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Ethnic Identity Politics and Voter Behavior: The 2018 West Kalimantan Gubernatorial Election

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini menelaah pengaruh politik identitas etnis terhadap perilaku pemilih pada Pemilihan Gubernur Kalimantan Barat 2018, dengan fokus pada sentimen identitas Dayak dan Melayu serta strategi kandidat dalam mengkomunikasikan identitas etnis dan agama. Latar belakang penelitian ini berangkat dari desentralisasi pasca-Reformasi yang membuka ruang bagi mobilisasi politik berbasis identitas, sementara sejarah marginalisasi etnis Dayak dan dominasi Melayu pada masa Orde Baru memengaruhi dinamika politik lokal. Penelitian menggunakan metode studi kasus kualitatif dengan pengumpulan data melalui wawancara mendalam, studi literatur, dan dokumentasi, melibatkan narasumber kunci seperti calon gubernur, elite adat, dan pengamat politik lokal. Analisis data dilakukan melalui reduksi, penyajian, dan verifikasi, untuk memahami interaksi antara strategi kandidat, afiliasi etnis-agama, dan perilaku pemilih. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa sentimen etnis-agama signifikan memengaruhi peta suara Pilkada 2018, di mana kemenangan Sutarmidji-Ria Norsan mencerminkan konsolidasi dukungan etnis Melayu-Muslim di wilayah pesisir, sedangkan Dayak-Kristen tetap mendominasi wilayah pedalaman. Strategi kandidat mengintegrasikan narasi pembangunan dan identitas lokal untuk meningkatkan kepercayaan publik, memperkuat pola voting berbasis etnis-religius, dan memanfaatkan koalisi partai serta jaringan tokoh masyarakat. Temuan ini memberikan kontribusi baru terhadap studi politik etnis, desentralisasi, dan perilaku pemilih dengan menyoroti interaksi kompleks antara identitas etnis, agama, dan strategi kampanye dalam Pilkada.
Kata Kunci: politik identitas; Pilkada 2018; Kalimantan Barat; desentralisasi; politik lokal.

Abstract

This study examines the influence of ethnic identity politics on voter behavior in the 2018 West Kalimantan gubernatorial election, focusing on Dayak and Malay ethnic sentiments and candidate strategies in communicating ethnic and religious identity. The research is grounded in post-Reformasi decentralization that enabled ethnic-based political mobilization, alongside historical marginalization of the Dayak and dominance of the Malay during the New Order period, shaping local political dynamics. The study employs a qualitative case study approach with data collected through in-depth interviews, literature review, and documentation, involving key informants such as gubernatorial candidates, ethnic leaders, and political observers. Data analysis follows reduction, presentation, and verification stages to explore the interaction between candidate strategies, ethnic-religious affiliation, and voter behavior. Results indicate that ethnic-religious sentiment significantly influenced the 2018 election outcomes, with Sutarmidji-Ria Norsan winning through consolidation of Malay-Muslim support in coastal areas, while Dayak-Christian voters remained dominant inland. Candidates integrated development narratives with local identity to build public trust, reinforce ethnic-religious voting patterns, and leverage party coalitions and community networks. The findings provide novel insights for ethnic politics, decentralization, and voter behavior studies, highlighting the complex interplay between ethnicity, religion, and campaign strategy in regional elections.
Keywords: identity politics; 2018 regional elections; West Kalimantan; decentralization; local politics.

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Preliminary

Indonesia is a nation characterized by an extraordinary degree of ethnic diversity across its regions, making identity politics a central issue in the post-reform era. This phenomenon emerged as a consequence of *New Order* policies, particularly Law No. 21 of 2001 on *Regional Autonomy (OTDA)*, which was later revised through Law No. 32 of 2004 and Law No. 23 of 2014 to transform the centralized administrative mechanism into a decentralized one (Deivid Oleyver Palenewen, 2021). The decentralization policy was designed to enhance the welfare of local communities, yet it simultaneously created opportunities for the resurgence of identity-based politics, especially in West Kalimantan Province. Regional Head Elections (Pilkada) became a crucial manifestation of democracy, affirming every citizen's right to elect and be elected as a political leader (Lewis, 2018).

