

DIGITAL POLITICAL MARKETING IN THE 2024 RIAU ISLANDS REGIONAL ELECTION: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA MEDIATION IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POSITIONING AND VOTER PREFERENCES

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the effect of positioning on voter preferences in the context of the 2024 Riau Islands gubernatorial election, with social media acting as a mediating variable within the framework of digital political marketing. Employing a quantitative research approach with an explanatory survey design, data were collected from 349 respondents representing active voters in the Riau Islands region. The data analysis technique used was Structural Equation Modeling based on Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) with the JASP 0.19.2 software. The findings indicate that positioning has a significant and positive influence on voter preferences, both directly and indirectly through social media as an intervening variable. These results emphasize the strategic importance of candidate positioning in shaping favorable perceptions and strengthening candidate images in the minds of voters. Furthermore, the study highlights the increasingly dominant role of social media as a digital communication platform that effectively bridges the relationship between candidate positioning strategies and voter decision-making. Theoretically, this study contributes to the advancement of digital political marketing literature by integrating social media as a mediating factor in the relationship between positioning and voter preferences a dimension that has been underexplored in previous studies, particularly within the context of regional political contests in Indonesia. Practically, the research suggests that candidates and campaign teams should develop and implement consistent, relatable positioning narratives through social media channels to optimize their influence on voter preferences and behavior.

Keywords: positioning, social media, voter preference.

INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has drastically changed the way political communication occurs in recent decades. Social media as a digital platform now functions as the main tool in conveying political messages and interacting between candidates and voters. In the midst of the digitalization current, political marketing strategies are no longer limited to traditional methods, but must adopt the efficient use of social media to build the image and preferences of voters. This is very relevant in the context of the 2024 Riau Islands Gubernatorial Election, where local political dynamics are influenced by intensive and complex digital interactions (Sajid et al., 2024).

Political positioning is a crucial fundamental concept in political marketing, concerned with how candidates or parties manage their image in the minds of voters based on the issues, policies and characteristics they offer.

Research by (Walgrave et al., 2020) emphasized that policy positions are the main factors influencing voter preferences, followed by competence and commitment. However, in the context of increasingly advanced democracy, the social media factor as a mediator between positioning and voter preferences has begun to receive serious attention because it can accelerate the spread of information and influence public perception (Okolikj & Quinlan, 2021).

The problem is how to ensure a candidate's political position is well-received and influences voter preferences through social media platforms. In Indonesia, particularly in the Riau Islands, there is limited research comprehensively discussing the role of social media in the relationship between political positioning and voter preferences in the context of regional head elections. While social media is widely recognized as a

means of political communication, its influence on changes in voter preferences remains variable and requires more in-depth empirical research (Yerlikaya & Aslan, 2020).

The proposed solution in the context of digital political marketing involves the optimal use of social media as a means of mediation that not only spreads political messages but can also shape voter opinions and preferences. This approach requires the right strategy for managing content, interaction, and engagement on digital platforms so that political placement is effective and has a direct impact on voter decisions (Duche-Pérez et al., 2023).

The existing literature review reveals a significant research gap: the lack of attention to the mediating role of social media in the relationship between political positions and voter preferences in regional head elections. Most studies tend to discuss positions and preferences separately or view social media as an independent variable, without clearly testing its mediating role. This study aims to address this gap with a rigorous and contextual quantitative approach (Mande et al., 2022).

In a study of digital political marketing, it was revealed that social media functions not only as a medium for disseminating information, but also as an interactive space that influences political views and voter choices through various means, such as framing, agenda setting, and echo chambers (Sajid et al., 2024). However, the impact of social media is complex and sometimes contradictory, so research exploring the mediation relationship of social media is needed to explain the mechanism (Koiranen et al., 2022).

This study is novel due to its focus on the integration of political positioning and the role of social media in regional head elections in the Riau Islands, a region with unique social and political characteristics that has been under-researched. Furthermore, the study employs a cutting-edge empirical approach that combines political marketing theory and digital communication to achieve a more profound understanding of voter behavior. The study aims to analyze the mediating role of social media in the relationship between candidates' political positions and voter choices in the 2024 Riau Islands Gubernatorial Election. Consequently, it is expected to provide accurate empirical insights and strategic suggestions for political actors seeking to optimize efficient digital political marketing.

The urgency of this research is increasing, along with the important role of social media in influencing the political decisions of modern society, especially among the younger generation, who are highly dependent on digital platforms to obtain political information. This research is expected to provide insight for policymakers and political practitioners in managing political positions digitally by utilizing social media effectively to influence voter preferences in the current era of digital democracy (Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2020).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a quantitative design with an explanatory approach to analyze the relationship between political positioning, social media, and voter preferences. This approach allows for evaluating the influence of political positioning on voter preferences, including mediation mechanisms (Hayes & Preacher, 2013). Data were collected through a survey of 349 voters selected using a purposive sampling method to ensure balanced representation across demographics. This study was conducted in the Riau Islands Province, with data collection taking place from June to December 2024. The population in this study included all residents of the Riau Islands Province registered in the Permanent Voters List (DPT) for the 2024 Simultaneous Regional Elections, which amounted to 2,183,300 people (KPU of the Riau Islands Province, 2024). The cluster sampling technique was applied to ensure fair representation based on the administrative area of the district/city.

