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Money Politics and Electoral Integrity in Local Democracy: A Case Study of Legislative Elections in Wajo Regency, South Sulawesi (2019–2024)

Jumardin *¹, Suanrdi Purwanda *², Elvi Susanti Syam *³, Bakhtiar Tijjang *⁴, Kairuddin *⁵

Abstract

Background: Money politics remains one of the most persistent challenges undermining democratic consolidation in Indonesia, particularly at the local level where patron-client relationships and economic vulnerability converge. Despite the introduction of electoral reforms and stricter legal frameworks, vote buying continues to shape the outcomes of legislative elections across many regions .

Purpose: This study investigates the dynamics of money politics in the legislative elections of Wajo Regency, South Sulawesi, focusing on the continuity and transformation of practices between the 2019 and 2024 electoral cycles. Employing a qualitative case study design, the research explores the socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors that sustain transactional politics in local elections .

Methods: Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, focus group discussions, and document analysis involving candidates, campaign teams, voters, government officials, and election observers. The analysis is guided by the theoretical frameworks of patron-client relations, rational choice theory, and system theory to explain how individual behavior, institutional weaknesses, and socio-cultural norms interact to normalize money politics .

Originality: By situating Wajo as a microcosm of Indonesia's broader electoral challenges, this study contributes to the understanding of how informal political economies persist within formal democratic institutions and provides insights for developing culturally grounded strategies to strengthen electoral integrity in local governance for the customary law. Even though the legal plurality of Indonesian society is directly protected by the constitution.

*¹Correspondence

Jurmardin, Sunardi
 Purwanda, Elvi Susanti
 Syam, Bakhtiar Tijjang,
 Kairuddin.

Institut Ilmu Sosial dan
 Bisnis
 Andi Sapada , Indonesia

Keywords:

Money Politics, Electoral
 Integrity, Local Democracy,
 Legislative Elections

INTRODUCTION

Money politics has become one of the most persistent challenges to democratic consolidation in Indonesia, especially during legislative elections at both national and local levels. It refers to the practice in which candidates use material incentives—such as cash, goods, or services—to influence voters' choices, thereby undermining electoral integrity (Muhtadi, 2019). Despite repeated legal prohibitions and public awareness campaigns, the phenomenon continues to thrive due to entrenched socio-political and economic structures.

Studies show that vote buying has evolved into a normalized political behavior among local communities, particularly in rural areas where economic vulnerability is high (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). In this regard, money politics not only distorts democratic ideals but also reproduces clientelistic relationships between voters and politicians (Hicken et al., 2022). In Wajo Regency, South Sulawesi, these practices remain deeply embedded in the electoral process, reflecting both structural inequality and weak political accountability. Consequently, the persistence of money politics raises urgent questions about the effectiveness of Indonesia's democratic institutions and electoral reforms.

The prevalence of money politics in Wajo Regency can be largely attributed to socioeconomic disparities and limited political literacy among the electorate. As a region where most residents depend on agriculture and small-scale trade, economic precarity often pushes citizens to accept financial inducements as immediate relief rather than as corruption (Yuningsih & Yusoff, 2020). Low levels of political education exacerbate the situation, leading many voters to perceive vote buying as an integral and legitimate part of the election process (Noor, 2018). This perception is reinforced by inadequate civic education programs and the weak enforcement of election laws at the local level (Fitriani et al., 2023). Consequently, voters may interpret campaign handouts as rightful compensation for their participation, rather than as an illegal exchange undermining democratic ethics. These conditions create a fertile ground for transactional politics, where economic needs outweigh democratic principles. Therefore, addressing political illiteracy and structural poverty becomes central to dismantling the foundation of money politics in Wajo.

In addition to socioeconomic conditions, intense political competition further incentivizes candidates to engage in vote buying. The legislative race in Wajo Regency is often characterized by narrow margins, prompting candidates to deploy personal wealth or party resources to secure electoral support (Tenri, 2021). Within this system, clientelism operates through networks of brokers—community leaders, village heads, and campaign agents—who act as intermediaries between candidates and voters (Aspinall et al., 2020). This mechanism sustains what scholars describe as “patron-client symbiosis,” in which economic favors are exchanged for political loyalty (Hicken et al., 2022). Candidates with substantial financial resources thus possess a strategic advantage over competitors with strong ideological platforms but limited funds. Consequently, electoral outcomes often reflect financial capacity rather than political merit or legislative competence (Muhtadi, 2022). This transactional nature of politics erodes public trust and weakens the representational function of democratic institutions in local governance.

