

Selective Democratic Engagement and Voter Participation in the 2024 Elections: Evidence from Palu City, Indonesia

Dhiyah Akmala Putri

Universitas Pembangunan Nasional "Veteran" Jakarta, Indonesia
dhiyahakmala12@gmail.com

Ridwan

Universitas Pembangunan Nasional "Veteran" Jakarta, Indonesia
ridwan.fisip@upnvj.ac.id

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Abstract:

This study aims to analyze the factors that contributed to the decline in voter participation between the 2024 General Election and the 2024 Regional Head Election (*Pilkada*) in Palu City, Central Sulawesi, Indonesia, and to explain how voters evaluated their decisions to participate in these two democratic arenas. This study employed a qualitative approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with voters, the Palu City General Election Commission, and local political observers, supported by document analysis of official electoral records. The findings indicate that the decline in voter participation was influenced by economic pressure, job mobility, administrative constraints, electoral fatigue, evaluations of local politics, and the level of trust in the local government. These factors did not directly lead to political apathy; instead, they shaped voters' evaluations of the benefits, relevance, and consequences of participating in the *Pilkada*. This study highlights the importance of strengthening voter education and developing electoral policies that are more responsive to local social conditions. The primary contribution of this study lies in the development of the concept of *Selective Democratic Engagement*, which extends *Rational Choice Theory* by demonstrating that voters' rational considerations are directed not only toward candidate selection but also toward the decision of whether to participate in a particular democratic arena.

Keywords: Political Participation; Voting Behavior; Simultaneous Elections; Local Democracy; Rational Choice.

Abstrak:

Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis faktor-faktor yang menyebabkan penurunan partisipasi pemilih antara Pemilihan Umum dan Pemilihan Kepala Daerah Tahun 2024 di Kota Palu, Sulawesi Tengah, Indonesia, serta menjelaskan bagaimana pemilih mengevaluasi keputusan untuk berpartisipasi dalam dua arena demokrasi tersebut. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dengan pemilih, Komisi Pemilihan Umum Kota Palu, dan pengamat politik lokal, serta didukung oleh studi dokumentasi terhadap dokumen penyelenggaraan pemilu. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa penurunan partisipasi dipengaruhi oleh tekanan ekonomi, mobilitas pekerjaan, kendala administratif, kejenuhan pemilu, evaluasi terhadap politik lokal, dan tingkat kepercayaan terhadap pemerintah daerah. Faktor-faktor tersebut tidak secara langsung mendorong apatisme politik, tetapi membentuk proses evaluasi pemilih terhadap manfaat, relevansi, dan konsekuensi partisipasi dalam *Pilkada*. Studi ini mengimplikasikan pentingnya penguatan pendidikan pemilih dan penyusunan kebijakan pemilu yang lebih adaptif terhadap kondisi sosial masyarakat. Kontribusi utama penelitian ini terletak pada pengembangan konsep *Selective Democratic Engagement* yang memperluas *Rational Choice Theory* dengan menunjukkan bahwa pertimbangan rasional pemilih tidak hanya diarahkan pada pemilihan kandidat, tetapi juga pada keputusan untuk berpartisipasi dalam suatu arena demokrasi.

Kata Kunci: Partisipasi Politik; Perilaku Pemilih; Pemilu Serentak; Demokrasi Lokal; Pilihan Rasional.

INTRODUCTION

Political participation is one of the primary indicators of democratic quality because it reflects citizens' involvement in determining political leadership and shaping public policy (Pulungan et al., 2020). In democratic systems, elections serve not only as mechanisms for the transfer of political power but also as opportunities for citizens to express their trust, expectations, and evaluations of political institutions (Kirana et al., 2024; Nuna & Moonti, 2019). Consequently, the level of voter participation is widely used to assess the legitimacy of democracy at both the national and local levels (A. Fikri Ainurriszqi & Sukmana, 2025).

However, voter participation in Indonesia demonstrates different patterns between the General Election (*Pemilu*) and the Regional Head Election (*Pilkada*). Data from the General Election Commission of the Republic of Indonesia (2024) indicate that voter turnout in the 2024 General Election reached 81.78%, whereas participation in the 2024 *Pilkada* declined to 68.10% (Komisi Pemilihan Umum, 2025; Rahayu, 2024). A similar pattern occurred in Palu City. Data from the Palu City General Election Commission (2024) show that voter turnout reached 75.01% in the 2024 General Election but declined to 62.13% in the 2024 *Pilkada*, even though both elections were conducted within the same year and involved a largely identical electorate. This pattern is further supported by reports published by Musabar et al., (2024) and Kalsum and Andhika (2024). These differences indicate that citizens do not perceive all democratic arenas equally. Instead, their decisions to participate depend on how they evaluate the relevance and perceived benefits of each type of election.

