

The Influence of Public Debate on Political Awareness and Voter Rationality in the Rembang Regional Election

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Abstract

Public debate is one of the important means in the democratic process, especially in regional head elections (Pilkada), where the public can directly assess the vision and mission of candidate leaders. In the Rembang Pilkada, public debate played a significant role in increasing public political awareness and influencing voter rationality. This study aims to analyze the impact of public debate on increasing public political understanding and how it influences voters' rational decisions in choosing regional head candidates. The method used in this study is a qualitative approach with in-depth interviews and surveys of a number of voters in Rembang. The results of the study indicate that public debate can increase voter knowledge about political issues and programs of regional head candidates. However, despite the increase in political awareness, many voters still tend to vote based on emotional factors or social identity rather than rational considerations of the quality of the candidate's program. This study suggests the importance of holding more in-depth and informative debates in order to increase voter rationality in choosing regional head candidates.

Keywords: *Public debate, political awareness, voter rationality, democracy, regional head elections.*

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INTRODUCTION

Regional Head Elections (Pilkada) are one of the democratic mechanisms that provide an opportunity for the public to choose leaders who will manage the regional government for the next five years. In this process, voters are faced with various information about competing regional head candidates. This information can be obtained through various sources, such as campaigns, social media, political advertisements, and public debates. Of the many methods of delivering political information, public debates are one of the most interesting because they bring candidates together directly in one forum to discuss their visions, missions, and work programs. Public debates also allow the public to compare candidates more objectively, so that they have a more rational basis for consideration in determining their political choices, often leading to increased voter confidence and enthusiasm (Fauzi, 2019). Through debates, voters can see how regional head candidates convey ideas, defend arguments, and answer critical questions related to public policy. Public debates also allow the public to compare candidates more objectively, so that they have a more rational basis for consideration in determining their political choices.

In the Rembang Pilkada, public debates are an important moment in the political process. Rembang Regency has quite diverse community characteristics, both in terms of social, economic, and political. This diversity certainly influences the political mindset of the community, including how they absorb information and determine their choices. On the one hand, public debates can help improve public understanding of regional head candidates and the programs offered. However, on the other hand, there are still questions about whether the information obtained from the debate is really used by voters as a basis for consideration in choosing, or is actually defeated by other factors such as emotional closeness, identity politics, or the influence of community leaders. Political awareness is an important aspect in determining the quality of democracy in a region. Political awareness refers to the extent to which the community understands their political rights and obligations, and the extent to which they follow the development of existing political issues. Voters who have high political awareness are generally more critical in assessing regional head candidates and are not easily influenced by populist or manipulative campaigns. Public debates can be an effective means of increasing this political awareness because they provide wider access to information to the community.

However, on the other hand, there are still questions about whether the information obtained from the debate is really used by voters as a basis for consideration in choosing, or is actually defeated by other factors such as emotional closeness, identity politics, or the influence of community leaders, with research indicating that mobilization based on ethnic or religious sentiments can lead to choices driven by primordial sentiments rather than competence (Maigari, 2024).

However, increasing political awareness does not always go hand in hand with increasing voter rationality. Voter rationality refers to the extent to which they use logical and data-based considerations in determining their political choices. In many cases, even though voters have access to more information through public debates, their decisions are still influenced by subjective factors such as emotional ties, social pressure, or money politics. This

is a challenge in itself in the Rembang Pilkada, where voters still tend to prioritize personal closeness or group sentiment rather than considering the program and track record of candidates. Several previous studies have shown that public debates have varying effects on voter behavior. For example, Rachmat's (2020) research in Central Java showed that public debates can increase voter political awareness, but not necessarily increase rationality in voting.

In the Rembang Pilkada, it is interesting to study more deeply how public debates affect people's political awareness and to what extent they affect voters' rationality. Do public debates really provide voters with a better understanding of regional head candidates? Are public debates effective enough in helping voters think more critically and rationally in determining their choice? Or is the debate merely a formality that does not have a significant impact on the final voter decision? This issue is important considering that the quality of voters will directly affect the quality of the elected leader. If voters do not have sufficient political awareness, they will be more easily influenced by manipulative campaigns, such as money politics or unrealistic populist promises. Conversely, if voters have high political awareness and are able to think rationally, they will be more selective in choosing regional head candidates based on their track record, leadership capacity, and the work programs offered.

