

Cultural Civic Engagement and Typologies of Political Participation in the 2024 Gorontalo City Mayoral Election

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Abstract

Studies of political participation in Indonesian regional elections continue to interpret non-voting as an indicator of political apathy, while local cultural values are treated as a social background complementing institutional analysis. This article offers a conceptual correction to both assumptions through a case study of the 2024 Gorontalo City Regional Election. Using a qualitative case study approach and interviews with voters, non-voters, election organizers, and cultural figures, this study formulates the concept of Cultural Civic Engagement: civic engagement mediated by local cultural values lipu, pohalaa, huyula, adab, tanggomo, and eeya that shape legitimate actors of participation, which arenas are meaningful, and what goals citizens seek through political engagement. This framework is manifested in three modes of participation with cultural motivations: normative, in which voting is understood as a form of service to the lipu; ambivalent, in which citizens vote while restraining criticism to preserve adab and social harmony; and resistive-reflective, in which citizens withdraw from the polling station as an ethical rejection when tanggomo and adab are perceived to have been violated by the political process. The findings indicate that non-voting in the third mode does not signify an absence of political awareness, but rather a conscious ethical assessment of electoral legitimacy. This article therefore argues that measures of local democratic success should move beyond voter turnout and assess the extent to which electoral systems accommodate civic engagement rooted in citizens' cultural values and culturally grounded understandings of citizenship and political responsibility.

Keywords: Participation, Cultural Civic Engagement, Participation Typology, Non-Voting, Gorontalo City

Introduction

Regional Head Elections (Pilkada) are often treated as a benchmark for the health of local democracy, with voter turnout interpreted as the sole evidence of the legitimacy of elected authorities (Wahyudi et al., 2024). Yet behind these figures lies a more fundamental question: does citizens' presence in the voting booth truly reflect meaningful political engagement, or is it merely a periodic ritual that conceals the gap between the normative expectations of democracy and the ways in which citizens actually understand and experience politics in their everyday lives? This question has become increasingly urgent as electoral participation, as demonstrated by various studies on elections in Indonesia, does not always correspond directly to the quality of civic engagement or the legitimacy of electoral outcomes themselves (Rojak et al., 2021)

Constitutionally, Regional Head Elections represent one of the most concrete manifestations of popular sovereignty within Indonesia's democratic system. Public participation should

ideally not be understood narrowly as merely being present at polling stations, but rather as encompassing citizens' involvement from the stages of rule formulation and public dissemination to monitoring and post-election policy evaluation. Forms of participation into *voting, campaigning, communal activity, and contacting*, a framework that emphasizes that citizens' political participation is far richer than simply casting a ballot on election day (Thelma & Chitondo, 2024). Arnstein (1969), through the concept of the "ladder of participation," likewise reminds us that citizen involvement may be merely symbolic when it is not accompanied by the genuine transfer of power. Although both frameworks have had a broad influence on global political participation studies, they share a fundamental limitation: both are constructed around the assumption of rational individuals who participate, or refrain from participating, based on calculations of interests and institutional access rather than on cultural value systems that bind individuals to their communities.

This limitation becomes problematic when confronted with the empirical realities of many regions in Indonesia, including Gorontalo City, where several structural problems continue to overshadow the quality of public participation in Regional Head Elections: the widespread practice of money politics, which transforms citizens' votes into commodities; public distrust toward political parties and election organizers; and the limited capacity of nominated candidates resulting from weak party selection mechanisms (Arriola et al., 2022). In such circumstances, declining participation rates or shifts in citizens' motivations from democratic awareness toward pragmatic considerations are often interpreted one-sidedly as a failure of citizens, characterized as apathy, ignorance, or indifference. Such an interpretation, we argue, conceals more than it explains.

