

The Empty Ballot Movement as a Form of Protest Voting in the 2024 Brebes Regency Regional Election

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Abstrak

Fenomena kotak kosong pada Pemilihan Kepala Daerah (Pilkada) Kabupaten Brebes 2024 menjadi sorotan setelah memperoleh 341.407 suara (40,4%), sementara partisipasi pemilih hanya 58,27%, yang merupakan partisipasi terendah di Jawa Tengah. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan Gerakan Kotak Kosong sebagai bentuk protest voting menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan 15 informan, terdiri atas ketua gerakan, tokoh masyarakat, relawan, dan warga. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa gerakan ini muncul sebagai respons atas kekecewaan terhadap demokrasi lokal, yang dipicu oleh tiga faktor utama: dominasi oligarki yang menghadirkan calon tunggal melalui pemborongan partai politik; persepsi bahwa calon tunggal merepresentasikan dinasti politik karena berhubungan dengan mantan pejabat yang pernah terjerat korupsi; serta program harga bawang merah Rp13.000 yang dinilai merugikan petani. Gerakan Kotak Kosong berhasil menarik simpati masyarakat dan menjadi simbol protest voting terhadap praktik politik yang dianggap tidak demokratis.

Kata kunci: Demokrasi, Gerakan Kotak Kosong, Partisipasi Pemilih, Pilkada, Protest Voting

Abstract

The phenomenon of the empty ballot in the 2024 Regional Head Election (Pilkada) of Brebes Regency attracted significant public attention after receiving 341,407 votes (40.4%), while voter turnout reached only 58.27%, the lowest participation rate in Central Java. This study aims to describe the Empty Ballot Movement as a form of protest voting by employing a qualitative method involving 15 informants, consisting of the movement's leader, community leaders, volunteers, and residents. The findings reveal that the movement emerged as a response to dissatisfaction with local democracy, driven by three main factors: the dominance of oligarchic politics that produced a single-candidate election through the consolidation of political party support; the perception that the sole candidate represented a political dynasty due to connections with former officials previously implicated in corruption cases; and the proposed IDR 13,000 shallot price policy, which was perceived as harmful to farmers. The Empty Ballot Movement successfully garnered public sympathy and became a symbol of protest voting against political practices regarded as undemocratic.

Keywords: *Democracy, Empty Ballot Movement, Voter Participation, Regional Head Election (Pilkada), Protest Voting.*

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INTRODUCTION

The Empty Ballot phenomenon in the 2024 Regional Head Election (Pemilihan Kepala Daerah or Pilkada) in Brebes Regency has attracted considerable scholarly attention, as it reflects a high level of public rejection toward a political configuration that presented only a single candidate pair. The Empty Ballot received 341,407 votes, accounting for 40.4% of the total valid votes, indicating that a substantial proportion of voters not only exercised their voting rights but also expressed dissatisfaction with a democratic process perceived as insufficiently competitive. Meanwhile, voter turnout in the 2024 Pilkada in Brebes Regency reached only 58.27%, representing the lowest level of electoral participation in Central Java. This situation raises important academic questions regarding the quality of local democracy, the effectiveness of the candidate nomination mechanism, and the extent to which the political system is capable of providing competitive and representative leadership alternatives.

From an academic perspective, the Empty Ballot should not merely be understood as a consequence of the presence of a single candidate pair but also as an indication of the emergence of protest voting and a crisis of political representation at the local level. Strong support for the Empty Ballot suggests that citizens utilize the electoral mechanism provided by the electoral system to express criticism of political practices perceived as undemocratic. This phenomenon is not confined to developing countries but is also observed in advanced democracies, indicating that dissatisfaction with the political system constitutes a global issue.¹

The phenomenon of the high Empty Ballot vote warrants scholarly attention to better understand the factors driving the emergence of the Empty Ballot movement, the relationship between voting behavior and public trust in political institutions, and its implications for the quality of democracy and the legitimacy of local government in Indonesia. Low levels of political trust have been associated with a preference for protest parties. Several scholars argue that, in this way, protest parties indirectly contribute to the stability of electoral democracy by serving as a "safety valve" for political dissatisfaction.² Moreover, protest is most effective when it follows a pattern characterized by close interaction between the government and anti-government actors or the political opposition.³

