

Emotionally charged or politically rational? The preferences of digital users for the presidential candidates

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ABSTRACT

Background: YouTube's impact on shaping voters's preferences during Indonesian presidential candidates is undeniably significant. As the second-most-used platform, its presence has transformed the communication model into a participatory one. However, as in any democratic climate, are these preferences driven by rational considerations or purely emotional factors? **Objective:** We explored how user comments on YouTube contribute to the construction of presidential candidate representation. We focused on the main framework, digital discourses, and shift patterns of digital user engagement between July and August 2023. **Methods:** We used qualitative content analysis and encoded comments from 20 political videos related to Ganjar, Prabowo, and Anies into eleven thematic categories. These categories are then analyzed through frequency mapping, word visualization (wordcloud), and cluster analysis. **Results:** We found that attributes related to intelligence, leadership, and change were consistently emphasized by digital users. The candidates who are perceived to be cognitively capable and reform-oriented were preferred by digital users. Meanwhile, problems related to corruption and race (SARA) remain, although they have decreased. We found that emotionally charged framing discourses, which in previous periods had proven effective in mobilizing political support, are now showing a decline in appeal, particularly among active digital users who tend to judge leadership in a more rational manner. **Conclusion:** We argue that YouTube serves as a participatory political landscape where user comments actively reshape the representation of candidates. This clearly challenges traditional charismatic authority and shows a shift in public expectations towards a rational-legal leadership. **Implications:** Given the tendency for political legitimacy to be determined by media logic, the candidates's representations must take into account the public's interests. This situation underscores a change in expectations of political legitimacy. It should remind us that people discuss non-media issues through media: social, economic, and political.

Keywords: YouTube; public perception; representation; digital discourse; politics

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INTRODUCTION

We have always held the view that contemporary Indonesian electoral politics cannot be understood only through institutional or policy-based frameworks. As Indonesia approaches the 2024 presidential election, we observe how political legitimacy, religious symbolism, and collective emotional memory remain central in shaping the candidate's portrayal. This means that how to present the image of the candidates in the public sphere as a legitimate representation is an important moment in the competition to gain power. As noted previously by Aspinall (2016) and Cocker and Cronin (2017), such representations reflect what voters perceive to be in tune with their own social experiences. Arnesen and Peters (2018) refer this tuning to one's experiences to empirical legitimacy which means what citizens believe is legitimate. Through research on citizens in Norway, they observed that citizens's acceptance of political decisions is shaped not only by outcomes, but by who makes them and how they are elected. This means that the candidates in the Indonesian presidential election cannot overlook the social discourses that are taking place, particularly in the digital sphere. This is very important to us because it concerns not only representation but also the power that underlies it. This is to say that strategically these representational efforts are actually to mediate the interaction between power and legitimacy. This, following Marcinkowski & Steiner (2014), is what is

referred to as media logic where power operates not only through formal authority but also through how citizens believe the candidates are legitimate. It is no surprise then when political actors tried to present their candidates in such a way that their images become sensational and bombastic (Lilleker, 2019; Russmann et al., 2019).

Such representations therefore gain influence precisely because they strengthen and legitimize existing power relations. It is no wonder that the political actors behind the candidates are actively shaping how they are portrayed, and symbolized. On this relationship between representation and power, Bergem (2018) give a note, 'the power to adjust the representation as its own', which means allowing representation to generate and legitimize its authority. This view is further reinforced by Torkington & Ribeiro's analysis (2019) which states that representation itself is not neutral but is strongly influenced by the dominant ideology. Both Bergem and Torkington-Ribeiro show how, through a discursive process, the candidates finally present themselves, allowing the public to recognize and interpret political messages through symbols, narratives, and performative practices. Unfortunately, the personality of a presidential candidate is never fully transparent or immediately understandable to the people. Digital users interpret political figures through their prior knowledge, cultural assumptions, and social experiences. Thus, representation remains inseparable from the cultural and social

aspects that shape the candidate's identity, public image, and the meaning attributed to the candidates (Auxier & Vitak, 2019).

In the context of digital media such as YouTube, this process of representation is now more transparent. Political engagement is no longer limited to institutional actors or elite media but increasingly involves digital citizens who create alternative spaces for participation. This clearly challenges conventional communication models from top to bottom. Like McCosker (2014) explains that online commentary helps democratize political engagement by allowing ordinary users to debate, question, and reinterpret political messages in a public environment, which is increasingly visible, and increasingly interactive. In Indonesia, especially since Reform In the 1998 period, this participatory dynamic was strengthened by the development of social media and increased civil society involvement (Ali & Eriyanto, 2021). However, this potential for democratization seems to be running in tandem with an increasingly intensified representation strategy since the 2014 elections. In this strategy, Andriyendi et al and Widodo et al has observed that personal attributes and symbolic appeal are increasingly emphasized in ways that actually push towards populism. A movement that obscures the political visions and political agendas of candidates, which is the appeal of personal ((Andriyendi et al., 2023; Widodo et al., 2022).

