



The Influence of Money Politics on Voter Behavior During Regional Head Elections (PILKADA) in South Sulawesi Province

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Abstract

Money politics, the practice of distributing material incentives to sway voter decisions, has long been a challenge in Indonesian elections. This study examines the influence of money politics on voter behavior during the regional head elections in South Sulawesi. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study combines quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to assess the prevalence of money politics and its impact on voting choices. The findings reveal that 61.1% of respondents were exposed to financial inducements, and lower-income voters were particularly susceptible to material rewards. The study also highlights the socio-cultural reinforcement of money politics, with local leaders playing a key role in distributing incentives and social norms of reciprocity shaping voter behavior. Despite these challenges, some voters demonstrated ethical awareness, suggesting that voter education could play a role in mitigating the impact of money politics. The study contributes to the broader literature on clientelism, emphasizing the need for both legal reforms and socio-economic changes to address the root causes of money politics. Future research could investigate the effectiveness of voter education programs and explore broader reforms to enhance electoral integrity.

INTRODUCTION

Regional head elections (Pilkada) in Indonesia are integral to the democratic governance system, offering citizens the opportunity to choose their leaders who will influence policy, development, and local governance. However, the integrity of these elections has increasingly come under scrutiny due to the phenomenon of money politics (*politik uang*), which undermines the democratic ideals of free and fair elections. Money politics refers to the practice of distributing cash, goods, or other material incentives to sway voter decisions, thus shifting the electoral focus from candidates' competencies or policy platforms to immediate, material gains (Hawing, Fadillah, & Parawu, 2020). This issue is particularly prominent in South Sulawesi Province, where local socioeconomic disparities, political rivalry, and deeply rooted cultural practices create a fertile ground for electoral manipulation (Begouvic & Cuan, 2021; Rahawarin, 2022).

Money politics is not merely a transaction between voters and candidates but is deeply embedded within broader socio-economic and political structures (Stoychev, 2025; Amrillah & Maliha, 2025). It capitalizes on voters' vulnerabilities, especially within low-income communities that may prioritize short-term financial rewards over long-term governance considerations (Djufri, 2023; Mukherjee & Merivaki, 2022). Research in South Sulawesi has highlighted patterns where candidates strategically target disadvantaged communities, offering immediate benefits in exchange for electoral support (Hawing et al., 2020; Sari, 2024). This dynamic results in electoral outcomes that reflect material incentives rather than informed civic choices, raising concerns over the legitimacy of elected officials and undermining the accountability of local governance systems.

The relationship between money politics and voter behavior is multifaceted. Empirical studies demonstrate that the distribution of financial incentives significantly alters voter behavior, creating dependencies that often extend beyond the election period (Hawing et al., 2020; Goldberg & Schär, 2023; Ashworth, 2012). The 2018 Wajo Regency election, for instance, found that money politics accounted for over 50% of the variance in voter participation, illustrating the profound impact of financial inducements on electoral outcomes. Furthermore, studies of South Sulawesi's 2013 gubernatorial election revealed that monetary incentives often take precedence over more important considerations such as candidate competence, policy alignment, or integrity (Hatta, 2013; Stephanopoulos, 2014; Rivera, 2020).

Socioeconomic conditions amplify the effects of money politics. Voters in regions characterized by poverty, limited educational opportunities, and constrained economic mobility are more susceptible to material incentives (Seligman, 2018; Patana, 2022). This vulnerability not only facilitates electoral manipulation but also perpetuates a cycle of clientelism in which political actors feel compelled to cater to financially disadvantaged populations to maintain electoral support (Begovic & Cuan, 2021; Patana, 2022). Consequently, money politics not only distorts democratic decision-making but also reinforces structural inequities, ensuring that electoral outcomes often favor those with more financial resources, rather than those with superior governance capabilities.