The issue of ethnicity in West Kalimantan has deep historical roots dating back to the *New Order* era, when political power was concentrated in the hands of certain groups, positioning the Malays as structural elites while marginalizing the Dayak community. After the 1998 Reform, the policies of decentralization and *Regional Autonomy* opened new avenues for the rise of ethnic-based local politics and the strengthening of *putra daerah* (native son) narratives in *Pilkada*. Within this multi-ethnic society comprising Dayak, Malay, Chinese, Javanese, and Madurese populations the dynamics of identity politics have grown increasingly complex. Decentralization facilitated the mobilization of ethnic-based political movements and strategic inter-ethnic collaborations, exemplified by the 1999 elite pact between the Dayak in Bengkayang and the Malays in Pontianak to maintain a balance of power (Bräuchler, 2017). Furthermore, the *Majelis Adat Budaya Melayu* (Malay Cultural Customary Assembly) has functioned as a mechanism for Malay political survival, enabling coexistence with the Dayak as the indigenous people of Kalimantan (Satyaningrum et al., 2024). This phenomenon persisted into the 2018 Pilkada, when ethnic-religious sentiments demonstrably influenced voter behavior and candidate strategies in establishing political legitimacy within the decentralization era.

The 2007 West Kalimantan *Pilkada* marked a pivotal moment in the resurgence of Dayak identity politics, symbolized by the victory of Cornelis, who utilized ethnic narratives as a political mobilization tool to end the long-standing marginalization experienced by his community during the *New Order* period (Hasanah, 2018). Through the spirit of *indigenous identity*, Cornelis successfully cultivated a more structurally organized Dayak consciousness, grounded in traditional values and local aspirations aimed at strengthening political representation at the provincial level (Haridison et al., 2023). This strategy demonstrated that ethnic awareness can evolve into an effective political force when supported by robust social institutions and cultural legitimacy.

In the 2012 *Pilkada*, the Cornelis–Christiandy pair secured victory with 52.13% of the vote, expanding Dayak representation within the bureaucracy and directing development initiatives toward the hinterland areas as a symbolic gesture of ethnic power redistribution. However, the political landscape shifted in the 2018 *Pilkada*, when Sutarmidji–Ria Norsan (Malay–Muslim) won with 51.55% of the vote, surpassing Karolin–Suryadman (Dayak) and Milton–Boyman, marking a voter orientation shift from a Dayak to a Malay–Muslim base (KPU of West Kalimantan Province, 2018). This transformation illustrates the intensifying

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political and identity rivalry between the Dayak and Malay communities, now further complicated by religion as a key element of social legitimacy within the political arena (Yusriadi et al., 2021).

The 2018 gubernatorial election data indicate a significant shift. Sutarmidji–Ria Norsan (Malay-Muslim) won the election with 1,334,512 votes (51.55%), defeating Karolin–Suryadman (Dayak) with 1,081,878 votes (41.79%) and Milton–Boyman with 172,151 votes (6.65%) (KPU Provinsi Kalimantan Barat, 2018). Political support was mobilized through party coalitions: Sutarmidji–Ria Norsan were backed by Golkar, Nasdem, Hanura, PKS, and PKB, while Karolin–Suryadman were supported by PDI-P and the Democratic Party, with Milton–Boyman running as the opposition candidates from Gerindra and PAN. This outcome reflects the complexity of ethnic-political dynamics, in which issues of identity politics and religion intersect to shape voter behavior.

During the campaign, instances of black campaigns and ethno-religious sentiments emerged, such as Cornelis's speech emphasizing that "the Malay and Muslim groups are colonizers of the Dayak", (Wicaksono & Nugraha, 2018) which triggered post-election tensions, particularly in Landak Regency. This phenomenon underscores the risk of communal conflict along ethnic lines and highlights the importance of electoral oversight regulations, as stipulated in Law No. 10 of 2016 on the Election of Governors, Regents, and Mayors, as well as Law No. 7 of 2017 on General Elections. These laws provide mechanisms for resolving electoral disputes and safeguarding voting rights, including provisions in Article 1(1) and Article 22 concerning electoral integrity.

