Otoritas : Jurnal Ilmu Pemerintahan Vol. 15, No. 2, 2025
DOI: https://doi.org/10.26618/ojip.v15i2.17044

How patronage and clientelism works in village head elections in Karawang Regency, Indonesia?

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Abstract

The implementation of democracy at the village level in Indonesia is institutionalized through direct village head elections. However, rather than strengthening democratic values, the 2021 simultaneous elections in Karawang Regency revealed persistent patronage and clientelism. This study investigates how such practices undermine democratic consolidation by examining three villages with distinct socio-economic contexts: an agricultural village (K), a coastal village (C), and an industrial village (M). Using a case study approach, the research highlights the prevalence of money politics, including vote buying, distribution of goods, provision of services, and project-based patronage. Findings demonstrate that electoral competition was shaped not only by material inducements but also by personalized candidate–voter relationships, reinforcing clientelist ties. The urgency of this study lies in exposing how entrenched local political practices threaten the credibility of democratic institutions and village governance. The novelty of this research is its comparative analysis across villages with different economic bases, revealing context-specific patterns of patronage. The study contributes to debates on local democracy by showing that institutional reforms alone are insufficient without addressing the socio-political structures that perpetuate patronage and clientelism.

Keywords: *patronage, clientelism, money politics, village head elections*

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Introduction

Elections are a prerequisite for a country to be considered as adhering to a democratic system (Budiardjo, 2007; Heywood, 2013). In Indonesia, direct elections extend beyond national and regional offices to the village level, where village heads, the lowest tier of government, are likewise chosen by direct vote. Under Law No. 6 of 2014 on Villages, a village is defined as a legal community unit with territorial boundaries and the authority to regulate and manage governmental affairs, local interests, rights of origin, and customary rights, all of which are recognized within the governmental system of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia. The village head is responsible for administering village governance, implementing development programs, fostering community life, and empowering residents. The village head even has the authority to give orders to members of the community (Phahlevy & Multazam, 2018; Prasetyo et al., 2020; Pratt & Yongvanit, 2016). Many people are competing for the position, so it is understandable if there is a lot of competition. For example, during the 2021 Simultaneous Village Head Elections in Karawang Regency, 163 villages had between two to five candidates, while 14 villages had more than five. In total, 563

individuals contested 177 village head positions. In addition, the establishment of village finance schemes from the central government opens up new potential for patronage and clientelism, which require significant financial resources.

Direct village head elections actually have a very good impact on the process of maturing democracy at the village level. The election of village heads, which should be carried out in an honest, fair, direct, free and secret manner, is inseparable from the phenomenon of money politics in the community. The term money politics is using money to influence certain decisions, in this case money is used as a tool to influence someone in making decisions (Astuti & Marlina, 2022). In this case, the decision to choose a candidate in the general election. Apart from cash, money politics can also be in the form of goods such as basic necessities (oil, sugar, rice, etc.) and clothing (Harianto et al., 2018).

The concept of money politics in Indonesia is still very vague. Indonesia has been characterized as a patronage democracy, where so-called "predatory elites" exploit patronage networks and money politics to maintain political power—particularly since the implementation of direct local elections in 2004, following the Reformasi era (Berenschot, 2018). The high political costs involved, which often manifest as financial burdens through money politics, have made such practices increasingly prevalent during electoral processes (Sari, 2024). Despite ongoing mitigation efforts by the bureaucracy, informal practices such as vote buying remain widespread and are often perceived as an inseparable part of the country's political reality (Soantahon, 2024).

To explain the phenomenon of money politics, several studies in other countries often use the concepts of Patronage and Clientelism. Folke et al., (2011) defines patronage as the sharing of benefits among politicians to distribute something individually to voters, workers or campaigners in order to gain their political support. Meanwhile Hutchcroft (2014) draws a distinction between the two concepts. Patronage refers to the allocation of cash, goods, services, and other financial benefits (such as employment opportunities or extended contracts) distributed by politicians, including benefits aimed at individuals (for example, cash envelopes) and at groups or communities (for example, a new soccer field for village youth). Patronage can also involve money or goods distributed to voters from private sources (e.g., during elections) or from public funds (e.g., government-financed pork barrel projects).

