

Identity Politics on Social Media in the 2020 Surabaya Mayoral Election: Narrative Strategies, Public Response, and the Impact of Digital Democratization

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Article Info

Article History

Accepted: 20-07-2025

Approved: 03-10-2025

Published: 05-10-2025

Keywords:

Identity Politics

Social Media

Surabaya Local Election

Framing

Digital Democracy

Abstract

Abstract: *This study aims to explore how identity politics was constructed, disseminated, and received by the public in the context of the 2020 Surabaya mayoral election through social media, particularly Instagram and X (formerly Twitter). The research focuses on how identity narratives were manipulated by candidates and their campaign teams as an electoral strategy, how the public responded to such campaigns, and the socio-political impact on the quality of local democracy. Using a qualitative approach and digital netnography methods, this study analyzes candidates' content, campaign hashtags, and public interactions. The findings reveal that social media became a highly contested arena for identity politics, where religious, regional, and moral narratives were used to shape candidate images and mobilize support. However, these practices also resulted in social polarization, minority exclusion, and limited deliberative space. This study contributes to the discourse on digital democracy and identity politics in the context of local elections in Indonesia.*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana politik identitas dibangun, disebarluaskan, dan diterima oleh publik dalam konteks Pemilihan Wali Kota Surabaya tahun 2020 melalui media sosial, khususnya Instagram dan X (sebelumnya Twitter). Penelitian ini berfokus pada bagaimana narasi identitas dimanipulasi oleh para kandidat dan tim kampanye mereka sebagai strategi elektoral, bagaimana respons publik terhadap kampanye tersebut, serta dampak sosial-politik terhadap kualitas demokrasi lokal. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dan metode netnografi digital, studi ini menganalisis konten para kandidat, tagar kampanye, dan interaksi publik. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa media sosial menjadi arena yang sangat diperebutkan dalam politik identitas, di mana narasi agama, kedaerahan, dan moral digunakan untuk membentuk citra kandidat dan menggalang dukungan. Namun, praktik ini juga mengakibatkan polarisasi sosial, eksklusi terhadap kelompok minoritas, dan ruang deliberasi yang terbatas. Studi ini berkontribusi pada diskursus tentang demokrasi digital dan politik identitas dalam konteks pemilihan lokal di Indonesia.

Introduction

In the era of digital democracy, social media no longer serves merely as a means of interpersonal communication but has evolved into an active and strategic political arena. Indonesia, with its large number of internet and social media users, demonstrates how technological transformation has shaped electoral political practices. The 2020 Surabaya mayoral election is a concrete example of how social media was utilized as a primary platform for political campaigns, particularly in constructing and disseminating identity politics. This transformation aligns with global trends in which social media platforms have become crucial for political mobilization, opinion formation, and voter engagement (Malorni & Wilf, 2025). In the context of urban democracy, digital platforms have blurred the lines between online discourse and offline political participation, reinforcing the notion that contemporary elections are inseparable from digitally mediated interactions (Horton, 2025).

Identity politics refers to political practices that utilize social categories such as religion, ethnicity, locality, and gender as the basis for forming political loyalties. In the context of elections, identity politics is not simply a reflection of social reality but is strategically produced and reproduced through symbols, narratives, and visual representations (Manullang, 2021). On social media, this phenomenon is further complicated by campaigns conducted in a fast-paced environment where messages are easily fragmented, regenerated, and amplified through algorithms and user engagement (Horton, 2025). Identity narratives can be strategically tailored to specific communities, while simultaneously triggering broader national or even transnational events. The interactive features of platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (now X), and YouTube increasingly allow candidates to co-create meaning with their audiences, enabling a reciprocal process of narrative production and legitimacy (Malorni & Wilf, 2025). Consequently, identity politics in the digital space is not simply an extension of traditional campaign strategies, but a reconfiguration of political communication within the architecture of social media platforms.