Election observers frequently report that voters engage in protest voting. Protest voting refers to the act of casting a vote primarily to express dissatisfaction with candidates, political parties, or the existing political system, rather than to support a particular candidate.⁴ Within democratic systems, protest voting is often regarded as a form of political expression

¹ Subekti, D., Sutan, A. J., Nurmandi, A., Mutiarin, D., & Al-Hamdi, R. (2023). The protest voting behaviour among local voters in the 2020 Surakarta mayoral election. *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, 8(4), 840-854. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20578911231161910>

² Hooghe, M., & Dassonneville, R. (2018). A spiral of distrust: A panel study on the relation between political distrust and protest voting in Belgium. *Government and Opposition*, 53(1), 104-130. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2016.18>

³ Ellinas, A. A., & Lamprianou, I. (2024). Movement versus Party: The Electoral Effects of Anti-Far Right Protests in Greece. *American Political Science Review*, 118(2), 687-705. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055423000588>

⁴ Kselman, D., & Niou, E. (2011). Protest voting in plurality elections: a theory of voter signaling. *Public Choice* 148, 395-418. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-010-9661-2>

through which citizens voice their grievances when channels of political representation are perceived as closed or unresponsive.⁵ Regional identity also plays an important role in encouraging protest voting, as voters may perceive that their local or regional concerns receive insufficient attention from the central government. This suggests that, in addition to national-level factors, local political dynamics significantly influence voters' decisions to engage in protest voting.⁶

Protest voting should not be interpreted merely as an expression of political apathy; rather, it represents a form of critical political participation that reflects citizens' political awareness. Protest voting exhibits distinctive characteristics, particularly in local elections, where the phenomenon is more likely to occur because of the close relationship between public policies and citizens' everyday needs. Consequently, local elections are more susceptible to protest voting than national elections.⁷

Protest voting may also occur when voters cast blank, invalid, or spoiled ballots. In some cases, protest voting is organized and mobilized by political elites. Furthermore, several countries provide voters with the option to select "None of the Above" (NOTA), which is widely regarded as a form of protest voting.⁸ In addition, some voters choose the "None of the Above" option to reject all available candidates, indicating that none of the electoral alternatives aligns with their expectations. In this study, protest voting is defined on the basis of the motivations underlying voters' electoral

⁵ Magalhães, P. C. (2016). Economic evaluations, procedural fairness, and satisfaction with democracy. *Political Research Quarterly*, 69(3), 522-534. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912916652238>

⁶ Otjes, S., Stroebe, K., & Postmes, T. (2020). When voting becomes protest: Mapping determinants of collective action onto voting behavior. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 11(4), 513-521. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550619872482>

⁷ McAllister, I., & White, S. (2011). Political parties and democratic consolidation in post-communist societies. *Party Politics*, 17(2), 179-196. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068807073858>

⁸ Alvarez, R. M., Kiewiet, D. R., & Núñez, L. (2018). A taxonomy of protest voting. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 21, 135-154. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-050517-120425>

choices.⁹ More broadly, increasing levels of electoral abstention and invalid ballots, together with declining trust in political institutions across democratic countries, have been associated with socioeconomic status, political interest, political knowledge, and distrust of political institutions and authorities.¹⁰

From a normative perspective, protest voting presents an ambivalent phenomenon. On the one hand, it reflects a crisis of political representation, as candidates or political parties fail to meet citizens' expectations. On the other hand, protest voting demonstrates that citizens are not politically passive; rather, they actively express their dissatisfaction through electoral channels.¹¹ Political scientists have identified protest voting as a consequence of dissatisfaction with traditional political alternatives.¹²

