and naming themes: Contextualization and labeling were applied to the final themes. 6) Composing the report: Theory and empirical data were combined with analysis. Basic descriptive statistics, such as average engagement per post, were used to further evaluate social media data in order to provide quantitative evidence for qualitative themes.

Triangulation was employed by the researcher to guarantee methodological rigor: Several types and sources of data were used; Member checks: Participants verified the interview summaries; Audit trail: Every step of the analysis was recorded and saved for future reference; detailed description: To enable the transferability of insights, contextual richness was preserved (Lincoln, Y. S., and Guba 1985).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Communication Patterns of M. Syukur and Electability Trends

Political communication is essential to influencing public opinion and electoral results in Indonesia's regional elections. Three main tenets served as the foundation for M. Syukur's campaign's multi-layered communication strategy: media hybridization, emotional connection, and policy clarity. He struck a balance between symbolic representation and technocratic vision in his messaging. He was well-positioned in a competitive local election environment thanks to this combination.

Syukur placed a great focus on the substance of the policies at the heart of his communications. Infrastructure, access to education, rural health, and agricultural modernization were among his main points of emphasis. Syukur distinguished himself from his competitors by taking issue ownership and portraying these problems as the direct results of poor leadership

(Entman 1993). His story of transformation was summed up in his slogan, "Merangin Baru" ("New Merangin"). Instead of making sweeping campaign pledges, he unveiled Four Major Actions that center on pro-people and inclusive development in the construction of Merangin. In addition to enabling all societal levels to take part in development, M. Syukur and his vice, Abdul Khafid, seek to establish Merangin Regency as an Advanced, Prosperous, Competitive, Innovative, and Superior Regency through the Four Major Actions outlined in the Vision and Mission. These were disseminated offline and online, which strengthened their legitimacy with sane voters (McNair 2011).

To gain the trust of rural and religious voters, Syukur's campaign used emotional and cultural symbols in addition to a technocratic appeal. He regularly quoted verses from the Qur'an, spoke in regional dialects, and participated in customary activities like *pengajian* and *kenduri adat*. These behaviors helped him connect with voters' identities and created what (Graber, D. A., and Dunaway 2017a) calls symbolic communication. By emphasizing Syukur's Merangin heritage and public service career, the campaign skillfully crafted his image as a "*putra daerah*"—a native son. He combined valence concerns (leadership, integrity) with regional cultural norms by projecting an image of competence and humility (Hidayat 2016).

By skillfully fusing digital and traditional media, the campaign's hybrid communication approach allowed for both wide-ranging and targeted outreach. Conventional media, such as posters, banners, community radios, and printed newsletters, were important elements. Face-to-Face: Village forums (*musyawarah dusun*), market gatherings, and door-to-door visits. Digital platforms include TikTok videos, Instagram Reels, Facebook, and WhatsApp broadcasts. Every medium was employed strategically. Instagram and TikTok were used to target young and first-time voters, while Facebook and WhatsApp were used to reach voters between the ages of 35 and 60 (Lim 2013). Real-time engagement was made possible by interactive sessions like "Muhammad Syukur" on Facebook, which strengthened relatability and transparency.

Three distinct phases, each with its own goals and strategies, characterized the evolution of M. Syukur's communication strategy. 1). Pre-campaign period (November–December 2023). Image building and issue introduction were the main priorities during this stage. The Syukur campaign for re-nomination as a DPD-RI member for the Jambi Electoral District 2024 runs concurrently with this phase. Soft narratives were employed in the campaign to present Syukur's history and principles. Videos of him walking through local markets, visiting farmers, and