The effects of money politics extend beyond election day, shaping governance quality and the ethical behavior of elected legislators. Politicians who rely on monetary exchanges to secure votes are more likely to prioritize rent-seeking behavior and corrupt practices to recover campaign expenditures (Haryanto, 2020). This dynamic perpetuates a cycle of dependency between constituents and elected officials, where public resources are diverted for personal or partisan gain (Prabowo & Cooper, 2022). Moreover, the commodification of votes reduces citizens' sense of political efficacy, discouraging genuine participation in future elections (Warburton, 2023). Over time, this contributes to democratic backsliding, as political accountability shifts from programmatic representation to clientelistic reciprocity (Aspinall & Weiss, 2022). In local contexts such as Wajo, such patterns have been shown to weaken the moral legitimacy of legislative bodies. Therefore, understanding how money politics influences both electoral behavior and governance performance remains vital for sustaining Indonesia's democratic trajectory.

Although previous studies have examined money politics in Indonesia, few have compared its dynamics across multiple electoral cycles at the local level. Firman Noor (2018) highlighted its role in degrading democratic legitimacy, while Muhtadi (2019) detailed the

mechanisms of vote buying in the 2014 and 2019 elections. However, limited research has explored the continuity and transformation of these practices in the 2024 legislative elections, especially within smaller districts such as Wajo. This study aims to fill that gap by examining how socioeconomic contexts, voter behavior, and institutional enforcement shape money politics across two election periods (2019–2024). It further analyzes the implications of these findings for local democratic consolidation and the rule of law. By focusing on Wajo Regency as a microcosm of Indonesia's electoral system, the study provides insights into the persistence of clientelistic politics in decentralized democracies. Ultimately, the research seeks to contribute to broader policy discussions on how to foster clean, fair, and sustainable elections in Indonesia and beyond.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Patron-Client Theory

The patron-client framework offers a foundational lens for interpreting money politics in developing democracies. It posits that politicians (patrons) provide material benefits to citizens (clients) in return for political loyalty and electoral support (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). This reciprocal relationship is sustained by personal obligation rather than ideological alignment (Hicken et al., 2022). In many Southeast Asian contexts, including Indonesia, these exchanges are not perceived as corrupt but as morally legitimate forms of reciprocity (Yuningsih & Yusoff, 2020). Consequently, money politics is embedded within a broader social contract of mutual dependence and protection. Patron-client relations thus constitute a parallel form of governance that coexists with formal democratic institutions (Aspinall et al., 2020). This perspective highlights the sociocultural underpinnings of transactional politics.

The durability of patron-client systems lies in their adaptability to modern democratic institutions. While democratic reforms introduce competition and transparency, they rarely dismantle informal exchange networks (Aspinall & Weiss, 2022). Instead, electoral competition often revitalizes these networks by increasing demand for personal mobilization. Brokers and intermediaries become crucial in translating financial resources into electoral outcomes (Muhtadi, 2022). This dynamic transforms political representation into a transactional marketplace mediated by trust and reciprocity. Therefore, rather than disappearing, clientelism evolves alongside democracy, adjusting to institutional incentives. The persistence of money politics in Indonesia exemplifies this adaptation.

In the patron-client model, moral economy and material necessity intertwine. Voters may justify accepting bribes as expressions of gratitude for patronal generosity rather than corruption (Haryanto, 2020). Similarly, patrons perceive their expenditure as legitimate investment in social ties (Prabowo & Cooper, 2022). This mutual rationalization blurs the distinction between altruism and exploitation. The informal nature of these relations also complicates legal intervention, as the exchange of favors rarely leaves explicit evidence (Aspinall et al., 2020). Thus, the patron-client theory provides a useful framework to explain the resilience of money politics beyond formal legality. It shows that corruption can coexist with moral legitimacy in certain cultural contexts.

In local contexts like Wajo Regency, the patron-client logic manifests through kinship-based and religious networks. Candidates rely on family ties, communal associations, and faith-based organizations to distribute patronage (Tenri, 2021). This structure embeds political transactions within community norms, making them socially acceptable. Furthermore, the communal orientation of local politics ensures that loyalty often outweighs ideology. Understanding this embeddedness is crucial for designing anti-corruption strategies that are culturally sensitive. Therefore, the patron-client framework remains

central for analyzing the micro-foundations of money politics in Indonesia's electoral landscape..

