



## The Affinity of Local Political Branding Toward The Distinction of Constituent Taste in NTT

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### ABSTRAK

This study examines the relationship between candidates' branding politik and the political preferences (selera) of voter groups during the 2024 Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT) gubernatorial election. The research is grounded in the strong influence of local political culture in shaping political orientation, both among elites and the general public. The main objectives of this study are: (1) to identify the distingsi of political selera among the public based on their ideal leadership qualifications, and (2) to analyze the alignment between candidates' branding politik and those political selera. This research employs a critical approach with a single-case study design. The findings reveal three categories of voter selera politik: Legitimate Taste (upper class), Middle-Brow Taste (middle class), and Popular Taste (lower class). The three gubernatorial candidate pairs presented distinct branding: Lema–Natalia portrayed a millennial-opposition figure; Lena–Asadoma emphasized political networks and accommodative communication; Kamlasi–Garu highlighted local Timorese identity. All candidates capitalized on symbolic capital to reach middle- and lower-class voters. The study concludes that political preference in NTT is not entirely shaped by rationality, but rather by culturally and symbolically embedded selera. This research underscores that the hegemony of local political culture remains highly dominant in the dynamics of political contestation and strategy in NTT.

**Keywords:** distinction, taste, constituents, political branding

## INTRODUCTION

Political elections represent the most normative form of political participation compared to other modes of political engagement (Oser, 2022). This is because political elections are constitutionally regulated, facilitated by official task forces, funded by the government, and implemented according to a fixed schedule. In Indonesia, political elections are governed by Law No. 7 of 2017 on General Elections and Law No. 10 of 2016 on the Election of Governors, Regents, and Mayors. In fact, Law No. 10 of 2016 mandates the simultaneous implementation of local elections. The entire electoral process in the province of Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT) refers to these legal frameworks. The success of a democratic government is often measured by the quality of its electoral processes (Bühlmann et al., 2008). This means that the state provides every citizen with the opportunity to freely choose political candidates according to their individual preferences. Democracy essentially grants society the freedom to shape its own political perceptions and attitudes. In 2024, the population of NTT reached 5,656,039, with 3,988,372 registered voters. This indicates that political participation in NTT involves approximately 70% of the total population.

Political choices among the people of NTT are driven by various factors that merit further investigation. Ethnicity, religion, and money are dominant variables that influence local political choices (Bataona & Bajari, 2017). Over the past 15 years, local political contests in NTT have consistently been marked by the practice of identity politics and *money politics* as tools to mobilize electoral support. These political deviations are embedded in the local political culture of NTT, having been sustained over time and thus proving difficult to eliminate. Ironically, both political elites and the general public regard these irregularities as common and acceptable in NTT politics. Political elites often tailor their *branding politik* to voter segments based on perceived preferences.

Political studies identify three major models for analyzing patterns of constituent political choice: (1) the sociological approach, which emphasizes geography and demographics as key determinants of voting behavior (Johnson, 2020), (2) the psychological approach, which focuses on personality, emotional attachment, perception, and attitude (Bakker, 2023), and (3) the rational choice approach, which prioritizes cost-benefit calculations, candidate popularity, and reputation (Abdullah, 2019). Voter preferences in NTT can be analyzed using these three approaches, as each aligns well with empirical realities observed in the field. Voter segmentation in NTT includes: age-based voters; voters driven by regional, ethnic, or religious sentiments; pragmatic voters driven by economic concerns; and rational voters based on issue-oriented considerations.

This study seeks to explore the role of *konstituen* within the context of the

2024 Gubernatorial Election in NTT Province. It is based on the assumption that the majority of local *konstituen* in NTT possess a form of *selera politik* when determining their political choices. These choices are manifested in political behavior shaped by belief systems, knowledge, values, habits, traditions, and specific norms (Touseef et al., 2023). Among these, belief, habit, and tradition emerge as dominant factors influencing political perception and attitudes among voters in NTT. These variables facilitate the prediction of constituent behavior, candidate image, political marketing strategies, and audience segmentation. Voter profiling in NTT becomes a relatively effective basis for political communication strategies aimed at mobilizing support.

Political preferences themselves are formed through historical processes involving knowledge, observation, and experiences related to political entities (Ma & Cao, 2023). The people of NTT are easily mapped into voter segments. Their political choices are often formed long before the official election season begins. This cannot be separated from their knowledge of and experience with local political dynamics; both political appreciation and disappointment, to some extent, shape their political choices. Candidates' political marketing does not significantly alter voters' perceptions and political attitudes. In general, the public already holds their own criteria in selecting political leaders. Conversely, political campaign efforts in NTT tend to align candidate profiling and public image with the selection criteria of the constituents (Mughtar & Aliyudin, 2019). Voter audience segmentation in NTT is considered the most effective communication approach in the political marketing strategies of candidates. The political branding of gubernatorial candidates in NTT is adapted to the political tastes of various voter segments.

**Table 1. Final Recap of the 2024 NTT Gubernatorial Election**

Candidate Number	Name of Candidate Pair	Vote Count
1	Yohanis Fransiskus Lema dan Jane Natalia Suryanto (Ansy-Jane)	873.524 (32,47%)
2	Emanuel Melkiades Laka Lena dan Johanis Asadoma (Melki-Johni)	1.004.055 (37,33%)
3	Simon Petrus Kamlasi-Adrianus Garu (Simon-Adrianus)	812.353 (30,20%)

Source: KPU RI, 2025

The political contestation of the NTT Gubernatorial Election also took place at the grassroots level, as evidenced by the clash of political tastes across different voter segments. Political taste is defined as a tendency in political choices based on pleasure, satisfaction, gratification, fulfillment, and the

perceived political role within society (Gkartzonikas & Gkritza, 2019). Voter groups in NTT possess a range of orientations behind their political choices, shaped by their knowledge of and experience with local political dynamics.

