



Original Article

Protest voting in 2024 single candidate local elections: Empty box votes, abstention, and electoral legitimacy

Imam Syahid*, Muhammad Reza Fahlevy, Widya Astuti, Merina Afrilia

Department of Government Studies, Universitas Mulawarman, Samarinda, Indonesia

*Corresponding author: imamsyahid@fisip.unmul.ac.id

Article Info	Abstract
Article history: Received Jun 8th, 2026 Revised Jun 19th, 2026 Accepted Jun 26th, 2026 Published Jun 30th, 2026 Keywords: <i>Protest voting; single candidate local election; empty box; abstention; electoral legitimacy</i>	The increasing number of single candidate regional head elections in Indonesia's 2024 local elections raises questions about how electoral legitimacy should be understood under conditions of restricted competition. Although such contests are formally decided through the victory of the sole candidate pair or the empty box, this study shows that their political meaning cannot be explained through the result alone. This study uses descriptive qualitative analysis of secondary electoral data from 37 regions that held single candidate local elections in 2024, supported by official election documents, regulations, and academic sources. The analysis was carried out through classification, comparison, and interpretative reading, drawing on the concept of protest voting and Beetham's theoretical framework of electoral legitimacy. The results show four broad patterns of voter response: dominant single candidate victories, significant empty box support, high abstention, and empty box victories. In 20 out of 37 regions, the combined number of empty box votes and abstention exceeded the votes obtained by the sole candidate pair, while Bangka Regency and Pangkalpinang City recorded empty box victories. This study shows that single candidate elections are better understood as arenas in which legitimacy is politically negotiated through the expressed consent reflected in support, rejection, and abstention. How to Cite (APA Style): Syahid, I, Fahlevy, M.R., Astuti, W., & Afrilia, M. (2026). Protest voting in 2024 single candidate local elections: Empty box votes, abstention, and electoral legitimacy. <i>Jurnal Ilmu Sosial</i>, 25(1), 59-74. https://doi.org/10.14710/jis.25.1.2026.59-74

INTRODUCTION

Single candidate regional head elections have developed from what was once seen as an incidental electoral phenomenon into a recurring pattern in Indonesia's local democracy (Romli, 2018; Tanjung & Saraswati, 2020). In several waves of simultaneous local elections, a number of regions have been contested by only one pair of candidates facing an empty box on the ballot. Although the electoral process continues to operate procedurally, such contests indicate that political competition does not always take place in an open, balanced, and meaningful manner. Under these conditions, voters are no longer presented with genuinely competitive political

alternatives, but rather with a limited set of choices that narrows the space for evaluating the candidates available (Prianto & Yusraini, 2024; Syahid et al., 2026).

The data presented in Figure 1 show this pattern has become increasingly visible in recent years. The number of single candidate contests has continued to rise across successive local elections, suggesting that the phenomenon is no longer a temporary anomaly but part of a broader trajectory in Indonesia's local electoral politics. In the 2024 simultaneous regional elections, this tendency became even more pronounced, as 37 regions were contested by only one candidate pair against an empty box (Anggraini, 2024). This development is important because it shows that the recurrence of single candidate elections cannot be understood merely as a technical consequence of candidacy procedures, but also as a sign of increasingly limited political competition at the local level.

Within this context, the empty box functions as the formal channel available to voters who reject the sole candidate pair. Legally, its presence is intended to ensure that elections with a single candidate still provide an alternative choice on the ballot (Burhanuddin, 2018). Politically, however, the empty box cannot be treated merely as an administrative complement to an otherwise incomplete contest. Its presence points to a more fundamental problem, namely the failure of the nomination process to produce substantive electoral competition. For this reason, the empty box needs to be understood not only as a procedural consequence of single candidate elections, but also as an indicator that local democracy is operating under conditions of constrained political choice (Mahardika, 2018; Syahid et al., 2024).

The urgency of this issue became even stronger in the 2024 local elections. Although the victory of the empty box is not entirely unprecedented in Indonesia, having previously occurred in Makassar in the 2018 local election, the 2024 electoral cycle marked its re-emergence in a more significant way, as the empty box succeeded in winning the contest in Bangka Regency and Pangkalpinang City (Putra, 2025). This outcome is significant because it demonstrates that electoral rejection can operate in a concrete and effective manner, rather than remaining purely symbolic. Hafidz et al. (2025) argue that in Bangka and Pangkalpinang, inadequate evaluations of incumbent performance served as the key catalyst that converted a pre-existing crisis of representation into a successful protest vote. Thus, the victory of the empty box in the 2024 local elections needs to be read as a political event that reflects a more visible expression of electoral rejection.

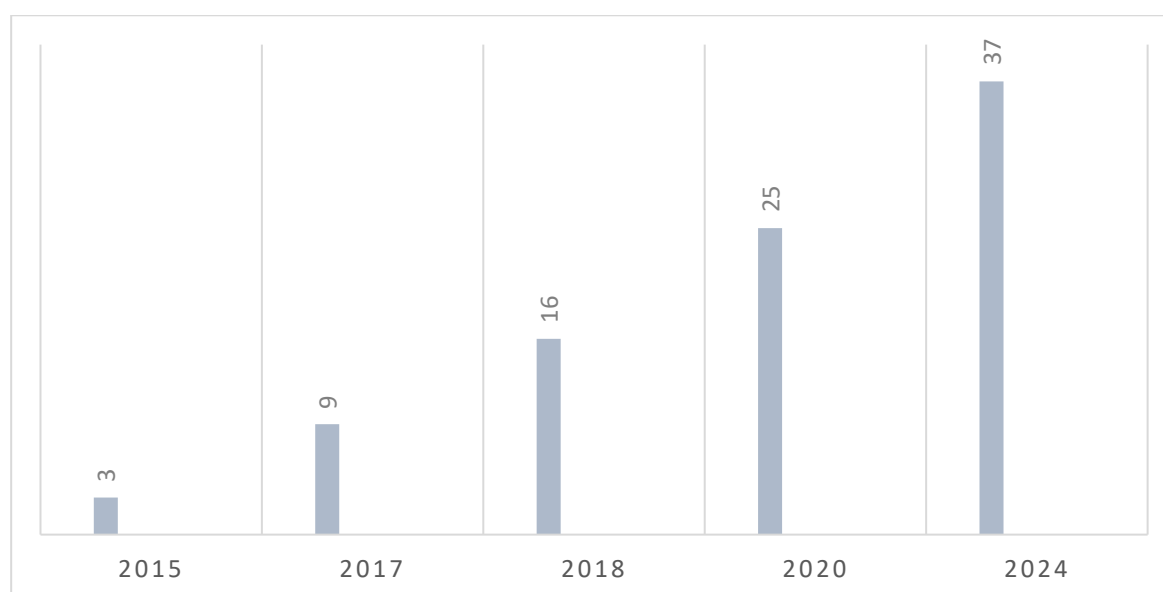


Figure 1. The Increase in the Number of Single candidate Contests and Empty box Dynamics in Local Elections in Indonesia.