participating in Friday prayers went viral. Posts with short success stories and local symbols got the most engagement, according to early digital analytics. A shift in content toward community-centric storytelling was influenced by these findings. 2) The official campaign period (May - July 2024). Syukur switched to policy promotion and contrast framing as the official campaign got underway. To introduce his program and gather grassroots feedback, he organized the “Syukur Kembali Untuk Merangin”, a tour of all 24 kecamatan (subdistricts). He remained composed but assertive throughout debates and media appearances, frequently contrasting his vision with that of the incumbent-backed candidates. He had an advantage in both logical persuasion and emotional appeal thanks to his use of facts and anecdotes (Lees-Marshment, 2021). Additionally, he emphasized the support of educators, farmers, and former bureaucrats, portraying them as natural corroborators of his legitimacy. Live broadcasts and brief testimonial videos were used to spread these endorsements. 3) Final Phase (November 2024). The campaign stepped up its mobilization and reminder messaging as election day drew near. More than 70,000 prospective voters received tailored WhatsApp messages based on their preferred issue and village. During this stage, videos of elderly women endorsing Syukur's candidacy or disabled farmers receiving his help went viral, marking the height of emotional storytelling. Campaign analytics show that this type of content improved sentiment among undecided voters and increased online engagement by 34%.

Throughout the campaign, external surveys conducted by the Public Trust Institute (PUTIN) tracked Syukur's electability. His rise reflected the strength of his communications and the weaknesses of his opponents.

Table 1.

Month	Electability (%)	Main Campaign Focus
November 2023	51,40	Image introduction, soft outreach
October 2024	47	Roadshow, policy brief release
November 2024	50,50	Islamic symbolism; Emotional mobilization, GOTV push

Monthly Electability and Campaign Strategy of M. Syukur (2023–2024)

Support intent was found to be strongly correlated with exposure to Syukur's messages. 68% of people who watched his Facebook and Instagram policy videos were likely to vote for him, according to a local survey (Public Trust Institute, 2024). His People's Contract booklet was well received by 73% of WhatsApp users. 55% of swing voters stated that their main justification for supporting the candidate was the "clear program." This data demonstrates how well multi-channel, message-integrated communication works to increase voter alignment.

Campaign funding and political party support were still crucial, but communication was the key that turned voter interest into preference. Syukur's campaign effectively adapted national-level campaign tactics to the unique cultural and socioeconomic circumstances of Merangin (Aspinall, E., and Berenschot 2019). By using digital agility, emotional storytelling, symbolic interaction, and framing, Syukur's communication produced a story of change, hope, and credibility. The significance of strategic communication in modern Indonesian electoral politics was highlighted by Syukur's victory in the 2024 Merangin Regional Election, which was decided by the KPU Plenary on December 5, 2024, with 50.96% of the vote in a two-way contest

Impact Analysis of M. Syukur's Communication on Electability

A detailed examination of the message and the public's reaction to it is necessary to comprehend how political communication affects electoral success. Communication was a key

component of M. Syukur's campaign in the 2024 Merangin Regional Election, helping to shape voter perceptions, influence issue salience, and ultimately increase electability.

Agenda-setting, framing, priming, and symbolic interaction are some of the mechanisms that underpin political communication (Entman 1993; Iyengar, S., and Kinder 1987; McCombs, M., and Shaw 1972). It is clear from applying these theories to Syukur's campaign that his communication helped to create a reality that was supportive of his candidacy in addition to disseminating information.

Syukur redirected public discourse from identity-based arguments to developmental challenges by prioritizing issues like youth employment, agricultural support, and healthcare access through agenda-setting. Voters found these issues more salient because of his constant attention to them, a phenomenon that was bolstered by repetition and media amplification. He used framing to contrast his “clean, native, and competent” identity with his opponents’ sense of elitism and stagnation. By portraying himself as a change agent, Syukur catered to voters' desire for change that was both realistic and locally based. Additionally, the campaign used priming to encourage voters to assess candidates on the basis of their vision and integrity rather than customary clientelist factors.

Several quantitative indicators demonstrate the efficacy of Syukur’s communication strategy. 1). Based on Polling Trends, Syukur’s electability steadily increased from November 2023 to November 2024. Independent polling by the Public Trust Institute (PUTIN, 2023) showed: November 2023 (51,40%), October 2024 (47%), and the final week before voting, November 2024 (50,50%). The surge closely aligned with the three communication phases: introduction, policy advocacy, and emotional mobilization. Notably, undecided voter percentages dropped significantly following the release of Syukur’s “Syukur Kembali Untuk Merangin” in May 2024. 2). Based on Social Media Analytics, from May to November 2024, Syukur’s digital presence grew substantially. Instagram followers increased by 145%, Facebook engagements tripled, and his Facebook and Instagram campaign hashtag (#Syukur-Khafid) gained over 5,500 views. Sentiment analysis conducted on Facebook comments using NVivo software indicated: Positive sentiment (62.4%), Neutral sentiment (28.7%), and Negative sentiment (8.9%). Posts with high positive reactions often featured personal stories (e.g., a visit to a flood-stricken area) or direct policy explanations in local dialects. The secret to connecting with the audience was to combine informative content with emotional relatability.

