

## **Delving into the Political Preferences of Youth in Merauke's Border Area, South Papua**

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### **Abstract:**

The study of young voters has become a topic of interest to various academics and a strategic issue in local political dynamics, especially in contesting the 2024 Merauke Regional Head Elections. This study analyzes the factors influencing young voters' preferences in determining their political choices. Using a quantitative approach with a survey method, this study involved 300 respondents from among young voters in Merauke Regency. Three main approaches in the study of voter behavior were used. Namely, the sociological, social-psychological, and rational choice theory approaches are used to understand the complexity of the factors that influence the electoral decisions of young voters. The results showed that the Joseph Gebze-Fauzun Hinayah pair received the highest support (46%) from young voters due to their combined bureaucratic and legislative experience. The Hendrikus Mahuze-H. Riduwan pair came second with 28% support, which shows the appeal of executive and technocratic experience in local government. Meanwhile, David Gepze and H. Kusmanto obtained 21% of the vote despite receiving support from the local political elite, indicating that the influence of traditional leaders and the political elite is no longer a dominant factor for young voters. These findings also show that young voters are more independent and rational in determining their political choices. The candidate's track record, leadership competence, and development vision and mission are more decisive factors than traditional factors such as ethnic affiliation or political elite recommendations. In addition, social media is the main source of political information for young voters, reinforcing the argument that digitalization has increased their political awareness. This study concludes that issue-based campaign strategies, policy transparency, and political communication through digital platforms are crucial factors in attracting the support of young voters in the contemporary political.

### **Keywords:**

Voter Turnout; Young Voters; Voting Behavior; Merauke Elections

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## Introduction

The idea of young voters (Generation Y and Generation Z) is relatively new in the discourse of Indonesian politics (Dewi, 2018). Young voters are viewed as a demographic group representing a subculture characterized by traits shaped alongside social transformation and industrial revolution in Indonesia (Alvara Research Center, 2020; Dewi, 2018). Indonesian youth voters can play a pivotal role as agents of social transformation and as a new political force. This is particularly important given Indonesia's large population of young voters—especially those from Generation Y and Generation Z—who significantly impact election outcomes (Fernandes et al., 2023). According to data from the Indonesian General Election Commission (KPU), Generation Y comprises 66,822,389 individuals (33.60%). In comparison, Generation Z comprises 46,800,161 individuals, accounting for 56.54% of the total electorate in the 2024 general election (Databoks.Katadata.co.id, 2023). This underscores the substantial capacity of young voters to influence and determine electoral results.

Although young voters tend to make logical decisions based on their preferences, they are often apathetic toward political issues such as public policy (Irawanto, 2019; Fitriyah et al., 2021). This demonstrates a dual attitude, marked by a strong commitment to the political process yet lacking specific goals. Such a phenomenon has significant implications for the diversity and complexity of young voting behavior in general elections (Henn & Foard, 2014).

Voting behavior is a conceptual framework to understand how individuals make election decisions (Munjani et al., 2012). It refers to individual actions that influence voting participation and shape preferences for political parties or candidates for public office (Munjani et al., 2012; Roth, 2008). In other words, voting behavior examines the attitudes and actions that affect a person's predisposition and serve as indicators in their decision-making process during elections.

Three main theoretical models are used to understand the factors influencing young voters' behavior during elections (Yustiningrum et al., 2015). First, the sociological model suggests that age, gender, social class, ethnicity, and religion are key factors that influence individuals when choosing political parties or candidates (Juelich & Coll, 2021). Accordingly, social characteristics and group affiliations will likely shape individual voting behavior.

Second, the social-psychological model incorporates variables such as emotional attachment to political parties (party identification), public figures, current issues, and attitudes toward candidates (Haryanto, 2016; Mujani, 2020). According to this model, individuals engage in electoral participation not necessarily due to social networks but because they are politically attentive, feel close to certain parties or candidates, and possess sufficient information to make informed political decisions (Şener et al., 2023). In short, the social-psychological model emphasizes self-identification with a political party or candidate, perception of personal traits, and views on public policy issues.

Third, the rational choice approach views decision-making as a process based on cost-benefit analysis (Jati, 2021; Jubba et al., 2019). Rational voters are driven by motivation, principles, and broad knowledge, acting based on reasoning and logical deliberation rather than chance or habit while prioritizing public interest over personal gain (Firmanzah, 2007; Nursal, 2004; Perdana, 2014). Thus, these three approaches—sociological, social-psychological, and rational choice—are crucial in understanding young voters' decision-making and political attitudes during elections.

Over the past decade, various studies analyzing youth participation and voting

behavior in elections have attracted considerable academic interest. Research has been conducted in developed countries such as Turkey (Önder & Karabulut, 2017), the United States (Coll & Juelich, 2022; Medenica, 2018), and in developing Asian nations such as Pakistan (Iqbal Y, 2017), as well as in Southeast Asia, particularly Malaysia (Saabar, 2014; Sah Allam et al., 2022).

Meanwhile, studies on young voter behavior in Indonesia are extensive. Several focus primarily on sociological factors (Adiwilaga et al., 2017; Rahimallah et al., 2019; Said Ahmad et al., 2024; Sandi, 2021; Sitanggang et al., 2024). These scholars emphasize the role of socio-cultural determinants in shaping youth voters' decisions in national and local elections. Ethnicity, regional identity, and religion play a dominant role in influencing young voters' preferences, particularly in urban areas.

Other researchers concentrate on social-psychological aspects to explain youth voter behavior in Indonesian elections (Erawaty, 2021; Sumerta et al., 2024). These academics highlight emotional connections between youth voters and political parties or candidates, with variables such as mass media influence, political image-building, and campaign positioning having a significant impact.

Additionally, some researchers focus on rationality variables, analyzing the effect of political communication on youth voter decision-making (Fernando et al., 2024; Rifani et al., 2024). Media exposure, access to information, education level, and strong ideological values significantly affect youth attitudes and behavior in major cities.

Youth voting behavior differs across cities in Indonesia, and as a result, past studies have largely focused on the unique characteristics that shape youth political preferences in national elections. However, studies addressing youth voter behavior in border regions remain limited and have received little academic attention. Previous research shows that the sociological, social-psychological, and rational choice models often offer competing explanations for understanding youth voter behavior in Indonesia.

This study seeks to fill that gap by examining how young voters behave in regions with limited information access, low human resource quality, and minimal public infrastructure. It integrates all three theoretical models—sociological, social-psychological, and rational choice—to understand the complexities of youth voting behavior in South Papua's border areas. These models form a hierarchical framework, where sociological factors serve as the foundation, social-psychological factors as the middle layer, and rational choice as the highest level (Munjani et al., 2012).

