

Research Article

The Politicization of Aid in the Electoral Process in Banda Aceh

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the politicization of aid in the 2024 Legislative Election in Banda Aceh through the lens of patron-client theory, exploring how candidates or political parties use material aid to secure electoral support. Using a qualitative descriptive method, data were collected through interviews with voters in Banda Aceh and a review of relevant literature. The findings reveal that material aid often functions as a transactional tool, with voters expected to reciprocate by voting for the candidates providing assistance. This reciprocal expectation significantly influences voter behavior, as many prioritize immediate material benefits over ideological or programmatic considerations. However, not all voters adhere to this transactional dynamic; some evaluate candidates based on their political qualities and programs, regardless of aid. Perceptions of candidates who abstain from providing aid vary—some voters see the absence of aid as a disadvantage, while others value the candidates' vision and integrity over material offerings. The study concludes that while aid politicization impacts electoral outcomes, maintaining voter trust and loyalty depends on candidates' fulfillment of political promises and long-term commitment. Balancing short-term aid strategies with genuine political accountability is essential for sustaining trust and upholding the integrity of the political system.

Keywords: Politicization of Aid; Patron-Client Theory; Legislative Election; Electoral Support; Reciprocity

1. INTRODUCTION

Elections are one of the fundamental pillars of a democratic system, providing citizens with the right to choose leaders they deem fit for office. However, the implementation of elections is often marred by practices that deviate from democratic principles, one of which is the politicization of aid. This practice refers to the use of social assistance for specific political interests. The politicization of aid is frequently carried out by incumbents, legislative candidates, or other parties with vested political interests in the electoral process. (Greenstein and Harvey, 2017).

The forms of aid politicization vary, such as distributing social assistance exclusively to specific groups or using the aid as a tool to support political campaign activities. Its impact on elections is significant. This practice can reduce voter participation as citizens may feel coerced or pressured to support a particular candidate. Moreover, the politicization of aid has the potential to erode public trust in the government and compromise the overall integrity of the electoral process.

The politicization of aid has become a prevalent phenomenon in the electoral process in Indonesia. This practice has drawn critical attention from various parties, including the General Election Commission (KPU). To address this issue, the KPU has issued several regulations aimed at preventing the politicization of aid. However, despite these preventive efforts, such practices persist. One area frequently highlighted for issues related to aid politicization is the city of Banda Aceh. As the capital of Aceh Province, Banda Aceh often becomes a target for aid politicization by legislative candidates seeking to leverage social assistance for their political interests (Badan Pengawas Pemilu (Bawaslu), 2019).

This study aims to deeply explore how the practice of aid politicization influences voter behavior in Banda Aceh. The primary focus is on analyzing the impact of aid politicization on voter behavior through two main mechanisms: the reciprocity mechanism and the dependency mechanism. These mechanisms have been identified within Clientelism Theory as key approaches to understanding the influence of aid politicization on voter preferences and decision-making (Kitschelt et.al, 2007: 45).

This research is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between aid politicization and voter behavior, particularly in the local context of Banda Aceh. Furthermore, the findings of this study are anticipated to contribute to the formulation of strategic recommendations to prevent the practice of aid politicization in future elections, thereby enhancing the quality of democracy at both local and national levels.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The research was conducted in Banda Aceh using a qualitative approach, with data presented descriptively to understand the dynamics of aid politicization and client-patron relationships during elections in Banda Aceh. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of individual perceptions and experiences. The qualitative study involved in-depth interviews with six participants. These participants included five residents of Banda Aceh and one representative from BAWASLU (Badan Pengawas Pemilu or the Election Supervisory Board). The selection of participants was based on their involvement in the elections and their direct experiences with the phenomenon of aid politicization. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and recorded to ensure data accuracy. The interview questions were designed to gain a deep understanding of how aid was distributed and received during the election period, as well as participants' perceptions of its influence on voter behavior and electoral legitimacy. The questions also focused on how client-patron relationships shaped voters' decisions. The interview transcripts were analyzed using content analysis techniques to identify key themes. This approach enabled the researcher to extract and interpret verbal data, uncovering patterns and connections within the participants' narratives (Byrne, 2022: 68).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The emergence of patron-client behaviour in the context of aid politicization can be explained through James C. Scott's (1972) patron-client theory. This theory refers to an unequal relationship between two parties: the patron (a political leader or candidate) who provides resources to the client (voters or the community) in exchange for political support. In the context of the Legislative Elections in Aceh, politicians act as patrons who utilize social assistance, such as agricultural tools or cash, to establish reciprocal relationships with voters. Voters, as clients, feel obligated by the aid they receive and perceive it as their duty to reciprocate with political support.