Despite the growing literature on identity politics and digital campaigns, several research gaps remain. First, most existing studies focus on national-level elections, with limited exploration of how identity politics operates at the local level, particularly in metropolitan cities in Indonesia (Rif'an, 2020). While numerous studies have examined the rise of populism, polarization, and sectarian discourse in national elections (Davis et al., 2025), attention to how local elections reproduce or challenge these dynamics in more diverse urban contexts is lacking. Second, comparative studies on digital identity politics often focus on Western democracies (Cao, 2025), leaving non-Western cases underrepresented despite their rich empirical diversity. Third, few studies systematically analyze how digital narratives of identity politics are received by the public and their implications for the quality of local democracy. Most analyses focus on the production of campaign narratives without examining their resonance, reinterpretation, and contestation by digital audiences (Katula, 2018). This gap underscores the need for context-sensitive research that examines not only the strategies of political actors but also the actions of citizens in negotiating digital identity narratives.

As a metropolitan city with a heterogeneous population and a dynamic political history, Surabaya offers a significant location to observe how identity politics is executed digitally. The two main candidate pairs in the 2020 election Eri Cahyadi Armuji and Machfud Arifin Mujiaman leveraged social media to build their image, cultivate relationships with voters, and emphasize alignments with particular identity groups. Unlike national elections where religious or ethnic divisions are often foregrounded, Surabaya presents a complex interplay of local, class, and professional identity politics within a diverse urban electorate. The novelty of this study lies in three aspects. First, it provides a systematic analysis of how identity politics narrative strategies are constructed and mobilized through social media in Indonesian local elections. Second, it examines public responses to these narratives, specifically how digital audiences engage with, support, or reject identity-based appeals. Third, it evaluates the broader impact of these dynamics on the democratization process at the local level, highlighting whether digital campaigns contribute to substantive democratic deliberation or reinforce polarization and symbolic representation. Thus, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between identity politics, digital media, and electoral democracy in the increasingly digitalized context of the Global South.

Research Method

This study employs a qualitative research approach through a case study design, complemented by a digital netnography strategy. The application of this methodological framework is based on the need to capture the nuanced and multifaceted dynamics of political and social interactions that unfolded across various social media platforms during the 2020 Surabaya mayoral election. As an interpretive approach, digital netnography is invaluable for investigating how political actors and citizens engage in meaning-making processes in digital environments (Gerbaudo, 2016). By systematically observing and analyzing user-generated content, interaction patterns, and narrative construction, this method allows researchers to uncover how identity politics is articulated, disseminated, and contested in online spaces. Crucially, digital netnography allows researchers to delve into the communicative ecology of social media without directly intervening in or altering user interactions (Addeo et al., 2019). This non-intrusive nature enhances the authenticity of the collected data, making it highly suitable for examining the symbolic and performative dimensions of identity politics in the context of digital campaigns. Through this methodological lens, this research is able to bridge the gap between the political communication strategies employed by candidates and the digital practices undertaken by citizens as they engage with, reinterpret, and respond to identity-based narratives.

Research location and subjects

This research focuses on Surabaya, a metropolitan center and one of the most politically dynamic cities in Indonesia, renowned for its history of civic participation, urban diversity, and strategic role in shaping regional politics. As the country's second-largest city, Surabaya provides not only fertile ground for examining electoral competition but also a unique socio-political landscape where issues of class, religion, locality, and generational identity intersect. This research focuses on two candidate pairs competing in the 2020 mayoral election: Eri Cahyadi–Armuji, who represented continuity with the ruling political coalition, and Machfud Arifin–Mujiaman, who positioned themselves as challengers advocating for change. Both pairs strategically utilized digital platforms as key tools in their campaigns,

particularly Instagram and X (formerly Twitter), which emerged as crucial arenas for political communication. These platforms were chosen not only for their popularity among Surabaya's urban voters but also for their capacity to rapidly disseminate messages, create visual and narrative branding, and engage directly with diverse voter communities. By analyzing campaign activities on these social media channels, this study aims to uncover how identity politics is constructed, negotiated, and contested in a highly digital local electoral context.