These political orientations are continually internalized and practiced, becoming habitual patterns of political behavior that are difficult to change. Voters' political orientation evolves into a set of subjective values and beliefs that are sustained and eventually crystallize into political taste. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of taste refers to the preferences of individuals or groups for particular behaviors or cultural objects, such as music, food, sports, literature, clothing, and so on (Fashri, 2014). This study adopts Bourdieu's concept of taste within a political context in order to identify and examine the subjective motives that drive political choices within society. The term "political taste" is used in the study of political preferences to emphasize the substantive difference between the two concepts. Preference refers to voting behavior based on rational and objective considerations.

Preference is flexible and can shift in response to changes in objective conditions. In contrast, taste is subjective and refers to feelings of like or dislike. Taste is difficult to change because it has become part of one's lived habitus (Syafhendry, 2016). The majority of voters in NTT possess voting motivations that are irrational and difficult to change. For example, the voting behavior of most voters in Flores and Timor tends to favor local-born candidates, or is shaped by the silent rivalry between Catholic and Protestant voter blocs, which has persisted over four gubernatorial election periods in NTT. Even intensive political education or outstanding candidate platforms rarely succeed in altering the perceptions and political attitudes of the majority of NTT voters, as these have already crystallized into political taste.

According to Pierre Bourdieu (2018), taste provides individuals or groups with an understanding of their position within the social space. Behind one's affinity for certain cultural objects lies a motive to differentiate oneself from others. Bourdieu refers to this social endeavor as *distinction*. Social distinction produces stratification that preserves hierarchical positions among social classes. Taste unites those with similar interests while distinguishing them from others with different preferences (Webb et al., 2020). The political taste of NTT society represents the socio-political standing of each voter segment. This study aims to examine the political taste of voters in NTT in order to highlight the differences in status, role, and political bargaining power of each segment. Moreover, the market value of local political branding in NTT depends on how well it aligns with the profiles of voter groups fragmented by their differing political tastes. Therefore, the central problems addressed in this study are: 1) How does the political taste of NTT society relate to the qualifications of gubernatorial

leadership in NTT? This study seeks to identify, map, and analyze the diversity of political taste among the people of NTT concerning their ideal model of gubernatorial leadership. 2) To what extent does the political branding of gubernatorial candidates in NTT correspond to the political taste of the electorate? The study aims to reveal the compatibility between each candidate's political branding and the voters' political taste during the 2024 NTT Gubernatorial Election.

To date, no political studies have specifically examined the political preferences of NTT society using Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *distinction*. The adoption of this concept in the present study serves to identify and uncover the logic, rules, orientations, and motives that shape voters' political preferences in NTT. Voters' political taste in NTT constitutes a part of the local political culture that is continuously internalized and practiced in every cycle of local political contestation. Furthermore, differences in political preference also represent disparities in status, role, and political bargaining power among each voter segment.

The study of constituent political preference is oriented toward improving the quality of political participation. Over the past two decades, electoral contestation in NTT has been dominated by political-economic interests that exploit three primary resources which ethnicity, religion, and money, operating both explicitly and symbolically. As such, this topic is worthy of in-depth investigation in order to enhance political participants' understanding of the complexity and dynamics of political choices, to prevent discriminatory practices that undermine democratic quality, and to promote healthier political alternatives and participation.

This study is also considered novel, as there has been no previous research adopting the perspective of *Distingsi* in the examination of political taste (preference) in NTT. Empirical reviews that highlight the novelty of this topic include: 1) *Distingsi Pemilih Di Indonesia (Studi Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis) Habitus Kelas Dan Perilaku Memilih Dalam Komunikasi Politik Dengan Pendekatan Strukturalisme Genetik Pierre Bourdieu* (Rahman, 2021). This study investigates class habitus and the modes of political opinion production across social classes in Indonesia using Pierre Bourdieu's *modes of production of opinion*. In contrast, the present study focuses on analyzing voters' *selera politik* and the *branding politik* of local elites in NTT, 2) *Preferensi Calon Pemimpin Di Pemilihan Umum Tahun 2024 Dalam Pemberitaan Media Online* (Larasati & Fernando, 2023), which focuses on mapping the political preferences of elites in Indonesia's general election. Meanwhile, this study examines *selera politik* within the general population, 3) *Political Distinction: Searching For A Structural Similarity Between Class And Politics In Flanders-Belgium* (De Keere, 2018). Which measures the structural similarity

between the political arena and the social class space in Belgium. In contrast, this study evaluates the degree of similarity between elite *branding politik* and voter segments based on *selera politik*, and 4) *A New Conceptualization of the Political Left and Right: One Dimension, Multiple Domains* (Joshi, 2021), which compares the roles of right-wing conservative and left-wing inclusive political organizations in contesting power legitimacy in Canada.

Meanwhile, the present study investigates the existence of "political classes" based on local *selera politik* in NTT. Democracy fundamentally accommodates the diversity of political choices. Every political individual is free to determine their own political preference. This study highlights the privilege of political participation while also emphasizing the residue of political freedom, which inevitably produces disparities, recessions, and discrimination. It is positioned as a democratic reflection aimed at educating political participants in building a more productive political sphere in NTT.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study is classified under the critical paradigm. The critical paradigm views social reality as a social construction influenced by hierarchical power relations and vulnerable to injustice (Karman, 2015). This research also aims to reveal how local political culture in NTT shapes the political preferences (*selera politik*) of voters. The *selera politik* of NTT society is shaped by the hegemony of local political culture, which is continuously internalized and practiced collectively by both political elites and the public. Political preferences in NTT tend to be ideological and militant, making it difficult to foster a healthy political election system. Voter groups often remain trapped in a cycle of pathological political practices, while local elites exploit this political culture for their own electoral gains.