Studies on political participation, particularly in Indonesia, have developed along several major strands. First, scholars have identified political trust, political education, and voter socialization as the primary factors that encourage electoral participation. Studies conducted by Permatasari et al. (2026), Ayunda et al. (2023), Susila et al. (2020), Pebriyenni et al. (2020), and Firdaus et al. (2025) demonstrate that trust in the political system, socioeconomic conditions, and voter education significantly influence citizens' decisions to exercise their voting rights. Second, previous studies emphasize the characteristics of electoral administration as important determinants of voter turnout. Hasanuddin et al. (2021) found that differences in participation between the General Election and the *Pilkada* were associated with campaign intensity, political stimuli, and media exposure. Similarly, Hanida et al. (2025) argue that the close scheduling of the 2024 General Election and *Pilkada* generated voter fatigue, which contributed to declining electoral participation. Third, studies on voting behavior increasingly emphasize the role of individual rational evaluation in political decision-making. Alwi and Ram (2024), Istianah et al. (2025), and Tomutu et al. (2025) argue that voters increasingly consider expected benefits, anticipated electoral outcomes, and satisfaction with political representation before deciding whether to participate.

Despite these contributions, previous studies generally treat political participation as the consequence of socioeconomic, institutional, or voting behavior factors in isolation. They have not adequately explained why the same voters demonstrate different levels of participation when confronted with two democratic arenas within the same electoral cycle. Consequently, the mechanisms through which citizens evaluate their decisions to participate in different types of elections remain insufficiently explored. This gap provides the central focus of the present study. Accordingly, this study aims to analyze the factors contributing to the decline in voter participation between the 2024 General Election and the 2024 *Pilkada* in Palu City while explaining how voters evaluate their decisions to participate in these two democratic arenas.

This study adopts *Rational Choice Theory* as its analytical framework. According to this theory, individuals make political decisions by evaluating costs, benefits, and expected outcomes (Downs, 1957). However, this study argues that voters' rational considerations extend beyond selecting candidates or political parties. Instead, voters also evaluate whether political participation itself is sufficiently valuable to justify their involvement. Based on this perspective, this study develops the concept of *Selective Democratic Engagement*, which refers to a condition in which voters rationally choose to participate only in democratic arenas that they perceive as offering greater benefits, relevance, and consequences for their lives. This concept also builds upon the perspective proposed by Ekman and Amnå (2012), who conceptualize political engagement as a spectrum of participation that cannot be reduced solely to electoral participation but also encompasses the ways citizens interpret and choose different forms of political engagement.

METHOD

The unit of analysis in this study consists of voters who participated in the 2024 General Election (*Pemilu*) and the 2024 Regional Head Election (*Pilkada*) in Palu City, Central Sulawesi, Indonesia, as well as the factors that influenced their decisions to exercise or not exercise their voting rights. Palu City was selected as the research site because voter turnout declined between the 2024 General Election and the 2024 *Pilkada*, even though both elections were conducted within the same year. This condition provides a relevant context for examining differences in citizens' participation across two distinct democratic arenas.

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive research design. The qualitative approach was selected because it provides an in-depth understanding of voters' perceptions, experiences, and considerations when making political decisions (Creswell, 2014). Through this approach, the study not only identifies the factors influencing political participation but also explains how voters interpret their decisions to participate or abstain in both the General Election and the *Pilkada*.

The study used both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews with seven informants, consisting of the Chairperson of the Palu City General Election Commission, one local political observer, and five voters. The voter informants were selected purposively to represent different patterns of electoral participation, including individuals who participated in both elections and those who voted in the General Election but did not participate in

the *Pilkada*. Secondary data were obtained from official documents published by the Palu City General Election Commission, media reports, and scholarly literature related to political participation and voting behavior.

The researchers collected data through in-depth interviews and document analysis. They conducted semi-structured interviews to explore informants' perceptions of political participation, their electoral experiences, and the considerations underlying their decisions to vote or abstain. The document analysis examined voter registration records, voter turnout statistics, and official documents related to the administration of the 2024 General Election and the *Pilkada* in Palu City. The combination of these two techniques enabled source triangulation and provided a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

The researchers analyzed the data using the interactive model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. They reduced the data by selecting, coding, and categorizing information according to themes relevant to the research objectives. Subsequently, they presented the data in a descriptive format to identify patterns of political participation and relationships among the findings. Finally, they drew and verified conclusions by interpreting the findings in accordance with the research focus. To ensure data credibility, the researchers conducted source triangulation by comparing interview results with official documents and other supporting information. They also confirmed the findings with several informants to ensure the consistency of the interpretations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Differences in Voter Participation Patterns between the 2024 General Election and the *Pilkada*

The 2024 General Election (*Pemilu*) and the Regional Head Election (*Pilkada*) in Palu City were conducted within the same calendar year and involved a largely identical electorate. Normatively, these conditions should have produced relatively similar levels of voter participation. However, the findings reveal a substantial difference in participation patterns between the two electoral events. This pattern indicates that citizens did not consistently exercise their voting rights across different democratic arenas, even though both elections took place within the same temporal and geographical context.