Protest voting not only contributes to electoral campaigns but also facilitates the mobilization of grassroots support, which is often more difficult for traditional political parties to reach.¹³ From a democratic perspective, the Empty Ballot phenomenon represents both the exercise of democratic rights and an instrument of freedom of expression. It provides voters with an alternative electoral choice when only a single candidate pair is contesting the election. Moreover, as a democratic mechanism, the Empty Ballot can encourage political parties to return to their fundamental role of securing sustained public support by improving the quality, integrity, and qualifications of their candidates.¹⁴ More broadly, a range of political

⁹ Van der Brug, W., Fennema, M., & Tillie, J. (2000). Anti-immigrant parties in Europe: Ideological or protest vote? *European Journal of Political Research*, 37(1), 77-102. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.00505>

¹⁰ Plescia, C., Kritzinger, S., & Singh, S. P. (2023). Who would vote NOTA? Explaining a 'none of the above' choice in eight countries. *European Journal of Political Research*, 62(1), 118-134. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12497>

¹¹ Magalhães, P. C. (2016). Economic evaluations, procedural fairness, and satisfaction with democracy. *Political Research Quarterly*, 69(3), 522-534. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912916652238>

¹² Birch, S., & Dennison, J. (2019). How protest voters choose. *Party Politics*, 25(2), 110-125. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068817698857>

¹³ Hurriyah, H. (2019). The myth of civil society's democratic role: Volunteerism and Indonesian democracy. *Journal of Politics and Policy*, 4(2), 237-258.

¹⁴ Irawan, H. (2024). Pilihan tanpa kandidat: Mengupas fenomena kotak kosong Pilkada 2024 Lampung. *Siyasah: Jurnal Hukum Tata Negara*, 4, 194-214. <https://doi.org/10.32332/rs7w5y11>

phenomena, including anti-government shifts, declining voter turnout, protest voting, electoral realignment, and voter alienation, has increasingly been observed across different political contexts.¹⁵

Despite decades of scholarly debate on the concept of protest voting, the existing literature remains relatively limited and lacks consistency in both its conceptualization and analytical perspectives. As democratic systems face growing pressures, it has become increasingly important for political science research to reassess contemporary studies on protest voting and evaluate its broader implications for the state of democracy.¹⁶ The dynamics of protest voting and the involvement of civil society in local elections have received comparatively little scholarly attention. Research at the local level can provide richer and more context-specific insights into how these factors interact within smaller yet equally significant political settings.¹⁷ The presence of protest voting serves as an important signal for political parties and candidates to improve their strategies of political representation, foster healthier electoral competition, and formulate more inclusive public policies. At the same time, excessive reliance on civil society may blur the distinction between genuine civic advocacy and partisan political interests. Furthermore, the protest voting literature suggests that ideological orientations are expected to influence voters, although these effects are generally expressed through relatively moderate forms of political behavior.¹⁸

This study aims to explore in depth how the dynamics of protest voting and the involvement of civil society interacted during the 2024 Regional Head Election (Pilkada) in Brebes Regency. Previous studies have shown

¹⁵ Weber, T. (2011). Exit, voice, and cyclicity: A micrologic of midterm effects in European Parliament elections. *American Journal of Political Science*, 55(4), 907-922. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2011.00522.x>

¹⁶ Camatarri, S. (2020). Piecing the puzzle together: A critical review of contemporary research on protest voting. *Political Studies Review*, 18(4), 611-619. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478929919862149>

¹⁷ Haass, F., & Ottmann, M. (2022). The effect of wartime legacies on electoral mobilization after civil war. *The Journal of Politics*, 84(3), 1322-1336. <https://doi.org/10.1086/718976>

¹⁸ Engler, S. (2020). Centrist anti-establishment parties and their protest voters: more than a superficial romance? *European Political Science Review*, 12(3), 307-325. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773920000132>

that civil society can serve as a powerful force for political mobilization and advocacy, influencing voter behavior. Civil society organizations are often involved in campaigns to increase voter participation, promote political education, and encourage transparency throughout the electoral process.¹⁹