Tackling the issue of money politics requires robust legal frameworks and institutional reforms (Ahmad & Zamri, 2024; Rachmad, 2025). Indonesian electoral laws explicitly prohibit the use of financial inducements to influence voters, but enforcement remains inconsistent due to limited institutional capacity, lack of effective monitoring, and the cultural normalization of transactional politics (Djufri, 2023; Rahawarin, 2022; Ramadhan & Azhari, 2023; Noor & Marlini, 2023). Mitigation strategies, therefore, must combine stricter enforcement of electoral laws with educational initiatives that raise voter awareness about the long-term consequences of money politics. Such initiatives could help cultivate an electorate that prioritizes policy considerations and candidate qualifications over material inducements.

Studies on the effectiveness of these interventions have suggested a growing recognition of the need for voter education and legal reform (Holbein et al., 2022; Suttman-Lea & Merivaki, 2022). However, limited empirical data on the extent of money politics in rural and economically marginalized areas necessitates further investigation into its pervasive influence on regional elections. While some scholars advocate for institutional reforms and stronger sanctions, others suggest that cultural shifts are equally crucial in reducing the appeal of material inducements (Rahawarin, 2022; Aparicio et al., 2025; Gelfand et al., 2024). There is a clear need for comprehensive, evidence-based research that not only identifies the scale and scope of money politics but also explores the socio-cultural dynamics that enable its persistence.

This study aims to contribute to the existing literature by exploring the impact of money politics on voter behavior in South Sulawesi, offering a detailed analysis of how financial inducements influence voting patterns. In particular, the research investigates the ways in which money politics intersects with local economic and cultural contexts, providing a deeper understanding of why certain communities are more vulnerable to such practices. The ultimate goal of this research is to inform policy recommendations that address the root causes of money politics, providing a pathway toward more transparent, accountable, and democratic electoral processes in Indonesia. By examining the socio-economic and political structures that sustain money politics, this study seeks to offer practical solutions to mitigate its harmful effects and foster a more informed electorate.

METHODS

This study utilizes a descriptive-analytical research design to examine the impact of money politics on voter behavior during regional head elections (Pilkada) in South Sulawesi Province. The research combines both quantitative and qualitative approaches, employing a mixed-methods design to provide a comprehensive understanding of the influence of financial incentives on voting behavior and the sociocultural context within which these practices occur. This methodological approach allows for triangulation of the findings, ensuring that both the measurable effects and the underlying social dynamics are captured.

Research Design and Approach

Given the complexity of the issue of money politics and its potential impact on electoral outcomes, a mixed-methods design was chosen to achieve a comprehensive analysis. As Creswell (2014) suggests, a mixed-methods approach allows for the integration of both numerical data and contextual insights, facilitating a deeper understanding of complex phenomena. In this study, quantitative data was collected through surveys, while qualitative insights were gathered from in-depth interviews. This combination of methods enhances the validity of the research findings and provides a more holistic view of the issue at hand.

The research design adheres to a descriptive-analytical framework, which enables the investigation of both the prevalence and the influence of money politics on voter behavior. According to Braun & Clarke (2006), a descriptive-analytical approach is ideal for understanding patterns and relationships within a given population, making it well-suited for this study's aim of analyzing the effect of money politics on regional election outcomes.

Population and Sample

The population of the study consists of registered voters in selected districts of South Sulawesi who participated in the recent regional head elections. To capture a comprehensive picture of voter behavior, a purposive sampling strategy was employed. This strategy was chosen to specifically target areas where money politics was reported to be prevalent, as indicated by election monitoring organizations and local media reports. This sampling approach is consistent with Creswell's (2014) recommendation to use purposive sampling when studying specific phenomena within a particular population.

A total of 450 respondents were surveyed for the study, representing a diverse cross-section of South Sulawesi's electorate. The respondents were selected from both urban and rural districts, ensuring that the sample reflects the varied socioeconomic conditions of the province. The selection criteria were designed to capture a broad spectrum of voting behaviors, as well as the socio-economic factors that might influence susceptibility to money politics.