Data collection techniques

Data collection in this study was carried out through passive participatory observation of social media activities within the period of October 2020 to January 2021. The primary sources of data consisted of several elements: first, visual content in the form of images, videos, and infographics disseminated through the candidates' official accounts; second, the captions and narrative structures that accompanied these campaign posts; third, the use of popular campaign hashtags such as #EriArmuji, #ArekSuroboyo, and #SantriMemilih; fourth, indicators of public interaction including comments, likes, shares, and retweets; and finally, content generated and circulated both by organic supporters and political buzzers, which further amplified the dynamics of online political discourse.

Data analysis techniques

The data analysis in this study adopts the model proposed by Miles et al. (2014), which is implemented through three interrelated stages. The first stage, data reduction, involves organizing and simplifying raw data to highlight dominant identity narratives and symbolic elements that emerged from the findings. The second stage, data display, structures the processed data into coherent forms such as narratives, tables, and typologies for instance, classifications of voter groups and strategies of political framing so that patterns and relationships become more visible. The final stage, conclusion drawing, focuses on interpreting the meanings of these patterns by examining how candidates employed identity politics, how the public responded to such strategies, and what implications these practices hold for the overall quality of local democracy.

Validity and ethics

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, this study employed methodological triangulation across platforms and data sources. Triangulation was conducted by systematically comparing campaign content disseminated by candidates with public responses, engagement metrics, and discussions taking place in online forums and comment sections. This approach not only strengthens the robustness of the analysis but also allows for a deeper understanding of how political messages are received, negotiated, and reinterpreted by different segments of the digital public. Furthermore, this study exclusively used publicly available data, minimizing issues of privacy and informed consent, which are commonly debated in digital research. Where necessary, user identities were anonymized to protect individual confidentiality, adhering to established ethical standards for internet-based research. By integrating these safeguards, this study aligns with international best practices in digital ethnography and political communication research, ensuring that the findings are methodologically and ethically rigorous.

Results and Discussion

This study reveals that the 2020 Surabaya mayoral election serves as a concrete example of how identity politics was digitally mobilized through social media. The candidates and their campaign teams did not rely solely on policy programs or track records, but actively constructed identity representations through symbols, language, visual narratives, and organized buzzer networks. The analysis is structured into six sub-sections based on the key findings.

Identity representation strategies on social media

In the dynamics of the 2020 Surabaya regional election (Pilkada), social media was not merely a conventional campaign tool, but had evolved into a strategic space for candidates to represent their political identities in a structured and symbolic manner. Identity representation is not a natural or spontaneous act of communication; rather, it is the result of carefully calculated political messaging designed to create emotional resonance with constituents.

The identity representation strategy employed by the candidate pair Eri Cahyadi–Armuji can be understood as an effort to construct a narrative portraying them as figures who are close to the people, religious, and authentic members of the Surabaya community. This image was built through consistent visual and symbolic approaches on social media, particularly Instagram. In many posts, Eri is seen wearing traditional santri attire such as sarongs and peci, attending tahlil prayers, participating in congregational prayers at village mosques, and conversing with ordinary citizens in traditional markets. These visuals strongly convey the message that he is part of the *wong cilik* (common people) and maintains deep spiritual and social ties with the grassroots community. He also frequently uses local language, such as the Surabayan dialect, to reinforce his regional identity. This kind of strategy not only strengthens symbolic attachment but also narrows the psychological distance between the candidate and the voters (Sommer-Topcu, 2015).

Meanwhile, the candidate pair Machfud Arifin–Mujiaman adopted a different identity representation approach, one that still drew upon cultural and religious symbols. Machfud leveraged his background as the former East Java Police Chief to project an image of a firm, nationalist, and religious leader. In various content pieces, he often appeared at formal events wearing a civil servant's uniform, attended forums at prominent Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), and quoted prominent religious scholars. The narrative constructed was that Machfud is a leader with bureaucratic credibility who is also morally supported by religious communities. In many posts on X (formerly Twitter), he emphasized the importance of clean governance, siding with the people, and aligning with moderate Islamic values. This narrative was strengthened through visuals of him interacting with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) figures and santri communities, as well as highlighting his professional background that was seen as capable of transforming Surabaya into a more orderly and modern city.