In this relationship, patrons exploit their position of power and resources to secure the loyalty of clients, who rely on the provided aid to meet their needs. This dynamic reinforces political and economic dependency, creating a cycle in which clients continue to support patrons to ensure access to material benefits. This reciprocal relationship perpetuates a dependency system that prioritizes immediate material gains over democratic principles, hindering the development of a fair and transparent electoral process. This theory explains why the politicization of aid can create asymmetric relationships and diminish voters' freedom to make independent political choices. Voters often feel morally obligated to support the candidates who provide them with aid, which undermines their autonomy in the electoral process (Scott 1972).

The politicization of aid in Aceh's Legislative Elections has become an increasingly relevant issue in the context of local politics. During the campaign period, many legislative candidates exploit social or economic assistance to gain voter sympathy in hopes of securing electoral support. This practice capitalizes on the socio-economic dependency of the community on aid provided by candidates or political parties. Although the aid is often distributed in the form of basic necessities, cash, or other facilities, its primary objective is to establish patronage relationships that benefit the politicians.

The 2024 Legislative Elections in Aceh were held on February 14, 2024, with the campaign period running from November 28, 2023, to February 13, 2024. During this campaign period, many politicians utilized aid as part of their strategy to secure political support. In several cases, the aid distributed served as a tool to reinforce client-patron relationships, wherein voters were expected to cast their votes in exchange for the assistance they received. The politicization of aid during the Legislative Elections poses significant challenges to the integrity of the democratic process, as it fosters economic dependency that can influence voters' political decisions. This practice exacerbates distortions within the electoral system, where voters prioritize material benefits over the policies or political vision of legislative candidates. Therefore, stricter oversight by electoral authorities is crucial to prevent the misuse of aid as a tool for securing votes.

3.1 Politicization of Aid as a Tool of Patronage

The assistance provided by candidates or political parties during election periods is often perceived more as a political strategy than as an act of goodwill or charity. This is evident in the responses of informants, who acknowledged that the primary purpose of such aid is to gain political advantage, particularly securing voter support. Based on interviews with three informants, it can be concluded that the material aid distributed during campaign periods is more frequently viewed as a form of exchange-trading assistance for votes rather than a genuine effort to address voters' needs.

For example, Informant I firmly stated that the assistance they received from a candidate or political party was temporary in nature and intended to influence voters' choices.

"It's just so we'll vote for them... we see who gives the most, and we choose them," said Informant I (interview, September 7, 2024).

This statement illustrates that the aid was provided with the clear motivation of securing votes in a direct and measurable manner. When candidates offer assistance, they expect voters to feel obligated to reciprocate by casting their votes as a form of gratitude for the aid provided. This assistance is perceived more as a tool to sway voters' political choices rather than as genuine social aid.

A similar perspective was expressed by Informant II, who described the provision of aid by candidates or political parties as a mutually beneficial arrangement.

"This aid benefits both sides. They get my vote, and I get their money," explained Informant II (interview, September 10, 2024).

This illustrates a clear reciprocal relationship between voters and candidates/parties within the framework of patron-client dynamics. In this relationship, the candidate (patron) provides material benefits, while the voter (client) is expected to reciprocate by casting their vote. This relationship is not merely personal or individual but reflects a structured pattern in the electoral process, where candidates seek to build voter loyalty through the distribution of aid. Such practices highlight the instrumental nature of aid politicization in fostering dependencies and shaping voter behaviour, ultimately influencing the democratic process. This phenomenon not only reflects the patron-client relationship in a socio-political context but also demonstrates that the provision of aid is part of a broader strategy to consolidate the political power of candidates or political parties. Within patron-client theory, this relationship emphasizes an exchange where resources or material benefits are provided by those in power (patrons) with the expectation of securing political support or loyalty from the recipients (clients). In this context, the aid given to voters is not perceived as a genuine act of generosity but rather as a short-term political investment.

