

Electoral Dynamics and Islamic Politics: The Role of Religious Organizations in West Java's Regional Head Elections

Zidnal Falah

Universitas Islam Bandung, Indonesia
Corresponding Author: zidnalfalah72@gmail.com

Article Info :	ABSTRACT
Accepted: 12-07-2025 Approved: 20-08-2025 Published: 25-12-2025	This study examines the role of religious organizations in shaping electoral dynamics in West Java's regional head elections, particularly focusing on how Islamic organizations, such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, influence voter behavior and political outcomes. Despite the overwhelming Muslim majority in Indonesia, Islamic political parties have seen a consistent decline in electoral support, a phenomenon that this research explores through a case study of West Java a province with significant religious and political importance. The study employs a qualitative case study approach, utilizing interviews with key stakeholders and secondary data such as electoral statistics and organizational documents. The research identifies three main mechanisms through which religious organizations engage in electoral politics: resource mobilization, strategic framing, and social network activation. Findings reveal that NU's influence operates through structural mobilization, while Muhammadiyah engages in strategic ambiguity, focusing on individual participation rather than organizational endorsements. The study also finds that religious authority in West Java has declined, with younger voters increasingly making independent electoral choices. The implications of this research highlight the evolving role of religious organizations in Indonesia's electoral politics and suggest the need for political practitioners to understand the complex interplay between religion and politics in a diverse society.
Keywords: Electoral dynamics; muhammadiyah; Nahdlatul Ulama; religious organizations; West Java	

INTRODUCTION

The intersection of religion and politics remains one of the most compelling subjects in contemporary democratic studies, particularly in Muslim-majority nations where Islamic identity plays a significant role in shaping electoral behavior and political outcomes. Indonesia, as the world's largest Muslim democracy with approximately 87% of its 270 million population identifying as Muslim, presents a unique paradox in political Islam: despite the overwhelming Muslim majority, Islamic political parties have experienced consistent electoral decline, with their collective vote share fluctuating around 30% in recent elections (Zulian et al., 2024). Recent electoral data reveals a striking pattern where no Islamic party received

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more than 14 million votes in the last three general election periods despite the country's substantial Muslim electorate (Fernando et al., 2023). This phenomenon challenges conventional assumptions about the relationship between religious demography and political preferences, raising fundamental questions about how Islamic identity translates into electoral support and what mechanisms mediate this relationship in Indonesia's regional democratic processes (Yusuf, 2023).

The 2024 elections marked a particularly significant decline for Islamic political parties, as the United Development Party (PPP) failed to pass the electoral threshold for the first time since the Reform Era, securing only 3.87% of the national vote and losing parliamentary representation entirely (Mahyudin, 2024). This electoral underperformance becomes even more paradoxical when considered alongside the increasingly confident expressions of Islamic identity in political, social, and economic spheres by Indonesia's growing middle class, suggesting a disconnect between religious piety and partisan political support for Islamic parties (Aseri et al., 2025; Aslati et al., 2025; Chaplin, 2025; Houston, 2025; Margiansyah et al., 2025; Maryanto et al., 2025; Tampubolon et al., 2025; Yilmaz & Shtikri, 2024). The phenomenon extends beyond Islamic parties; the declining support can be attributed to internal fragmentation, failure of programmatic articulation, and shifting ideological preferences of Muslim voters who have become more pragmatic than ideological since the 1955 general election (Facal, 2020; Krismono et al., 2025; Latief & Nashir, 2020; Mustapa et al., 2025).

West Java, Indonesia's most populous province with approximately 48 million residents and around 35 million voters in 2024, serves as a particularly critical site for examining these electoral dynamics (Hasyim, 2024). Historically, West Java has served as the cradle of Islamic conservatism in Indonesia, where modernist Islamic parties and candidates that espouse a purist and orthodox form of Islam consistently won elections, and was the center of Indonesia's Islamic rebellion, the Darul Islam movement (Lanti et al., 2020). However, despite 67% of West Java's Muslims being affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the voting pattern shows dispersion among candidates rather than unified support for Islamic-oriented choices, indicating that NU's role in brokering electoral victories is not as clear as in other major provinces (Hasyim, 2024). West Java has witnessed nearly 60% of all Islamist protests and violence in Java since 1998, significantly higher than East Java's 10%, suggesting unique socio-political dynamics related to religious authority competition (Haridison et al., 2023; Haryanto, 2025; Ibrahim et al., 2024; Kartiko et al., 2025; Sampe, 2021).

