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Political Education Through the Empty Box Movement: A Social Network Study of GenPABUMI

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Abstract

The single-candidate phenomenon in the 2024 Gresik Regency regional election, in which all 17 political parties backed one incumbent pair, gave rise to a civil society movement centered on the empty-box option. Gerakan Persatuan Pribumi (GenPABUMI) emerged as the driving actor, conducting political education through a series of organized activities. This study aims to understand GenPABUMI's social network during the 2024 Gresik election and identify the political education efforts carried out through that network. Using a qualitative approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with nine informants from GenPABUMI, the APD alliance, and community participants at the declaration events, supported by social media documentation and Constitutional Court case files, and analyzed through Putnam's social capital framework. Results show that GenPABUMI's network was built on trust inherited from GenPATRA, expanded through complementary collaboration with APD, and asymmetrically linked to formal institutions and local political elites. This network contributed to the empty box's electoral gains, which prevailed in five sub-districts that form the movement's base. Meanwhile, political education efforts occurred along an intersecting spectrum of consciousness-raising and electoral mobilization. The movement shifted the political orientation of some participants, though its effectiveness was uneven and constrained by incentive-based recruitment and the risks of elite co-optation. Normative autonomy from external interests remains essential for sustaining its political education function.

Keywords: Empty box, Social networks, Political education

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Introduction

The 2024 simultaneous regional elections, which involved 545 regions across Indonesia, marked an important moment in Indonesia's democratic electoral process. In practice, however, the single-candidate phenomenon has shown a consistent upward trend, rising from 3 candidate pairs in 2015 to 37 pairs in 2024. This increase indicates a weakening of local political competition and raises concerns about the effectiveness of electoral regulations and the quality of public political participation. As explained by Baird & Millar (2020), a single-candidate election is an uncontested election that eliminates the space for dialectical debate, which should serve as the rational basis for voters' considerations. This condition also diminishes the democratic legitimacy of elected leaders, as Ettorre (2023) emphasizes, arguing that the absence of alternative candidates significantly narrows the space for meaningful voter participation.

In response to this limited choice, Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 10 of 2016, Article 54C paragraph (2), accommodates the empty box mechanism as a legitimate option for voters in single-candidate elections (Kurnia Aznar Putra et al., 2026). The empty box carries legal weight equal to that of a vote for a candidate pair, meaning its outcome directly affects the election's final legitimacy. De Jong & Bono (2025) explain that the empty box is a democratic instrument that gives voters room to express disagreement with the only available candidate. The existence of this mechanism affirms that democracy functions not only as a means of electing representatives but also as a channel for expressing public political dissatisfaction. The empty box phenomenon thus becomes an important indicator for reading the weakness of healthy electoral competition at the local level.

A concrete case of this phenomenon can be seen in the 2024 Gresik Regency regional election, where the incumbent pair Fandi Akhmad Yani and Asluchul Alif secured full backing from 17 political parties, both parliamentary and non-parliamentary. This dominance closed off any space for alternative candidates to emerge and reflects the structural advantages of incumbency described by Leach et al. (2020), which include electoral benefits tied to office, personal qualifications, and the capacity to obstruct the rise of potential competitors. The situation was further compounded by the failure of the independent candidate pair Andhi Sulandra and Fatkhur Rokhman to meet the administrative requirement of at least 72,150 supporting ID cards. This failure was not merely a technical matter but a reflection of the structural political dominance that created a closed and uncompetitive electoral climate in Gresik (Hurtado, 2026).

Dissatisfaction with this condition gave rise to grassroots movements advocating for the empty box as a form of civic resistance, one of which was GenPABUMI (Gerakan Persatuan Pribumi), initiated by Ali Candi. This movement positioned itself not merely as a channel for protest but also as an instrument of political education aimed at transforming passive voters into critical participants. (Fitriananta et al., 2025) emphasize that grassroots mobilization of this kind is an important tool for

organizing communities to transform political systems dominated by elite interests.

GenPABUMI actively promoted public awareness that the empty box is a legitimate democratic mechanism through its social networks (Nasution et al., 2023). This effort emerged in response to the minimal official outreach from election organizers, particularly to young and educated voters.