Viewed from a critical point, the framing of

Indonesian presidential candidates often serves as an attitude of understanding or expression of resistance to certain organizations, ideologies, or social groups. Some experts have noted that this pattern persisted during the 2019 election (Ikasari et al., 2020; Sakti & Meindrasari, 2023; Silviana, 2019). This means that the developing narrative tends to place candidates as representatives of certain interests, so that political competition and the existence of resistance or support actually reflect social and economic divisions in society (Syam et al., 2020; Putera et al., 2020). The candidates become the main players either for support or opposition. And this depends on the point of view of different socioeconomic groups. In this point, research by Ali and Eriyanto (2021) and Panuju (2019). Their analysis provides evidence that the 2019 election marks a moment when the digital sphere increasingly resembles homogeneous reproductive space (echo chamber). That is, digital users are mostly exposed to information that corroborates their previous political views. It is also inseparable from the algorithmic curation and circulation of partisan content, those who support one of the candidates. As a result, this further narrows the perspective of discussion, deepens political segmentation and limits opportunities for cross-group dialogue. In other words, the dynamics in the digital space have become intensified by the rapid growth of social media use. The problem is that social media tends to favor content that triggers a strong emotional response over

more nuanced policy discussions. Under such conditions, Tran et al. (2022) provides a clear warning: disagreement and dissent, which naturally function as a diversity in a democracy, are only becoming a source of polarization.

Does the previous political dynamic have similar nuances for the 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election? The months from June 2023 to September 2023 reveal the complex dynamics of political change ahead of the 2024 presidential election (Setiawan & Tomsa, 2023). Various initiatives were carried out by political actors to provide an overview and perspective to the public regarding the competencies and qualifications of each candidate. Here, the presidential candidates began to use slogans that were clearly intended to convey an idea, attract attention, and create an impression of closeness. In other words, the candidates strategically tried to create a slogan that is emotionally appealing to the public and sets them apart from other candidates.

On the one hand, identification through this slogan is part of an effort to capture perceptions in society and use them for political promotion

strategies. This is necessary considering that this identification function is as a diagnostic tool (Roberts, 2024) aims to read public sentiment and as a tool of strategic instruments (Nurohmah & Rozak, 2024) . This identification is also intensified because ahead of the 2024 election, YouTube has become one of the platforms to display candidate representations. This is not surprising, because YouTube’s platform ranks second among the most used communication platforms in Indonesia during 2021-2024 (see Table 1). Although different from Facebook, which has proven to offer a strategic advantage in regional political communication (Moekahar et al., 2022), several studies have shown that YouTube is one of the important mediums to represent political leadership. For instance, Lee’s study (2019) about online comments on YouTube web series Lauren (WIGS), showing how entertainment media can function as an emotional public space in democratic settings. His analysis shows that user comments turn out to be more than just reactions to content. That means user comments can stimulate constructive debate, encourage political

Table 1 Top social media and messaging platforms in Indonesia from 2021 to June 2024

Rank	2021		2022		2023		2024	
	Brand	For news						
1	WhatsApp	60%	WhatsApp	54% (-6)	WhatsApp	51% (-3)	WhatsApp	46% (-5)
2	YouTube	46%	YouTube	46% (-)	YouTube	48% (+2)	YouTube	41% (-7)
3	Facebook	42%	Facebook	44% (+2)	Facebook	38% (-6)	Facebook	35% (-3)
4	Instagram	38%	Instagram	37% (-1)	Instagram	37% (-)	Instagram	29% (-8)
5	Twitter	22%	Twitter	20% (-2)	TikTok	22% (+6)	TikTok	29% (+7)
6	Telegram	18%	TikTok	16% (+5)	Twitter	21% (+1)	Twitter	12% (-9)

Source: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2024/indonesia>

criticism, and contribute to forms of social cohesion. This is similar to what was observed by Sohal and Kaur (2018) in their analysis of political advertisements during Elections to the Parliament of India. According to them, the candidates often rely on carefully displayed visual impressions. Why? Because according to this study, the use of such strategies is shaped by voter pessimism rooted in massive corruption and communal conflicts in society. Following above analysis, the digital media environment allows for political involvement but at the same time also limits the democratization process through the construction of the representation of candidates that is played strategically and emotionally.

RESEARCH METHODS

In this current paper, we conducted analysis of how YouTube's comments reflect public preferences related to political leadership. To this point, we paid attention to the qualities, values, attributes and expectations that digital users associate with the candidates. So, in this study, user comments are understood as an indicator of social sentiment. That means we consider user comments not only reflect individual opinions, but also as the public narrative about presidential candidates in Indonesia's digital political dynamics.

We used comments from a selected set of YouTube videos to do our analysis. We gathered information over the course of two months, from July to August 2023. Then, we chose

videos based on two criteria: how many people watched them (popularity) and recency, limited to content published in July and August 2023. We intended this strategy to capture the ongoing public discussion. When searching for videos, we were guided by several keywords that refer to Ganjar, Prabowo, and Anies as presidential candidates. We ended up finding 20 videos with nine videos at the end of July and eleven videos at the end of August.

After collecting data (see Table 2), we organized the videos by month and candidate, resulting in six analytical categories: Ganjar's video (July and August), Prabowo's video (July and August), and Anies's video (July and August). This categorization helps facilitate systematic comparisons and supports later stages of analysis. The last phase involves encoding all user comments in relation to the selected video. Through this process, we found eleven corpus items (see Table 3). This corpus contains themes that are important in understanding how presidential candidates are seen, interpreted and evaluated in digital discourse. In other words, the corpus serves as an indicator of the sentiment expressed by digital users regarding the representation of presidential candidates. In addition, this corpus also offers a solid foundation for further analysis and interpretation of data.

