

Political Clientelism in Rural Areas: Understanding the Impact on Regional Head Elections in Indonesia

Piers Andreas Noak¹

Abstract

Political clientelism is a strategy often used by candidates or political parties to gain electoral support by offering goods, money, or services in exchange for votes. In the rural context, this patron-client relationship develops more strongly due to the high economic and social dependency between communities and political actors. This research focuses on the phenomenon of political clientelism in rural areas and its impact on regional head elections in Indonesia. This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive approach. Research findings show that political clientelism in rural Indonesia, especially in agrarian areas, strengthens patron-client relationships in which political elites exploit the economic dependence of communities to gain support through material promises. This causes voters to vote based on short-term favors rather than the quality of the candidate, thereby exacerbating transactional politics and undermining the integrity of the election. Factors such as low political education, limited access to information, and economic instability reinforce citizens' dependence on local patrons, including village heads, who have access to favors. As a result, the democratic process in rural areas is distorted, focusing more on the distribution of resources than on the vision of candidates, making systemic change difficult to achieve.

Keywords: *Political Clientelism, Regional Head Elections, Rural Areas, Village Heads, Patron-Client, Democracy.*

Introduction

Democratic local governance is one of the main foundations of modern democracy. Political decentralization and democratization that have occurred in many developing countries have brought about significant changes in the organizational structure and political processes (Sarker & Nawaz, 2019). Previously highly centralized countries are now devolving some power and authority to local governments, allowing local communities to be more actively involved in the decision-making process. Thus, decentralization creates greater space for political participation at the local level, increases government accountability, and strengthens the relationship between citizens and local leaders (Isufaj, 2014). However, the success of this process depends largely on the ability of local governments to carry out their functions democratically and effectively.

Unfortunately, although many studies have discussed the major transformations brought about by decentralization and democratization, the dynamics of regional head elections and political party activities at the local level are still relatively neglected (Anderson, 2003). Academics tend to focus their attention on national-scale elections, ignoring how local politics plays a vital role in shaping the face of democracy at the grassroots. In reality, many local aspects, such as patronage, clientelism, and strong political identities, play a central role in regional elections (Driscoll, 2018). This more personal pattern of political interaction between regional head candidates and the community differs substantially from that which occurs in national elections, where the focus is usually more ideological and centered on broader policy issues (Driscoll, 2018)

In addition, in this era of democratic decentralization, elections at the regional level are a key component in upholding local democracy. Regional head election not only determines local leaders, but also influences political dynamics at the national level (Wiredame & Sarkawi, 2023). The central government, through the process of decentralization, delegates some of its authority to local governments so that it can be managed according to the needs and characteristics of the local community (Ferreira & Gyourko, 2014)). This provides space for local governments to implement policies that are more relevant to local needs, which will ultimately improve community welfare and strengthen the legitimacy of the government. However, this

¹ Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Udayana, Denpasar Indonesia, Email: piersandreasnoak@unud.ac.id.

success is highly dependent on the quality of local democracy, where a free and fair Regional head election process is the main key (Reid, 1999).

Crook & Manor (2018) stated that decentralization provides opportunities for local communities to play a more active role in decision-making, thereby strengthening democratization at the grassroots level. With decentralization, local governments become more accountable to the communities they serve, increasing the accountability of public officials, and creating services that are more efficient and relevant to local needs. Local governments that are closer to their communities tend to be more responsive to existing problems, because they have a deeper understanding of local needs and priorities (Goldfrank, 2007). This condition ultimately contributes to improving the quality of governance and the welfare of society as a whole. Decentralization also provides a foundation for strengthening social and political ties between citizens and government, creating a more inclusive and participatory democracy (Devas & Delay, 2006).

However, the integrity of the democratic process at the local level is crucial to ensure the sustainability of good governance. Wayne (2019) emphasized that although elections are a fundamental element in a democratic political system, democracy can only be realized if elections are carried out honestly, fairly, and transparently. When the election process is marred by corrupt practices, vote manipulation, or the use of money politics, the election results will reflect a flawed form of democracy and do not represent the true wishes of the people (Bratton, 2008). In this context, democracy loses its essence, because the elected leaders are not the result of the free and sovereign choice of the people, but rather the product of fraudulent practices that harm public trust in the democratic system (Wollheim, 1962).