The results of the 2024 Gresik regional election showed a significant achievement, with the empty box securing 40.28% of the vote and prevailing in 6 of the 18 sub-districts, namely Ujungpangkah, Sidayu, Manyar, Bungah, Gresik and Kebomas. This outcome stands in sharp contrast to the dominance of single candidates in previous election cycles, who won by margins as high as 98.11% in the 2015, 2018, and 2020 elections. This result cannot be separated from GenPABUMI's role in educating the wider public until a collective awareness of the empty box's legitimacy as a political choice took hold. The success of this mobilization rested on a social network that played a crucial role in disseminating information, building solidarity, and strengthening trust among members. (Kurdiati Miare et al., 2026) affirm that social capital derived from social networks plays a significant role across various domains of life, including improving the quality of democracy.

Based on the discussion above, the researcher is therefore interested in examining how the empty box movement process in the 2024 Gresik Regency regional election, initiated by the Gerakan Persatuan Pribumi (GenPABUMI), sought to provide political education to the public. This was ultimately intended to cultivate political awareness among the people of Gresik Regency, with the final vote recapitulation showing the empty box option achieving a significant 40.28%, the highest figure among single-candidate regional elections in East Java. This study will also examine in depth how GenPABUMI utilized its social network to disseminate information, foster solidarity, and awaken critical public awareness, particularly among young voters, who are regarded as having the potential to serve as agents of change.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the subjective dimensions and complexity of experiences related to the empty-box voting movement in the 2024 Gresik Regency regional election. (Sugiyono, 2023) explains that qualitative research focuses on examining objects in their natural setting, with the researcher serving as the primary instrument and data analysis conducted inductively to understand meaning rather than to produce generalizations. This approach allows the researcher to fully capture participants' narratives, perceptions, and motivations regarding the phenomenon under study. This research specifically applies Robert D. Putnam's social network theory to analyze the social network of GenPABUMI (Gerakan Persatuan Pribumi) and the political education efforts carried out through the movement.

The research subjects were determined through snowball sampling, a sampling technique that

begins with a limited number of data sources and expands through referrals from prior informants until the data reach saturation. This study involved nine informants, consisting of one key informant, Ali Candi, chairman of GenPABUMI and concurrently chairman of the NGO GenPATRA, and eight additional informants comprising members of the Aliansi Penyelamat Demokrasi (APD, Alliance for the Protection of Democracy), regional coordinators of the empty box movement across several sub-districts, and community members who attended the empty box declaration events. Data collection was conducted through two techniques: semi-structured in-depth interviews carried out in stages from August 2025 to January 2026, and documentation consisting of campaign posters and pamphlets, posts from GenPABUMI's official social media accounts, photographs of declaration events, and Constitutional Court petition documents. These two techniques were used to complement and reinforce the validity of the data, given that the period of the movement under study had already passed, making direct observation impossible.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, which consists of three concurrent activity flows: (1) data reduction, involving the categorization and filtering of information obtained from interviews and documentation into two main themes, namely GenPABUMI's social network and its political education efforts; (2) data display, presented through descriptive narratives illustrating GenPABUMI's strategies and social network, supported by direct informant quotations and relevant visual documentation; and (3) conclusion drawing and verification, carried out through cross-checking among informants, matching interview data with documentation, and testing the consistency of findings against Putnam's social capital framework. These three stages were designed to answer the study's two main research questions: how GenPABUMI's social network was formed and how it functioned within the empty box movement, and how the movement's activities contributed to political education and the growth of political participation awareness among the people of Gresik Regency.

Result and Discussion

GenPABUMI is an alliance without formal institutional legality, established by Ali Candi, an activist who also serves as chairman of the NGO GenPATRA, in response to the emergence of a single candidate in the 2024 Gresik regional election. Its membership structure is egalitarian and does not follow a conventional organizational hierarchy, with sub-district coordinators emerging organically through informal interaction rather than through formal recruitment mechanisms (Hermawan et al., 2025). Member recruitment is voluntary and does not involve material incentives, with participation driven by a shared vision and collective disappointment with the state of local governance. GenPABUMI's external network was formed through collaboration with the Aliansi Penyelamat Demokrasi (APD, Alliance for the Protection of Democracy), which played a role in organizing the grassroots mass base, as well as several other community groups such as Pantura fishermen, labor unions, and the Forum Komunikasi Warga Suci (FKWS, Suci Residents' Communication Forum) (A.