The analytical findings substantiate that identity politics exerted a profound influence on the electoral configuration, wherein the triumph of Sutarmidji–Ria Norsan signified a pivotal realignment of political allegiance from Dayak constituencies to Malay-Muslim electorates, most notably within districts previously characterized by Dayak predominance (Ilmy et al., 2024). This outcome reaffirms that voter behavior was decisively conditioned by ethno-religious sentiments, the persistence of dynastic political structures, and candidate communication strategies strategically accentuating local identity markers. Moreover, this study underscores a salient research lacuna regarding the extent to which decentralization and regional autonomy operate as institutional conduits for the mobilization of ethnically driven politics. This gap is particularly evident in the West Kalimantan context, where the dialectical nexus between ethnicity and religion in the 2018 gubernatorial election has remained insufficiently explored through rigorous empirical inquiry.

Previous studies, such as Buchari (Buchari, 2014), have underscored the resurgence of Dayak identity politics; nevertheless, they have not sufficiently examined the concrete modalities through which ethnic and religious sentiments intersect to shape voter behavior in the 2018 gubernatorial election. This phenomenon demonstrates that identity politics, although inherently laden with conflict potential, can nevertheless be managed constructively through local values and collective consciousness aimed at preserving interethnic harmony (Syahrin et al., 2023). Moreover, data from the Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) regarding the 2018 Regional Election Vulnerability Index revealed that West Kalimantan was particularly prone to ethnoreligious (SARA) contestations, fabricated accusations, electoral fraud, and deliberate voter segmentation (Arifianto & Chen, 2019 dalam (Syahrin et al., 2019). This scholarly lacuna constitutes the epistemic foundation for the study's novelty, namely the analytical focus on the

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strategic deployment of ethno-religious identity in candidate communication and its consequential implications for the configuration of voter behavior.

The primary objective of this study is to analyze the extent to which Dayak and Malay ethnic identity sentiments influenced the outcome of the 2018 West Kalimantan gubernatorial election, as well as the strategies employed by candidates in articulating ethnic and religious identities to shape voter behavior. Theoretically, the study contributes to advancing scholarly understandings of ethnic politics and local political dynamics, while also providing policy-relevant insights for the state in fostering the harmonization of identity politics (Rahman et al., 2024). From a practical standpoint, this research enhances public comprehension of the interplay between ethnic politics and voter behavior in Indonesia. The scope of analysis is delimited to the organizational level, represented by the National Dayak Customary Council (*Majelis Adat Dayak Nasional*) and the Malay Cultural Customary Council (*Majelis Adat Budaya Melayu*), and to the individual level, specifically the candidacies of Sutarmidji and Karolin Margret Natasha.

Method

This study employs a case study approach to examine the role of ethnicity and voter behavior in the 2018 West Kalimantan gubernatorial election. The case study design was selected as it enables an in-depth investigation of a complex phenomenon within its real-life context, encompassing the interactions among political parties, customary elites, and candidates, as well as the ways in which Dayak and Malay ethnic identities shaped voter preferences (Kusumastuti & Khoiron, 2019). This approach further facilitates the collection of comprehensive and contemporaneous information from multiple sources over a defined temporal scope.

This study seeks to analyze the influence of ethnic identity on voter behavior and to examine the strategies employed by candidates in articulating ethnic identity to shape the outcome of the 2018 gubernatorial election. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews with four key informants: H. Sutarmidji (the elected Governor, affiliated with the United Development Party/PPP), Drs. Cornelis (Chairman of the National Dayak Customary Council), Prof. Dr. Chairil Effendy (Chairman of the Malay Cultural Customary Council), and Dr. Karolin Margret Natasha (2018 gubernatorial candidate). The selection criteria for these informants were grounded in their direct involvement in ethnic politics and the substantive relevance of their roles to the phenomenon under investigation.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, literature review, and documentation. The interviews were carried out in person, guided by a set of semi-structured questions that allowed informants to elaborate extensively on their experiences, perspectives, and perceptions (Salam, 2023). The literature review encompassed reports from research institutions such as the General Elections Commission (KPU) and the Indonesian Survey Institute (LSI), as well as credible mass media sources. The research site was West Kalimantan Province, comprising 14 regencies and municipalities. The research timeline included two weeks in late November for the preparation of Chapters I–III, two weeks in early December for finalizing the interview guidelines, two weeks from mid- to late December for interviews and the drafting of Chapter IV, and January for data analysis and the completion of the final

