Analysis of The Utilization of Religious Sentiments in Political Parties in The Pilkada Campaign in Sidoarjo

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Abstract
This research analyzes the utilization of religious sentiment in the political campaign strategies of local political parties during the regional head elections (Pilkada) in Sidoarjo. The study employs a qualitative field research method through in-depth interviews, media content analysis, and observation. The purpose is to explore how religious symbols, narratives, and identity politics are mobilized to gain political legitimacy and mass support. In particular, the study focuses on how candidates strategically employ religious expressions, such as references to Islamic values, practices, and symbols, to resonate with voters, especially in a region where religion plays a significant role in social and cultural life. The results show that several political parties in Sidoarjo intentionally used religious issues, particularly those tied to Islamic values and institutions, as campaign tools. These strategies include invoking Islamic symbols, securing endorsements from religious leaders, and framing political discourse within religious narratives to appeal to religious sentiment. It has significant implications for the democratic process, raising concerns about the potential polarization of society and the manipulation of religious identity for political gain. Additionally, such practices may impact religious harmony in the region, as political parties exploit religious sentiments to consolidate their voter base. Theoretically, this study contributes to the discourse of political sociology and the sociology of religion by highlighting how religion is instrumentalized in contemporary electoral politics providing insights into the intersection of religion and political strategy in local governance.

Keywords: Identity Politics; Political Campaign; Regional Election; Religious Sentiment; Sidoarjo

Introduction

The simultaneous regional head elections (Pilkada) held in 2024 were among the most strategic moments in the consolidation stage of local democracy in Indonesia. In the decentralization system adopted by Indonesia since the 1998 reform, Pilkada plays an important role in shaping regional leadership that is not only administratively legitimate but also culturally and socially legitimate among its citizens.

Sidoarjo District is a fascinating region to study, especially for its unique sociocultural characteristics. Sidoarjo is not only known as a densely populated buffer zone of Surabaya but also has an active and dominant religious life, especially in the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) Islamic tradition. This combination of urban modernity and traditional values makes Sidoarjo a microcosm of the complex dynamics of local politics in East Java. As political activity in the run-up to the local elections intensified from mid to late 2023, it became apparent that almost all candidates and political parties involved used religious elements in their campaign strategies. This phenomenon is not only shown in the way candidates dress, which emphasizes religious symbols such as a black

cap, a turban, and a *koko* shirt, but also in the selection of campaign slogans that use Islamic diction such as "blessing", "amanah", 'sholeh' or "Islamic leader". In addition, the participation of local religious leaders, both symbolically and structurally, became a key factor relied upon to gain legitimacy and community support. It is not uncommon for candidates to make visits to Islamic boarding schools, participate in religious activities such as Islamic gatherings, including grand recitations or *haul ulama*, and even make declarations of candidacy in the presence of influential religious figures. This trend is not only observed in Sidoarjo but also reflects a broader pattern in electoral politics in Indonesia.

The politicization of religion as an electoral strategy has been the concern of many academics and democracy practitioners. In the national context, Aspinall and Berenschot's (2019) study in Democracy for Sale clearly illustrates how religious symbols are mobilized to gain votes, even in contexts that are not always substantially relevant. Meanwhile, data from the Indonesian Survey Institute (LSI, 2023) indicate that candidate religiosity is a primary consideration for voters in East Java, even surpassing the vision, mission, and work programs offered. Research from the Wahid Foundation (2023) also shows that communities in areas with strong religious traditions are more easily polarized when religion is brought explicitly into the political arena. However, most of these studies are general and do not examine how the politicization of religion is carried out and accepted within a specific local context, such as Sidoarjo. This is where the importance of this study lies. By taking Sidoarjo as its locus, this study seeks to fill a research gap in the study of the politicization of religion in Indonesia. In the context of Sidoarjo, where social and religious networks are closely intertwined, the ways political parties and candidates strategize around religious sentiments are exciting to examine. How do they shape the narrative? What religious symbols and practices are used? How does the public respond? Moreover, what are the sociological implications of it all?