Focusing on this election provides an opportunity to examine directly how local factors, including region-specific issues and local political actors, shaped voter behavior and the strategies adopted by civil society organizations. This study is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon and its implications for the democratization process at the local level, while taking into account the unique political and social context of Brebes Regency, which is characterized by a diverse political and historical trajectory.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research approach using a case study design, as its primary objective is to develop an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of the Empty Ballot movement as a form of protest voting in the 2024 Regional Head Election (Pilkada) in Brebes Regency. Qualitative research is an exploratory process grounded in diverse inquiry methodologies.²⁰ A qualitative approach was chosen because it enables the exploration of the meanings, motivations, and socio-political experiences of citizens that cannot be adequately explained through numerical or statistical data alone, but instead require contextual and interpretive analysis. A case study design is particularly appropriate because the Empty Ballot phenomenon in Brebes represents a unique and context-specific case that warrants intensive examination within a particular temporal and geographical setting.

The primary data were collected through in-depth interviews with 15 informants selected using purposive sampling. The informants included the chairperson of the Empty Ballot Movement, who played a central role in organizing the movement; community leaders who were considered

¹⁹ Mlambo, V. H., Zubane, S. P., & Mlambo, D. N. (2020). Promoting good governance in Africa: The role of the civil society as a watchdog. *Journal of Public Affairs*, 20(1). <https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.1989>

²⁰ Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.

influential in shaping public opinion; volunteers directly involved in disseminating the Empty Ballot campaign; and members of the general public representing the voter base. The selection of these informants was based on their level of involvement, knowledge, and firsthand experience with the Empty Ballot phenomenon.

This study also utilizes secondary data obtained through observations of mass media coverage, including both print and online news sources, that documented the development of the Empty Ballot movement. Additional secondary data were collected from official documents, such as electoral regulations, official vote tabulation results, and other relevant archival records. These secondary sources served to corroborate the interview findings while also providing insights into how the Empty Ballot phenomenon was portrayed and perceived within the public sphere.

All collected data were analyzed using the interactive model developed by Miles and Huberman, which consists of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. During the data reduction stage, the researcher selected and filtered the data according to the research objectives. In the data display stage, the information was organized into narrative descriptions, matrices, and thematic categories to facilitate interpretation. Finally, the conclusion drawing and verification stage involved interpreting the data, identifying patterns and relationships, and formulating the study's findings. To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, this study employed source triangulation by comparing evidence obtained from interviews, media observations, and official documents. In addition, member checking was conducted by confirming the interview findings with the informants to ensure that the researcher's interpretations accurately reflected the participants' experiences and perspectives. Through these procedures, the study seeks to produce valid and reliable findings that provide a comprehensive understanding of the Empty Ballot movement as a form of protest voting within the context of local democracy in Brebes Regency.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Empty Ballot Movement in the 2024 Regional Head Election of Brebes Regency

The 2024 Regional Head Election (Pemilihan Kepala Daerah or Pilkada) in Brebes Regency was held on 27 November 2024. The election featured only a single candidate pair for the positions of Regent and Vice Regent of Brebes, namely Paramitha Widya Kusuma and Wurja, who were nominated with the support of all political parties holding seats in the Brebes Regency Regional House of Representatives (DPRD). However, the presence of a single candidate pair was not universally accepted by the public. This dissatisfaction was reflected in the emergence of the Empty Ballot Movement (Gerakan Kotak Kosong, hereafter Gertak).

The Empty Ballot Movement was initiated by community members, including former village heads and prominent local figures from several villages across Brebes Regency. The movement was led by Slamet Maryoko, widely known as Jarot, who served as the Chairperson of Gertak. He is a former Village Head of Randusanga Kulon Village, Brebes District, Brebes Regency. The movement also received support from influential informal political elites, including Kaji Likhun from Banjaratma and Cahrudin, a former member of the Brebes Regency Regional House of Representatives (DPRD) who served for three consecutive terms.

The Chairperson of the Empty Ballot Movement occupied a central position in the organization and coordination of the movement. According to the interview data, the Empty Ballot movement was understood as a collective response to the narrowing of political competition resulting from elite domination and the consolidation of political parties behind a single candidate pair. The Chairperson's role extended beyond organizational coordination to the construction of a political narrative that framed the Empty Ballot as a rational and dignified choice for politically conscious voters. This narrative emphasized that voting for the Empty Ballot constituted a deliberate political act aimed at safeguarding democratic integrity rather than merely expressing emotional dissatisfaction. These findings reinforce the argument that protest voting in Brebes was socially organized, although it was not institutionalized within the formal political system.