These differing representation styles were also influenced by the social media platforms used. Instagram was effectively utilized as a visual tool to build emotional closeness, using more humanist and warm aesthetics. Candidates showcased daily interactions with citizens, smiles, handshakes, and social activities that reflected care for the community. On the other

hand, X was used as a battleground for issue debates and the dissemination of more substantive and ideological political ideas. Through threads, quotes, and responses to local and national issues, candidates sought to portray themselves as reflective leaders who are responsive to public aspirations. Thus, platform use was not merely a technical aspect of communication, but also part of a broader strategy to frame identity.

Furthermore, these identity representation strategies suggest that candidates not only sought to be recognized but also to be accepted as part of the collective identity of society. They were not simply offering programs, but were “selling” themselves as symbols of hope, representations of values, and reflections of the voters’ social identity. This aligns with Stuart Hall’s theory of identity, which argues that identity is performative and formed through representation in social discourse. In this context, political campaigns are not merely contests for votes, but also contests over meaning and recognition over who is deemed “worthy” of representing a particular community.

In other words, the identity representation strategies employed by both candidate pairs did not exist in a vacuum. They were shaped by the competitive context of electoral politics, within a highly pluralistic society with strong identity sentiments. Therefore, identity not only serves as political fuel but also becomes a battlefield for legitimacy. Candidates who can build strong, authentic identity representations that align with the emotional aspirations of the public have a greater chance of winning not only at the ballot box but also in the digital social space that now heavily influences public opinion.

Framing the narrative of identity politics

In political communication studies, *framing* is a crucial process used by political actors to influence how the public perceives an event, figure, or issue. In the context of the 2020 Surabaya mayoral election (Pilkada), the framing of identity politics became a central strategy employed by each candidate pair to shape public perception and construct a favorable image in the eyes of voters. This framing was carried out by emphasizing elements of identity considered most resonant with the majority of voters, such as religion, locality, cultural values, and social morality. The candidate pair Eri Cahyadi–Armuji consistently framed themselves as the embodiment of “*anak daerah*” (local sons) religious and people-oriented figures. This framing was evident in the narratives built across various social media channels, especially Instagram, which maximized the use of visual power. In their narrative, Eri was often portrayed as someone who grew up in Surabaya, understood the pulse of urban village life, and had close ties with the *santri* (Islamic students) community and local figures. This narrative was reinforced through visual imagery showing him wearing *santri* attire, conversing with market vendors, or attending religious gatherings at local prayer rooms. All of this was designed to create the impression that he not only understood the aspirations of the people but was also inherently part of the community.

The “local son” framing was further reinforced by the use of local language in digital narratives, such as the word “*arek*” (kid) and other typical Surabayan expressions, to convey authenticity and highlight the candidate’s cultural identity. This strategy created a psychological effect suggesting that voting for Eri–Armuji meant voting for “our own,” symbolically narrowing the space for outsiders to gain political trust. On the other hand, the Machfud Arifin–Mujiaman pair employed a framing strategy oriented around technocratic strength, religiosity, and nationalism. They sought to present themselves as experienced in

bureaucracy and law enforcement, while also upholding moderate religious values. Their narrative appeared more frequently in the form of statements on X (formerly Twitter), highlighting seriousness, integrity, and development plans. Machfud, for instance, often quoted prominent Islamic scholars such as KH Hasyim Asy'ari or Gus Dur in his digital posts, as if to reinforce his moral legitimacy among the traditionalist Muslim community an important voter base in Surabaya.

In campaign visuals, Mujiaman was frequently shown wearing formal attire, standing in front of large mosques or alongside religious leaders. This framing was designed to convey that the pair were not only administratively capable but also possessed religious acceptability and moral commitment to the people. Their narrative thus pointed to a fusion of professionalism and religiosity as the key capital to lead a major city like Surabaya. What is particularly interesting is how both candidate pairs used social media as the primary channel for delivering their framing. Instagram was utilized as a space for visualizing emotional narratives, while X served as a platform for reinforcing political arguments and distributing ideas. The identity framing constructed through these platforms was not reactive, but part of a deliberate communication design tailored to their target audiences (Kavada, 2012). Each pair tailored their messages according to the digital demographics of the electorate for example, millennials who preferred inspiring and emotionally engaging content over dry data exposure.