Table 1. Comparison of Voter Participation in the 2024 General Election and the *Pilkada* in Palu City

Type of Election	Registered Voters	Votes Cast	Voter Turnout (%)	Difference in Turnout (Percentage Points)
2024 General Election	271,124	203,270	75.01	–
2024 <i>Pilkada</i>	274,293	170,376	62.13	-12.88
Change	+3,169	-32,894	-12.88	-12.88

Source: Komisi Pemilihan Umum Kota Palu, 2024.

Table 1 shows that voter turnout in Palu City declined between the 2024 General Election and the 2024 *Pilkada*. Although the number of registered voters increased from 271,124 to 274,293, the number of citizens who cast their votes decreased from 203,270 to 170,376. Consequently, voter turnout declined from 75.01% in the General Election to 62.13% in the *Pilkada*, representing a decrease of 12.88 percentage points. These findings indicate that an increase in the number of registered voters did not automatically lead to higher levels of political participation.

The decline in voter turnout was further examined across each type of election conducted in 2024. Presenting participation rates by electoral contest provides a clearer understanding of whether the decline occurred only in a specific election or reflected a broader pattern across national and local elections. Table 2 presents the comparison of voter turnout by electoral contest.

Table 2. Voter Turnout by Electoral Contest in Palu City, 2024

Electoral Contest	Voter Turnout (%)
President and Vice President	75.77
Regional Representative Council (<i>DPD RI</i>)	75.02
House of Representatives (<i>DPR RI</i>)	75.01
Provincial House of Representatives (<i>Provincial DPRD</i>)	74.72
City House of Representatives (<i>City DPRD</i>)	74.52
Governor and Vice Governor	62.25
Mayor and Vice Mayor	62.01

Source: Komisi Pemilihan Umum Kota Palu, 2024.

Table 2 demonstrates that voter turnout remained relatively stable across all electoral contests in the 2024 General Election, ranging from 74.52% to 75.77%. In contrast, participation declined substantially in the 2024 *Pilkada*, both in the gubernatorial election (62.25%) and the mayoral election (62.01%). This pattern indicates that the decline did not occur in only

one local electoral contest but consistently characterized all regional elections. Therefore, lower voter turnout in the *Pilkada* cannot be interpreted as an isolated phenomenon. Instead, it reflects a broader shift in citizens' engagement with local democratic institutions.

Taken together, Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate that differences in voter participation occurred not only at the aggregate level but also consistently across all electoral contests. Every contest in the 2024 General Election, from the presidential election to the election of city legislative representatives, recorded relatively high and stable turnout. In contrast, participation in the 2024 *Pilkada* declined in both the gubernatorial and mayoral elections. This consistent pattern suggests that the decline in voter turnout was neither incidental nor confined to a particular electoral contest. Rather, it reflects citizens' tendency to assign different levels of importance to national and local elections.

The interview with the Chairperson of the Palu City General Election Commission further supports these findings. Idrus explained that the relatively high voter turnout in the 2024 General Election resulted primarily from the strong public attention devoted to the national electoral contest, particularly the presidential election. According to him, the greater intensity of political campaigns, broader dissemination of political information, and extensive media exposure made the General Election considerably more attractive to voters than the *Pilkada* (Interview, November 4, 2025). This explanation indicates that voter participation depends not only on the existence of elections as democratic procedures but also on the perceived attractiveness and intensity of political competition associated with each electoral contest.

Overall, the findings demonstrate a clear difference in voter participation patterns between the 2024 General Election and the 2024 *Pilkada* in Palu City. This difference appears not only in the overall decline in voter turnout but also in the consistent decrease across all local electoral contests. These findings suggest that citizens do not perceive all electoral contests as equally important democratic arenas. Therefore, the decline in participation in the *Pilkada* should not be interpreted solely as a reduction in political engagement. Instead, it reflects differences in how citizens assign meaning and significance to different democratic arenas.

Factors Contributing to the Decline in Voter Participation

The decline in voter turnout in the 2024 *Pilkada* did not result from a single factor. Patterns emerging from the interviews indicate that the factors contributing to lower voter participation can be grouped into six major categories: economic pressure, job mobility, administrative constraints, voter fatigue, disappointment with local politics, and low trust in local government.

First, economic pressure. Economic pressure emerged as one of the most influential factors shaping citizens' decisions not to vote in the 2024 *Pilkada*. This condition primarily affected voters working in the informal sector who relied heavily on daily earnings. For these individuals, the decision to visit a polling station represented not only an act of political participation but also a choice that could reduce their opportunity to earn income. Consequently, exercising the right to vote directly competed with the economic demands that had to be fulfilled on election day.

The experience of Agus, a vegetable vendor at Manonda Market, illustrates how economic pressure influenced his decision not to participate in the 2024 *Pilkada*, despite having voted in the 2024 General Election (*Pemilu*). Agus explained that election day coincided with the busiest period of market activity. Leaving his stall during that time would have reduced the number of customers and, consequently, his daily income. Under these circumstances, he prioritized maintaining his economic activity over participating in the *Pilkada* (Interview, November 8, 2025).