This research is essential in providing insight into the diverse characteristics of youth voter behavior in border areas, particularly in decision-making during the 2024 regional head elections. Young voters in these regions often face challenges such as restricted access to information, limited educational resources, and fewer economic opportunities than in urban areas in other parts of Indonesia (Ham & Octaviani, 2022).

The study focuses on Merauke Regency, the capital of South Papua Province, a newly formed autonomous region. Several factors make Merauke a compelling case for studying youth voting behavior. First, Merauke serves as the administrative center of South Papua Province and faces complex issues involving customary law, migration, religious institutions, and local governance.

Second, since the establishment of the new province, Merauke has experienced rapid growth marked by a more diverse demographic landscape. The high level of migration—240,681 individuals—illustrates that Merauke, though a small city on Indonesia's eastern frontier, attracts significant migration. This influx has reshaped the demographic balance between indigenous residents and migrants.

Third, although Merauke is characterized by pluralism regarding ethnicity, customs, culture, and religion, traditional structures and Indigenous leadership still hold substantial political and social influence. In reality, there exists a social cleavage between Indigenous people—"Orang Asli Papua" (OAP)—and non-indigenous migrant communities (Ajo, 2016). As such, ethnocentrism and stereotyping strongly influence political and social interactions in Merauke (Lefaan & Nugroho, 2012), affecting youth voter preferences.

Furthermore, the strong dominance of customary structures, represented in traditional political systems, means that indigenous elites or community leaders wield significant influence and are often seen as representatives of the people (Bao, 2020; Suryawan, 2016). These traditional elites can mobilize voters, legitimize candidates, and shape public perception. This forms what can be described as political ethnocentrism, wherein indigenous leadership plays a magnetic role in political configurations during elections.

This study is centered on young voters in Merauke Regency. The findings contribute to the literature on youth voting behavior at the local level, particularly in Indonesia's border regions. The research locus is the 2024 deputy regent elections in Merauke Regency, South Papua Province. Accordingly, the primary objective of this study is to analyze the characteristics and factors that influence the voting behavior of young voters in the border area of Merauke Regency, South Papua Province, Indonesia.

## Methodology

This study employs a descriptive quantitative research design, utilizing systematic methods to investigate phenomena through data collection and statistical analysis (Ansori & Iswanti, 2020). The survey method serves as the research approach to gather data on current and past attitudes, characteristics, and behaviors and test hypotheses and variables through samples drawn from a specific community (Sugiyono, 2016). The research was conducted in Merauke Regency, located at the easternmost tip of Indonesia and sharing a border with Papua New Guinea, in the province of South Papua. This location was chosen due to the significant proportion of young voters in Indonesia and the upcoming regional elections in 2024. The study analyzes young voters' characteristics and voting behavior preferences in the 2024 Merauke regent election. The theoretical framework employed includes three classic models of voting behavior: the sociological model, the social-psychological model, and the rational choice model. The research subjects consist of young voters categorized into Generation Y and Generation Z. The survey was conducted using Google Forms between November 10 and 26, 2024. The 16-day survey involved 300 respondents from the youth electorate in Merauke Regency, South Papua. The following research questions were addressed:

RQ1: Focused on initials, age, religion, and ethnicity.

RQ2: How do young voters perceive technology, particularly using digital platforms as tools for political communication and information?

RQ3: What is the level of youth participation in elections, focusing on how urgent elections are perceived by young voters in the border area?

RQ4: What factors influence the voting behavior of young people in the 2024 Merauke regent and vice-regent election?

Secondary data for this research was collected through a literature review, including books, websites, and journal articles relevant to the proposed hypotheses. Data analysis in this study involves three distinct processes. First, data reduction is used to organize the data more systematically, reflecting trends and qualities derived from the information. Second, data verification involves identifying and thematically consolidating the data. Third, data description entails thematically identifying and presenting the data in numerical form, including tables and diagrams that illustrate respondents' responses and perspectives. Following these three stages, deductive analysis is conducted to interpret the data. This interpretive process involves reorganizing and analyzing the data about prevailing trends, patterns, and the broader socio-cultural context. These analytical procedures support drawing conclusions related to the stated hypotheses (Miles et al., 2014).

Data collected via questionnaires must be analyzed in survey research to draw meaningful conclusions. The data processing begins with data checking to ensure completeness and accuracy of responses, followed by coding the responses using a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5. The researcher then conducts a descriptive analysis by examining means and percentages—for instance, the percentage of young voters interested in politics. Additionally, the standard deviation indicates the variability of respondent answers. To conclude, the data will be presented in tables or graphs, explaining the findings and conclusions from the analysis.

## **Results and discussion**

### *Demographic Characteristics Of Young Voter Respondents In The 2024 Merauke Regent And Vice-Regent Election*

Merauke Regency consists of 22 districts located in the southern region of Papua. This area is the ancestral land of the Marind Anim tribe, which includes several sub-tribes such as the Yei-Anim, Yab-Anim, Maklew-Anim, Kanum-Anim, and Kurari-Anim, all of whom inhabit this region up to the Papua New Guinea border. The Indigenous population's social structure strongly emphasizes customary and cultural values, with traditional leaders or community authorities occupying the top social hierarchy governing Indigenous community life (Yuniarto, 2018).

On the other hand, the region is also inhabited by non-indigenous ethnic groups who have long settled in southern Papua. These groups include migrants from Ambon, Java, Bugis, Makassar, Toraja, Sunda, Manado, and Batak ethnicities. Many migrated decades ago to work as civil servants, traders, farmers, and land cultivators, ultimately settling in the region and giving rise to multiple generations.

According to data from Badan Pusat Statistik Merauke, (2023) the total population of Merauke Regency has increased significantly, reaching approximately 246,400 people. Most of the population falls within the productive age group of 17–59 years, totaling around 155,690 individuals. This rise in the number of people within the productive age group carries significant implications for the region's social, economic, and political dynamics, especially in a border area. With most residents in their productive

years, this also affects voter participation. Young voters, who largely fall within this age range, are emerging as influential in the political process, particularly in elections, contributing significantly to electoral outcomes.