Numerous studies have noted that religion, particularly Islam, has high electoral appeal in Indonesia's political landscape. From the New Order era to the Reformation era, religious symbols and institutions have been integral to political dynamics, albeit in different forms and functions. During the New Order era, the politicization of religion was strictly controlled, and religious institutions functioned within the framework of state stability. Since 1998, however, political liberalization has created a broader space for the expression of religious identity in politics. This phenomenon is reflected in the rise of Islamic-based political parties and in the strategies of nationalist parties that employ Islamic narratives to attract constituents. In the context of Pilkada, according to Simandjuntak (2020), religious symbols can even become an important "political currency" in shaping voter perceptions, loyalty, and mobilization. Research by Hidayat and Ningsih (2024), which focused on Pilkada in the Tapal Kuda region of East Java, found that candidates who are associated with specific religious figures or *pesantren* tend to gain electoral advantages, even though their track records and political programs are not prominent. This finding reinforces the hypothesis that in religious societies, religious identity politics is more easily accepted and trusted than rational political promises. Meanwhile, research from the Wahid Foundation (2023) shows that the practice of religious politicization is often also accompanied by identity exclusivism and the spread of religion-based hoaxes, which ultimately disrupt social harmony and inclusive democracy. In their report on political polarization in East Java, the authors note that regions such as Sidoarjo, Lamongan, and Pasuruan have a high potential for social tensions ahead of regional elections because religious factors are used as political dividers. However, behind this general trend lies a gap that researchers have not fully explored: how religious narratives are shaped locally in

Pilkada campaigns and how people respond to these narratives within real social relations. These questions are important because each region has its own unique history, social structure, and religious dynamics. In Sidoarjo, for example, there is a contest between traditional Islamic values in the *pesantren* (santri) style and modern urban Islamic expressions that develop through social media and *hijrah* communities. These differences in proselytizing styles, symbols, and social networks shape the way people understand and respond to the politicization of religion. Therefore, this study seeks to not only explain "what" and 'how' religious politicization occurs, but also "why" this practice is accepted, rejected, or negotiated by local communities.

Based on the above facts and trends, this study aims to develop a sociological framework that explains the practice of religious politicization in the local election campaign in Sidoarjo Regency. Beyond explaining campaign practices, this study aims to uncover the social meanings behind the use of religious symbols and their long-term implications for democracy, political participation, and social cohesion. The study also challenges the overly normative or binary view of the relationship between religion and politics. The author argues that the relationship between religion and politics in local contexts, such as Sidoarjo, is ambivalent: on the one hand, it can strengthen citizens' political engagement through religious channels; on the other hand, it can narrow the space for discourse and threaten pluralism if pursued exclusively.

Theoretically, the analytical framework used in this research draws on classic and contemporary approaches to the sociology of religion. One of them is the social construction theory proposed by Peter L. Berger (1990) in the theory of social construction of reality, explaining that religion can be reproduced depending on social and political needs. In this case, political campaigns serve as an arena in which religious meanings are reformulated to support political narratives. This research examines how religion, as a social construction, is mobilized in local political campaigns, particularly in the 2024 Sidoarjo regional election. This research analyzes the use of religious symbols, meanings, and identities in campaign strategies and their relationship to the electoral politics of contemporary Muslim communities. Socially, this research aims to build critical awareness of the impact of religious politicization on democracy, social cohesion, and religious life. The research was conducted in the Sidoarjo district, which is considered representative due to the strength of its religious tradition and the dynamics of its modernity. Data was collected through interviews, campaign observations, and content analysis. The approach was qualitative and interpretive, aimed at understanding the social meanings that emerged among political actors, communities, and religious institutions. Thus, this research is expected to make theoretical and practical contributions to the study of religion and politics at the local level and to produce studies that are not only academically relevant but also practically useful in strengthening democratic ethics and maintaining the sacredness of religious values in the public sphere.