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report. Data triangulation was employed by cross-validating the findings from interviews, field observations, and secondary documents to ensure the reliability and validity of the data.

The analysis employed a qualitative descriptive approach encompassing three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion verification. Data reduction entailed distilling complex information into its core substantive issues, while data presentation was conducted through narrative exposition, tabular organization, and matrices to facilitate interpretation. Conclusion verification involved triangulating primary and secondary data against theoretical frameworks, such as political communication models and the conceptualization of ethnic identity in local elections. This methodological design enabled a nuanced understanding of the socio-political meanings embedded within the gubernatorial election. Nonetheless, the study is constrained by certain limitations, including its reliance on elite political interviews, which may introduce interpretive bias, as well as the use of media-based sources, which inherently carry the potential for subjectivity.

Results and Discussion

The Influence of Dayak and Malay Ethnic Identity Sentiments on the 2018 West Kalimantan Gubernatorial Election Results

The analysis of the 2018 West Kalimantan gubernatorial election indicates that ethnic identity sentiment was a crucial factor shaping voter behavior, particularly among the Dayak and Malay ethnic groups, each of which possesses a complex political and social history. This pattern of identity mobilization does not stand alone but rather reflects a form of ethnocentrism that has historically been a source of political and social tension in Kalimantan. As explained by (Hamdani, 2022), ethnic differences have often been exploited as instruments of socio-economic and political competition, which in turn pose challenges to the consolidation of democracy. The Dayak, as the majority group but one that was historically marginalized during the New Order, employed identity politics as an instrument to demand equal political representation, as reflected in the predominance of Dayak voters supporting candidates who shared their ethnic identity. However, the promotion system within the West Kalimantan Provincial Government remains influenced by patrimonial and traditional values, which allow space for ethnic loyalty and patron–client relationships rather than being based solely on objective competence (Rusdiono et al., 2022).

In contrast, the Malay, who during the New Order occupied strategic positions within the bureaucracy and government, responded by reinforcing their cultural identity through the establishment of the Malay Cultural Council (Majelis Adat Budaya Melayu/MABM) and various cultural activities such as the construction of the Rumah Melayu and cultural festivals. This phenomenon is in line with the legal framework, particularly Law No. 10 of 2016 on Regional Elections, Article 6(2) and Article 7(1), which emphasize citizens' rights to vote and to be elected, as well as Law No. 23 of 2014 on Regional Government, Article 18(7), which affirms regional autonomy in managing local leadership. Statistical data show that in 2010 the Dayak population reached 34.93%, while the Malay accounted for 33.84%. Moreover, the religious distribution in West Kalimantan reveals a polarized voting pattern based on religious identity: 60.07% Muslim, 22.16% Protestant Christian, and 11.58% Buddhist (Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Kalimantan Barat, 2021). This reflects a significant correlation between ethnic-religious affiliation and voter behavior, where the 2018 gubernatorial campaign not only

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highlighted programs and visions but also explicitly mobilized ethnic sentiment to garner support, thereby reinforcing the dynamics of identity politics that have persisted since the post-1998 reform era. The principal focus of this study is the impact of Dayak and Malay ethnic identity sentiments on the outcome of the 2018 gubernatorial election in West Kalimantan, which constitutes a critical indicator for comprehending the dynamics of local politics shaped by ethnic identity. As indicated in Table 1, the candidate pair Sutarmidji–Ria Norsan secured 1,334,512 votes, representing 51.55% of the total, surpassing the pair Karolin Margret Natasha–Suryadman Gidot, who garnered 1,081,878 votes (41.79%), while Milton Crosby–Boyman Harun obtained only 17,151 votes (6.65%).