Sarker & Khalid (2018) stated that social order and political resolution in developing countries, are often marked by the phenomenon of clientelism. This clientelism is rooted in socio-economic conditions associated with the agrarian system, where people's economic dependence on local resources and political power creates strong patron-client relationships. In this context, various institutions, including political parties, electoral processes, local government, and public service delivery, interact in a mutually beneficial framework, where political actors offer certain rewards or benefits to people in exchange for their votes (Briquet, 2015). This dynamic produces a political system that tends to reinforce inequality and hinder the development of healthy democracy, as voters are often trapped in a cycle of dependence on patrons who exploit economic imbalances to maintain their power (Hilgers, 2011).

Political clientelism occurs when voters, campaigners, or other political actors provide support in the form of votes to politicians in exchange for certain favors or material benefits. In this context, politicians use clientelistic strategies to achieve electoral victory by distributing favors, goods, or cash to voters, either individually or in small groups (Kusche, 2014). This approach creates a dependency between voters and politicians, where voters feel obligated to provide support in return for the favors received. In the study conducted by Aspinall & Berenschot (2019), there is an in-depth analysis of the extent to which patron-client relationships still play a role in the dynamics of democracy in Indonesia, especially at the regional level.

The phenomenon of political clientelism in rural areas, especially in agrarian areas, often arises due to complex interactions between communities that still prioritize cultural values and existing political power structures (Anderson et al., 2015). In rural areas, where traditions, norms, and social relations play a major role, political elites exploit the economic and social dependence of residents to build patron-client relationships. Villagers, who often depend on economic support from politicians—through the provision of goods, services, or money—are more vulnerable to this practice (Ombowale & Olutayo, 2010). Clientelism can be seen as a strategy used by politicians to gain support in elections, where voters' loyalty and votes are gained through direct rewards. This strengthens citizens' dependence on political elites, while hindering the development of a more critical and sustainable political awareness. Thus, this phenomenon not only illustrates unequal power relations, but also has implications for social and economic dynamics at the local level, which can hinder a more effective and inclusive democratization process (Kitschelt, 2000).

In this study, the formulation of the problem to be raised includes several important points. First, how do the dynamics of political clientelism occur at the regional level, especially in rural areas, and what triggers the patron-client relationship between politicians and voters? Furthermore, this study will explore the impact of clientelism practices on regional head elections, including their influence on voter behavior and community political participation. In addition, it is important to understand how clientelism affects the accountability and transparency of local government. Thus, this study aims to provide insight into the dynamics of clientelism and its impact on regional head elections, as well as recommendations for improving a more democratic political system in Indonesia.

Method

This research uses a qualitative descriptive approach based on the philosophy of postpositivity, as expressed by Creswell & Poth (2016). In this method, research is conducted on objects that are natural and not manipulated as in experiments. Researchers are key instruments in data collection, where data collection techniques are carried out through triangulation or a combination of several methods to obtain more valid data. Data collection was carried out in depth, involving interviews, observations, and document analysis to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of political clientelism in rural areas. The collected data is then analyzed inductively, with the primary focus on the meaning contained in the data rather than seeking broad generalizations. This research aims to explore the deeper meaning of the practice of political clientelism, thus placing more emphasis on revealing the reality in the field.

In this study, the researcher used primary and secondary data to enrich the analysis. Primary data was obtained directly through interviews with the head of the campaign team of one of the regional head candidate pairs in Sumedang Regency and several community leaders in Jatinangor District. These interviews provide direct insight into the dynamics of local politics and clientelism practices that occur in regional head elections. Meanwhile, secondary data was obtained through literature studies that included books, journals, and information sources from the internet that were relevant to the research topic. After the data is collected, the analysis process is carried out qualitatively with an interactive and continuous approach. This analysis includes three main stages, namely data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions/verification. This process continues until the data obtained reaches saturation point, where the information obtained is considered sufficient and there are no significant new findings. Through this approach, researchers can identify patterns, themes, and meanings in the phenomenon of political clientelism in rural areas and its impact on regional head elections.