Literature Review

In the study of politics and sociology of religion internationally, the phenomenon of politicization of religion has become a serious concern for social scientists. Casanova (1994), through his idea of "derivatization of religion," states that even in the modern era, religion does not completely recede into the private sphere, but instead returns to the public sphere, one of which is through politics. Berger (1990) asserts that social reality, including religious and political reality, is a social construction negotiated by social actors through symbols, language, and institutions. This view inspires many studies on how religious symbols not only act as spiritual

expressions, but also as tools of legitimacy and power in contemporary politics. In the context of Muslim-majority democracies, such as Indonesia, the utilization of religious symbols and narratives in politics has become a common strategy. Recent studies such as Hidayat's (2023) and Firdaus's (2024) show that political Islam does not always take the form of an explicit ideological movement, but often comes in "cultural" forms, such as the use of religious symbols in political communication. Olivier Roy refers to this phenomenon as the "Islamization of politics," which is when religion is adapted to meet political needs, not the other way around.

In the Indonesian context, especially post-reform, religion-based identity politics is increasingly prominent. Research by Aspinall and Berenschot (2022) shows that politicians at various levels use religious symbols to attract support, especially in areas with a strong religious base. This phenomenon is reinforced by research by the Wahid Foundation (2023), which noted an increase in the use of religious rhetoric in the Pilkada campaign in East Java, both through billboards, political preaching, and social media. The Indonesian Survey Institute (LSI) also reports that candidate religiosity is one of the primary considerations for voters in Java, including Sidoarjo. However, most of these studies have focused on macro or national phenomena, and few have explored the local context in depth. Studies of Sidoarjo, an area with a strong NU tradition but also experiencing rapid urbanization, are limited. Not many studies have examined how religious narratives are produced, disseminated, and responded to in socio-political interactions at the district level. In fact, local dynamics can show complexities that are not always captured in national analysis. For example, how do NU members respond to candidates who claim "NU-ness"? Are conservative Islamic symbols accepted in traditional Islamic bases? These questions are gaps that have not been answered by previous literature. In addition, conceptually, many studies on religious politicization tend to only explain the phenomenon as a form of political campaign or mobilization, without exploring its social meaning and symbolic construction.

This research tries to go beyond a purely descriptive approach by borrowing the framework of Berger and Luckmann's social construction of reality theory. With this theory, religious symbols and narratives in campaigns are understood as the result of social constructions that are not neutral, but rather the product of power relations and social interests, as conceptualized by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their seminal work *The Social Construction of Reality*.

In the context of the Sidoarjo local elections, this means seeing billboards, political proselytizing and endorsements of religious figures not as mere "campaign tools", but as arenas of meaning production that influence people's political consciousness. Thus, this study not only maps the practice of religious politicization but also critiques the way religious symbols work in local politics. This study fills a gap in the literature by presenting an analysis rooted in the local context of Sidoarjo but connected to the global discourse on the relationship between religion and politics. This zooming approach from internationally established theoretical frameworks in the sociology of religion to local empirical realities is expected to make conceptual and empirical contributions to the development of the sociology of religion studies in Indonesia.

Results and Discussion
Utilization of Religious Symbols in the Sidoarjo Regional Election Campaign

Religious symbols in the Sidoarjo local election campaign are not just ornaments but have a deeper meaning in the context of local politics. Candidates in Sidoarjo consistently used symbols associated with Islamic values, such as pictures of mosques, calligraphy and images of influential

religious figures in the region. This phenomenon reflects politicians' efforts to build emotional connections with voters, especially among Muslims. The use of religious symbols in this campaign serves as a bridge to create closeness between candidates and voters, giving the impression that the candidate has an affinity with religious values believed by the community. Not only in visual forms such as billboards or posters containing religious images, but religious symbols are also present in verbal forms, such as in speeches or lectures delivered by candidates, which often contain verses of the Qur'an or hadith that are relevant to the socio-political context. The use of these religious sentences is not just to show personal piety, but rather an attempt to build a religious political image that can be trusted by voters who have a high tendency to religiosity. In this case, religious symbols become a very effective tool in attracting sympathy and gaining support from most voters who value the importance of religious factors in determining the quality of a leader. These symbols also serve to emphasize the political identity of regional head candidates who prioritize common values with most of the community, which in this case is the Muslim community. For example, in the Sidoarjo regional election campaign, many candidates highlighted their ties to religious organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) or Muhammadiyah, the two most prominent Islamic organizations in Indonesia. This image was maintained using images of prominent religious figures in the area, such as ulama or kiai who were respected by the community, symbolically showing that the candidate had religious authority and was worth following. This, in turn, forms bonds of trust and political loyalty, which are often decisive factors in elections in areas with a highly religious voter base, such as Sidoarjo.

