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The Winning Strategy of dr. Christian Widodo and Serena Francis (CS'an): An Analysis of Public Perception in the 2024 Kupang City Regional Election

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Abstract

Abstract: The 2024 regional head election (Pilkada) in Kupang City represents a significant political event reflecting the dynamics of local democracy within a socially, culturally, and educationally diverse society. The victory of the CS'an candidate pair (dr. Christian Widodo and Serena Francis) is noteworthy because the pair secured broad support across community groups despite not originating from the conventional political elite or the city's dominant ethnic group. This study aims to identify and describe the winning strategy employed by the CS'an pair and to analyze public perception of their victory. A descriptive qualitative approach was used, with data collected through in-depth interviews, field observation, and documentary study involving eleven key informants, including the elected candidates, the winning team, supporting political party officials, community and religious leaders, women's and youth representatives, first-time voters, and academics. Data were analyzed descriptively-thematically through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, using Rational Choice Theory (Weber, Coleman, Downs, and Ritzer) as the primary analytical framework. The findings indicate that the CS'an pair's winning strategy was built through strengthening personal candidate image, consolidating the supporting political parties and winning team, inclusive two-way political communication, and a community-based approach sensitive to socio-cultural diversity. Public perception of the CS'an pair was generally positive and legitimizing; the public viewed both candidates as figures of integrity who were close to the people and capable of bringing hope for change. The study concludes that the CS'an victory resulted from a synergy between planned political strategy and positive public perception, and that Kupang City voters' choices reflected rational considerations more than mere emotional mobilization.

Introduction

The election of regional heads is one of the important instruments in the local democratic system in Indonesia. Through the regional election mechanism, the community is given the opportunity to determine leaders who are considered capable of representing the aspirations and interests of the public at the local level (Hadi et al., 2026). In this context, the dynamics of political competition are not only determined by the strength of political parties, but also by campaign strategies, candidate image, and public perception of the figures fighting in the contest (Uma et al., 2025).

In the study of electoral politics, a candidate's winning strategy is often related to the ability to build effective political communication to voters. Political communication not only serves as a tool for delivering campaign messages, but also as a means of building social legitimacy and public trust in candidates (Andamisari, 2024). Therefore, the candidate's success in managing communication strategies is an important factor in determining the outcome of the election. Firdiansyah (2025) stated that Strategy can be interpreted as an effort to achieve victory. At first, strategy was only known in the military world. Etymologically, strategy comes from the Greek word strategos, which means "military command". In terminology, strategy is thinking, planning, and directing aimed at achieving specific goals that have been formulated in advance (Haliza, 2021). Muhammad Ardi Firdiansyah et al. (2024) found that there are four important political strategies to analyze the causes of the defeat of the ERI-HI pair, namely political competitor strategies, political communication strategies, political lobbying strategies, and political issue strategies. Based on the results of the study, the four strategies were not optimally implemented by the ERI-HI pair.

Kupang City as the capital of East Nusa Tenggara Province has distinctive socio-political characteristics in every local political contest. Ethnic diversity, socioeconomic background, and the level of political participation of the community make the dynamics of regional elections in this region interesting to study academically (Mali et al., 2025). This condition also affects the behavior patterns of voters in determining their political choices. The 2024 Kupang City Regional Election presents quite competitive political dynamics with the emergence of various candidate figures who offer a vision for regional development. One of the prominent phenomena in the contest was the victory of the couple dr. Christian Widodo and Serena Francis known as CS'an. This victory attracted attention because it showed a shift in voters' preferences towards a leadership model that was considered more responsive and innovative (Taniu et al., 2026).

In the political science literature, a candidate's victory in an election is often influenced by a combination of structural factors and agency factors. Structural factors include the political system, party support, and socioeconomic conditions of the community, while agency factors are related to the candidate's ability to manage political strategies and build leadership image (Kamindang et al., 2025). Official data of the vote recapitulation shows the large difference in votes obtained by the CS'an pair compared to the other four candidate pairs, as presented in the table below.