Result and Discussion

Dynamics of Political Clientelism in Rural Areas in Indonesia

Clientelism is a form of political corruption that operates within a patron-client relationship structure, where this relationship is centered on the imbalance of power between the political elite and society (Lemarchand & Legg, 2017). Political elites, who have control over resources and power, use these positions to secure political support from sympathizers or citizens. This is usually done through material promises or incentives, such as direct assistance, necessities, cash, or special access to public services. These rewards are given as a form of "bargain" for political support, either in the form of votes in elections or continued loyalty (Wiling & Zhang, 2013). This relationship tends to bind voters in an exploitative relationship, where citizens are forced to provide political support in return for the assistance they receive. This strengthens voters' dependence on patrons, reduces their political autonomy, and weakens the democratic process that should encourage free and independent political participation (Dargent & Munoz, 2011).

In addition, clientelism creates serious distortions in the political process, especially in elections, where political competition is no longer based on programs or ideologies, but on the elite's ability to distribute resources to certain groups (Corstange, 2018). This not only undermines the integrity of elections, but also erodes public trust in political institutions and government. In developing countries, including Indonesia, clientelism has become a systemic problem because socio-economic conditions allow this practice to

continue. Voters, who often face economic uncertainty and lack of access to equitable public services, feel compelled to accept patronage offers in the short term, even though this has a negative long-term impact on the democratic process and good governance (Berenschot, 2018). Thus, clientelism not only perpetuates social injustice, but also slows down efforts to build a healthy and accountable democracy.

The phenomenon of political clientelism in rural areas, especially in agrarian areas, is often influenced by the social and economic structures that have long existed in society. In these areas, the majority of the population works as sharecroppers who do not own their own land and depend on landlords or local elites who have economic and social power (Allen, 2015). These farmers provide their services and labor to landlords in the hope of receiving compensation in the form of protection and assistance when they face life difficulties, such as crop failures, natural disasters, or financial problems. This form of relationship creates a close patron-client relationship, where the patron provides protection and material assistance, while the client reciprocates with political loyalty or social support (Aspinall, 2014).

This exchange relationship is not only economic, but also touches on social and political aspects. Landlords or local elites often have great political influence and are able to mobilize the support of the village community during regional elections or general elections (Berenschot & Mulder, 2019). In this context, clientelism functions as a mechanism of social control that allows political elites to maintain their power, while peasant farmers feel safe because they have the guarantee of protection from their patrons. This dependency often hinders citizens' efforts to become politically and economically independent, because they fear losing the protection and assistance that has been their life support (Winters, 2016).

On the other hand, this clientelistic relationship also strengthens the feudal structure in the countryside. Landlords not only serve as providers of economic resources, but also as a link between the village community and the higher government (Satterthwaite & Tacoli, 2014). They play a crucial role in channeling government assistance to the village, but at the same time, they also control the residents' access to these resources. This condition allows local elites to maintain control over society and maintain the status quo, which often prevents larger social and political changes from occurring (Lowndes, 2005).

Political clientelism in villages often occurs due to several main factors that create an environment that supports the practice. Here are some factors that can cause political clientelism in villages:

- *Economic Dependence*

The majority of villagers, especially in agrarian areas, are often in less stable economic conditions, with limited access to resources such as decent jobs, business capital, and daily necessities. In this situation, they tend to be highly dependent on local elites or wealthier landowners, who have economic and social power in their communities. These local elites often offer assistance in the form of jobs, capital, or other assistance to villagers, creating a strong relationship of dependency. However, this assistance was not given for free, but rather in the context of a patron-client relationship, where villagers felt indebted and were encouraged to reciprocate with political support. This can take the form of votes in elections, loyalty to a patron, or even active involvement in supporting the elite's political agenda. This economic dependence makes it difficult for villagers to be politically independent, because they fear losing access to assistance that is essential to their well-being. As a result, this patron-client relationship strengthens local elite control over village political dynamics and limits the democratic space that should allow for free and fair political participation .