Source: Processed by the authors, 2026

At the same time, single candidate elections cannot be understood only through the formal victory or defeat of the candidate pair. A focus that is limited to the official electoral outcome tends to obscure the broader range of voter responses that emerges under conditions of restricted competition. In such contests, voters may support the sole candidate pair, cast their vote for the empty box, or abstain from voting altogether. This means that the dynamics of single candidate elections are better understood through the relationship between votes for the candidate pair, votes for the empty box, and abstention, a tripartite configuration of electoral response whose political meaning cannot be captured by examining any one of its components in isolation (Mahpudin, 2021).

The existing literature, however, still leaves an important analytical gap. Most previous studies are stronger in explaining local cases, voter behavior in particular regional contexts, or the normative dimensions of protest voting. There is still limited research that maps, in an aggregate manner, how protest voting and abstention operated across the entirety of single candidate local elections in 2024. This limitation is important because, without a broader reading, the victories of the empty box in Bangka Regency and Pangkalpinang City can easily be understood as isolated cases, when in fact they may form part of a wider pattern of voter response under conditions of restricted electoral competition. Ramadani et al. (2025) are relevant in this regard, emphasizing that protest voting in single candidate local elections should not be understood merely as a matter of electoral law, but also as a political expression of the quality of competition and the democratic choices available.

Based on this gap, this article positions single candidate local elections in 2024 not only as a problem of limited competition, but also as an electoral arena in which legitimacy is negotiated through support, rejection, and voter non-attendance. This article argues that the political meaning of single candidate elections cannot be captured solely through the formal victory of the candidate pair, because such a reading tends to obscure the broader configuration of non-affirmative electoral responses. By examining the relationship between votes for the sole candidate pair, votes for the empty box, and abstention, this study seeks to explain how protest voting and abstention together shape the electoral dynamics of single candidate local elections in 2024. In this context, this study aims to map the patterns of protest voting and abstention across the 2024 single candidate local elections, while situating the empty box victories in Bangka Regency and Pangkalpinang City within the broader configuration of voter responses in single candidate contests, reading the aggregate rather than the exceptional, so that the political meaning of these elections can be assessed in full.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To explain the dynamics of voter response in single candidate elections, this article draws on the concept of protest voting as its central analytical foundation. Protest voting is generally understood as an electoral act through which voters express dissatisfaction with the government, political elites, or the political alternatives available (Bowler & Lanoue, 1992; Kselman & Niou, 2011). In a similar vein, Bergh (2004) emphasizes the role of political distrust as a structural precondition that shapes this type of electoral behavior, suggesting that protest voting is not simply a spontaneous reaction but a form of politically mediated dissatisfaction. In the context of single candidate local elections, votes cast for the empty box can therefore be interpreted as the most explicit form of protest voting, since voters still choose to participate in the election and deliberately direct their vote toward the formal channel of rejection provided on the ballot. This indicates that the empty box is not merely a residual option in single candidate contests, but a political instrument through which dissatisfaction can be expressed electorally and made visible in the official results.

This position, however, requires a conceptual distinction that is fundamental to the analytical framework of this article. Protest voting through the empty box must be distinguished from abstention, which in this article refers to the absence of voters from the polling station or the non-

use of voting rights on election day. Kang (2004) shows that protest voting and abstention may emerge within the same electoral setting, yet they are not analytically identical: the former involves active electoral participation directed toward rejection, while the latter represents a withdrawal from the electoral act altogether. DeLuca (1995) reinforces this point by cautioning against the automatic equation of political protest with apathy, a conflation that would obscure the different political meanings carried by each form of non-affirmative electoral behavior. In single candidate elections, this distinction carries particular analytical weight. Fossati & Martinez i Coma (2020) demonstrate that turnout and other forms of electoral expression in Indonesia are empirically related but cannot be collapsed into a single analytical category, which means that abstention must be treated as a separate indicator of voter distance, fatigue, or weak attachment to the available options rather than as a synonym for protest. For this reason, this article maintains a clear analytical boundary between votes for the empty box as an expression of protest voting and abstention as a distinct form of electoral non-participation. This boundary is preserved throughout the analysis that follows; where the two categories are later read alongside one another, this is done not to treat them as a single behavioral category, but to ask what each, in its own distinct way, reveals about the broader question of electoral legitimacy.

This conceptual boundary is further supported by a broader body of research on voter motivation and electoral behavior, which shows that non-participation is rarely reducible to a single cause. Kang (2004) approaches abstention through a public choice lens, arguing that the decision not to vote can itself be a rational response to the structure of available alternatives rather than a simple failure of civic engagement. DeLuca (1995) extends this point by distinguishing apathy, which reflects weak political attachment, from more deliberate forms of political withdrawal, a distinction that cautions against treating all non-voting behavior as analytically equivalent. Camatarri (2020) similarly observes that the motivations underlying protest-related electoral behavior are heterogeneous and often shaped by the specific institutional channels available to voters, which means that motivation cannot be inferred directly from the electoral outcome alone. In the Indonesian context, Hanida et al. (2025) show that the simultaneous administration of national and local elections in 2024 contributed to voter fatigue, a structural condition that may independently depress turnout regardless of voters' substantive evaluation of the candidates on offer. Read together, this literature indicates that abstention may originate from rational calculation, weak attachment, fatigue, or logistical constraint, and that these motivations operate differently from the deliberate intentionality that characterizes a protest vote cast for the empty box. This body of work on voter motivation therefore provides the analytical basis on which this article treats abstention as a distinct, more ambiguous category throughout the analysis that follows.