Many candidates or political parties explicitly or implicitly indicate that their provision of aid is intended to secure votes. This can be seen as a strategic action employed by parties or candidates to ensure continued support from specific groups with significant voting power in elections. Candidates or parties offering aid tend to reinforce the perception that they are attentive to the needs of the community. However, in reality, such aid is often perceived more as a means to bolster their position in the electoral process rather than a genuine effort to address societal needs. Although the provision of aid is seen as a strategic move by candidates and political parties, its impact on voters is not always long-term or capable of fostering enduring loyalty. In many cases, voters acknowledge that they accept the aid because they genuinely need it, rather than due to any emotional connection or trust in the candidate or party providing it. As stated by Informant III,

"Because we are ordinary people, any assistance offered is something we will accept and need... They give it because they need our votes" (interview, September 11, 2024).

This illustrates that voters often do not perceive the aid as a long-term commitment but rather as a temporary necessity they accept due to pressing circumstances. This transactional nature highlights the short-lived impact of such assistance on voter behaviour, driven more by immediate needs than by genuine political allegiance. However, although aid is often accepted out of practical necessity, there is an awareness that such assistance is intended to elicit reciprocal support in the form of votes during elections. Informant III, for instance, emphasized that this reciprocity has become a recurring pattern in every election. Voters accept aid but are also aware that it is provided with the expectation of securing their votes. As Informant III stated,

"This aid happens every election; they give me money, and they also expect us to vote for them" (interview, September 11, 2024).

This statement reinforces the view that the provision of aid is perceived more as a strategic political instrument than as a purely altruistic social act. It highlights the transactional nature of the aid, wherein both parties engage with an understanding of mutual benefit—material assistance for political support. From the interviews with informants, it is evident that the aid provided by candidates or political parties in the context of the Legislative Elections in Banda Aceh carries a strongly political nature. The distribution of aid is not merely an act of charity or social concern but a strategic move designed to secure political support and votes from the electorate. In the framework of patron-client theory, this relationship reveals how candidates or political parties act as patrons who provide material assistance, while voters function as clients expected to reciprocate with support or votes. This underscores that the politicization of aid has become an integral part of electoral political practices during elections, reflecting a transactional approach to voter engagement that prioritizes strategic gains over democratic integrity.

Through this aid, a reciprocal transaction occurs between candidates/parties and voters, influencing voters' decisions at the ballot box. Even though there is acknowledgment that the aid is primarily political in nature, not all voters base their evaluation of candidates or parties solely on the assistance they receive. Some voters maintain their preferences based on personal political views, while also acknowledging the material influence in their electoral decisions. Ultimately, this phenomenon illustrates that the politicization of aid in the context of the Legislative Elections in Banda Aceh reflects a broader political reality seen in many places. Material aid is utilized as a tool to garner votes and consolidate the political power of candidates or parties, showcasing a strategic rather than democratic engagement with voters.

3.2 Social and Political Dependency: Reciprocal Expectations

One of the recurring themes in the interviews with informants is the expectation of reciprocity that emerges after the receipt of aid. Respondents were keenly aware that the assistance provided by candidates or political parties was not given without a clear purpose but was part of a strategy to garner electoral support. This expectation of reciprocity reflects the typical patron-client relationship, where the provision of material aid by candidates or parties is anticipated to be repaid by voters in the form of their votes on election day. Informant I explicitly stated that after receiving aid, there was a clear expectation from the provider for them to vote for the candidate or party that had given the assistance.

"Yes, I feel they are asking me to vote for them in the election," said Informant I.

This statement demonstrates that voters are consciously aware of the transactional nature of the aid provided. They accept the assistance with the understanding that it is not given unconditionally but rather as a strategic move aimed at securing something more significant — their vote. In the context of patron-client theory, this is a clear example of reciprocal relationships. Here, candidates or political parties act as patrons who provide assistance in exchange for the political support they anticipate. While the aid may materially benefit voters, the expectation from the providers is that voters will

reciprocate by casting their votes in return. This expectation can sometimes be very explicit, as expressed by Informant II, who stated,

"This aid benefits both sides. They get my vote, and I get their money" (interview, September 10, 2024).