Table 2 List of Featured YouTube Videos

No	Title	Duration	Count View	Channel
JULY 2023				
1	Jawaban Ganjar Pranowo, Anies Baswedan Saat Ditanya Soal Pembangunan, Indonesia Ganjar Pranowo and Anies Baswedans answers IKN development questions	3:57	1.3M	KompasTV
2	[FULL] Pidato Adu Gagasan Ganjar, Anies, and Prabowo di Rakernas Apeksi (2023) [FULL] Anies and Prabowo's Brainstorming Speech at the 2023 Apeksi National Meeting.	1:43:40	1.1M	KompasTV
3	[FULL] Gibran di Antara Ganjar dan Prabowo, Pilih Mana? ROSI [FULL] Gibran versus Prabowo: Which is Better? ROSI	45:21	607 K	KompasTV
4	SIAPAKAH KETURUNAN TERBAIK: Silsilah Keluarga Calon Presiden, Indonesia; Siapa Paling Layak, Indonesia Who is the best-bred? Family Tree of Indonesia's Presidential Candidate Who Is Most Worthy?	28:14	554 K	Daftar Populer
5	Menjelang Pemilu 2024, Ini Rangkuman Hasil 18 Survei Terbaru Capres 2024 selama Tiga Bulan Terakhir Ahead of the 2 General Elections, this is a Summary of the Results of Recentest Surveys of 2024 Presidential Candidaover for the Last 3 Months	7:56	544 K	TribunNews
6	LIVE TURKI! ANIES PULANG HAJI, LANGSUNG UMUMKAN GATOT CAWAPRES LIVE TURKEY! ANIES RETURNS TO HAJJ, IMMEDIATELY ANNOUNCES A GATOT VICE PRESIDENT!	20:34	1.3M	Refly Harun
7	JOKOWI DI "SIMPANG JALAN" // ANIES MELENGGANG?? Jokowi at the Crossroads of the Road??	1:55:41	1.2M	Indonesia Lawyers Club
8	Luhut Bicara Gantikan Ketum Golkar Airlangga hingga di Balik Pertemuan Jokowi, Surya Paloh ROSI Luhut Talks to Replace General Chief Piranga at Behind Jokowi Meeting: Surya Paloh ROSI	51:08	1M	KompasTV
9	VIRAL ANAK INDIGO YANG RAMALANNYA SELALU TEPAT!! "PRESIDEN INDONESIA 2024 ADALAH....!! VIRAL INDIGO KID WHOSE PREDICTIONS ARE ALWAYS RIGHT! ! "THE PRESIDENT OF INDONESIA 2024 IS....!!" □	39:51	1.8M	
AUGUST 2023				
1	[FULL] Ganjar-Anies vs. Prabowo-Gibran, Siapa Menang Pilpres, 2024? ROSI [FULL] Ganjar-Anies and Prabowo-Gibran: Who wins the 2024 Presidential Election? ROSI	50:44	521 K	KompasTV
2	BEREBUT CINTA JOKOWI SIAPA YANG MENANG? JOKOWI'S LOVE FIGHT OVER, WHO WINS?	1:49:25	675 K	Indonesia Lawyers Club
3	PDP EPS 23-PAK GANJAR PUNYA TRIK MENANG PEMILU PDP EPS 23-PAK GANJAR HAS A TRICK TO WIN THE ELECTION	38:32	2M	Kaesang Pangarep by G. K. Hebat
4	Informasi A1: Dijegal Logistik Dihambat? Ini Jawaban Anies Baswedan Episode 2 Information A1: Cut off? Logistics hampered? This is Anies Baswedan's Answer Episode 2	1:24:24	715 K	kumara
5	[FULL] Kala Anies Baswedan 'Dihujani' Pertanyaan dari Mahasiswa hingga Dosen, FISIP, UI [FULL] Anies Baswedan was 'bombarded' with questions from students to FISIP UI lecturers.	1:26:55	1.1M	KompasTV
6	DESAK ANIES Tanya Jawab Masyarakat dengan Anies Baswedan ANIES URGED Social Q&A with Anies Baswedan	59:32	182 K	KompasTV

Continued

7	Aksi Prabowo Larang Anaknya Injak Karpet Merah Istana, and Ajudan Lompat Bak Kijang Prabowo's Action Forbids His Son from Stepping on the Palace's Red Carpet, Adjutant Jumping Like a Deer	2:24	902 K	Merdeka.com
8	BREAKING NEWS: Airlangga Hartarto Dilaporkan ke Mahkamah Partai Buntut Dukung Prabowo BREAKING NEWS: Airlangga Hartarto Supports Court Tail Party in Thailand	13:45	992 K	KompasTV
9	Golkar-PAN Resmi Dukung Prabowo di Pilpres, 2024. Anies: Kami Bismillah Jalan Terus. Golkar-PAN Officially Supports Prabowo in 2024 Presidential Election: Anies: We 'Bismillah' Continue to Go	4:35	94 K	KompasTV
10	[FULL] Nasdem: Yenny Cocok jadi Wakil Anies ROSI [FULL] Nasdem: Yenny is a suitable Anies deputy ROSI	46:24	810 K	KompasTV
11	Pilpres: Anies, Ganjar, and Prabowo. The Final Round: Ganjar Pranowo Abraham Samads SPEAK UP Presidential Election: Anies, Ganjar, Prabowo. The Final Round: Ganjar Pranowo Abraham Samads SPEAK UP	36:20	749 K	Abraham Samad SPEAK UP,