Building on this conceptual foundation, it is important to situate the present study within the existing body of empirical research on protest voting in Indonesia. In the Indonesian context, protest voting has been examined through several electoral channels, including invalid ballots, support for the empty box, and broader patterns of voter behavior in local elections (Mahpudin, 2021; Prasetyo, 2017; Subekti et al., 2023). Studies specifically focused on the empty box consistently show that support for this option does not emerge in a political vacuum, but is often related to dissatisfaction with candidates, resistance to local elite domination, opposition to oligarchic control, and in some cases is also shaped by organized political mobilization (Amelia, 2020; Harianto et al., 2020; Sardini & Fitriyah, 2018). Mahpudin (2021) provides a particularly relevant starting point by placing protest voting and abstention as two distinct yet co-present expressions in single candidate local elections, an analytical move that this article extends by applying it to the full set of 37 single candidate contests in 2024. Taken together, this body of literature is sufficient to establish that the empty box is not merely a formal supplement in single candidate elections, but a political channel that may carry a

substantive meaning of rejection whose significance cannot be read from the official electoral outcome alone.

While the literature on protest voting explains how individual electoral responses are formed, it does not by itself clarify why these responses matter for the broader question of electoral legitimacy, which requires a more explicit theoretical anchor. Beetham (2013) offers a particularly useful framework in this regard by arguing that political legitimacy cannot be reduced to the mere legality of a procedure, but rests on three interrelated dimensions: the conformity of power to established rules, the normative justifiability of those rules, and the expressed consent of those subject to them. Read through this lens, single candidate local elections present a distinctive analytical puzzle, since they may fully satisfy the dimension of legality while leaving the remaining two dimensions considerably more uncertain.

The procedure through which a sole candidate pair is declared the winner, or defeated by the empty box, remains legally valid under Indonesian electoral law regardless of the level of competition involved, yet legality alone offers little guidance on whether the rules permitting single candidacies are normatively justifiable or whether voters have meaningfully expressed their consent to the outcome produced under such rules. It is precisely at this point that the tripartite configuration of electoral response examined in this article, namely support for the sole candidate pair, votes for the empty box, and abstention, becomes analytically significant: each of these responses can be read as a different register through which expressed consent is either affirmed, withheld, or withdrawn, even though they remain distinct in the form and intentionality of the act involved. This article therefore treats protest voting and abstention not as interchangeable indicators of the same underlying attitude, but as two analytically separate signals that nonetheless converge on the same theoretical question, namely the extent to which single candidate elections succeed in generating the expressed consent on which their legitimacy ultimately depends.

Notwithstanding the contributions of this literature, a gap remains that the present study seeks to address. Most existing studies are stronger in explaining individual local cases, voter behavior in particular regional contexts, or the normative dimensions of protest voting, while aggregate analyses that map how protest voting and abstention operated across an entire wave of single candidate elections remain limited. This gap matters analytically because, without a broader reading, prominent cases such as the empty box victories in Bangka Regency and Pangkalpinang City risk being understood as isolated events rather than as part of a wider pattern of voter response under conditions of restricted electoral competition. The following section explains the methodological approach through which this article addresses that gap by mapping protest voting and abstention across all 37 single candidate local elections held in Indonesia in 2024.

METHODS

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to examine the patterns of protest voting and abstention in the 2024 single candidate local elections in Indonesia. The main focus of this study is to analyze how electoral responses were distributed across contests in which only one candidate pair competed against an empty box, and to assess how these responses shaped the broader dynamics of electoral legitimacy. The unit of analysis consists of all 37 regions that experienced single candidate local elections in the 2024 simultaneous regional elections. Through this approach, the study seeks to explain how support for the sole candidate pair, votes for the empty box, and voter abstention together formed the electoral configuration of single candidate contests in 2024.

The research is based on secondary data obtained through document review and literature research. The main data source is the recapitulation of the 2024 single candidate local election results, which contains electoral data from 37 regions, including the number of registered voters,

voter turnout, valid votes, votes for the sole candidate pair, votes for the empty box, and abstention. To strengthen the interpretation of the electoral data, this study also uses supporting documents such as official regulations, reports from election-related institutions, and scientific publications relevant to protest voting, abstention, and single candidate local elections in Indonesia. The data were selected based on their relevance to the research focus, particularly in explaining patterns of support, rejection, and non-participation in single candidate electoral contests.

The analysis process was carried out in three stages: classification, comparison, and interpretative reading. First, the electoral data were classified based on key variables such as votes for the sole candidate pair, votes for the empty box, voter turnout, and abstention across all 37 regions. Second, the data were compared to identify broader patterns of electoral response, including the relative position of empty box votes and abstention in relation to the votes obtained by the sole candidate pair, as well as the specific placement of Bangka Regency and Pangkalpinang City within the wider configuration of single candidate elections in 2024. Third, the findings were interpreted using the concept of protest voting and the broader discussion on electoral legitimacy. Through this analytical procedure, the study seeks to explain how protest voting and abstention functioned as part of the electoral dynamics of single candidate local elections, while also showing that the political meaning of these contests cannot be understood solely through the formal victory of the candidate pair.

The thresholds used in the classification stage, namely the 80 percent benchmark for dominant single candidate victories, the 20 percent benchmark for significant empty box support, and the 40 percent benchmark for high abstention, were employed as heuristic analytical devices rather than as fixed statistical boundaries. Their purpose is to identify broad tendencies within the electoral data and to make the resulting patterns analytically tractable across 37 regions, not to impose rigid cut-off points with independent theoretical standing. Regions positioned close to these thresholds are therefore better read as belonging to a broader tendency than as cases that have crossed a precise behavioral line.