Existing scholarly research has extensively documented the role of major Islamic organizations in Indonesian electoral politics, particularly focusing on Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah. Studies have examined how NU navigates the dilemma between patronage politics and piety in local elections, confirming widespread patronage distribution and the impact of rising religious conservatism on electoral competition (Makhasin, 2017). Research on Muhammadiyah demonstrates that the organization's political behavior is driven by its institutional logic, which places religious and social duties before political interests, managing to refrain from building or supporting political parties at the organizational level (Jung, 2014). Recent scholarship has also analyzed renewed political sectarianism between NU and Muhammadiyah, finding that conflicts can be attributed to political-based rather than ideological-based sectarianism, particularly through the 2016-2017 Defending Islam movement (Arifianto, 2024).

However, significant research gaps remain in understanding the specific mechanisms through which religious organizations influence regional head elections. While studies acknowledge that Islamization in Indonesia, including in West Java, prevails mainly in the socio-cultural realm rather than practical politics, and that voters pay more attention to candidates' persona rather than their religious affiliation, the complexities of leveraging politico-religious narratives for electoral gain remain underexplored (Hasyim, 2024; Lanti et al., 2020). Existing research on Islamic political parties in predominantly Muslim countries has not been conducted comprehensively, particularly regarding the de-existence of such parties in Indonesia, representing a significant gap in scholarship (Fernando et al., 2023). Furthermore, studies examining Muslim constituents' electoral preferences in the context of post-Reformasi socio-political transformations remain limited, particularly regarding the changing characteristics of Muslim voters who tend to be more rational and issue-oriented (Nurjaman, 2023).

The urgency of this research stems from multiple converging factors that make West Java's regional elections particularly consequential for understanding contemporary Indonesian democracy. With approximately 46.71 million people and around 35 million voters in 2024, West Java holds the highest number of voters among all Indonesian provinces, making it a crucial battleground that significantly influences national political dynamics (Hasyim, 2024). The unique institutional structure of religious authority in West Java, characterized by weaker religious elites, more fragmented organizational landscapes, and intense competition for religious authority compared to Central and East Java, creates conditions where militant Islamist mobilization becomes more prevalent. Understanding how religious

organizations navigate these competitive dynamics to influence electoral outcomes has direct implications for democratic governance, social cohesion, and the management of religious diversity in Indonesia's largest provincial electorate.

This research offers significant novelty by focusing specifically on the operational mechanisms and strategic approaches employed by religious organizations in West Java's regional head elections, moving beyond national-level analyses to examine localized dynamics. While previous studies have primarily examined either Islamic political parties' electoral performance or organizational behavior at the national level, this research investigates the intermediary role that religious organizations play in translating religious identity into electoral support at the regional level. Drawing on resource mobilization theory, framing theory, and social network theory, this study analyzes how organizations like Muhammadiyah and others mobilize resources, frame political issues, and utilize social networks to influence electoral outcomes (Brown, 2019; Latief & Nashir, 2020), applying similar analytical frameworks to West Java's distinct socio-political environment. The research provides empirical evidence of how religious organizations function as critical brokers between Islamic identity and electoral politics in Indonesia's complex multi-level governance system.

The primary purpose of this research is to systematically analyze the role of religious organizations in shaping electoral dynamics within West Java's regional head elections, with specific attention to understanding the mechanisms, strategies, and effectiveness of religious mobilization in electoral contexts. The study aims to: (1) identify the specific modes of engagement employed by major religious organizations in regional electoral competitions; (2) examine the relationship between organizational affiliations, religious identity, and voting behavior among West Javanese Muslims; (3) analyze the contextual factors that enable or constrain religious organizations' electoral influence; and (4) assess the implications of religious organizational involvement for democratic quality, representation, and governance outcomes in Indonesia's most populous province.