This method was chosen to ensure that the distribution of respondents reflects demographic diversity, including age, education level, and access to social media. The sample size was determined by referring to the Isaac and Michael (1981) formula with a margin of error of 5%, resulting in 349 respondents randomly selected from each cluster. The research instrument was a structured questionnaire designed based on variable indicators that have been proven valid and reliable in international literature. This questionnaire uses a 5-point Likert scale and has been tested for validity and reliability through confirmatory factor analysis and Cronbach's alpha.

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire utilizing a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). This questionnaire aims to measure three main variables: positioning, social media, and voter preferences. To ensure the quality of the instruments used, validity and reliability tests were carried out using confirmatory factor analysis and Cronbach's alpha. This method is expected to produce accurate and reliable data regarding the variables studied.

Data were analyzed using the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) method, using JASP 0.19.2 software. This method was chosen because of its ability to test complex causal models with multiple mediator variables (Hayes & Preacher, 2013). This model includes a direct path analysis to test the relationship between positioning and voter preferences and a mediation effect analysis to

understand the role of positioning in the relationship between these two variables (Ortega & Oñate, 2024). In addition, a mediation effect analysis was conducted to assess the influence of positioning on voter preferences (Durmuşoğlu et al., 2023). Testing was conducted at a significance level of $p < 0.05$, with the strength of the relationship between variables measured through the path coefficient (β), the R^2 value for endogenous variables, and the f^2 value to assess the strength of the effect. The final results are presented in the form of tables and path diagrams to illustrate the contribution of each variable in the research model.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Statistik Deskriptif Responden

This study involved 349 respondents who were voters in the Riau Islands Province. Demographic characteristics show that most respondents are between 26 and 45 years old (56.2%), with the majority of their last education being a bachelor's degree (38.5%), and are spread across seven districts/cities. In terms of social media access, 91.3% of respondents actively use social media every day, especially on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok.

Measurement Model Evaluation Results (Outer Model)

Evaluation of the measurement model was conducted to test the validity and consistency of the construct. The results of the analysis showed that all indicators had loading factor values > 0.70 , AVE > 0.50 , and composite reliability > 0.80 , which indicated that the constructs in this study met the criteria for convergent validity and internal reliability. The discriminant validity test using the Fornell-Larcker and Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) criteria also showed that each construct had adequate discriminatory properties. This indicates that each construct in this model measures different dimensions empirically.

Structural Model Evaluation (Inner Model)

The structural model was tested to evaluate the predictive power and relationships among the latent variables. The R^2 for the social media variable was recorded at 0.706, while the R^2 for voter preferences reached 0.618. This indicates that this model can explain 61.8% of the variation in positioning through the applied independent and mediating variables. A Q^2 value greater than 0 (Q^2 social media = 0.447; Q^2 voter preferences = 0.521) indicates that the model has good predictive ability. In addition, the VIF value between the constructs is also less than 5, indicating the absence of multicollinearity issues.

Path diagram

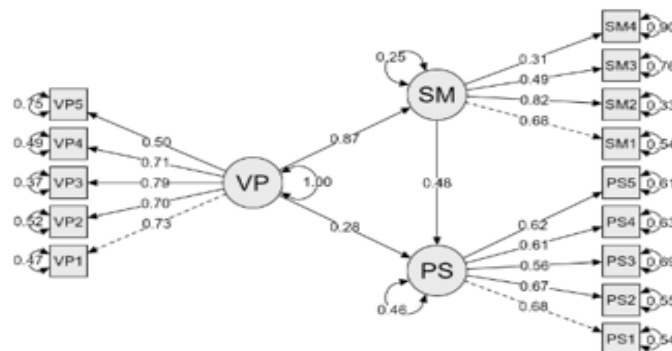


Figure 1 Structural Model (Inner model)

Hypothesis Testing (Bootstrapping)

Bootstrapping analysis with 349 samples showed that of the four hypotheses proposed, all were proven to be significant. The summary of the hypothesis test results is as follows.

Tabel 1 Significance of Direct Structural Equation Models

Hypothesis	Relationship	t-statistic	P-value	Results
H1	PS-> VP	16,586	0,001	Significant
H2	PS-> SM	2,866	0,004	Significant
H3	SM->VP	27,828	0.001	Significant
H4	PS->SM->VP	2,7490	0,005	Significant Mediation

Source Data Processing Result 2024

These results strengthen the argument that social media is not only a communication channel, but also plays an important mediating role between candidate positioning strategies and voter preference formation.