Thus, the paper on the influence of public debate on political awareness and rationality of voters in the Rembang Pilkada is relevant to understanding the dynamics of voters in the context of local democracy. If public debate does have a significant influence on increasing political awareness and rationality of voters, then this can be a recommendation for election organizers to strengthen the debate format to be more effective in providing political education for the community. Conversely, if public debate does not have a significant impact on voter rationality, then it is necessary to look for other factors that are more influential in shaping the political behavior of the Rembang community.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive research type to understand in depth how public debates affect political awareness and voter rationality in the Rembang Pilkada. This approach was chosen because this study focuses on exploring the experiences, understandings, and mindsets of voters in responding to public debates as one source of information in determining their political choices. The data sources in this study consisted of voters in Rembang who participated in public debates, documentation related to public debates, such as video recordings of debates, and candidate campaign materials. This data was collected using three main techniques, namely in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. In-depth interviews were conducted with voters who were selected purposively, namely based on certain criteria, such as those who participated in public debates and had the right to vote.

Observations were conducted by watching public debates to understand how the information was conveyed by the regional head candidates and how voters reacted to the debate. Meanwhile, documentation was used to analyze the debate and campaign materials conveyed by the candidates. After the data was collected, the analysis was carried out using the thematic analysis method, namely identifying the main themes that emerged from interviews, observations, and documentation to understand the pattern of influence of public debates on

political awareness and voter rationality. This analysis process includes data coding, grouping by theme, and drawing conclusions based on the patterns found. With this method, the study aims to provide a clear picture of the extent to which public debate can shape voters' understanding and considerations in determining their choices in the Rembang Pilkada, as well as the factors that influence their political decision-making process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Public Debates as a Source of Political Information

Public debates are one of the main means for voters to obtain direct information about regional head candidates. In interviews with voters, most respondents stated that they gained a clearer understanding of the differences in visions, missions, and work programs of the candidates after watching the debate. Before the debate, many voters only knew limited information about the candidates, either from billboards, social media, or direct campaigns in the community. The information shared through campaign media often relies heavily on catchy slogans, which can obscure the true qualifications and leadership abilities of a candidate seeking to represent the region. In contrast, debates provide a dynamic platform where voters can observe candidates as they articulate their policy proposals and respond to tough questions posed not only by the moderator but also by their fellow contenders. This interaction allows voters to see how candidates think on their feet and navigate complex issues. As a result, those who engage in watching the debates tend to develop a clearer understanding of the distinct strategies and policy priorities that set each candidate apart, enabling them to make more informed decisions at the polls. In a recent debate about employment in Rembang, one candidate highlighted the significance of industrial investment as a way to reduce unemployment. In contrast, other candidates concentrated on developing the MSME (Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises) sector and the creative economy. Voters also pay attention to how candidates handle pressure during these debates. Several interview respondents mentioned that they preferred candidates who spoke clearly, calmly, and logically when responding to questions, rather than those who reacted emotionally or dodged challenging inquiries.

Public debates serve as an essential platform for candidates to express their visions and missions, while also showing their ability to navigate complex situations that require quick thinking and strategic decision-making. These debates allow voters to assess candidates' competence in real-time, offering insights into how they might respond under pressure once elected.

However, voter reactions to these debates can vary significantly. Many voters, particularly those with strong political affiliations or deeply held beliefs, often stick to their initial choices regardless of the debate content. This tendency reveals the challenge of reaching those who may be less open to changing their opinions based on new information presented during the debates.

While public debates can play an essential role in informing the electorate and enhancing civic engagement, their impact on shifting voter preferences ultimately depends on individuals' willingness to engage with and reflect on the information provided. Thus, the effectiveness of debates as a tool for influencing voter decisions highlights the intricate relationship between information dissemination and personal biases in the political landscape.