It is also important to acknowledge the limitations inherent in this analytical approach. Because the data used in this study are aggregate electoral results rather than individual-level survey or interview data, the patterns identified here describe the distribution of electoral responses across regions rather than the specific motivations that led individual voters to support the sole candidate pair, vote for the empty box, or abstain. Votes for the empty box can reasonably be read as a deliberate act of protest, since they require active participation directed toward a visible alternative on the ballot, but abstention is treated throughout this study as a distinct and more ambiguous indicator, one that may reflect dissatisfaction, fatigue, logistical barriers, or simple disengagement, rather than as a direct proxy for protest voting. This distinction is maintained consistently in the analysis that follows, including where the two categories are read together in relation to the broader question of electoral legitimacy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that the 2024 single candidate local elections did not produce a single and uniform pattern of voter response. Although all 37 regions were contested under the same electoral format, namely a sole candidate pair facing an empty box, the outcomes reveal important variations in how voters responded to restricted competition. In some regions, the sole candidate pair won by an overwhelming margin, indicating a relatively strong degree of electoral acceptance. In other regions, however, support for the empty box was substantial, abstention was relatively high, or the empty box even emerged as the winning option. These variations indicate that the political

meaning of single candidate elections cannot be understood solely through the formal result of the contest.

Based on these empirical findings, this discussion is organized into four main focuses. First, it examines the electoral configuration of the 2024 single candidate local elections in order to show the broader setting in which these contests took place. Second, it maps the patterns of protest voting and abstention across the 37 regions by examining the relationship between votes for the sole candidate pair, votes for the empty box, and voter abstention. Third, it discusses the victories of the empty box in Bangka Regency and Pangkalpinang City as the most explicit form of electoral rejection in the 2024 contests. Fourth, it explains the implications of these patterns for electoral legitimacy in single candidate local elections. Taken together, these dimensions are used to show that restricted competition in local elections generated varied forms of voter response, ranging from support and acceptance to distance, rejection, and non-participation.

Electoral configuration of single candidate local elections in 2024

The 2024 simultaneous local elections in Indonesia recorded 37 regions that were contested by only one candidate pair facing an empty box. These 37 contests form the empirical basis of this study. Rather than focusing only on isolated cases, this article begins from the broader configuration of all single candidate local elections held in 2024 in order to show the electoral setting in which different voter responses later emerged. To present this configuration more clearly, the analysis first maps the basic electoral profile of each region through several indicators, namely the number of registered voters, votes obtained by the sole candidate pair, votes cast for the empty box, voter turnout, and abstention. These indicators are important because they provide the basic structure of the contest in each region before the data are read more systematically in the following sections. The overall configuration of the 2024 single candidate local elections is presented in Figure 2.

No	Region	DPT	Sole Candidate Votes	%	Empty-Box Votes	%	Turnout	%	Abstention	%
1	Papua Barat (Province)	376,548	269,245	92.9%	20,643	7.1%	298,858	79.4%	77,690	20.6%
2	Aceh Utara	427,967	357,738	97.0%	11,164	3.0%	373,135	87.2%	54,832	12.8%
3	Aceh Tamiang	210,712	90,669	75.5%	29,370	24.5%	124,977	59.3%	85,735	40.7%
4	Asahan	557,361	178,671	74.9%	59,820	25.1%	255,548	45.8%	301,813	54.2%
5	Labuhanbatu Utara	273,819	155,800	88.0%	21,148	12.0%	183,690	67.1%	90,129	32.9%
6	Pakpak Bharat	37,790	17,690	68.2%	8,256	31.8%	27,020	71.5%	10,770	28.5%
7	Serdang Bedagai	483,631	253,898	91.6%	23,272	8.4%	290,537	60.1%	193,094	39.9%
8	Nias Utara	104,168	47,562	80.9%	11,255	18.2%	60,631	58.2%	43,537	41.8%
9	Dharmasraya	169,079	65,922	69.5%	28,895	30.5%	96,873	57.3%	72,206	42.7%
10	Empat Lawang	258,302	147,332	80.4%	35,923	19.6%	186,913	72.4%	71,389	27.6%
11	Batang Hari	218,007	114,674	77.8%	32,667	22.2%	153,211	70.3%	64,796	29.7%
12	Ogan Ilir	314,632	154,088	78.8%	41,523	21.2%	207,692	66.0%	106,940	34.0%
13	Bengkulu Utara	218,848	162,119	94.5%	9,526	5.5%	177,349	81.0%	41,499	19.0%
14	Lampung Barat	222,236	121,098	82.8%	25,217	17.2%	151,662	68.2%	70,574	31.8%
15	Tulang Bawang Barat	220,140	100,557	66.2%	51,442	33.8%	158,245	71.9%	61,895	28.1%
16	Bangka	237,930	50,443	42.8%	67,546	57.2%	124,083	52.2%	113,847	47.8%
17	Bangka Selatan	151,742	64,795	84.2%	12,134	15.8%	80,406	53.0%	71,336	47.0%
18	Bintan	126,902	49,430	68.3%	22,949	31.7%	75,793	59.7%	51,109	40.3%
19	Clamis	960,995	589,695	89.3%	70,605	10.7%	682,353	71.0%	278,642	29.0%
20	Banyumas	1,390,832	540,554	59.4%	368,790	40.6%	958,919	68.9%	431,913	31.1%
21	Sukoharjo	684,491	319,923	66.8%	159,256	33.2%	508,592	74.3%	175,899	25.7%
22	Brebes	1,519,562	503,719	59.6%	341,407	40.4%	886,423	58.3%	633,139	41.7%
23	Trenggalek	591,912	282,576	80.8%	67,131	19.2%	370,128	62.5%	221,784	37.5%
24	Ngawi	694,934	409,499	94.1%	25,756	5.9%	464,462	66.8%	230,472	33.2%
25	Gresik	971,740	366,944	59.7%	247,479	40.3%	650,172	66.9%	321,568	33.1%
26	Bengkayang	206,502	77,766	71.1%	31,611	28.9%	113,759	55.1%	92,743	44.9%
27	Tanah Bumbu	243,014	154,187	91.5%	14,390	8.5%	174,557	71.8%	68,457	28.2%
28	Balangan	97,255	74,246	92.4%	6,132	7.6%	83,171	85.5%	14,084	14.5%
29	Malinau	57,435	39,382	93.5%	2,724	6.5%	42,801	74.5%	14,634	25.5%
30	Maros	278,930	121,892	64.0%	68,527	36.0%	194,185	69.6%	84,745	30.4%
31	Muna Barat	61,202	40,307	84.8%	7,199	15.2%	48,693	79.6%	12,509	20.4%
32	Pasangkayu	114,155	41,819	54.7%	34,657	45.3%	78,487	68.8%	35,668	31.2%
33	Pangkalpinang	164,330	35,177	42.0%	48,528	58.0%	86,874	52.9%	77,456	47.1%
34	Pasuruan	153,678	79,814	80.6%	19,228	19.4%	103,288	67.2%	50,390	32.8%
35	Surabaya	2,229,244	980,380	81.4%	224,340	18.6%	1,253,009	56.2%	976,235	43.8%
36	Samarinda	614,790	306,392	88.1%	41,301	11.9%	365,866	59.5%	248,924	40.5%
37	Tarakan	172,962	59,204	57.5%	43,787	42.5%	105,891	61.2%	67,071	38.8%