Economic pressure therefore functioned not only as a practical barrier preventing voters from visiting polling stations but also as a factor shaping their priorities when political participation conflicted with everyday economic needs. Data from Statistics Indonesia indicate that the average monthly income of informal workers in Palu City was IDR 1,939,777 (*Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Sulawesi Tengah*, 2022). This relatively modest income suggests that losing a day's work on election day could substantially reduce the household income of many informal workers. Among individuals who depended on daily earnings, the decision not to participate in the *Pilkada* reflected the economic consequences of taking time away from work rather than a lack of political interest. These findings indicate that political participation depends not only on citizens' willingness to vote but also on their capacity to allocate time and resources while meeting essential economic needs.

A similar perspective was expressed by Sahran Raden, a local political observer. He argued that economic pressure constituted one of the dominant considerations influencing citizens' voting decisions, particularly among low-income groups whose livelihoods depended on daily employment. According to him, many individuals chose to continue working because they did not perceive any immediate benefits from participating in the *Pilkada*. Under these conditions, maintaining economic activity became a higher priority than participating in the regional election (Interview, November 20, 2025).

The convergence of perspectives expressed by both voter informants and the political observer indicates that economic pressure extends beyond an individual obstacle and instead represents a broader social condition influencing citizens' electoral decisions. When political participation competes directly with the necessity of securing daily income, many voters prioritize employment over voting. Consequently, the decline in participation in the *Pilkada* cannot be attributed solely to declining political interest but must also be understood as a consequence of economic constraints that shape how citizens allocate their time and resources.

Second, job mobility. Job mobility also emerged as an important factor influencing citizens' decisions not to vote in the 2024 *Pilkada*. This condition primarily affected informal-sector workers whose schedules were unpredictable and whose workplaces frequently changed. For these workers, continuous work obligations throughout the day substantially reduced their opportunity to visit polling stations, even when they intended to participate in the election.

This condition is illustrated by the experience of Ruli, an online motorcycle taxi (*ojek online*) driver in Palu City. Ruli explained that he voted in the 2024 General Election but did not participate in the *Pilkada* because he continued accepting ride requests throughout election day. His uninterrupted work schedule made it difficult to leave work and return to the polling station, particularly because his working area frequently shifted far from the polling station where he was registered to vote. As a result, he missed the opportunity to cast his ballot even though he had initially planned to participate in the *Pilkada* (Interview, November 23, 2025).

This experience demonstrates that job mobility involves more than limited time availability; it also reflects employment characteristics that are difficult to reconcile with the election schedule. Among workers whose jobs require constant movement between locations, non-participation was primarily driven by their inability to coordinate work schedules and workplace locations with access to polling stations. Therefore, lower voter turnout among this group does not indicate rejection of the democratic process. Instead, it shows that the nature of their employment significantly constrained their opportunity to exercise their voting rights.

Third, administrative constraints. Administrative constraints also constituted one of the factors contributing to low voter participation in the 2024 *Pilkada*. These constraints were not limited to the technical aspects of election administration but also involved citizens' access to polling stations and administrative conditions that affected voters' opportunities to exercise their voting rights. For some groups of citizens, limited accessibility, transportation costs, and the amount of time available made the voting process difficult to undertake.

This condition is reflected in the experience of Ukin, a daily wage worker in Mantikulore District. Ukin explained that he did not participate in either the 2024 *Pemilu* or the 2024 *Pilkada*, although he was aware of the schedules for both elections. His unpredictable work schedule, the distance to the polling station, transportation costs, and physical exhaustion after work prevented him from having adequate opportunities to exercise his voting rights. This situation demonstrates that knowledge of election administration does not necessarily guarantee citizens' ability to access the voting process (Interview, November 22, 2025).

This finding is consistent with the explanation provided by the Chairperson of the Palu City General Election Commission. Idrus stated that voter turnout was also influenced by the quality of the voter database used in election administration. According to him, some citizens who had relocated or passed away remained listed in the Permanent Voter List because the administrative documents required to update the voter database had not yet been completed. On the other hand, the various voter outreach and voter education programs implemented by the Election Commission had not yet achieved the targeted level of participation. Consequently, a gap remained between the information disseminated by election administrators and the actual level of public participation on election day (Interview, November 4, 2025).

Fourth, voter fatigue. The implementation of the *Pemilu* and the *Pilkada* within a relatively short period also affected citizens' enthusiasm for participating in elections. The continuous sequence of political contests caused some voters to experience fatigue with the electoral process. This condition was reflected in declining public attention toward the *Pilkada* after citizens had previously participated in the lengthy process of the national election. As a result, participation in the regional election no longer attracted the same level of public response as the national election.