The emergence of the Empty Ballot Movement (GERTAK) was triggered by perceived imbalances in the local democratic process, characterized by the concentration of political elite support behind a single candidate pair. This situation substantially reduced the competitiveness of the election, as virtually all political parties formed a coalition to endorse the same candidates. Consequently, political competition became increasingly constrained, citizens were deprived of meaningful leadership alternatives, and the electoral process was less able to fulfill its democratic function as a mechanism for selecting political leaders. Within this context, GERTAK emerged as a form of collective civic response to democratic practices that were perceived as being more procedural than substantive.

The primary objective of the Empty Ballot Movement (GERTAK) was to advocate for the rerun of the regional head election so that citizens would have the opportunity to choose from more than one candidate pair. The movement maintained that a high-quality democracy requires open and fair political competition that provides voters with meaningful electoral alternatives. Accordingly, support for the Empty Ballot was understood not merely as a rejection of the sole candidate pair, but also as an effort to promote a more competitive, representative, and accountable democracy. Through this approach, the movement sought to ensure that regional head elections would generate stronger political legitimacy by offering voters a broader range of candidate choices.

Many citizens questioned the consolidation of support from all political parties behind a single candidate pair, a phenomenon that gave rise to public speculation regarding the factors underlying the nomination process, including possible financial considerations. Several informants described this phenomenon using the expression "buying up political parties" (*memborong partai*), referring to a situation in which nearly all political parties endorsed the same candidate pair, thereby eliminating opportunities for alternative candidates to compete. Nevertheless, this expression should be understood as reflecting public perceptions and criticism of the prevailing political dynamics rather than as an empirically verified conclusion.

The Empty Ballot Movement was financed through voluntary public contributions, one of which involved the purchase of campaign merchandise produced by the movement. This funding model reflects the

characteristics of a grassroots movement, in which the continuity of organizational activities does not depend on financial support from political elites or particular interest groups. Public contributions through the purchase of campaign materials served not only as a source of operational funding but also as a symbolic expression of political support and civic participation by individuals who identified with the movement's objectives.

Growing support for the Empty Ballot was influenced by citizens' increasing understanding of its meaning and function within the regional electoral system, as well as their critical evaluation of the background and qualifications of the competing candidates. This understanding encouraged voters to perceive the Empty Ballot not merely as a formal option on the ballot paper, but as a democratic instrument through which they could express their political preferences and dissatisfaction with an electoral contest that offered insufficient leadership alternatives. Consequently, the decision to vote for the Empty Ballot reflected a deliberate process of political judgment shaped by citizens' level of political literacy and their assessment of the quality of the nominated candidates.

Overall, the results of the 2024 Brebes Regency Pilkada reveal two closely intertwined dimensions. On the one hand, the sole candidate pair, Paramitha Widya Kusuma and Wurja, was legitimately declared the winner in accordance with the prevailing rules and procedures of electoral democracy. On the other hand, the substantial share of votes cast for the Empty Ballot signaled a significant expression of political dissatisfaction that cannot be overlooked. Support for the Empty Ballot can be interpreted as a form of public criticism of local democratic practices that were perceived as providing insufficient opportunities for meaningful political competition, particularly as a consequence of elite dominance, the strengthening of dynastic politics, and the limited availability of alternative leadership candidates. Therefore, the 2024 Brebes Regency Pilkada not only produced a formal electoral winner but also created an important opportunity for critical reflection on the quality of local democracy and the urgent need to reform political mechanisms so that they become more inclusive, competitive, and responsive to citizens' aspirations.