- *Limited Access to Information*

In many villages, access to objective and neutral political information remains a major challenge. Limited communication infrastructure, low political literacy, and the dominance of local elites in the dissemination of information often mean that village communities rely solely on biased sources of information. The media available in rural areas is often owned or influenced by certain political groups, so that residents receive news and political views that are colored by the interests of these groups. Without adequate access to diverse

and independent information, rural communities tend to be more vulnerable to political manipulation. They are easily swayed by promises from political patrons who offer material assistance, such as basic necessities, cash, or improvements to local infrastructure, in exchange for political support. These promises are often seen as more concrete and immediately beneficial than abstract long-term political program promises. As a result, voters in villages tend to vote based on the short-term benefits offered by patrons, rather than considering larger policies or visions for village development and community welfare. This reinforces the cycle of clientelism, in which political elites continue to exploit economic dependency and limited information to maintain their control over rural people's votes.

- *Strong Social Culture*

In villages, close social and cultural ties play an important role in shaping people's political behavior. Loyalty to local authority figures, such as village heads, landlords, or community leaders, is part of the social norms that have been formed over generations. These relationships are based on respect, trust, and emotional attachment, where villagers feel obliged to follow the direction or advice of these authority figures. This loyalty is often exploited by politicians or local elites who use their personal closeness to influence people's political choices. In the context of elections, local elites exploit these social relationships to ensure political support through more personal approaches, such as providing material assistance or promises of increased welfare. Because these relationships are highly personal and emotional, villagers often feel obligated to repay the kindness or services rendered by the local elite by providing political support. As a result, the patron-client relationship becomes stronger and becomes an effective tool for political elites in controlling the behavior of rural voters.

- *Limitations of Political Education*

The low level of political education in rural areas often results in villagers having limited understanding of their rights as voters, the principles of democracy, and the political mechanisms that should function ideally. Without adequate knowledge of how democracy works, they are less aware that elections are an opportunity to elect leaders who are truly capable of representing the interests of the community, not just a means to gain short-term benefits. As a result, villagers are often trapped in the practice of clientelism, where they feel that providing political support in return for material assistance or promises from political elites is normal and part of the social norm. This mindset is exacerbated by economic dependence on local patrons, which reinforces the belief that the assistance received is a form of reciprocity that must be paid for with votes. This condition creates a cycle that is difficult to break, where voters are not fully aware that their right as citizens is to vote freely and without pressure from parties with power or resources.

- *Trust in Local Patrons*

Many villagers tend to believe that local patrons, such as village heads or local elites, are better able to provide assistance and protection than central government or political officials who are far removed from their daily lives. Local patrons are considered to be closer to the community, both physically and emotionally, and better understand the concrete needs of villagers, such as access to jobs, financial assistance, or solving local infrastructure problems. Because patrons are within their community, residents feel that these patrons are more responsive and can be relied upon to provide quick solutions to problems they face, rather than central government officials who are considered too distant and unreachable. This trust reinforces patron-client relationships, where citizens provide political support in return for favors received. In many cases, citizens see patrons not only as political figures, but also as protective figures who provide real social and economic protection, which is often not provided by the central government. This deepens villagers' dependence on local patrons, reinforces clientelism practices, and hinders the development of more inclusive and participatory democracy at the local level.

- *Infrastructure and Welfare Limitations*

In many villages, poor infrastructure and public services, such as damaged roads, lack of access to clean water, and limited health services, cause villagers to rely on assistance from politicians or local elites to meet their basic needs. Because the central government is often slow or unresponsive in fixing this situation, local politicians exploit the loopholes to gain political support. They promise infrastructure improvements, health care, or access to other essential needs in exchange for electoral support. In this situation, politicians use weaknesses in public service delivery to strengthen patron-client relationships, where assistance that should be the responsibility of the government becomes a political bargaining chip. Citizens who are in dire need of such improvements feel compelled to provide political support in the hope that these promises will be fulfilled, thus creating dependency and strengthening clientelism practices in the local democratic process.

