

# BEHIND HIGH COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION: COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES OF ORGANIZERS IN SOCIALIZING LOCAL HEAD ELECTIONS

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## ABSTRACT

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This research analyzes the communication strategies of the Rembang District General Election Commission (KPU) in increasing community participation in regional head elections, against the backdrop of high voter turnout in the area. The research used a descriptive qualitative approach thru in-depth interviews, field observations, and document studies, and was analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns and meanings in the KPU's communication practices. The results of the study show that the KPU Rembang implements an integrated, adaptive, and participatory communication strategy. This strategy combines traditional media, such as face-to-face interactions, local radio, and community activities, with digital media, including Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, along with clear audience segmentation targeting young voters, women, rural communities, and people with disabilities. The success of this strategy is strengthened by the involvement of community leaders and democracy volunteers as local communicators who increase the reach of the message and public trust. The research also found obstacles such as limited digital infrastructure, low digital literacy among the elderly, and the prevalence of political hoaxes. The Rembang KPU is addressing this thru a community-based communication approach, strengthening internal coordination, and ensuring consistency in public messaging. Theoretically, this research confirms that public communication plays an important role as a democratic infrastructure that builds trust, political literacy, and community involvement in the electoral process, and contributes to the study of local political communication and the practice of inclusive and socially-trust-based election administration.

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## 1. Introduction

Community participation in local elections is an important indicator of the success of local democracy in Indonesia. High voter turnout is often seen as a reflection of increasing political awareness and public trust in the democratic process. However, high participation doesn't always happen spontaneously. In many cases, the success in increasing voter turnout is the result of a planned and systematic communication strategy by election organizers, especially

the General Election Commission (KPU) at the local level. According to Norris (2020) in *Electoral Integrity in Southeast Asia* (Routledge), the success of voter participation at the local level is highly dependent on the effectiveness of public communication and the clarity of the message conveyed by election organizers in building social trust. This view aligns with the findings of Tapsell's (2019) research in the *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, which emphasizes the importance of using digital media and local social networks as a means of strengthening citizen political engagement in Indonesia.

The Rembang Regency KPU is one of the election organizers that is considered successful in maintaining the enthusiasm of residents in participating in the regional head election. In several election periods, voter turnout in Rembang Regency was considered high compared to the average for Central Java province. This condition not only demonstrates the technical success of the election organization but also signifies the effectiveness of the political communication strategy implemented consistently and contextually. Research by Echeverría and Mani (2020) in *Communication & Society* shows that using communication strategies aligned with the social and cultural context of the community plays an important role in building political trust and strengthening the legitimacy of democratic institutions at the local level. This principle appears to have been adopted by the Rembang KPU thru a socialization approach involving community leaders, educational institutions, youth groups, and local media in disseminating the "Let's Vote" message. This strategy strengthens emotional and social resonance, as explained by Homero Gil de Zúñiga, Logan Molyneux & Pei Zheng (2014) in the *Journal of Communication*, which states that the use of social media aimed at political interaction and expression increases political participation by mediating thru citizens' acts of political expression.

Additionally, the success of the Rembang KPU can also be attributed to the implementation of multi-channel communication, combining traditional face-to-face approaches with interactive digital campaigns. This approach has proven effective in reaching younger voter groups and first-time voters who are more active on social media. The use of social media by public institutions can significantly increase civic participation when accompanied by transparent and data-driven messaging strategies (Hao Yuan Yuan et al., 2023). In this context, the Rembang KPU utilizes online channels such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube to disseminate procedural information, educational campaigns, and locally-based creative content like short videos themed around Rembang culture. Two-way communication thru social media not only broadens the reach of information but also strengthens the KPU's image as an open and responsive institution, ultimately increasing public trust in the electoral process.

In the context of political communication, the effectiveness of election message delivery heavily depends on how well the organizing body can adapt the form and content of the message to the characteristics of the target audience. Political communication theory emphasizes that a good political message is not only informative but also persuasive and dialogic, fostering a sense of ownership toward the democratic process itself (McNair, 2018). Additionally, political participation theory explains that citizen participation in elections is not only determined by structural factors such as education or economics, but also by the level of trust and understanding of the political process gained thru public communication (Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995).