Table 1. Number of Generation Y and Generation Z in Merauke Regency, 2024

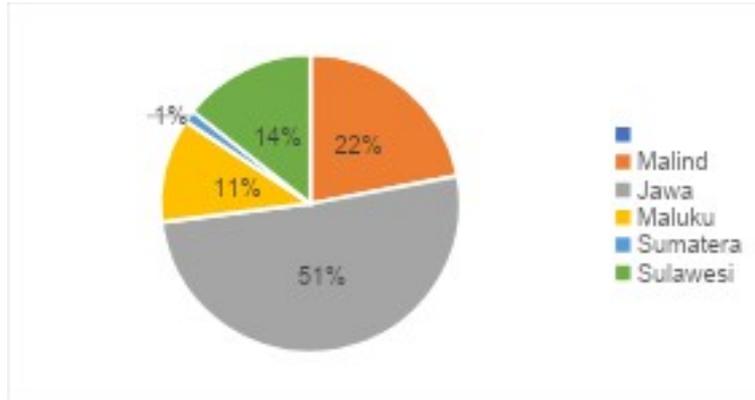
Age Cohort	Population('000 persons)
15-19	17,21
20-24	22,31
25-29	21,61
30-34	20,18
35-39	18,91

Source: Badan Pusat Statistik Merauke, (2023)

Based on the data above, the number of individuals in Generation Z reaches approximately 29,000, while Generation Y dominates with 60,700 individuals. This demographic composition indicates that the substantial size of the Gen Y and Gen Z population grants young voters significant influence in shaping electoral outcomes in Merauke Regency. Regarding the composition of respondents in this study, 153 identified as being from Javanese ethnic groups, 34 from Maluku, 43 from Sulawesi, four from Sumatra, and 66 respondents identified as Malind, the indigenous ethnic group—totaling 300 respondents overall.

This ethnic diversity among the respondents reflects the rich cultural and social backgrounds that characterize the Merauke population. The high number of respondents from Java suggests historical migration patterns or a larger proportion of migrants in this border region. Meanwhile, the significant presence of Malind respondents indicates that local indigenous groups also play a key role in the voter composition. In elections, such diversity may imply differing political preferences among various ethnic communities.

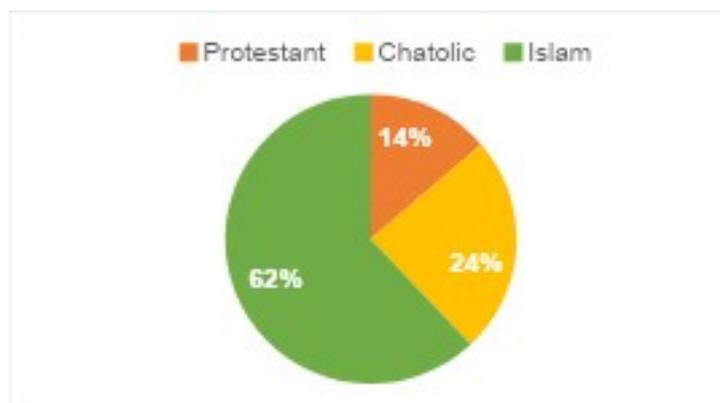
While the respondent sample in this study may not perfectly mirror the overall population distribution, the findings reveal that young voters—primarily from Gen Z and Gen Y—hold substantial potential to influence electoral dynamics in Merauke Regency. At the same time, the ethnic diversity among respondents adds a layer of complexity to understanding voter behavior, which warrants further in-depth analysis (see Figure 1).



Source: Authors

Figure 1. Distribution of young voter respondents by ethnicity

The religious composition in Merauke Regency exhibits significant diversity. Catholics constitute 40.42% of the population, making Catholicism the majority faith, while Protestants account for 22.81%. Christian adherents (Catholic and Protestant denominations) represent 63.23% of the population. These statistics demonstrate that Christians form the majority in Merauke. Meanwhile, Muslims comprise 36.55% of the population—indicating that although Islam is not the majority religion in Merauke, it represents the second-largest religious group overall. Hinduism and Buddhism are also present but in very small proportions, at 0.12% and 0.10%, respectively, reflecting the limited number of followers of these faiths in the regency. Such diversity underscores a high degree of peaceful coexistence among different religious communities in the local society.



Source: Authors

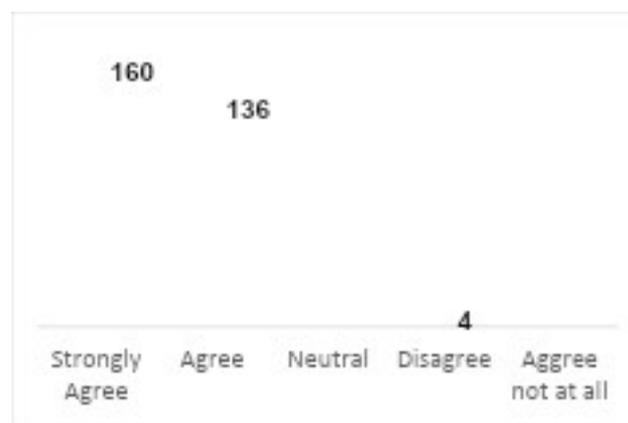
Figure 2. Distribution of respondents by religion

Based on Figure 2, although the respondent distribution was not proportional to the overall population, the religious breakdown among survey participants was as follows: 62% (183 respondents) identified as Muslim, 14% (43 respondents) as

Protestant, and 24% (73 respondents) as Catholic. This disproportionality may be influenced by respondent accessibility and willingness to participate in the survey or interviews.

### *Youth Voter Engagement With Digital Platforms In The Border Region*

Young voters and digital platforms are closely linked as youth increasingly leverage digital media for political communication and information-seeking. Ohme, (2019) argues that digital platforms are crucial in mobilizing young voters. In contemporary electoral politics, these platforms serve as intermediaries through which young voters access political information, influencing their participation (Saud et al., 2020; Saud & Margono, 2021). To assess young voters' attitudes toward digital platforms in Merauke Regency, we posed questions designed to measure how they respond to and utilize digital technologies as channels for political communication and information.



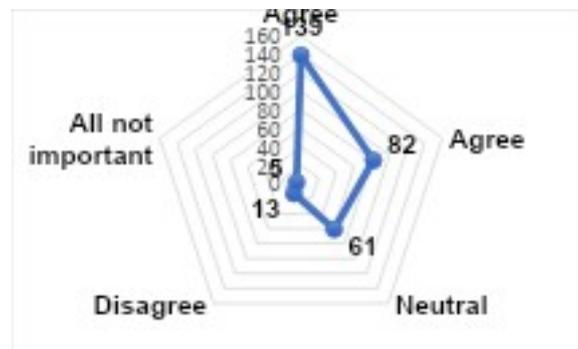
Source: Authors

Figure 3. Survey questions concerning digital literacy and adaptability

According to our survey statements, young voters in the border region demonstrate strong digital literacy and tend to use digital platforms as their primary source of information. As shown in Figure 3, out of 300 respondents, 54% (160 respondents) "strongly agree" and 45% (136 respondents) "agree" that they leverage digital technology for political content, while 0.3% (4 respondents) "disagree" and none selected "strongly disagree." These results indicate a pronounced tendency among border-area youth to rely on digital channels to obtain political information.