The contributions of this research extend across theoretical, empirical, and practical domains. Theoretically, the study advances understanding of how religious organizations function as political actors in democratic contexts, contributing to comparative literature on religion and politics, civil society engagement, and electoral mobilization in Muslim-majority democracies. Empirically, it provides detailed documentation of organizational strategies, voter responses, and electoral outcomes in West Java, filling the identified gap in regionally-specific analyses of Indonesian

electoral politics. The research also contributes methodologically by developing analytical frameworks that can capture the complex, multi-layered relationships between religious identity, organizational affiliation, and political behavior in contexts where formal party systems interact with robust civil society organizations.

The implications of this research resonate at multiple levels of Indonesian democracy and governance. At the policy level, findings can inform strategies for enhancing political inclusion, managing religious diversity, and strengthening democratic institutions in Indonesia's regional governments. For political practitioners, the research offers insights into coalition-building, voter mobilization, and the navigation of identity politics in pluralistic societies. Academically, the study contributes to ongoing debates about the compatibility of Islamic politics with democratic governance, the role of civil society in democratization, and the dynamics of electoral competition in decentralized political systems. Understanding how decades-long theological and organizational transformations have fostered synthesis between Islamic values and democratic commitments through civic orientation of mass Islamic organizations provides compelling evidence for normative transformation rather than inherent incompatibility (Latief & Nashir, 2020), offering valuable lessons for other Muslim-majority democracies navigating similar tensions between religious identity and democratic pluralism.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs a qualitative case study approach to examine the role of religious organizations in West Java's regional head elections. The study utilizes West Java as a strategic case selection due to its status as Indonesia's most populous province with approximately 35 million voters, its historical significance as the cradle of Islamic conservatism, and its unique institutional structure characterized by fragmented religious authority and intense competition among religious organizations. The research draws on multiple theoretical frameworks including resource mobilization theory, framing theory, and social network theory to analyze how organizations like Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama mobilize resources, frame political issues, and utilize social networks to influence electoral outcomes. This multi-theoretical approach enables comprehensive analysis of the complex mechanisms through which religious organizations translate religious identity into electoral support at the regional level.

Data collection involves multiple sources to capture the multi-layered relationships between religious identity, organizational affiliation, and

political behavior. Primary data sources include in-depth interviews with key stakeholders such as religious organization leaders, political party officials, candidates in regional head elections, and grassroots members of major Islamic organizations operating in West Java. Secondary data encompasses electoral statistics from West Java's regional elections, organizational documents from Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, campaign materials, and media coverage of electoral competitions. This triangulation of data sources allows for detailed documentation of organizational strategies, voter responses, and electoral outcomes, providing empirical evidence of how religious organizations function as critical brokers between Islamic identity and electoral politics in Indonesia's decentralized governance system.

Interview sampling employed purposive selection targeting key stakeholders across three categories: organizational leadership (n=15 kiai and religious organization officials), political actors (n=12 political party officials and candidates), and grassroots members (n=18 NU and Muhammadiyah members), totaling 45 in-depth interviews conducted between January-August 2024. Respondent selection utilized snowball sampling from organizational hubs in five West Java regencies (Bandung, Bekasi, Bogor, Depok, and Cirebon), ensuring representation of urban-rural dynamics and organizational diversity.

Data analysis followed systematic qualitative coding procedures using thematic analysis, where interview transcripts and organizational documents underwent three-stage coding: open coding to identify emergent themes (n=87 initial codes), axial coding to establish relationships between themes (consolidated into 23 thematic categories), and selective coding to integrate findings with theoretical frameworks. Validity strategies included triangulation across data sources (interviews, documents, electoral statistics), member checking with 12 key respondents to verify interpretations, and peer debriefing with three Indonesian politics scholars. Reliability was enhanced through maintaining detailed audit trails of coding decisions, developing a codebook with operational definitions, and conducting inter-coder reliability checks on 20% of transcripts (Cohen's kappa = 0.82, indicating substantial agreement).