From a framing theory perspective, as outlined by Entman (2021) the framing process involves four key elements: defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgments, and suggesting remedies. In the context of the Surabaya election, both candidate pairs defined the city's challenges through identity narratives: that Surabaya needs a leader who is "authentic," "close to the people," or "grounded in religious values." The diagnosis of urban problems was then linked to issues of morality, social inequality, or emotional disconnection with previous leadership. These moral judgments ultimately served to recommend a singular solution: electing a candidate who "represents us," both in cultural values and religious beliefs.

Thus, the framing of identity narratives by both candidate pairs in the 2020 Surabaya election was not merely a campaign strategy to gain votes, but also a form of meaning production that influenced how society perceives ideal leadership. Political representation in the digital space does not simply sell ideas, but also constructs who is deemed worthy to be the symbolic figure of the community within the structure of local power.

Table 1. Framing illustrates

Candidate	Main Framing	Dominant Media	Raised Identity Symbol
Eri Cahyadi – Armuji	A local figure, devout, and close to the people	Instagram	Engaged in local culture and mosque-based activities
Machfud – Mujiaman	Assertive, a patriotic Islamic scholar, and experienced leader.	X (Twitter)	Quotes from Islamic scholars, civil servant uniform, and peci (traditional cap)

This framing illustrates how social media functions as a vital tool for constructing and disseminating political imagery, rather than merely transmitting information. Emotionally engaging visual content tends to be more easily accepted by the public than rational or argumentative discourse.

Buzzer orchestration and hashtag usage

One of the key findings of this study is the crucial role played by *buzzer* networks in amplifying identity politics narratives during the 2020 Surabaya mayoral election. In this context, buzzers were not merely individual accounts engaging voluntarily, but rather organized networks systematically disseminating campaign content across social media platforms, particularly X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram. These networks were actively involved in content production, information distribution, hashtag amplification, and controlling public discourse through a pre-structured communication agenda.

The use of hashtags such as *#ArekSuroboyo*, *#EriArmuji*, *#SantriMemilih*, and *#SurabayaHebat* did not emerge organically. Instead, they were part of a deliberate digital communication orchestration strategy. Temporal analysis of posts containing these hashtags reveals highly coordinated publishing patterns. Many accounts posted content within close timeframes, often sharing nearly identical narratives or using the same captions and visual templates. This indicates a high level of coordination aimed at creating trending topics and saturating the digital space with specific campaign messages. The goal was to exploit platform algorithms to mark the topic as popular, thereby increasing its visibility on users' timelines.

Buzzers also played a pivotal role in producing political memes rich in identity symbols and emotional messaging. These memes frequently juxtaposed the two candidates in visual comparisons that implicitly conveyed messages such as who was more religious, more “authentically” Surabayan, or closer to influential local figures. Such memes were highly effective due to their simplicity, humor, shareability, and ability to trigger affective responses from voters. The effectiveness of political memes lies not only in their rapid dissemination but also in their ability to simplify complex issues into narratives easily absorbed by the broader public.

Moreover, buzzers functioned as guardians of identity-based narratives. Their role extended beyond information dissemination to active engagement with public comments. For example, when citizens voiced criticism of a particular candidate, buzzer accounts were quick to respond undermining, denying, or deflecting attention. This tactic aimed to create the impression that the dominant narrative had broad support and that dissenting opinions were marginal or deviant. In some instances, overly critical accounts were targeted with mild forms of digital backlash, including doxxing, identity exposure, or efforts to suppress the visibility of their posts.

Another form of orchestration involved semi-aggressive narratives aimed at political rivals. These attacks were not explicit or vulgar but instead relied on symbolic insinuation. For instance, buzzers supporting a particular candidate circulated narratives suggesting that their opponents were “less religious” or “less authentically Surabayan” without directly

naming them. This strategy avoided legal consequences associated with black campaign practices while still sowing doubt about the rival's identity and integrity.