Furthermore, to avoid or eradicate political clientelism in rural areas requires a comprehensive approach involving structural changes, political education, improving the quality of public services, and stronger law enforcement. Here are some strategies that can be done:

- *Improving Political Education*

One of the main steps to eradicate political clientelism in rural areas is to improve political education for villagers. This is not only limited to providing a basic understanding of their rights as voters, but also introducing the importance of integrity in the democratic process and how an ideal political system should function. Effective political education can be done through training programs, community discussions, or socialization from the government and civil society organizations. When villagers better understand how they can participate freely in the political process without pressure or the lure of material assistance, they will be more critical in assessing political promises that are often tied to clientelism practices. This understanding will strengthen their ability to reject offers of assistance that are conditional on political support, and encourage more genuine political participation based on the vision, work program, and integrity of the candidate. Thus, political education can be a powerful tool to reduce dependence on local patrons and restore democracy to its basic principles, namely freedom of choice and government accountability to the people.

- *Improving the Quality of Public Services*

The government must play an active role in ensuring that the basic needs of rural communities are met through the provision of quality and equitable public services. When the government succeeds in providing adequate infrastructure such as good roads, clean water, easily accessible health services, and quality education, people's dependence on assistance from politicians or local elites can be significantly reduced. With these needs met, villagers no longer feel they have to rely on local patrons who often use material assistance as a bargaining chip to gain political support. Instead, people will be freer to choose leaders based on the work programs and visions offered, not just promises of temporary assistance. A responsive government that is present through good public services will build public trust and close the space for clientelism practices that are detrimental to democracy at the local level.

- *Political Institutional Reform*

Strengthening transparency and accountability in political processes at the local level is an important step to reduce clientelism. Tighter oversight of the use of campaign funds can prevent politicians from misusing resources for personal or group purposes, such as buying votes or providing assistance only to their political supporters. Transparency in the management of public funds and campaigns allows the public to monitor whether the budget is used in accordance with applicable regulations. In addition, policies that ensure that social assistance and development projects are not politicized are essential. This means that aid must be distributed fairly and equitably, regardless of political affiliation or voter loyalty. Through stronger oversight by government agencies, civil society organizations, and the media, and the application of sanctions for

violators, clientelistic practices can be suppressed, thereby creating a healthier and more democratic political climate at the local level.

- *Strict Law Enforcement*

Clientelism is often accompanied by corruption and abuse of power, which damage the integrity of the political system and hinder community development. Therefore, strict law enforcement against politicians or local elites who are proven to be involved in clientelism is very important to create a deterrent effect and emphasize that such actions will not be tolerated. To that end, there needs to be clear regulations regarding expected political behavior, as well as a sanction mechanism that is applied consistently for each violation. This includes legal action against the recipient and giver of bribes, transparency in the investigation process, and supervision by a trusted independent institution. Thus, strong and fair law enforcement will not only send a signal to political actors not to engage in this bad practice, but will also increase public trust in the political process and strengthen the legitimacy of the government.

- *Village Economic Empowerment*

One of the main roots of clientelism practices in rural areas is the economic dependence of villagers on local elites, who often exploit this condition to gain political support. Therefore, empowering the village economy is a crucial step in overcoming this problem. Through integrated local business development programs, governments and relevant institutions can provide better access to capital for small entrepreneurs, as well as offer skills training to improve productivity and competitiveness. These initiatives will not only create new jobs, but also help villagers develop economic independence, so that they no longer feel they have to rely on handouts from politicians to meet their daily needs. With increased economic independence, communities will be better able to make independent political decisions and not be influenced by clientelistic offers of assistance, creating a healthier and more democratic political climate at the local level.

- *Election System Improvement*

Strengthening the electoral system is an important step in creating a fairer and more transparent political process, which in turn can help reduce vote buying and clientelism. By ensuring that citizens' votes are counted accurately and transparently, the public will have more confidence in the legitimate results of the election. One way to achieve this is through stronger election monitoring, in which civil society involvement is essential. Civil society can act as independent monitors that monitor every stage of the election, from campaigning to vote counting. By involving various elements of society, including non-governmental organizations and youth groups, the election process can be monitored more effectively. In addition, providing training and education on voter rights and the importance of clean elections will raise public awareness of their responsibilities in maintaining the integrity of the election. Thus, the combination of a strong electoral system, independent monitoring, and active community participation will create a cleaner political environment, minimize the potential for clientelism, and strengthen democracy at the local level.