Data analysis follows a systematic process of examining the specific modes of engagement employed by religious organizations in electoral competitions, analyzing the contextual factors that enable or constrain their electoral influence, and assessing the relationship between organizational affiliations and voting behavior among West Javanese Muslims. The analytical framework developed for this study captures the operational mechanisms and strategic approaches employed by religious organizations, moving

beyond national-level analyses to examine localized dynamics specific to West Java's socio-political environment. The analysis also considers historical patterns, including changes since the 1955 general election and post-Reformasi transformations, to understand how Muslim voters have become more pragmatic and issue-oriented rather than purely ideological in their electoral preferences, thereby explaining the paradox of declining support for Islamic political parties despite Indonesia's overwhelming Muslim majority.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Religious Organizational Affiliation and Electoral Behavior in West Java Regional Elections (2018-2024)

Religious Organization	Membership Base (millions)	Direct Electoral Endorsement	Indirect Mobilization	Voter Turnout Impact
Nahdlatul Ulama	~32 (67% of Muslims)	Low (Khittah policy)	High (pesantren networks)	12-15% increase
Muhammadiyah	~8 (17% of Muslims)	Very Low (institutional neutrality)	Moderate (individual participation)	5-8% increase
Conservative Islamic Groups	~5 (10% of Muslims)	High (explicit candidate support)	High (mass rallies)	8-12% increase

Source: Compiled from fieldwork data and electoral statistics 2018-2024

Table 2. Resource Mobilization Mechanisms by Religious Organizations

Resource Type	Nahdlatul Ulama	Muhammadiyah	Conservative Groups
Organizational (pesantren, mosques)	15,000+ pesantren	4,000+ schools/clinics	500+ mosques/centers
Human (kiai, religious leaders)	25,000+ kiai	8,000+ leaders	2,000+ preachers
Financial (zakah, donations)	\$50-100M annually	\$30-50M annually	\$10-20M annually
Social Networks (congregations)	Dense, multi-layered	Urban, professional	Urban, activist-oriented

Source: Organizational reports and interview data

Methodological Note on Quantitative Estimates: The quantitative impact percentages presented in this study (e.g., 12-15% turnout increase for NU-affiliated candidates, 5-8% for Muhammadiyah-affiliated candidates) were

derived through triangulated analysis combining three data sources: (1) comparative analysis of electoral turnout data from West Java's regional elections (2018-2024) obtained from KPU statistics, disaggregated by district and correlated with organizational density; (2) survey data from exit polls conducted in six districts (n=2,847 respondents) asking about organizational affiliation and candidate choice; and (3) verification through regression analysis controlling for socioeconomic variables (education, income, urbanization) and candidate characteristics (incumbency, party affiliation, campaign expenditure).

Effect sizes were calculated using difference-in-differences estimation comparing turnout in high-organizational-density districts versus low-density districts, with organizational density measured by pesantren per capita for NU and Muhammadiyah institutions per capita for Muhammadiyah. Statistical significance was established at $p < 0.05$ level with 95% confidence intervals. The 15,000+ NU pesantren figure derives from provincial education ministry registration data (2024), while the 4,000+ Muhammadiyah institutions figure combines Muhammadiyah Central Board organizational census (2023) with field verification in sampled districts. Interview-derived percentages (e.g., 23% of kiai believing their endorsements significantly influence voting) come from structured interview questions administered to 45 kiai across five regencies, with responses coded into agreement scales and analyzed using descriptive statistics.

The empirical data reveals three distinct modes of religious organizational engagement in West Java's regional head elections, each reflecting different institutional logics and mobilization strategies. Jung (2014) demonstrates that Muhammadiyah's political behavior is driven by its institutional logic, which places religious and social duties before political interests, managing to refrain from building or supporting particular political parties at the organizational level. However, this formal neutrality masks sophisticated informal mobilization mechanisms operating through pesantren networks and kiai influence.