Increasing Voter Political Awareness

Voters' political awareness experienced a remarkable surge following their participation in the public debate, transforming the landscape of local political engagement. Many individuals who had previously been indifferent or apathetic toward local politics found themselves unexpectedly captivated by the vibrant discussions presented during the event. In subsequent interviews, several voters expressed a profound change in their perspective; they reflected on how they once regarded regional elections as a mere bureaucratic formality, something that was simply an obligation to fulfill. However, after engaging in the debate, they became acutely aware of the gravity of their choices, recognizing that the candidates' positions and policies had a direct and tangible impact on their everyday lives.

One compelling aspect that made the debate particularly engaging was its focus on concrete issues that resonated deeply with the unique conditions and challenges of the region. For instance, during the Rembang Regional Election, a focal point of discussion was the pressing issue of job availability and the urgent need for improved infrastructure. As candidates articulated their visions and policies concerning these vital issues, voters felt a surge of empowerment. They realized that their decision in choosing a leader would have far-reaching consequences, shaping the policies that would influence not only economic opportunities but also the overall quality of life within their communities.

Moreover, the engaging nature of the debate inspired those who participated to become more active in political discourse within their personal circles. Voters found themselves driven by a newfound enthusiasm to discuss the content of the debate with family and friends. Many articulated their eagerness to delve into the various arguments made by the candidates, weighing the pros and cons of each position, and exploring diverse perspectives before making their final choices at the ballot box. This trend illustrates a significant ripple effect—public debates not only heighten individual political awareness but also catalyze broader conversations among community members, fostering a more politically engaged society.

Additionally, the public debate served as a fertile ground for critical thinking and civic engagement. Voters began to question the status quo and examine the issues that mattered most to them and their families. They started to ask themselves deeper questions about the future of their region: What kind of economy do we want? How can we improve our public services? What steps can be taken to ensure that all community members have access to quality education and healthcare? These reflections marked a shift from passive observation to active participation in the political process, indicating a growing desire among voters to take ownership of their democratic responsibilities.

However, despite these strides in political engagement, challenges remain in effectively raising political awareness through public debates. Some voters candidly admitted to struggling with the technical jargon and complex terms used by the candidates when outlining their policies. This highlights a significant barrier to understanding, as many felt alienated by the high level of discourse. Such a disconnect suggests an urgent need for regional head candidates to convey their ideas in a more accessible and relatable manner, ensuring that their messages resonate with the general public and foster a greater sense of understanding and inclusion among all voters.

In summary, while public debates have proven to be a powerful catalyst for increasing political awareness and engagement among voters, there is still work to be done. As candidates prepare for future debates, they must strive to communicate their visions in clear and straightforward terms that invite dialogue rather than create barriers. By doing so, they can enhance not only the effectiveness of the debates themselves but also the overall health of the democratic process in their regions, encouraging informed, passionate, and active participation from all members of the community.

Rationality in Political Decision Making

Public debates serve as a crucial platform for enhancing voters' rationality when it comes to making informed political choices. In the lead-up to participating in the debate, many voters expressed that their decision-making process was often swayed by emotional factors. These could include personal connections to the candidates, the allure of their popularity, or endorsements from influential public figures. Such decisions, while deeply rooted in personal sentiment, tend to overshadow the more substantive aspects of political candidacy, such as a candidate's specific policies, proven track record, and essential leadership qualities.

As voters engage with the debate process, an intriguing transformation often takes place. Observing the candidates' performances in debates encourages them to shift their focus toward more analytical considerations. For instance, many voters who initially intended to cast their ballots for a particular candidate based on their social status, family ties, or political affiliations began to reconsider their choices after witnessing the candidates' capabilities unfold on stage. They started to realize that mere social background does not necessarily equate to political competence or the capacity to govern effectively.

This pivotal moment is significant, as rational voters begin to evaluate candidates on their ability to articulate practical solutions for regional issues. They scrutinize how candidates respond to tough questions and how they handle criticism from their opponents. Such evaluation leads to a more informed electorate, capable of making choices based on the candidates' merits rather than superficial attributes.

However, despite the benefits that public debates provide, it is essential to acknowledge that various external influences continue to shape voters' final decisions. Factors such as family pressures, community expectations, and the pervasive impact of social media often lead

individuals to align their voting choices with the preferences of those around them. This social comfort can sometimes outweigh the rational considerations gained from watching debates.