His opponent, Nalim-Nilwan, used a more conventional strategy centered on political patronage and large-scale rallies, whereas Syukur-Khafid adopted an organized, two-way communication model. It's instructive to see the difference in voter conversion and engagement. This disparity supports research on political communication that shows interactive communication boosts voter mobilization and trust (Norris 2000; Strömbäck 2008).

Table 2.

Candidate	Primary Communication Strategy	Voter Engagement Quality	Electability Growth
Syukur-Khafid	Hybrid digital-traditional, participatory	High (interactive, focused)	+27% (November 2023–November 2024)
Nalim-Nilwan	Mass events, print media, radio	Moderate (one-way)	+12% (same period)

Comparative Analysis of Campaign Strategies and Electoral Outcomes

According to a Public Trust Institute (2024) post-election survey, 41% of voters who backed Syukur gave "clear policy ideas" as their primary justification, while 28% cited "personal character and background." "Direct outreach or interaction" was mentioned by 18%. Additionally, 13% mentioned "party or religious influence." According to this data, voter preference was primarily influenced by communication rather than party machinery or ethnicity. Voters were becoming more and more interested in candidates who were genuine, approachable, and clear.

Additionally, his campaign assisted in bringing his suggested solutions into line with public concerns. For example, his targeted content on crop subsidies and irrigation went viral, causing surveys to show a 22% increase in concern about agricultural stagnation. This bolsters the agenda-setting theory that voters' priorities for issues are altered by repeated exposure to campaign narratives (McCombs, M., and Shaw 1972).

Despite being crucial, Syukur's communication strategy worked within a framework that was impacted by a number of other factors. 1. Anti-incumbent sentiment: Outsider narratives were able to gain traction due to public dissatisfaction with local bureaucracy. 2. Religious leaders' endorsements: Although not planned, some of these helped him gain more credibility, particularly in communities of Islamic boarding schools, or pesantrens. 3. Election logistics: By using digital platforms more frequently, the KPU was able to promote candidates like Syukur who had effective digital strategies. His communication's impact and reach were increased by these contextual factors, indicating that strategic alignment with institutional change and public sentiment is just as important as communication (Kaid 2004).

Important lessons for political communication in Indonesia's regional elections can be learned from Syukur's campaign. 1. Substance-driven messaging fosters trust: Voters reacted more favorably to targeted, attainable programs than to catchphrases. 2. Cultural adaptation improves relatability: Using regional dialects, religious allusions, and customs strengthened the emotional bond. 3. Reach is increased through digital integration: Using multiple platforms made it possible to communicate consistently with various voter segments. 4. Interactive channels boost trust: Voters placed greater trust in live Q&A sessions and WhatsApp messages than in billboard slogans. These results support the notion that communication performance, rather than merely political structure or elite support, is increasingly influencing electability in the modern era.

The 2024 Merangin Regional Election served as an example of how electability could be greatly impacted by strategic, multifaceted communication. M. Syukur's ability to communicate consistently, authentically, and interactively was a major factor in his ascent from a candidate who was initially questioned due to his youth in comparison to his rivals (Nalim) and had been more active in Jakarta to the top spot. He was able to change voter preferences and establish himself as a symbol of legitimacy at the grassroots level by emphasizing policy clarity, cultural symbolism, and digital engagement. His campaign provides useful models for upcoming candidates in Indonesia's changing democratic environment, while also validating important theories of political communication. Communication will remain not only a tool but also a factor in determining political success as electoral dynamics change toward a more information-based paradigm. The peak was the inauguration of M. Syukur and Abdul Khafid as Regent and Deputy Regent of Merangin 2025-2030 by President Prabowo on February 20, 2025.