Source: Research Results, 2024

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After encoding the digital user's comments into eleven corpus, see Table 3, we then used word visualization (wordcloud) to visually represent and analyze the textual data. For us, this visual data can provide an approach to investigate emerging patterns and themes. Here, we applied segmentation with code analysis. That means we assigned some code to a single

sentence or into a document. In this process, we found intelligence to be the most prominent theme or discourse of digital users. After that, following behind intelligence are themes related to change, honesty, and regime. These patterns show that digital users are actually evaluating all three presidential candidates, especially in terms of political intelligence. Expectations

Table 3 Segments with code

	Frequency	Percentage
Intelligence	2651	27.56
Leadership	2604	27.07
Changes	1218	12.66
Honesty	839	8.72
Races	804	8.36
Corruption	770	8.00
Determination / assertiveness	303	3.15
Development	230	2.39
Religion	115	1.20
Fear	52	0.54
Regime	33	0.34
QUANTITY	9619	100.00

Source: Research Results, 2024

regarding change and ethical behavior (such as determination, corruption) apparently occupy a less important position. Interestingly, we also found that race appears in the political discourse of the candidates. This indicates that issues related to SARA (ethnicity, religion, race, and intergroup relations) continue to shape political discourse and have not completely disappeared from electoral competition. On the other hand, our results also showed that references to religion and regime seem to be losing interest from digital users. We suspect that users's attention seems to be shifting more and more to concerns about corruption and the assertiveness or determination of the candidates. We identify that this shift may be related to other expectations

around development. For more details, we will cover this in the discussion section.

To deepen the interpretation of the previously identified codes, we created charts with the intention of visually summarizing and distinguishing each category. We summarized the accompanying descriptions from the process of reading the comments contained in the 20 YouTube videos (see Table 4). Interestingly, we observed that user comments directed at specific presidential candidates revealed different patterns of emphasis. As illustrated in Table 5, intelligence emerged as a particularly prominent attribute in the comments about Anies, a tendency that was also evident, albeit less strongly, across the other candidates. It

Table 4 Description of each code

Coding	Description
Leadership	Leadership refers to holding formal authority accompanied by the responsibility to guide, direct, and represent a group or organization, particularly in the context of Indonesian politics.
Intelligence	Intelligence is generally associated with political competence and skills, including the ability to make informed decisions, respond to complex challenges, and adapt to changing conditions. In user discourse, these attributes are closely related to public trust and perception of effective governance.
Corruption	Corruption is commonly understood to involve unethical and dishonest practices that compromise public accountability. It is defined as the abuse of official authority or position for personal gain.
Races	It is a socially constructed category in which individuals are classified based on perceived physical characteristics. Sometimes, it gives rise to differences leading to racist behavior.
Honesty	It is understood as a commitment to integrity, trust, and principled behavior regardless of any situation.
Changes	It is an abstract concept intended to shift toward a hopefully better state. Regardless of how it is implemented, this concept has become political jargon that has generated a lot of backlash.
Determination	This represents a public preference for leaders who are uncompromising in their approach to injustice. They are considered capable and confident in providing solutions, especially to systemic problems such as corruption.
Development	This concept refers to what was lacking in the previous governance and will be improved in the next one, especially in relation to economic, social, or infrastructural conditions.
Regime	This term refers to the dominance of a leader or the dominant influence of certain political groups who, in every policy-making process, do not pay attention to the aspirations that arise from society.
Religion	This is a political concept that is used and framed in such a way that any political decisions and actions are always interpreted within the framework of divine morality. Sin, Heaven and Hell, which are the language of religion, are forced into political fragility.
Fear	This refers to a psychological state in which anxiety and restlessness arising from past bad experiences can recur.

Source: Research Results, 2024

Table 5 User Response to Anies, Prabowo and Ganjar based on Code Segments

Anies					
	July			August	
	f	%		f	%
Leadership	1013	25.22	Intelligence	1115	38.13
Intelligence	924	23.01	Leadership	925	31.63
Change	594	14.79	Change	349	11.94
Corruption	322	8.02	Honesty	227	7.76
Race	270	6.72	Corruption	213	7.28
Honesty	260	6.47	Race	95	3.25
Determination (c)	220	5.48	Regime (a)	0	0
Development (e)	213	5.3	Fear (b)	0	0
Religion (d)	115	2.86	Determination (c)	0	0
Fear (b)	52	1.29	Religion (d)	0	0
Regime (a)	33	0.82	Development (e)	0	0
TOTAL	4016	100	TOTAL	2924	100
Prabowo					
	July			August	
	f	%		f	%
Leadership	755	25.57	Intelligence	378	28.97
Intelligence	618	20.93	Leadership	292	22.38
Race	403	13.65	Change	200	15.33
Change	222	7.52	Corruption	199	15.25
Corruption	221	7.48	Honesty	153	11.72
Determination (c)	185	6.26	Race	83	6.36
Development (e)	182	6.16	Regime (a)	0	0
Honesty	167	5.66	Fear (b)	0	0
Religion (d)	115	3.89	Determination (c)	0	0
Fear (b)	52	1.76	Religion (d)	0	0
Regime (a)	33	1.12	Development (e)	0	0
TOTAL	2953	100	TOTAL	1305	100
Ganjar					
	July			August	
	f	%		f	%
Leadership	897	28.54	Intelligence	363	26.44
Intelligence	768	24.44	Leadership	302	22
Honesty	276	8.78	Change	222	16.17
Race	243	7.73	Honesty	188	13.69
Corruption	207	6.59	Corruption	176	12.82
Determination (c)	196	6.24	Race	122	8.89
Development (e)	178	5.66	Regime (a)	0	0
Change	178	5.66	Fear (b)	0	0
Religion (d)	115	3.66	Determination (c)	0	0
Fear (b)	52	1.65	Religion (d)	0	0
Regime (a)	33	1.05	Development (e)	0	0
TOTAL	3143	100	TOTAL	1373	100

