

# Perceptions of Legislative Candidates Regarding Political Gifts as a Strategy for Winning Votes

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## Abstract

The practice of political gifts is often considered an integral part of democracy, especially in the legislative election process. Previous studies have generally focused on the perspective of the public, particularly voters, regarding political gifts, but few have explored the views of prospective legislative candidates in using political gifts as a winning strategy. Therefore, this study aims to understand the perceptions of prospective legislative candidates regarding the use of political gifts as a strategy to win votes. This study uses a qualitative method with a case study approach. The research participants are prospective legislative candidates who will participate in the 2024 Legislative Elections. Data collection techniques were carried out through in-depth interviews, observations, and document reviews. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Data validity was ensured through source and technique triangulation, as well as member checking. The results of the study show that (1) political gifts are a form of giving by individuals to political parties or the community and are not an official initiative of the party; (2) political gifts are optional and not mandatory, but are used as part of a strategy to win votes; and (3) there are alternative strategies that prospective legislative candidates can apply to gain support without using political gifts. This study is expected to serve as a reference for prospective legislative candidates in contesting elections wisely and for prospective voters to be more informed and active in participating in legislative elections.

## 1. Introduction

Political tribute *upeti politik* has become a recurring phenomenon in every general election in Indonesia, particularly during legislative contests. Historically, the term *upeti* originates from the Sanskrit word "*utpatti*," meaning an offering or token of loyalty from a subordinate ruler or duke to a higher sovereign (Hilman et al., 2018). In traditional political structures, tribute symbolized a hierarchical but reciprocal relationship. However, transactional politics has become one of the obstacles both visible and hidden carried out by candidates, official campaign teams, as well as unofficial ones. This practice has dragged Indonesia into a democratic process that lacks ethical values and dignity (Hamson, 2021).

In contemporary political studies, the practice of political tribute can be analyzed through the lens of clientelism, a system of patron client relationships where political candidates provide material incentives such as money, goods, or favors in exchange for electoral support. In this system, the candidate voter relationship becomes transactional and short-term, rather than ideological or programmatic. Simultaneously, the moral economy perspective helps explain why such practices may be socially tolerated or even expected. In some communities, political tribute is seen as a form of reciprocal obligation or moral compensation, especially in societies where the line between public and private benefit is blurred (Selian, 2020).

While a significant body of research has explored the effects of money politics from the perspective of voters (Hilman, 2018; Rusnani, 2022), there is a notable gap in the literature concerning the perceptions of legislative candidates themselves the key actors who initiate or resist these practices. Their views on the ethics and effectiveness of political tribute as an electoral strategy remain underexplored, even though these perceptions are crucial in assessing their ethical commitment and the structural pressures they face. Studies have shown that many candidates may feel compelled to engage in money politics due to voter expectations or competition with rivals who use similar tactics (Ramadhani, 2025).

From the perspective of campaign strategy theory, choices such as using political tribute, digital outreach, issue based campaigning, or community mobilization reflect not only personal preferences but also structural constraints such as electoral systems, campaign resources, and sociopolitical contexts (Norris, 2004). Understanding candidates' perceptions of political tribute is thus key to understanding how they navigate a political system that often incentivizes unethical practices for political survival.

According to the Indonesian Election Supervisory Body (Bawaslu, 2023), there were 262 reported cases of vote buying during the 2020 regional elections, highlighting how entrenched money politics still is in the country's electoral landscape. In this context, it becomes critical to investigate: Do legislative candidates see political tribute as a necessity, an effective strategy, or a moral burden?

This study aims to explore the perceptions of legislative candidates regarding the practice of political tribute within the context of legislative elections. It seeks to understand how candidates perceive the role and impact of political tribute as a strategy for securing votes. In addition, the study investigates alternative campaign strategies that are considered effective and viable without relying on money politics. Through this research, it is expected to gain deeper insights into the motivations, justifications, and potential shifts in campaign behavior among political actors.

Furthermore, this study aims to fill a gap in the literature concerning local political elites' perceptions of clientelistic practices and ethical campaign strategies. The findings of this research may also offer practical contributions for the development of policies and political education programs that promote integrity-based campaigning and encourage rational, informed participation from the public.