Table 1. Votes obtained for the pair of candidates for Mayor and Deputy Mayor of Kupang 2024-2029

Candidate Pairs (serial number)	Votes	Percentage
Christian Widodo – Serena Francis (5)	**68.830**	**36,39%**
efri Riwu Kore – Lucia Adinda Nurak Lebu Raya (4)	50.093	26,48%
Jonas Salean – Alo Sukardan (2)	41.300	±21,81%
George Hadjoh – Theodora Ewalda Taek (3)	15.084	±8,12%
Alexander Foenay – Isyak Nuka (1)	13.863	±7,33%

The victory of the CS'an pair in the 2024 Kupang City Regional Election can be understood as a result of their success in managing various elements of political strategy effectively. The strategy includes a direct communication approach to the public, the use of socio-political networks, and the use of digital media in building the candidate's image in the public space (Rangkuti, 2025). In addition to campaign strategy, the candidate's figurative factor also plays an important role in shaping voter preferences. Leaders who are considered to have integrity, leadership capacity, and closeness to the community tend to gain higher levels of trust from voters (Mujiono et al., 2024; Setiaman & Girsang, 2023). dr. Christian Widodo as a doctor and professional figure is perceived to have high intellectual capacity and social concern. Meanwhile, Serena Francis is seen as a representation of women's leadership who has social closeness to society. The combination of these two leadership characters creates political synergy that is able to expand the base of voter support in various segments of Kupang City society.

From the perspective of voter behavior, people's political preferences are often influenced by evaluations of previous government's performance as well as expectations of future policy changes (Firmansyah & Putra, 2024; Pratiwi, 2020). Voters not only consider the programs offered by the candidate, but also assess the candidate's capacity to realistically realize the program (Falah, 2024). In addition, the local political network factor also plays an important role in determining the success of candidates in regional elections. This network can be in the form of support from community leaders, social organizations, or local communities that have a significant influence on voter preferences (Amiruddin, 2022; Putra et al., 2023). In many cases in Indonesia, local social networks are often the main determinants of political support mobilization (Ginting et al., 2024; Huda et al., 2024). This makes digital communication strategy one of the important elements in modern political campaigns.

Based on the description above, this research is formulated into two research questions, namely: (1) what is the winning strategy of the CS'an pair in the 2024 Kupang City Election, and (2) what is the public perception of the victory of the CS'an pair in the Regional Election. In line with the formulation of the problem, this study aims to identify and describe the

winning strategy of the CS'an couple, as well as analyze the public perception of the couple's victory, using the Rational Choice Theory as the main analytical framework to understand the extent to which the decision to choose the people of Kupang City is based on rational considerations, and not solely on the emotional mobilization or structural strength of political parties.

Research Method

This research was carried out in Kupang City, East Nusa Tenggara Province, as the administrative area where the 2024 Regional Elections will be held. The research uses a descriptive qualitative approach that emphasizes understanding the meaning, social processes, and natural context of the phenomenon being studied (Rifa'i, 2023; Waruwu, 2024). The data source consists of primary data obtained through interviews and direct observation of voters, success teams, community/religious leaders, and academics, as well as secondary data in the form of official documents of the Kupang City KPU, KPU regulations, media reports, and relevant academic literature (Romdona et al., 2025).

Data collection techniques were carried out through in-depth interviews, field observations, and documentation studies (Priatna et al., 2025). The research informants were determined purposively, consisting of eleven people, dr. Christian Widodo (elected Mayor of Kupang), Serena Francis (elected Deputy Mayor of Kupang), Antonio Sarmento (Chairman of the Kupang City Gerindra Party DPC Bapilu DPC), Filmon Loasana (Chairman of DPD PSI Kupang City), Kanisius To (Secretary of the CS'an Paslon Winning Team), Adhy La'a (novice voter), Wilibaldus Nahak and Roy Hendriquez (community leaders), Usman Sakan (religious leader), Anshar Dahlan (youth leader), Shinta Manuputy (female leader), and Amir S. Kiwang (academician of the University of Muhammadiyah Kupang).

Data analysis is carried out in a descriptive-thematic manner through three stages, namely, data reduction, selection, and categorization of information relevant to the formulation of the problem (Rozaq et al., 2026). Data presentation, compilation of findings into narrative and thematic forms according to the focus of victory strategy and public perception, and inductive conclusion drawing to interpret the relationship between campaign strategy, public perception, and the winning results of CS'an pairs (Qomaruddin & Sa'diyah, 2024).

Results and Discussion

CS'an Candidate Winning Strategies

A victory strategy is understood as a series of plans and actions that are systematically designed to gain the support of the majority of voters in a political contest, including setting goals, mapping strengths and weaknesses, managing resources, and adjusting steps to the socio-political conditions of the community (Ibad & Musdalifah, 2020; Yani et al., 2025). In the context of the Regional Elections, the winning strategy is not only oriented to obtaining votes, but also to building public trust and legitimacy (Sukatendel & Sitepu, 2025). Field findings show that Dr. Christian Widodo's strategy is built on a foundation of public trust that is maintained in the long term, not on the material strength of the campaign alone. dr.