Table 1. Recapitulation of the 2018 Gubernatorial and Vice Gubernatorial Election Results

No	Candidate Pair	Election Results
1	Milton Crosby - Boyman Harun	172.151 (6,65%)
2	Karolin Margret Natasha-Suryadman Gidot	1.081.878 (41,79%)
3	Sutarmidji - Ria Norsan	1.334.512 (51,55%)

Data Source: West Kalimantan Provincial General Elections Commission (KPU), 2018.

This distribution illustrates the predominance of votes in coastal regions largely inhabited by the Malay ethnic group and adherents of Islam, including Sambas Regency, Singkawang City, Mempawah Regency, Pontianak City, Kubu Raya Regency, Kayong Utara Regency, and Ketapang Regency (see Table 2). The inland regencies of Landak, Sanggau, Sekadau, Sintang, Melawi, and Kapuas Hulu predominantly inhabited by Dayak and Christian/Catholic populations tended to support the Karolin–Suryadman coalition. This outcome indicates that social deprivation fostered political discontent, motivating communities to react to perceived threats to their identity. Such dynamics are consistent with *identity politics* theory, illustrating how Dayak and Malay identities were effectively mobilized in the 2018 West Kalimantan gubernatorial election (Alexandra, 2018).

Table 2. Vote Results by Regency/Municipality in West Kalimantan – 2018 Gubernatorial Election

No	Regency/City	Milton- Boyman	Karolin- Suryadman	Sutarmidji-Ria Norsan
1	Kab. Landak	6.361	218.968	20.634
2	Kab. Melawi	15.099	50.152	64.581
3	Kab. Mempawah	3.561	50.152	64.581
4	Kab. Sambas	9.093	53.264	89.773
5	Kab. Sanggau	24.568	151.450	63.080
6	Kab. Sekadau	22.480	52.087	34.316
7	Kab. Sintang	40.735	98.166	79.591
8	Kab. Bengkayang	3.817	87.635	33.682
9	Kab. Kapuas Hulu	6.051	59.204	63.814
10	Kab. Kayong Utara	5.231	9.679	40.944
11	Kab. Ketapang	14.366	87.241	125.140
12	Kab. Kubu Raya	4.248	65.155	200.484
13	Kota Pontianak	4.809	73.100	239.135
14	Kota Singkawang	1.732	37.330	52.023
	Accumulation	**172.151**	**1.081.878**	**1.334.512**

Data Source: West Kalimantan Provincial General Elections Commission (KPU), 2018.

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A longitudinal analysis of the 2007, 2012, and 2018 gubernatorial elections in West Kalimantan (see Tables 4.7 and 4.8) reveals a consistent electoral pattern: coastal regions serve as the electoral stronghold of the Malay ethnic group, whereas the hinterland functions as the political base of the Dayak community. For instance, in the 2007 election, the Cornelis–Christiandy (Dayak–Chinese) ticket secured victories in Landak, Sanggau, Sintang, Sekadau, Bengkayang, Melawi, and Singkawang City, demonstrating the consolidation of Dayak electoral support. This pattern persisted in the 2012 election, albeit with noticeable vote fragmentation among the Malay electorate. A marked shift emerged in the 2018 election, as the Malay successfully consolidated their support in the coastal areas through the mobilization of Malay cultural organizations and the candidacy of a single, broadly representative figure (Sutarmidji–Ria Norsan).