Personalized control relationship (Hutchcroft, 2014) and material benefits are traded for political support. Scott (1972) emphasizes that clientelism is typically a face-to-face relationship explains that the definition of clientelism contains at least three key elements. Hicken (2011) clarifies that the definition of clientelism contains at slightest three things. First, contingency or reciprocity. The arrangement of merchandise or administrations from one party (supporter or client) may be a coordinate reaction to the arrangement of benefits from the other party. More often than not material assets are reserved for votes or other shapes of political bolster. Second, hierarchical. There's an accentuation on unequal control relations between supporter and client. Third, continuity: clientelistic exchanges tend to occur repeatedly over time. Nevertheless, patronage is not always embedded in long-term clientelistic relationships. For example, a candidate may give money to a voter whom he has never met before and may never meet again. Such a transaction cannot be classified as an iterative relationship but rather as a one-off exchange (Aspinal & Sukmajati, 2015).

The use of clientelism patterns in village head elections is associated with asymmetrical but mutually beneficial power and exchange relationships, unequal socioeconomic or political positions (Roniger, 2012). Villagers tend to wait for the

village head election moment as an arena to find 'extra money' by getting a lot of money from the candidates (Adlin et al., 2022; Hasan et al., 2023; Still & Dusi, 2020). For some people, giving money or goods to voters who are classified as poor is considered valid and even equated with assistance, infaq, alms, and so on (Zen, 2015).

From several previous studies that discuss cases of patronage and clientalism in Indonesia, it has been found in several regions including (Aspinall & Rohman, 2017; Andhika, 2019; Harianto et al., 2018; Romadhan & Sihidi, 2023; Putri et al., 2020).

A study in two villages in Central Java to examine how local elites and their connections with higher levels of government shaped voter behavior at the village level. One key mechanism is the strategic use of financial resources, commonly referred to as "money politics," by elites to influence electoral outcomes. The findings indicate that after the fall of the Soeharto regime, village head elections became highly competitive. To secure victory, candidates needed to mobilize extensive personal networks, demonstrate strategic and intellectual agility, invest substantial physical effort, and command adequate material resources, including resources used to persuade economically disadvantaged voters (Aspinall & Rohman, 2017).

Previous research on patronage and clientelism in village head elections was also conducted by Andhika (2019), that the village fund policy from the government has increased interest in becoming a village head. Poverty and low political education cause patronage and clientelism methods to be believed to be still appropriate to use. The use of money to gain sympathy from voters is still very effective, but the use of money politics is very vulnerable to horizontal conflict. Such as creating seeds of hatred between relatives and creating hatred between supporters (Andhika, 2019) . The adverse effects of using patronage and clientelism patterns during village head elections were also carried out by Harianto et al., (2018) in five sub-districts in Magetan Regency including Takeran, Maospati, Karangrejo, West, and Magetan sub-districts, each of which was represented by two elected villages. According to him, money politics still colors village head elections to attract voters. However, the use of money politics can lead to horizontal conflicts among supporters, resulting in a tense atmosphere in the village.

In addition, Romadhan & Sihidi (2023) conducted research on the phenomenon of patronage and clientalism in two villages with different social and economic characteristics. Their findings showed that both villages with low economic status (such as villages in Sampang) and those with higher incomes and a more educated population (such as villages in Batu City) demonstrated that vote buying, individual gifts, and pork barrel projects remained effective strategies for village head candidates. However, money politics in the villages of Sampang Regency was enforced more strictly. Practices included vote buying ranging from 50,000 to 750,000 rupiah per voter (Romadhan & Sihidi, 2023), pork barrel projects with the promise of administrative positions in the village office, and individual gifts such as basic necessities.

The last one by Putri et al., (2020) illustrates that the election of village heads in one of the villages in Jombang Regency, East Java, is closely associated with the tradition of money politics. Interestingly, although the distribution of money prior to the village head election is considered commonplace and even a tradition, the candidate who ultimately won was not the one who gave the most money to voters. While residents welcomed the practice of receiving money from candidates, they also applied their own criteria in selecting village heads. Preferred candidates were those perceived as populist, approachable, and representative of community values.

In contrast to previous studies such as Aspinall & Rohman (2017) which discussed the influence of village elites in the village head election process, (Harianto et al., 2018) which focused on five sub-districts in Magetan Regency, a comparison of the use of money politics in rural-urban village head elections (Romadhan & Sihidi, 2023), and Putri et al., (2020) which studied money politics in a village in Jember, this study explores patterns of patronage and clientelism in three villages with qualifications of industrial villages, agricultural villages and coastal villages in Karawang Regency.

Karawang Regency is one of the regions in Indonesia that has organized simultaneous village head elections. The regency is also notable for its diverse regional potential, which includes agriculture, industry, fisheries, tourism, and infrastructure development (Bahfein, 2022). In 2021, Karawang Regency held the second wave of simultaneous village head elections following the first wave in 67 villages in 2020. This study examines the practices of patronage and clientelism, more commonly referred to as "money politics," in village head elections across three selected villages that reflect the socioeconomic characteristics of the regency: an agricultural village (Village "K"), a coastal village (Village "C"), and an industrial village (Village "M"). Rather than comparing money politics across the three areas, this study seeks to illustrate how patronage and clientelism operate within each village context.