Christian Widodo explained that the strategy he built in the 2024 Kupang City Election was taken through a structured, adaptive, and responsive approach to the social dynamics of the city community. He emphasized that the victory strategy does not solely rely on the strength of the party or campaign materials, but on public trust built through a long process, and stated that the key to victory does not lie in the size of billboards or campaign funds, but in how much public trust in the candidate.

This view emphasizes that the strategies implemented are long-term and value-based. Dr. Christian Widodo consciously builds a political image as a doctor who serves the community, not as a conventional politician, through a consistent personal branding between his personal life and his public image, and emphasizes the importance of two-way communication by rejecting a one-way campaign approach that contains only political promises. The work programs offered are also prepared based on the real needs of the community, not just campaign rhetoric. Furthermore, dr. Christian Widodo explained that the personal branding strategy he implemented is directed at presenting himself as a professional, clean, and integrity figure, by prioritizing the values of empathy, social concern, and public service, as well as maintaining consistency between personal life and political image. He emphasized that he is known to the public as a doctor who works for the people, not just looking for positions, and that his approach is carried out through direct dialogue with the community in the village and community, open discussions with youth and students, and the use of social media as a means of political education, with the principle that the community wants to be heard, not patronized, so that communication must take place in two directions and not monologues. The work program he prepared is based on the real needs of the people of Kupang City, including strengthening basic health services, improving the quality of health centers and medical personnel, digitizing public services, and improving education and youth welfare.

Based on the overall results of the interview with dr. Christian Widodo, it can be concluded that his winning strategy is oriented towards building public trust through a personal, professional, and humanist approach; personal branding as a doctor who serves is the main differentiator compared to other candidates; two-way and participatory political communication plays an important role in shaping positive public perceptions; and a realistic and need-based work program strengthens voters' confidence in their leadership capacity. Unlike dr. Christian Widodo, Serena Francis' role in the CS'an couple's victory strategy is not limited to a candidate companion, but as an active political actor who helps formulate social strategies and approaches to society, especially women, young people, and groups that have been under-heard. He builds an emotional closeness with his voter base through an experience-based approach and community dialogue, as well as a program that expands the support base of CS'an beyond health issues.

Serena Francis, explained that her role in the CS'an couple is not only as a companion to the candidate, but also as a political actor who is active in the formulation of strategies and social approaches to society. She views politics as a space of service, especially for women, young people, and groups that have been under-heard, with the belief that when people feel

understood, trust will grow on its own. The approach she takes is in the form of regular discussions with small community groups such as the women's community, MSME actors, and students, as well as the use of social media to build emotional closeness with the community. She emphasized that the work program must touch daily life, especially for mothers and children, so that the issues raised include women's empowerment, MSMEs, child and family protection, and youth capacity building.

It can be concluded that Serena Francis' winning strategy is built through an approach of social representation, empathy, and emotional closeness to society, especially women and young voters; personal branding as inclusive and communicative women leaders is an important factor in shaping positive public perception; and a community-based network of volunteers who move on the basis of a kinship approach strengthen the couple's social legitimacy. Overall, Serena Francis' role complements dr. Christian Widodo's strategy, so that the CS'an couple appears as collaborative and humanist leadership in accordance with the dynamics of Kupang City voters. In addition to the strength of the personal figures of the two candidates, structural support for the CS'an pair was also supported by the consolidation of the Gerindra Party and the Indonesian Solidarity Party (PSI) coalition: Antonio Sarmento, Chairman of the Kupang City Gerindra DPC Bapilu, explained that the formation of the coalition was based on the same vision of professional and clean leadership, while Filmon Loasana, Chairman of the Kupang City PSI DPD, emphasized the suitability of the CS'an pair with the party's values that prioritize youth politics and meritocracy.

Antonio Sarmento, Chairman of the Kupang City Gerindra Party DPC Bapilu DPC, explained that the formation of the coalition is based on a common vision in encouraging professional, clean, and responsive leadership to the needs of the community. He said that Gerindra is taking advantage of the traditional mass base and local network of figures to reach out to lower-middle class voters, while emphasizing that the people of Kupang are now increasingly critical and pay more attention to their track record and programs than just party affiliation (Interview with Antonio Sarmento, September 18, 2025). In line with this, Filmon Loasana, Chairman of DPD PSI Kupang City, stated that the CS'an pair is considered to be in line with the party's values that emphasize youth politics, anti-corruption, and openness, and reflect the politics of ideas and meritocracy that has been pushed by PSI. He emphasized that the party is only a political vehicle, while its driver is a figure trusted by the people.