This statement underscores that the provision of aid is perceived as a mutually beneficial transaction, where both parties expect to gain something. Voters receive much-needed assistance, while candidates or parties secure electoral support in return. This dynamic highlights the instrumental nature of aid distribution as a political strategy rather than a purely altruistic act. This expectation of reciprocity is also evident in the statement of Informant III, who clearly explained that aid provided during every election is always followed by the expectation that voters will return the favor by casting their votes.

"This aid happens every election; they give me money, and they also expect us to vote for them," said Informant III.

This indicates that the provision of aid has become a structured component of the electoral cycle and is now normalized as part of electoral politics. Patron-client dynamics are not a one-time occurrence but are repeatedly reinforced in every election, becoming a routine aspect of the political process. In societies that practice patron-client relationships like this, there is often a perception that voters who receive aid feel obligated to cast their votes for the candidate or party providing the assistance. Even when the relationship is primarily transactional and lacks a strong foundation in political or ideological commitment, voters still feel morally or socially bound to provide political support in return for the aid received. This can be viewed as a form of dependency arising from the provision of aid, designed to influence the outcomes of elections.

Interviews revealed that the provision of aid is often perceived as a tool to secure support during the electoral process. Candidates or political parties that distribute aid with the expectation of gaining votes create a highly transparent relationship regarding their intention to receive something in return. While the provision of aid might be viewed as an act of goodwill by the candidates or parties, in reality, it is driven by a clear motivation: to secure the votes needed to win the election. For instance, Informant III noted that this reciprocal relationship does not occur just once but has become a recurring pattern in every election. This indicates that the provision of aid is part of a structured campaign strategy, where parties or candidates aim to secure support through material assistance intended to influence voters' political preferences. In this context, the distribution of aid serves as a critical instrument for cultivating voter loyalty, reinforcing the patron-client dynamic as a central feature of electoral politics. However, while this patron-client relationship clearly leads to expectations of reciprocity, not all voters perceive it in the same way. Some voters acknowledged that they accepted the aid simply because they needed it, rather than out of a sense of moral or political obligation to vote for the candidate providing it. Nevertheless, despite these differing perspectives, the majority of voters still recognize that the provision of aid is inherently tied to the expectation of securing electoral support. This duality highlights the complex dynamics of voter behavior, where immediate material needs intersect with the strategic intentions of political actors.

The expectation of reciprocity that arises in patron-client relationships also significantly impacts voters' perceptions of the candidates or parties providing aid. While many voters acknowledge feeling an obligation to support the candidates or parties that offer assistance, this shift in perception does not always occur. For instance, Informant II stated that although they recognized the expectation of reciprocity, their view of the candidate or party remained unchanged after receiving aid.

"My view stays the same," said Informant II.

This indicates that while the expectation of reciprocity exists, it does not necessarily alter voters' political perceptions of the candidates or parties providing the aid. It highlights the complexity of voter behaviour, where material assistance may influence actions (e.g., voting) but not always shift underlying political attitudes or beliefs. However, this is not the case for all voters. Some voters may feel that the aid provided establishes a more personal or direct connection with the candidate or party, making them more likely to change their preferences after receiving assistance. This illustrates how patron-client relationships can directly influence voters' political preferences, depending on how they perceive the value and benefits of the aid received. This variation highlights the nuanced impact of aid politicization, where the effectiveness of such strategies depends largely on the voter's interpretation of the relationship and the significance they attach to the assistance.