Note: Percentages for sole candidate and empty box are based on valid votes; turnout and abstention are based on DPT.

Figure 2. Electoral Profile of the 2024 Single Candidate Local Elections.
Source: Processed by the authors, 2026

Table 1. Classification of Electoral Response Patterns in the 2024 Single Candidate Local Elections

Category	Criteria	Number of Regions	Percentage
Dominant single candidate victory	Sole candidate gained at least 80% of valid votes	19	51.4%
Significant empty box support	Sole candidate won, but empty box gained at least 20% of valid votes and sole candidate remained below 80%	10	27.0%
High abstention	Abstention reached at least 40% of the voter base	6	16.2%
Empty box victory	Empty box received more votes than the sole candidate pair	2	5.4%
Total		37	100.0%

Source: Processed by the authors, 2026

The data presented in Figure 2 show that, formally, most of the 2024 single candidate local elections were won by the sole candidate pair. At the same time, the figure also shows that the electoral configuration across the 37 regions was not entirely identical. Differences can be seen in the scale of support obtained by the sole candidate pair, the share of votes received by the empty box, and the level of voter turnout and abstention in each contest. These differences indicate that the same institutional format produced varying electoral configurations at the local level. For this reason, the configuration shown in Figure 2 needs to be read not only as a summary of electoral outcomes, but also as the empirical basis for mapping broader patterns of voter response in the 2024 single candidate local elections. The next section discusses this more systematically by examining the patterns of protest voting and abstention that emerged across the 37 regions.

Patterns of protest voting and abstention

The electoral results of the 2024 single candidate local elections show that voter responses to restricted competition were not uniform. Although all 37 regions were contested under the same institutional format, namely a sole candidate pair facing an empty box, the outcomes reveal important variations in the relationship between votes for the sole candidate pair, votes for the empty box, and abstention. This variation is significant because it shows that the absence of electoral competition did not automatically produce a single form of political response. Instead, the data indicate different configurations of acceptance, rejection, and non-participation, suggesting that single candidate elections were experienced in different ways across local contexts.

To examine these variations more clearly, the electoral responses in the 2024 single candidate local elections can be grouped into four broad patterns: dominant single candidate victories, significant empty box support, high abstention, and empty box victories. This classification is not intended to reduce the complexity of each local contest into rigid categories. Rather, it is used as an analytical tool to identify broader tendencies in the electoral data and to show how support, rejection, and non-participation were distributed across the 37 regions. The classification of these patterns is presented in the Table 1.

The data presented in Table 1 show that the most common pattern in the 2024 single candidate local elections was the dominant victory of the sole candidate pair. Nineteen out of 37 regions fall into this category, or 51.4 percent of the total cases. In these regions, the sole candidate won by a wide margin, while the empty box remained comparatively weak. Cases such as Empat Lawang, Pasuruan, Trenggalek, Nias Utara, Surabaya, and Lampung Barat illustrate this pattern. Descriptively, these results show that the restricted format of single candidate elections did not always generate visible resistance through the ballot. In a number of regions, the sole candidate pair still received an overwhelming share of valid votes, indicating that the absence of alternative candidates was followed by a relatively consolidated vote in favor of the only available option.

Even so, the dominance of the sole candidate in this category should not be read too simply as evidence of uncontested electoral legitimacy. A large vote share within valid votes certainly indicates

electoral strength, but it does not automatically eliminate the possibility that dissatisfaction was present outside the formal ballot choice. In other words, dominant victory reflects one important pattern of response, but it does not exhaust the political meaning of single candidate contests. This is why the broader configuration of empty box votes and abstention remains necessary in order to understand the full range of voter reactions.

A second pattern can be seen in regions where support for the empty box was significant, even though the sole candidate pair ultimately won the contest. Ten regions fall into this category, including Pasangkayu, Tarakan, Banyumas, Gresik, Maros, and Tulang Bawang Barat. In these regions, the empty box did not succeed in defeating the sole candidate, but it nevertheless attracted a substantial share of valid votes. This pattern is important because it shows that formal victory by the sole candidate pair did not necessarily correspond to broad electoral acceptance. Instead, a visible segment of voters used the empty box as a channel through which dissatisfaction could be expressed within the ballot itself. As Camatarri (2020) argues, protest voting is better understood through the motivations underlying electoral choice than through assumptions attached to parties or outcomes alone. In this respect, the empty box functioned not merely as a procedural complement to a single candidate election, but as a meaningful electoral option for voters who rejected the limited political choices available. This reading is also consistent with the argument that a formal protest option on the ballot can register deliberate electoral dissent rather than a residual or accidental choice (Kselman & Niou, 2011; Ujhelyi et al., 2021).

A third pattern is found in regions where abstention was relatively high. Six regions can be placed in this category, including Brebes, Bintan, Dharmasraya, Bengkayang, Asahan, and Aceh Tamiang. In these cases, the restricted electoral format was accompanied by a relatively high level of voter non participation. This pattern requires careful interpretation. High abstention cannot be automatically equated with protest voting, since non participation may also result from weak political attachment, low electoral interest, logistical limitations, or broader forms of political disengagement (DeLuca, 1995; Kang, 2004). Hanida et al. (2025) are particularly relevant in this regard, as they show that the 2024 electoral context in Indonesia was also marked by voter fatigue that could reduce participation and weaken the quality of electoral decision making. Even so, in the context of single candidate elections, high abstention remains analytically important because it forms part of the broader response to limited competition. Rather than being treated as identical to explicit protest, abstention in this category is better understood as an additional indicator of distance between voters and the electoral alternatives available, especially when turnout and other forms of electoral expression cannot simply be collapsed into a single category (Fossati & Martinez i Coma, 2020).