The Strategy of the Empty Ballot Movement in the 2024 Brebes Regency Regional Head Election

Although the sole candidate pair was officially declared the winner of the election, the proportion of votes cast for the Empty Ballot was remarkably high within the context of a single-candidate election. This result indicates that a substantial share of voters deliberately exercised their voting rights to convey a political message of rejection. The relatively strong support for the Empty Ballot reflects a collective expression of political dissatisfaction directed both at the dominance of the local political oligarchy and at a candidate who was perceived as not fully representing the aspirations of the public. Therefore, the Empty Ballot phenomenon in the 2024 Brebes Regency Pilkada should not be understood merely as a technical feature of the electoral system but rather as a symbolic form of protest against the limitations of local democracy.

The Empty Ballot Movement developed a structured mobilization strategy by establishing organizational networks across sub-districts (kecamatan) to serve as the foundation for coordination and movement consolidation. The creation of organizational teams in each sub-district demonstrates that the movement did not emerge spontaneously; instead, it evolved through a systematic process of organization aimed at mobilizing organizational resources, social networks, and volunteers. This finding is consistent with Resource Mobilization Theory, developed by John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, which argues that the success of a social movement largely depends on its capacity to organize and mobilize critical resources, including leadership, social networks, financial resources, volunteers, and communication channels. In the context of the Empty Ballot Movement, the establishment of sub-district-level teams demonstrates the movement's organizational capacity to coordinate campaign activities effectively and extend its reach to the village level.²¹

The movement's door-to-door campaign strategy, implemented through face-to-face engagement at the village level, reflects the importance of leveraging local social networks to foster citizens' political awareness. Interpersonal campaigning served not only to disseminate

²¹ McCarthy, J. D., & Zald, M. N. (1977). Resource mobilization and social movements: A partial theory. *American Journal of Sociology*, 82(6), 1212-1241.

information about the Empty Ballot voting option but also to cultivate political trust and strengthen the collective identity of the movement's supporters. This finding is consistent with the perspective of Charles Tilly, who argues that social movements emerge through processes of collective mobilization facilitated by social networks that enable people to organize collective action.²² Accordingly, the effectiveness of the movement's outreach depended not only on the political messages it conveyed but also on the strength of the social relationships connecting actors at the local level.

The use of billboards, banners, and various campaign materials demonstrates that the Empty Ballot Movement strategically utilized public spaces as arenas for constructing political identity. From the perspective of New Social Movement Theory, as developed by Alain Touraine and Alberto Melucci, movement symbols play a crucial role in creating a collective identity that distinguishes supporters from other political actors.²³ In this context, the Empty Ballot symbol came to represent more than an administrative option on the ballot; it evolved into a symbol of resistance against limited political competition and inadequate representation of citizens' aspirations for a more competitive democracy. Through billboards and campaign materials, the movement promoted a shared understanding that voting for the Empty Ballot constituted a legitimate form of political participation within a democratic system.

At the same time, the emergence of political vandalism can be understood as a manifestation of contentious politics, referring to political practices that arise when citizens face limited access to formal channels of political participation. According to Sidney Tarrow's concept of Political Opportunity Structure, the strategies adopted by social movements are shaped by the degree to which political opportunities are open or closed. When virtually all political parties endorsed a single candidate pair, thereby severely restricting electoral competition, some supporters of the movement sought alternative avenues through which to express their

²² Tilly, C. (1978). *From mobilization to revolution*. Addison-Wesley.

²³ Touraine, A. (1981). *The voice and the eye: An analysis of social movements*. Cambridge University Press; Melucci, A. (1989). *Nomads of the present: Social movements and individual needs in contemporary society*. Temple University Press.

political demands.²⁴ In this context, political vandalism may be interpreted as an expression of dissatisfaction with a political configuration perceived as failing to provide adequate opportunities for political representation. Nevertheless, from both normative and legal perspectives, such actions cannot be justified because they contravene the principles of public order and democratic ethics.

Furthermore, the emergence of the Empty Ballot Movement demonstrates how citizens were able to capitalize on the existing political opportunity structure. The configuration of a regional head election featuring only a single candidate pair created favorable conditions for the emergence of an alternative movement that utilized the Empty Ballot as a legitimate instrument of political resistance. From the perspective of Political Opportunity Structure, such an institutional arrangement constitutes an external factor that facilitates collective action. In other words, the Empty Ballot Movement emerged not only because of widespread public dissatisfaction but also because the electoral system itself provided a lawful channel through which citizens could express their opposition by voting for the Empty Ballot.