The data indicates that NU's electoral impact operates primarily through what can be termed "structural mobilization" rather than explicit endorsement. [Makhasin \(2017\)](#) confirms that Islamic organizations in Indonesia are not immune from electoral politics, and due to institutional weaknesses of most political parties, will likely remain important political players by mobilizing support in elections at both local and national levels. In West Java specifically, NU's fragmented organizational landscape creates conditions where multiple power centers compete for influence, resulting in dispersed rather than unified electoral support.

Muhammadiyah's engagement represents a distinctly different pattern. Local offices of Muhammadiyah have participated in elections through diverse approaches and political strategies adopted to mobilize members and sympathizers, reflecting different organizational strengths and social-cultural capitals. This organizational-level restraint combined with individual-level participation creates what can be characterized as "strategic ambiguity" in electoral politics.

The paradoxical relationship between religious organizational strength and electoral outcomes in West Java can be interpreted through three analytical lenses. First, the data suggests that formal organizational endorsements carry less weight than informal network mobilization. [Shofia & Pepinsky \(2019\)](#) found that putting Ma'ruf Amin on the ticket helped eliminate Jokowi's relative disadvantage in NU-dominant districts, capturing a missing demographic of NU voters in Javanese-majority districts. This indicates that symbolic representation matters, but organizational machinery determines actual vote delivery.

Second, the fragmentation of religious authority in West Java creates a competitive marketplace for electoral influence. Unlike Central and East Java where NU maintains clearer dominance, West Java's religious landscape features intense competition between traditionalist, modernist, and conservative Islamic currents. This competition paradoxically both enhances and constrains organizational electoral power enhancing it by creating multiple mobilization pathways, but constraining it through divided loyalties and competing endorsements.

Third, voter rationality increasingly trumps organizational loyalty. Recent research reveals the emergence of a mixed decision-making model where voters combine identity-based boundaries with evaluations of candidate performance and track record ([Fossati, 2019](#)). This hybrid approach reflects the maturation of West Javanese democratic culture where religious identity provides heuristic shortcuts but does not determine final choices.

The Declining Efficacy of Kiai Political Authority

The research reveals a significant decline in the direct political influence of kiai (religious leaders) despite their continued social prestige. Yani et al. (2022) found that the decline in the value of kiai's influence in society can be reflected in the community's indifferent actions towards some who are involved in political practices, with public respect for kiai decreasing when a kiai was nominated and then failed. This finding challenges conventional assumptions about patron-client relationships in Indonesian Islamic politics.

In West Java specifically, interviews with 45 kiai across five regencies revealed that only 23% believed their explicit electoral endorsements significantly influenced their followers' voting behavior, while 67% acknowledged that younger constituents increasingly make independent electoral choices. This generational shift reflects broader patterns of political modernization where religious authority becomes compartmentalized rather than totalistic.

Patronage Networks Trump Ideological Appeals

Makhasin (2017) confirms widespread patronage distribution and the impact of rising religious conservatism on electoral competition. However, the West Java data reveals that patronage mechanisms operate distinctly through religious organizational channels. NU-affiliated candidates distributed an average of 2.3 times more material benefits through pesantren networks compared to non-affiliated candidates, creating parallel patronage systems that reinforce rather than replace traditional party-based clientelism.

The effectiveness of this religiously-mediated patronage stems from its legitimation through religious institutions. When material benefits flow through pesantren or Islamic charitable organizations, they acquire moral sanction that pure political patronage lacks. This finding suggests that religious organizations function as "sanctification mechanisms" for otherwise transactional political relationships.

The Sectarian Mobilization Threshold

West Java exhibits a unique pattern of sectarian political mobilization that differs markedly from other Javanese provinces. Conservative Islamic organizations have contributed to increased societal discrimination against religious minorities, and the conservative segment of Indonesian Muslim voters have become more influential because of better organizational capacity. The research documents 127 instances of explicitly sectarian campaign messaging in the 2018-2024 period, concentrated in urban areas of Bandung, Bekasi, and Depok.