Until now, the study of patronage and clientelism in elections remains highly relevant, as these practices are still considered effective by many actors in increasing electoral support. Borrowing (Diamond, 2003), concept of hybrid regime influence, some countries employ the symbols of democracy without adhering to the principles of substantive democracy. This aligns with the notion of "pseudo-democracy," characterized by the strengthening of money politics in elections, political corruption, poor electoral quality, low political participation, and other phenomena that reflect the decline of democracy in Indonesia (Thesia, 2021). Research on patronage and clientelism, particularly within the context of village head elections, remains limited both in Indonesia and globally. This study seeks to fill this gap in the political science literature by examining the dynamics of these practices. Specifically, the research aims to explore the manifestations of patronage and clientelism in the 2021 Simultaneous village head elections in Karawang Regency, focusing on three selected villages as the primary case study sites.

Research Methods

This study employed a qualitative approach using case studies in three villages in Karawang Regency. A case study is a research strategy in which the researcher closely investigates a program, event, activity, process, or group of individuals within a specified time frame (Creswell, 2013). Data collection techniques included observation, interview, and documentation. Primary data were obtained from interviews with three elected village heads, three representatives of the success team of village, and the Head of the Village Community Institutional Empowerment Section of the Karawang Regency Village Community Empowerment Office. Additional documentary sources were derived from regulations governing the implementation of simultaneous village head elections currently in force. The selection of the three villages was carried out using purposive sampling, based on village potential categories that were considered representative of the diverse characteristics of village contexts. This approach was intended to capture variations in the manifestation of patronage and clientelism across different regional settings.

The selection of these three villages was unique because it reflected the diverse potential characteristics of Karawang Regency. Karawang has approximately 97,000 hectares of agricultural land, 55,560 hectares of maritime area, and 13,718 hectares of industrial zones within one region (Khumaini, 2022; Khumaini, 2025). Therefore, three villages with different potentials were selected, each representing a distinct characteristic of the regency: Village K (agricultural), Village C (coastal), and Village M (industrial). For ethical considerations and to protect informant anonymity, the names of the villages are presented as pseudonyms. All three villages held simultaneous Village Head Elections in 2021.

Village K has an area of 833.27 hectares and a population of 5,972, making it the largest village in its sub-district. It is located 39 km from the Karawang Regency capital. According to central government data, extreme poverty in Karawang Regency affects 4.51 percent of the population, or 106,780 people, spread across 25 villages, including Village K. The majority of Village K residents earn their livelihoods as farm laborers and farmers (1,013 out of 5,966 residents), while others work as casual laborers, small traders, breeders, private teachers, village employees, and civil servants, with some residents unemployed or without permanent jobs.

Village C represents the coastal typology, located 41 km from the regency capital, with a population of 5,169. The village covers 1,441 hectares, of which 1,300 hectares (85%) are dedicated to pond-based aquaculture. Most residents work as pond laborers and aquaculture farmers. Other sources of livelihood include small-scale industries, particularly salted fish processing, traditional fishing, and small businesses in services and trade.

Finally, village M represents the industrial typology and is located 10 km from the regency capital. It covers an area of 977.85 hectares and has a population of 6,916. The village hosts an industrial estate as well as an international sports facility. Village M is divided into two productive areas, north and south. The northern part includes forest areas, industrial zones, residential settlements, and rice fields, while the southern part is predominantly agricultural land. Residents are engaged in a wide range of occupations, including farming, private sector employment, civil service, teaching, services, and trade. The data collection was conducted from February 2023 to July 2024. Data analysis followed an interactive model that starts from data collection, compaction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Miles & Huberman, 2014). This study also tested validity with a triangulation strategy by checking data from different sources (Creswell, 2013).

Results and Discussion

Understanding patronage and clientelism in Indonesia requires situating these phenomena within the broader context of Southeast Asian politics. Clientelism, arguably the most fitting term to describe the political character of the region, is often accompanied by oligarchy as a competing framework (Berenschot, 2015). In countries such as Japan, Philippines, and Thailand, patronage has functioned as a form of "political cement," helping to maintain territorial control within weak institutional frameworks (Hutchcroft, 2014). The nature of electoral patronage varies across these countries: Japan demonstrates a more impersonal form of patronage; the Philippines exhibits highly personalized patron-client relationships; and Thailand occupies a middle ground between the two (Hutchcroft, 2014). Prior comparative research between Indonesia and the Philippines has shown that democratic processes often reinforce the emergence of patron–client ties. During local elections, candidates actively construct

clientelist networks through the distribution of material rewards, infrastructure development, and by positioning themselves as national-level political figures (Komarudin & Pramuji, 2023). Building upon these previous studies, this research explores the patterns of patronage and clientelism in rural political contexts, aiming to fill a critical gap in the literature on political practices in Indonesia and contribute to broader theoretical discussions at the global level.