The strategy adopted by the Empty Ballot Movement can therefore be understood as a combination of resource mobilization, collective identity formation, and the strategic exploitation of political opportunity structures. These three theoretical perspectives suggest that the effectiveness of the movement depended not merely on the scale of public support but also on its organizational capacity to mobilize resources, cultivate political solidarity, and take advantage of opportunities embedded within the political system to organize collective action. This integrated perspective demonstrates that the Empty Ballot Movement represents an organized socio-political movement oriented toward expanding the space for political competition within local democracy.

The Empty Ballot Movement in the 2024 Brebes Regency Pilkada can be understood as an institutionalized form of protest voting within an electoral democratic system. This phenomenon demonstrates that high levels of political participation do not necessarily correspond to high levels

²⁴ Tarrow, S. (2012). *Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

of political legitimacy for the elected candidate. Rather, the substantial proportion of Empty Ballot votes serves as an important indicator of the tension between the formal procedures of democracy and citizens' demands for a more substantive, competitive, and representative democratic process. Accordingly, the findings of this study underscore the urgent need to reform political recruitment mechanisms, strengthen the competitive function of political parties, and create healthier opportunities for electoral opposition as essential prerequisites for improving the quality of local democracy in the future

The Empty Ballot Movement as a Form of Protest Voting

The Empty Ballot Movement (GERTAK) in the 2024 Brebes Regency Pilkada demonstrates that support for the Empty Ballot should not be interpreted as an expression of political apathy, but rather as a form of protest voting. From the perspective of Anderson and Mendes, protest voting refers to electoral behavior in which citizens use their votes to express dissatisfaction with political actors, political parties, or the quality of democratic competition.²⁵ Voting for the Empty Ballot is not intended to secure the victory of a particular candidate; instead, it serves as a mechanism for communicating a political message to the elite that the ongoing democratic process is perceived as failing to uphold the principles of political representation and fair competition. The findings of this study indicate that GERTAK emerged from widespread public concern over the consolidation of support by all political parties behind a single candidate pair, leaving voters without meaningful political alternatives. This situation was widely perceived as a democratic imbalance, triggering collective action in which the Empty Ballot was promoted as a symbol of opposition to the single-candidate election.

From the perspective of Hirschman's Exit, Voice, and Loyalty theory, support for the Empty Ballot represents an act of voice—an effort by citizens to express criticism of the political system without withdrawing from the democratic process.²⁶ Unlike electoral abstention, which

²⁵ Anderson, C. J., & Mendes, S. M. (2006). Learning to lose: Election outcomes, democratic experience and political protest potential. *British Journal of Political Science*, 36(1), 91-111.

²⁶ Hirschman, A. O. (1970). *Exit, voice, and loyalty: Responses to decline in firms, organizations, and states*. Harvard University Press.

represents an exit from political participation, supporters of GERTAK continued to exercise their voting rights as a means of voicing their objections to the configuration of the Pilkada contest. This is reflected in the movement's primary objective of advocating for a rerun of the regional head election so that citizens would be able to choose from a more diverse set of candidates. In this sense, the Empty Ballot functioned as a corrective mechanism directed at a procedural form of democracy that was perceived as failing to provide meaningful political competition. These findings suggest that citizens did not reject the institution of regional head elections itself; rather, they challenged the quality of political representation produced by the candidate nomination process.

The emergence of GERTAK can also be explained through Sidney Tarrow's concept of Political Opportunity Structure.²⁷ Tarrow argues that social movements develop when political opportunities create favorable conditions for citizens to engage in collective action. In the context of the 2024 Brebes Regency Pilkada, the electoral regulations, which retained the Empty Ballot as a voting option in single-candidate elections, created an institutional channel through which citizens could legally express their political protest via the ballot box. GERTAK capitalized on this political opportunity by establishing organizational networks across sub-districts, conducting village-to-village outreach, utilizing billboards and social media, and engaging in communication with electoral management bodies. Notably, the movement had already begun to take shape before the official nomination of the sole candidate pair, as information circulated that all political parties intended to endorse the same candidates. This finding demonstrates that GERTAK was not a spontaneous movement but rather an organized form of collective action that strategically exploited the political opportunities embedded within the electoral system.