Data Collection Methods

The data collection process involved both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. The quantitative component of the study involved structured questionnaires administered to the 450 selected respondents. These questionnaires were designed to assess respondents' exposure to money politics, their voting behavior, and their socioeconomic background. The questionnaires included both closed-ended and Likert-scale items, which allowed for the collection of both categorical data and attitudinal responses. The Likert-scale items, in particular, facilitated the measurement of the intensity and frequency of exposure to money politics, as well as the extent to which it influenced voting decisions.

In addition to the quantitative surveys, in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with key informants, including election officials, community leaders, and representatives from civil society organizations involved in election monitoring. These interviews aimed to uncover the underlying mechanisms of money politics and to explore the socio-cultural and economic factors that influence voter susceptibility to material inducements. As Braun and Clarke (2006) note, qualitative interviews are particularly useful for gaining insights into complex social phenomena that are difficult to capture through quantitative methods alone.

The interviews were semi-structured, allowing for flexibility in probing deeper into respondents' experiences and perceptions. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. The interview data were transcribed and analyzed thematically, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns and themes related to money politics.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was carried out in two stages: quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis. The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, which provided an overview of the patterns of voter behavior and exposure to money politics. Descriptive statistics were used to calculate frequencies, percentages, and averages, which helped to identify the extent of money politics exposure among voters in South Sulawesi. For example, Table 1 (Exposure to Money Politics Among Voters) shows that 61.1% of the respondents reported receiving some form of cash or goods during the election, indicating that money politics is widespread in the region.

In addition to descriptive statistics, inferential statistics were employed to explore the relationships between money politics exposure and voting behavior. Specifically, correlation and regression analysis were used to examine the strength and direction of the association between financial inducements and voters' choices. As indicated in Table 3 (Correlation Between Exposure to Money Politics and Voting Choice), the results show a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.52$, $p < 0.01$) between exposure to money politics and the likelihood of voting for the incentivizing candidate. This finding provides empirical support for the theory that material inducements can significantly influence voting decisions.

The qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method commonly used to identify patterns in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis involves coding the data into categories and identifying recurring themes across the interviews. This process helps to uncover the social and cultural dynamics that underlie voter behavior and the strategies employed by political candidates. The findings from the qualitative analysis were used to contextualize and explain the patterns observed in the quantitative data, providing a richer understanding of the mechanisms of money politics in South Sulawesi.

For example, the qualitative interviews revealed that the distribution of material incentives through local leaders created social pressure to support candidates who

offered rewards, which reinforced clientelist relationships between politicians and voters. As noted in Table 4 (Summary of Qualitative Findings), this social reinforcement was particularly evident in rural areas, where cultural norms of reciprocity played a significant role in shaping voter behavior.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study on the influence of money politics on voter behavior during regional head elections (Pilkada) in South Sulawesi Province. The results are derived from both quantitative and qualitative data, which were analyzed to examine the prevalence of money politics, its impact on voting behavior, and the social and cultural dynamics that influence voters' susceptibility to financial inducements. The results are presented in three main areas: (1) exposure to money politics among voters, (2) the influence of money politics on voting decisions, and (3) the thematic findings from the qualitative interviews.

Exposure to Money Politics Among Voters

The quantitative survey revealed a significant level of exposure to money politics during the regional head elections in South Sulawesi. As shown in Table 1, the majority of respondents (61.1%) reported receiving some form of cash or material incentive during the election campaign. This high percentage indicates that money politics is a widespread practice in the region, particularly in areas with higher levels of economic vulnerability. The findings suggest that candidates are strategically using financial incentives to gain support, particularly in low-income communities where voters may prioritize short-term material benefits over long-term policy considerations (Hawing et al., 2020).

Table 1. Exposure to Money Politics Among Voters (N = 450)

Exposure to Money Politics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Received cash or goods	275	61.1
Did not receive	175	38.9
Total	450	100

The high prevalence of money politics in South Sulawesi suggests that such practices are entrenched in local political dynamics. This finding supports previous research by Hawing et al. (2020) and Sari (2024), who documented the widespread use of material inducements in the region. It also reinforces the notion that money politics is a pervasive feature of the electoral landscape in South Sulawesi, where economic disparities and political competition intersect to create fertile ground for these practices.