Reciprocity is a critical aspect of the patron-client relationship that is clearly evident in the politicization of aid during elections. The provision of material assistance by candidates or political parties is not merely viewed as a way to support voters but also as a strategic move aimed at securing electoral support in return. This expectation is strongly ingrained and reflected in the acknowledgment of voters, who recognize that the aid is provided with clear political intentions. The aid serves as a tool to strengthen the candidate's position in the election while simultaneously creating a reciprocal bond between voters and the benefactors, which is expected to benefit both parties. For voters, the assistance fulfils immediate material needs, while for candidates, it increases the likelihood of securing votes, making it an effective, albeit transactional, strategy in electoral politics. Thus, the patron-client relationship in the context of aid politicization during the Legislative Elections in Banda Aceh illustrates how electoral politics can be shaped by the provision of aid with reciprocal expectations. Voters accept the aid with the implicit understanding that they are expected to vote for the candidate or party providing it. This pattern not only reflects local political practices but also underscores the significance of material aid in the electoral process as a strategic tool for securing the political support needed to achieve victory. It highlights the transactional nature of political engagement in this context, where assistance is leveraged to create dependencies and influence voter behaviour.

3.3 The Influence of Aid on Voter Perception and Political Trust

Interviews with informants revealed differing views on how the provision of aid influences voters' political perceptions of the candidates or parties providing it. While material aid clearly affects voters' decisions in choosing a particular candidate

or party, its impact on long-term political perceptions is not uniform. Some voters indicated that the aid did not alter their view of the candidate or party, treating the assistance as a one-time transaction rather than a reflection of broader political commitment. As stated by Informant II, *"My view stays the same,"* highlighting that the material benefit did not translate into deeper political loyalty. Conversely, other voters reported a shift in their perception, especially when they experienced dissatisfaction with the candidate after they were elected. This dissatisfaction often stemmed from unmet expectations or the candidate's failure to deliver on campaign promises beyond the initial provision of aid. For these voters, the realization that the assistance was primarily a campaign strategy rather than a genuine commitment to their welfare led to a more critical view of the candidate or party. This divergence underscores the complex role of aid in shaping political perceptions, with its influence varying based on individual voter expectations and post-election experiences. While aid can temporarily sway decisions, it does not guarantee sustained political trust or loyalty, particularly if voters feel their needs are neglected once the candidate assumes office.

One key finding from the interviews is that while material aid influences voting decisions, many voters reported that their political views remained unchanged after receiving the aid. For example, Informant II explicitly stated that despite accepting assistance, their perception of the candidate or party providing it did not shift. *"My view stays the same,"* they noted. This suggests that while the provision of aid can act as an incentive in the electoral process, it does not necessarily succeed in altering voters' deeper perceptions of the candidate's or party's integrity or political commitment. Voters may accept aid as a practical benefit without it affecting their broader political beliefs or loyalties, highlighting the limited long-term impact of such strategies on political perception. This may reflect the reality that voters have more nuanced views and do not solely rely on material aid to evaluate a candidate's quality. Some voters may perceive the aid as temporary and regard it as part of a short-term campaign strategy rather than a genuine commitment from the candidate to fulfil their political promises. As a result, while such aid is intended to influence voters' decisions, more critical voters may remain unaffected in terms of their long-term perceptions of the candidate. This indicates that voters, especially those with heightened political awareness, can distinguish between immediate benefits and a candidate's overall political integrity and competence. Such voters are less likely to let short-term incentives override their broader evaluations of a candidate's commitment and performance.

However, not all respondents exhibited indifference toward the aid provided by candidates. Some voters reported that the provision of aid did influence their political perceptions, but this change was more closely tied to dissatisfaction with the candidates after they were elected. For instance, Informant I stated,

"They made many promises before, but after being elected, none of the programs were implemented."

This indicates that while aid is provided during the campaign period, many voters feel disillusioned once the candidates fail to fulfil their political promises after being elected. This dissatisfaction subsequently affects voters' perceptions of the candidates or parties they previously supported because of the aid received. It highlights the potential for short-term campaign strategies to backfire, as unmet expectations can lead to a loss of trust and a more critical view of the candidates' political integrity. This dissatisfaction often leads to a decline in voter trust toward the candidates or parties that provided the aid. The aid is perceived as a tool for securing votes rather than a genuine commitment to meaningful change. Once elected, if the candidates fail to implement promised programs or fulfilled their commitments, voters feel let down, resulting in a shift in their political perceptions of the candidate. These dynamics underscore the transactional nature of aid distribution during campaigns, where the lack of follow-through on promises erodes the credibility and integrity of candidates in the eyes of the electorate. Over time, this can diminish the effectiveness of such strategies and further alienate voters, contributing to broader scepticism about the electoral process.