Several previous studies have shown the important role of communication in increasing voter turnout. Studies confirm that using local broadcast media is proven to be effective in increasing voter turnout at polling places. Cross-national meta-analytic research shows that social media plays a significant role in building political awareness and engagement among youth—but the magnitude of the effect is highly dependent on the local socio-cultural context (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020). On the other hand, public trust in electoral integrity is positively correlated with citizen participation in direct elections; practices that undermine trust—such as vote buying—tend to suppress participation (Carreras, 2013).

In the context of political communication at the local level, the use of digital media by election management bodies not only functions as a channel for disseminating information, but also as a space for shaping political meaning and encouraging collective engagement. The communication strategy implemented by the Rembang Regency KPU through social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube reflects this function, as digital content is designed to foster interaction, responsiveness, and a sense of inclusion among citizens, particularly young and first-time voters. This finding aligns with Rohid et al. (2025), who argue that “social media serves as a communication tool and a discursive space for shaping identities, conveying political narratives, and mobilizing collective action.” In this sense, digital communication employed by the KPU does not merely transmit procedural electoral information, but also contributes to building political identity and public trust, which are essential foundations for sustaining high levels of community participation in local democratic processes.

However, the results of these studies have not extensively discussed the communication strategies employed by election organizers at the district level, particularly in the context of local elections involving direct interaction between the KPU and the local community. Most research still focuses on campaign communication by candidates or political parties, rather than by election management bodies. This is the research gap that this study attempts to fill.

The novelty of this research lies in its specific examination of the Rembang Regency KPU's communication strategies for socializing the local elections in an area with high community participation. This research views the General Election Commission (KPU) not merely as an administrative body, but also as a public communication actor holding a strategic role in building citizens' political literacy. This approach is expected to enrich the study of political communication in Indonesia, particularly at the level of democratic policy implementation in the regions.

Therefore, this study aims to describe and analyze the communication strategies of the Rembang Regency KPU in socializing the regional head election, assess the extent to which these strategies influence public understanding of the election process, and examine their relationship with voter turnout. The results of this study are expected to provide practical contributions to improving the effectiveness of election socialization at the local level, while also strengthening the scientific literature on political communication and citizen participation in local democracy in Indonesia.

## 2. Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the communication strategies implemented by the Rembang District General Election Commission (KPU) in socializing the regional head election. The research is based on a constructivist paradigm, which views political communication not merely as a one-way message delivery, but as a process of meaning exchange between election organizers and the public.

The research location was determined to be Rembang Regency, Central Java Province, because this area demonstrates a high voter turnout rate, making it a relevant example for examining the effectiveness of public communication in the context of regional elections. Informants were selected using purposive sampling with a total of 15 people, including KPU officials in charge of socialization and voter education, community leaders, first-time voters, women's groups, and voters with disabilities, to obtain diverse perspectives. This research will be conducted from August to early October 2025.

Data was collected thru in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis of communication materials such as posters, brochures, short videos, social media posts, and official KPU activity reports. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis as developed by Braun and Clarke (2019), which included verbatim interview transcription,

repeated reading, open coding, theme identification, and verification thru source and method triangulation.

Data validity was ensured by member checking with several informants and applying research ethics principles, including informed consent, confidentiality of identity, and the use of research findings solely for academic purposes. This approach allows researchers to comprehensively understand how and why the Rembang KPU's communication strategies are formed and how effective they are in increasing community participation in local elections.

### 3. Results and Discussion

This research yielded several key findings that illustrate how the Rembang District General Election Commission (KPU) developed and implemented a communication strategy to increase community participation in local head elections. Based on the results of interviews, observations, and document analysis, it can be concluded that the communication strategy of the Rembang KPU is integrated, adaptive, and participatory, where socialization messages are delivered thru a combination of traditional and digital media, taking into account the socio-cultural characteristics of the local community. This strategy not only disseminates information but also fosters shared meaning and trust between the organizing institution and the citizens.

#### General Pattern of Rembang KPU Communication Strategy

From the results of interviews with the Socialization, Voter Education, and Human Resources Division of the Rembang Regency KPU, it was identified that the institution's communication strategy is oriented toward the principle of "participatory democratic communication." The KPU not only serves as a provider of procedural information regarding the stages of the regional elections but also as a facilitator of interaction between the public and democratic values. The communication used is two-way symmetrical communication, a concept proposed by Grunig and Hunt (1984), where the flow of information is bidirectional, allowing the public to provide feedback on policies and the election process.