Source: Research Results, 2024

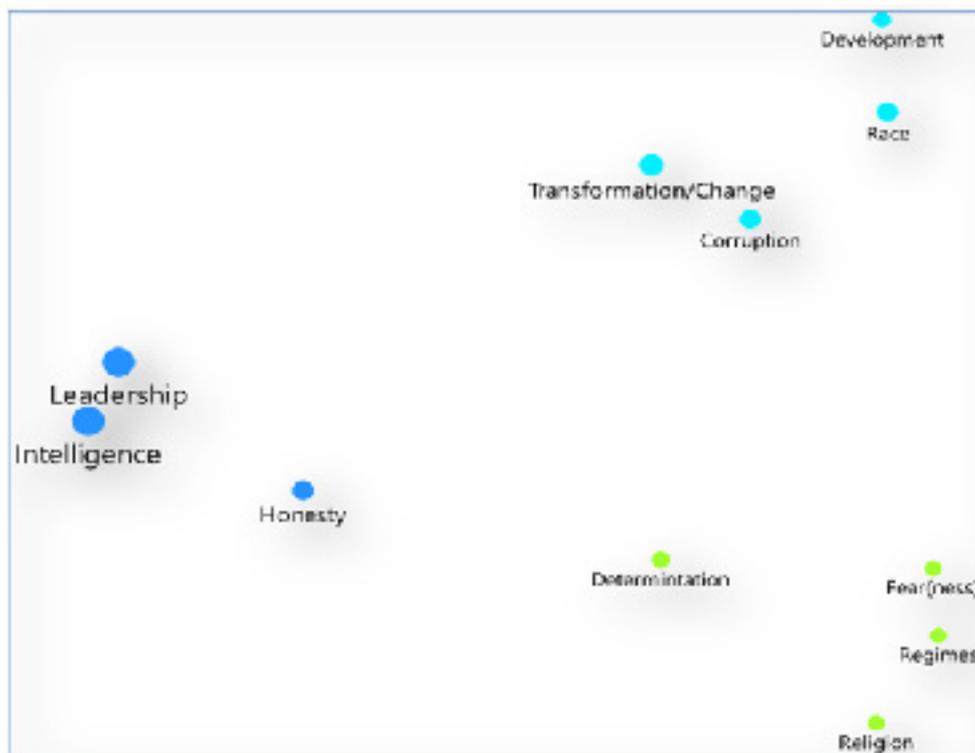
Note: f = frequency; % = percentage

seems to us that, for digital users cognitive competence remains an important evaluative criterion. Whereas, in Prabowo's case, the issue of identity (race) decreased from July to August. This decline appears to be related to a shift in narrative regarding leadership style and the challenges of corruption.

We also found that the theme of change, while stable for Anies, became public's concern for the other two candidates in August. Overall, looking into the preferences directed at the three candidates, these patterns show that voter assessments are not so stable and fixed. Apparently, these preferences vary across themes that emerge between the candidates. For example, intelligence and change emerge as a cross-sectoral dimension that shapes perceptions of candidates even at different levels. Other themes, including regime, fear,

determination, religion, and development, received relatively limited attention, especially in relation to Ganjar.

In the final stage of analysis, the grouping results shown in Figure 1 reveal three interconnected clusters of code. This cluster shows the relational structure between the themes that help us interpret and discuss them. For us, these clusters offer a more colorful picture of how user comments are grouped and around specific area. These results clearly contribute to a broader understanding of how public preferences are articulated in the context of elections. On this basis, we expect that such clusters can also account for and reveal vulnerabilities contained in the preferences of digital users. Finally, based on the identification of the eleven corpus and through data visualization, we grouped them into three



Source: Research Results, 2024

Figure 1 The appearance of two or more codes assigned to the same data segment

aspects to discuss: power, historical experience, and credibility.