The political branding of local elites in NTT merely aligns with the political taste of constituents, without the pretense of fostering a political image grounded in competence and integrity. Accordingly, this study seeks to uncover the hegemony of negative cultural practices that influence the political behavior of both elites and voter groups in NTT, while simultaneously promoting education for ideal political conduct. This study adopts a qualitative research variant that seeks to understand reality through the deep interpretation of meaning, experience, and the perspective of individual or group subjects, using data exposition as its primary approach (Wallwey & Kajfez, 2023).

This study outlines the structure and analyzes the political behavior of constituents through narrative exposition containing both empirical data and theoretical-conceptual reviews as analytical tools. The method employed is a case study, which is intended to describe reality in a coherent and nuanced manner

within a specific spatial and temporal context (Yin, 2002). Since this research focuses on describing the structure and dynamics of political practices during the 2024 NTT Gubernatorial Election, it is categorized as a single case study (Creswell, 1998). The data collection techniques used include: First, In-Depth Interviews. Informants consist of political voters spread across sample districts throughout the NTT region and university academics from various disciplines relevant to the theme of this study (Public Policy, Political Science, Sociology, and Communication Studies). Informants were selected through purposive sampling, in which participants were chosen based on their knowledge, understanding, and experience, as well as their direct or indirect involvement during the 2024 NTT Gubernatorial Election.

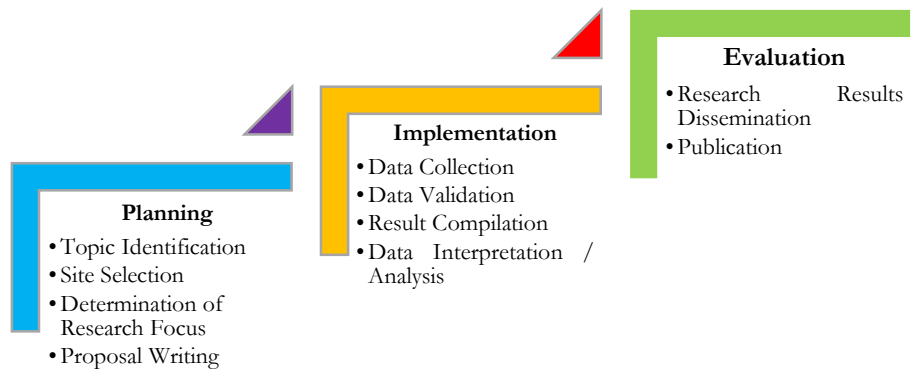
**Tabel 2. Research Informants**

No.	Informant Category	Total
1	Political Voters	10 People
2	University Academics	4 People

Source: Researcher, 2025

Secondly, Documentation. Since the 2024 Gubernatorial Election in NTT had already been conducted, the researcher carried out documentation of visual, audio, and audiovisual materials related to the object of study. This included: news coverage from mass media, social media links, photos and videos of political campaign events, political testimonials, political surveys, as well as other relevant manuscripts that represented the object of study.

The documentation technique serves as a substitute for the impossibility of field observation of events that have already occurred (Cheong et al., 2023). Archival records function to enrich field data. This study employed source and method triangulation to validate the data collected in the field. The data analysis technique in this study consists of (Stake, 1995) : 1) Category Collection. The researcher recorded empirical data in accordance with the specific research focus, namely: the substance of constituent preferences, the practice of political preference distinction, and the similarity between political branding and political preferences, 2) Pattern Formation. The researcher correlated field data from each research focus into a political event that illustrates the existence of political preference differentiation, and 3) Comprehensive Analysis. All field data were then analyzed using concepts and theories that facilitate the generalization of findings to similar political cases and provide recommendations for follow-up actions.



Source: Compiled from various sources

Figure 1. Research Procedure Flow

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The political preferences of constituents in NTT are shaped by a categorization of values, beliefs, preferences, interests, appreciation, and pride, which are expressed through political support. The findings of this study confirm that the basis of political support in the 2024 NTT gubernatorial election was driven by political taste rooted in historical and ideological contexts. Voters' political preferences in NTT are constructed through their observations and experiences of the everyday dynamics of local politics. This is reflected in their relatively consistent and difficult-to-change political tastes during each electoral cycle. Consequently, the political image of local elites in NTT typically adapts only to the taste-based profiling of constituents. On the other hand, only a small portion of voters in NTT demonstrate normative political preferences based on rationality and show flexibility in response to political developments. The distinction of political tastes among constituents during the 2024 gubernatorial contest in NTT gave rise to grassroots-level political "clans." This differentiation of political tastes not only produced political supporters but also represented privileges of political support in terms of political orientation, status and roles, as well as the political bargaining position of each voter segment.