Fauzi et al., 2018). On the other hand, GenPABUMI's relationship with formal institutions such as the KPU (General Elections Commission) was asymmetrical, as the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) resulting from the 24 May 2024 demonstration was not followed by substantive implementation in the public socialization of the empty box option.

GenPABUMI carried out four main activities: demonstrations, empty box declarations, social media campaigns, and a petition to the Constitutional Court (Surbakti, 1992). Empty box declarations were held at approximately 14 sites across Gresik Regency, primarily targeting first-time voters and young people, as stated by Ali Candi (Chairman of GenPABUMI), "The ones we targeted were first-time voters, the younger generation. So the majority of those who attended were young people" (interview, 28 August 2025). The distribution of support showed an uneven pattern, concentrated in the industrial Pantura region, which formed the movement's network base, with the empty box vote share reaching 65% in Sidayu and prevailing in 19 of the 21 villages in that sub-district, while the southern region, which served as the single candidate's stronghold, remained relatively unreached.

Social media campaigns were managed systematically through Ali Candi's personal account, which had 20,000 followers, as well as several Facebook community groups such as Gresik Sumpek and Ndukun Sumpek, with poll results consistently showing dominant support for the empty box, reaching 75% in the Gresik Sumpek group. Meanwhile, the petition to the Constitutional Court, filed on 6 December 2024, was ultimately declared inadmissible due to issues of legal standing and late registration, which Ali Candi (Chairman of GenPABUMI) framed not as an attempt to win the case but as a moral stance, "For us, this petition to the Constitutional Court was purely a moral gesture, we knew from the start it would never win, that they would look for every possible loophole" (interview, 28 August 2025).

Community perceptions of GenPABUMI's declarations varied depending on the information channel, the motivation for involvement, and the impact experienced by participants (Surbakti, 1992). Some informants obtained information through direct personal networks with Ali Candi, while others learned of the events through social media posts or invitations from neighbors, indicating that information spread through a combination of face-to-face and digital networks (Li & Ding, 2024). Most informants reported a positive impact of their involvement on their political awareness, including a subsequent motivation to spread their understanding to family and close social circles. However, more skeptical and situational perceptions were also observed, particularly regarding circulating reports of material incentives given to some declaration participants. Fasya (Declaration Participant), who initially attended because of a material incentive channeled through a neighbor as intermediary, admitted that her political stance shifted toward a more substantive one after receiving an explanation of local issues relevant to her life, "After attending, I became more convinced about choosing the empty box, because I became more aware of the many unresolved problems in Gresik, especially the dump truck issue" (interview, 29 December 2025).

GenPABUMI's Social Network: Bonding, Bridging, and Linking Social Capital

This study finds that the sustainability of GenPABUMI's collective action in supporting the empty box option in the 2024 Gresik regional election was not sustained by a formal organizational structure, but rather by a layered social network formed organically through informal interaction among actors. Drawing on Putnam's concept of social capital, this network can be mapped into three forms: internal horizontal networks (bonding), external horizontal networks (bridging), and vertical networks (linking), each with a distinct basis of formation and function. At the bonding level, trust accumulated from historical relations within GenPATRA served as the primary foundation of GenPABUMI's internal network, as exemplified by Rofi, who had been involved since 2022 and drew on the Laskar Pantura Bersatu network to expand the support base in the coastal region. This finding reinforces Kagungan & Rosalia's (2025) argument that social capital is cumulative, whereby trust built through a long history of interaction can be reactivated in a new political context without needing to be built from scratch. In contrast to the pattern of empty-box mobilization typically portrayed as reactive and spontaneous following the announcement of a single candidate (Irawan, 2021), GenPABUMI had, in fact, been initiated before the single candidacy was confirmed, meaning its bonding network was relatively more solid than that of similar movements elsewhere.