2. *Money Politics*

Money politics is widely defined in political science literature as the use of financial or material inducements by political candidates or parties to influence voter preferences and electoral outcomes (Muhtadi, 2019). It represents a form of political corruption that undermines electoral integrity and transforms democratic participation into transactional exchanges (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). The practice typically involves direct cash payments, gifts, or promises of future benefits provided to individual voters or groups in exchange for political support (Hicken et al., 2022). Scholars argue that money politics not only violates the moral foundation of democracy but also distorts the principle of equality among voters (Noor, 2018). In many developing democracies, including Indonesia, the phenomenon has become normalized due to the intersection of poverty, weak law enforcement, and clientelistic culture (Yuningsih & Yusoff, 2020). It is, therefore, best understood as a continuum of behaviors that range from explicit bribery to subtle patronage networks that sustain unequal power relations. Within this framework, money politics becomes both a symptom and a sustaining mechanism of political inequality.

The conceptualization of money politics has evolved alongside changing electoral systems and modes of political participation. Early studies framed it as a deviant practice linked to elite manipulation, whereas contemporary analyses see it as a systemic outcome of competitive but weakly institutionalized democracies (Aspinall et al., 2020). The term encompasses not only direct vote buying but also indirect incentives, such as preferential access to public goods and services (Muhtadi, 2022). According to Haryanto (2020), such exchanges blur the boundary between legitimate campaigning and corrupt practices. In contexts of electoral decentralization, candidates are incentivized to mobilize resources for direct voter contact, creating opportunities for transactional politics. This transformation reflects the commercialization of elections in which votes are treated as market commodities (Prabowo & Cooper, 2022). Consequently, money politics has become a structural component of electoral competition rather than a temporary aberration.

Recent academic debates emphasize the multidimensional nature of money politics. It involves economic, sociological, and cultural dimensions that reinforce one another in shaping voter behavior (Aspinall & Weiss, 2022). Economically, it reflects the exchange of material benefits for political loyalty. Sociologically, it embodies the persistence of clientelism as a mechanism for maintaining social cohesion in unequal societies (Hicken et al., 2022). Culturally, it reveals enduring moral ambivalence, where accepting money from candidates is not necessarily seen as unethical (Fitriani et al., 2023). These perspectives underscore the importance of studying money politics not merely as corruption but as a socially embedded practice. Therefore, addressing it requires an understanding of both the structural incentives and moral economies that sustain it.

At the same time, the definition of money politics varies across legal and cultural contexts. While Indonesia's Election Law explicitly prohibits material inducements, enforcement remains weak due to the difficulty of proving intent and transaction (Warburton, 2023). Legal scholars distinguish between vote buying (direct cash exchange) and patronage (indirect reward mechanisms), though both serve similar ends in shaping political behavior (Tenri, 2021). In comparative perspective, Southeast Asian democracies share similar challenges where informal networks override formal institutions (Aspinall et al., 2020). This suggests that money politics is less a deviation from democracy than a mode of its local operation. Consequently, defining and combating money politics requires integrating insights from legal, sociological, and behavioral research. Understanding this conceptual

diversity provides the foundation for analyzing its manifestation in local elections, such as those in Wajo Regency.

Money politics manifests in multiple forms, reflecting different strategies used by political actors to secure votes. The most common form is direct cash payment to voters, either individually or through community brokers (Muhtadi, 2019). Other variations include the distribution of consumer goods, food packages, and subsidized services such as healthcare or transportation during campaign periods (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). Candidates may also promise future material rewards, such as access to government contracts, employment, or development projects once elected (Yuningsih & Yusoff, 2020). These future-oriented exchanges extend the temporal dimension of corruption, linking electoral decisions to long-term clientelistic expectations. In some cases, financial contributions to community events or religious gatherings serve as disguised vote-buying mechanisms (Tenri, 2021). Such diversity in forms makes money politics a pervasive yet difficult phenomenon to regulate.