The Chairperson of the Palu City General Election Commission also acknowledged this phenomenon. Idrus explained that holding the *Pemilu* and the *Pilkada* within the same year led some citizens to believe that they had already fulfilled their democratic participation by voting in the General Election. According to him, this condition was reinforced by declining public enthusiasm for the *Pilkada*, which involved fewer candidates and less intensive campaign activities than the *Pemilu*. Consequently, public attention toward the regional head election became relatively lower (Interview, November 4, 2025).

Sahran Raden, a local political observer, reinforced this interpretation. He argued that voter fatigue was influenced not only by the close scheduling of the two elections but also by the decline in political discussion within the public sphere following the conclusion of the national election. According to him, reduced public attention toward the *Pilkada* weakened the process of political mobilization compared with the *Pemilu*, causing some voters to no longer perceive an urgent need to return to the polls (Interview, November 20, 2025).

Fifth, disappointment with local politics. Disappointment with local politics constituted another factor influencing citizens' decisions not to exercise their voting rights in the 2024 *Pilkada*. This disappointment did not arise from a lack of concern for democratic processes. Instead, it developed from citizens' evaluations of local government performance, which they perceived as having failed to produce meaningful improvements in their daily lives. The accumulation of these experiences fostered a more critical attitude toward the *Pilkada*, leading some voters to conclude that participating in the regional head election would not necessarily produce improvements consistent with their expectations.

This perspective is reflected in the experience of Atiek, a trader at Masomba Market. Atiek explained that she exercised her voting rights in the 2024 *Pemilu* but chose not to participate in the *Pilkada* because the political promises made during previous elections had failed to produce tangible improvements in either local economic conditions or her trading activities. These experiences made her increasingly cautious in evaluating the *Pilkada* and doubtful that replacing regional leaders would bring different outcomes for the lives of ordinary citizens (Interview, November 15, 2025).

Sahran Raden, a local political observer, expressed a similar opinion. According to him, many citizens had begun to question the tangible benefits of changes in regional leadership because previous government policies had failed to generate

improvements that people could directly experience. As a result, citizens no longer perceived the *Pilkada* as a political event that would automatically improve public welfare, leading some voters to decide not to exercise their voting rights (Interview, November 20, 2025).

Sixth, low trust in local government. Low trust in local government also influenced the decisions of some citizens not to exercise their voting rights in the 2024 *Pilkada*. This trust was related not only to evaluations of individual candidates for regional office but also to citizens' confidence in the ability of local governments to address various public problems. When citizens perceived that local governments had failed to provide public services and development consistent with community expectations, they no longer regarded the *Pilkada* as an effective mechanism for producing meaningful change.

This perspective is reflected in Putri's explanation when comparing her reasons for participating in the *Pemilu* and the *Pilkada*. Putri explained that she exercised her voting rights in both elections because she believed that local governments play an important role in determining the quality of public services, employment opportunities, and regional development in Palu City. According to her, the *Pilkada* remains relevant as long as citizens believe that regional leadership can produce tangible improvements in their everyday lives (Interview, May 29, 2026).

These contrasting perspectives indicate that the level of trust in local government constitutes one of the factors distinguishing citizens' decisions to participate in the *Pilkada*. Citizens who continued to believe that local governments could improve the quality of local life were more likely to exercise their voting rights, whereas those who no longer held such confidence were more likely to abstain. Therefore, trust in local government institutions influences not only citizens' evaluations of political candidates but also the extent to which they perceive the *Pilkada* as a meaningful mechanism for producing change.

Table 3. Factors Contributing to the Decline in Voter Participation in the 2024 *Pilkada* in Palu City

No.	Factor	Empirical Indicators
1	Economic Pressure	Maintaining daily income was prioritized over exercising the right to vote.
2	Job Mobility	Irregular working hours, changing work locations, and limited time constrained access to polling stations.
3	Administrative Constraints	The distance to polling stations, transportation costs, issues related to the Permanent Voter List (DPT), and the effectiveness of voter outreach influenced citizens' opportunities to vote.
4	Voter Fatigue	The close scheduling of the <i>Pemilu</i> and the <i>Pilkada</i> reduced public attention and enthusiasm for the <i>Pilkada</i> .
5	Disappointment with Local Politics	Previous experiences with unfulfilled political promises reduced citizens' motivation to participate.
6	Low Trust in Local Government	Citizens' confidence in the capacity of local government influenced their decisions to exercise their voting rights.

Source: Authors' analysis based on interviews with informants (2024–2026).

Overall, the factors contributing to the decline in voter participation in the 2024 *Pilkada* indicate that citizens' decisions to exercise their voting rights were not shaped by a single cause. Instead, these decisions resulted from the interaction of economic conditions, employment characteristics, administrative constraints, voter fatigue, and citizens' evaluations of local politics and local government (see Table 3). Together, these six factors shaped how citizens perceived the relevance of the *Pilkada* to their everyday lives. This pattern demonstrates that low voter participation cannot be interpreted solely as an expression of political apathy. Rather, it reflects a more complex process of evaluation through which citizens decided whether to participate in the regional head election.