The fourth pattern is the outright victory of the empty box, which occurred in only two regions, namely Bangka Regency and Pangkalpinang City. Numerically, this category is the smallest. Politically, however, it is the most significant, because it represents the clearest form of electoral rejection in the 2024 single candidate local elections. In these two cases, the empty box was no longer merely a symbolic alternative on the ballot, but became the winning option. This result shows that, under certain political conditions, the protest channel formally provided within the ballot can operate effectively enough to defeat the sole candidate pair. Ujhelyi et al. (2021) are useful here because they treat a ballot-based protest option as a direct expression of political dissatisfaction, rather than as an incidental byproduct of voting behavior. In the Indonesian case, this logic becomes even more consequential because the empty box is not only counted separately but can also defeat the sole candidate pair. In this respect, the victories of the empty box in Bangka and Pangkalpinang need to be understood not as isolated anomalies, but as the most explicit expression of electoral dissent within the wider landscape of single candidate contests in 2024 (Mahpudin, 2021).

Table 2. Regions Where Empty Box Votes and Abstention Exceeded Votes for the Sole Candidate Pair

No	Region	Sole Candidate Votes	Empty Box Votes	Abstention	Empty Box + Abstention
1	Surabaya	980.380	224.340	976.235	1.200.575
2	Brebes	503.719	341.407	633.139	974.546
3	Banyumas	540.554	368.790	431.913	800.703
4	Gresik	366.944	247.479	321.568	569.047
5	Asahan	178.671	59.820	301.813	361.633
6	Sukoharjo	319.923	159.256	175.899	335.155
7	Trenggalek	282.576	67.131	221.784	288.915
8	Bangka	50.443	67.546	113.847	181.393
9	Maros	121.892	68.527	84.745	153.272
10	Pangkalpinang	35.177	48.528	77.456	125.984
11	Bengkayang	77.766	31.611	92.743	124.354
12	Aceh Tamiang	90.669	29.370	85.735	115.105
13	Tulang Bawang Barat	100.557	51.442	61.895	113.337
14	Tarakan	59.204	43.787	67.071	110.858
15	Dharmasraya	65.922	28.895	72.206	101.101
16	Bangka Selatan	64.795	12.134	71.336	83.470
17	Bintan	49.430	22.949	51.109	74.058
18	Pasangkayu	41.819	34.657	35.688	70.325
19	Nias Utara	47.562	11.255	43.537	54.792
20	Pakpak Bharat	17.690	8.256	10.770	19.026

Source: Processed by the authors, 2026

Table 3. Electoral Profile of Empty box Victories in Bangka Regency and Pangkalpinang City

Region	Sole Candidate Votes	%	Empty Box Votes	%	Margin of Empty Box Victory	Turnout (%)	Abstention (%)
Bangka	50,443	42.8	67,546	57.2	17,103	52.2	47.8
Pangkalpinang	35,177	42.0	48,528	58.0	13,351	52.9	47.1

Source: Processed by the authors, 2026

An important aggregate finding strengthens this broader reading. In 20 out of 37 regions, the combined number of empty box votes and abstention exceeded the votes obtained by the sole candidate pair. At the aggregate level, total votes for sole candidates reached 7,425,207, while total empty box votes and abstention together reached 7,955,122. This means that the broader bloc of non-affirmative electoral responses was larger than the total vote received by the sole candidate pairs. Descriptively, this finding shows that in more than half of the single candidate contests, formal victory by the sole candidate pair coexisted with a wider field of nonsupport that was electorally larger. Analytically, this does not mean that all abstention should be interpreted as protest voting, nor does reading the two categories together collapse the distinction established earlier in this article. Following Beetham (2013) conception of legitimacy as resting on expressed consent rather than on legality alone, empty box votes and abstention remain analytically separate acts, yet both can be read as instances in which expressed consent for the sole candidate pair was either actively withheld or simply not given, even though only the former carries the deliberate intentionality of protest. It is in this narrower and specific sense, namely as two distinct signals bearing on the same question of expressed consent, that the two categories are read together here, rather than as a single undifferentiated indicator of voter sentiment.

Nevertheless, it does indicate that the electoral meaning of these victories is more complex than the formal result alone suggests. Camatarri (2020) is important here because he reminds us that protest voting cannot be inferred too quickly from outcomes alone, but must be read through the forms in which dissatisfaction is expressed. At the same time, the findings of Ujhelyi et al. (2021) suggest that when a formal protest option exists, a substantial share of protest-oriented voters may

otherwise be located within abstention. This helps explain why the combination of empty box votes and abstention in the 2024 single candidate local elections deserves analytical attention, even though the two categories should not be collapsed into one. In many regions, support for the sole candidate pair was substantial within the valid ballot, but when read against the broader combination of empty box voting and abstention, the extent of electoral affirmation appears more limited and more ambiguous. To clarify this broader pattern, the regions where the combined total of empty box votes and abstention exceeded the votes for the sole candidate pair are presented in the Table 2.

The data in Table 2 show that the combination of empty box votes and abstention exceeded the votes for the sole candidate pair not only in the two regions where the empty box won, but also in a broader set of regions where the sole candidate remained the formal winner. Cases such as Surabaya, Brebes, Banyumas, Gresik, and Asahan indicate that electoral nonsupport often extended beyond the empty box alone. This pattern suggests that the political meaning of single candidate elections cannot be reduced to the official outcome recorded through valid votes only. It also indicates that protest and distance were expressed through more than one channel, and that in many regions, the visible protest represented by the empty box was accompanied by a wider field of voter withdrawal or non-participation.