The structure of money politics often mirrors the socioeconomic landscape of local communities. In rural or economically marginalized regions, material incentives tend to carry greater weight because they address immediate survival needs (Aspinall et al., 2020). Conversely, in urban contexts, money politics often takes more sophisticated forms through business donations or lobbying networks (Prabowo & Cooper, 2022). The logic of reciprocity is central to these transactions: voters perceive payments not as coercion but as a rightful exchange in the moral economy of politics (Hicken et al., 2022). Candidates exploit this perception by framing their generosity as social obligation rather than bribery. This dynamic blurs ethical boundaries between gift-giving and corruption, making enforcement highly complex (Haryanto, 2020). Thus, money politics functions as both a cultural and economic transaction that thrives within existing moral norms.

Another variant of money politics involves campaign financing and the role of intermediaries. Political brokers act as gatekeepers who distribute resources to voters in exchange for guaranteed electoral support (Aspinall & Weiss, 2022). These brokers often belong to local elite families or community organizations with established authority. Their involvement not only expands the network of influence but also insulates candidates from direct legal liability (Muhtadi, 2022). Moreover, third-party financiers—such as business groups—frequently cover campaign costs in return for post-election favors (Prabowo & Cooper, 2022). This creates a chain of dependency that extends beyond elections into policymaking and governance. Consequently, money politics becomes institutionalized within broader networks of political financing.

Finally, symbolic and immaterial forms of money politics also deserve attention. Promises of future access to public resources or policy benefits serve as powerful inducements even without direct payment (Fitriani et al., 2023). For example, candidates may pledge infrastructure projects or preferential treatment in social programs to attract voter loyalty (Warburton, 2023). Such promises function as “deferred bribes,” establishing moral debts between voters and politicians (Aspinall et al., 2020). While these actions may appear legitimate campaign strategies, they perpetuate a clientelistic order in which political loyalty is tied to material expectation. These patterns reveal that money politics operates on both tangible and symbolic levels, connecting material exchange with social obligation. Addressing this complexity requires nuanced legal and ethical frameworks that recognize the cultural logic underpinning these practices..

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach with a case study design to explore the phenomenon of money politics in the legislative elections of Wajo Regency, South

Sulawesi. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for a deep understanding of the meanings, motivations, and social interactions underlying electoral behavior. By focusing on Wajo as a bounded case, the research seeks to uncover the socio-political dynamics, actors, and mechanisms that sustain vote buying in local elections. The case study method provides flexibility in examining the phenomenon from multiple perspectives, enabling contextual interpretation grounded in empirical realities. Through this interpretive lens, the research aims to capture not only observable practices but also the underlying cultural and economic rationalities shaping them. Thus, the approach emphasizes depth of understanding rather than statistical generalization, aligning with the epistemological orientation of interpretive political research.

The research was conducted in Wajo Regency, a district characterized by a distinctive social and political structure shaped by local patronage and elite influence. The region's historical legacy of strong patron-client relations and economic dependency provides an ideal context for examining how money politics persists within democratic processes. Fieldwork was carried out across several subdistricts representing diverse socio-economic backgrounds, ensuring that the findings reflect variations in local electoral culture. Data collection relied on both primary and secondary sources to achieve triangulation and comprehensive understanding. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and focus group discussions (FGDs) with stakeholders involved in the electoral process, while secondary data were drawn from official documents, academic literature, and media reports. Combining these data sources enhanced the reliability and contextual validity of the findings.

Primary data were collected from a range of informants representing different positions within the electoral ecosystem. These included legislative candidates – both elected and non-elected – campaign team members, voters, local government officials, law enforcement officers, and political observers. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing participants to share their experiences and perspectives freely while ensuring thematic focus on the central issues of money politics. Participant observation was conducted by attending campaign events, political meetings, and community gatherings to observe direct interactions between candidates, brokers, and voters. FGDs were organized to encourage collective reflection and dialogue among community members regarding electoral practices and perceptions of vote buying. Secondary data were obtained from legal regulations, election commission reports, prior research, and media investigations that documented cases of money politics. The integration of multiple data sources ensured a rich, multifaceted understanding of the phenomenon.

Data analysis followed the principles of thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, categories, and themes emerging from the field. The process involved several stages: systematic data organization, coding, theme identification, and interpretative synthesis. Coding was conducted manually and, where appropriate, with the support of qualitative data analysis software to ensure accuracy and traceability. Thematic categories were then developed around major aspects such as actors, strategies, motivations, and impacts of money politics. Interpretation focused on the interconnections among these themes, seeking to relate empirical findings to broader theoretical frameworks such as clientelism, rational choice, and systemic institutionalism. This analytical process provided a coherent understanding of how money politics operates as both a rational and culturally embedded practice within Wajo's local democracy. The iterative process of analysis allowed for continuous reflection and refinement as new insights emerged from the data.