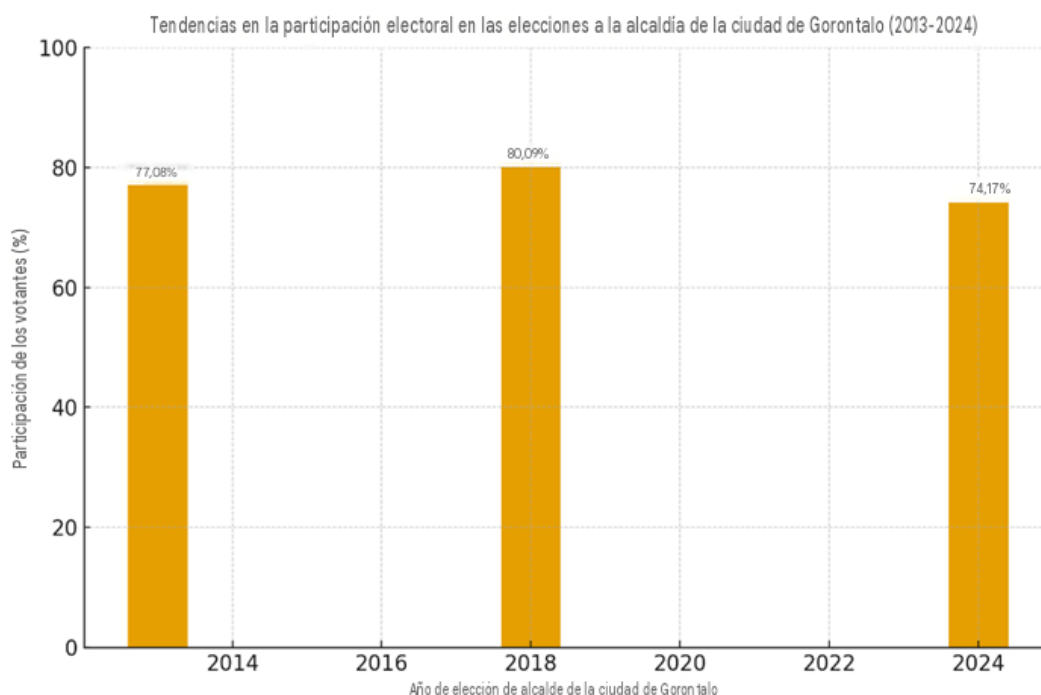


Figure 1. Participation trends in the Gorontalo City mayoral elections over the last three election cycles.

Source: 2024 Regional Election Stages Report, Gorontalo City KPU

As shown in Figure 1, the last three regional election cycles in Gorontalo City reveal an interesting trend in voter participation. In the 2013 Gorontalo City Regional Election, voter

participation was recorded at 77.08%. This figure was still within the relatively good category, although challenges remained, including low enthusiasm among younger voters and suboptimal political mobilization. Nevertheless, the figure indicates that the majority of citizens continued to exercise their right to vote.

This trend subsequently increased in the 2018 Regional Election, when participation reached 80.09%. This increase indicated growing public confidence in the local democratic process, accompanied by the increasing use of social media-based campaigns as political instruments. Unfortunately, this positive trend did not continue in the 2024 Regional Election. The data show that participation declined to 74.17%. This figure is considerably below the national voter participation target stipulated in the 2020-2024 National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN) and KPU Decision No. 197 of 2020 concerning the KPU Strategic Plan for 2020-2024, which set a target of 77.5%. This decline is substantial and serves as an alert for election organizers and political actors at the local level. It may indicate political fatigue as well as external factors affecting citizens' engagement. Historically, Gorontalo has recorded noteworthy levels of participation, but sustaining the quality of participation requires strategies that go beyond mass socialization. A segmented approach is needed for first-time voters, women, persons with disabilities, and customary or communitarian communities.

Gorontalo City presents a distinctive context in which to examine this interpretation. As a society that continues to strongly uphold local value systems *lipu* (collective honor), *pohalaa* (genealogical ties), *huyula* (mutual cooperation), *adab* (propriety in conduct), *tanggomo* (honesty and responsibility), and *eeya* (the divine dimension of public ethics)-citizens' decisions to vote, vote conditionally, or withdraw from the polling station during the 2024 Regional Election cannot be adequately understood solely through conventional frameworks of electoral participation. It is possible that what has thus far been interpreted as "low participation" is actually a form of civic engagement mediated by cultural values, but one that remains invisible to participation measurement instruments oriented exclusively toward electoral attendance.

This gap in understanding motivates the present study. This article aims to develop and examine the concept of Cultural Civic Engagement civic engagement mediated by local cultural values as an alternative framework for understanding the political participation of Gorontalo City residents in the 2024 Regional Election, while also proposing a typology of three modes of participation (normative, ambivalent, and resistive-reflective) derived from this framework. Through this approach, the article is expected to make two major contributions: first, a conceptual contribution in the form of an analytical framework that positions cultural values as an active mechanism, rather than merely a social background, in explaining political participation behavior; and second, an empirical contribution through granular evidence from the local context that can enrich global debates on the limitations of conventional political participation theories when applied to societies characterized by strong collective value systems.