Several factors contribute to this trend, including improved access to technology, the widespread use of social media, and a preference for obtaining information more quickly and efficiently than traditional ones. The survey findings suggest that young voters in the border region possess the technological competence necessary to engage with and influence electoral dynamics. Consequently, these youth are willing to embrace

technology, viewing it as essential to political communication and information acquisition.



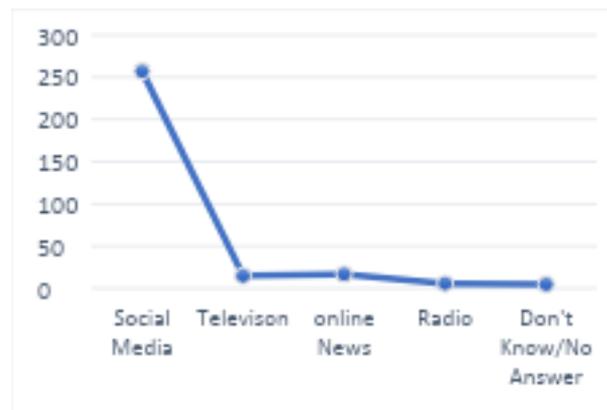
Source: Authors

Figure 4. Distribution of Social Media Impact

We also measured young voters' attitudes toward the importance of social media as a vehicle for information penetration and communication (see Figure 4). Prior studies indicate that social media significantly boosts political participation among Indonesian youth, particularly by facilitating discussions of political issues with friends and colleagues (Morissan, 2019). Our survey findings reveal a clear consensus among border-area youth on the critical role of social media in political information and communication. Specifically 139 respondents (46.3%) Strongly agree, 82 respondents (27.3%) Agree, 61 respondents (20.3%) Neutral, 13 respondents (4.3%) Disagree, and five respondents (1.7%) Strongly disagree.

Nearly half of all respondents "strongly agree" that social media is essential for obtaining political information, indicating a heavy reliance on digital platforms to learn about political issues in border communities. An additional 27.3% "agree" that social media is important, meaning over 73% of young voters recognize its significance. The 20.3% who remain neutral may acknowledge social media's relevance but are uncertain about its direct impact on their political attitudes or decisions. A small minority express skepticism—4.3% "disagree" and 1.7% "strongly disagree"—perhaps reflecting concerns about the reliability or security of information obtained online.

Most young voters in the border region consider social media moderately important for political communication and information dissemination. This underscores how digital technologies, particularly social media, have become integral to the political lives of young voters. Digital platforms facilitate interaction and serve as primary channels for accessing political content, engaging in discussion, and participating in broader political discourse.



Source: Authors

Figure 5. Channels of information on sociopolitical and governance-related issues

Figure 5 illustrates the primary sources of information young voters use to learn about social, political, and governmental issues. Out of 300 respondents, 257 respondents (85.7%) Social media, 15 respondents (5.0%) Television, 17 respondents (5.7%) Online news sites, six respondents (2.0%) Radio, five respondents (1.7%) No answer.

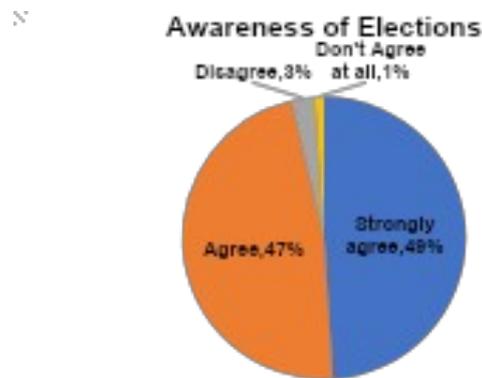
These findings underscore that young voters in the border region overwhelmingly rely on social media as their principal channel for obtaining information on political, social, and governmental matters. The predominance of social media reflects its advantages in speed, interactivity, and direct access to information from relevant sources or stakeholders. Other channels—television, online news, and radio—are used far less frequently. Overall, this pattern confirms that social media is the dominant information platform among young voters, offering rapid dissemination and a horizontal communication space that reaches and engages a broad youth audience, thereby significantly influencing their levels of political participation (Kashyap & Jonjua, 2020).

#### *Measuring Youth Voter Participation In South Papua's Border Region*

To assess the extent of youth voter participation in the border areas, we posed the following question: "Some people believe that voting in elections is an obligation of a good citizen. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?"

Figure 5 demonstrates that the vast majority of young voters understand the significance of elections. Specifically, 49% of respondents "strongly agree" and 47% "agree" that casting a ballot is a civic duty. Only 3% "disagree" and 1% "strongly disagree." These results indicate a deep awareness among border-region youth of their role in democracy. The high combined percentage of "strongly agree" and "agree" responses reflects their recognition of voting as a fundamental civic responsibility and the importance of their vote in shaping future governance. To further gauge actual electoral engagement, we asked: "Did you vote in the simultaneous general election for

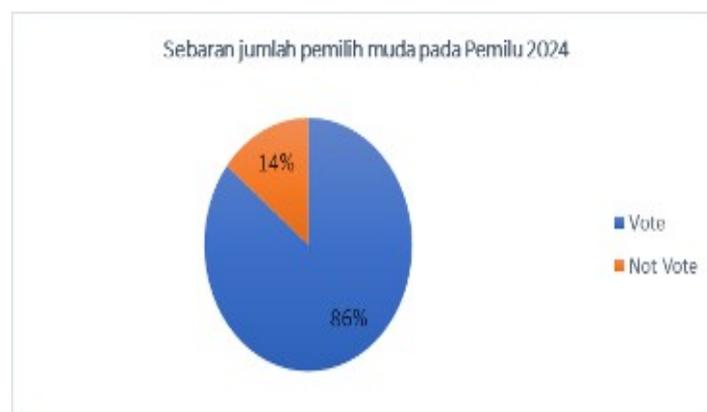
President/Vice President, DPR/DPD, Provincial DPRD, and Regency/City DPRD held last February?"



Source: Authors

Figure 5. Electoral awareness among young voters

Figure 6 reveals that 86% of young voters exercised their right to vote, while 14% abstained. This exceptionally high turnout underscores the strong political awareness among the younger generation in Merauke, reflecting their understanding of the election’s importance in determining local governance. Notably, this 86% participation rate surpasses the overall simultaneous election turnout in Merauke Regency, which was 77% (RRI, 2024).