To ensure the validity and reliability of findings, several verification strategies were implemented. Data triangulation was achieved by cross-checking information from different sources and methods – interviews, observations, FGDs, and document analysis – to confirm

consistency. Peer debriefing was conducted by consulting academic colleagues familiar with Indonesian electoral studies to validate interpretations and avoid researcher bias. An audit trail was maintained throughout the research process, documenting all methodological decisions, field notes, and analytic steps to ensure transparency and replicability. Reflexivity was also an integral part of the study, as the researcher continuously evaluated potential biases and positionality that might affect data interpretation. Ethical considerations were strictly upheld: informed consent was obtained from all participants, confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing personal identifiers, and findings were reported truthfully without manipulation or distortion. These ethical and methodological safeguards reinforce the credibility, dependability, and integrity of the research.

RESULTS

Data for this study were obtained through multiple qualitative methods: twenty-two semi-structured interviews, three focus group discussions (FGDs), and four sessions of participant observation conducted during and after the 2024 legislative election in Wajo Regency. Informants included six legislative candidates (three elected and three non-elected), five campaign team coordinators, seven registered voters, two election officials from the local *Komisi Pemilihan Umum* (KPU), and two observers from the *Badan Pengawas Pemilu* (Bawaslu) and civil society organizations. Secondary materials—such as electoral reports, news archives, and policy documents—were used to corroborate primary findings. Data were coded thematically using NVivo software, applying both inductive and theory-driven coding derived from patron-client and rational choice frameworks. Triangulation was achieved through the convergence of three data sources (interviews, observation, and documents) and three analytical lenses (actor, motivation, and consequence). Validity was further strengthened by peer debriefing with two independent researchers specializing in electoral governance and by maintaining an audit trail documenting all analytical decisions. The credibility and dependability of data interpretation were verified through member checking with five key informants who confirmed the accuracy of the narratives presented. Table 1 summarizes the principal findings, their empirical sources, and validation methods.

Table 1. Summary of Main Findings, Data Sources, and Validation Methods

Theme	Key Finding	Empirical Source	Validation
1. Practices of Money Politics	Distribution of cash or goods to voters, often labeled as "social aid."	Interviews with 5 candidates; 2 voter FGDs; observation of 3 campaign events.	Triangulated with Bawaslu 2024 local report and field observation notes.
	Sponsorship of social and religious events to enhance visibility.	Interviews with 3 campaign team coordinators and 2 religious leaders.	Confirmed by event posters and media reports (March-April 2024).
	Use of kinship and community networks to distribute incentives.	Interviews with 4 brokers; direct observation in 2 subdistricts.	Verified through network mapping and informal discussions.
2. Candidate Motivation and Strategy	Monetary distribution used to gain popularity and simulate generosity.	Interviews with 6 candidates; observation of 2 FGDs with voters.	Triangulated with content analysis of campaign materials.

	Vote buying employed to neutralize rival support.	Interviews with campaign coordinators; 2 Bawaslu officials.	3	Validated by cross-checking records (Bawaslu 2024).
	Reliance on social brokers to ensure vote delivery.	Interviews with local brokers; 2 elected candidates.	4	Peer-checked through follow-up interviews.
3. Electoral Impact	Integrity of elections undermined by transactional practices.	Interviews with KPU and Bawaslu officers; 5 voters.		Confirmed through document analysis of electoral reports.
	Vote buying distorts voter preference toward material incentives.	FGDs with 7 voters across 3 districts.		Triangulated with observation of pre-election activities.
	Money politics perpetuates post-election corruption and rent-seeking.	Interviews with 3 local academics and journalists.		Supported by media documentation and prior research comparison.
4. Thematic Analysis	Economic and social dependency reinforces clientelism.	Coded from 18 interview segments; 2 FGDs.	18	Member-checked with informants for accuracy.
	Campaign focus shifted from policy to transactional engagement.	Observations at campaign meetings.	4	Verified through cross-case comparison (2019 vs. 2024 data).
	Public perceives vote buying as normative due to low political literacy.	FGDs and informal conversations with voters.		Validated via triangulation with survey data from KPU 2024.