The Influence of Money Politics on Voting Decisions

The results also highlight the significant influence that money politics has on voter behavior. The correlation between exposure to money politics and voting choices was strong, with a correlation coefficient of 0.52 ($p < 0.01$), as shown in Table 3. This suggests that voters who received cash or goods were more likely to support the candidate providing the material incentives. The statistical analysis indicates a direct relationship between the amount of exposure to money politics and the likelihood of voting for the incentivizing candidate, thus supporting the theory that financial inducements significantly affect electoral outcomes (Hawing et al., 2020).

Table 2. Correlation Between Exposure to Money Politics and Voting Choice

Variable	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Significance (p)
Exposure to Money Politics & Voting Choice	0.52	< 0.01

This finding aligns with studies that have shown how financial inducements can substantially alter voting patterns. In the 2018 Wajo Regency election, for example, Hawing et al. (2020) found that money politics accounted for over half of the variance in voter participation, emphasizing its profound impact on voter behavior. Similarly, the results from this study underscore how the distribution of material incentives shifts voters' attention away from candidates' competencies or policy positions toward immediate personal gain.

Further analysis of the data revealed a significant disparity in the influence of money politics based on voters' income levels. As shown in Table 2, lower-income voters were far more likely to be influenced by money politics than their higher-income counterparts. Specifically, 63% of voters below the provincial median income reported being influenced by material incentives, compared to only 8% of those above the median income. This finding is consistent with previous studies that have identified socioeconomic vulnerability as a key factor in determining susceptibility to clientelistic politics (Begovic & Cuan, 2021; Djufri, 2023). The data indicate that candidates strategically target economically disadvantaged populations, who are more likely to accept material rewards in exchange for their votes.

Table 3. Influence of Money Politics on Voting Decisions

Respondent Income Level	Influenced by Money Politics	Not Influenced	Total
Below provincial median income	180	105	285
Above provincial median income	13	152	165
Total	193	257	450

The analysis highlights the significant role that income level plays in mediating the effect of money politics. Lower-income voters appear to be more vulnerable to material inducements, while higher-income voters are less likely to be influenced by such practices. This dynamic reinforces the argument that money politics exacerbates existing inequalities, as candidates with more financial resources are able to disproportionately sway the votes of economically disadvantaged populations (Rahawarin, 2022).

The Interaction of Socioeconomic Factors, Money Politics and Voter Behavior

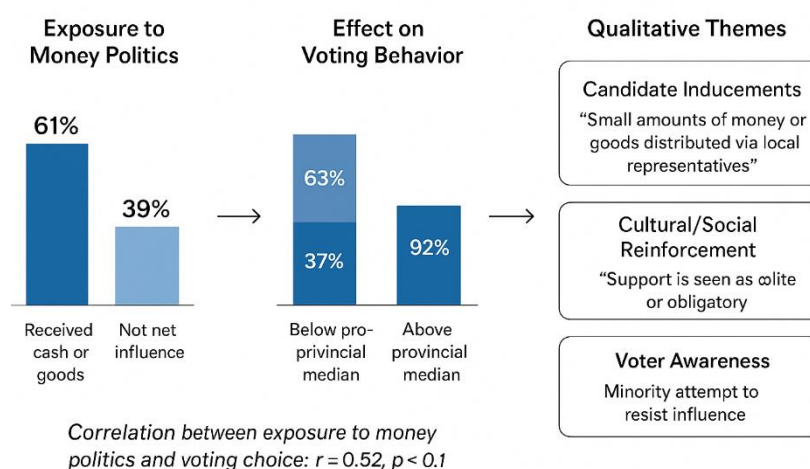


Figure 1. Influence of Money Politics on Voter Behavior in South Sulawesi Pilkada

The qualitative data from the in-depth interviews provided additional insights into the mechanisms of money politics and the social and cultural factors that influence voter behavior. Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts revealed several key themes related to the practice of money politics in South Sulawesi, including candidate inducements, social and cultural reinforcement, and voter awareness.