### **Distinction of Political Taste: Leadership Qualifications for Governor of NTT**

The leadership qualifications for the Governor of NTT became the primary basis for constituents in determining their political choices. Voters had an idealized view of the type of candidate they deemed worthy and capable of holding the gubernatorial position. This study summarizes three major



categories of political taste among voter groups in NTT related to the qualifications of gubernatorial leadership. First, leadership that embraces and unites differences. This segment believes that a good leader of NTT is one who embraces and empowers differences to ensure political stability and support local democracy. NTT is a region with a pluralistic socio-cultural background and potential for horizontal conflict. This political preference stems from the disappointment of voters who are concerned about the polarization that emerged during previous gubernatorial elections and administrations. NTT, as an archipelagic territory, consists of 23 administrative regencies/cities spread across six major islands: Timor, Flores, Sumba, Alor, Lembata, Rote, and Sabu. Each area has distinct cultural characteristics, including traditional beliefs, values, knowledge systems, norms, languages, customs, and practices. Thus, a major challenge for gubernatorial candidates is their ability to unite these differences and foster solidarity to sustain a healthy local democracy (Negong, 2017).

Identity-based social conflict remains one of the critical issues in NTT's development. Therefore, a leader who can accommodate and mediate socio-cultural differences is needed to prevent such conflicts. This voter group prefers a candidate capable of transforming diversity into a stable social unity. This indicates that the majority of NTT constituents favor leaders with strong social capital, those who can connect across differences, are humane, and generate public sympathy.

Second, leadership based on primordial ties. Geopolitical variables remain a strategic asset for candidates in attracting voter sympathy (Curiel & Rivas-de-Roca, 2023). This means that voters tend to choose leaders based on emotional bonds and identity representation. Political support is grounded in the similarity between the candidate's image and the voter's profile. Primordial politics is part of Indonesia's political culture and is seen as a practical and effective strategy for mobilizing electoral support by both national and local elites (Azhar, 2017). Identity politics is relatively prevalent in NTT's local political practices, with emotional bonds based on religion and ethnicity serving as effective political capital. Voters in this segment admit to feeling socially satisfied and proud when they vote for a leader who shares their identity. Their choices are driven by emotional closeness based on shared socio-cultural identity. This group believes that such a leader affirms their existence in social competition with other groups. Their preferences are also shaped by reflections on NTT's political culture, which is rife with identity politics.

The three candidates who contested the 2024 gubernatorial election in NTT represented different geographic and demographic backgrounds. Yohanis Fransiskus Lema and Emanuel Melkiades Laka Lena are from Flores and both

are Catholic. Meanwhile, Simon Petrus Kamlasi is a native of Timor and a Protestant. All three leveraged social identity issues to some extent. Geopolitical aspects were strategically used to attract voters' sentiments based on regional affiliation. The 2024 gubernatorial election in NTT was often described as a "2 versus 1" contest, depending on the candidates' regional origin. This was evident in how Simon Petrus Kamlasi secured a majority of votes in Timor, particularly in Kota Kupang, Kabupaten TTS, and Kabupaten TTU. In NTT, the articulation of identity is most evident in political choices based on emotional group affiliations and the allocation of people in government or political institutions.

In addition to ethnicity and regional origin, religion is another significant geopolitical variable in NTT's local political contests. As of 2024, the majority of the population in NTT is Christian (90.56%), comprising Catholics (53.74%) and Protestants (36.82%). Muslims make up 9.25%, while Hindus and Buddhists comprise 0.18% and 0.01%, respectively (BPS NTT, 2024). Religious identity politics in NTT occurs both explicitly and symbolically in legislative and regional elections. The political endorsement of religious leaders plays a significant role in shaping public choices (Roem et al., 2023). The 2024 gubernatorial election showed a tendency among candidates to leverage religious sentiments to increase their electability.

The political calculation is clear: if a gubernatorial candidate is Catholic, then the running mate is Protestant, and vice versa. Yohanis Fransiskus Lema (Catholic) ran with Jane Natalia Suryanto (Protestant), Emanuel Melkiades Laka Lena (Catholic) ran with Yohanis Asadoma (Protestant), and Simon Petrus Kamlasi (Protestant) ran with Adrianus Garu (Catholic). While the religious-based voter segment is not dominant, it remains present and influential in each local election. In the 2024 NTT gubernatorial election, religious identity was not a strong determinant of voter behavior. Interestingly, the religious variable in NTT's local politics is likened to a "sleeping giant" that may awaken if provoked by certain political events. Geopolitical variables perpetuate unavoidable identity politics in every five-year election cycle in NTT. Identity politics is defined as the political practice of exploiting social identity as a basis for mobilization, achieving group interests, and gaining recognition (Zaini et al., 2023). This voter group bases their leadership choices on emotional group ties.

Third, young, energetic, and progressive leadership. The youth political group represents idealism, critical thinking, and innovation, open to all forms of change that align with the times and capable of advancing productive democracy (Alfaruqy & Padmonurcahyo, 2023). This view stems from public disappointment over the repeated failure of older generations of leadership. Therefore, the public seeks a "new face," namely, younger leaders expected to

offer better prospects. This voter group perceives that the face of local leadership in NTT is dominated by outdated models—leadership styles that are feudal, formalistic, and conservative. Such political leadership is seen as obsolete and irrelevant to the modern era. This constituent segment yearns for figures who can implement creative and innovative leadership approaches in the realm of local politics in NTT.