Since the Soekarno era (1945–1966), history has shown that the selection of political leaders and the exercise of political authority have been intertwined with bureaucratic mechanisms (see Aspinall, 2016; Mietzner, 2020; Setiawan & Tomsa, 2023). Such mechanisms have increasingly taken on a rational-procedural form since the Reformation era. This is not without reason; it aims to avoid certain cults, as was previously experienced in Indonesian politics (see Aspinall, 2005; Jeffrey A. Winters, 2013; Mietzner, 2014). However, along with the increasing role of social media, the development of this procedural administrative mechanism apparently opens up space for quite problematic power dynamics. This clearly presents a dilemma. On the one hand, trying to avoid previous political experiences, while on the other, the reality of Indonesian politics cannot escape the digital realm that is increasingly opening up participatory spaces. It is in this digital space that problems arise. Following Bergem (2018) and Tran et al. (2022), this shift is not only gradual, but also introduces and displays the tension around loyalty and representation of figures. The tensions then become especially transparent as democratic institutions try to find a middle ground between rules-based procedures for digital environment and the expectations of citizens for a charismatic leadership style. It becomes a kind of digital *déjà vu*, bringing past experiences

into digital reality. This leads to some difficult implications. Like Ali and Eriyanto (2021) explains that this tension can encourage an emphasis on procedural compliance, as personal involvement or commitment is seen as potentially weakening the relational dimension of political representation. That means procedural compliance can erode trust and the emotional connection between leaders and the public. In other words, charismatic leadership is seen as unfit in a democratic setting. Following Wagner's anti-charismatic authority (2023) the semiotics of sequence and succession favored humility over hubris in the victory of Biden after Donald Trump. As well, drawing on Weber's three types of authority (traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational, we observe that the priority of legal-rational authority actually results in an ongoing tension. The tension that will always exist in the compromise between the pursuit of organizational efficiency and maintaining personal relationships and trust in the political system.

With the increasing use of social media, these tensions have led to the emergence of a form of polarization in society. Fortunately, this trend can be said to be fading as we approach the 2024 general election. The responses of digital users to the three presidential candidates provide important insights into today's leadership expectations. User comments in digital spaces provide insight into which candidates are considered intellectually capable and morally credible. This combination has

repeatedly emerged in our data, which means it is important and necessary to face challenges such as corruption and ineffective governance. Historically, leadership effectiveness in Indonesia has always been associated with power, procedural compliance, and hierarchical authority. As seen in the discourse and preferences of digital users, these dimensions are starting to fade. Indeed, a strong bond of loyalty between the leader and citizens remains necessary. However, this loyalty now seems to stem from an emotional bond where leaders are like them (Arnesen & Peters, 2018). Even when political decisions or policies do not benefit them. On this point, viewed from a democratic perspective, such a conception of power in relation to procedural compliance becomes less persuasive. This occurs because, in addition to people feeling emotionally disconnected, such power can be manipulated and exploited solely for the benefit of certain groups. On this basis, Power (2018) and Wiratraman (2022) shows evidence that Indonesian people previously supported authoritarian attitudes. This supports were considered more efficient in managing aspects of multiculturalism and social diversity. But to say such power is fading away seems difficult. Today, we cannot deny that power is constantly framed through the lure of charismatic authority. This is easiest to apply because such power is hidden yet operates through representation in digital media. (Aspinall, 2016). We recognize that these tensions present a broader challenge: how to

conceptualize intelligence as a leadership quality in democratic systems that have traditionally not been hierarchical or refer entirely to charismatic authority, but rather emphasize individual attributes and performance.

They distinguish traditional leadership that emphasizes service to the community from legal authorities that prioritize interpretation of rules and bureaucracy. Through this framework, we understand that digital user comments often portray and associate leaders as figures far removed from the emotional experiences of society. In situations of uncertainty and crisis, such distance has a significant impact, especially when charismatic authority re-emerges as an important reference by society. However, as Evans (2016) and Werlins (2008) state that legitimacy that relies on law and tradition is not infrequently understood less as legitimate authority. This legitimacy is considered more of a control mechanism. that digital commentary often raises concerns about stagnation and corruption that are seen as part of the constitutional structure itself. Along with these concerns, there is also a desire for a leader who is capable of decisive charismatic intervention. This is in line with Sohal and Kaur's analysis (2018) that corruption remains a central issue during election campaigns, even when candidates emphasize logical arguments and address issues related to national development, the future of the country, and strong and dynamic leadership. In this regard, we argue that public expectations that emphasize intelligence and

honesty reflect widespread concerns about the sustainability of corrupt practices (Tran et al., 2022).

Furthermore, framing corruption as a central political problem inevitably gives rise to a series of interconnected problems. Such problems are particularly closely related to public demands for clean and good governance. This means the need for effective strategies and institutional capacity to address systemic failures is a serious concern for digital users. In this regard, anti-corruption efforts require political, social, and institutional reforms which underscore the complexity of governance itself. Unfortunately, several themes that emerge in digital user preferences, such as regime dynamics, religious tensions, and racial divisions, further complicate this landscape. Clearly this has an impact on how corruption itself is perceived and discussed. That means corruption practices do not stand alone, but are intertwined and have an impact on the way the public views political legitimacy. For example, regime stability can affect the credibility of the anti-corruption movement. Also, how religious and racial considerations can shape public trust and electoral support. Hence, it must be recognized that media framing plays a decisive role, as it conditions how corruption scandals are interpreted and how the legitimacy of candidates is assessed (Bhakti et al., 2023). In other words, we think that overly sensational framing risks undermining trust in political actors. Indeed, these dynamics offer a more