Discussion of Findings

The findings show that strong candidate positioning, effectively transformed through social media, has a significant influence in shaping voter preferences. This supports the theory of digital political marketing. (Enli, 2017) , which states that political identity communicated digitally is able to create emotional and cognitive resonance with voters. In addition, the role of social media as a mediator confirms that the effectiveness of positioning strategies is highly dependent on the quality of message distribution on social media. In the context of the Riau Islands Pilkada, digital campaigns based on local content, two-way interactions, and authentic narratives are more able to attract voter sympathy.

This finding is in line with previous research by (Effing et al., 2016) which emphasizes the importance of digital engagement in shaping voter loyalty. In the context of Indonesia, especially the Riau Islands which has an archipelagic geography, social media has proven to be an efficient and inclusive political communication tool.

Comparison with Previous Research

This finding strengthens the results of the study (Enli, 2017) and (Effing et al., 2016), which shows that social media is not just a one-way communication tool, but an interactive space that is able to shape voter perceptions. In the Indonesian context, this result is also consistent with the findings (Havers et al., 2020), who noted that the digitalization of politics has a major impact on the engagement of young voters and digital-native voters.

However, in contrast to conventional studies that emphasize the dominance of political parties and elites in shaping preferences, these findings place candidate positioning distributed through social media as the dominant element in influencing voter attitudes in the archipelago.

Discussion of Findings Based on Scientific References

Theoretically, the results of this study strengthen the Political Market Orientation theory. (Lees-Marshment, 2004), which emphasizes the importance of political communication strategies based on market segmentation. Candidate positioning has proven effective when delivered visually and narratively through social media, allowing voters to engage emotionally and cognitively.

Social media acts as a mediator that strengthens the resonance between the candidate's personal values and public expectations. This supports the two-way communication approach as explained in the Dialogic Communication theory (Kent & Taylor, 1998), di mana interaksi yang terjadi melalui media digital meningkatkan kepercayaan dan loyalitas pemilih.

Follow-up of Research Findings

Based on the results of this study, it is recommended that the campaign teams of candidates in regional head elections design a comprehensive digital strategy. This strategy should not only focus on delivering political messages, but also strive to increase voter participation and engagement through interactive content. Emphasis on local stories, responsive interactions, and consistency in position visualization will significantly increase voter preference. In addition, local political actors need to improve their social media management capabilities in order to manage public perception directly and utilize algorithmic technology to analyze public opinion.

Research Limitations

This study has limitations in terms of geographical and demographic aspects. The sample used only covers the Riau Islands Province, so caution is needed in generalizing the results to other regions in Indonesia. In addition, the quantitative approach based on surveys is unable to explore qualitative dimensions

such as feelings, ideology, or levels of socio-political interaction. Another limitation is the time of the survey which was conducted in a short period before the campaign period, so rapid changes in preferences may not be fully identified.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The study examines the direct and indirect effects of candidate positions on voter preferences, with social media acting as a mediating variable, in the context of the 2024 Riau Islands gubernatorial election. Analysing the data using structural equation modelling with the partial least squares (SEM-PLS) approach via JASP 0.19.2 reveals the following:

First, candidate positions have a significant and positive effect on voter preferences, indicating that voters' perceptions of the uniqueness of candidate positions and images play a substantial role in determining political choices.

Second, social media functions as a significant mediator in the relationship between candidate positions and voter preferences, emphasising the importance of digitalisation in contemporary political communication.

Third, the results of this study highlight that, within the context of local election competition, the use of social media not only serves as a means of distributing information, but also as a strategic channel in shaping voter opinions based on candidate positions.

Therefore, this study confirms that effective digital political marketing requires synergy between positioning strategies and the use of social media platforms to build and maintain voter preferences.

The results of this study add insight into the political marketing literature by highlighting the role of social media as a bridge in the model of the relationship between positioning and voter preferences. These findings strengthen the validity of digital-based political marketing theory, where social media acts as a two-way communication channel between candidates and voters. This study also supports an integrated political communication approach, where message consistency across digital platforms can enhance the impact of positioning strategies on voter decisions.

For political actors, these findings underscore the importance of formulating a clear placement strategy and consistently reflecting the candidate's values and uniqueness through social media platforms. Candidates and their campaigns must be aware that voter preferences are not only influenced by political promises or programs offered, but also by how well the message is packaged and delivered through digital channels.

Furthermore, systematic use of social media allows for more personal, direct, and measurable interactions, increasing the likelihood of voter engagement both emotionally and rationally. A digital data-driven campaign strategy can also help segment voters and tailor messages according to audience preferences.

This study recommends that candidates in regional head elections, especially in areas with similar geographic and demographic characteristics to the Riau Islands, develop digital-based political marketing strategies. The strategy must integrate aspects of positioning, creative content, and the use of social media as a whole. For future research, it is recommended to explore the moderating role of other variables such as political trust or voter engagement in a more complex model.

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