**Tabel 3. Voter Age Preferences in the 2024 NTT Gubernatorial Election**

No.	Age Range (Years)	Number of People
1	17 – 22	688.053
2	23 – 28	619.904
3	29 – 34	502.668
4	35 – 40	457.617
5	41 – 46	420.535
6	47 – 52	358.276
7	53 – 68	689.646
8	69 – 74	123.450
9	75 – 80	77.538
10	81 +	50.685

Source: KPU NTT, 2024

The youth voter group in NTT has experienced significant growth and now constitutes the majority of voters. The Millennial Generation accounts for 1,312,047 voters (32.73%), Generation Z reaches 1,172,985 voters (29.26%), and First-Time Voters amount to 688,389 voters (17.17%). There has been a paradigm shift among a large segment of constituents in NTT who increasingly sympathize with the idea of a "Young Leader." Yohanis Fransiskus Lema is the gubernatorial candidate who most significantly branded his political image as a young leader compared to the other two candidates. The campaign team of Yohanis Fransiskus Lema effectively targeted the youth voter segment by utilizing social media, engaging young influencers, and applying millennial-style political marketing. The political marketing strategies of Emanuel Melkiades Laka Lena and Simon Petrus Kamiasi also reached young voters, but not as a priority strategy. Young voters tend to be interested in candidates who represent their world. They tend to observe or directly experience the political activities of the leadership candidates. Laurensius Petrus Sayrani, an academic from Nusa Cendana University, explained the typical political voter behavior in NTT based on policy issues:

“The people of NTT can be categorized into two types of political voters: issue-based voters and non-issue-based voters. The issue-based segment chooses leaders based on the evaluation of their political promises. Interestingly, the majority of them vote for regional leaders who can

promise practical, short-term policies that can be felt directly. For example: social assistance, infrastructure, subsidies, electricity, water, and so on. These issues are far more appealing than strategic policies such as the transformation of agricultural political economy, public service reform, or bureaucratic reform. As a result, the vision and mission of candidates tend to align with the political taste of the public, which leans toward issues that directly respond to their practical needs. Meanwhile, the non-issue segment tends to be more pragmatic and transactional. This group usually votes for a leader due to *money politik*, political affiliation, or identity politics.” (25/03/2025).

Broadly speaking, voters in NTT can be categorized into two groups: issue-based voters and non-issue-based voters. The issue cluster relates to matters of public welfare such as road access, water, communication, electricity, basic necessities, education, bureaucracy, public services, and others. This group evaluates candidates based on their vision and mission while in office. They assess the extent to which the candidates’ political promises meet their needs as citizens. The main development problems in NTT include socioeconomic disparity, poverty, and limited public facilities. Other issues include dry climate, the quality of human resources, and dependence on central government subsidies. Among these problems, infrastructure and social assistance are prioritized by lower-middle-class constituents. As many as 59% of provincial roads are severely damaged, hampering ground transportation mobility. Water infrastructure has not been well managed, resulting in only 4.5% of water being used for community and livestock needs, while the rest remains underutilized. The poor population in NTT stands at 19.02%, and they rely solely on government assistance (BPS NTT, 2024). Short-term political agendas are fulfilled quickly and directly felt by the public. In contrast, strategic political issues require long-term implementation and are indirectly related to public interests in the future (Santoso, 2015).

The impact of strategic issues is indirect, making them less attractive, especially for those in the lower economic class. This class is oriented toward meeting daily needs, so they are more interested in short-term programs with direct benefits. Issue-based political preferences in NTT are solely directed toward public issues that can be directly experienced by the people. On the other hand, roles such as policy control, public benefits, or bureaucratic governance are not indicators in the political choices of constituents. For example, road development issues attract more voter interest in NTT than discussing agricultural economic reform or governance restructuring. Constituents tend to choose based on the fulfillment of practical needs, while strategic issues are often ignored. Political taste in NTT also points to the qualifications of leaders

who can promise to fulfill the people's practical needs.

Political constituents in NTT can also be categorized into the non-issue cluster. Political choices in this group are based on pragmatic benefits, such as *money politik*, identity politics, affiliation, and economic-political ties. The five-yearly political contests in NTT highlight three prominent non-issue clusters: money, religion, and ethnicity. These three variables often serve as effective capital to increase electoral effects for politicians (Bataona & Bajari, 2017). Local political contests in NTT are also influenced by voter segments driven by *money politik*. It is viewed as a practice of gratification (in the form of money, goods, or promises) aimed at influencing constituents' political perceptions and choices. Voters' support is exchanged for certain rewards (Muhtadi, 2019).

Culturally, *money politik* exists in NTT because it is seen as part of a cultural practice known as *uang sirih pinang*. People even consider it as *rezeki* (blessing) or *berkat* (grace) to meet daily living needs. This dishonest practice is co-constructed by both politicians and the public through a mutualistic symbiosis: politicians gain vote support, while the public receives economic benefits or political promises. In NTT culture, the offering of *sirih pinang* symbolizes hospitality, respect, intimacy, and gratitude (Forshee, 2006). This tradition has been adopted into the practice of *money politik*, thereby losing its essential value as a form of local wisdom. *Money politik* is a manifestation of *clientelism*, in which politicians use material distribution to gain electoral support from voters (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). Economic hardship, lack of alternatives, and political tolerance sustain the practice of *money politik* in NTT.

According to Bourdieu (2018), the distinction of taste among people is intended to signify a particular social class within a power hierarchy. The representation of social class through taste does not necessarily operate on an equal footing. Taste generates classification between superordinate and subordinate classes in society. The differentiation of political preferences among constituents in NTT functions in line with Bourdieu's logic, with contextual modifications according to NTT's local political dynamics. Bourdieu mapped three zones of taste: legitimate taste, middle-brow taste, and popular taste (Fashri, 2014). Each class is distinguished by distinctive consumption practices and lifestyle patterns. This study, however, uses economic and educational capital as reference points to help map voter groups in NTT and their political preferences.