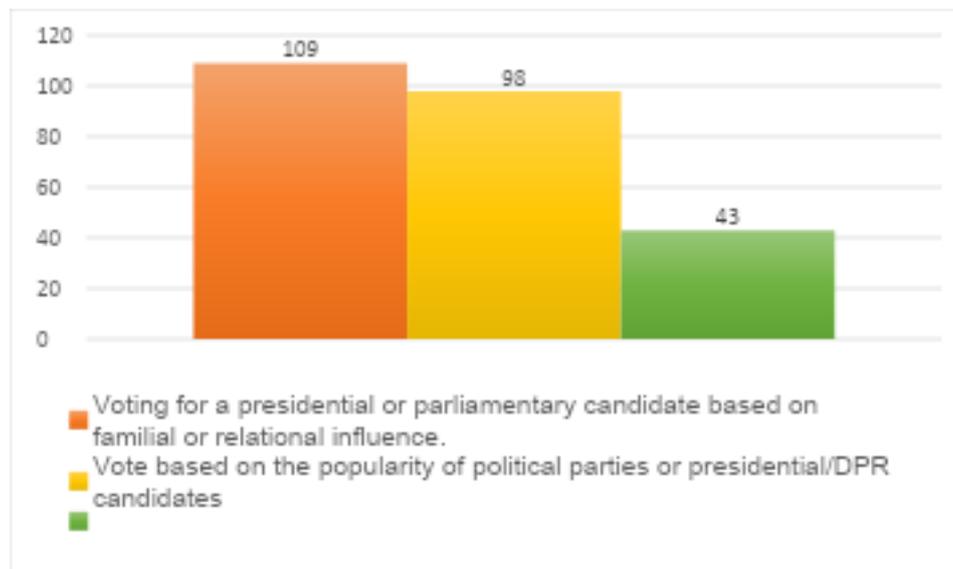


Source: Authors

Figure 6. Level of youth electoral participation in Merauke Regency during Indonesia's 2024 presidential and DPR elections

We also asked respondents, “What was your primary reason for voting?” As shown in Figure 9, the most cited reason—109 respondents—was “Voted for a

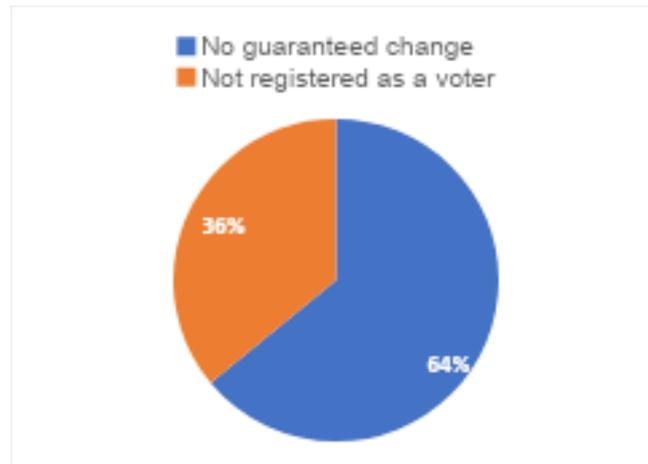
presidential or legislative candidate due to family or relational influence.” This finding indicates that young voters’ choices are often shaped more by familial and social networks than by individual reasoning or policy-based considerations. The predominance of this response points to a robust culture of political patronage, where family ties or social group affiliations significantly drive voting decisions during elections.



Source: Authors

Figure 7. Motivations behind young voters' participation in the 2024 general election

Is Popularity the Main Consideration? Ninety-eight respondents selected a candidate or party primarily due to their popularity. This indicates that public image and political marketing strategies, including digital campaigns and social media, influence young voters' preferences. The main appeal of candidates or parties is their popularity, suggesting that young voters may be more influenced by trends and media visibility than by a thorough examination of policies or political ideologies. Only 43 respondents chose a candidate or party because "I've always liked them." This suggests that the duration of loyalty to a political party or candidate is relatively short compared to other influencing factors. Young voters are more responsive to political trends and external factors than to ideological loyalty or the historical context of a political party. The significant impact of family relationships and social status indicates that young voters may not comprehensively understand a candidate or party's vision, mission, or policies. Consequently, Figure 7 illustrates that young voters in the 2024 elections were more influenced by social factors and popularity than by ideology or political loyalty.



Source: Authors

Figure 8. Motivations behind young voters' intention to participate in the 2024 general election

What about young people who didn't vote? What caused them to abstain from voting in the simultaneous election? Of those who abstained in the 2024 election, 36% reported that they did not vote because they believed there was no guarantee of change. This suggests a lack of trust in the incumbent government or existing political parties. Meanwhile, 64% indicated that they were not registered to vote. This substantial proportion implies that many young voters may face administrative barriers or lack awareness of the voter registration process. Such challenges underscore a critical issue for political parties and key civic organizations in ensuring that young voters are registered and can exercise their right to vote.

#### *Socio-Political Context of The 2024 Merauke Regent Election*

The 2024 regional election in Merauke has become a high-stakes contest among local elites. The candidacies of Martinus Guntur Ohoiwutun, Kristian Gepze, Hendrikus Mahuse, and Joseph Bladip Gebze have intensified the political landscape. When analyzed through ethnicity, each ticket symbolizes a distinct identity, tribe, and culture that serves as a voting bloc in the Merauke election. Candidate number one, Martinus Guntur Ohoiwutun, hails from the Maluku ethnic group; candidate number two, Kristian David Tarigan Gepze, and candidate number three, Hendrikus Mahuse, as well as candidate number four, Joseph B. Gebze, all represent the indigenous Malind community of South Papua. Notably, each vice-regent candidate on all four tickets is of Javanese descent. This configuration suggests that ethnicity remains a dominant factor influencing voting behavior, particularly in a relatively homogeneous environment where indigenous cultural norms are strong.

Moreover, the endorsement and campaign leadership of South Papua's influential figure John Gluba Gebze for the Kristian Gepze–H. Kusmanto ticket has added another

layer of complexity to the contest. Consequently, the 2024 Merauke election has revolved around political identity sentiments and voter mobilization rooted in ethnic affiliation (Alfarabi et al., 2021).