The synergy between Gerindra's structural strength and the creative approach based on social media and young volunteers from PSI makes this coalition complementary in reaching traditional voter segments as well as urban and novice voters. At the operational level, Kanisius to as the Secretary of the Winning Team emphasized that the campaign strategy is designed centrally but flexibly, starting from mapping areas and voter characteristics based on field data, not mere assumptions. Kanisius To as the Secretary of the CS'an Candidate Pair Winning Team explained that the team's main task is to ensure that the candidate's strategy, coalition parties, and volunteers run in one command. The steps taken include mapping the vote base per sub-district and sub-district, identifying rational voters, novice voters, and

floating voters, as well as determining campaign priority areas. He emphasized that volunteers are the spearhead of campaigns that move on the basis of belief, not payment, and that negative issues and hoaxes are faced with data, not emotions, because for the winning team, victory is not solely about vote numbers, but public trust.

Overall, the findings in this subchapter show that the winning strategy of the CS'an pair is the result of an integration between strengthening the candidate's personal image, Serena Francis' social representation and empathy, the consolidation of party coalitions built on the basis of common values and not just short-term electoral interests, and systematic and data-driven campaign management at the level of the winning team. These four elements work in a complementary manner, so that the integrated and contextual victory strategy is a determining factor for the success of the CS'an pair in winning the 2024 Kupang City Regional Election.

Public Perception of the Victory of the CS'an Candidate Pair

Public perception is a process in which the public receives, interprets, and gives meaning to political information related to candidates, programs, and election processes; these perceptions are not always shaped by objective facts alone, but also by experiences, social values, political communication, and social interactions that develop in society (Adiwibowo & Larasati, 2025; Judijanto et al., 2023). Adhy La'a, a novice voter in the 2024 Kupang City Regional Election, assessed the CS'an pair as a pair of candidates who have a professional, communicative, and relevant image to the needs of the younger generation. The information-seeking pattern that he and other young voters conducted by scouring social media, observing candidate debates, and selecting sources based on credibility, rather than simply following the opinions of family or friends confirmed Anthony Downs' proposition in Sompa et al. (2023) that rational voters use political information selectively to maximize the benefits of their decisions.

Adhy La'a, a novice voter, revealed that CS'an couples are seen as having a professional, communicative, and relevant image to the needs of the younger generation. He assessed that the programs offered were realistic, easy to understand, and not merely normative, and delivered in simple and reasonable language without excessive promises. According to him, the CS'an couple's campaign is educational and in accordance with the character of young voters who tend to be critical and rational, and he himself knows the couple more through social media which displays openness and willingness to dialogue with young people. Similar positive perceptions were also conveyed by community leaders and religious leaders in Kupang City. Wilibaldus Nahak, as a community leader, views the direct presence of CS'an couples in the community both through neighborhood visits, citizen dialogue, and community meetings as a form of seriousness and concern for local issues. The support of interfaith religious leaders for the CS'an couple, which is based on an assessment of the integrity and track record of service, also shows a form of collective rationality.

Wilibaldus Nahak, as a community leader, stated that his perception of CS'an couples in general is positive and constructive, with a leadership approach that is popular,

communicative, and not distant from the community. He assessed that the public viewed the presence of the couple not only during the campaign period, but as a sincere willingness to listen to residents' complaints. The program presented was considered reasonable and in accordance with the conditions of the community on the ground, especially in the field of public services and social welfare, and he underlined that the couple did not take advantage of sensitive issues or social differences in their campaigns. From a religious point of view, the CS'an couple is perceived as a figure who upholds moral values, political ethics, and tolerance between religious communities, because they do not use religious symbols or sentiments as political tools so as not to cause unrest in the midst of a pluralistic society, namely support based on values that are believed to be true. A similar attitude was also conveyed by a female figure, Shinta Manuputy, who saw the presence of female figures in CS'an pairs as a new representation for women's involvement in public policy-making.

A religious leader said that the CS'an couple was considered not to bring religion into political conflict, something that was seen as important for the life of a harmonious society. He assessed that the two candidates were seen trying to build a city together regardless of differences. Shinta Manuputy, a female figure in Kupang City, explained that the CS'an couple is perceived as a candidate couple who are inclusive, care about women, and are able to represent the interests of families and vulnerable groups. She stated that women are beginning to be given space to be involved and their aspirations heard, and that society, especially women, sees the sincerity and concern of the couple, not just a political promise.