"We are always trying to hear what the public feels and thinks about the election process. If anyone is confused or critical, we accommodate them, we explain directly in dialog forums or thru our media channels. The principle is two-way communication, not just conveying information from top to bottom." (Interview, September 29, 2025)

This two-way communication practice is evident in the Village Democracy Dialog, a face-to-face forum held at the sub-district level and involving community leaders, village officials, youth, and first-time voters. In the forum, the KPU listened to criticism, answered residents' questions, and openly explained technical election issues. Maureen Taylor's coffee

#### Integrating Communication Channels: Traditional and Digital

The Rembang KPU's communication strategy demonstrates an ability to adapt to technological developments while also being sensitive to local culture. In rural areas, where digital literacy is still limited, the KPU is maintaining conventional media such as community radio, banners, and face-to-face socialization. As for young people, this institution actively uses social media as the main channel to disseminate short visual content about voting rights, election schedules, and anti-abstention campaigns.

"We can't rely solely on social media because not all citizens are active there. So, we combined radio and community meetings in the village, while in the city we used Instagram and YouTube. Each one has their own way of connecting with the citizens." (Interview, September 29, 2025)

Face-to-face activities are realized thru socialization at the village level, visits to schools and campuses, and citizen dialogs at community meeting halls. This approach strengthens the KPU's physical presence within the community and fosters a sense of social closeness. On the other hand, digital media such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube channels are used to reach urban groups and young people with a light and participatory visual style.

The dual approach—combining face-to-face interaction and interactive messaging on social media—aligns with large-scale experimental evidence that digital messages mobilize participation thru social influence, especially when supported by real-world friendship ties (Bond et al., 2012; Jones et al., 2017), while face-to-face mobilization has been shown to strongly boost offline participation (Vissers et al., 2012). Taken together, these findings suggest higher effectiveness when online and offline channels are coordinated. In other words, hybrid communication strategies like the one implemented by the Rembang KPU are more effective in building public trust and engagement.

The Rembang KPU also adjusted the message format to make it easily understood by various segments of society. Messages about voting rights, how to cast a ballot, and anti-money politics campaigns are packaged in simple language and sometimes use local dialects. A member of the General Election Commission (KPU) affirmed that using local languages is effective in reducing the psychological distance between institutions and rural communities. This approach reflects the principle of inclusive communication as stated by McNair (2018) in *An Introduction to Political Communication*, that the success of political communication is highly determined by the institution's ability to adapt symbols and language to the social experiences of its audience.

### **Audience Segmentation and Message Customization**

The Rembang KPU demonstrates a high awareness of the importance of audience segmentation, which is a key element in strategic communication. Based on interviews, this institution divides its communication targets into five main groups: young voters, women, rural communities, voters with disabilities, and first-time voters. Each group receives different treatment based on their communication needs and preferences.

“We are aware that each group has different perspectives and habits. Young people prefer creative visual messages, while village mothers are more comfortable if it's explained directly in religious forums or social gatherings.” (Interview, September 29, 2025)

For young voters, the KPU utilizes local influencers and student communities in activities such as Digital Democracy Classes in high schools. This program combines political education and digital literacy, encouraging students to create creative content themed “Let's Vote.” This strategy is consistent with the findings of Vaccari and Valeriani (2015) in *Political Communication*, which show that political communication emphasizing self-expression and emotional engagement on social media has a stronger influence on young people's political participation than normative or informative messages.

Meanwhile, for women's groups and rural communities, the KPU is using a community-based communication approach. The message was delivered thru social activities such as religious studies, gatherings, and health posts, where KPU officers were present as resource persons. This informal approach makes the message more easily accepted because it is delivered in a familiar social space.

Special approaches are also applied for people with disabilities. The KPU is collaborating with organizations for people with disabilities to conduct socialization. This step aligns with the UNDP's (2022) recommendation, which emphasizes the importance of inclusive political participation, where every citizen must have equal opportunities to participate without discrimination, including thru the widespread and barrier-free provision of accessible election information.