Table 2. Candidates for Regent and Vice-Regent, 2024

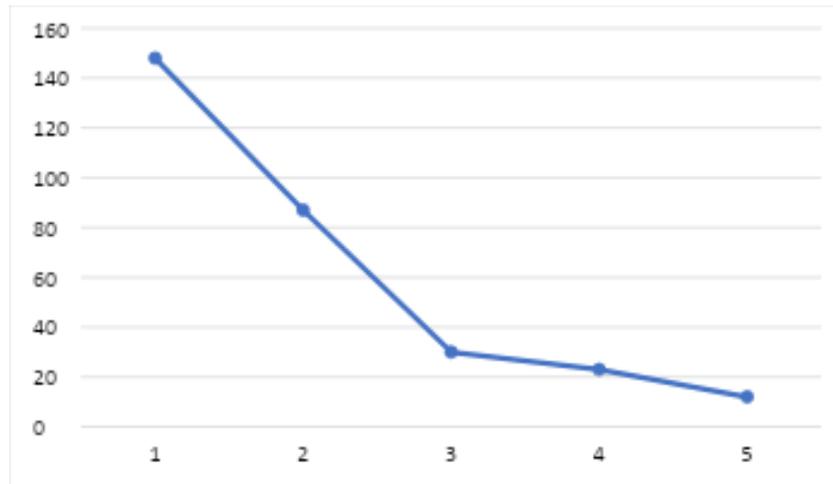
Names of Candidate Pairs for Regent and Vice-Regent Position	Ethnicity	Sponsoring Political Parties
(1) Martinus Guntur Ohoiwutun – Prayogo	Maluku – Jawa	PDIP dan PPP
(2) Kristian David Tarigan Gepze – H. Kusmanto	Marind – Jawa	Golkar, Gerindra, PKS
(3) Hendrikus Mahuse – H. Riduwan	Marind – Jawa	PKB, Perindo, dan PSI
(4) Yoseph B. Gebze – Fauzun Nihayah	Marind – Jawa	Nasdem, Demokrat, Hanura, Gelora

Source: General Election Commission of Merauke Regency, 2025

Political parties are critical in mobilizing the masses to increase the vote share for regent and vice-regent candidates. Thus, political party coalitions are crucial as they contribute to expanding the voter base. The Martinus Guntur Ohoiwutun – Prayogo ticket is supported by the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) and the United Development Party (PPP). The Kristian David Tarigan Gepze – H. Kusmanto ticket is backed by the Great Indonesia Movement Party (Gerindra), the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), and the Golkar Party. The Hendrikus Mahuse – H. Riduwan ticket is endorsed by the National Awakening Party (PKB), Perindo, and the Indonesian Solidarity Party (PSI). Meanwhile, the Yoseph B. Gebze–Fauzun Nihayah ticket is supported by the NasDem Party, the Democratic Party, the National Democratic Party (Hanura), and the Gelora Party. This coalition composition highlights the importance of power-sharing between the regent and vice-regent candidates with different ethnic, tribal, and cultural backgrounds in securing the vote base needed to win over young voters.

### *Sociological Factors of Young Voters in The Border Region for the 2024 Merauke Regent Election*

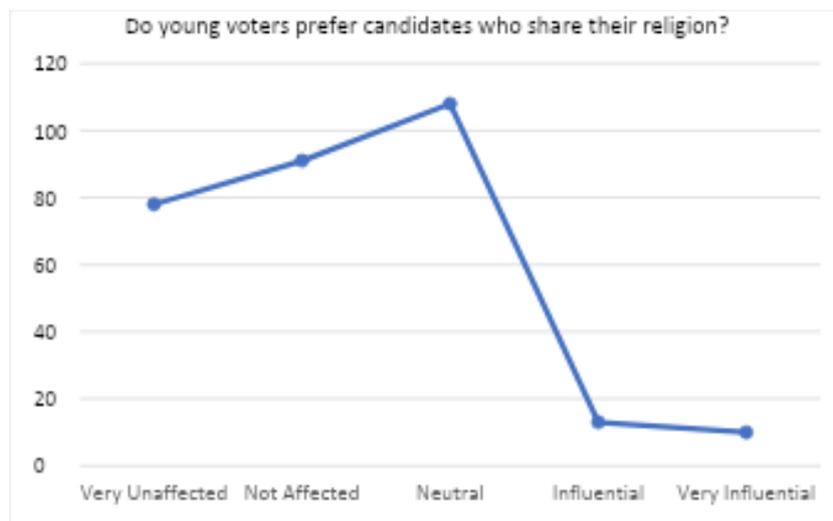
To What Extent Does Ethnic Or Tribal Similarity With The Regent Candidate influence your decision to vote? According to the survey, most young voters indicated that ethnicity does not significantly impact their voting decisions. The categories of "Not Influenced at All" (148 respondents) and "Not Very Influenced" (87 respondents) represent 235 out of 300 respondents (78.3%). In comparison, only 23 respondents (7.7%) consider ethnic identity to be "Influential," while 12 respondents (4%) consider it to be "Very Influential."



Source: Authors

Figure 9. Ethnic Affiliation

Therefore, ethnic identity does not play a significant role in the voting decisions of young people in border regions. This can be attributed to implementing the 2024 election law, which does not require regent and vice-regent candidates to be indigenous Papuans or belong to native tribes. As a result, voters are less influenced by ethnic or racial issues when making political decisions (Alfarabi et al., 2021).



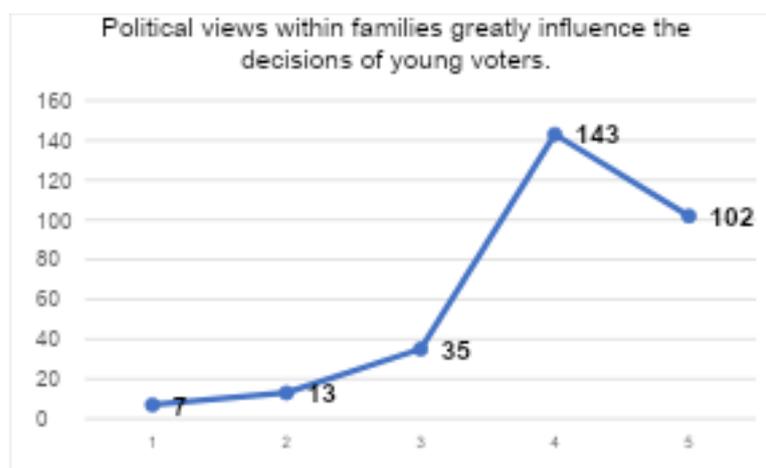
Source: Authors

Figure 10. Religious similarity

Has religion become a political choice? This is an important question, especially considering that over the past decade in Indonesia's electoral landscape, identity politics driven by religious sentiment has become a political commodity used to influence voting

behavior—ultimately contributing to political polarization in Indonesian society. The struggle over identity politics strongly demonstrates its impact on voter preferences. As Rif'an (2020) noted in Palembang during the 2019 presidential election, the politicization of religion and the use of religious symbols served as mobilization tools that effectively influenced voter choices. Similar findings were reported by Arjon (2018) and Sumaktoyo (2021) in their studies on elections in Jakarta, where the escalation of identity politics significantly affected political preferences.