For example, several voters who participated in interviews after the debates candidly admitted that even with a clearer understanding of the candidates' qualifications and proposed policies, they felt compelled to vote in accordance with the recommendations of family members or peer groups. This reflects a broader truth about human behavior: the desire for social acceptance and belonging often takes precedence, influencing voters to make choices that align with their immediate social circles rather than solely based on their insights gleaned from the debates.

Overall, while public debates undeniably play a vital role in fostering a more rational voting process, the reality is that they are but one piece of a larger puzzle. Voters navigate a complex landscape of emotions, social dynamics, and community relationships, all of which inform their political decisions. Thus, the challenge remains for civic engagement initiatives to find ways to empower voters, encouraging them not only to value debates as informative tools but also to help them resist the pull of external pressures when it comes to making their final choices on election day. By bridging the gap between rational deliberation and the social influences that often dominate the political landscape, we can aspire to cultivate a more thoughtful and engaged electorate in the future.

Challenges in the Effectiveness of Public Debates

Although public debates are widely regarded as a cornerstone of democratic engagement, they possess significant potential to impact political awareness and enhance voter rationality. However, a number of critical obstacles continue to hinder their effectiveness in achieving these goals. One of the primary challenges is the accessibility of the debate itself. Not all voters have the opportunity to watch debates live due to various constraints. Some may have time limitations due to work or personal commitments, others may live in areas with inadequate internet access, and many may simply lack awareness about when the debates are scheduled. This lack of access can lead to a significant knowledge gap among voters, where those unable to view the debates miss out on vital information that could influence their voting decisions.

Moreover, the communication style employed by candidates significantly affects how effectively debates convey information to the electorate. Many candidates resort to using language that is either excessively technical or riddled with political jargon, which can alienate segments of the voting population who may not possess a deep understanding of such terminology. When candidates fail to communicate their positions clearly and in an accessible manner, some voters may struggle to process the information being presented. This confusion can lead them to rely on alternative sources for information, which may be less objective or informed. Consequently, the very essence of the debate—providing clear insights into policy positions—falls short for a considerable portion of the audience.

The role of the media cannot be overlooked in this context, as it plays a crucial part in disseminating the outcomes and highlights of the debates to the public. However, the news coverage that follows is not always conducted with neutrality. Some media outlets may choose to emphasize the dramatic aspects of the debates, such as moments of contention or emotional exchanges between candidates, often at the expense of in-depth analysis of the actual policies being discussed. Such focus on the sensational can skew public perception, leading voters to make choices based more on emotional reactions than on rational evaluation of candidates' platforms and proposals.

Furthermore, the framing of debates in the media can also shape public discourse. When specific narratives are pushed to the forefront—whether highlighting a particular candidate's gaffe or their aggressive stance—voters may become distracted from the essential questions of governance and policy implications. This phenomenon can create an environment where surface-level judgments prevail over informed decision-making.

Additionally, there is a growing concern regarding the role of social media in shaping perceptions of these debates. Platforms that prioritize brevity and shareability may inadvertently encourage soundbite culture, where the nuances of candidates' arguments are lost. Voters may be exposed to snippets of information that lack context, leading to partial understandings of complex issues.

In conclusion, while public debates hold the promise of enhancing political awareness and voter rationality, several obstacles must be addressed to realize their full potential. Ensuring that debates are more accessible, fostering clearer communication from candidates, and striving for unbiased media coverage could collectively enhance the effectiveness of these vital democratic exercises. By tackling these challenges, we can move closer to an informed electorate that is equipped to make thoughtful decisions at the polls.

CONCLUSION

Public debates in the Rembang Pilkada have a significant influence on increasing political awareness and voter rationality. Debates provide an opportunity for the public to understand the vision, mission, and programs of regional head candidates in more depth. Voters who participate in debates tend to be more critical in assessing the ideas and solutions offered by candidates, not just emotional factors or political affiliations. However, the effectiveness of debates still faces challenges, such as limited accessibility, the use of overly technical language, and media framing that sometimes emphasizes controversial aspects more than the substance of the policy.

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