This cross-segment message adaptation reflects the theory of adaptive strategic communication (McNair, 2018), which emphasizes the importance of adjusting language style, symbols, and delivery timing according to the social context. In the context of Rembang, this also fosters a sense of relevance and closeness between citizens and election organizers.

## Public Perception and Participation in the KPU Socialization

Based on interviews with residents and community leaders, the majority of the public assessed the KPU's socialization activities as intensive, transparent, and easy to understand. Residents say information about the stages of the regional election, the location of polling stations, and voting procedures was repeatedly disseminated thru various media.

Based on interviews with residents and student activists in Rembang, the majority of the community believes that the KPU's socialization activities are intensive and easily accessible. A community leader in Lasem District stated:

KPU socialization is now more open, not just formal. We were invited to a discussion and even given the opportunity to ask technical questions like the location of polling stations or campaign rules. (Interview, October 1, 2025)

Meanwhile, a student activist who is also a first-time voter revealed:

"I didn't used to care much about elections, but after taking a democracy class, I realized how important my vote is. From there, I wanted to go and vote." (Interview, October 2, 2025)

First-time voters, especially high school students and college students, feel more engaged due to activities like Democracy Class and Young Voter Simulation Debate. This participatory program boosts their confidence to participate in elections. This aligns with Birch's (2010) findings in Electoral Studies, which show that trust in election management bodies is a key factor determining the level of political participation and public perception of election integrity.

Furthermore, field observations show that rural residents prefer direct interaction because they can ask questions and receive immediate clarification from KPU officers. This highlights the importance of interpersonal communication in building trust capital, which strengthens the legitimacy of public institutions. Thus, high participation in Rembang is a reflection of successful interpersonal communication that fosters trust, not merely the result of administrative mobilization.

## Barriers and Adaptations in Communication Strategies

Despite showing positive achievements, the Rembang KPU faces a number of complex obstacles. First, digital communication infrastructure in rural areas is still limited, resulting in uneven online information dissemination. Second, the digital literacy level of the elderly is relatively low, making social media messages less effective. Third, as the election approaches, the spread of hoaxes and disinformation increases sharply, threatening the credibility of the organizing institutions.

Although positive achievements are evident, the Rembang KPU faces several obstacles. This is evident from the interview results:

"Our biggest challenge is in remote villages. The internet signal is weak, so digital information is not reaching. Additionally, there are still many elderly residents who are not yet accustomed to reading messages from social media." (Interview, September 29, 2025)

To address this, the KPU is activating the Democracy Volunteer Network (Relasi) as an extension of communication on the ground. Volunteers are tasked with disseminating accurate information, countering hoaxes, and strengthening communication between residents. This strategy reflects the concept of community-based resilience as explained by Tsfaty et al. (2020) in *Nature Human Behavior*, which emphasizes that resilience to disinformation can only be built thru social trust, strong community networks, and collaboration among actors in the information ecosystem. Additionally, the KPU is enhancing internal cross-divisional coordination to maintain consistency in public messaging.

### **Analytical Discussion: Communication as an Infrastructure of Democracy**

Reflectively, the results of this study confirm that public communication is not only a means of socialization, but also a democratic infrastructure that underpins political legitimacy at the local level. The success of the Rembang KPU shows that effective communication strategies don't stop at delivering a message, but continue to the formation of shared political meaning.

“If the citizens already trust and feel involved, they will come to the polling station without being told. We want democracy in Rembang to grow from a sense of ownership, not from unilateral invitations.” (Interview, September 29, 2025)

The Rembang KPU's communication approach reflects a deep understanding of the principles of participatory democracy, where citizens are positioned as active subjects who contribute to shaping the direction and meaning of local politics. Thru dialog forums, community-based activities, and volunteer participation, the community directly experiences the process of learning democracy.

From the perspective of the Civic Voluntarism theory proposed by Verba, Schlozman, & Brady (1995), political participation arises from a combination of three factors: resources (knowledge), communication skills, and institutional opportunities. The Rembang KPU has provided all three: imparting knowledge thru socialization, building citizens' communication skills thru public forums, and creating opportunities for participation thru formal and informal channels.