nuanced view of how power works in Indonesia and its broader implications. As Aspinall (2016) said, aspirations for progress and political insecurity becomes a mirror of Indonesia's complex and complicated politics. With the strengthening of homogeneous reproductive space (echo chamber) in the digital space, the context of the 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election is apparently increasingly complex. As shown in our data (see Figure 1), digital discussions around themes of regime and religion often intensify polarization, reinforcing existing biases. As Wijanarko (2021), state about the populist phenomenon, this dynamic limits meaningful debate and weakens democratic engagement because digital users override alternative perspectives. This brings public discourse into increasingly fragmented and makes the capacity to address corruption through political power weaken. The problem is that political actors often continue to prioritize these issues because emotionally fragmentation remains an effective tool to mobilize support. This is especially noticeable when social friction, such as Cebong and Kadrun (Ali & Eriyanto, 2021; Ikasari et al., 2020), used to strengthen representation that benefits certain parties. Kubin & von Sikorski (2021) corroborated these patterns through a systematic review of 121 empirical studies. Their review shows that research on media and political polarization has increased substantially over the past decade and consistently finds that the use of media to shape voters's attitudes actually exacerbates

polarization.

However, such framing strategies in August apparently began to lose effectiveness. One possible explanation is that emotionally charged narratives increasingly clash with rational-legal expectations associated with contemporary Indonesian democratic politics. Nevertheless, discourse that refers to personal history or experience with the aim of evoking emotional vulnerability often generates more momentary motivation than a lasting justification for contemporary political action. Lee (2019) explains that when circulated through media formats such as talk shows or personalized video content, this instability of emotional appeal becomes very apparent. YouTube viewers, for example, can filter political narratives through their own experiences, selectively validating stories that fit what they already know or experience. However, as intelligence emerges as a more prominent concern in our data output, this implies that digital users engage in a more critical and individualized form of evaluation. Thus, digital users assess the continuity of political narratives with their knowledge and experience limiting the persuasive power of emotionally driven politics. Therefore, we take the view that the reduced impact of emotional framing in political debates or similar discussions can be attributed to the increasing influence of the younger generation, who have less focus on the historical emotional side of Indonesian politics. As noted by Mada Sukmajati (Gusti, 2023), appeals rooted in past

experiences of vulnerability is increasingly considered irrelevant in the context of the 2024 presidential election. Why? Because the main concern of today's young generation lies precisely in economic insecurity and access to jobs.

While our data cannot confirm whether the users we analyzed were from the younger generation, we strongly suspect that most of these users were the younger generation. We believe that they are more aligned with current and future issues. Young people place greater emphasis on logical reasoning and current realities (see Alberto et al., 2025). Our claim lies in the observation that political audiences are increasingly prioritizing forward-looking solutions. Emotionally charged rhetoric, religious, racist, and authoritarian narratives seem to have lost their appeal. In other words, emotional appeal, once the center of political communication, now plays a diminished role in shaping electoral preferences. For the 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election, voters showed a tendency towards a more critical and rational form of evaluation, where fact-based reasoning takes precedence over references to historical emotionality. The fluid and often unpredictable behavior of millennial and Gen Z voters in turn determines their position as a decisive group in the 2024 Indonesian elections. Survey data from CSIS shows that 51% of voters in this demographic remain open to changing their presidential choice, while 58.1% reported the possibility of reconsidering their legislative

preferences (Gusti, 2023).

In August, a noticeable change also emerged in how digital citizens view the three presidential candidates as public figures. While the theme of change continues to attract attention, unfortunately it remains conceptually vague and lacks a clearly articulated direction. We think that this ambiguity likely reflects the candidates's attempts to differentiate themselves from previous administrations rather than outlining concrete policy alternatives. Despite the persistence to display the idea of change, we consider it to remain symbolically important because of its close relationship to credibility. Following Malfatti (2019), rationality in a democratic context oriented towards informed judgment and collective decision-making. Within this framework, we consider change, even when abstractly defined and unclear in its direction, to still serve as a marker of rational leadership and contribute to the public image of the candidates (see Auxier & Vitak, 2019). That is why the superiority of the discourse on change is closely related to concerns about corruption, which continues to occupy a central place in the preferences and evaluations of candidates. It is no surprise that the candidate's representation of being intelligent and honest resonates strongly with the preferences of digital users. However, it also means that this preference reflects long-standing skepticism towards political leadership in Indonesia, where the moral virtues of past leaders have often been questioned. This tension raises

questions about the extent to which emotional appeal continues to shape the image of the candidates. This emotional appeal in relation to credibility seems to reinforce previous views regarding the distinctive characteristics of a form of leadership. As Anggraini (2024) states, the influence of Javanese leadership in the presidential system has become a pattern in this political system and will continue to persist, as emotional appeal intertwines with expertise and ethical behavior.

Meanwhile, during periods of crisis, questions of credibility become very prominent, especially when issues such as corruption and racism dominate election discourse. In such conditions, efforts to form a good representation of figures could strengthen or even damage the legitimacy of the candidates. In social media like YouTube, such representations cannot escape public interpretation. The public reads, assesses, and evaluates how policy solutions taken in crisis situations constitute a commitment to integrity, trust, and principled behavior (see Gastil & Xenos, 2010; Gross, 2008; Putera et al., 2020) we draw on broader psychological theories of the attitude-behavior relationship to postulate specific reciprocal patterns of causality between the civic attitudes and forms of political and civic engagement featured in contemporary political communication research. We then examine the extent of these reciprocal relationships with a 2-wave panel survey of 2,872 Pacific Northwest residents. Spanning the 2004 elections, structural equation modeling of

the panel data shows complex reciprocal causal paths between political/civic attitudes (internal and external efficacy and civic pride and faith. While on the one hand its impact goes beyond policy debates or discussions about leadership styles, Hou (2019) and Lewis (2020) state that YouTube still contributes to the promotion of greater transparency, reform, and equality in political communication. This means that the platform allows for a more participatory form of political engagement by allowing users to actively engage in discussions about candidates and policy issues.