The concept of class in this study differs slightly from the orthodox Marxian perspective. In his critique of capitalism, Karl Marx divided society into two classes: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The bourgeoisie is the elite class that owns capital and means of production. This privilege places them in a superordinate position, dominating and hegemonizing the subordinate class. The

proletariat is the class subordinated by the power of the bourgeoisie. The struggle of the proletariat is the central theme of Marx's thought and political movement (Sutrisno & Putranto, 2005). Meanwhile, the class classification in this study refers to Pierre Bourdieu's three zones of taste. Thus, the terminology and substance of "class" in this study differ from Marxian theory. This study uses a socio-economic classification to examine political taste. Legitimate taste refers to the upper social class based on economic status. This group generally has more than enough financial capital to meet their primary, secondary, and even tertiary needs. They are often entrepreneurs or large-scale property owners. In *NTT*, this group represents only about 1–2% of the population but controls a significant portion of the local economy. Among them, 78% have a relatively high educational background, often funded independently (BPS NTT, 2024). They enjoy premium public access and are prioritized in public services due to their substantial economic capital. This group is marked by access to economic resources and strong social networks oriented toward business gains and investment knowledge (Falcon, 2006).

The political preference of this class is issue-based, yet consistently oriented toward the accumulation of economic capital. The leadership qualifications they support are determined by development programs, especially those intersecting with economic and business dimensions. A dominant political discourse in *NTT* suggests that behind the candidacy of Yohanis Fransiskus Lema and Jane Natalia Suryanto lies the financial support of a political figure and businessman, Herman Herry. The nomination of Yohanis Fransiskus Lema as a gubernatorial candidate is suspected to be part of a "political trade-off" involving Stevano Adranacus, Herman Herry's son, who replaced Lema's seat in the national parliament (DPR RI). Similarly, Viktor Bungtilu Laiskodat, a politician with a broad business landscape in *NTT*, is believed to be backing the Simon Petrus Kamlasi–Adrianus Garu (Simon–Adrianus) ticket.

Middle-brow taste is represented by the middle class, positioned between the upper and lower classes. Nationally, this group accounts for about 21% of Indonesia's total population. They are relatively well-educated, having access to higher education (BPS NTT, 2024). This group consists of local politicians, contractors, entrepreneurs, bureaucrats, government employees, and private sector workers. The middle class in Indonesia often relies on the state as their main source of employment. Their economic advantage does not come from ownership of capital and production tools, but from controlling rents through their positions within government structures (Pratomo et al., 2020). In the context of local politics in *NTT*, the middle class is motivated by the prospect of controlling state resources. Access to power is pursued both through formal bureaucratic channels and through social and cultural networks. The middle class

in *NTT* constitutes the most active and involved segment of constituents in local political contests.

They are often perceived as opinion leaders whose voices are acknowledged by the public. Although their numbers are small, the political persuasion of the middle class can influence the political choices of the lower class, which constitutes a much larger population. Among them, educators (teachers) and village heads in *NTT* have proven to be effective political successors in garnering political electability at the grassroots level. Their advantage as an educated group with esteemed professions enables this class to easily consolidate constituent political support. The middle class is positioned between the upper and lower classes; hence, they also have aspirations for upward mobility, including through illegitimate means (Rocca, 2017). The 2024 *NTT* gubernatorial election reflects the support of the local middle class, such as academics, entrepreneurs, contractors, social activists, and others, for all three competing candidates.

The *popular taste* group is represented by the lower class. This group constitutes approximately 24.23% of Indonesia's total population (BPS NTT, 2024). In *NTT*, the lower class is typically found in remote or rural areas. Poverty, lack of access to education and healthcare, as well as limited infrastructure, are the primary challenges faced by this segment of society. In 2024, the poverty rate in *NTT* reached 19.02%, affecting both urban and rural areas. In fact, poverty in *NTT* is identified as a priority issue within the national development agenda (Febriandika et al., 2022).

The lack of communication infrastructure and political education hinders political participation among the lower class. They have limited access to information about electoral processes, government policies, national and local political dynamics, and related matters. Political participation among the lower class in *NTT* is relatively insignificant due to their disadvantaged living conditions. Their political understanding is minimal, largely due to limited educational attainment. The political decisions of the lower class in *NTT* tend to be subordinated to the power of local figures who control public resources and services (Erb, 2011). These actors leverage the social obedience of the community to mobilize political support. The political taste of the lower class in *NTT* includes issue-based variables but is also highly vulnerable to non-issue variables, such as *money politic*, identity politics, and cultural obedience. *NTT* remains a region grappling with unresolved development problems. Economic inequality, poverty, healthcare, education, and infrastructure represent the primary issues in development (Wuryandari, 2016).

The ideal leadership qualifications for lower-class constituents in *NTT* are represented by figures capable of addressing these development challenges. The

political taste of the lower class is oriented toward the fulfillment of short-term needs that can be directly felt by the public. *Money politic* and primordial sentiments are integral elements of the political preferences of lower-class voters.

### **Political Branding Similarity: Candidate Image and Constituent Preferences in the NTT gubernatorial Election**

Political contestation involves a battle of political images to gain constituent sympathy and support. Political image itself is constructed through political communication activities with various functions and purposes (Mas'amah et al., 2023). One of the most prominent elements in political competition is *political branding*. Political branding refers to the strategy of individuals, groups, or political organizations to create, maintain, and communicate the uniqueness of their identity in contrast to their political rivals. It aims to build positive public perception, increase constituent support, and influence public opinion. The 2024 NTT gubernatorial election featured three competing candidate pairs: Yohanis Fransiskus Lema and Jane Natalia Suryanto, Emanuel Melkiades Laka Lena and Johanis Asadoma, and Simon Petrus Kamiasi and Adrianus Garu. All three sought to win political support from constituents through distinctive political branding. The pair of Yohanis Fransiskus Lema and Jane Natalia Suryanto was known for their political slogan "*Menyala Kaka*". This phrase was adopted from the popular slang "*Menyala Abangkuh*" among Indonesian netizens. It became a linguistic trend especially among young people. The youth voter segment in NTT had increased and constituted the majority of voters in 2024. The Millennial Generation accounted for 32.73%, Generation Z for 29.26%, and First-Time Voters for 17.17%. This candidate pair therefore involved local influencers in several campaign moments and utilized social media extensively as a political branding tool.