Taken together, the patterns identified in the 2024 single candidate local elections show that restricted competition generated varied electoral responses rather than a single, uniform outcome. In some regions, the sole candidate pair received overwhelming support, suggesting a relatively stable degree of electoral acceptance. In other regions, however, significant empty box support, high abstention, or outright empty box victories indicated different levels of rejection and distance. This variation is important because it shows that the political consequences of single candidate elections cannot be understood solely through the binary distinction between victory and defeat. Instead, they need to be read through the broader configuration of support, rejection, and non-participation that emerged across local contexts. In this sense, the 2024 single candidate local elections reveal not one singular response to limited competition, but a range of electoral behaviors that reflected different degrees of acceptance, non-affirmation, and dissent.

The empty box victories in Bangka Regency and Pangkalpinang City

The victories of the empty box in Bangka Regency and Pangkalpinang City occupy a particularly important position in the broader landscape of the 2024 single candidate local elections. Out of 37 regions contested by only one candidate pair, only these two cases ended with the defeat of the sole candidate by the empty box. This means that Bangka and Pangkalpinang were not simply part of the wider pattern of electoral variation identified in the previous section, but represented the most explicit form of electoral rejection in the 2024 single candidate contests, cases that reveal how protest voting through the empty box could become electorally decisive.

The data presented in Table 3 show clearly how the empty box won in both regions. In Bangka Regency, the sole candidate pair obtained 50,443 votes, or 42.8 percent of the valid vote, while the empty box received 67,546 votes, or 57.2 percent, giving the empty box a margin of victory of 17,103 votes. A similar pattern also occurred in Pangkalpinang City. The sole candidate pair received 35,177 votes, or 42.0 percent of the valid vote, whereas the empty box secured 48,528 votes, or 58.0 percent, with a margin of 13,351 votes. In both cases, therefore, the empty box did not merely attract substantial support, but obtained a clear electoral advantage over the sole candidate pair. At the same time, turnout remained relatively limited, with abstention reaching 47.8 percent in Bangka and 47.1 percent in Pangkalpinang, indicating that the victories of the empty box emerged within contests marked not only by formal rejection through the ballot, but also by a considerable level of voter non participation.

These two victories should not be read as detached from the broader electoral tendencies identified in the previous section. As shown in Subsection 3.2, the 2024 single candidate local elections had already revealed significant empty box support in a number of regions, as well as a broader field of nonsupport in which the combined total of empty box votes and abstention often exceeded the votes obtained by the sole candidate pair. In this context, Bangka and Pangkalpinang represent the point at which these broader tendencies became electorally decisive. The two cases therefore do not stand outside the wider pattern of 2024, but rather mark its sharpest expression. If significant empty box support in other regions reflected dissatisfaction that remained electorally contained, the victories in Bangka and Pangkalpinang show that under certain conditions such dissatisfaction could be consolidated into an outcome that directly defeated the sole candidate pair. In this sense, the two cases can be understood as the culmination of the broader spectrum of protest-oriented responses that had already emerged across the 2024 single candidate contests.

At the same time, the significance of these two victories cannot be understood only through electoral figures. Their political meaning also needs to be read in relation to the local context in which they occurred. Hafidz et al. (2025) are especially relevant in this regard because they show that the victories of the empty box in Bangka and Pangkalpinang were closely related to negative evaluations of incumbent performance and to a broader crisis of representation in local politics. Their analysis also suggests that the expression of protest did not take the same form in the two regions. Pangkalpinang reflected a more visible form of protest, while Bangka showed a quieter, but still electorally effective, pattern of rejection. This is important because it indicates that the success of the empty box in both regions cannot be reduced to low participation alone. Rather, the local context helps explain why dissatisfaction with the available candidate configuration could be converted into an effective electoral choice against the sole candidate pair (Susilo, 2025).

The victories of the empty box in Bangka and Pangkalpinang also need to be situated within the broader Indonesian experience of single candidate local elections. The success of the empty box is not entirely unprecedented, as Makassar had already produced a similar outcome in the 2018 local election. Studies of Makassar show that the victory of the empty box was closely related to political contestation, local mobilization, and public resistance to the candidate configuration presented in the election (Harianto et al., 2020). At the same time, other studies on empty box contests in Indonesia have shown that support for the empty box may reflect resistance to elite domination, dissatisfaction with restricted electoral competition, and opposition to oligarchic patterns in local politics (Mahpudin, 2021; Sardini & Fitriyah, 2018). In this context, the importance of 2024 lies in the fact that after the absence of empty box victories in 2020, the phenomenon reappeared not in one, but in two regions. Bangka and Pangkalpinang should therefore be placed not as isolated anomalies, but as part of a continuing Indonesian trajectory in which the empty box can function as a meaningful electoral channel of rejection.

Taken together, the cases of Bangka and Pangkalpinang show that single candidate local elections do not always culminate in the reaffirmation of the sole candidate pair. Under certain political conditions, the empty box can become an effective instrument of electoral rejection and can even produce the formal defeat of the candidate pair. This makes the victories of the empty box in 2024 important not only as exceptional outcomes within the broader electoral map, but also as cases that sharpen the question of how electoral legitimacy should be understood in contests with restricted competition. It is this issue that will be discussed more fully in the following section.

Electoral legitimacy under restricted competition

The findings presented in the previous sections show that the formal victory of the sole candidate pair cannot automatically be read as evidence of strong electoral legitimacy in single candidate local elections. Beetham (2013) distinction between legality, normative justifiability, and expressed

consent offers a useful theoretical anchor for explaining why this is the case. In procedural terms, the election still produces a winner, and this outcome remains legally valid regardless of how restricted the competition was; the dimension of legality is therefore consistently satisfied across all 37 single candidate contests examined in this study.

The dimension of normative justifiability, however, is considerably less settled, since the very fact that voters were offered only one candidate pair raises a prior question about whether the rules permitting such contests are themselves defensible, a question this article does not attempt to resolve but registers as the structural condition under which the third dimension, expressed consent, must be assessed. It is at the level of expressed consent that the broader electoral configuration identified in this study becomes analytically decisive. As demonstrated across the 2024 single candidate local elections, formal victory frequently coexisted with substantial empty box support, high abstention, and, in many regions, a wider field of non-affirmative responses that complicated the meaning of electoral success. In this respect, the problem of legitimacy in single candidate contests lies not only in who formally wins the election, but also in how far the contest succeeds in generating broad and meaningfully expressed consent, as Mahpudin (2021) had already suggested in the context of earlier single candidate local elections.