In this context, buzzers functioned as informal gatekeepers within the digital public sphere. They shaped which topics were deemed relevant, which issues should be amplified, and which opinions should be promoted or suppressed. Their influence was further magnified by social media algorithms that prioritize content based on engagement levels rather than information quality. In other words, the presence of buzzers intensified echo chamber effects and restricted the ideal deliberative space essential for democratic discourse. Furthermore, buzzer strategies did not operate in isolation. Many of them employed strong visual and storytelling techniques—combining images of community engagement, religious quotations, and personal stories of the candidates' struggles. These techniques were designed to foster emotional identification between voters and candidates, making content not only informative but also inspirational and emotionally resonant.

Overall, these findings indicate that buzzers should no longer be viewed as peripheral elements of a campaign, but rather as key actors shaping the digital political landscape. They are not merely message distributors but perception engineers, narrative gatekeepers, and discourse controllers. In the context of the 2020 Surabaya mayoral election, buzzers became instrumental in orchestrating identity politics through fast-paced, structured, and emotionally charged strategies in the digital realm.

Typology of voters based on responses to identity politics

In local political contests such as the 2020 Surabaya mayoral election, the dominant presence of identity politics in digital spaces elicited various responses from the public. These responses were neither singular nor homogeneous, but highly diverse, depending on individuals' social backgrounds, political preferences, levels of digital literacy, and identity affiliations. Based on observations of public interactions on social media especially through comments, retweets, likes, and participation in digital discussions this study finds that the public can be categorized into five voter typologies in responding to the identity politics narratives presented by the candidates.

Affective voters

The first type is affective voters, a group who respond to political campaigns based on emotional closeness and shared identity. For them, common religion, ethnicity, language, or cultural background matter more than the candidates' programs or performance. Affective voters tend to support candidates they perceive as "representing us" without further questioning their qualifications or track record. In the context of the Surabaya election, they were strongly influenced by narratives such as "true native Surabayans," religious symbols like *peci* and *sarong*, or the candidates' involvement in religious activities. Comments such as "We choose the santri who is a true Surabayan" or "Gus Eri is from NU, surely trustworthy" are typical expressions of this affective voter preference.

Ideological voters

Unlike affective voters, who are highly emotional and based on personal identity, ideological voters choose based on alignment with values and principles they believe in. They support candidates not because of physical or symbolic proximity, but because of the candidate's vision, ideological platform, or perceived political morality that fits their preferences.

Ideological voters may come from religious activists, nationalist communities, or social groups with strong value orientations. They tend to be critical of all candidates but lean toward those considered to represent the values they fight for. For example, they might support candidates who promote Islamic boarding school education, interfaith tolerance, or reject money politics even if the candidate is not locally based.

Rational voters

The third type is rational voters, who use a logical and data-based approach in making political choices. They care more about candidates' track records, administrative expertise, and offered programs. Identity symbols have less influence on their political preferences. Rational voters often question the effectiveness of promised policies, compare candidates' experience, and critically analyze the measurability of campaign promises. Comments like "What is the concrete plan to solve flooding?" or "Where is the data on past achievements?" indicate that rational voters are less easily swayed by emotional or symbolic narratives and prioritize substance and candidate performance.

Opportunist voters

The fourth type is opportunistic voters—individuals or groups who support candidates based on pragmatic considerations or personal gain. For them, who the candidate is matters less, as long as concrete incentives are provided, such as social assistance, business opportunities, MSME capital support, or access to government projects. Opportunistic voters often appear in communities with low welfare levels, where political preferences are shaped by urgent economic needs. On social media campaigns, they are usually not active in substantive discussions but respond strongly to content offering aid, direct cash transfers (BLT), or other economic promises. Comments like "What matters is helping MSMEs" or "As long as I get social aid, I support anyone" characterize this group.

Reactive minority voters

The last identified type is reactive minority voters, groups that feel marginalized by dominant narratives in identity politics campaigns. They may come from religious, ethnic, gender, or social class minorities who feel unrepresented by the symbols and narratives used in the campaigns. In the context of the 2020 Surabaya election, for example, the dominance of traditional Islamic symbols led some non-Muslim residents to feel ignored or excluded from the target voters. This group tends to be critical of identity campaigns and attempts to present counter-narratives or warn of social exclusion risks. Comments such as "We non-Muslim citizens of Surabaya also have political rights" or "Why are minorities not mentioned in the programs?" express their reaction to this exclusivity.