However, based on our survey, we found a different trend—religious similarity did not appear to be a significant factor. As shown in Figure 10, most young voters were not strongly influenced by religious similarity when selecting candidates. The categories "Neutral" (108 respondents), "Not Influenced" (91 respondents), and "Strongly Not Influenced" (78 respondents) made up 277 out of 300 respondents (92.3%), indicating that most young voters were either neutral or unaffected by religious considerations. Only 13 respondents (4.3%) reported that religious similarity was "Influential," and just 10 respondents (3.3%) viewed it as "Very Influential" (see Figure 10).



Source: Authors

Figure 11. Family influence

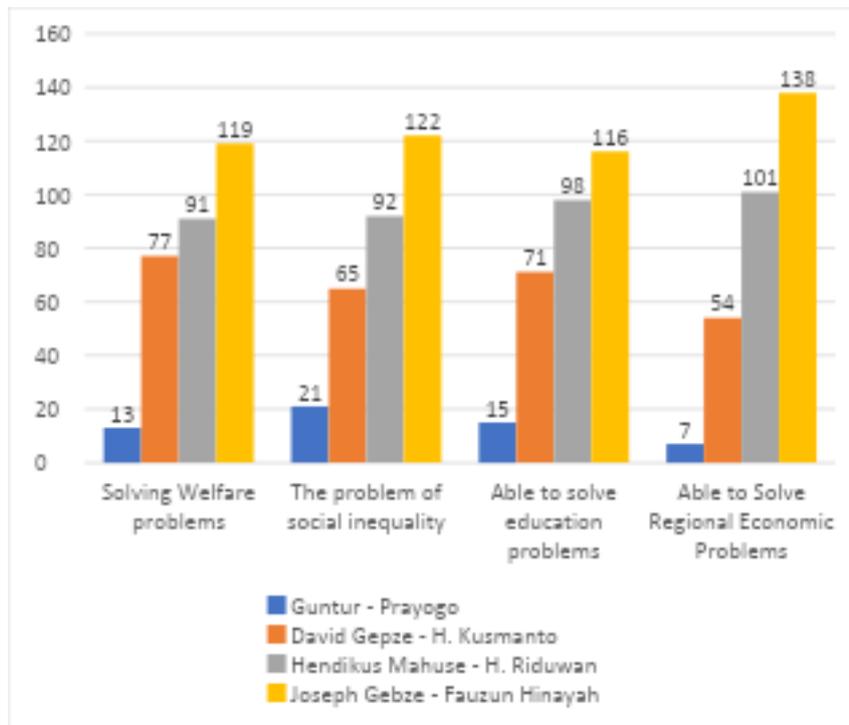
How does family influence the political decisions of young voters? Based on the survey illustrated in Figure 11, the distribution of responses among young voters indicates the extent to which family influences their voting choices. This aligns with Figure 11, which provides evidence that during the simultaneous elections held last February, many young voters chose presidential or parliamentary candidates based on family or relational influence. As Iqbal & Shabir, (2019) noted in their research, the family significantly predicts youth voting behavior. This is echoed in our survey, in which 143 respondents (47.7%) chose "Agree," and 102 respondents (34%) selected "Strongly Agree." Altogether, 245 out of 300 respondents (81.7%) acknowledged that their family

influenced their voting preferences. A smaller portion of respondents were neutral (35 respondents or 11.7%), suggesting they might consider factors beyond family influence. Only 20 respondents (6.6%) selected "Disagree" or "Strongly Disagree," indicating that family influence plays a major role in the voting behavior of young voters.

*Rational Attitude of Young Voters in The Papua Border Region*

In assessing the rationality of young voters, the Rational Choice approach to voting behavior is based on the assumption that voters act rationally, selecting candidates or parties that offer the greatest personal benefit. A cost-benefit analysis and perceived gains guide their choices. According to survey results in Figure 12, young voters rated the Joseph Gebze–Fauzun Hinayah pair as the most competent across all issue categories, particularly in regional economic matters. This suggests that young voters prioritizing economic stability are more inclined to see the Gebze–Hinayah pair as better equipped to address these challenges than other candidates.

Joseph Gebze, the candidate for Merauke regent, is a seasoned bureaucrat with in-depth knowledge of governance and economic policy. Meanwhile, Fauzun Hinayah, who has experience as a legislator in the Papua Province, is viewed as having a strong orientation toward public interest.



Source: Authors

Figure 12. Voter preference is determined by candidates' perceived capacity to resolve problems in Merauke Regency

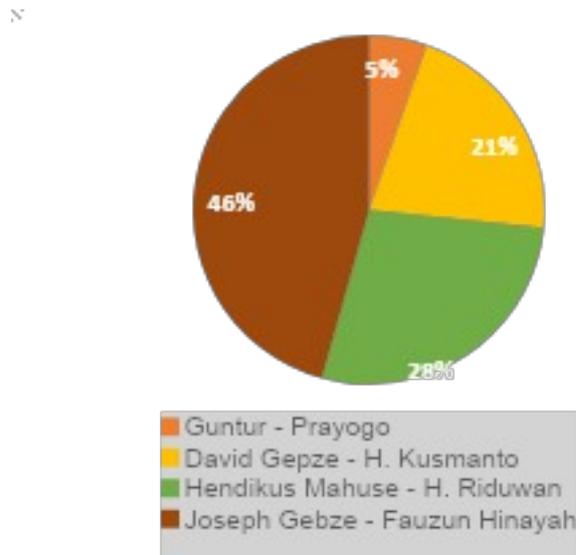
The Hendrikus Mahuze–H. The Riduwan pair ranked second, emerging as strong contenders due to their background in regional financial management and executive government experience. The David Gebze–H. Kusmanto pair ranked third despite receiving support from John Gluba Gebze, a prominent figure in South Papua. This indicates a lack of trust from young voters in their economic competence. The Guntur–Prayogo pair was rated lowest overall.

According to the Rational Choice approach to voting behavior, this theory explains that individuals act rationally by considering the benefits and consequences of their political choices. In the context of young voters in border regions, this approach helps explain why they are more inclined to support the Joseph Gebze–Fauzun Hinayah ticket over other candidates. It can be said that young voters in these regions tend to make rational decisions when choosing leaders they believe can deliver tangible economic, social, and political benefits that directly impact their lives. Joseph Gebze and Fauzun Hinayah may be perceived as more competent in regional economic affairs—a crucial factor for young voters seeking economic stability and job opportunities.

#### *Psychosocial Factors of Young Voters in Border Regions*

Within the psychological stream, factors such as party identification, candidate perception, policies, and emotions serve as key indicators in understanding the behavior of young people in border areas. Based on Figure 13, the survey reveals that the Joseph Gebze–Fauzun Hinayah pair holds a dominant appeal among young voters, garnering 46% support. Their popularity is primarily driven by Joseph's experience as a bureaucrat and Fauzun's role as a legislator—reflecting a balance between administrative capability and policymaking expertise. These findings indicate that young voters are inclined to support candidates they perceive as agents of change with proven track records in public administration and policymaking aligned with the aspirations of their generation.