Additionally, the success of the Rembang KPU can also be attributed to the implementation of multi-channel communication, combining traditional face-to-face approaches with interactive digital campaigns. This approach has proven effective in reaching younger voter groups and first-time voters who are more active on social media. As stated by Kim, Lee, and Oh (2020) in the *Government Information Quarterly*, the use of social media by public institutions can significantly increase civic engagement when accompanied by transparent and data-driven messaging strategies. In this context, the Rembang KPU utilizes online channels such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube to disseminate procedural information, educational campaigns, and locally-based creative content like short videos themed around Rembang culture. Two-way communication thru social media not only broadens the reach of information but also strengthens the KPU's image as an open and responsive institution, ultimately increasing public trust in the electoral process.

Furthermore, the participatory communication developed by the Rembang KPU is based on the principle of collaboration between organizers and the community. As explained by Boulianne (2020) in *Political Communication*, the success of local democratic campaigns is highly dependent on the extent to which electoral institutions are able to foster participatory dialog that allows citizens to feel like they are part of the political process, rather than simply objects of mobilization. The Rembang KPU's collaborative strategy is realized thru face-to-face forums, voter education workshops in schools and universities, and the involvement of community organizations in election monitoring and education. This approach not only enhances citizens' understanding of the importance of exercising their right to vote but also fosters a sense of ownership toward the democratic process itself.

Thus, the high voter turnout in Rembang Regency can be understood as a result of a combination of comprehensive communication strategies: the use of local value-based messages, cross-sectoral collaboration, the utilization of social media, and continuous voter education. In line with the views of Clark and Brisset-Foucault (2021) in the *Journal of Asian Studies*, healthy local democracy is not only characterized by participation rates, but also by the quality of public communication that can build trust, engagement, and critical awareness among the public. The Rembang KPU, thru its adaptive and participatory communication strategy, has demonstrated how a contextual public communication approach can strengthen the foundations of democracy at the local level.

The results of this study enrich the literature on local political communication in Indonesia by showing that high participation is not solely the result of political mobilization, but rather the fruit of inclusive, relevant, and trust-based public communication strategies. In a broader context, communication based on participatory values like this can serve as a model for other election management bodies in strengthening the quality of democracy at the local level.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This research shows that the success of the Rembang Regency KPU in maintaining a high level of community participation in regional head elections is not unrelated to the mature, adaptive, and community-needs-oriented planning and implementation of communication strategies. Thru a descriptive qualitative approach, this study found that public communication conducted by the Rembang KPU is not merely the dissemination of procedural information, but a process of social interaction that builds trust, understanding, and citizen engagement in the democratic process.

The KPU Rembang's communication strategy proved effective because it combined two main dimensions: integration between traditional and digital media, and a communication approach based on audience characteristics. Face-to-face activities at the village level, religious studies, and community forums have proven to remain relevant amidst advancements in digital technology, as they foster emotional closeness and a sense of trust. On the other hand, the use of social media and interactive digital content has successfully reached young people and rapidly expanded access to political information. The combination of these two channels results in more inclusive and participatory communication.

Additionally, the segmentation strategy implemented by the KPU, treating each community group as a unique audience, was a key factor in the success of the socialization efforts. Young voters are reached thru light visual language, while women, people with disabilities, and rural communities are approached thru more personal and contextual communication methods. Such a communication pattern aligns with Kent and Taylor's (2016) view that effective public communication must be dialogic, involve two-way participation, and be based on mutual respect between institutions and the public.

However, this research also found that the success of the KPU's political communication is not without various challenges. Challenges such as limited communication infrastructure in rural areas, low digital literacy, and the spread of hoaxes leading up to the election are obstacles that need to be continuously anticipated. Therefore, future communication strategies need to strengthen the digital literacy capacity of the community and build more resilient community-based communication networks against disinformation.

Theoretically, this research enriches the study of local political communication by showing that high voter turnout is not only determined by political mobilization factors, but also by the effectiveness of election organizers' communication strategies in building

democratic dialog at the grassroots level. Practically, the results of this research provide recommendations for the KPU in other regions to not only focus on disseminating information, but also on building relationships and trust with the community through adaptive, interactive, and sustainable communication.

Thus, it can be concluded that the high public participation in the Rembang Regional Head Election is the result of a successful public communication strategy that effectively connected the message of democracy with the social context of its community. The Rembang District KPU has demonstrated that good communication is not just about conveying information, but about building shared meaning between the organizing institution and citizens as partners in maintaining the quality of democracy.

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