



The Empty Box Phenomenon in the 2024 Regional Elections: Manifestation of Public Resistance to Political Oligarchy

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: This study aims to analyze this phenomenon through a qualitative, literature-based approach, using Jeffrey Winters' political oligarchy theory as an analytical framework.

Methodology: This study uses a qualitative approach based on literature analysis. This study uses the theory of political oligarchy developed by Jeffrey Winters as the main analytical framework. The analysis process is carried out through three main stages.

Main Findings: The results of the study show that the increasing number of single candidates is a manifestation of the strengthening of the power of political oligarchy, where political elites control the electoral mechanism to maintain power. However, the victory of the empty box in several regions indicates public resistance to the limitations of political choices and candidates who are considered not to meet expectations. This phenomenon has an impact on the quality of democracy and the legitimacy of local government, as well as being a warning of the need for political system reform to create a more inclusive and competitive democracy.

Novelty/Originality of this study: Research on the Empty Box Phenomenon in the 2024 Election reveals manifestations of public resistance to political oligarchy, which reflects public dissatisfaction with the dominance of certain political forces and shows the potential for change in the dynamics of general elections at the regional level.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The 2024 Simultaneous Regional Elections mark an important chapter in Indonesia's democratic journey, with elections being held in 548 regions, including 37 provinces, 415 regencies, and 93 cities. However, the phenomenon of single candidates occurring in 37 regions is a major highlight. This condition raises concerns about the health of democracy in Indonesia. Data from the General Elections Commission (KPU) shows that of the 37 regions with single candidates, there are 1 province, 31 regencies, and 5 cities [1]-[3]. Some of the regions experiencing this phenomenon include West Papua Province, North Aceh Regency, and Pangkalpinang City.

The empty box phenomenon has attracted widespread attention because it indicates a serious problem in Indonesia's democratic system [4], [5]. The victory of the empty box in several regions, such as Pangkalpinang and Bangka, underlines public dissatisfaction with the single candidate supported by a coalition of large political

parties. In this context, the empty box is not merely an administrative choice, but a form of symbolic resistance by the public against the dominance of political elites who are considered not to represent their aspirations [6]. The dominance of large political parties in "buying up" support for one candidate pair reflects the practice of political oligarchy. This is contrary to the basic principles of democracy which prioritize pluralism and healthy competition. When people are faced with limited choices, trust in the democratic process has the potential to decline.

Jeffrey A. Winters, in his theory of oligarchy, emphasizes that oligarchy is a form of government in which power is concentrated in a small group of people who have wealth and power [7]. They use the resources they have to maintain and expand their influence, often at the expense of the public interest. In the context of the 2024 Pilkada, Winters' oligarchy theory can be used to analyze how political and economic elites work together to maintain their power. By securing support from various political parties for one candidate pair, they create a situation where choices for voters are very limited. This shows a systematic effort to consolidate power and reduce political competition, which can ultimately weaken the quality of democracy in Indonesia. This is indicated by the Indonesian Democracy Index which is getting weaker from year to year.

In the Democracy Index 2023: Age Of Conflict report released by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), Indonesia is ranked 56th with a score of 6.53, down two places from 2022 (score 6.71). The EIU Democracy Index measurement includes five dimensions, namely the electoral process and pluralism, government functioning, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties. In particular, we can see how the electoral process, political culture and political participation are closely related to political oligarchy so that Indonesian democracy is categorized as flawed democracy.

The phenomenon of empty boxes and single candidates in the 2024 Pilkada reflects a significant challenge for Indonesian democracy. Analysis through the perspective of Winters' oligarchy theory helps us understand the dynamics of power at play behind this phenomenon, as well as the importance of efforts to ensure that the democratic process continues to reflect the will and interests of the people at large [8]-[10]. The phenomenon of empty boxes in the 2024 Pilkada raises a number of important questions regarding the state of democracy in Indonesia. The rise of single candidates in the Pilkada reflects problems in the nomination mechanism that are increasingly narrowing the space for political competition. The victory of empty boxes in several regions, such as Pangkalpinang, is a strong signal of public resistance to the dominance of political oligarchies that limit their choices. This phenomenon also has an impact on the legitimacy of regional government, because regional heads who are elected without healthy competition risk facing low public trust. Overall, the existence of empty boxes shows a crisis of political representation that hinders the quality of democracy, while also indicating that the public wants change towards a more inclusive and competitive political system.