Before explaining how patterns of patronage and clientelism emerged in the three villages with different characteristics during the 2021 simultaneous village head elections in Karawang Regency, it is important to emphasize that village head election, regional head elections, and other general elections share many similarities. Both regional head and village head election serve as miniature reflections of how democracy functions at the local level, with the distinction that village-level elections cover a much smaller territorial scope compared to regency or city elections. Another difference lies in the participants: while regional head election legislative elections, and presidential elections involve political parties, village head election is contested by individual candidates. In Indonesia, regional head elections are regulated by Law No. 10/2016 on the Second Amendment to Law No. 1/2015 concerning the Stipulation of Government Regulation in Lieu of Law No. 1/2014 on the Election of Governors, Regents, and Mayors. Meanwhile, village head elections follow a six-year cycle, with incumbents permitted to serve up to three consecutive or non-consecutive terms, as stipulated in Article 39 of Law No. 6/2014 on Villages. However, the most recent amendment—Law No. 6/2023—extends the term of office to eight years from the date of inauguration, with a maximum of two consecutive or non-consecutive terms.

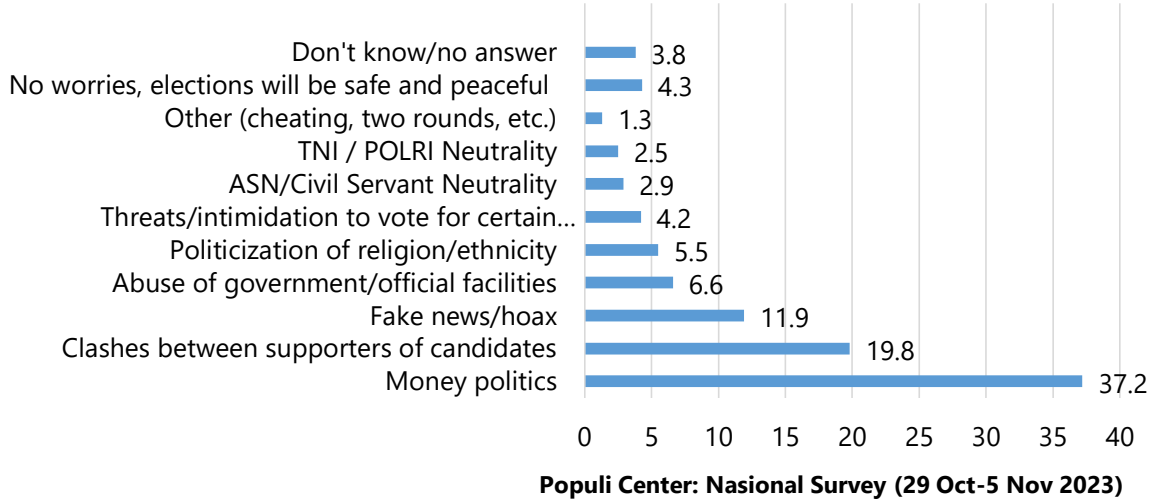

Figure 1. Concerns about The Election 2024
Source: Populi Center, 2024

The data above shows that money politics remained the most prominent concern during the 2024 elections, surpassing other issues such as disputes between supporters, the spread of hoaxes, misuse of state or government facilities, and similar problems. Furthermore, Indonesia ranks as the third highest country in the prevalence of money politics after Uganda and Benin, and ahead of several Latin American countries where money politics is also pervasive, including Argentina, Venezuela, Mexico, and Brazil (Muhtadi, 2023). The widespread use of money politics in both national and regional head elections has had a systematic impact on village head elections at the local level. Indeed, the practice of money politics has become

widespread in village head elections and is even considered normalized within post-New Order electoral practices (Muhtadi, 2019).

The Simultaneous Village Head Elections in Karawang Regency were conducted in two waves: the first wave involved 67 villages, while the second wave covered 177 villages. These elections were regulated under the Minister of Home Affairs Regulation (Permendagri) No. 112/2014 on Village Head Elections and further detailed in Regent Regulation No. 4/2021 on Village Head Election Procedures in Karawang Regency. The findings indicate that the process of the Simultaneous Village Head Elections in Karawang was managed under the authority of the Community and Village Empowerment Office. Election oversight was carried out by research and examination teams at both the regency and sub-district levels, along with technical election teams at the village level initiated by the Village Consultative Body.