Furthermore, citizens' motivation to vote for the Empty Ballot was influenced not only by the presence of a single candidate pair but also by their evaluation of the quality of the candidates and the political elites who supported them. Many informants reported that public dissatisfaction stemmed from the perception that all political parties had neglected their

²⁷ Tarrow, S. (2012). *Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

representative function by endorsing the same candidate pair. In addition, perceptions emerged regarding transactional political practices, which some informants described using the expression "buying up political parties" (*memborong partai*). However, this characterization reflects public perceptions rather than an empirically verified finding. At the local level, issues concerning the candidates' track records, allegations of corruption, the high cost of politics, fluctuations in shallot prices, and inadequate infrastructure were repeatedly emphasized throughout GERTAK's campaign. From the perspective of protest voting theory, these findings indicate that support for the Empty Ballot represented the cumulative outcome of citizens' negative evaluations of both political elites and the quality of local democracy, rather than merely a rejection of the individual candidate.

The Empty Ballot Movement in Brebes can be understood as a manifestation of protest voting arising from citizens' dissatisfaction with the quality of local democracy. Support for the Empty Ballot did not represent an expression of political apathy; rather, it constituted a form of corrective political participation directed at a candidate nomination process perceived as failing to provide meaningful leadership alternatives. By exercising their voting rights in favor of the Empty Ballot, citizens sought to convey a clear message to political parties and local elites that democracy should not be judged solely by its adherence to formal electoral procedures. Instead, it must also ensure open political competition, meaningful political representation, and accountability in the process of political recruitment. Accordingly, GERTAK illustrates the transformation of the Empty Ballot from a mere administrative option on the ballot paper into a symbol of citizens' political resistance against democratic practices perceived as having lost their substantive competitive character.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the 2024 Regional Head Election (*Pilkada*) in Brebes Regency reflects a fundamental challenge to local democracy: the erosion of electoral competition resulting from the presence of a single candidate pair supported by all political parties. This situation placed voters in a context where meaningful political alternatives were absent, allowing the Empty Ballot to evolve from a merely technical

electoral option into a substantive vehicle for political expression. The substantial number of votes cast for the Empty Ballot indicates that a significant proportion of voters consciously and actively exercised their electoral rights to express opposition to a local political configuration perceived as undemocratic, oligarchic, and lacking meaningful political representation. The findings of this study reinforce the understanding that support for the Empty Ballot constituted a rational, organized, and socially grounded form of protest voting, shaped by citizens' socio-economic experiences and political dissatisfaction. This support was neither sporadic nor driven solely by emotion; rather, it emerged through a social process involving key actors, including movement leaders, community leaders, volunteers, and ordinary citizens as the electoral base. The interaction among these actors demonstrates that protest voting in Brebes represented a collective response to a crisis of political representation rather than an individual deviation from established electoral norms.

Although the Empty Ballot Movement did not alter the formal outcome of the election, its political significance should not be underestimated. The substantial Empty Ballot vote serves as a strong indicator of the tension between procedural democracy, which adheres to formal electoral rules, and citizens' demands for a more substantive, competitive, and accountable democratic process. Accordingly, this study argues that high voter turnout should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of robust political legitimacy unless it is accompanied by meaningful electoral choice and effective political representation. More broadly, the Empty Ballot phenomenon in the 2024 Brebes Regency Pilkada illustrates that local elections function not only as mechanisms for selecting political leaders but also as arenas for the articulation of citizens' political criticism and resistance. These findings underscore the urgent need to reform candidate recruitment mechanisms, strengthen the competitive role of political parties, and create healthier opportunities for electoral opposition as essential prerequisites for enhancing the quality of local democracy in Indonesia.

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