Triangulated evidence from interviews, FGDs, and observation showed that vote buying in Wajo took several forms: direct cash handouts, distribution of basic commodities, and sponsorship of religious or community events. Five out of six candidate respondents admitted to allocating “social funds” during campaigns, though they reframed these as charitable acts. Observational data from three campaign gatherings documented the physical distribution of food packages and envelopes within two days before the election. Religious event sponsorships—such as *maulid* celebrations and mosque renovations—were also used to enhance candidates’ visibility while remaining within socially acceptable norms. Cross-checking with Bawaslu’s 2024 monitoring report confirmed that these acts were widespread but rarely sanctioned due to limited evidence and community complicity. The integration of informal networks was particularly evident; campaign brokers, often respected village figures, acted as intermediaries between candidates and voters. These converging data sources establish that money politics in Wajo is both relational and systemic, embedded in the moral economy of reciprocity.

Interview data consistently indicated that candidates viewed monetary exchange as a pragmatic necessity rather than a moral failure. Four out of six candidates explicitly stated that “no one can win without funds,” highlighting structural dependence on financial

resources in elections. Campaign coordinators described the process as a “strategic investment,” where spending decisions were rationally calculated against expected vote margins. Observation and FGD data revealed that candidates often combined symbolic and material gestures—donating to funerals, supporting local festivities, or offering temporary employment—to secure emotional connection and legitimacy. Bawaslu documentation corroborated that many of these actions fell into “grey zones” of legality, making enforcement challenging. Data triangulation between candidate narratives and community accounts confirmed that money politics served both instrumental and expressive functions—instrumental in securing votes, expressive in demonstrating care and belonging. The pattern illustrates the intersection of rational choice and socio-cultural obligation in local electoral strategies.

Documentary evidence from KPU and interview data with election observers revealed that transactional politics severely eroded electoral integrity in Wajo. Cases recorded by Bawaslu (2024) documented at least eleven allegations of vote buying during the legislative race, though none resulted in formal prosecution due to insufficient proof. Voter FGDs showed that financial inducements directly influenced electoral behavior: five of seven participants admitted voting for candidates who offered material incentives. Thematic coding across sources highlighted three interlinked consequences—loss of fairness, manipulation of voter preference, and normalization of corruption. This convergence was validated by peer review with independent electoral researchers, confirming consistency with national patterns reported by Muhtadi (2022) and Warburton (2023). Moreover, cross-referencing media archives revealed that post-election patronage appointments reinforced the perception of “politics as business.” These findings, supported by documentary and observational validation, show how money politics reproduces corruption cycles beyond the electoral moment.

Data from FGDs and interviews reveal that voters’ acceptance of money politics is grounded in material vulnerability and reciprocal cultural norms. Seventeen of twenty-two participants mentioned “economic need” as the primary justification for accepting inducements, while others described it as “balas budi” (repaying kindness). Triangulation with local media reports and KPU’s 2024 voter survey confirmed that economic hardship was a significant factor in electoral decision-making. This interdependence blurs ethical distinctions between gratitude and bribery, transforming clientelism into a normalized social contract. Peer validation of these interpretations affirmed that money politics in Wajo is less a moral anomaly than an adaptive response to structural poverty. The reliability of this conclusion was strengthened through member checking, where informants agreed that political loyalty was often a form of economic survival rather than ideological alignment. Hence, the phenomenon reflects both structural inequality and social reciprocity embedded in the local moral economy.

Thematic coding revealed a strategic transition from programmatic campaigning toward transactional engagement. Observations of four campaign rallies showed that discussions centered on personal aid rather than policy debates. Interview data from campaign teams confirmed that distributing goods was considered more “effective” than promoting legislative platforms. This pattern was triangulated with document analysis of campaign spending reports that indicated a significant proportion of budget allocations categorized as “community outreach” or “social assistance.” Peer validation with electoral finance experts indicated that such spending was consistent with soft-money practices documented nationally. The cumulative evidence demonstrates that candidates in Wajo rationalized money politics as an inevitable adaptation to voter expectations, mirroring the logic described in Rational Choice Theory (Downs, 1957; Muhtadi, 2019). Thus, campaign strategies in Wajo signify an entrenched alignment between electoral pragmatism and cultural permissiveness.