This phenomenon is also part of the growing trend of identity politics in Indonesia, especially after the reform era. Based on qualitative interviews conducted with several residents in Sidoarjo, this study finds that voters tend to prefer candidates who are perceived as being close to ulama and kyai. Informants expressed that such candidates are considered more trustworthy, morally grounded, and less likely to deceive the public, as religion is viewed as a moral foundation guiding their political commitment.

In this context, religion is viewed not merely as personal aspects of people's lives but also as a significant public element that shapes political choices. The politicization of religion is inseparable from the global landscape, where, in many Muslim-majority countries, religious symbols have become central to politics and public campaigning. However, the deployment of these symbols has faced criticism from some observers who argue that such practices manipulate religious sentiments for political advantage. This critique suggests that the overuse of religious symbols can foster polarization within society, particularly in diverse social and religious contexts. Thus, while religious symbols can serve as powerful tools for garnering support, they also carry the risk of intensifying inter-group tensions if not applied with caution.

Conversely, proponents of incorporating religious symbols into campaigns argue that doing so validates the sincerity of candidates for regional head positions, demonstrating their adherence to moral and ethical principles grounded in religious teachings. The utilization of religious symbols in the Sidoarjo local election campaign exemplifies the intricate nature of local politics, which is influenced not only by economic and social issues but also by strong religious identity factors. In this instance, religious symbols transcend mere visual representations; they function as instruments for creating emotional connections with voters and asserting candidates' political identities within a socio-religious framework that significantly impacts the electoral process in Sidoarjo. This phenomenon illustrates how religion can be leveraged to achieve political

objectives while simultaneously highlighting the challenges of balancing identity politics with the diverse nature of a pluralistic society.

In this context, religious symbols are used to demonstrate the candidates' closeness and loyalty to religious values that are respected by the local community. This supports the concept of identity politics often used in campaigns in Indonesia, where religion is used as a tool to strengthen political legitimacy and gain support from the majority group. These religious symbols, while often used for strategic purposes, also illustrate efforts to maintain traditional values in a society that is increasingly affected by globalization and social change. Furthermore, the use of religious symbols is also related to the theory of Islamization of Politics proposed by Olivier Roy (2011). According to Roy, political Islamization does not only occur in the form of ideological movements, but also in the form of adaptation of religious values in a more cultural politics. In Sidoarjo, this is evident in the way politicians use religious symbols to communicate their identity as part of the majority religious community, while creating a political narrative based on Islamic values.

Voters' Response to the Use of Religion in Campaigns

Voters in Sidoarjo indicate that religion plays a very important role in determining their political choices. Based on qualitative interviews with local residents in Sidoarjo, several informants revealed that they felt closer to and placed greater trust in candidates who emphasized religiosity in their campaigns. This is consistent with the findings of research by the Wahid Foundation (2023), which noted that voters in East Java, including Sidoarjo, often assess candidates based on their conformity with religious norms, such as their practice of Islamic teachings and links to religious organizations. However, this phenomenon is not homogenous. Some voters are concerned about the intensity with which religious symbols are used in campaigns. They argue that the politicization of religion can create tensions between groups of people who have different religious understandings. On the other hand, some voters also see that the politicization of religion brings benefits because it provides a clear picture of which candidates truly understand and appreciate the religious values of the community. Criticism of this phenomenon tends to be related to the possibility of marginalization for those who are not in line with the religious narratives built by candidates.

Criticism of the politicization of religion in the Sidoarjo regional election campaign also refers to Giddens' (2009) assertion that religious identity-based politics can exacerbate social fragmentation in a plural society. The dominant use of religious symbols in the campaign, such as images of mosques or calligraphy, can emphasize the boundaries between groups that identify with a particular religion and other groups that feel unrepresented by these symbols. It has the potential to foster a sense of exclusivity, where non-religious groups feel marginalized or ignored in the political process. In pluralistic Indonesia, religious identity-based politics can exacerbate polarization between different religious groups. When religious symbols are overused, it can create a sharp division between the religious "us" and the non-religious "them", which in turn can lower the level of political participation of groups that feel alienated. Giddens (2009) emphasizes that the politicization of religion often links political identity with religious identity, which can exacerbate social tensions and undermine inter-group integration in society.