Although the technical election teams at the regency and sub-district levels included high-ranking officials—such as the Regent, the Head of the Regional House of Representatives, the Chief of Karawang Resort Police, the Head of the Regency Attorney's Office, and the Commander of the 0604/Karawang Military Regency Command—no cases of money politics were prosecuted. The weak enforcement of regulations concerning perpetrators and recipients of money politics has contributed to the persistence of such practices (Rahmi & Putra, 2022). For instance, Village Regulation No. 4/2029, Article 202, stipulates that "anyone who deliberately commits an act aimed at benefiting or harming one of the candidates, or commits fraud unlawfully for personal or group interests in the village head election, shall be subject to a maximum imprisonment of six months and/or a maximum fine of IDR 50 million." However, this provision was not operationalized in subsequent regulations related to the 2021 simultaneous village head elections. Instead, sanctions were primarily directed at violators of health protocols, as the elections coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–2021.

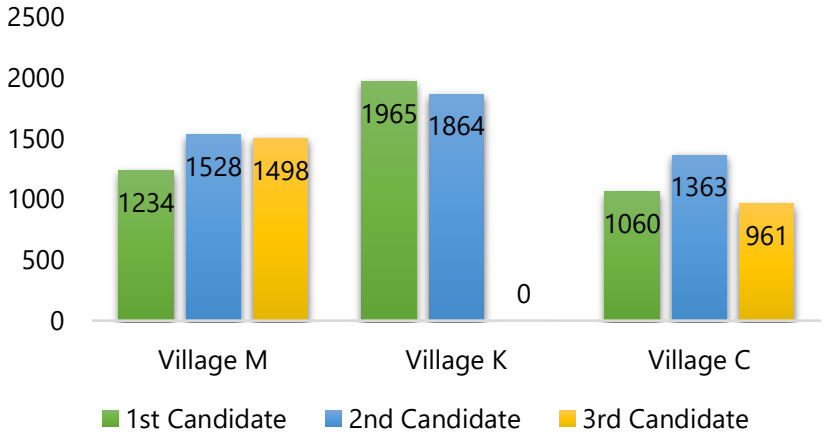

Figure 2. Vote Acquisition of 3 Villages in Village Head Election 2021
Source: Community and village empowerment office Karawang Regency, 2024

Figure 2 presents the voting results from the three villages examined in this study. In Village M, an industrial area, the 2021 village head election was contested by three candidates whose vote totals were relatively close. The 1st candidate received 1234 votes, the 2nd candidate (incumbent) received 1528 and the 3rd candidate received 1498 votes. Meanwhile, in Village K, a village with agricultural potential, only two candidates participated, with the 1st candidate getting 1965 votes and the 2nd candidate (incumbent) getting 1864 votes. And finally in Village C, a village with coastal

potential, three candidates participated, with the 1st candidate (incumbent) gaining 1060 votes, the 2nd candidate gaining 1363 votes and the 3rd candidate gaining 961 votes. Notably, in two of the three villages, incumbents contested the election, but they did not always secure victory.

The results indicate that Village K, Village C, and Village M all employed patterns of patronage and clientelism, albeit with different strategies. Patronage and clientelism in this context are characterized by the distribution of benefits or resources by politicians to individual voters, workers, or campaigners in order to secure their political support.

Table 1. variations of patronage

	Public	**Private**
Individual	welfare benefits, patronage work, government contracts	vote buying
collective	pork barrel projects for community infrastructure. government subsidies for civic associations	private community donations to religious, sports and other associations

Source: (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019)

In analyzing the form of patronage distributed from politicians, they are generally classified into private and public patronage items. As illustrated in table 1. Variation of patronage, clientelistic strategies in Indonesia tend to revolve more around vote buying and community donations. The prevalence of either common goods or private patronage often depends on regional customs and the influence of community leaders (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). In this study, we analyze how patterns of patronage and clientelism operated in the 2021 Simultaneous Village Head Elections in Karawang Regency, drawing on various forms of clientelist patronage identified by Edward and Mada (Aspinal & Sukmajati, 2015) including; a). Vote buying; b) individual gifts; c) services and activities; d) club goods; and e) pork barrel projects.

Vote Buying

Vote buying is defined as the systematic distribution of cash or goods by candidates or their supporters in the period leading up to an election, with the implicit expectation that recipients will reciprocate by voting for the giver (Aspinal & Sukmajati, 2015). In Indonesia, this practice is commonly referred to by several terms, including the so-called "dawn attack." Money politics frequently occurs in general elections as a form of malpractice or electoral fraud, typically involving the bribery of voters with money or valuable goods to influence whether they abstain from voting or cast their votes in a particular way (Djuyandi & Mahmuda, 2024). Beyond direct vote buying, money politics is also manifested through the provision of financial support for campaign activities, particularly for the success teams of certain candidates (Jensen & Justesen, 2014).