Selective Democratic Engagement as the Basis of Voter Decision-Making

The various factors contributing to the decline in voter participation indicate that citizens' decisions to exercise their voting rights were not shaped by a single consideration. Instead, these decisions emerged through a process of evaluating the relevance of elections to their lives. Economic pressure, job mobility, administrative constraints, voter fatigue, disappointment with local politics, and the level of trust in local government did not directly lead citizens to become politically apathetic. Rather, these factors shaped the way citizens evaluated whether participation in the *Pilkada* offered sufficient benefits, relevance, and significance relative to the consequences they would face. Therefore, the decision to participate in the *Pilkada* reflected a selective process of evaluation rather than merely a decline in political interest.

This pattern is reflected in the experience of Putri, who exercised her voting rights in both the 2024 *Pemilu* and the *Pilkada*. Putri explained that her decision to participate was not based solely on her obligation as a citizen but also on her assessment of the importance of each election. According to her, the *Pemilu* determined the direction of national policy, while the *Pilkada* remained relevant because it directly affected public services, employment opportunities, and regional development in Palu City. Consequently, she regarded both elections as equally worthwhile because each carried tangible consequences for the lives of local citizens (Interview, May 29, 2026).

A different perspective emerged from Atiek, who chose not to exercise her voting rights in the *Pilkada* despite participating in the 2024 *Pemilu*. Atiek explained that her decision was influenced by her evaluation of previous political experiences, which she believed had failed to produce meaningful improvements in economic conditions or the daily lives of local communities.

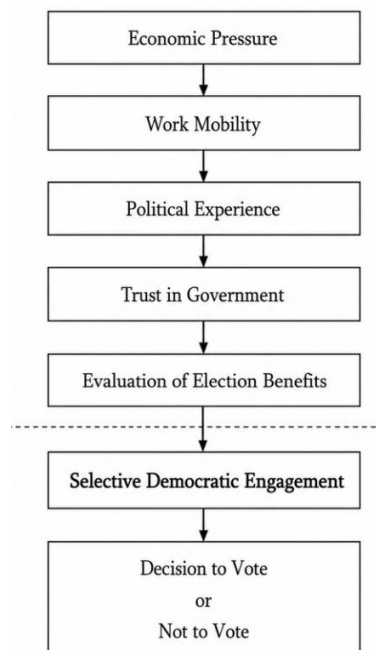
The repeated cycle of political promises without corresponding improvements led her to conclude that the *Pilkada* no longer possessed sufficient significance to motivate her to visit the polling station. Under these circumstances, her decision not to participate reflected an evaluation of the relevance of the *Pilkada* rather than a rejection of the democratic process as a whole (Interview, November 15, 2025).

A similar pattern also appeared in the experience of Agus, who voted in the 2024 *Pemilu* but did not participate in the *Pilkada*. Agus explained that he regarded the *Pemilu* as having a greater influence on the direction of national policy and therefore considered it more important to attend. In contrast, he believed that the *Pilkada* had not provided sufficient confidence that its outcomes would generate meaningful improvements in local economic conditions or the daily lives of citizens. This difference in evaluation led Agus to participate in the *Pemilu* while choosing not to exercise his voting rights in the *Pilkada* (Interview, November 8, 2025).

These voter experiences demonstrate that decisions to exercise or abstain from voting were not made spontaneously but resulted from a process of evaluating the significance of each election. During this process, citizens considered not only their economic conditions, employment situations, and political experiences but also the extent to which a particular election was relevant to their needs, expectations, and desired social changes. Differences in these evaluations led some citizens to participate in the *Pemilu* but abstain from the *Pilkada*, whereas others participated in both elections because they believed that each election carried meaningful consequences for their lives. Therefore, the decision to participate depended not merely on the existence of an election itself but also on how citizens interpreted the value and relevance of each democratic arena.

The findings presented above demonstrate that citizens' decisions to participate in the *Pilkada* were not determined by a single factor. Instead, these decisions emerged through an evaluative process involving the social, economic, and political conditions that citizens encountered. Economic pressure, job mobility, administrative constraints, political experiences, and the level of trust in local government did not directly determine voters' decisions. Rather, these factors first shaped how citizens evaluated the benefits and relevance of a particular election. Based on these interconnected empirical patterns, this study proposes an empirical model illustrating the process through which *Selective Democratic Engagement* develops as the basis for citizens' decisions to participate or abstain in the *Pilkada* (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). This model is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Empirical Model of *Selective Democratic Engagement* in Voter Participation



Source: Authors' elaboration based on empirical findings and the conceptual perspective of Ekman and Amnå (2012), 2026.