One of the most prominent themes to emerge from the interviews was the role of local leaders in distributing material incentives. Many respondents reported that candidates often provided small amounts of money or goods to village representatives, who then distributed these incentives to voters. This pattern was particularly common in rural areas, where community leaders play a key role in shaping political behavior. As one respondent noted,

"During the campaign, many candidates provide small amounts of money or goods to village representatives,"

Highlighting the importance of local intermediaries in the distribution of material rewards.

Another significant theme was the social and cultural reinforcement of money politics. In many rural communities, cultural norms of reciprocity and respect played a crucial role in shaping voters' decisions. Several interviewees mentioned that if a candidate gave something to their village, it was considered disrespectful not to support them. As one interviewee explained,

"If a candidate gives something to our village, it is polite to support them, otherwise it may be seen as disrespectful."

This finding suggests that money politics is not only a transactional practice but also deeply embedded in the social fabric of local communities, where norms of reciprocity and respect reinforce the influence of financial incentives on voting behavior.

Despite the pervasive influence of money politics, some voters exhibited critical awareness of its negative impact on the electoral process. A small number of respondents reported attempting to separate material incentives from their voting choices, reflecting ethical considerations in their decision-making. One respondent stated,

"Some voters attempt to separate incentives from their choice, reflecting ethical consideration,"

Suggesting that there is potential for voter education initiatives to raise awareness about the long-term consequences of money politics and foster a more informed electorate.

The qualitative findings offer critical insights into the underlying factors that drive the persistence of money politics in South Sulawesi, highlighting the interplay between economic vulnerability and cultural norms. The distribution of material incentives, often facilitated by local leaders, plays a significant role in reinforcing clientelist relationships, especially in rural and economically disadvantaged areas. In these communities, where access to resources and opportunities is limited, voters are more likely to accept financial incentives as a means of securing immediate benefits. This creates a reciprocal relationship between politicians and voters, where candidates provide material rewards in exchange for electoral support, thus perpetuating a cycle of dependency that undermines democratic decision-making. The study underscores the idea that economic vulnerability, coupled with the lack of alternative political engagement options, makes voters more susceptible to the allure of money politics.

Moreover, the qualitative findings reveal that money politics in South Sulawesi is not only a transactional phenomenon but is deeply ingrained in local social and cultural dynamics. In many areas, cultural norms of reciprocity and respect play a crucial role in shaping voters' decisions. Local leaders, who act as intermediaries in the distribution of material incentives, often exploit these cultural practices to further their own political interests. As respondents noted, refusing to support a candidate who provides incentives could be perceived as disrespectful or disloyal, highlighting the extent to which social pressure is used to reinforce political behavior. This cultural reinforcement of money politics emphasizes that the practice is not just about financial gain; it is also about maintaining social harmony and fulfilling cultural expectations. In this way, money politics becomes embedded in the political and social fabric of South Sulawesi, making it an enduring feature of the electoral process.

The Persistence and Impact of Money Politics in South Sulawesi's Elections

The findings of this study contribute to the growing body of literature on money politics, particularly its role in shaping electoral outcomes in developing democracies like Indonesia. The pervasive use of financial inducements during the Pilkada in South Sulawesi highlights the significant challenges to the integrity of elections in regions marked by economic vulnerability and strong local patronage systems. These findings align with previous studies on clientelism and transactional politics in Indonesia, which emphasize that money politics serves not just as a political tool but as a cultural and social mechanism embedded in the very fabric of electoral behavior (Hawing et al., 2020; Begovic & Cuan, 2021). As shown in this study, the transactional nature of elections in South Sulawesi is not solely about gaining votes through material rewards but about sustaining relationships within communities through the practice of reciprocity, where voters feel obligated to support candidates who provide them with immediate benefits.