At the bridging level, GenPABUMI expanded its support base through overlapping substantive interests with other groups, such as the Aliansi Penyelamat Demokrasi (APD, Alliance for the Protection of Democracy), labor unions, and Pantura fishermen, who joined not on behalf of any institution but on the basis of a shared collective disappointment with single-candidate dominance. In line with Coleman (Al Kautsar & Aji, 2026), the flow of information regarding local governance failures helped lower coordination costs among groups with differing backgrounds, allowing solidarity to form without requiring lengthy institutional negotiation (Setyawati et al., 2026). Collaboration with APD subsequently proved crucial when GenPABUMI filed its petition with the Constitutional Court, as APD was responsible for documenting alleged violations in the field, which later served as the material basis for the petition. This pattern shows that bridging social capital formed at an earlier stage can become a prerequisite for the subsequent formation of linking social capital (Syahid et al., 2026). This finding enriches the understanding that bridging networks function not only to expand the reach of outreach efforts but also to provide the technical capacity for more formal political action.

At the linking level, GenPABUMI's vertical network operated along two contrasting paths: a formal-confrontational path involving the KPU, Bawaslu, the Regional House of Representatives (DPRD), and the Constitutional Court, which produced only symbolic recognition without substantive reciprocity, and an informal-patronage path involving covert support from a number of legislative

members and party cadres (Fauzi et al., 2025). The memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed by the KPU following the 24 May 2024 demonstration was ultimately not followed by empty box outreach equal to that given to the candidate pair, while the petition filed with the Constitutional Court on 6 December 2024 was declared inadmissible due to issues of legal standing (Saputra & Prasetyo, 2026). On the other hand, the study also found financial support and mass mobilization from formal political actors channeled covertly through intermediaries, including indications that nearly 80 percent of one political party's cadres were involved. This finding regarding hidden patronage relations reveals a dimension rarely uncovered in the literature on empty box movements, which tends to emphasize civil society resistance alone (Hariyanti & Sufyanto, 2026). This condition confirms that a movement which normatively rejects patronage politics nonetheless remains dependent on the very power relations it opposes, a paradox that could threaten the movement's long-term autonomy.

Political Participation in Networked Society

Table 1. Indicators of Political Education and Electoral Mobilization

Dimension	Political Education	Electoral Mobilization
Direction of communication	Dialogical and two-way	One-way (top-down)
Ultimate goal	To form citizens who are aware, critical, and autonomous in their political conduct	To direct the public toward taking a specific political action
Position of the public	As subjects invited to understand, evaluate, and make decisions autonomously	As a support base that needs to be mobilized to serve the interests of a particular elite or group
Method	Discussion, dialogue, exchange of opinions	Campaigning, instruction, consolidation, mass mobilization
Long-term orientation	Long-term: shaping the autonomous political character of citizens	Short-term and situational: the effect of participation is usually tied to a particular momentum or interest

GenPABUMI's activities during the 2024 Gresik regional election are analyzed through two complementary concepts: political education and political mobilization. (Mustofa et al., 2025) emphasize that political education is dialogical in nature and aims to build citizens' capacity for critical thinking and autonomous political decision-making, whereas Huntington and Nelson describe political mobilization as a one-way effort to direct support toward a predetermined political goal (Febriandy & Sudarmanti, 2024). The dimension of political education appears strongest in the demonstration activities and the petition filed with the Constitutional Court, through which citizens learned to employ legal argumentation, such as invoking KPU RI Decision Number 532 of 2024, and gained an understanding of the mechanisms of constitutional litigation, even though the petition was

ultimately declared inadmissible. The empty box declaration events likewise conveyed important educational content, particularly regarding the fundamental distinction between abstention and voting for the empty box, a distinction that had never been formally socialized by the KPU (Farchan et al., 2025). Taken together, these activities demonstrate that GenPABUMI succeeded in opening a space for political learning that went beyond mere emotional expression of public dissatisfaction with the single-candidate phenomenon.