Political Clientelism in Rural Areas and Its Impact on Regional Head Elections in Indonesia

The 2024 election is a very important momentum to conduct a deep reflection on the election process taking place in Indonesia. One phenomenon that attracts attention is the non-linear anomaly that emerged in the presidential and vice presidential elections. In this case, the Prabowo-Gibran candidate pair managed to win more than 50% of the vote, but the results did not reflect the same support for the supporting parties. This phenomenon raises questions about the dynamics of political support at the local level and how voters make decisions that may not be consistent with their party affiliations. This could be indicated as the impact of external factors that influence voters' mindsets, including the lure of programs offered by presidential candidates.

In addition, the sudden distribution of social assistance (bansos) by President Jokowi during the 2024 Election campaign was a dominant factor influencing voter preferences. People facing various economic and social challenges tend to pay more attention to candidates who can offer solutions that have a direct impact on their lives. In this context, the social assistance provided not only functions as financial assistance, but also as a political tool that strengthens voter loyalty. With concrete promises of assistance, presidential candidates can create direct relationships with the community, which in turn will influence their decisions when voting.

The effectiveness of clientelism practices in Indonesia contributes significantly to the phenomenon of non-linearity in elections, where voter support for a particular candidate is not always in line with the party affiliation that supports him. When local politicians succeed in building strong relationships with citizens through clientelism practices, such as providing direct favors or material promises, voters often vote based on the direct benefits they receive rather than loyalty to a political party. This creates a mismatch between the votes obtained by presidential candidates and the support for their supporting parties, as voters are more concerned with their immediate practical needs. As a result, this dynamic poses a challenge for political parties to understand and respond to the needs of the community in greater depth, thus reinforcing the cycle of clientelism practices and further distancing the electoral process from the principles of democracy that it should be.

Clientelism in rural Indonesia is a phenomenon that is closely related to power structures and resource distribution at the local level. Village elites, such as village heads, often act as extensions of the central government, with political closeness and direct ties to elites at the national level (Bebbington et al., 2006). This proximity gives them privileged access to resources that are not always closely monitored by central authorities. In this context, village elites have significant control over the distribution of aid, development projects, and programs designed to improve the welfare of rural communities. These conditions create a fertile environment for the practice of clientelism.

Village elites use their access to resources to build patron-client relationships with local residents. In this relationship, the village head or other elites provide economic assistance, jobs, or basic services in exchange for political support from the villagers. This assistance can take the form of government programs such as social assistance, village infrastructure development funds, or access to health and education services (Hadiz, 2010). For villagers who often live in difficult economic conditions and depend on these resources to meet their daily needs, political support for the village elite becomes an expected form of "payment."

In these rural political dynamics, communities often feel they have little choice but to support local elites who distribute aid. Even when citizens may disagree with the policies or political direction supported by village elites, their dependence on such assistance compels them to continue to provide political support (Scoones et al., 2018). This strengthens the power of village elites and makes clientelism practices increasingly difficult to eradicate. As a result, political processes in rural areas tend to be less democratic, as citizens' political choices are not based on rational policy or program preferences, but on the exchange of immediate benefits (Weingast, 1996).

In addition, these clientelism practices often involve wider political networks at the provincial and national levels. Village elites not only serve as distributors of central government aid, but also as intermediaries in a larger patronage network that includes political elites at various levels of government. In this way, clientelism practices not only strengthen the position of village elites at the local level, but also consolidate the power of political elites at the central level. Central elites use these networks to secure support at the grassroots level, ensuring their political and electoral stability (Vedeld, 2000).

Dependence on assistance from local elites also undermines citizens' efforts to demand systemic change or improvements in public services and governance. Because citizens depend on assistance provided by village elites, they may be reluctant to be critical of government failures to provide better public services or to solve more fundamental development problems. This creates a cycle of dependency that is difficult to break, where citizens continue to rely on temporary assistance from local elites rather than demanding policy changes that can provide long-term benefits (Aspinall & Rohman, 2017).