Overall, citizens' decisions to participate in either the *Pemilu* or the *Pilkada* did not occur automatically as a consequence of possessing political rights. Instead, these decisions emerged through an evaluative process in which citizens assessed the benefits, relevance, and consequences of each democratic arena. Social, economic, administrative, and political conditions served as important considerations that shaped how citizens interpreted the significance of a particular election. Based on these empirical patterns, this study identifies the concept of *Selective Democratic Engagement*, which refers to citizens' tendency to participate selectively according to their evaluations of the value and relevance of each electoral contest (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). These findings demonstrate that the decline in participation in the *Pilkada* should not be interpreted solely as

an indication of political apathy. Instead, it represents a form of democratic engagement grounded in citizens' evaluations of the meaning and benefits of political participation itself.

DISCUSSION

The decline in voter participation between the 2024 General Election (*Pemilu*) and the Regional Head Election (*Pilkada*) in Palu City indicates that lower voter turnout in the *Pilkada* cannot be simply interpreted as political apathy. The findings demonstrate that voter participation declined even though both elections were conducted within the same year and involved a largely identical electorate. Furthermore, voters' decisions were shaped by several interrelated factors, including economic pressure, job mobility, administrative constraints, voter fatigue, disappointment with local politics, and low trust in local government. These findings suggest that lower voter turnout reflects changes in the way citizens evaluate different democratic arenas rather than a general decline in political awareness.

These findings indicate that the decision to participate in the *Pilkada* emerged through a gradual process of evaluation. Economic, occupational, and administrative constraints did not directly cause citizens to withdraw from the democratic process. Instead, these factors first shaped citizens' evaluations of whether participation in the *Pilkada* remained relevant and worthwhile. At the same time, citizens' experiences with the performance of local politics and their level of trust in local government reinforced this evaluative process. Consequently, the decline in voter participation cannot be explained solely by structural barriers or individual limitations. Rather, it resulted from the interaction between the social conditions experienced by citizens and the ways they interpreted the benefits and consequences of political participation.

This interpretation extends previous studies on political participation. Permatasari et al. (2026), Ayunda et al. (2023), Susila et al. (2020), Pebriyenni et al. (2020), and Firdaus et al. (2025) argue that political trust, socioeconomic conditions, and voter education significantly influence citizens' levels of political participation. The present study supports these findings but demonstrates that these factors do not operate independently. Instead, they provide the basis upon which voters evaluate the value of a particular election. These findings are also consistent with Hasanuddin et al. (2021) and Hanida et al. (2025), who emphasize the influence of electoral characteristics, campaign intensity, and *voter fatigue* on political participation. However, this study demonstrates that differences in voter participation between the *Pemilu* and the *Pilkada* are determined not only by the characteristics of election administration but also by citizens' evaluations of the relevance of each democratic arena. Therefore, this study extends previous explanations by identifying voter evaluation as the mechanism that connects social, economic, and political factors in shaping participation decisions.

Based on these findings, the decline in voter participation in the *Pilkada* is better understood as a transformation in patterns of democratic engagement rather than as a decline in citizens' political awareness. Citizens have not withdrawn entirely from the democratic process. Instead, they have become increasingly selective in determining which elections they consider meaningful and relevant to their lives. This perspective suggests that voter turnout reflects not only the strength or weakness of democracy but also the ways citizens evaluate the effectiveness of each democratic arena in producing the changes they expect. Consequently, interpreting lower voter participation solely as an indication of political apathy risks overlooking the evaluative process that constitutes the primary basis of citizens' political decision-making.

Rational Choice Theory explains political participation as the outcome of a rational decision-making process in which individuals evaluate the costs, benefits, and expected outcomes of political action (Downs, 1957). From this perspective, voters are expected to participate when the perceived benefits outweigh the costs they must bear. Accordingly, political decisions are understood as actions based on rational evaluations of the available alternatives. Nevertheless, this formulation has generally been used to explain how voters choose candidates or political parties rather than how they decide whether to participate in an election.

The present study demonstrates that the process of rational evaluation does not end with candidate selection but begins when voters evaluate the democratic arena in which they intend to participate. Decisions to participate in either the *Pemilu* or the *Pilkada* are preceded by evaluations of the benefits, relevance, and consequences associated with each type of election. Within this context, economic pressure, job mobility, political experience, and the level of trust in local government do not directly determine political decisions. Instead, these factors shape the way voters evaluate whether a particular election is worthwhile. Consequently, the primary object of rational consideration shifts from selecting among competing candidates to making an initial decision about political participation itself.

This interpretation extends the existing body of research on voting behavior. Alwi and Ram (2024) argue that voters tend to support candidates whom they perceive as providing the greatest benefits. Likewise, Istianah et al. (2025) demonstrate that voting behavior is increasingly influenced by rational evaluations of personal interests and expected electoral outcomes. Meanwhile, Tomutu et al. (2025) emphasize that disappointment with political representation can reduce citizens' political participation, whereas Cantoni et al. (2025) show that expectations regarding policy outcomes also shape political decisions. Consistent with these studies, the present study confirms that rational evaluation remains the foundation of political decision-making. However, this evaluation is directed not only toward determining whom to support but also toward assessing whether a particular democratic arena offers sufficient value to justify participation.