Public perception data derived from three FGDs and follow-up interviews with seven voters demonstrated widespread moral ambivalence toward money politics. Although most participants acknowledged the practice as "wrong," six out of seven justified accepting cash due to economic necessity and the perception that "every candidate does it." Triangulation with Bawaslu's 2024 civic education report confirmed low levels of voter political literacy in the region. Observation data also revealed passive acceptance during campaign events, where recipients expressed gratitude without perceiving it as corruption. These convergent findings suggest a cultural normalization of money politics as part of the electoral process. To ensure interpretive validity, member checking was conducted with selected participants who confirmed that their acceptance stemmed from both social pressure and distrust of political institutions. The final analysis thus situates public perception within the framework of system theory – showing how weak institutional feedback and cultural adaptation sustain transactional democracy in Wajo.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that money politics in Wajo Regency remains deeply entrenched in both social and institutional structures, manifesting through cash payments, goods distribution, and sponsorship of community events. These practices are sustained by reciprocal relationships between candidates and voters, where material exchange is interpreted as both political strategy and social obligation. The evidence from interviews, FGDs, and document analysis confirms that transactional behavior has not only persisted between the 2019 and 2024 legislative elections but has also become more organized and culturally legitimized. As documented by previous national studies (Muhtadi, 2019; Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019), such persistence indicates that money politics in Indonesia functions less as an act of deviance and more as a socially adaptive mechanism embedded in local democracies. In Wajo, this adaptation is reinforced by economic inequality, low political literacy, and weak institutional enforcement, which collectively transform vote buying into a normalized electoral practice. These conditions highlight the intersection of structure, culture, and agency in sustaining transactional democracy.

Interpreting the findings through the Patron-Client framework clarifies how money politics operates as a moral economy of exchange rather than a purely corrupt practice. Candidates act as patrons who provide short-term material assistance in exchange for political loyalty, while voters – positioned as clients – perceive these benefits as legitimate rewards for their allegiance (Aspinall & Weiss, 2022; Hicken et al., 2022). The research observed that this dynamic is not only instrumental but also relational, maintained through networks of kinship, religion, and local prestige. The embeddedness of clientelistic ties explains why voters do not necessarily perceive monetary gifts as unethical, but rather as part of their social reciprocity obligations. Similar findings were reported by Yuningsih and Yusoff (2020), who observed that rural communities often rationalize vote buying as a culturally acceptable form of gratitude. The Wajo case thus illustrates how clientelism adapts democratic institutions to pre-existing social hierarchies, enabling political elites to secure loyalty through localized generosity. This relationship demonstrates that efforts to eliminate money politics must go beyond legal prohibition and address the cultural and relational foundations that sustain patronage.

From the perspective of Rational Choice Theory, the persistence of money politics in Wajo can also be understood as a product of calculated behavior by both voters and politicians under constrained rationality. Candidates distribute money as an investment aimed at maximizing the probability of winning, while voters accept inducements as immediate utility gains in a context where policy outcomes are uncertain or intangible (Downs, 1957; Mueller, 2019). The empirical data support this logic: six of the interviewed candidates

explicitly justified financial spending as a “necessary cost of competition,” while voters in FGDs described the exchange as “normal compensation.” This behavior is consistent with the findings of Muhtadi (2022), who argued that Indonesian voters act as rational actors optimizing short-term welfare within the limits of institutional inefficiency. However, as noted by Prabowo and Cooper (2022), such individual rationality aggregates into collective irrationality, eroding democratic accountability and perpetuating corruption. The Wajo case confirms this paradox – rational decisions made by self-interested agents produce systemic outcomes detrimental to democratic integrity. This finding underscores the need to reframe anti-money politics interventions not merely as moral persuasion but as altering incentive structures through transparent political financing and equal campaign access.

Applying System Theory provides a more comprehensive understanding of how individual actions and institutional weaknesses interact to reproduce money politics as a systemic equilibrium. Within Wajo’s political ecosystem, weak enforcement mechanisms, permissive cultural norms, and economic vulnerabilities form interdependent subsystems that reinforce each other (Easton, 1965; Luhmann, 1995). The data demonstrate that Bawaslu and KPU’s limited monitoring capacity, combined with social acceptance of vote buying, creates feedback loops that stabilize rather than disrupt corruption. This dynamic supports the argument by Aspinall and Berenschot (2019) that decentralized governance in Indonesia multiplies opportunities for transactional exchanges without proportional strengthening of accountability mechanisms. The finding that campaign sponsorships and indirect donations have become normalized further exemplifies system adaptation: when legal constraints tighten direct bribery, the system evolves to accommodate indirect patronage. As Luhmann (1995) suggests, such adaptation is characteristic of self-referential systems that absorb disturbances by reconfiguring rather than reforming their components. Therefore, addressing money politics in Wajo requires systemic reform – strengthening legal enforcement, enhancing political education, and creating economic alternatives that reduce citizens’ dependence on political patronage.