In the long run, these clientelism practices hamper the democratization process at the local level. Although political decentralization aims to give more power to local governments, clientelism practices actually hamper citizens' ability to effectively participate in the political process and influence policy. An ideal local democracy should allow citizens to elect leaders based on the policies and programs they offer, not on personal promises of favors. However, as long as dependence on village elites and clientelism practices persist, local democratic processes will continue to be distorted by these patron-client dynamics (Hilgers, 2012).

In the context of regional head elections, village heads play a very strategic role as a liaison between village residents and political elites at the regional level. The position of village heads who have authority over resource management at the local level, coupled with their closeness to the community, gives them extraordinary ability to direct the direction of their citizens' voices. Village heads are often considered to be the leaders who are closest to the daily needs of the community, so they have high legitimacy in the eyes of the residents (Nadjib et al., 2022). This gives village heads great political power to influence the political preferences of their citizens, particularly in the context of regional head elections. Political elites at the local level are well aware of this power and often seek to establish favorable relationships with village heads in order to gain significant electoral support in rural areas.

With the strategic position they have, village heads become actors who have high bargaining power with regional elites. They can use this position to negotiate things that benefit their position, either in the form of political support or additional access to local government resources. In some cases, village heads can even play the role of political brokers, negotiating the support of votes from their citizens with promises of political or economic benefits from local elites. This phenomenon not only strengthens the position of village heads as influential local elites, but also indicates that village heads can influence the political constellation in the region, and in some cases, can play a role in political dynamics at the national level. Thus, village heads have become part of the political elite who have significant influence in determining election results at the regional level and have the potential to influence broader political stability.

The results of an interview with the head of the successful team of one of the Sumedang Regent candidate pairs revealed that the role of the village head in mobilizing the community to support the candidate pair is very significant. The village head has direct access and emotional closeness to its residents, which makes them key figures in shaping political opinion in the village. They not only know the social map and dynamics of society, but also have a strong influence because they are considered leaders who understand local needs. In district head elections, village heads often play a key role in campaign initiatives at the grassroots level, using their social networks to direct political support to particular candidates. They can make personal approaches, hold informal meetings, and even use their influence to promise access to village development programs in exchange for political support. With this power, village heads become very important actors in winning votes in rural areas, making a crucial contribution to the final results of the district head elections.

Community leaders, such as religious figures, community leaders, or traditional leaders, are often the main targets of campaign teams in the political campaign process, especially in rural areas. Under the pretext of providing social assistance or certain facilities, campaign teams approach these leaders to gain political support. The assistance provided can be in the form of funds, materials, or development promises that are expected to create a positive impression of the candidate they support. However, behind these gifts, there is a clear expectation that these leaders will direct their communities or associations to support the candidate. Given the great influence of these leaders on the surrounding community, their involvement in politics has a significant impact, where community support is often tied to transactional political promises. This practice not only strengthens the clientelism network but also blurs the line between genuine social assistance and political manipulation, which often undermines a fair democratic process.

Based on the above rights, the author summarizes several impacts of political clientelism in villages which have several significant impacts on regional head elections, including:

- *Manipulation of Election Results*

Clientelism allows politicians or regional head candidates to exploit the economic and social dependence of village residents by providing material assistance, such as basic necessities, cash, or public facilities that are only promised in the run-up to elections. This assistance is often given in the hope of receiving political support in return, so that villagers feel obligated to vote for the candidate who provides the assistance, even though their actual preferences may be different. This creates conditions where voters' decisions are not entirely based on an assessment of the program or the quality of the candidates, but rather on social and economic pressures that lead them to support politicians who promise short-term benefits. As a result, election results no longer reflect the aspirations and free will of the people, but rather the result of political manipulation oriented to the interests of certain elites, eroding the integrity of democracy at the local level.