In the three villages studied, namely Village K, Village C, and Village M, the implementation of the Simultaneous Village Head Election was marked by the practice of by dawn attacks. The amount of money distributed to voters through the success team varied in each village. As shown in Table 2 on the size of vote buying in the three villages, the elected head of Village K reportedly distributed between Rp300,000 and Rp1,000,000 per voter, while in Village M the amount ranged from Rp600,000 to Rp800,000. In Village C, the village head declined to disclose the amount of money distributed, but a member of the winning team stated that payments ranged from Rp200,000 to Rp700,000. Furthermore, according to the head of Village K, his opponent offered as much as Rp2,000,000 per family to secure the loyalty of voters who were

strong supporters of the opposing candidate. These findings are consistent with (Adlin et al., 2022); (Hasan et al., 2023) who note that the period of simultaneous village head elections is anticipated by many villagers not out of enthusiasm for local democratic participation, but rather for the financial benefits they expect to receive from candidates.

Table 2. The size of Vote Buying in Three Villages

Village	Nominal Vote Buying (in Rupiah)
K	300.000-2.000.000
M	600.000-800.000
C	**200.000-700.000**

Source: the three village research result, 2024

The use of patronage and clientelism, or money politics, remains highly effective in the three villages studied. However, the candidate who distributes the largest amount of money does not always secure victory. In Village K, for example, the losing candidate reportedly gave more money to voters than the amount distributed by the elected village head. A similar phenomenon was observed in the election of the Kedungjati village head in Jombang Regency, East Java, as reported by (Putri et al., 2020). Residents of Villages K, M, and C consciously accepted money from candidates as part of efforts to secure their support. Nevertheless, community members also considered the personal qualities of leadership candidates when making their choices. The results suggest that electoral success is not necessarily determined by the candidate who provides the most money.

Individual Gifts

Candidates often provide personal gifts to voters as a means of reinforcing systematic vote-buying tactics. This technique is typically employed during interactions with voters, such as home visits or campaign events. These gifts are frequently perceived as social lubricants, offered as tokens of goodwill or keepsakes; however, they carry an implicit expectation that recipients will reciprocate with electoral support (Aspinal & Sukmajati, 2015). Individual gifts may include free food and beverages, cigarettes, or snacks distributed during campaign meetings attended by candidates and voters. In all three villages studied, respondents acknowledged that individual gifts were one of the most effective strategies for strengthening the relationship between candidates and potential voters. In Village K, the provision of goods such as snacks, cigarettes, and basic necessities (rice, eggs, oil, noodles, sugar, coffee, etc.), as well as transport allowances for attending campaign meetings, was considered essential to foster cohesion between voters and candidates. Similarly, in Village C, individual gifts were also distributed, although the schedule was strategically organized by dusun (hamlets). This arrangement was intended to minimize costs and enable the campaign team to focus its resources more efficiently on targeted voter groups.

Meanwhile, Village Head M during the nomination process chose to give gifts in the form of shopping vouchers, cash, and sometimes groceries to his supporters through an invitation to change the WhatsApp status containing the candidate's campaign. Interestingly, Village Head M instructed his campaign team to encourage loyal followers to update their WhatsApp status according to the candidate’s directives. He considered this approach effective in identifying disloyal followers by monitoring who complied with the status updates. The campaign team system established by Village Head M resembled a multi-level marketing strategy, whereby each team member was responsible for coordinating ten “subordinates” to mobilize support

during the election. Success teams are often entrusted by candidates and become key instruments in the electoral arena, as they are believed to possess knowledge of voter behavior and mastery of the local political landscape (Abbiyyu, 2020). This structure also enabled the candidate to more easily monitor and control his followers. An overview of the success team pattern in Village C is presented in Figure 3.

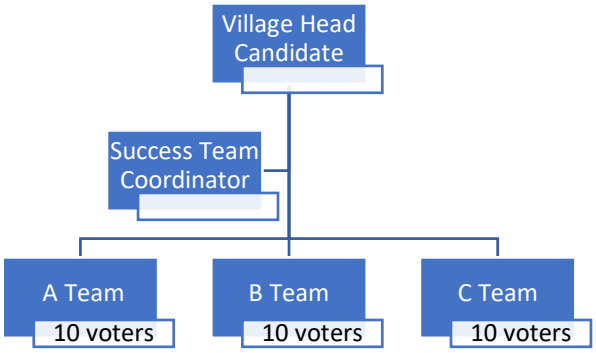

Figure 3. Village C success team structure
Source: research result, 2024

Services and Activities

Candidates often provide or finance activities and services for voters. The most common form of such activities involves campaigning during community events. In these forums, candidates typically promote themselves (Edward & Mada, 2015) by organizing football or other sports tournaments, religious study groups, cooking demonstrations, or community gatherings. Among the village head candidates, many also financed free health services, though the approaches varied. While services were not limited to health-related activities, in the three villages studied the provision of health services emerged as the most common form offered to voters.