Methods

Research Design

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to explore not how extensive citizens' political participation is in the Regional Election, but rather how deeply the meaning of participation is understood and interpreted by citizens before and after voting (Denzin & Lincoln, in Moleong, 2014). This approach was selected because the research question how local cultural values mediate citizens' civic engagement requires experience-based and

subjective meaning-oriented data that cannot be reduced to quantitative measures such as turnout figures alone.

Location and Time

The research was conducted in Gorontalo City, Gorontalo Province, focusing on districts with the highest and lowest participation rates in the 2024 Regional Election in order to capture contrasting variations in participation experiences. Supporting institutional data were obtained from the Gorontalo City KPU Office. Data collection was conducted over three months (September–December 2025), covering the stages of preparation, data collection, analysis, results compilation, and dissemination.

Data Sources

Primary data were obtained from two groups of sources: (1) registered voters in Gorontalo City as the main respondents, whose experiences and interpretations of participation constituted the primary focus of the study; and (2) key informants consisting of political party activists, community leaders/cultural figures, and election organizers (the Gorontalo City KPU and Bawaslu), who were purposively selected based on their proximity to and understanding of the local Regional Election dynamics. Secondary data were obtained from academic literature and official electoral documents relevant to the research theme.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data Collection

Data were collected using three techniques: (1) direct observation of citizens' participation situations and behaviors; (2) in-depth interviews with voters, non-voters, and key informants, following the principle that informants' words and actions constitute the primary sources of data in qualitative research (Lofland, in Moleong, 2014); and (3) documentary analysis of public records and official electoral data.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (1984), which consists of three stages: (1) *data reduction*, involving the selection of raw data through coding and thematic identification; (2) *data display*, involving the organization of findings into narrative and thematic matrices so that cross-case patterns could be identified comprehensively; and (3) *conclusion drawing/verification*, involving the formulation of provisional conclusions that were continuously cross-checked against supporting data and the theoretical framework until data saturation was achieved. The processes of data reduction and data display formed the basis for identifying the three modes of participation (normative, ambivalent, and resistive-reflective) reported in the Results section.

Data Validity

Data quality was maintained through three criteria (Moleong, 2014): (1) *credibility*, ensuring that the collected data accurately reflected the realities experienced by the informants; (2) *dependability*, maintaining rigor in the collection and interpretation of data so that the findings could be scientifically accounted for; and (3) *confirmability*, cross-checking the data, interpretations, and supporting materials to ensure that the conclusions were not merely subjective.

Results and Discussion

The implementation of the Regional Head Election (Pilkada) in Gorontalo City presents complex dynamics between the formalities of electoral procedures, demographic transformations among voters, and the strong influence of the local sociocultural order. As the administrative and educational center of the Tomini Bay region, Gorontalo City has an urban character while remaining strongly embedded in religious and customary values through the philosophy “*Adati hula-hula’a to syara’a, syara’a hula-hula’a to Kitabullah*” (customary law is based on Islamic law, and Islamic law is based on the Qur’an). The existence of customary institutions, traditional kinship structures (*pohala’a*), and the tradition of mutual cooperation (*huyula*) functions not only as a social cohesive force but also actively mediates patterns of political mobilization and voter preferences at the grassroots level.