Previous research conducted by Febriandy & Sudarmanti [6] highlighted the empty box phenomenon as a democratic dilemma, where the lack of alternative candidates is considered a challenge to the democratic process or a form of rational public choice. However, the current research emphasizes that the phenomenon is not merely a problem of procedural democracy, but rather a reflection of public resistance to the dominance of political oligarchy that limits the space for electoral competition. Thus, the main difference between the two studies lies in the analytical perspective: previous research sees it as a problem of democracy and freedom of choice, while the current research interprets it as a form of active public resistance to the hegemony of political elites in regional elections.

The scope of this study includes an analysis of areas experiencing the empty box phenomenon in the 2024 Pilkada, with a focus on areas that show significant data related to the victory of the empty box, such as Pangkalpinang, Bangka, and several other areas. In addition, this study examines the role of political parties, nomination mechanisms, and local political dynamics that influence the emergence of this phenomenon. The theoretical approach used is Jeffrey Winters' political oligarchy theory, which is relevant in explaining the relationship between elite dominance and community resistance. This study relies on secondary data, including media reports, survey results, and academic literature related to democracy and local politics in Indonesia, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact and implications of the empty box phenomenon on the political system at the regional level.

This study has a novelty in examining The Empty Box Phenomenon in the 2024 Regional Head Elections as a manifestation of public resistance to political oligarchy, not just a challenge to democracy or rational choices of society as discussed in previous studies. This approach provides a new perspective by highlighting how the empty box phenomenon can be a symbol of dissatisfaction with a political system that is increasingly closed and dominated by certain elites. The urgency of this research lies in the importance of understanding the impact of minimal electoral competition on the legitimacy of local democracy and its implications for public political participation. With the increasing trend of single candidates in regional elections, this research can contribute to formulating more inclusive policies to prevent oligarchic political practices that can weaken substantive democracy in Indonesia.

This study aims to analyze the empty box phenomenon in the 2024 Pilkada as a form of community resistance to political oligarchy. Using Jeffrey Winters' political oligarchy theory, this study attempts to explain how the dominance of political elites influences the democratic process at the local level. In addition, this study

also identifies the implications of the empty box phenomenon on the quality of democracy and the legitimacy of government in Indonesia. Based on the findings obtained, this study is expected to provide recommendations for political system reform in order to create a more inclusive and competitive democracy.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1. Research Approach

This study employs a qualitative approach with a literature-based analysis to examine the phenomenon of single candidates and empty boxes in the 2024 Pilkada. This approach enables researchers to identify relevant patterns, explore causal relationships, and interpret existing data critically. The study relies on secondary data sources, including official election reports from the General Elections Commission (KPU), academic journals, and reputable mass media coverage of the Pilkada. To ensure data credibility and reliability, researchers apply specific selection criteria [11], [12]: (1) data must come from official and verified institutions, such as KPU reports or peer-reviewed academic journals; (2) media reports must originate from credible news sources with a track record of balanced electoral reporting; and (3) studies included in the analysis must be published within the last ten years to maintain relevance. To enhance validity, data triangulation is conducted by cross-referencing findings from different sources to confirm consistency and avoid bias in interpretation.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Jeffrey Winters' political oligarchy theory as its main analytical framework [13]. Winters defines oligarchy as a power structure controlled by a small group of elites with access to material and institutional resources [14], [15]. This framework is particularly relevant for analyzing how dominant political parties shape the Pilkada process, leading to the prevalence of single candidates and empty boxes. Additionally, the study incorporates democratic theory, particularly concepts of political pluralism and electoral competition, to examine the broader impact of these phenomena on Indonesia's democratic landscape. This dual framework allows for a more nuanced understanding of both elite control and public resistance.

2.3. Analysis Process

The analysis process is carried out through three main stages. First, identification of empty box victory data in various regions. This data is obtained from official KPU reports, relevant news, and previous research results. Researchers mapped areas experiencing the empty box phenomenon and recorded the underlying factors. Second, analysis of the relationship between the dominance of large political parties, the emergence of single candidates, and community resistance. In this stage, researchers use concepts in Winters' oligarchy theory [13] to understand how the power of political elites influences the Pilkada process. Third, interpretation of data in the context of Indonesian democracy. Researchers evaluate the impact of this phenomenon on public trust in the democratic system and political pluralism in Indonesia.

Through this method, the study aims to provide an in-depth picture of the empty box and single candidate phenomena, as well as their implications for the quality of democracy in Indonesia. The approach used is expected to be able to explain the oligarchic dynamics that occur and offer a critical perspective for improving the democratic system in the future.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Empty Box Vs. Single Candidate in Various Regions

The phenomenon of single candidates in the 2024 Pilkada has become a public spotlight, especially related to the high number of empty box votes in several regions. Statistical data shows that people in several regions expressed their dissatisfaction with the local political system through their choice of empty boxes. This trend provides an overview of public resistance to the dominance of single candidates who are considered not to represent public aspirations as a whole. Table 1 summarizes several examples of the empty box phenomenon that occurred in several regions in the 2024 Pilkada.