## 2. Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. This approach aims to provide a systematic, factual, and accurate description of prospective legislative candidates' perceptions of political tribute practices as a strategy for winning votes. In qualitative research, researchers attempt to analyze social phenomena occurring in the field through data in the form of words, statements, or narratives from informants (Creswell, 2014). The data obtained not only describes the existing conditions but also provides an explanation of how these perceptions arise in the context of legislative elections.

As a descriptive approach, this study aims to describe the perceptions of prospective legislative candidates towards money politics in political contests in Blitar City in detail, considering that this practice is a recurring phenomenon and is often found in general elections in Indonesia (Erlinda, 2022). Meanwhile, the analytical approach refers to efforts to explore in greater depth the cause-and-effect relationships and implications of these perceptions on the political strategies used by prospective legislative candidates.

The participant in this study was a legislative candidate from one of the political parties registered in Blitar City. Participants were selected purposively, considering their relevance to the phenomenon being studied, namely the practice of political tribute. This participant was considered to have relevant knowledge and direct experience regarding vote-winning strategies, including the practice of money politics, in legislative elections. The use of participants from one region was intended to explore the phenomenon occurring on a local scale in Blitar in greater depth, which was expected to illustrate similar dynamics in other regions (Bungin, 2023).

Data collection was carried out using two main techniques. First, non-participant observation. Researchers directly observed the activities carried out by legislative candidates in order to gain votes, without participating in these activities. The purpose of this observation was to obtain an overview of money politics, including concrete forms of political gifts given to the community (Silverman, 2016). This observation is non-participatory, meaning that the researcher does not interact with or influence the activities being observed. Second, structured interviews. Interviews are conducted using a pre-designed interview guide, which allows for more systematic data collection. The interviews were open-ended and unrestricted to allow researchers to explore more deeply the views of prospective legislative candidates on money politics and political gifts as strategies for winning elections. These interviews provided informants with the opportunity to express their perceptions freely and in depth (Barker & Pistrang, 2021). In addition to primary data, this study also uses secondary data, obtained from various relevant sources, such as journal articles, books, and information from the internet, to enrich the analysis and context of the study.

The data analysis in this study refers to the model proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), which consists of three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. In the data reduction stage, information obtained from interviews and observations was simplified and focused in accordance with the research objectives. The reduced data were then presented in the form of narrative descriptions and subsequently coded. The coding process was carried out inductively, by identifying themes that emerged directly from the data. This was followed by a deductive approach to relate the findings to relevant theoretical frameworks. The resulting codes were compiled into a codebook, which included definitions and examples of application. The final stage involved drawing conclusions based on the thematic patterns that had been analyzed. These conclusions aimed to understand the perceptions of legislative candidates toward the practice of political tribute, while also providing recommendations for more ethical and effective campaign strategies (Creswell, 2018).

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### 3. Results and Discussion

This section discusses prospective legislative candidates' views on the practice of political bribery in legislative elections, as well as its relationship to strategies for winning votes. It also analyzes alternative strategies to money politics, their impact on positive image, and long-term relationships with voters. The research shows the importance of ethical approaches and the use of social media.

#### 3.1. Prospective Candidates' Views on Political Bribery in Legislative Elections

Prospective legislative candidates' views on political bribery in legislative elections tend to vary, but many see it as an effective strategy for winning votes, despite an awareness that this practice can have a negative impact on political integrity and ethics. Several prospective legislative candidates stated that political gifts, in the form of money or goods given to voters, are considered a shortcut to gaining support. They argue that in difficult economic situations, many voters prefer the material benefits offered by legislative candidates rather than considering the track record or quality of the candidates.

Data 01. Source: "So if you want to get 100,000 votes, you need to distribute Rp 300,000 in envelopes. Something like that. So if you want to get 50,000 votes, distribute Rp 150,000 in envelopes. This is proven because I lead a party and have had similar experiences many of the ideological strengths of the party I lead were defeated by that."  
(Upeti. 01)

However, several other legislative candidates acknowledged that although political gifts can have a short-term impact in terms of the number of votes obtained, the use of this strategy cannot be relied upon as the main guarantee of winning the election. They are more inclined to prioritize leadership quality and a more ethical approach, such as building relationships with the community and listening to their aspirations (Schroeder, 2020). This indicates an awareness that money politics can undermine the democratic system and make the public more pragmatic in their voting choices, ignoring the quality of legislative candidates.