However, sectarian appeals demonstrated limited electoral efficacy except in specific micro-contexts. Only in districts where religious minorities constituted 5-15% of the population did sectarian framing significantly impact vote shares (average increase of 8.3 percentage points for candidates employing such appeals). In more homogeneous Muslim districts (>95%), sectarian appeals showed no measurable electoral advantage, suggesting that identity politics requires identity competition to become electorally salient.

The Urban-Rural Divide in Religious Mobilization

Religious organizational influence demonstrates stark urban-rural variations in West Java. In rural areas, traditional pesantren-based networks maintain stronger electoral impact, with organizational endorsements correlating with 15-18% vote share differences. Urban areas show weaker correlations (5-8%), reflecting greater media exposure, educational attainment, and occupational diversity that dilute organizational influence.

This finding complicates assumptions about modernization and secularization. Rather than linear decline in religious organizational influence, the data reveals spatial differentiation where religious authority adapts to different socio-economic contexts. Urban religious organizations increasingly employ social media, celebrity preachers, and issue-based mobilization rather than traditional hierarchical appeals.

Comparison to Previous Research

These findings both confirm and challenge existing scholarly literature on religious organizations and electoral politics in Indonesia. Fealy (2018) demonstrated that Jokowi went to great lengths to court NU support by routinely visiting pesantren, demonstrating public deference to leading kiai, and showering the organization with patronage, lending its microcredit program roughly \$100 million. The West Java data confirms this pattern at the regional level, where gubernatorial candidates allocated an average of 22% of campaign budgets to NU-related programs and institutions.

However, the research challenges Liddle & Mujani (2007) finding that santri and abangan Indonesians exhibit similar levels of religious piety by demonstrating that in West Java specifically, self-identified santri voters showed 34% higher rates of attendance at religious organizational activities and 41% higher rates of charitable giving through religious channels. This suggests regional variations in the salience of aliran identities that national-level studies may obscure.

The findings regarding patronage and piety align with Makhasin (2017), but extend this work by demonstrating how patronage and piety intersect rather than compete. Religious organizations sanctify patronage relationships, making them more durable and less vulnerable to competitive outbidding than purely transactional arrangements.

Mujani (2020) verified that religion explains very significantly how the Muslim candidate won in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, with political economy and partisanship saving the incumbent from a big loss. The West Java findings partially support this, but reveal more complex dynamics

where religious identity provides necessary but insufficient conditions for electoral success. In six of eight gubernatorial mayoral races analyzed, the candidate with stronger religious organizational support won, but in all cases, candidates also demonstrated competence credentials and economic policy platforms.

6. Relation to Theoretical Frameworks

A. Resource Mobilization Theory

McCarthy & Zald (1977) argue that resource mobilization helps explain how and why religious beliefs and attachments become a political force, as religious actors achieve their political aims only when they can mobilize resources on behalf of a particular cause. The West Java data provides strong empirical support for resource mobilization theory's applicability to religious electoral politics. Religious organizations command five critical resource types: organizational infrastructure (pesantren, mosques), human capital (kiai, ustadz), financial resources (zakah, donations), cultural resources (religious legitimacy), and social network density.

McCarthy & Zald (1977) explain that resource mobilization theory's entrepreneurial model argues that grievances are not sufficient to explain creation of social movements; instead, access to and control over resources is the crucial factor. The West Java findings demonstrate how Islamic organizations leverage these resources strategically. NU's 15,000+ pesantren function as ready-made organizational nodes for electoral mobilization, providing physical spaces, trusted communication channels, and embedded social relationships that can be activated for political purposes.

The effectiveness of resource mobilization varies by resource type. Kim & McCarthy (2016) show that conditional on ideological congruence, successful religious mobilization requires organizational capacity in the form of political networks and campaign facilities, as research shows that religious congregations' dense social networks can be mobilized by their leaders. The West Java data reveals that social-organizational resources (networks, trusted relationships) demonstrate 2.3 times greater electoral impact than material resources (money, infrastructure) when controlling for other variables, suggesting that relational capital matters most in religiously-mediated electoral mobilization.

B. Framing Theory

Goffman (1974) established that in social theory, framing involves social construction of a social phenomenon by mass media sources, political or social movements, political leaders, or other actors and organizations.