Within this framework, the empty box occupies a particularly important position because it represents the most explicit form of protest voting available in single candidate elections, and, in Beetham's terms, the clearest instance in which expressed consent for the sole candidate pair is actively withheld rather than merely absent. Unlike abstention, voting for the empty box is a direct electoral act expressed through the ballot itself. It is therefore better understood as an intentional rejection of the candidate configuration presented to voters, rather than as withdrawal from the election altogether. This point is strengthened by Ujhelyi et al. (2021), who show that a formal protest option on the ballot can function as a direct channel for political dissatisfaction. In the Indonesian case, this becomes even more consequential because the empty box is not merely symbolic, but can also defeat the sole candidate pair, as demonstrated in Bangka and Pangkalpinang.

At the same time, abstention needs to be treated more carefully. This article does not assume that all abstention in single candidate local elections constitutes protest voting. Non participation may emerge from different motivations, including weak political attachment, limited interest, or fatigue within the broader electoral context. Even so, abstention remains relevant to the analysis of legitimacy because, in contests where voters are offered only one candidate pair, high non participation still reflects the limited capacity of the election to produce broad electoral attachment. Read alongside the empty box through Beetham's framework, abstention occupies a different position within the same dimension of expressed consent: where the empty box signals consent actively withheld, abstention signals consent that was simply never extended, a distinction in form and intentionality that this article maintains even as both are read as bearing on the same underlying question. In this sense, abstention should not be collapsed into protest voting, but neither should it be removed from the broader reading of support and rejection under restricted competition.

The relationship between protest voting, abstention, and legitimacy becomes clearer when the findings of this article are read as a whole. In some regions, the sole candidate pair won with overwhelming support, suggesting a relatively stronger degree of electoral acceptance. In many other regions, however, substantial empty box support and high abstention indicated that the formal result rested on a more fragile social basis. The victories of the empty box in Bangka and Pangkalpinang sharpen this point further, because they show that dissatisfaction under restricted competition may not remain latent, but can be transformed into an electorally decisive rejection of the sole candidate pair. This means that legitimacy in single candidate local elections is not a fixed

consequence of formal victory, but a contingent outcome shaped by the broader configuration of support, rejection, and non-participation.

Taken together, the 2024 single candidate local elections show that electoral legitimacy under restricted competition is inherently more fragile than the formal outcome of the contest may suggest. This broader reading is also in line with Yandy et al. (2025), who argue that the empty box phenomenon should be understood not only as an electoral mechanism, but also as a sign of tension within democratic legitimacy itself. From this perspective, the problem of legitimacy in single candidate local elections cannot be reduced to the binary distinction between victory and defeat alone. Rather, following Beetham (2013), it must be understood through the wider relationship between electoral support, formal rejection through the empty box, and the varying degree of voter withdrawal that shaped the 2024 contests, three responses that together indicate how far, and in what form, expressed consent was extended, withheld, or withdrawn under conditions of restricted competition.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the 2024 single candidate local elections in Indonesia did not produce a single and uniform pattern of voter response. Based on the electoral results from 37 regions, the findings indicate four broad patterns, namely dominant single candidate victories, significant empty box support, high abstention, and empty box victories. Although most contests were formally won by the sole candidate pair, the broader electoral configuration reveals that these victories were not always accompanied by strong electoral affirmation. In many regions, substantial empty box support and high abstention complicated the meaning of formal victory, while in 20 out of 37 cases the combined number of empty box votes and abstention exceeded the votes obtained by the sole candidate pair. These findings confirm that the political meaning of single candidate local elections cannot be understood solely through the official result of the contest.

The study also shows that protest voting and abstention occupied different but related positions within the electoral dynamics of single candidate contests. Votes for the empty box constituted the most explicit form of protest voting because they represented a direct electoral rejection expressed through the ballot itself. By contrast, abstention cannot be automatically equated with protest voting, since non-participation may emerge from different motivations. Even so, abstention remained analytically important because, in elections where only one candidate pair was available, high voter withdrawal still reflected the limited capacity of the contest to generate broad electoral attachment. In this context, the victories of the empty box in Bangka Regency and Pangkalpinang City represented the clearest and most decisive expression of electoral rejection in the 2024 single candidate local elections. These two cases should not be read as isolated anomalies, but rather as the culmination of broader patterns of dissatisfaction that had already appeared across the wider map of single candidate contests.

Taken together, the findings of this article suggest that electoral legitimacy under restricted competition is more fragile than the formal outcome of single candidate elections may imply. The problem of legitimacy in these contests lies not only in who formally wins the election, but also in how far the election succeeds in producing meaningful electoral affirmation under conditions of limited democratic choice. Read through Beetham (2013) distinction between legality, normative justifiability, and expressed consent, this study suggests that the legality of single candidate elections is rarely in question, but their normative justifiability and the expressed consent they generate remain considerably more uncertain, and it is this uncertainty that the relationship between support, the empty box, and abstention helps to illuminate.

In this respect, the article contributes to the study of single candidate local elections by showing that their political meaning must be read through this wider relationship, rather than through the binary distinction between victory and defeat alone. At the same time, this study remains limited by its reliance on aggregate secondary electoral data, which does not allow a more detailed reconstruction of voter motivations at the individual level. Future research may therefore deepen this discussion by combining aggregate electoral analysis with interviews, surveys, or local case studies in order to further examine how protest voting and abstention are formed and articulated in single candidate electoral contexts.

Author Contribution

Conceptualization, I.S. and M.R.F.; methodology, I.S.; formal analysis, I.S. and W.A.; investigation, M.R.F. and M.A.; data curation, M.R.F. and M.A.; writing, original draft preparation, I.S.; writing, review and editing, I.S., W.A., and M.A.; visualization, M.R.F.; supervision, I.S.; project administration, I.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study were derived from secondary sources, including official electoral documents and publicly accessible reports published by the General Elections Commission of the Republic of Indonesia (KPU RI). The data are available by request to the corresponding author.

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