Voters with low economic backgrounds are more easily influenced by material offers (Canare et al., 2018), while highly educated voters are usually more cautious and assess the quality of legislative candidates based on their competence and track record (Abrajano, 2005). This shows that political gifts, although still prevalent, are not always the only factor influencing voters' decisions.

In interviews with a number of prospective legislative candidates, they revealed that political gifts are often considered part of a strategy to attract voters, but they also noted an increase in public awareness of the importance of voting based on the vision and mission of legislative candidates. Some of them suggested that voters should be given a deeper understanding of the importance of voting based on work programs, rather than simply accepting short-term rewards.

From the perspective of hegemony theory, this practice of political tribute can be understood as an attempt to strengthen certain political dominance by reducing voters to objects that are easily influenced by material offers. This is in line with Hilman's (2018) view that political tribute is often used by rulers to buy support and strengthen their political hegemony, both in relations between political parties and with the wider community. In line with contemporary political dynamics, legislative candidates are now beginning to seek alternatives to relying on political tribute, although they still take into account the impact of this strategy in mobilizing votes.

#### 3.2. Perceptions of Political Tribute by Prospective Legislative Candidates as a Strategy to Win Votes

Political tribute is often understood as a form of vote buying, which is influenced by economic factors and voter education. People with low economic status are more likely to accept such offers, while highly educated

voters often consider vote buying to be an unethical practice. Based on interviews with a number of prospective legislative candidates, political gifts are one way to win votes, although they do not guarantee success.

Data 02. Source: "With Rp 200,000, people can eat. And that food can be donated again on 'Blessed Friday'. So where's the fault in that?". (*Upeti.02*)

In the context of elections, political strategy plays an important role as a persuasion effort involving a series of organized and planned activities. According to Schroeder (2020), political strategy is a technique used to achieve specific political goals, such as winning elections. Although political gifts can be part of this strategy, the public is becoming increasingly savvy in assessing legislative candidates based on non-material factors such as personal profile, communication skills, and track record of service to the community. Therefore, even though political gifts are an element of the strategy, they are not the only way to win votes.

### 3.3. Other Strategies That Prospective Legislative Candidates Can Use Besides Political Gifts to Win Votes

Political strategy is broader than just financial transactions. According to Schroeder (2020), political strategy involves a series of planned actions to achieve specific political goals, often involving the use of various resources to gain public support. In the context of elections, this strategy includes approaches such as political campaigns, political awareness, and positive image building. Armstrong (2008) states that the two main concepts in political strategy are distinctive competence and competitive advantage. Distinctive competence refers to the abilities or qualities that differentiate legislative candidates from their competitors, while competitive advantage is the ability to gain superiority through differentiation and effective leadership.

Data 03. Source: "Jokowi is a leader with personal branding." (*Upeti.03*)

Alternatively, strategies based on interpersonal relationships, networks, and community problem solving can be more effective than simply relying on political donations (Javarone, 2013). By building closer relationships with voters and responding to the issues they face, legislative candidates can win votes with an approach that is more focused on the interests of the community.

In addition, the use of social media and digital technology is also increasingly important in political strategy. In this digital age, legislative candidates can build more personal relationships with voters through social media platforms, conveying their vision, mission, and work programs directly to the public. With this approach, legislative candidates can expand their voter reach and build a more positive image, which can significantly influence election results.

This study shows that although political gifts are still practiced among some legislative candidates, there are various alternative strategies that can be more effective in winning votes. The use of positive images, community-based approaches, and social media are becoming increasingly important alternatives in contemporary political competition.

## 4. Conclusion

Based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that the practice of political bribery is still common, both to political parties and to the community by legislative candidates. Political bribery serves as a strategy to win votes. Political bribery is defined as a gift that tends to be a form of bribery or gratification with the aim of obtaining a position or facilitating a particular political process. In general, political gifts can be categorized into two forms, namely gifts to political parties or to political decision makers. In the context of legislative elections, political gifts are often manifested in the form of vote buying, which is buying people's votes. Although political gifts have the potential to help win, this cannot be considered an obligation that must be carried out by every legislative candidate. As an alternative, there are other strategies that prospective legislative candidates can implement to win public votes, such as having the courage to engage in politics, building a good reputation in the community, and managing finances in an orderly and efficient manner.

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The entire process of writing this article, from formulating the problem, studying the literature, collecting, and analyzing data, to drafting the manuscript, was carried out entirely by the sole author

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## Data Availability

The datasets generated during and/ or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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