The results also reinforce the idea that economic vulnerability plays a significant role in making certain voter groups more susceptible to financial inducements. This vulnerability is compounded by the socio-cultural context in which local leaders act as intermediaries who both distribute material rewards and exert social pressure on voters. The findings underline how local political structures, particularly in rural areas, perpetuate clientelism. Such structures are deeply entrenched and reinforced by cultural norms of reciprocity and respect, which dictate that voters who receive material benefits must reciprocate by casting their votes in favor of the candidates offering these inducements (Baidoo et al., 2018). This social dynamic is critical to understanding why money politics continues to thrive, despite formal prohibitions against it. While scholars such as Rahawarin (2022) have noted the importance of social norms in sustaining political clientelism, this study further suggests that these norms are not merely passive but active forces that shape voter decisions, making money politics not just a political tactic, but also a cultural expectation.

At the same time, the study suggests a small but notable shift in voter behavior, as some voters exhibited a growing awareness of the detrimental effects of money politics. While this group remains small, it signals the potential for greater political awareness and change. Voter education initiatives could play a crucial role in fostering a more informed electorate that prioritizes candidates' policies and integrity over immediate financial benefits. This potential for change is important as it suggests that, despite the deep-seated nature of money politics, there is room for intervention. Educating voters about the long-term consequences of transactional politics could shift voter behavior in future elections, even in regions where material inducements have traditionally dominated political engagement. However, this requires not just voter education, but structural reforms to reduce socio-economic inequalities that make financial inducements so appealing in the first place.

One of the key contributions of this study is its insight into how money politics undermines the democratic process by distorting the foundation of electoral integrity. When voters are swayed primarily by material rewards, the focus of elections shifts away from evaluating candidates on their competency or policy platforms. This makes it difficult for the electorate to make decisions based on the qualities that should define democratic leadership. As such, the study reinforces the need for stronger legal and institutional reforms to combat money politics. While Indonesian electoral law prohibits the use of financial inducements, enforcement remains weak, and political elites often have sufficient resources to bypass regulatory mechanisms. In this light, the study calls for enhanced legal enforcement, coupled with stronger institutional capacity to monitor and address violations of electoral laws. It also suggests that reforms must be multifaceted, involving not only stricter regulations but also efforts to shift cultural practices that normalize clientelism.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the understanding that combating money politics requires more than just legal reform; it necessitates a broader socio-economic transformation. Money politics thrives in an environment of poverty, limited access to education, and social inequality. As long as voters remain economically vulnerable and politically disengaged, money politics will continue to exploit these weaknesses. Therefore, tackling money politics requires a long-term commitment to reducing economic disparities and enhancing civic education to ensure that voters are equipped to engage with political processes in a more informed and ethical manner. As Begovic and Cuan (2021) argue, systemic changes in economic and educational policies are as critical as electoral reforms in breaking the cycle of clientelism.

CONCLUSION

This study provides valuable insights into the persistent issue of money politics in South Sulawesi's regional head elections (Pilkada) and its influence on voter behavior. The findings indicate that financial inducements are widespread and have a significant impact on electoral outcomes, particularly among lower-income voters. Socio-cultural factors, such as local norms of reciprocity and the role of local leaders in distributing material incentives, reinforce the persistence of clientelism in the region. Despite the pervasive nature of money politics, some voters exhibited ethical awareness, suggesting that there is potential for change through voter education and awareness initiatives.

The study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on electoral integrity and clientelism, particularly in Indonesia. By focusing on the socio-economic and cultural factors that sustain money politics, this research highlights the complexity of addressing this issue and underscores the need for a multi-faceted approach to reform. The findings suggest that, in addition to legal reforms, socio-economic and cultural shifts are necessary to reduce the influence of money politics. Future research could explore the effectiveness of voter education programs and institutional reforms in mitigating money politics, as well as investigate the long-term effects of such interventions on democratic processes.

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