

Challenger Political Strategies in Defeating An Incumbent in The Village Head Election of Ganra Village, Soppeng Regency, Indonesia

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Received: 29/10/2025 - Approved: 19/01/2026 - Published 11/03/2026

Abstract

This study aims to analyze the political strategies employed by a challenger candidate in defeating an incumbent during the 2020 Village Head Election (Pilkades) in Ganra Village, Soppeng Regency, Indonesia. Village elections represent a significant arena of local democracy where political actors compete to gain legitimacy and public support. Theoretically, incumbents possess considerable advantages, including access to bureaucratic resources, political networks, and social legitimacy established during their tenure. However, the 2020 Village Head Election in Ganra Village demonstrated a different phenomenon, as the challenger successfully defeated the incumbent.

This research employed a qualitative approach using a case study method. Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation involving village head candidates, campaign teams, community leaders, religious leaders, youth leaders, and local residents. The findings reveal that the challenger's victory was influenced by three primary factors: interpersonal political communication, the mobilization of community social networks, and the construction of a political image representing change. These strategies enabled the challenger to build alternative legitimacy capable of challenging the incumbent's political dominance.

The study further demonstrates that local democracy in Ganra Village has undergone a transformation toward a more participatory and rational political culture. Although Bugis cultural values, particularly *siri' na pacce* (honor and solidarity), as well as kinship relations, continue to influence political behavior, voters increasingly consider leadership quality, development programs, and candidates' communication abilities in making political choices. The findings contribute to the literature on local politics by explaining how shifts in political legitimacy and social mobilization can reshape power relations within village-level democratic institutions.

Keywords: local politics, political strategy, incumbent defeat, village election, local democracy.

1 Introduction

Village Head Elections (Pemilihan Kepala Desa/Pilkades) constitute one of the most important forms of local democracy in Indonesia, providing citizens with the opportunity to directly elect their village leaders. Beyond serving as an administrative mechanism for leadership succession, village elections have evolved into arenas of political contestation characterized by competition among local elites, struggles over legitimacy, and changing patterns of voter behavior.

The enactment of Law Number 6 of 2014 on Villages significantly strengthened the role of village heads in local governance and development. As a result, the position of village head has become increasingly strategic due to its authority over village administration, development planning, and financial management. Consequently, village head elections have become highly competitive political events.

Previous studies have generally argued that incumbents possess significant electoral advantages because of their access to bureaucratic resources, social networks, and established political legitimacy. Nevertheless, incumbent defeat remains an important phenomenon in local electoral politics. One notable example occurred during the 2020 Village Head Election in Ganra Village, Soppeng Regency, where a challenger successfully defeated an incumbent who had previously maintained a relatively strong political position within the community.

This phenomenon is particularly interesting because it reflects changing political orientations among rural voters. Electoral choices are no longer determined solely by traditional patronage systems and kinship ties but are increasingly influenced by political communication, leadership capacity, social proximity, and narratives of change that resonate with community expectations.

This study therefore seeks to analyze the political strategies employed by the challenger candidate in winning the 2020 Village Head Election and to explain the factors contributing to shifts in political support among the people of Ganra Village.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theory of Power

According to Weber (1947), power refers to the ability of an individual or group to impose its will despite resistance from others. Political power is sustained not only through formal authority but also through legitimacy. In village elections, incumbents often derive their strength from both institutional positions and social legitimacy developed through interactions with the community.

Political Mobilization Theory

Tilly (1978) defines political mobilization as the process through which actors organize and utilize resources to gain support within political competition. Mobilization may involve family networks, community leaders, youth groups, and other social organizations that function as channels for political influence.

Local Politics and Village Democracy

Local politics refers to interactions between formal institutions and informal social forces within a community. In rural settings, kinship relations, social solidarity, cultural norms, and local leadership structures play important roles in shaping political behavior and electoral outcomes.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a case study design. The research was conducted in Ganra Village, Ganra District, Soppeng Regency, South Sulawesi Province, Indonesia. The location was selected due to the unique phenomenon of a challenger defeating an incumbent in the 2020 Village Head Election.

Research participants included the elected village head, the incumbent candidate, campaign team members, community leaders, religious leaders, youth leaders, election committee members, and village residents. Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation.

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman, consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. This approach enabled the researcher to identify patterns, themes, and relationships related to political competition and voter behavior.

3. RESULTS

Interpersonal Political Communication Strategy

One of the most significant strategies employed by the challenger candidate was interpersonal political communication. The challenger actively engaged in face-to-face interactions through home visits, participation in community activities, and direct communication with residents. These activities strengthened emotional connections and enhanced trust between the candidate and voters.

The findings indicate that interpersonal communication was more effective than formal campaign activities because the social structure of Ganra Village is characterized by close interpersonal relationships and strong community trust.

Mobilization of Social Networks

The challenger's success was also supported by the effective mobilization of social networks involving extended families, community leaders, religious figures, and youth organizations. These networks functioned as mechanisms for disseminating political information and shaping public opinion at the village level.

Within Bugis society, kinship relations continue to exert considerable influence on political support. However, these networks were not merely used to preserve existing political arrangements; they also became instruments for promoting political change and mobilizing support for the challenger.

Narratives of Change and Alternative Legitimacy

The challenger successfully constructed an image as an agent of change who was more responsive to community needs. The campaign emphasized promises of more participatory, transparent, and accountable governance.

As a result, many residents gradually shifted their political support from the incumbent to the challenger. This finding suggests that political legitimacy is no longer determined solely by formal authority but increasingly depends on candidates' ability to establish trust and credibility within the community.

Transformation of Political Behavior

The study reveals a significant transformation in political culture among the residents of Ganra Village. Voters increasingly evaluate candidates based on leadership quality, development programs, and communication skills rather than relying exclusively on patronage networks or family affiliations.

This transformation reflects the emergence of a more participatory and rational form of local democracy. Citizens are becoming more willing to evaluate government performance and support leadership change when necessary.

5. CONCLUSION

The victory of the challenger candidate in the 2020 Village Head Election of Ganra Village resulted from a combination of effective interpersonal political communication, social network mobilization, and the successful construction of a political narrative centered on change. These strategies enabled the challenger to establish alternative political legitimacy capable of challenging the incumbent's dominance.

The findings indicate that political behavior in Ganra Village has shifted toward a more participatory and rational orientation. While Bugis cultural values and kinship ties remain influential, voters increasingly prioritize leadership quality, development programs, and communication effectiveness when making electoral decisions. This study contributes to the understanding of local democracy by demonstrating that political power at the village level is not determined solely by formal authority or patronage networks but also by the ability of political actors to build social legitimacy and public trust.

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