Table 1: The phenomenon of empty boxes in several regions in Indonesia

Region	Single Candidate	Total Empty Box Votes	Empty Box Percentage	Description
Pangkalpinang	There is	34,000	38%	Significant community resistance
Bangka Regency	There is	25,000	29%	Candidate support is still dominant
Kediri Regency	There is	45,000	35%	Criticism of local political dominance

Makassar City	There is	50,000	37%	Symbolic community support
Sragen Regency	There is	20,000	27%	Lower dissatisfaction
Blitar City	There is	32,000	52%	Empty box wins
Lamongan Regency	Single Candidate	40,000	54%	Empty box wins

Sumber: <https://rumahpemilu.org/kotak-kosong-pilkada-2024- pesta-daulat-oligarki/>

In Blitar City and Lamongan Regency, the Pilkada results showed the victory of the empty box with a percentage of votes of 52% and 54% respectively. The victory of the empty box reflects a very strong public protest against the single candidate. This condition indicates that most voters are dissatisfied with the available choices and choose to convey their message of protest through the empty box. This phenomenon not only highlights the crisis of representation in local democracy but also shows serious challenges in building public trust in the political process [16]. In addition, areas such as Pangkalpinang, Makassar City, and Kediri Regency also recorded significant levels of public resistance. In Pangkalpinang, the empty box vote reached 38% of the total vote, indicating significant public resistance to the single candidate. In Makassar City and Kediri Regency, the empty box vote reached 37% and 35% respectively. Although the empty box failed to win in these areas, the high percentage of votes remains a strong indicator of public disappointment with local political dominance [17]. In Makassar, symbolic support for the empty box reflected the community's efforts to express their political aspirations, even though single candidates still dominated the final results.

Meanwhile, Bangka and Sragen Regencies showed lower levels of resistance compared to other regions, with the percentage of empty box votes of 29% and 27% respectively. In Bangka Regency, although the empty box votes were quite significant, support for single candidates was still dominant. A similar thing happened in Sragen Regency, where public dissatisfaction with single candidates was relatively lower compared to other regions. This condition shows that despite resistance, the dominance of single candidates is still strong enough to maintain their political legitimacy.

Overall, these data show a worrying pattern in local democracy in Indonesia. The high number of blank box votes, especially in areas experiencing the single candidate phenomenon, indicates that people are increasingly aware of their right to express protest through this choice. However, the success of the blank box in some areas also poses a serious challenge to the democratic system, which ideally aims to represent the will of the people more inclusively. Public dissatisfaction with single candidates can reflect a variety of issues, ranging from a lack of variety in political choices to the dominance of certain elites in the nomination process.

This phenomenon also provides important lessons for policy makers and political parties. They need to evaluate the nomination process to be more inclusive and reflect the wishes of the people. Transparency in candidate selection, empowerment of independent candidates, and strengthening of checks and balances mechanisms are important steps that can be taken to reduce public resistance to single candidates. In addition, the victory of the empty box in Blitar City and Lamongan Regency shows that the people have the courage to show their dissatisfaction openly, which is a strong signal for decision makers to improve the local political system. On the other hand, the people also need to continue to be empowered to understand the importance of constructive political participation. Political education is key to increasing public awareness of their rights and responsibilities in the democratic process. Thus, their choice in the Pilkada is not only a tool of protest, but also a means to build a better government.

The phenomenon of single candidates and the high number of empty box votes in the 2024 Pilkada is a reflection of the complex dynamics of local politics and democracy that tends to be elitist. On the one hand, this shows the increasing political awareness of the community. However, on the other hand, this phenomenon also reveals the major challenges that must be overcome to strengthen democracy at the local level. By learning from this data, it is hoped that in the future the Indonesian political system can develop to be more inclusive, representative, and in accordance with the aspirations of the wider community [18].

3.2. Analysis with Political Oligarchy Theory

The phenomenon of single candidates in the 2024 Pilkada illustrates the real impact of the dominance of large political parties on local democracy. Large parties such as PDIP, Golkar, Gerindra, NasDem, and PKB have significant influence in determining candidates, often sidelining small parties and independent candidates. This condition reflects the theory of political oligarchy, as explained by Jeffrey A. Winters, where political power is concentrated in a handful of elites who dominate decision-making [13], [18], [19].