The emergence of young political leadership reflects the increasing engagement of the younger generation in politics, which was previously dominated by older generations. Youth participation holds promising prospects for democratic political transformation (Onodera et al., 2020). Jane Natalia Suryanto was the only female candidate competing in the 2024 NTT gubernatorial election, which was expected to attract votes from the female voter segment. Jane Natalia Suryanto promoted empowerment programs such as "*Mama Bantu Mama*" and "*Perempuan Bantu Perempuan*", aiming to appeal to and gain support from female voters. Women accounted for 50.89% of voters in NTT, surpassing male voters at 49.10%. This candidate pair also targeted lower-class voters through the political branding of "NTT", an acronym for *Nelayan (fishermen)*, *Tani (farmers)*, *Ternak (livestock)*. This branding was introduced as an optimistic response to the longstanding perception of "NTT" as an abbreviation



of “*Nanti Tuhan Tolong*” (“Later God Will Help”), a phrase expressing despair over unresolved welfare issues.

Their branding was intended to instill hope among the people of *NTT*, who had begun to lose faith in socioeconomic progress. The political position of Yohanis Fransiskus Lema and Jane Natalia Suryanto also represented national-level political contestation. Their main political backer was PDIP. Previously, Yohanis Fransiskus Lema served as a national legislator representing PDIP. The party had been involved in political tensions with President Jokowi, who eventually supported Prabowo Subianto–Gibran Rakabuming Raka (Jokowi’s son). PDIP was among the most vocal critics of the alleged authoritarianism of Jokowi’s second term. The graft case involving PDIP Secretary General Hasto Kristiyanto was suspected to be a politically motivated criminalization effort orchestrated by President Jokowi. Thus, the candidacy of Yohanis Fransiskus Lema in *NTT* symbolized local opposition politics. This form of political branding was targeted at the middle-class voter segment in *NTT*, which tends to be more politically literate. Interestingly, dissatisfaction with Jokowi’s ten-year administration mostly came from constituents with relatively higher education and economic security, while lower middle-class voters expressed high levels of satisfaction with Jokowi’s government (Indikator, 2024).

“*Ayo Bangun NTT*” (Let’s Build NTT) was the central theme of the political branding of Emanuel Melkiades Laka Lena and Johanis Asadoma, who ultimately won the 2024 *NTT* gubernatorial election. Emanuel Melkiades Laka Lena is a seasoned politician with experience both at the national level and in local *NTT* politics. Their campaign slogan, “*Ayo Bangun NTT*”, consisted of seven pillars of development programs: Sustainable Economy, Community Empowerment, Infrastructure Equity, Health, Education, Bureaucratic Reform and Human Rights, and Collaboration. The development programs offered by Emanuel Melkiades Laka Lena and Johanis Asadoma were highly relevant to the persistent problems faced by the majority of *NTT* residents. For the lower-class segment, key issues included education, health, economic hardship, and infrastructure. Their campaign’s “*Dasa Cita Ayo Bangun NTT*” included priority programs aligned with the practical needs of lower-class constituents, such as: *From Farms and Seas*, *NTT Tourism Driving Local Economy*, *Strong Posyandu*, *Roads*, *Electricity*, *Decent Housing*, *Health Insurance*, and *Employment for the People*. For the middle-class segment, the pair offered policies aimed at improving the welfare of civil servants as a way to stimulate the local economy. Their political marketing also engaged with the millennial segment by proposing policies focused on optimizing digital infrastructure.

Most of the political branding strategies marketed by the pair Emanuel Melkiades Laka Lena and Johanis Asadoma targeted cross-class segments,

particularly the lower class, which constituted the majority of voters in NTT. One of the most prominent branding strategies during the 2024 NTT gubernatorial election was their representation of the central government. Both candidates were backed by parties in the *Koalisi Indonesia Maju* (the Advanced Indonesia Coalition), which had previously secured victory in the 2024 Indonesian presidential election. These parties included: Golkar, Gerindra, Demokrat, PSI, and PAN. Their image as central government representatives was reinforced by Emanuel Melkiades Laka Lena's political connections with national-level politicians and officials. Since 2021, the Provincial Budget of NTT has experienced a severe fiscal crisis. In 2024, 67% of NTT's Provincial Budget came from central government transfers, which were mostly allocated to employee salaries and special allocation funds (*Dana Alokasi Khusus*). Only 33% of the budget came from regional own-source revenue (*Pendapatan Asli Daerah*), which was insufficient to address the socioeconomic challenges faced by the people of NTT. The limited fiscal space constrained the local government's capacity to finance development programs. Political leadership with strong networking capabilities is essential to gain developmental priorities through political proximity, affiliations, and business networks (Hardiman, 2006). Among their supporters, Emanuel Melkiades Laka Lena is perceived as a cross-ethnic, populist, and down-to-earth political figure. His political consolidation relied on long-term social relationships, including for the purpose of electoral mobilization.