Compared with previous studies on money politics in Indonesia, this research extends the analysis by offering a longitudinal and micro-level perspective. While earlier works by Firman Noor (2018) and Muhtadi (2019) emphasized the national patterns of vote buying and democratic degradation, the Wajo case highlights the localized mechanisms through which these patterns persist. In contrast to the urban-centered findings of Aspinall et al. (2020), this study shows that in rural districts, economic vulnerability and social intimacy reinforce the moral justification for transactional politics. The results also align with Tenri’s (2021) analysis of South Sulawesi, which noted that money politics functions as both a political tactic and a cultural expectation. By incorporating multi-source validation – interviews, FGDs, and documentary evidence – this research contributes to the methodological robustness of existing literature. It advances theoretical integration by demonstrating how patron-client relations (micro-level), rational choice behavior (meso-level), and systemic adaptation (macro-level) converge to sustain money politics within Indonesia’s democratic framework. Hence, the study situates Wajo as a representative microcosm of transactional democracy in decentralized Southeast Asian contexts.

The implications of these findings are significant for both theory and practice. Theoretically, they reaffirm that the persistence of money politics cannot be fully explained by moral deficiency or weak institutions alone; it is a multi-layered phenomenon emerging from the interaction of cultural reciprocity, economic rationality, and systemic feedback. Practically, reform strategies must combine legal, economic, and educational interventions. Strengthening the capacity of electoral monitoring institutions such as Bawaslu, enforcing transparency in campaign financing, and providing voter education that emphasizes civic responsibility are critical. Equally important is addressing structural poverty, which remains the enabling condition for vote buying. As Warburton (2023) and Fitriani et al. (2023) argue,

democratic resilience depends on citizens' ability to evaluate political choices beyond material exchange. Therefore, sustainable solutions must reconfigure both institutional incentives and socio-cultural values that perpetuate transactional politics. The Wajo case provides empirical grounding for such an integrated approach—linking micro-level behavior with macro-level reform in the pursuit of cleaner and more equitable elections

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that money politics in Wajo Regency remains a persistent feature of local democracy, driven by the convergence of economic dependence, pragmatic political strategies, and cultural normalization. Despite reforms and monitoring efforts, vote buying continues to dominate electoral competition, especially during the 2019 and 2024 legislative cycles. The practice reflects a structural reality in which voters' economic vulnerability intersects with weak institutional enforcement, turning monetary exchange into a socially accepted form of political participation. These findings confirm that money politics is not merely an electoral violation but a deeply embedded political culture shaped by poverty and patronage. As in previous research (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Muhtadi, 2022), Wajo exemplifies how transactional democracy persists under decentralization, where financial resources outweigh ideology and accountability.

Theoretically, the persistence of money politics in Wajo can be explained through the intersection of patron-client, rational choice, and system theories. Patron-client relations sustain reciprocal obligations between candidates and voters, giving moral legitimacy to financial exchanges. Rational Choice Theory explains these exchanges as rational strategies for maximizing utility within contexts of uncertainty and weak enforcement. Meanwhile, System Theory reveals how institutional fragility and cultural permissiveness create feedback loops that stabilize transactional behavior as part of the political order. Together, these frameworks demonstrate that eradicating money politics requires multidimensional reform—addressing individual incentives, collective norms, and structural imbalances simultaneously.

To promote cleaner and fairer elections, this study recommends three priority reforms. First, institutional reform must strengthen the capacity and independence of electoral monitoring bodies, particularly Bawaslu, through transparent funding and digital campaign reporting. Second, educational reform should enhance civic and political literacy to reshape public perception of vote buying as a moral and legal violation rather than a social norm. Third, economic empowerment programs must reduce voters' dependence on candidates' financial assistance, ensuring that livelihood security does not hinge on electoral transactions. Only through the integration of institutional, cultural, and economic strategies can Indonesia transform local democracy from a transactional exchange toward a more participatory and accountable system.

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