Meanwhile, the Hendrikus Mahuze–H. Riduwan ticket remains a strong contender in the Merauke regional election, securing 28% of the youth vote. Although not leading in this segment, the pair holds an advantage in executive and bureaucratic experience, which could appeal to other segments of the electorate. Hendrikus Mahuze, who previously served as Treasurer of Merauke's Regional Government and was a former regent candidate in the 2019 election, possesses deep technical knowledge in regional financial management. On the other hand, H. Riduwan, currently serving as the Vice Regent of Merauke, brings hands-on experience in regional governance—an added value for voters who prioritize governmental stability and continuity.



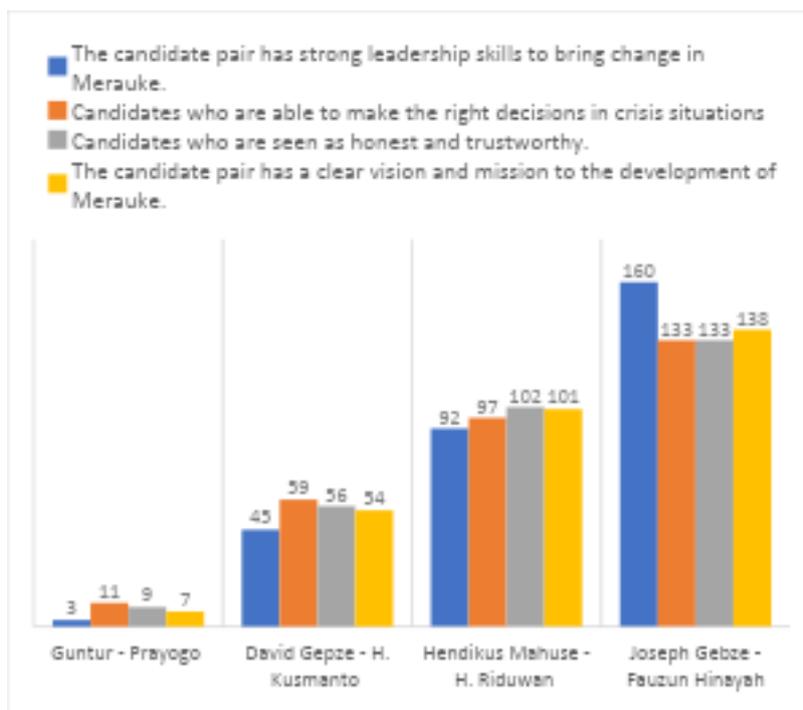
Source: Authors

Figure 13. Candidate perceived as representing the aspirations of young voters

Next, the David Gebze–H. Kusmanto pair received 21% support from young voters despite receiving full backing from John Gluba Gebze, a prominent figure in South Papua. The presence of John Gluba Gebze indicates this ticket's strength in securing political elite support and backing from indigenous communities, particularly the Indigenous Papuans (OAP). However, this support has not fully translated into youth sympathy, as young voters appear to prioritize other factors in making their political decisions.

This phenomenon underscores the tendency of young voters to be more independent in their political preferences. Policy issues, candidates' track records, and perceived leadership competence influence them more than following endorsements from political elites or influential figures. This trend reflects a shift in political behavior among the younger generation, where political rationality and critical awareness increasingly shape their choices, replacing traditional patterns rooted in patronage or social affiliation.

Thus, the electoral dynamics of the Merauke regional election indicate that candidates aiming to win the youth vote must ground their campaign strategies in concrete policy proposals, credible track records, and issue-based political communication rather than solely on elite endorsements or traditional political symbols.



Source: Authors

Figure 14. Perceptions of young voters regarding the competence of candidate pairs in the Merauke Regency local election

Based on Figure 14, the survey measuring young voters' perceptions of candidate pair competency in the Merauke regional election shows that the Joseph Gebze–Fauzun Hinayah ticket received the highest scores across all indicators. This indicates that the pair is perceived as the most competent regarding leadership, decision-making, honesty, and their vision and mission for Merauke's development. The scores they obtained in each category were as follows: leadership (160), decision-making (133), honesty (133), and vision-mission (138).

Meanwhile, the Hendrikus Mahuze–H. Riduwan pair ranked second based on young voters' assessments. They received the following scores: leadership (92), decision-making (97), honesty (102), and vision mission (101). These figures indicate a relatively high level of trust, although still below that of Joseph Gebze–Fauzun Hinayah.

In third place, the David Gebze–Haji Kusmanto pair scored in the mid-range, with lower results compared to the two leading candidates. Their scores across the measured indicators were: leadership (45), decision-making (59), honesty (56), and vision mission (56). Lastly, the Guntur–Prayogo pair received the lowest scores in all categories, reflecting a lack of appeal and trust from young voters regarding their competence to lead and develop Merauke.

These findings reflect that young voters in Merauke have political preferences based on their perceptions of candidate competency—especially in leadership, integrity, and developmental vision. Candidate pairs who demonstrate experience, decision-making

ability, and a vision that resonates with the younger generation's aspirations tend to receive greater electoral support than those less prominent in these aspects.

## **Conclusion**

Young voters in border regions possess unique characteristics in terms of political attitudes and voting preferences. Based on the findings of this study, we show that a combination of sociological, socio-psychological, and rational choice factors influences youth voting behavior in the 2024 Merauke regional election. The candidate pair Joseph Gebze–Fauzun Hinayah received the highest level of support among young voters, reflecting their preference for candidates perceived to be competent in leadership, decision-making, integrity, and developmental vision. Support for this pair also indicates that young voters tend to favor candidates with strong track records in both bureaucracy and the legislature as indicators of leadership capability. On the other hand, the Hendrikus Mahuze–H. Riduwan ticket ranked second with a fairly competitive level of support. This suggests that experience in local governance and technical knowledge in financial management remain relevant factors for young voters, even if they are not the primary determinants of political preference. Meanwhile, the David Gebze–H. Kusmanto pair, despite receiving backing from influential political elites and traditional leaders, has not managed to significantly capture the attention of young voters—indicating that the influence of traditional political elites is diminishing in shaping the political preferences of the younger generation.

These findings also confirm that young voters increasingly display independent and rational characteristics when determining their political choices. They are more influenced by candidate competence, track record, and proposed policies rather than ethnic affiliations or endorsements from political elites. In addition, social media plays a central role as the primary channel for accessing political information, reinforcing the argument that digitalization has heightened political awareness among young voters—especially in border areas such as Merauke.

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