Table 3. Results of the 2012 Regional Head Election in West Kalimantan Province by Regency/City

Regency/City	Cornelis-Christiandy	Armyn-Fathan	Morkes-Burhanudin	Tambul-Barnabas
Kab. Sambas	56.552	44.053	132.652	13.169
Kab. Pontianak	46.579	24.882	31.928	6.157
Kab. Sanggau	173.127	16.974	35.850	10.582
Kab. Ketapang	111.034	20.547	72.945	9.519
Kab. Sintang	120.906	14.686	68.251	10.895
Kab. Kapuas Hulu	54.573	7.686	11.709	54.701
Kab. Bengkayang	83.138	9.590	15.431	3.557
Kab. Landak	213.758	4.751	8.024	4.462
Kab. Sekadau	66.144	6.782	25.100	6.993
Kab. Melawi	64.446	8.298	39.656	8.931
Kab. Kayong Utara	11.504	7.651	18.343	3.642
Kab. Kubu Raya	84.603	57.675	65.167	22.121
Pontianak City	90.447	110.107	48.783	13.708
Singkawang City	48.374	28.062	17.242	3.219
Accumulation	**1.225.185**	**361.744**	**591.081**	**172.016**

Data Source: West Kalimantan Provincial General Elections Commission (KPU), 2012.

In examining the gubernatorial elections in the post New Order era, the electoral triumph of Cornelis and Christiandy Sanjaya representing the Dayak and Chinese ethnic constituencies was fundamentally underpinned by the consolidation of support from these respective communities. According to (La Ode, 2012) their success can be attributed to a strategic configuration effectively synergized the electoral preferences of both ethnic bases. By contrast, other candidates who embodied cross-ethnic pairings, such as Usman Ja'far–L. H. Kadir, Oesman Sapta Oedang–Ignatius Lyong, and Akil Mochtar–Mecer, garnered support dispersed across both coastal and hinterland constituencies. Nevertheless, this support was partial and inconsistently articulated, rendering them incapable of consolidating voter preferences as effectively as the Cornelis–Christiandy ticket. This phenomenon underscores that the success of ethnic politics in West Kalimantan is not merely contingent upon symbolic representation but also on the strategic capacity to orchestrate inter-ethnic alliances:

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Table 4. Vote Acquisition in the 2007 Regional Head Election in West Kalimantan Province

No	Candidate Pairs (Governor and Vice Governor)	Election Results	Electoral Strongholds
1	Usman Ja'far and L. H Kadir	659.279 (30,94%)	Kab. Sambas; Kab. Pontianak; and Pontianak City
2	Oesman Sapta Oedang and Ignatius Lyong	335.368 (15,74%)	Kab. Ketapang
3	Akil Mochtar and Mecer	205.763 (9,66%)	-
4	Cornelis and Christiandy Sanjaya	930, 679 (43,67%)	Kab. Landak; Kab. Kapuas Hulu; Kab. Sanggau; Kab. Sintang; Kab. Sekadau; Kab. Bengkayang; Kab. Melawi; Singkawang City

Data Source: Data compiled by the author from various sources.

Several key factors influenced this shift in ethnic voting patterns. First, identity politics emerged as the primary determinant. The historical marginalization of the Dayak ethnic group during the *New Order* period, as documented in Law No. 5 of 1974 on Regional Government and Law No. 22 of 1999 on *Regional Autonomy*, encouraged the rise of Dayak ethnic identity through the *Majelis Adat Dayak* (MAD) as a means of consolidating political support. Second, the fragmentation of the Malay ethnic vote during the 2007 and 2012 Pilkada elections hindered their political effectiveness, whereas in 2018, the successful consolidation of Malay support resulted in electoral victory. Third, the role of mass and social media amplified identity-based sentiments by disseminating issues targeting specific groups, aligning with the concept of *primordial sentiment* in the study of identity politics (Perdana, 2023).

Data from Table 2 indicate that in Sambas Regency, Pontianak City, and Kubu Raya Regency, the Sutarmidji–Ria Norsan ticket secured a decisive margin of victory, exemplified by their performance in Pontianak City, where they obtained 239,135 votes compared to Karolin–Suryadman's 73,100 votes. This phenomenon is attributable not only to Malay ethnic affiliation but also to religiosity, as the predominantly Muslim electorate tended to support candidates of the same faith. Conversely, Sanggau and Landak Regencies exhibited strong support for Karolin–Suryadman, thereby reaffirming that Dayak-Christian identity persisted as a dominant determinant in the hinterland constituencies.