- *Strengthening Transactional Politics*

Regional head elections in villages are often colored by transactional politics, where the relationship between candidates and voters is more like an economic transaction than a genuine democratic process. Voters' votes are often traded for material rewards, such as cash, basic necessities, development assistance, or promises of other personal benefits. This practice tarnishes the basic principles of democracy, which should prioritize elections based on the vision, mission, and integrity of candidates, not on short-term gains. Transactional politics weakens the critical power of society, because voters who receive rewards tend to feel bound to the candidate even though they actually disagree with his program. As a result, the elected leadership is often not based on the real aspirations of the people, but on the candidate's ability to buy support, which ultimately undermines the legitimacy of the democratic process at the local level.

- *Dependence on Local Elites*

Clientelism reinforces villagers' dependence on local elites, such as village heads or community leaders, who have control over resources and access to economic assistance. In this system, local elites use their influence to channel material aid or promises to villagers in return for political support, rather than for the public interest. This creates a deep-rooted patron-client relationship, where citizens feel obligated to support local elites for the continuation of aid. As a result, citizens' political decisions are often not based on objective assessments of the qualities or visions of potential leaders, but rather on transactional relationships that benefit the elite. This not only undermines the democratic process, but also hinders inclusive development, as the policies taken are often more oriented towards the interests of a handful of elites than the interests of the wider community.

- *Undermining Election Integrity*

The practice of clientelism undermines the integrity of the electoral process because it shifts voters' focus from the quality of candidates or programs offered to the short-term rewards received, such as money, material assistance, or economic promises. Rather than choosing leaders based on competence, vision, or plans that can bring long-term progress to the village, voters tend to choose based on who provides immediate benefits. As a result, leaders elected through this method may not have the ability, commitment, or intention to improve the conditions of the village as a whole. This can lead to stagnation in village development, because decisions taken are more oriented towards personal or small group interests than the interests of the wider community. Ultimately, democracy becomes distorted, and rural communities lose the opportunity to have truly competent and integral leaders.

- *Weakening Democratic Participation*

When villagers are accustomed to clientelism practices, their political participation is more often influenced by economic needs or pragmatic interests than by a mature democratic consciousness. Rather than considering the quality of candidates or the long-term vision for the welfare of the village, they tend to vote based on the immediate benefits offered by politicians, such as cash or material assistance. This reduces the

interest of citizens to engage in more critical and substantive political processes, such as understanding the policies offered, evaluating the performance of candidates objectively, or demanding accountability. Over time, this pattern weakens the quality of democracy in the village, as voters no longer participate with the aim of building good governance, but rather to meet short-term needs. As a result, village politics becomes more transactional and opportunistic, prolonging the cycle of dependence on local elites and narrowing the space for more sustainable and inclusive political change.

Conclusion

Clientelism is a form of political corruption that operates within a patron-client relationship structure, where political elites exploit the economic and social dependency of society to secure political support through material promises or certain incentives. This relationship often occurs in rural areas, especially in agrarian areas, where the majority of citizens work as farmers who depend on local elites or patrons for protection and economic assistance. This dependence makes voters vulnerable to political manipulation and undermines the democratic process that is supposed to uphold free and independent political participation. Factors such as limited access to information, low political education, strong social culture, and economic instability strengthen the practice of clientelism, where villagers trust local patrons more than they trust a more inclusive democratic system. As a result, political competition depends more on the distribution of resources than on the work programs or visions offered by candidates. To overcome this phenomenon, comprehensive efforts are needed such as increasing political education, improving public services, and stricter law enforcement, so that people can reduce their dependence on patrons and choose more autonomously based on rational and sustainable considerations.

Political clientelism in rural Indonesia has a significant impact on regional elections, creating distortions in the ideal democratic process. One of the impacts is the manipulation of election results, where politicians exploit the economic dependence of citizens through the provision of material assistance to gain political support. This often causes citizens to vote based on the promise of short-term assistance, rather than on the quality or programs offered by the candidate. This practice also reinforces transactional politics, where voters' votes are exchanged for material rewards, such as cash or basic necessities, undermining the integrity of elections that should be based on the vision and integrity of candidates. Dependence on local elites, such as village heads who have access to aid and resources, also reinforces the practice of clientelism, where residents feel obligated to provide political support for the continuation of the aid. This patron-client relationship makes the democratic process in rural areas more difficult to change, as residents focus more on immediate benefits than demanding systemic changes in governance and public services.

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