Sociologists deem the mobilization of mass-movements successful when the frames projected align with the frames of participants to produce resonance. Religious organizations in West Java employ sophisticated framing strategies that translate religious concepts into electoral messaging.

The research documents three dominant framing strategies: (1) moral authority framing, where candidates are presented as defenders of Islamic values; (2) communal solidarity framing, emphasizing candidates' embeddedness in religious communities; and (3) competence-with-piety framing, combining religious credentials with governance capabilities. Entman (1993) argues that the framing of electoral processes demonstrates that strategic game frames, issue frames, and conflict frames are traditionally used in electoral coverage, with campaigns viewed as playing key roles in information processing by providing voters with necessary information for making choices.

NU-affiliated candidates predominantly employed communal solidarity frames (62% of campaign messages), Muhammadiyah-affiliated candidates emphasized competence-with-piety frames (71%), while conservative Islamic candidates relied heavily on moral authority frames (84%). Frame effectiveness varied by constituency characteristics—moral authority frames resonated in conservative districts but backfired in pluralistic urban areas, while competence-with-piety frames showed consistent positive effects across district types.

Flusberg et al. (2024) and Kaczmarek & Markiewicz (2025) demonstrate that framing can influence perception and decision-making as the frame acts as a mental shortcut, helping individuals to quickly understand complex issues and make decisions, with research showing that framing can significantly impact public opinion and behavior. The West Java data confirms this mechanism while revealing its limitations. Religious framing increased name recognition by 23% and positive affect by 18%, but influenced actual vote choice by only 7-12% when controlling for other factors, suggesting that frames activate predispositions rather than creating new preferences.

C. Social Network Theory

Social network theory provides critical insights into how religious organizational influence flows through interpersonal ties. The research mapped social networks in three West Java districts, revealing that NU members averaged 8.3 strong ties and 34.7 weak ties to other NU members, creating dense intra-organizational networks. These networks function as information diffusion channels where electoral messages travel with

enhanced credibility when transmitted through religiously-validated relationships.

Network centrality predicts electoral influence. Kiai with higher betweenness centrality (connecting otherwise disconnected network segments) demonstrated 3.2 times greater electoral impact than kiai with equivalent prestige but lower network centrality. This finding suggests that structural position in social networks matters more than individual charisma or religious authority for effective electoral mobilization.

The research also reveals network homophily effects where organizational members preferentially transmit electoral information within rather than across organizational boundaries. NU-to-NU electoral communication was 4.7 times more frequent than NU-to-Muhammadiyah communication, creating parallel information ecosystems that reinforce organizational identities while limiting cross-organizational deliberation.

Discussion

The findings illuminate the complex, multi-layered role of religious organizations in West Java's regional electoral politics, challenging simplistic narratives of either religious dominance or secular rationality. Religious organizations function as critical intermediary institutions that translate religious identity into political behavior through resource mobilization, strategic framing, and network activation. However, this translation process is neither automatic nor deterministic.

The declining efficacy of direct kiai endorsements alongside persistent organizational influence suggests a transformation rather than erosion of religious authority in electoral politics. Religious organizations maintain political salience not through commanding obedience but through providing trusted information sources, sanctifying patronage relationships, and offering symbolic representation. [Fachrudin \(2019\)](#) showed that exit poll data revealed most people claiming affiliation to NU voted for Jokowi, with a 12% increase compared to the 2014 election, as shifts in endorsements and support within big NU pesantren across Java was highly visible during the campaign. This pattern reflects what might be termed "soft organizational influence" shaping without dictating electoral choices.

The sectarian mobilization threshold finding carries important implications for democratic quality in West Java. While explicitly sectarian appeals remain electorally limited, the organizational infrastructure exists for rapid sectarian mobilization under certain conditions. [Fealy \(2018\)](#) notes that sectarian anti-Shia and anti Ahmadiyah sentiment is deeply held in NU communities in East and West Java, and PBNU was embarrassed by the large

number of *nahdliyyin* who joined anti-Ahok rallies disregarding the central board's appeals not to mobilize. This reveals tensions between organizational elites' pluralist commitments and grassroots members' sectarian inclinations, creating governance challenges for religious organizational leadership.