These five typologies reflect the complexity of public responses to identity politics. Identity narratives are not accepted wholesale by the public but are interpreted diversely based on social position, experience, and value orientation of each voter. In this context, social media becomes the arena where all these voter typologies interact, debate, and either affirm or reject one another. Understanding this diversity is important not only to evaluate the effectiveness of campaign strategies but also to understand the socio-political conditions of society in accepting or rejecting identity politics practices.

Public responses to identity political narratives are not homogeneous. Based on patterns of comments, likes, and retweets, five voter typologies are identified:

Table 2. Typology of voter behavior in the 2020 surabaya local election

Voter Type	Key Characteristics	Illustrative Public Statement
Affective Voters	Driven by emotional attachment or identity-based affinity.	<i>"Wong Suroboyo should support a true native of Surabaya!"</i>
Ideological Voters	Influenced by religious beliefs or nationalist values.	<i>"A leader must be close to the ulama and the people."</i>
Rational Voters	Prioritize policy programs, performance, and candidate track records.	<i>"Where's the proof that past promises were fulfilled?"</i>
Opportunistic Voters	Motivated by direct benefits or personal access to social assistance.	<i>"What matters is that aid and cash transfers are smooth."</i>
Reactive Minority Voters	Express resistance to perceived identity-based marginalization by the majority.	<i>"I'm Christian, but I'm still a citizen of Surabaya!"</i>

This typology shows how identity serves both as a distinguishing factor and as a shaper of political choices. In fact, some groups create counter-narratives in response to the dominance of majority symbols.

Comparison with the 2017 Jakarta regional election

Compared to the 2017 Jakarta Regional Election, identity-based campaigning in Surabaya was more subtle and symbolic. There were no direct attacks against other groups, yet exclusivity in representation remained. Jakarta showed identity conflicts openly, while Surabaya did so through selective representation. Both cities demonstrate that religious and ethnic symbols can be exploited in the public sphere, differing only in the level of expression. This reveals that local democracy in large cities is vulnerable to the politicization of identity, regardless of its form or packaging.

Political and local democratic impact

The political impact of using identity politics strategies through social media in the 2020 Surabaya Regional Election was significant and multidimensional. This phenomenon not only influenced patterns of digital interaction among citizens but also resulted in complex social and institutional consequences in the medium to long term. What should have been a competition based on programs and visions instead became a battleground of emotional, exclusive, and polarizing identity symbols.

Social polarization based on political identity

The 2020 Surabaya Regional Election displayed strong social polarization. Social media played a key role in emphasizing divides between supporters of each candidate pair. This polarization did not merely represent differences of opinion but escalated into identity antagonism. According to Hall (2025), identity is not a stable "self" but is continuously constructed in opposition to the "other." In Surabaya, narratives like "us vs. them" were massively used to build political loyalty through religious, ethnic, and locality symbols. This polarization seeped into social life. Relationships within families, neighborhood communities (RT/RW), and friendships experienced tension because political preferences were associated with "piety" or "authenticity" of local origin. Sentiments such as "Candidate A is more Islamic" or "Candidate B is more genuinely Arek Suroboyo" were no longer mere opinions but became the foundation of affiliations and social conflicts.

Minority exclusion and majority symbolism

Identity-based campaign strategies tended to frame politics as the domain of the majority group. Across various social media posts, majority symbols such as Muslim attire, use of local language, and quotes from sacred texts were reproduced as tools of legitimacy. In the framework of visual representation, as explained by Rose (2007) such visualizations are not neutral but loaded with political meaning and power. Consequently, minority groups—religious, ethnic, or social experienced representational excision. They were not only absent from campaign narratives but often became targets of stigmatization or negative stereotypes. This reinforced symbolic gaps in the local democratic space, which ideally should guarantee inclusion of all citizens without discrimination.