Research Findings

The research findings were obtained through an in-depth analysis of field data from various informant perspectives using the theoretical approaches of the *3A3 Framework*, *Deliberative Democracy*, and *Civic Voluntarism Theory (CVT)*. First Finding, the meaning of public participation originates from cultural and social actors. Public participation in the 2024 Gorontalo City Regional Election begins with cultural and social actors who construct meaning based on the values, traditions, and collective experiences of citizens. Second Finding, the arena of public participation is formed within social and cultural spaces. Social and cultural arenas constitute the primary spaces in which political attitudes and decisions are formed, while formal arenas, including polling stations, represent the culmination of the participation process rather than its determinant. Third Finding, the objectives of public participation are neither singular nor always electoral. The findings indicate that public participation in the 2024 Gorontalo City Regional Election was not solely aimed at selecting leaders but also encompassed social, cultural, and moral objectives. Public participation in the 2024 Gorontalo City Regional Election is therefore multidimensional. These diverse objectives shape a complex and contextual meaning of public participation, extending beyond the purely electoral dimension into a comprehensive sociocultural-moral process. Fourth Finding, *Civic Voluntarism Theory (CVT)* emphasizes that public participation occurs when individuals are motivated by civic values, trust in institutions, and awareness of collective responsibility, rather than by coercion or purely pragmatic incentives. The findings are consistent with *Civic Voluntarism Theory*, indicating that public participation in the 2024 Gorontalo City Regional Election emerged from civic awareness, institutional trust, and collective responsibility. Strengthening these values is important for improving the quality of meaningful and sustainable participation. Fifth Finding, deliberative democracy emphasizes dialogue, the exchange of rational and inclusive arguments, and the pursuit of collective decisions that are legitimate and publicly accepted. The findings indicate that strengthening spaces for public deliberation is essential for building a high-quality democracy. The 2024 Gorontalo City Regional Election requires broader and more equal opportunities for dialogue based on rational arguments in order to produce decisions that are legitimate, fair, and trusted by all citizens.

Amid these differences in meaning, a common ground can be identified in citizens’ engagement rooted in local cultural values, such as deliberation, solidarity, mutual cooperation, *huyula*, *pohalaa*, and respect for leaders. These cultural values provide the foundation for citizens’ involvement in political processes, both directly and indirectly. This form of engagement reflects civic engagement arising from collective awareness rather than merely

from institutional incentives or electoral interests. Aneta et al. (2023) demonstrate that governance transformation in Gorontalo needs to consider the local context and strengthen the capacity of community actors, because effective governance depends not only on administrative procedures but also on institutions' ability to respond to the needs and dynamics of local communities. The findings of this study demonstrate that the political engagement of Gorontalo City citizens in the 2024 Regional Election cannot be adequately understood solely through conventional frameworks of electoral participation. Behind every decision to vote, vote critically, or withdraw from the polling station, there is a mechanism that operates consistently: civic engagement mediated by local cultural values. This mechanism is formulated in this study as Cultural Civic Engagement the way citizens engage, evaluate, and adopt political positions through reference to the values of *lipu*, *pohalaa*, *huyula*, *adab*, *tanggomo*, and *eeya*, rather than solely through formal electoral procedures.

Cultural Values as an Active Mechanism, not a Social Background

Interview data from cultural figures and citizens indicate that local values operate at three points simultaneously: determining who is regarded as a legitimate actor of participation, which arenas are considered meaningful, and what objectives are pursued through political engagement. *Pohalaa* (genealogical community) and *lipu* (collective honor) function as initial legitimacy filters, determining whether the act of voting is considered appropriate and necessary, long before electoral institutions become involved through public outreach. Meanwhile, *huyula* (mutual cooperation) emerges strongly as a form of practical social capital. Alim Niode, a cultural figure interviewed in this study, described *huyula* as an important foundation that is evident in voluntary efforts to assist polling station officers, community solidarity, and maintaining security in the field. This demonstrates that the technical success of the Regional Election depends not only on the institutional capacity of the state but also on sociocultural capital that had already become deeply rooted long before the modern electoral system was introduced.

Cultural Ethics as the Spirit of Local Democracy

Interviews with two cultural figures, Alim Niode and Ishak Bumulo, indicate that Gorontalo citizens assess the legitimacy of political processes not merely through procedures but through three ethical values: *eeya* (divinity), which places politics under a form of moral accountability that transcends positive law; *tanggomo* (honesty and responsibility), which demands consistency between political promises and actions and functions as a direct critique of money politics and electoral pragmatism; and *adab* (propriety in conduct and communication), which ensures that political competition does not damage social relations among citizens. When these three values are violated by political actors through manipulated promises, money politics, or inappropriate communication, citizens do not merely lose trust in a particular candidate but may perceive the entire process as unworthy of being granted legitimacy.

Cultural Civic Engagement Manifested in Three Modes of Participation

As a consequence of the mechanisms described above, this study identifies three patterns of citizen engagement that differ in their cultural motivations, although all emerge from conscious assessments of local values:

Normative Mode (Voting)

Citizens attend polling stations because they perceive voting as a form of service to *lipu* and an obligation affirmed by *pohalaa*. The motivation to vote becomes stronger when a relative figure provides affirmation and weaker when genealogical ties are absent.