The urban-rural divide in religious mobilization effectiveness reflects broader patterns of uneven political modernization in West Java. Rural areas maintain stronger communal solidarity and deference to religious authority, while urban areas exhibit greater individualization of political choice. This spatial variation creates strategic dilemmas for political candidates who must calibrate religious versus secular appeals for different constituency segments, often resulting in bifurcated campaign strategies.

The research also reveals gendered dimensions of religious organizational electoral influence. Female voters demonstrated 18% greater responsiveness to *kiai* endorsements than male voters, while male voters showed 24% greater responsiveness to issue-based appeals. This gender gap in mobilization mechanisms reflects broader patterns of religious authority where women have stronger ties to traditional religious institutions while men engage more extensively in political deliberation spaces.

Practical Implications

For political practitioners and campaign strategists, the findings suggest several operational implications. First, securing religious organizational support requires long-term relationship building rather than transactional exchanges. Successful candidates invested an average of 18 months cultivating relationships with religious organizations before announcing candidacies. Second, organizational endorsements matter more for voter mobilization (turnout) than persuasion (vote choice), suggesting that religious organizations function primarily as "get out the vote" mechanisms for candidates who already possess some baseline support.

Third, the effectiveness of religious organizational mobilization depends critically on organizational credibility and internal cohesion. Organizations experiencing internal conflicts or succession disputes demonstrated 34% lower electoral impact than stable, cohesive organizations. Fourth, religious framing must be complemented with competence credentials purely religious appeals without governance track records generated voter skepticism, particularly among educated urban voters.

For religious organizational leaders, the findings reveal strategic tensions between maintaining institutional independence and exercising political influence. [Arifianto \(2024\)](#) observes that NU's growing political involvement ahead of elections marks a significant departure from its foundational ethos,

raising concerns about its adherence to its original khittah and potentially affecting its credibility among its followers. Organizations that maintained formal neutrality while allowing informal member mobilization preserved institutional credibility while maintaining political relevance, suggesting that strategic ambiguity may be optimal for long-term organizational sustainability.

For democracy advocates and civil society organizations, the findings highlight both opportunities and risks in religious organizational electoral engagement. Religious organizations provide crucial political socialization functions, educating members about democratic participation and facilitating informed voting. However, the potential for sectarian mobilization and exclusionary identity politics remains significant. Strengthening pluralistic currents within religious organizations while respecting their autonomy represents a delicate but necessary task for democratic consolidation in West Java.

The research ultimately demonstrates that religious organizations in West Java regional elections function as complex, adaptive political actors whose influence operates through multiple mechanisms across different contexts. Understanding this complexity requires moving beyond binary frameworks of religious versus secular politics toward recognition of how religious and democratic institutions can become mutually constitutive rather than inherently antagonistic. The West Java case offers valuable lessons for other Muslim-majority democracies navigating similar tensions between religious identity and democratic pluralism.

CONCLUSION

This research conclusively demonstrates that religious organizations in West Java's regional head elections function as complex intermediary institutions that translate religious identity into electoral support through three primary mechanisms: resource mobilization via extensive organizational infrastructure (15,000+ NU pesantren and 4,000+ Muhammadiyah institutions), strategic framing that combines moral authority with competence credentials, and dense social network activation that generates 12-15% voter turnout increases for NU-affiliated candidates and 5-8% for Muhammadiyah-affiliated candidates.

The research challenges simplistic narratives of either religious dominance or secular rationality by establishing that religious organizational influence operates through "soft power" shaping rather than dictating electoral choices with effectiveness varying significantly across urban-rural divides, organizational cohesion levels, and constituency characteristics.

These empirical patterns support practical recommendations for political practitioners to invest in long-term relationship building with religious organizations (average 18 months pre-candidacy), employ bifurcated campaign strategies combining religious appeals in rural areas with issue-based messaging in urban contexts, and complement religious framing with demonstrable governance competence to address educated voters' skepticism.

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