Erosion of public deliberation quality

Social media platforms, especially X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram, instead of serving as deliberative spaces, became arenas for symbolic agitation. Campaign narratives were filled with emotional quotes, political memes, and identity-based viral sarcasm. Public discourse was dominated by fast, humorous, and emotionally charged content rather than in-depth substantive discussions. As explained by Sunstein (2022) and Tufekci (2017), this phenomenon marks a shift from “public information” to “affective resonance.” Instead of fostering rational debate, social media algorithms reinforce existing biases through echo chambers. Voters thus become more vulnerable to identity manipulation and less critical in evaluating candidates’ programs or track records.

Persistence of symbolic conflict post-election

Symbolic conflicts did not end when voting concluded. Post-election, the digital space remained a battleground for narratives. Supporters continued producing content such as victory memes, mocking opponents, or conspiracy narratives about the loss. In the post-election polarization study by McCoy & Somer (2019), this phenomenon is called “competitive victimhood,” where each group feels most justified and most victimized. This symbolic conflict prolongs political wounds and hinders reconciliation. However, in local democracy, post-election social harmony is vital for effective governance. If unmanaged, the risks undermining long-term political legitimacy.

Fragmentation of the digital public sphere

Over time, segmentation of the digital public sphere occurred based on political affiliations and cultural identities. On platforms like X and WhatsApp, exclusive groups formed containing only supporters of one candidate or identity. Within these groups, identity narratives were continuously reproduced and reinforced. There was no space for criticism, as all information confirmed the group’s beliefs. This phenomenon aligns with the echo chamber theory described by Pariser (2011). When users are exposed only to information that reinforces their beliefs, openness to difference disappears. As a result, democracy loses its deliberative nature and is replaced by political isolation based on homogeneous convictions.

Vulnerability of electoral legitimacy

Leaders elected through identity symbol mobilization face serious challenges in building legitimacy after victory. If voters choose candidates based on identity similarity rather than programs or capabilities, public trust in the leader’s ability can be unstable. Conversely, groups feeling “symbolically unrepresented” tend to reject election results. This shows that

legitimacy built on identity symbols is fragile. It is prone to political disappointment, post-performance delegitimization, and resistance from opposition groups. A healthy local democracy requires rational legitimacy based on programs, competence, and integrity—not merely on visual images or affective symbols.

Conclusion

This study shows that identity politics in the 2020 Surabaya Regional Election was a systematically constructed campaign strategy through social media. Candidates not only conveyed ideas and work programs but also built strong identity narratives through religious symbols, locality, and cultural representation. This strategy was not carried out spontaneously but was designed by considering voter demographics, the public's affective preferences, and digital dynamics that enable fast and broad interaction. An important finding in this research indicates that social media has become the main arena for the contestation of identity politics. Platforms like Instagram and X function not only as communication tools but also as spaces for meaning production that strengthen the candidates' images in the public mind. Through religious visualization, use of local language, quotations from religious leaders, and reinforcement of regional symbols, candidates build symbolic closeness with the public. This framing strategy is supported by networks of buzzers who actively disseminate content, control the flow of discussions, and create a digital ecosystem biased toward the dominant narrative.

Public responses to identity narratives show a high level of diversity. The five typologies of voters affective, ideological, rational, opportunistic, and reactive minority—illustrate that society does not uniformly accept identity symbols. Some feel represented, while others feel marginalized (Jenke & Huettel, 2020). Exclusive identity politics ultimately contributes to social fragmentation both online and offline. The impact of this digital identity politics is also very significant. Social polarization based on political affiliation, exclusion of minority groups, and erosion of public deliberation quality are consequences that cannot be ignored. After the election, symbolic conflicts did not subside but continued to develop in digital spaces, prolonging tensions and weakening the spirit of deliberative democracy. In the long term, identity politics practices risk creating leadership that gains only symbolic legitimacy rather than rational legitimacy based on policy.

Thus, it can be concluded that the 2020 Surabaya Regional Election represents an important portrait of the dynamics of digital democracy in Indonesia, where identity and symbols dominate more than substance and work programs. Local politics is increasingly directed toward emotional battles and representation rather than contests of ideas and achievements. This issue requires serious attention from democracy stakeholders at both local and national levels.

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