Furthermore, a comparative analysis with other provinces, such as Jakarta, reveals that the configuration of identity politics in West Kalimantan is more structurally embedded along ethno-religious lines. In Jakarta, religious identity assumes primacy over ethnicity in shaping electoral behavior, whereas in West Kalimantan the two dimensions are interwoven and mutually reinforcing in the distribution of votes. This divergence underscores the imperative for candidates to tailor their strategies to local issues, including a nuanced understanding of demographic composition and the region's socio-political history. Conceptually, the electoral map of West Kalimantan may be illustrated as an ethno-religious voting bloc diagram: coastal constituencies (Malay–Muslim) consolidated behind Sutarmidji–Ria Norsan; interior constituencies (Dayak–Christian) predominantly supported Karolin–Suryadman; while minority candidates attracted dispersed votes without significant consolidation (Milton–

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Boyman). This diagram demonstrates a relatively stable pattern of ethnic–religious voting blocs from the 2007 to the 2018 gubernatorial elections.

From the perspective of laws and regulations, the entire electoral process followed Law No. 10 of 2016 on the Election of Governors, Regents, and Mayors, Law No. 7 of 2017 on General Elections, as well as Article 1 Paragraph 1 of Law No. 23 of 2014 on Regional Government, which emphasizes the principles of democracy, representation, and non-discrimination. The use of ethnic and religious identities as campaign strategies remains legally permissible as long as it does not violate provisions related to hate speech and discrimination. However, from a critical perspective, such practices raise concerns about the integrity and quality of democracy, which ideally should be grounded in meritocratic principles rather than identity-based affiliations (Duryat et al., 2021). Thus, the influence of Dayak and Malay ethnic identity sentiments on the outcome of the 2018 West Kalimantan gubernatorial election was clearly visible in the consolidation of ethnic and religious votes, the shift in voting patterns compared to previous elections, and the strategic influence of ethnic organizations as well as social media. These results not only confirm the theory of identity politics but also highlight the importance of understanding history and social structures in political campaign planning. This analysis is consistent with the findings of (Djumadin, 2022) on transitional democracies, where primordial sentiments remain an important factor in voter decision-making.

Candidate Strategies in Communicating Ethnic and Religious Identities to Influence Voter Behavior in West Kalimantan

The research findings reveal that candidate strategies in the 2018 West Kalimantan gubernatorial election were profoundly shaped by ethnic and religious identities, although, in practice, the two pairs of candidatesSutarmidji–Ria Norsan and Karolin Margret Natasha–Suryadman Gidot adopted distinct approaches in mobilizing these factors. Sutarmidji–Ria Norsan, representing the Malay ethnic constituency, underscored a pragmatic narrative of inclusive leadership, foregrounding developmental achievements such as the construction of 1,530 kilometers of roads with an increase in road quality from 30% to 79% within a five-year period, the establishment of educational facilities, as well as a significant growth in regional revenue from IDR 1 trillion to IDR 3.256 trillion. This strategy combined direct campaigning with the use of social media to build a positive image and enhance public trust in their programs. In an interview, Sutarmidji emphasized:

> "However, we continued to combine face-to-face campaigning with the use of social media. Social media was utilized to disseminate our programs, counter hoaxes, and build a positive image. At the same time, direct campaigning remained the primary tool for reaching voters in remote areas. Our target audience consisted of the people of West Kalimantan, who are highly diverse in terms of ethnicity, religion, and socio-economic background. As a result, public trust in our proposed programs increased significantly, which ultimately led to a high level of electability and our victory in the 2018 regional election" (Sutarmidji, 2025).

Sutarmidji's campaign emphasized an integrative approach to identity politics, avoiding ethnic and religious confrontation, particularly in sensitive areas such as Kabupaten Landak, while simultaneously consolidating the existing support base. The coalition of supporting parties Golkar, Nasdem, Hanura, PKS, and PKB played a crucial role in mobilizing votes through local networks and community leaders, particularly within the Malay

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community, demonstrating that although identity politics was not overtly imposed, ethnic and religious factors remained significant in shaping voter behavior. Figure 1 illustrates the Sutarmidji–Ria Norsan campaign, which emphasized developmental achievements as the central narrative.