To sum up, digital users participation plays a crucial role in shaping political narratives. Meantime, YouTube provides audiences the capacity to question, reinforce, or oppose the dominant discourse or important issues that are developing in the public space (Anwar et al., 2023). Through digitally generated content, comment threads, and participatory debate, YouTube facilitates interactions that transcend the boundaries of conventional media. This may happen because the representation of candidates on the platform has shifted from narratives centered on personal portrayals to policy issues. These issues are ultimately used by digital users to determine their preferences for the candidates themselves. But, to say that the opportunity for democratic participation has expanded is too early. First, YouTube does indeed create an inclusive and dialogical space. Second, it is precisely within this space that various symbolic interpretations of the candidates's

representations emerge (see Winengan, 2018; Ma & Lewis, 2019). Both can indeed lead to the belief that political legitimacy depends on citizen trust and perception. However, this belief is also accompanied by a non-media reality where critical issues ultimately cannot escape the rational-procedural framework.

CONCLUSION

First of all, there was a shift from how presidential candidates are viewed in digital discourse toward how digital users assess their leadership capacity, integrity, and policy orientation in a more rational and future-oriented manner. To these three presidential candidates, contemporary digital users give preference on how candidate representation should be structured on the basis not only of emotion but of rational consideration. There are three political structures in digital user's preferences: power, credibility, and references to past events. Here, power refers to leadership, intelligence, and honesty. This preference was raised because it is closely linked to concerns about corruption and expectations of strong leadership. This first structure was even expressed through the digital discourse of a firm or charismatic leader figure. Such charismatic figures are considered capable of tackling crucial issues. The problem, at this point, is that digital users's preferences reveal a more complex understanding of leadership itself. They prefer charismatic leadership, but it also requires rational-procedural compliance. Nevertheless, this preference for power remains

central to public discourse. At the very least, there has been a shift in public evaluations of candidates. But this shift is not without tension. The tension reveals an emerging demand for a leadership style that combines practical solutions to social problems with ethical governance.

That is why credibility, encompassing determination, fear, religion and regime, emerges in the discourse of digital user preferences. Issues that attempt to shape perceptions of past events apparently give rise to nuances of fear and concern regarding authoritarian leadership. Indeed, on the one hand, this explains why assertiveness or determination on coping with national issues is necessary. On the other hand, unfortunately, the attributes of assertiveness referred to here are also unclear. Does it refer to moral aspects or the safety and security of society as a whole? The topic of religion arises here, it is believed, because through the framework of religious morality, all problems can be resolved. The problem is, while politics is inherently fragile and therefore requires agreement, the language of religion is absolute and non-negotiable. Choosing one and ignoring the other will clearly affect the credibility of presidential candidates. Debates and discussions that emerge on social media platforms like YouTube, in turn, contribute to the formation of homogeneous reproductive spaces (echo chambers) in which extreme or polarized positions are amplified. This limits the scope for inclusive and pluralistic debate in seeking solutions. Regarding credibility

in terms of references to the past, this effort shows regression, or even failure. At this stage, young voters seem to be less interested in such a narrative. As a result, political discourse is trapped in simplifying complex issues into a binary opposition that does not fully capture the public's concerns, such as Cebong and Kadrun frames. On the other hand, although fragmentation is beginning to fade, democratic deliberation in the discussion of actual and contextual issues in a more comprehensive manner is still far from being completed.

The biggest problem that needs to be addressed immediately is corruption. This means that the solutions offered so far seem ineffective. Digital users are well aware that the problem of corruption cannot be compromised. Therefore, change is necessary. However, preferences for change itself are unclear, regarding where and what kind of change to pursue. Hence, this ambiguity makes the development topic the most sensible option. However, this concept of development is always tied to past experiences. It is not surprising that the topic of identity also arises, as Java has always been prioritized in development. Whether this development refers to equality or progress seems to remain a key consideration for presidential candidates. At this point, we believe that user comments serve as a barometer of public sentiment regarding government performance. In other words, user comments reflect the expectation that leaders are trustworthy and reliable when tackling serious issues.

Finally, findings regarding the power framework, historical references, and credibility in addition to the active role of user comments lead to theoretical questions. One of the central dilemmas concerns how the democratic system reconciles a commitment to legal-rational authority with a public preference for the pragmatic function of a leader, determined but still loved emotionally. For Indonesia, these tensions reflect the debate over the emergence of authoritarian tendencies within democratic life. On the one hand, digital citizens are skeptical of political narratives rooted in nostalgia or emotional appeals to the past. On the other hand, there are indications of a tendency towards a pragmatic form of government that has good ethical behavior but is also having determination against corrupt behavior. While this shift presents challenges to established political communication models, it opens up new avenues for understanding how political power and legitimacy are reconfigured in the digital age.

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