The influence of aid on voters' political perceptions is closely tied to the factor of political trust. Political trust is a crucial element in the relationship between voters and their political representatives. When candidates provide aid, they are not only aiming to secure votes but also attempting to build voter trust by signalling that they will deliver on their promises. However, if these promises remain unfulfilled after the candidates are elected, the trust that was initially cultivated is broken, ultimately affecting voters' perceptions of the integrity of the candidate or party. This breakdown in trust can lead to long-term disillusionment among voters, reducing their confidence not only in the individual candidate but also in the broader political system. It highlights the fragile nature of trust in electoral politics, where unmet expectations can significantly damage the credibility and legitimacy of political actors. Informant I mentioned that despite receiving aid, they felt disappointed because no programs were implemented after the candidate was elected.

"Now I don't want to trust what those party people say anymore; none of their words can be relied on," said Informant I.

This statement illustrates a significant decline in the voter's political trust toward the candidate. When voters perceive the aid as temporary and unaccompanied by tangible changes after the candidate assumes office, it can lead to deep disillusionment with both the political system and the candidate. This disillusionment reflects a broader erosion of trust, where voters feel manipulated by short-term incentives that fail to deliver on the promised outcomes, ultimately undermining the legitimacy of the political process.

From the perspective of patron-client theory, the relationship between candidates and voters based on material aid is often temporary and heavily contingent on the outcomes of the election. However, its long-term impact on voter loyalty depends on whether the promises made by the candidates are fulfilled. If candidates fail to meet the expectations created through the provision of aid, voter loyalty toward them may diminish, potentially shifting to other candidates or parties in future elections. This indicates that while aid can be an effective tool for gaining support during elections, the inability to deliver on promised commitments can undermine the patron-client relationship that has been established. Such failures erode the trust and reciprocity inherent in these relationships, highlighting the fragile nature of voter loyalty when it is built on short-term incentives rather than sustained political performance or genuine engagement with the community's

needs.

Several informants, such as Informant II, expressed the hope that the provision of aid would be accompanied by a long-term commitment to their welfare. However, when such commitments are not fulfilled, voters feel that they have been exploited solely for the purpose of securing electoral victory. In this scenario, voters become increasingly sceptical of candidates who provide aid exclusively during the campaign period but fail to address their needs once elected. This growing scepticism highlights a critical gap between campaign promises and post-election actions, reinforcing voter disillusionment and diminishing trust in candidates who prioritize short-term strategies over sustained engagement with the community's interests

The provision of aid during elections clearly influences voters' decisions, but its long-term impact on their perceptions and political trust is more complex. Some voters believe that the aid does not change their views of the candidates or parties, while others feel disappointed and alter their perceptions after political promises go unfulfilled. This dissatisfaction leads to a decline in political trust toward the candidates or parties that provided the aid. Therefore, while aid distribution can be an effective tool for gaining votes, the inability to deliver on political promises can damage the relationship between voters and candidates in the long term. It also erodes trust in the political system as a whole, highlighting the risks of short-term electoral strategies that fail to address voters' deeper needs and expectations.

This phenomenon highlights that while the politicization of aid during elections can help candidates secure votes, without being accompanied by genuine political commitment, the patron-client relationships established will quickly deteriorate. Voters tend to assess candidates not only based on the material aid provided but also on the concrete actions taken after they are elected. This underscores the importance of building deeper political trust and fostering relationships that do not rely solely on temporary assistance. Sustained trust requires candidates to demonstrate long-term dedication to fulfilling their promises and addressing the broader needs of the electorate, rather than merely leveraging aid as a short-term electoral strategy