The perception of the younger generation towards CS'an couples also tends to be positive and progressive. Anshar Dahlan, a youth figure in Kupang City, assessed that this couple was able to represent the hopes of young people for change, openness, and modern leadership, through a campaign narrative that emphasizes youth empowerment and the avoidance of identity politics. A similar pattern is also seen in groups of traders, informal workers, and MSME actors, who consider the potential for increased income, economic stability, and strategic policies that benefit the small business sector as the basis for their support a form of economic benefit calculation that is pragmatic and in line with the zweckrational dimension in Weber's framework, where actions are directed by rational profit-loss considerations. Anshar Dahlan, a youth leader in Kupang City, emphasized that the CS'an couple is seen as able to represent the hopes of young people for change, openness, and modern leadership. He stated that the younger generation needs leaders who provide space for youth to contribute, not just be used during election periods, and that young people view this couple as more open and willing to listen to their aspirations.

From an academic perspective, Amir S. Kiwang, an academic at the University of Muhammadiyah Kupang, assessed that the public perception of the CS'an pair was formed through a combination of candidate image, political communication strategy, and the local socio-political context of Kupang City, and was strongly influenced by dr. Christian Widodo's professional background as a doctor with a track record and technocratic competence which was considered by voters to guarantee the sustainability of development. At the same time, it reduces political risks because it is seen as stable and does not have the potential to cause

conflict. This preference for low-risk candidates, as also conveyed by volunteers who joined on the basis of belief in the chances of victory and a neat team structure, confirms that the consideration of political risk is also part of the rational calculation of voters and supporters.

Amir S. Kiwang, an academic at the University of Muhammadiyah Kupang, explained that the CS'an pair succeeded in building a relatively positive and moderate public perception, especially because they were able to present themselves as a rational, non-confrontational, and adaptive couple to the character of local voters. He assessed that the couple's campaign strategy tended to be substantial, by emphasizing issues of public services, health, and community welfare, along with the shift in the preferences of voters in Kupang City towards more rational voters so that issues and programs became important factors in shaping perceptions.

Based on the overall results of interviews with novice voters, community leaders, religious leaders, women, youth leaders, local economic actors, volunteers, and academics, it can be concluded that the public's perception of the victory of the CS'an pair is generally positive and legitimate, and that this perception is formed through a process that is in line with the four variants of the Rational Choice Theory used in this study. Weber explains the coexistence of zweckrational (consideration of program benefits and candidate track record) and wertrational (support based on moral values and tolerance) among voters, Coleman explains how individual decisions are formed in social networks and communities, including through references to religious leaders and trusted community leaders, Downs explains the pattern of voters, especially the younger generation, in selectively using political information through social media; while Ritzer emphasized the centrality of the subjective experience of individuals, as seen from the number of informants who claimed to vote not because of party fanaticism, but because of personal experience witnessing the real work of CS'an couples in the community. Thus, the positive public perception of the CS'an couple is not just the result of imagery, but the product of rational cognitive and social processes, which ultimately contributed significantly to their victory in the 2024 Kupang City Regional Elections.

Conclusion

The winning strategy of the CS'an pair in the 2024 Kupang City Pemilukada is built through a comprehensive approach by paying attention to the social, cultural, and characteristics of local voters. Strengthening the image and figure of the candidate is the main strategy: Dr. Christian Widodo is perceived as a professional and humanist figure with a high concern for public service, while Serena Francis represents the figure of women and the progressive young generation, and the combination of the two creates a strong electoral appeal. The consolidation of supporting political parties and winning teams is also carried out effectively through organized fieldwork up to the village level, while an adaptive and inclusive approach to political communication through face-to-face campaigns, cross-group dialogue, and the use of social media strengthens the acceptance of concrete and relevant work programs to the needs of the community. A community-based approach and local wisdom, which attunes to the ethnic, religious, and socio-cultural diversity of Kupang City,

complements the strategy by building an emotional closeness between candidates and voters.

Public perception of CS'an couples is generally positive. The public considers dr. Christian Widodo as a professional figure, with integrity, and has high social concern, especially in health services, while Serena Francis is seen as a representative of women and the younger generation who brings the spirit of renewal and alignment to social issues, education, and women's empowerment. This positive perception is strengthened by a polite, open, and inclusive communication style, as well as work programs that are perceived to be realistic and relevant to the conditions of Kupang City. Despite this, the study also found that public perceptions are not entirely homogeneous; a small part of the public remains rational-critical and waiting for concrete proof of the political promises made during the campaign, which shows that Kupang City voters are increasingly selective in making their political choices.

Overall, this study concludes that the victory of the CS'an pair is the result of a synergy between a planned political strategy and positive public perception, where the image of leadership, political communication, and closeness to the community are the dominant factors in determining voter preferences. Read through the framework of Rational Choice Theory, the decision to choose the people of Kupang City reflects more rational calculations of political benefits, values, and risks than mere emotional mobilization. This positive public perception is an important socio-political capital in the victory of the CS'an couple, as well as a challenge for the elected couple to maintain consistency between political promises and policy realization during the government.

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