Normatively, the political branding of the Simon Petrus Kamlasi–Adrianus Garu pair was relatively similar to the other two candidate pairs, focusing on issues relevant to multiple voter segments. However, their political branding stood out in its emphasis on *identity representation*. One of the campaign team members for Simon Petrus Kamlasi stated:

'In the past, people called us *Timor Kouk* (backward Timor). Now is the time for us to unite and prove that *Timor Kouk* is not what others say. We have sons of Timor who are intelligent and accomplished. Don't let us be trapped by narratives that hinder the progress of the Timorese. Tell our brothers and sisters: vote for a Timorese candidate. We must record this moment in history, Timorese leadership for NTT. We can do this. We've voted for others to represent us in the national parliament, and they betrayed the people's voice. They were power-hungry and turned their backs on us. Don't let the same people fool us again.' (Garda Indonesia, 2024).

Simon Petrus Kamlasi was the only gubernatorial candidate in 2024 of

*Timorese (Dawan)* ethnicity, specifically from the Timor Tengah Selatan Regency. The voter base on Timor Island was significant, encompassing: the City of Kupang, Kupang Regency, Timor Tengah Selatan, Timor Tengah Utara, Belu, and Malaka. Among these, Timor Tengah Selatan, Kupang City, and Kupang Regency held the highest number of registered voters on Timor Island. In total, voters from across Timor Island accounted for approximately 35% of the entire NTT electorate. Simon Petrus Kamiasi was the second ethnic Timorese to run for Governor of NTT, following Esthon Foenay. To date, no ethnic Timorese candidate has succeeded in winning the governorship of NTT. The *water issue* became the most prominent branding element in their campaign, alongside their commitment to continue the programs of the last three NTT governors.

The promotion of political branding aims to mobilize electoral support within the arena of local politics. Political campaigns are part of the process of constructing political relationships between candidates and constituents throughout the course of electoral contestation. This study finds that distinctions exist not only at the level of constituent taste but also in the political branding strategies offered by each candidate. In this context, each candidate tailored their political branding to align with the preferences of various voter segments. The political branding of each candidate is also perceived as a form of capital that supports the struggle for electoral dominance within the arena of political contestation.

Bourdieu (as cited in [Fashri, 2014](#)) classifies social practices into four forms of capital: (1) *Economic capital*, which consists of financial resources and material assets used for various purposes; (2) *Cultural capital*, encompassing intellectual qualifications acquired through education or family heritage; (3) *Social capital*, manifested in social networks that are closely tied to power relations; and (4) *Symbolic capital*, comprising prestige, status, authority, and legitimacy. The 2024 NTT gubernatorial election demonstrated the distribution and deployment of these forms of capital within the domain of electoral politics. All three candidates were supported by economic capital in the form of campaign financing, including expenditures related to *money politics*.

The open-list proportional electoral system requires large-scale mass mobilization, which in turn necessitates substantial financial resources. Additionally, the economic-based voter segments in NTT make money a virtually inescapable political variable. Yohanis Fransiskus Lema was distinguished by his strong cultural capital, evident in his structured and eloquent public speaking skills, which stem from his academic background (Master's degree) and previous experience in journalism. Emanuel Melkiades Laka Lena capitalized on his extensive political network as a compelling political asset, owing to his long-standing engagement in both national and local politics since a

young age. Meanwhile, Simon Petrus Kamlasi employed an identity-based political strategy, showcasing his symbolic capital. His status as a native Timorese was emphasized to mobilize support from the majority Timorese electorate in NTT. Although all candidates utilized a combination of available forms of capital in their political campaigns, each had one form of capital that stood out as their main political branding strategy. The 2024 NTT gubernatorial election thus reflects a struggle for power capitalized through various forms of capital.

## CONCLUSION

The 2024 gubernatorial election in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) reflects the complex social dynamics underlying the political preferences of local constituents. Voter preferences are shaped by their knowledge, perceptions, and historical and ideological experiences with politics. Everyday lived experience forms a political taste that tends to be militant and resistant to change, especially during the campaign season. Consequently, candidates' campaign strategies are largely aimed at aligning their public image with the preferences of constituents. Audience segmentation becomes a strategic approach in political marketing, whereby candidate branding is constructed based on voter taste.

This study identifies three main preferences regarding the qualities of leadership according to NTT voters: (1) inclusive leadership that unites diversity, (2) leadership rooted in primordial ties, and (3) young, energetic, and progressive leadership. Broadly, NTT constituents are divided into two main groups: issue-based voters and non-issue-based voters. Issue-based voters are more concerned with practical development problems than strategic discourse.

Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of distinction, this study maps three layers of political taste among constituents: (1) *Legitimate taste*, representing upper-class preferences driven by economic capital and political networks; (2) *Middle-brow taste*, representing middle-class voters who prioritize transactional politics as a means of social mobility; and (3) *Popular taste*, reflecting the pragmatism of lower-class voters who assess leadership based on its immediate benefits to their daily needs.

The campaigns of the three main candidates—Yohanis Fransiskus Lema, Emanuel Melkiades Laka Lena, and Simon Petrus Kamlasi—represent diverse branding strategies: from millennial opposition, power network consolidation, to local identity politics. Each candidate utilized symbolic capital deemed most relevant to attract specific segments of the electorate.

The findings of this study show that constituent political preferences are shaped more by subjective taste than by rational calculation. In this context, Bourdieu's framework serves as a critical tool to understand how politics and

power operate through cultural and symbolic logic. This study hopes to contribute to increased awareness of the importance of fostering a more rational and healthy political culture in NTT.

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