4. CONCLUSION.

This study reveals that the politicization of aid in the Legislative Elections in Banda Aceh plays a significant role in shaping voter behaviour. Based on interviews with several informants, it can be concluded that the provision of material aid by candidates or political parties is often perceived as a strategy to secure electoral support, creating a characteristic patron-client relationship. The aid provided is not merely intended to meet the immediate needs of voters but also to foster short-term political loyalty, where voters are expected to reciprocate by casting their votes in return for the assistance received. This dynamic reflects a transactional approach to voter engagement, emphasizing the strategic use of aid as a political tool. The expectation of reciprocity that arises in this patron-client relationship demonstrates that candidates or political parties provide aid with the hope of securing electoral support, while voters feel an obligation to reciprocate through their votes. Material aid becomes a highly effective tool for influencing voting behaviour, as voters often prioritize the practical benefits they can gain over long-term political considerations. As a result, the provision of aid becomes a critical factor in shaping voter decisions, even though ideology and the quality of candidates continue to play an important role for some voters. These dynamic highlights the interplay between immediate material incentives and broader political values in influencing voter behaviour during elections. However, although many voters view material aid as a determining factor, not all voters are trapped in this transactional relationship. Some voters, particularly those who are more critical, choose to support candidates based on their political quality and proposed programs, even if they do not receive material assistance. This reflects the diversity in voter preferences, where a significant portion prioritizes the immediate benefits of aid, while others place greater emphasis on deeper political considerations. This variation highlights the complexity of voter behaviour, shaped by a mix of practical needs and ideological or programmatic evaluations, underscoring the nuanced dynamics of electoral decision-making. Perceptions of candidates who do not provide material aid also vary. Some voters view the absence of aid as a disadvantage, feeling that they are not receiving any "reward" for their support. On the other hand, there are voters who prefer to support candidates they believe can bring positive change without relying on material assistance. The absence of aid can exacerbate social tensions, as those who do not receive assistance may feel marginalized. Meanwhile, candidates who choose not to provide aid are often seen as more idealistic, emphasizing values and policy-based campaigning over transactional politics. This dichotomy illustrates the challenges faced by candidates in balancing the expectations of aid with the need to build a reputation based on integrity and long-term political commitment. Overall, the politicization of aid in the Legislative Elections in Banda Aceh illustrates how candidates and political parties utilize patron-client relationships to influence election outcomes. However, the long-term impact of this practice depends on whether candidates can meet the expectations created through the provision of aid. If political promises are not fulfilled after election, voter loyalty may decline, ultimately undermining the patron-client relationship and eroding trust in the political system. Therefore, while the distribution of material aid can be an effective tool for garnering support, it must be accompanied by genuine political commitment and programs that address voter expectations to maintain trust and loyalty. Balancing short-term strategies with long-term accountability is crucial for ensuring sustainable voter engagement and strengthening democratic practices

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the issues identified in this study, several recommendations are proposed. Electoral management bodies, such as the KPU and BAWASLU, should enhance regulations and monitoring mechanisms to prevent the transactional politicization of aid, ensuring transparency and accountability during campaigns. Additionally, voter education programs are essential to promote political literacy, emphasizing the importance of assessing candidates based on their policies and

vision rather than material incentives. These programs can be implemented collaboratively by government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and educational institutions. Furthermore, elected candidates must demonstrate accountability by fulfilling their campaign promises, which is critical to maintaining voter trust and fostering sustainable political relationships. Future research should explore the long-term impacts of aid politicization on democratic quality across other regions in Indonesia, potentially employing quantitative approaches to provide deeper insights into voter behavior. Lastly, political parties and candidates should adopt ethical practices that prioritize sustainable policy solutions over short-term transactional strategies, ensuring a stronger and more trustworthy democratic process

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AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTIONS

The author was solely responsible for conceptualizing the study, designing the research methodology, conducting interviews, and analyzing the data. The author also wrote and revised the manuscript. All discussions and interpretations of the results were carried out independently, ensuring a comprehensive approach from the initial stages of the research to the final manuscript. The author confirms that all aspects of the study, including its findings and conclusions, reflect their individual efforts and dedication to the research process

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no competing interests related to this research. The study was conducted independently, without any financial, institutional, or personal influences that could affect the objectivity, integrity, or outcomes of the research process. All findings, interpretations, and conclusions presented in this manuscript are solely based on the data collected and analyzed, ensuring an unbiased contribution to the academic field. The author confirms that there were no conflicts of interest in collaboration with external parties, including the Katahati Institute, which provided support during the research. This declaration affirms the commitment to uphold transparency and academic integrity throughout the research and publication process.

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