Ambivalent Mode (Voting with Criticism)

Citizens continue to participate by attending the polling station, but their participation is guided by considerations of *adab* and social harmony rather than by complete confidence in a particular candidate or the electoral process. Criticism is either withheld or expressed in informal spaces after voting.

Resistive-Reflective Mode (Non-Voting)

Citizens withdraw from the polling station when they perceive that the political process has violated *tanggomo* and *adab*. This withdrawal does not represent apathy but rather an ethical refusal to legitimize a process perceived as dishonest.

Table 1. Cultural Civic Engagement and Its Manifestations in Three Modes of Participation

Dimension	Normative (Voting)	Ambivalent (Voting With Criticism)	Resistive-Reflective (Non-Voting)
Dominant cultural values	<i>Lipu, pohalaa</i> (honor and collective ties)	<i>Adab</i> (propriety, maintaining harmony)	<i>Tanggomo</i> (honesty), <i>adab</i> (propriety that has been violated)
Function of values	Affirming the legitimacy of the act of voting	Restraining criticism to avoid damaging social relations	Providing the basis for ethical rejection of the process
Form of cultural expression	Family discussions as reinforcement of the decision	Criticism expressed in informal spaces	Evaluation and discussion of candidates without proceeding to the polling station
Relationship with Cultural Civic Engagement	Cultural engagement aligns with electoral channels	Cultural engagement operates alongside electoral channels while maintaining critical distance	Cultural engagement completely supersedes electoral channels

Discussion

These findings offer a conceptual correction to how studies of local political participation are typically constructed. To date, cultural values in studies of regional elections have often been treated as contextual variables or complementary factors that explain the “local character” of voter behavior, without functioning as the primary analytical framework (O’Brien, 2026). Evidence from Gorontalo suggests otherwise: cultural values are not merely complementary variables but determining mechanisms that operate earlier and at a deeper level than electoral institutions themselves. Electoral institutions, particularly the KPU and Bawaslu, are effective in regulating *how* citizens vote, but Cultural Civic Engagement determines *why* voting or not voting is considered meaningful.

Cultural Civic Engagement as an Explanatory Bridge for the Conversion Gap

The gap between the civic capacity of Gorontalo citizens, which is relatively high, and the extent to which this capacity is converted into electoral participation, which is comparatively low, becomes clearer through this framework. Citizens do not lack capacity. They are politically aware, understand electoral procedures, and possess strong social capital through *huyula*. However, this capacity is not automatically converted into attendance at polling stations because such conversion is first filtered through ethical-cultural questions: whether the process is consistent with *tanggomo*, whether its conduct is appropriate according to *adab*, and whether its outcomes are consistent with the honor of *lipu*. When the answer is negative, civic capacity remains present but is channeled into other arenas family discussions, community evaluation, and voluntary activities through *huyula* rather than into the ballot box (Thelma et al., 2024; Khan, 2026).

Cultural Civic Engagement as an Explanation of Deliberative Withdrawal

The same pattern explains why citizens' withdrawal from formal arenas is not necessarily synonymous with the termination of political engagement (Malafaia et al., 2021). Citizens operating in the resistive-reflective mode continue to discuss candidate ethics, evaluate the electoral process, and develop political positions, but they do so through sociocultural arenas that they perceive as more authentic than campaign forums or formal debates. Within Habermas's (2018) framework of the public sphere, these findings extend the understanding of deliberation: the rationality of Gorontalo citizens does not operate through the formal-rational format idealized by classical deliberative theory but through ethical assessments rooted in *eeya*, *tanggomo*, and *adab*. Deliberation continues to occur, but through different languages and arenas from those assumed by the theory.

Implications for Interpreting Participation Rates

With Cultural Civic Engagement as the primary analytical framework, non-voting can no longer be interpreted as a singular failure, whether a failure of citizens in the form of apathy or a failure of the system to reach voters. It is more appropriately understood as a signal of a point of disconnection between two value systems: the formal electoral system, which requires physical presence as a measure of success, and the citizens' ethical-cultural system, which requires moral legitimacy as a condition for engagement. As emphasized in the accounts of Alim Niode and Ishak Bumulo, the problem does not lie in the absence of cultural values within local democracy but in the inability of the political system to translate *eeya*, *tanggomo*, and *adab* into concrete electoral practices (Henga, 2025).