Figure 1. The 2018 Sutarmidji–Ria Norsan Campaign

Picture Soucre: (SU03, 2018)

Conversely, Karolin Margret Natasha–Suryadman Gidot emphasized Dayak identity politics by leveraging the political legacy of her father, Cornelis, as well as the support of customary organizations such as the National Dayak Customary Council (MADN) and the Dayak Customary Council. This strategy aimed to strengthen Dayak representation within the provincial government. Karolin stated:

> "…It's quite difficult to say whether Dayak people vote for Dayak candidates or whether Catholics vote for Catholic candidates. Everything was largely based on party segmentation because that became the primary basis for analyzing electoral prospects and voter bases. So, I relied on party segmentation, focusing on areas where we already had strong support and hoping to win over votes in other parties' strongholds. As for ethnic, religious, or tribal segmentation — it was present, but not particularly significant" (Karolin, 2025).

Karolin's campaign also emphasized the 'Local Son' narrative to assert Dayak cultural and ethnic legitimacy, employing a cultural approach through participation in customary events and community gatherings. Support from social and customary organizations helped mobilize the Dayak voter base while simultaneously reinforcing ethnic political awareness. Figure 2 illustrates Karolin's interaction with the Muslim community during the campaign, indicating efforts to expand her support base beyond the Dayak community.

Figure 2. Karolin and Cornelis reached out to Islamic communities during the campaign in 2018

Pictures Source: Teman Karolin-Gidot on Facebook.

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A critical analysis indicates that although Sutarmidji emphasized pragmatic and inclusive development, whereas Karolin foregrounded Dayak identity politics, both strategies were shaped by the sociological characteristics of voters, including ethnicity, religion, locality, and party affiliation. This pattern resembles identity politics dynamics in other provinces, such as Jakarta, where religious identity proved to be a determinant of voter behavior in the 2017 gubernatorial contest; however, in West Kalimantan, the ethnic-religious constellation is more complex due to the diversity of Malay, Dayak, and Chinese ethnic groups. Secondary data demonstrate that political parties play an instrumental role in mobilizing voters through customary and religious community networks, underscoring that identity-based strategies cannot be divorced from formal political structures.

These findings indicate that candidate communication strategies, which combined pragmatic development, ethnic and religious identity, and broad party coalition support, constituted key factors influencing voter behavior in West Kalimantan. The concept of an ethnic- and religion-based voter diagram can be constructed to clarify the mapping of Dayak–Dayak, Malay–Malay, and Chinese–Dayak alignments within the political contest, illustrating the fragmentation and consolidation of votes. The candidates' strategies in communicating ethnic and religious identities to influence voter behavior in West Kalimantan underscore that identity politics remains relevant and influential, yet its effectiveness is augmented when integrated with pragmatic policy measures and the candidates' capacity to build cross-community coalitions.

Conclusion

The conclusions of this study highlight that ethnic politics in Indonesia is not merely a dominant socio-political phenomenon but also carries significant theoretical implications for the study of ethnic politics, decentralization, and voter behavior. The findings demonstrate that ethnicity-based mobilization enables specific groups to advance their political and economic interests through strategic alliances, while simultaneously exerting substantial influence on public policy. From a theoretical perspective, these results enrich the literature on how ethnic identity shapes patterns of political support, intergroup interactions, and the allocation of resources at both local and national levels. Practically, this study recommends the development of inclusive governance practices, equitable decentralization policies, and strategies to mitigate identity-based polarization, in order to ensure broader representation and prevent ethnic conflict. For future research, it is crucial to examine the role of young voters, compare ethnic political dynamics following the 2019 elections, and analyze the influence of ethnic identity on cross-generational political participation, thereby deepening the understanding of the interactions among ethnic identity, public policy, and voter behavior within Indonesia's decentralized context.

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