Nevertheless, religion still plays an important role in social and political life, especially in areas with a religious majority, such as Sidoarjo. Religion is not only a spiritual guide to life, but also shapes social values that influence people's political behaviour. In the context of local elections, for example, religious affiliation and the use of religious symbols are often important

factors in building candidates' image and legitimacy in the eyes of voters. On the other hand, the politicization of religion is a common strategy used by political actors to gain sympathy and electoral support. Religious symbols, narratives, and rhetoric are used to create emotional closeness between candidates and voters. However, this strategy is not free from risks, mainly when religion is used manipulatively to form a sharp social dichotomy between the "faithful" and the "others". In the long run, this can undermine inclusive and tolerant social structures.

Unwise politicization of religion has the potential to exacerbate social polarization. When religious symbols and identities are used as tools of political exclusivity, society can be divided into groups that are ideologically and socially opposed to each other. This kind of polarization not only threatens a healthy democratic life but also risks causing horizontal conflicts in the community, especially in religious and culturally heterogeneous areas. Therefore, politicians need to balance the use of religious symbols with the principles of inclusiveness and diversity. Responsible political campaigns should not exploit religion as a tool of power but rather make it a source of ethical values that promote justice, solidarity, and respect for differences. These principles should be the basis for building a political narrative that is non-discriminatory and able to reach all levels of society. In this context, caution in using religious symbols and discourses is essential. The politicization of religion should be directed at strengthening social harmony, not the other way around. Political actors need to realize that social stability and community cohesion are far more valuable than short-term electoral victories. Therefore, a joint commitment is needed to create political practices that are more just, democratic, and unite all groups in a pluralistic society.

The Role of Social Media in Spreading Religious Sentiments

Social media became a very dynamic arena in the Sidoarjo regional election campaign, and played an important role in expanding the use of religious symbols. Candidates used social media such as Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp to disseminate their religious messages. They not only uploaded pictures and posters, but also shared videos of political lectures packed with religious messages relevant to their campaigns. This phenomenon illustrates that social media provides a new space for candidates to connect with voters, especially the younger generation, who are more active in using social media. In this case, social media not only functions as a communication tool, but also as a space to "create" a socio-political reality that is more personalized and directly connected to the community.

The presence of social media in Pilkada campaigns not only expands the reach of information but also allows candidates to build a religious image more effectively and quickly. Videos of lectures or faith-based content published on these platforms can easily reach a wider audience and invite direct engagement, such as comments, shares, or discussions involving voters. Social media also allows candidates to deliver messages more informally and directly, giving a sense of immediacy between candidates and voters. It is undoubtedly an important factor in attracting support from younger voters who are more familiar with technology and digital media. However, while social media provides a more inclusive platform, there is also a risk that the use of religious symbols in these digital spaces could lead to further polarization. When religious messages are massively disseminated through social media, not only does it provide a space for those who agree with the message to connect, but it can also reinforce social divisions among those who disagree or feel alienated by the message. In the context of the Sidoarjo regional election, this shows how social media has become a new terrain for utilizing religious symbols to attract voters, but can also exacerbate social fragmentation in a plural society.

From the perspective of social construction theory proposed by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966), social media functions as a space for the externalization and circulation of meaning, which contributes to the objectification of religious narratives and shapes the collective consciousness of society through processes of externalization, objectification, and internalization. This theoretical perspective is also applied in analyzing offline campaign practices involving religious symbols and events. The use of religious symbols on social media allows candidates to build political narratives that are more personalized and more easily accepted by voters. In addition, these platforms allow for direct discussion and interaction between candidates and voters, which has a greater impact than traditional media. However, on the other hand, social media also risks exacerbating polarisation, given an open and accessible discussion space for everyone, including those with very different views on religion. Therefore, while social media provides advantages in terms of reach, its impact on social cohesion still needs to be studied further.