Implications for Post-Election Evaluation

The implications for post-election evaluation are fundamental. Increasing participation cannot be achieved merely through intensifying technical voter education and outreach, because the problem is not an information deficit but a deficit of trust in the ethical legitimacy of the political process. A more appropriate approach is to involve cultural actors—customary leaders, cultural figures, and *pohalaa* structures—not as ceremonial complements to campaigns, but as epistemic partners capable of bridging citizens' ethical language with the procedural language of election organizers. Aneta et al. (2025) emphasize that governance at the local level needs to be supported by the principles of justice, equality, the rule of law, and meaningful participation so that policies do not stop at procedural compliance but are able to realize the substance of citizens' rights and interests.

Accordingly, this study concludes that Cultural Civic Engagement functions as an empirical bridge that integrates questions concerning the actors, arenas, capacities, and deliberative dimensions of citizen participation in Gorontalo into a coherent framework. Civic engagement is not merely a function of capacity or institutions but rather the product of an ongoing negotiation between local cultural values and the formal electoral democratic system.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the political participation of Gorontalo City citizens in the 2024 Regional Election cannot be adequately understood through conventional electoral participation frameworks that assess the success of local democracy solely through voter turnout. Through the concept of Cultural Civic Engagement, this study demonstrates that local cultural values *lipu*, *pohalaa*, *huyula*, *adab*, *tanggomo*, and *eeya* are not merely a social background complementing institutional analysis but active mechanisms that determine who

is regarded as a legitimate participant, which arenas are considered meaningful, and what objectives citizens seek to achieve through political engagement.

This framework is manifested in three modes of participation that differ in their cultural motivations: normative, ambivalent, and resistive-reflective. The most significant finding concerns the third mode: for some citizens, non-voting does not represent an absence of political awareness but rather a conscious ethical assessment of the legitimacy of the electoral process. This finding challenges the basic assumptions of several classical participation theories, including Civic Voluntarism Theory, Habermas's deliberative democracy, and the 3A³ framework, which tend to interpret low electoral participation as a failure of citizens' capacity or willingness rather than as a consequence of a value system that is not adequately accommodated by electoral institutional design.

Conceptually, this study contributes by positioning local cultural values as causal mechanisms equal in analytical importance to resources, social networks, and political opportunity structures in explaining participation behavior. Empirically, the study provides granular evidence from the context of Gorontalo City that can enrich global debates concerning the limitations of conventional political participation theories when applied to societies characterized by strong collective value systems.

Research Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, as a single-case study conducted in one city, the findings and resulting typology cannot necessarily be generalized directly to other regions with different cultural value structures. Replication in other locations is therefore necessary to assess the extent to which Cultural Civic Engagement is specific to Gorontalo or has broader applicability. Second, although the qualitative approach is effective in capturing the depth of meaning, it is not designed to measure the proportion of each participation mode within the voter population representatively. Future research incorporating quantitative approaches could complement this limitation. Third, because data collection was conducted after the election, the study may be subject to recall bias among informants when reconstructing their motivations for participation.

Recommendations

For election organizers (KPU and Bawaslu): Post-election evaluation should move beyond simply measuring voter turnout toward understanding the reasons underlying non-voting, including the possibility that some forms of non-attendance represent legitimate ethical positions that deserve to be heard rather than merely targets to be increased through technical voter education. Involving customary leaders and cultural figures as epistemic partners, rather than merely as ceremonial complements to campaigns, could serve as a bridge between citizens' ethical language and the procedural language of election organizers.

For political parties and candidates: Findings concerning the ambivalent and resistive-reflective modes indicate that violations of *tanggomo* (honesty) and *adab* (propriety) have tangible electoral consequences, even when these consequences are not always visible through conventional preference surveys. Consistency between political promises and actions, together with adherence to local norms of propriety in campaigning, should therefore be treated as a substantive electoral strategy rather than merely as a matter of normative ethics.

For future researchers: This study opens several avenues for further research, including testing the Cultural Civic Engagement framework in other regional contexts with different cultural value structures, developing quantitative instruments to measure the prevalence of the three participation modes representatively, and further examining how Cultural Civic Engagement

interacts with other factors such as educational attainment, access to digital information, and voter generations, particularly younger voters whose relationship with local cultural values may differ from that of older generations.

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