The results of this study have important theoretical implications for the development of political communication studies, particularly in the context of local democracy in Indonesia. Findings regarding M. Syukur's communication patterns in the 2024 Merangin regional elections show that the effectiveness of political communication is not only determined by the message and media used, but is also influenced by the candidate's ability to adapt to the cultural and religious values of the local community. Therefore, this study expands on classical political communication theory (McNair 2011; Graber and Dunaway 2017) through the concept of culturally embedded communication, namely political communication that is rooted in local culture and the symbolic closeness between the communicator and the audience. In addition, this study also enriches electability theory by emphasizing that relational and social trust-based communication has a significant influence on voting decisions, surpassing structural factors such as patronage or party power (Aspinall and Berenschot 2019).

Another implication is that this study contributes to the development of agenda-setting and framing theory (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Entman 1993) through the introduction of the concept of distributed agenda-setting, in which citizens, volunteers, and social media play a role in shaping local political discourse. In this context, M. Syukur successfully utilized a hybrid communication strategy that synergistically combined conventional and digital media, building a narrative of “a candidate of the people” through powerful emotional and visual messages. The results of this study enrich the theory of mediatization of politics (Strömbäck 2008) by adding the dimension of localized mediatization, namely that media logic at the local level is influenced by communitarian and religious values. Overall, this research confirms that modern political communication theory needs to integrate cultural, relational, and digital dimensions simultaneously to understand the formation of candidate electability in a decentralized democracy such as Indonesia.

This study has several limitations related to the interpretation of results and the generalization of findings. First, this study uses a single case study approach to the figure of M. Syukur in the context of the 2024 Merangin regional elections. This makes the findings contextual and not fully generalizable to other regions with different social, political, and cultural conditions. The local political dynamics in Merangin, characterized by strong kinship-based social networks and religious values, give candidates' political communication patterns unique

characteristics. Therefore, the application of similar communication strategies in other regions with different social structures and political competition patterns may produce different effects.

Another limitation is related to the rapidly changing dynamics of political campaigns, especially on social media, which poses challenges in capturing the full range of messages and public responses in real time. Thus, generalizations of the findings of this study should be made with caution and limited to local political contexts that have similar social structures, political cultures, and patterns of candidate-voter interaction.

CONCLUSION

The case of M. Syukur in the 2024 Merangin Regional Election illustrates how communication, when designed with strategic intentionality and cultural sensitivity, becomes a decisive factor in determining voter behavior and candidate success. The most significant insight is the transformation of M. Syukur's political profile from a questionable figure to a competitive frontrunner. This transformation was not primarily driven by party machinery, ethnic politics, or financial mobilization, but by an integrated communication strategy that prioritized clarity, authenticity, and two-way engagement. Syukur successfully shifted the focus of public discourse toward his strengths: integrity, grassroots concern, and pragmatic policy proposals (Entman 1993; McCombs, M., and Shaw 1972). Syukur's ability to incorporate local values, religious references, and the Merangin dialect into his messages significantly enhanced his emotional connection with the electorate. Unlike technocratic campaigns that often alienate rural voters, Syukur's communication tapped into the cultural codes familiar to the Merangin population, aligning with the idea that effective political communication must be contextually embedded (Norris 2000; Schaffer 2007).

The use of both traditional and digital platforms proved crucial in amplifying his message. Digital channels—such as WhatsApp broadcasts, Facebook Live sessions, and TikTok micro-videos—allowed for direct interaction with younger voters, while in-person dialogues and religious gatherings preserved his presence among older and rural constituencies. This hybrid model helped reduce the communication gap across generations, supporting findings from recent political communication literature (Chadwick 2017). Syukur's electability improved as voters increasingly associated him with key local issues such as agricultural reform, employment, and

healthcare. This issue ownership translated into voter trust, especially when combined with transparent campaign messaging and open question-and-answer formats. As empirical evidence from the Merangin case demonstrates, voter trust is a function of both message content and delivery style, reinforcing earlier theories of campaign effects (Iyengar, S., and Kinder 1987; Kaid 2004). One of the most intriguing aspects of this case was how Syukur managed to reduce reliance on political patronage networks. Through a consistent and authentic communication strategy, he created a direct line of political accountability between himself and the electorate—what scholars term as "direct representation" (Strömbäck, 2008). In doing so, he helped reshape voter expectations away from transactional politics toward performance-based evaluation.

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