Village Head K stated that at that during the nomination period he provided health-related services, including four vehicles that could be used to transport residents to hospitals, clinics, midwives, or for other community purposes such as transporting schoolchildren or residents attending celebrations. In cases where villagers were not yet registered with the national health insurance program, the candidate personally covered the cost of their treatment. It is therefore not surprising that the elected village head was remembered positively by residents in need of access to health services, particularly the elderly and those with health problems.

In contrast to Villages K and C, which invested considerable effort in providing health services to the community, the elected head of Village M, who was the incumbent, appeared to place less emphasis on service provision during the campaign period. As an incumbent, he often relied on services already available through village institutions, such as facilitating access to BPJS health insurance or assisting residents without BPJS to register. In addition, he promoted the *Karawang Cerdas* scholarship program initiated by the Karawang Regency Government, which provided opportunities for underprivileged students to pursue education. According to the elected village head, he succeeded in breaking the long-standing perception that no candidate in Village M had ever been elected for a second term. Village Head M, a wealthy industrial waste entrepreneur, carried the image of being preoccupied with business affairs—an

image that his opponents attempted to exploit during the *village head election* campaign.

Table 3. Type of Service and Activities

Village	Type of Service and Activities
K	Providing 4 cars for transportation for health, education and community celebrations
	providing medical expenses for residents
C	Free medical treatment brings in medical personnel (doctors and nurses)
	Free blood sugar, uric acid and cholesterol checks
M	help register BPJS
	informing citizens of the Karawang Cerdas scholarship

Source: the three village research result, 2024

As shown in Table 3, the three villages studied continued to apply the pattern of providing "services and activities" to the community, albeit with different strategies. While the village head candidates in Villages K and C were first-time participants in the elections, the incumbent candidate in Village M adopted a relatively more relaxed approach in his second-term campaign. Nevertheless, Village Head M faced strong political competition, as reflected in the narrow margin of only 30 votes between him and the runner-up candidate. By comparison, the margin was 161 votes in Village K and 302 votes in Village C.

Club Goods

Club goods represent a form of patronage provided for the collective benefit of a particular social group rather than for individual gain. Such donations are typically directed to community organizations or groups. According to (Aspinal & Sukmajati, 2015), club goods can be categorized into two types: (a) donations to associations of specific community groups, and (b) donations to broader communities residing in rural, urban, or other settings. These are often distributed during visits to community gatherings, where candidates provide goods such as worship equipment (e.g., *mukena*, *peci*, prayer beads), or household items (e.g., rice cookers, bowls, glasses). In some cases, candidates may also donate to or renovate community infrastructure. Table 4 illustrates the distribution of club goods in the three villages studied.

Table 4. Type of Club Goods

Village	Type of Club Goods
K	Providing headscarves to the local women's recitation community
	Sponsored the creation of NGO uniforms
C	Build ronda posts in each hamlet
	Repairing roads affected by abrasion
	Build a mushola
	Repairing abrasion-affected shorelines
	Donating goats during Eid al-Adha Celebration
M	Building a pedestrian bridge
	Renovating the mushola
	repairing the road

Source: the three village research result, 2024

In Village K, the elected village head candidate provided headscarves to members of a women's religious study group. He was also actively involved in one of

the community organizations in Karawang Regency. Beyond distributing money, the candidate sponsored the purchase of uniforms for the organization's members. These efforts were intended to secure the organization's support and strengthen his chances of victory in the *village head election*.

In Village C, the provision of club goods was especially prominent. These activities included the construction of security posts in each hamlet, the building of bridges, the repair of roads damaged by abrasion, the construction of mosques, and the reinforcement of shorelines affected by erosion. The distribution of these goods was also closely tied to the candidate's campaign message of religious harmony. For instance, the candidate, who was a Buddhist, donated goats for sacrifice during the Islamic celebration of Eid al-Adha as a strategy to gain the sympathy of Muslim residents.