Accordingly, *Rational Choice Theory* is relevant not only for explaining voters' preferences for candidates or political parties but also for explaining citizens' decisions to participate in particular types of elections. In this context, voters' rationality does not begin only after they enter the polling station. Instead, it operates from the moment citizens decide whether they will enter a particular democratic arena. This perspective expands the analytical scope of *Rational Choice Theory* from *electoral*

choice to participation choice, thereby demonstrating that political rationality also operates during the earliest stage of democratic engagement.

This extension suggests that decisions to participate can no longer be understood solely as consequences of preferences for particular candidates or electoral competition. Instead, citizens first evaluate whether an election possesses sufficient relevance, benefits, and potential to generate the changes they expect. This evaluative pattern provides the conceptual foundation for *Selective Democratic Engagement*, which refers to democratic participation grounded in rational evaluations of the value of each democratic arena.

The empirical model presented in Figure 1 illustrates that voters' decisions to participate in the *Pilkada* emerged through the interaction of economic pressure, job mobility, administrative constraints, political experience, and the level of trust in local government. These factors did not operate independently in shaping political behavior. Rather, they collectively structured the evaluative process through which voters assessed the benefits and relevance of each democratic arena. Consequently, the decision to exercise one's voting rights resulted from an evaluative process that occurred before voters entered electoral competition and selected a particular candidate.

Based on these empirical patterns, this study identifies the concept of *Selective Democratic Engagement* as voters' tendency to participate selectively according to their evaluations of the perceived value, relevance, and impact of each type of election (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). This concept suggests that democratic engagement is not uniformly distributed across all political arenas. Instead, it depends on how citizens evaluate an election's capacity to generate changes that correspond to their needs and expectations. Therefore, the decision not to participate in the *Pilkada* does not necessarily reflect a rejection of democracy but rather an evaluation of the effectiveness of the democratic arena itself.

This interpretation differs from the concept of *Political Apathy*, which generally explains low political participation as the result of declining political interest, concern, or attachment. In the present study, most voters continued to express interest in political issues and exercised their voting rights in the *Pemilu*, yet they chose not to participate in the *Pilkada* because they perceived the two democratic arenas as having different levels of relevance. Therefore, lower participation in the *Pilkada* is more appropriately understood as a differentiated pattern of political engagement than as a decline in democratic awareness.

The concept of *Selective Democratic Engagement* also extends the scope of *Rational Choice Theory*. Downs (1957) argues that political rationality operates when voters compare the benefits offered by competing candidates or political parties before making their electoral choices. The present study demonstrates that this rational process begins earlier, namely when citizens decide whether a particular election is worth participating in. Consequently, voters' rationality operates not only at the stage of *candidate choice* but also at the stage of *participation choice*, making the decision to participate an integral part of the rational evaluation of democratic arenas themselves.

The primary contribution of this study lies in extending *Rational Choice Theory* through the introduction of the concept of *Selective Democratic Engagement*. Unlike previous studies that focused primarily on the relationship between voters' rationality and candidate selection, the present study demonstrates that rationality also shapes the initial decision regarding participation in an electoral contest. These findings expand the understanding of political participation by positioning evaluations of the relevance of democratic arenas as the mechanism that connects social, economic, and political factors in shaping participation decisions. Accordingly, *Selective Democratic Engagement* offers a new conceptual perspective for explaining why the same voters may exhibit different levels of participation across two elections conducted within the same democratic cycle.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the decline in voter participation between the 2024 General Election (*Pemilu*) and the Regional Head Election (*Pilkada*) in Palu City cannot be understood solely as an indication of political apathy. Instead, citizens' decisions to exercise their voting rights emerged through a process of evaluating the perceived benefits, relevance, and consequences of each democratic arena. Economic pressure, job mobility, administrative constraints, voter fatigue, political experience, and the level of trust in local government did not operate independently. Rather, these factors collectively shaped the rational considerations through which citizens determined whether a particular election was worth participating in. Consequently, voter turnout reflects not only the level of citizens' political awareness but also the ways in which they evaluate the effectiveness of each electoral contest in producing the changes they expect.

The primary contribution of this study lies in extending *Rational Choice Theory* through the introduction of the concept of *Selective Democratic Engagement*. This concept expands the understanding of political rationality by demonstrating that voters' evaluative processes are directed not only toward candidate choice but also toward the initial decision to participate in a democratic arena (participation choice). This perspective offers a new conceptual framework for explaining why the same voters may display different levels of participation across two elections conducted within the same democratic cycle. Nevertheless, this study is limited to the context of Palu City and employs a qualitative approach, which limits the generalizability of its findings to other regions with different social and political characteristics. Future studies should examine the concept of *Selective Democratic Engagement*—as an extension of the conceptual perspective proposed by Ekman and Amnå (2012)—through quantitative or comparative research across different regions. Such studies would provide broader empirical validation while further advancing theoretical development on political participation in the context of local democracy.

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