One of the main factors causing this dominance is the political cartel coalition. This coalition allows large parties to support each other in order to maintain common interests in policy and power. This practice not only secures their control but also marginalizes the voices of small parties that often do not have sufficient resources to compete [20]. This is in line with the finding that post-reform Indonesian politics tends to be colored by the logic of cartel politics, where political parties unite to maintain their existence in the circle of power, regardless of ideology or public interest [21], [22]

In addition, the minimum support requirements stipulated in the Regional Election Law further narrow the opportunities for independent candidates to compete. Candidates must obtain a certain percentage of party votes to run, which is almost impossible for those who are not affiliated with a major party. This situation shows how regulations actually strengthen oligarchies and reduce diversity in local democracy.

The control of resources by large parties is also a crucial factor. Large parties have access to funds, media, and extensive political networks, giving them a great advantage in campaigns and public influence. Material power, as described by Winters, is the core of oligarchic power. In this context, candidates from large parties have a greater chance of winning elections [16], [19]. This oligarchy in local politics creates a major risk for democracy in Indonesia. When the choice of candidates becomes increasingly limited, the public loses the opportunity to choose alternatives that truly represent their interests. Democracy turns into a mere formal ritual without substantive essence, which ultimately strengthens the dominance of political elites [21], [22]

3.3. Symbolic Resistance of Society to Oligarchy Through Empty Boxes

The empty box phenomenon in elections reflects public protests against the limited choice of candidates. Based on media reports such as Kompas and Tempo, many voters use the empty box as a symbol of disappointment with a system that is considered not to provide adequate alternative representation. This phenomenon reflects the lack of substantive democracy, where people do not feel they have full control over the process of electing their leaders [17].

The LSI Denny JA survey showed that as many as 41% of respondents in areas with single candidates considered the empty box as a way to fight against the dominance of power. This shows that the empty box is not just a passive choice, but a form of resistance to a political structure that is considered too concentrated in elite power [17]. In Makassar in the 2020 Pilkada, for example, the empty box almost won the vote against a single candidate supported by a large coalition, underlining the level of public dissatisfaction.

A similar trend also occurred in Pangkalpinang in the 2024 Pilkada, where the empty box again became a significant alternative for the community. Social media played an important role in mobilizing the empty box campaign. This campaign not only organized collective resistance, but also highlighted the weak public trust in the formal democratic process which is often influenced by the practice of money politics and oligarchy [23]. In response to this phenomenon, the Constitutional Court through Decision No. 100/PUU-XIII/2015 gave voters the right to choose an empty box as a form of expression of disapproval, while still giving a single candidate the opportunity to advance. This step is expected to strengthen the legitimacy of democracy and reduce the potential for money politics, although the challenges of increasing public participation and maintaining the integrity of democracy remain significant [17].

3.4. Crisis of Representation in Democracy

The phenomenon of single candidates in local democracy highlights the crucial problem of the lack of alternatives for voters. In this situation, voters are faced with limited choices between supporting a single candidate or an empty box. This condition not only violates the principle of competition in democracy but also eliminates the opportunity for the people to determine a leader who truly represents their aspirations [24]. One of the main causes of this phenomenon is the non-inclusive nomination process. Independent candidates are often constrained by complicated administrative requirements, while small parties are unable to compete with the dominance of large parties that tend to form coalitions to support single candidates. This situation is further exacerbated by the high cost of politics which often favors candidates with large financial support over candidates who have a strong mass base but are limited in terms of capital [25].

The impact of this representation crisis is real. Many voters feel that the local democracy system does not reflect the will of the people, which leads to a decline in public satisfaction with the political process. In fact, voter turnout also tends to decline in areas with single candidates, because people consider the available choices to be irrelevant to their expectations [26]. In the future, political system reforms are needed that can encourage inclusivity, such as lowering the nomination threshold and strengthening political party cadres. These efforts are important to ensure the sustainability of a healthy and competitive democracy, while restoring public trust in the political process and elitist democracy can be eroded.

3.5. Impact on Democracy in Indonesia

A healthy democratic system requires a competitive and inclusive election process. However, the phenomenon of single candidates in regional head elections (pilkada) has caused various impacts on democracy, especially in terms of the legitimacy of local governments and challenges for political parties.

When a single candidate wins against an empty box, the legitimacy of the resulting government is often questioned. This is due to the limited choices given to voters, which can reduce the level of trust in the elected leader. For example, in the 2020 Pilkada in Makassar, although a single candidate won, the legitimacy of his government was questioned by almost half of the total voters who chose the empty box. In Makassar City, the 2018 Pilkada was even won by an empty box [27]. This case reflects the public's doubts about the democratic

process which is considered less representative, which can ultimately affect the stability and effectiveness of the government.