Criticism of the Politicization of Religion

Criticism of the politicization of religion in the Sidoarjo regional election campaign has emerged as religion is often used manipulatively to gain political support. Some community groups feel that the politicization of religion risks creating greater social tensions, especially in a highly plural society like Sidoarjo. The use of religious symbols in campaigns, such as pictures of mosques or quotes from religious verses, is often seen as a tactic to mobilize voters based on religious similarities, without regard to the impact on wider social cohesion. It can exacerbate divisions between groups, particularly between those who feel marginalized or unrepresented in the political narrative. In addition, the open and persistent politicization of religion in the Sidoarjo regional election campaign could also create a more polarizing atmosphere, where voters feel forced to vote based on religious affiliation rather than the quality of candidates or policy programs offered. It has the potential to reduce the quality of democracy, as voters are driven more by religious identity factors than rational considerations about candidates' ability to lead and advance the region. Therefore, the use of religion in politics should be done with caution and attention to the broader social context so as not to exacerbate existing social fragmentation.

On the other hand, however, some argue that religion still plays a legitimate role in political life, especially in areas where the majority of the population is Muslim. In this case, the use of religious symbols can be seen as a reflection of the values held dear by the majority of the community. Nonetheless, this criticism remains relevant because while religion is an important part of socio-political life, excessive politicization of religion still has the potential to undermine social integration and create unnecessary tensions.

The use of religious symbols in campaigns is considered to exacerbate social conflicts between groups that are not in line with the religious narratives constructed by the candidates. In this context, the politicization of religion is more often seen as a strategy to strengthen certain political power, rather than to create an inclusive space for all levels of society. Religious symbols used in campaigns are often only intended to attract specific segments of voters, especially those with similar religious identities, without considering the social diversity that exists in society. It has the potential to alienate groups with different religious views or even those who do not feel connected to these symbols, exacerbating tensions and distrust between different groups in society. In addition, the politicization of religion often manipulates religious values for political purposes, which can ultimately reduce the meaning of religion itself. Religion, which should be a moral and

spiritual guide for individuals, is turned into a tool to gain power. It creates a distortion in society's understanding of religious teachings, where religious messages that should be universal and promote peace are instead used to strengthen political polarization. This phenomenon risks eroding religious values that can unite people in diversity, and replacing them with narrow and exclusive identity politics. Thus, the politicization of religion in the Sidoarjo regional election campaign not only affects inter-group relations but also has the potential to undermine the essence of religion itself as a source of moral values that promote unity and peace. Therefore, politicians need to be wiser in using religious symbols, considering the long-term social impact that using religious symbols as a political tool can have.

Thus, the use of religious symbols in politics must be viewed with caution. In a multicultural society like Indonesia, especially in Sidoarjo, religious symbols have great social power and can significantly influence people's political behavior. However, this power can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it can strengthen the relationship between leaders and the people, but on the other hand, it also has the potential to create exclusivity and social segregation. Excessive politicization of religion can undermine social integration and hinder the realization of an inclusive democracy. When religious symbols are strategically utilized for electoral purposes, they can blur the lines between the public interest and the interests of certain groups. As a result, society can become trapped in a binary narrative that separates "us" and "them, exacerbates identity differences, and creates social tensions that are difficult to heal. Therefore, it is important to keep political practices within the corridors of social and religious ethics. For the Sidoarjo regional election campaign to run inclusively and fairly, there needs to be strict supervision of the use of religious symbols in the political sphere. It is not to curb religious expression, but to ensure that religion is not misused as a tool to emphasize differences, but as a shared value that emphasizes unity in diversity. With this approach, local democracy can grow in a healthy, fair, and harmonious atmosphere.

Table 1: Use of Religious Symbols in the Sidoarjo Regional Election Campaign (2024)

Candidate	Type of Religious Symbols	Campaign Platform
A	Mosque, Al-Qur'an Verses	Billboards, Social Media
B	Image of Ulama, Calligraphy	Billboards, Facebook
C	Religious Lectures, MUI Photos	Instagram, WhatsApp

Table 2: Voters' Response to the Utilization of Religious Sentiments in Campaigns Response Category Voter Percentage (%)

Response Category	Voter Percentage (%)
Support	60 %
Reject	30 %
Neutral	10 %

The findings shown in Tables 1 and 2 stem from qualitative interviews (n = 12), field observations, and the collection of campaign materials documented during the 2024 regional election campaign in Sidoarjo.