Nevertheless, the dimension of electoral mobilization is evident in several of the movement's operational practices (Hidayat et al., 2026). GenPABUMI's social media campaign was explicitly directed toward shaping political preference, as reflected in poll results circulated in the Gresik Sumpek and Ndukun Sumpek groups, which showed support for the empty box reaching 75-92 percent, far exceeding the official election result of 40.28 percent, indicating substantial sampling bias and a failure to represent the broader voting population. The expansion of declaration sites was likewise uneven, prioritizing the Pantura region deemed more receptive to the empty box narrative, a pattern that reflects the logic of campaign efficiency rather than the logic of political education, which should ideally reach the groups least exposed to information (Aydin & Sahin, 2019). A more problematic finding concerns the covert involvement of several legislative members and nearly 80 percent of the cadres from one political party, who provided financial support and mass mobilization discreetly, alongside indications of financial incentives ranging from IDR 50,000 to IDR 150,000 given to some declaration participants through informal intermediary networks. This pattern reveals a fundamental ambivalence within the movement, namely a normative commitment to rejecting money politics that coexisted with an implicit tolerance of incentives channeled by external parties, so long as the ultimate outcome was perceived to align with the movement's broader agenda for change (Cabezudo & Haavelsrud, 2022).

From the recipients' side, community responses to GenPABUMI's declarations can be mapped into four categories of perception reflecting differing levels of political consciousness: educational, protest, skeptical, and situational. The educational category is marked by reflective and participatory awareness, exemplified by participants who came to regard the declaration as a learning space that reshaped their view of the relationship between citizens and government, whereas the protest category reflects the conversion of emotional disappointment into more directed political action. The skeptical category reflects a more critical awareness of power relations, in which some participants remained able to distinguish their doubts about the organizers' independence from their conviction that the empty box remained a legitimate political choice. The situational category, meanwhile, exhibits the weakest degree of substantive understanding, driven by social invitation and material incentives, yet nonetheless capable of developing into more substantive awareness once participants received explanations of local issues relevant to their own lives.

This variation across the four categories indicates that GenPABUMI's political education did not produce a homogeneous form of consciousness, consistent with the typology of participant, subject,

and parochial political orientations (Harianto et al., 2020). The reflective awareness found in the educational category did not emerge from a blank slate but was instead underpinned by prior trust in particular figures or by pre-existing political leanings formed before the declaration. This implies that GenPABUMI is more accurately understood as an accelerator for political consciousness that already possessed an initial seed, rather than as an instrument for building awareness from the most basic starting point, while the groups most in need of political education were precisely those entering the activity with the most varied motivations and greatest vulnerability to transactional logic. This condition underscores a structural limitation of the declaration-based format of political education in reaching those with the least prior political orientation.

Overall, GenPABUMI operated within a dynamic spectrum where the idealism of political education and the reality of electoral mobilization intersected, rather than constituting two mutually exclusive categories. The movement succeeded in building political literacy and fostering awareness of popular rights and sovereignty, yet its segmented network expansion, use of material incentives, and covert ties with political elites revealed an orientation toward concrete political gains. These two dimensions cannot be sharply separated, as illustrated by cases in which participation began purely instrumental but evolved into substantive support once participants were exposed to content relevant to their own grievances (Corral-Montoya et al., 2022). The sustainability of GenPABUMI's role in strengthening local democracy ultimately depends on its capacity to limit the influence of elite interests and maintain internal transparency. It is precisely this normative autonomy from external interests that constitutes the essential precondition for ensuring that mobilization does not continue to erode the political education gains so painstakingly built through the movement's social network.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the success of GenPABUMI's empty box movement in the 2024 Gresik regional election was underpinned by a layered social network, comprising bonding social capital inherited from GenPATRA, bridging social capital built through collaboration with APD and various community groups, and linking social capital that produced largely symbolic recognition rather than substantive change from formal institutions. Through this network, GenPABUMI carried out political education via demonstrations, declarations, social media campaigns, and a petition to the Constitutional Court, which succeeded in opening public understanding of political rights and democratic mechanisms, although its impact on community consciousness was uneven and functioned more effectively as an accelerator for political awareness that already possessed an initial foundation. At the same time, the movement could not be separated from the dimension of electoral mobilization that intersected with its political education efforts, as seen in incentive-based recruitment and the potential for elite co-optation, meaning that the sustainability of its function going forward depends on the movement's ability to maintain its independence and transparency.

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