This phenomenon also presents a serious challenge for political parties to reform the nomination system to be more democratic and inclusive. One important recommendation is to facilitate access for independent candidates. Currently, the administrative requirements for independent candidates are considered too heavy, thus limiting the opportunities for competent individuals to participate in regional elections. Simplifying administrative requirements can open up more space for people who want to run for office without having to rely on political parties.

In addition, the threshold for political party support to nominate regional heads needs to be reviewed. A threshold that is too high often becomes a barrier to the emergence of alternative candidates, which ultimately narrows the competition. By lowering the nomination threshold, political parties can encourage more candidates to come forward, thereby enriching the choices for the community [28], [29].

Another reform is to encourage political parties to involve the public more in the process of selecting regional head candidates [30], [31]. Currently, the nomination mechanism in many political parties tends to be controlled by party elites, thus sidelining the aspirations of the people. Political parties need to open up wider participation space, such as through public consultation or transparent internal elections, so that the candidates they nominate truly reflect the wishes of the people.

This research is important to do because the empty box phenomenon not only has an impact at the local level, but also reflects a larger challenge in Indonesian democracy. The victory of the empty box indicates a gap between public expectations and the existing political system, so this research can contribute in several aspects. In terms of developing science, this research enriches academic discussions on the crisis of representation and local democracy in Indonesia, especially through the approach of political oligarchy theory that highlights the power relations between the elite and the community. From a policy perspective, the findings of this study can be a basis for policy makers in designing political system reforms, especially in the mechanism for nominating regional heads to be more competitive and inclusive. In addition, this research also plays a role in increasing public political participation by providing a deeper understanding of the factors behind the empty box phenomenon, so that the community can be more aware of their rights and responsibilities in maintaining the quality of democracy.

This study provides significant insights into the empty box phenomenon in the 2024 Pilkada, particularly in relation to political oligarchy and its implications for Indonesian democracy. By analyzing secondary data from credible sources, the research highlights how dominant political parties influence electoral processes, leading to a lack of political competition and limited voter choices. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how oligarchic tendencies shape regional elections and may undermine democratic values, such as political pluralism and fair representation. Additionally, this study offers a critical perspective on the role of voter resistance in challenging elite-controlled elections, providing valuable input for policymakers, political analysts, and electoral institutions in designing reforms that promote a more inclusive and competitive democratic system.

However, this research is subject to several limitations. Since it relies solely on secondary data, it does not capture first-hand voter perspectives or the experiences of candidates and election organizers. As a result, the study may lack a comprehensive understanding of the grassroots motivations behind voter decisions and the internal dynamics within political parties. Furthermore, the findings are context-specific to the 2024 Pilkada and may not fully reflect broader electoral trends across different political periods. Future studies could address these limitations by incorporating primary data collection through interviews, surveys, or focus group discussions, allowing for a more holistic analysis of the phenomenon. Additionally, a comparative study with previous elections could help identify long-term patterns and changes in Indonesia's electoral landscape.

4. CONCLUSION

The empty box phenomenon in the 2024 Pilkada reflects complex political dynamics, as well as being a sign of a crisis of representation at the local level, even at the national level. The increasing number of single candidates in the regional elections indicates the strengthening of the dominance of political oligarchy, as explained in Jeffrey Winters' theory, where political elites have succeeded in manipulating the system to secure power. However, the victory of the empty box in several regions, such as Pangkalpinang, highlights the community's resistance to this dominance. This indicates that the community is not entirely passive in facing limited political choices, but instead uses the empty box as a form of symbolic resistance to the oligarchy and the quality of candidates who are considered inadequate.

The impact of the empty box and single candidate phenomena on the quality of democracy and the legitimacy of regional government is an issue that needs to be studied further. The victory of the empty box can indicate deep public dissatisfaction with the current political nomination mechanism, as well as a warning that political system reform is needed to create a more inclusive and competitive democracy. By understanding this phenomenon in depth, it is hoped that solutions can be found to strengthen political representation and increase public trust in the democratic process in Indonesia. Future research should incorporate primary data collection

through interviews with voters, election officials, and political candidates to gain deeper insights into the motivations and perceptions surrounding the empty box phenomenon. Additionally, a comparative study across multiple election cycles would be beneficial in identifying long-term trends and assessing the evolving impact of political oligarchy on Indonesia's democratic processes.

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