Table 1 illustrates the various religious symbols employed by candidates along with the campaign platforms through which these symbols were communicated. As depicted in Table 1, Candidate A utilized religious symbols such as mosques and Qur'anic verses, prominently displayed on billboards and shared across social media. Candidate B focused on images of ulama and Islamic calligraphy, primarily disseminating these through billboards and Facebook. In contrast, Candidate C engaged in participation at religious lectures and shared photographs with the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI), mainly through Instagram and WhatsApp. These trends suggest that candidates strategically tailored their use of religious symbols to suit different media platforms, thereby maximizing their audience reach.

Table 2 presents voters' responses to the utilization of religious sentiments in campaign practices. The data show that 60% of respondents expressed support for the use of religious symbols in political campaigns, 30% rejected such practices, and 10% remained neutral. These percentages were derived from interview responses in which participants were asked to describe their attitudes toward faith-based campaign strategies. Supportive respondents generally associate religious symbolism with moral integrity and trustworthiness, while those who rejected it raised concerns about the politicization of religion and its potential to generate social division.

When combined, the results shown in Tables 1 and 2 indicate that religious symbols significantly influence campaign strategies and affect voter perceptions in the Sidoarjo regional election.

The results of this study show that religious symbols have a very significant role in the election campaign in Sidoarjo, both as a tool to attract political support and as part of the social construction that shapes people's political identity. The use of religious symbols on social media also shows the importance of digital platforms in building political awareness, but with the potential for social polarization that needs to be considered. While the effectiveness of religious politicization in gaining political support is not in doubt, its impact on social cohesion and community plurality must be scrutinized to ensure that it does not exacerbate existing social divisions. Therefore, it is important for political actors, civil society, and academics to critically evaluate faith-based campaign strategies so that they do not only focus on electoral effectiveness

but also pay attention to their impact on broader social structures. Campaign strategies that utilize religious symbols need to be placed within the framework of political ethics that uphold the values of tolerance, diversity, and social justice. An inclusive and sensitive approach to religious and cultural diversity must be promoted to prevent religious exclusivism and the potential for social disintegration. Thus, the use of religious symbols in politics does not become a divisive tool but rather strengthens social cohesion and builds a healthy and democratic public space.

Conclusion

This study confirms that religious sentiments play a strategic role in local political campaigns in Sidoarjo. Through qualitative interviews with residents, systematic field observations, and the documentation of campaign materials, the findings illustrate that religious symbols and narratives are intentionally utilized to not only garner electoral support but also to shape voters' political identities and emotional connections. The use of diverse data sources was aimed at enhancing the credibility and analytical rigor of the results.

Drawing on the social construction of reality framework proposed by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, this study shows that religious symbols in political campaigns function as socially constructed meanings. These meanings are externalized through campaign practices, objectified in public political discourse, and subsequently internalized by voters in shaping their political perceptions and preferences. In this sense, religion operates as a symbolic resource that is continuously produced and reproduced within the political arena.

The use of social media further amplifies this construction process by accelerating the circulation, visibility, and normalization of religious narratives in the public sphere. As a result, candidates who are perceived as religiously devout or closely affiliated with religious figures tend to receive more substantial support from voters. However, this pattern also reveals the ambivalent nature of religious symbolism in politics.

While religious symbols may strengthen trust, moral legitimacy, and emotional closeness between candidates and voters, their strategic politicization raises critical concerns regarding social polarization and the weakening of inclusive democratic practices. The instrumental use of religion risks blurring the boundary between public interest and group-based political agendas, potentially fostering exclusivism and social division within a multicultural society.

This study has limitations. It focuses primarily on Muslim-majority areas in Sidoarjo and relies predominantly on qualitative methods, which limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research is encouraged to incorporate minority group perspectives, employ mixed-method approaches, and further explore how younger, digitally connected voters interpret and negotiate religious symbolism in political campaigns. Such efforts would contribute to a more comprehensive and methodologically robust understanding of the evolving relationship between religion, politics, and democracy in Indonesia.

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