Meanwhile, in Village M, the provision of club goods also played an important role in attracting community support. The elected village head financed the construction of a pedestrian bridge, the renovation of prayer rooms, and the repair of road infrastructure. Whether these initiatives were part of his campaign or a continuation of his duties as an incumbent village head, the evidence suggests that he benefited significantly from his official position in leveraging such projects to secure electoral support.

Pork Barrel Projects

A pork barrel project is typically a government-funded initiative targeted at a specific geographical area. The defining feature of pork barrel politics is that such projects are directed toward communities and financed with public funds, with the expectation that these communities will provide political support to certain candidates (Aspinal & Sukmajati, 2015). Historically, researchers have concluded that pork barrel politics represents a corrupt practice in which political actors exploit public resources for personal or group benefit. This is carried out by allocating large amounts of public funds in ways that are distributed unfairly and do not prioritize the interests of the broader community. Public resources are misused for pragmatic interests to maintain or gain political power by channeling budgets into electoral districts to secure voter support (Ferdiansyah et al., 2024). Pork barrel projects are also commonly referred to as "aspiration funds" for constituents. Because of their iterative nature—with the expectation of continued support in future elections—these practices fall under the category of patronage.

Of the three villages studied, only one had an incumbent candidate, namely Village M. During his campaign, the village head initiated infrastructure projects such as road repairs and bridge construction in residential areas. From the perspective of the village development program, these projects were part of the government's annual plan and had already been budgeted in the previous year. However, their implementation was deliberately scheduled just before the election to maximize political gain. As an incumbent, the elected village head of Village M recognized that development programs—such as repairing damaged roads and building bridges—could be strategically advanced to attract community sympathy and electoral support. In contrast, in Villages K and C, the gifts provided to residents, whether in the form of

money or goods for individuals and communities, were financed from personal resources rather than public funds. As (Prasetyo et al., 2020) emphasize, village heads occupy a high and respected position within the community, often perceived as protectors or "fathers" of their constituents. Such authority allows incumbents to leverage their position as local rulers to extract and reallocate resources in the lead-up to elections.

Clientalism in the Village Head Election Process

Whereas *patronage* refers to the distribution of material or intangible rewards from politicians to their voters or supporters, *clientelism* refers to the nature of the relationship between politicians and voters. Clientelism is a personalized power relationship in which material benefits are exchanged for political support (Hutchcroft, 2014). The findings from the three villages (K, M, and C) demonstrate that all employed patron–client networks to mobilize support during the 2021 Simultaneous Village Head Elections in Karawang Regency.

First, evidence of contingency or reciprocity was observed, namely the provision of goods or services by one party (patron or client) as a direct response to benefits provided by the other. The elected village heads openly acknowledged that they distributed facilitation payments—both in cash and in-kind—to their voters during the election process. Village Head K even referred to this practice as *"Buka Warung"* (literally, "Opening a Shop"), underscoring how transactions of goods and money—whether directed at individuals or groups—were systematically exchanged for electoral support. Notably, all three winning candidates admitted that they spent between IDR 1–3 billion in the course of the village head election campaigns.

Second, the relationship is hierarchical, with a clear emphasis on unequal power relations between patrons and clients. Success teams relied heavily on direct payments from the village head candidates, either in the form of daily wages or remuneration for participating in campaign activities. These success teams were often composed of individuals connected to or subordinate within the government structure, or people who had previously benefited from the candidate's assistance. On average, members of the success teams came from economically disadvantaged backgrounds compared to the candidates themselves. In contrast, the three elected village head candidates were relatively wealthy and influential figures: retired civil servants who also held assets as landlords, pond entrepreneurs, nightlife business owners, and factory waste management entrepreneurs. This highlights that in all three villages, the elected leaders did not come from ordinary social classes. Furthermore, in Village C, the elected head was also the son of a respected religious and community leader in the local area, further reinforcing the hierarchical nature of the patron–client relationship.

Third, clientelistic exchanges are characterized by repetition, as they take place on a continuous rather than a one-time basis. This demonstrates that clientelism is not limited to the distribution of gifts during the campaign period, but extends over a prolonged process of cultivating relationships with voters. The elected Village Head of Village K admitted that he had spent nearly two years prior to his nomination building connections with the local community to secure their support. In contrast, the elected Village Head of Village C had less than one year to mobilize support, as he initially had no plans to run for office. Meanwhile, Village Head M, as the incumbent, devoted

approximately seventeen months to preparing for his re-election campaign. In all three cases, the role of brokers or success teams was indispensable. These teams acted as intermediaries between candidates and voters, ensuring continuous engagement and sustaining clientelistic networks at the grassroots level.

Although the use of patronage and clientelism in village head elections is often perceived as more effective than relying solely on merit or personal reputation, it has become deeply entrenched in the electoral process. Many village heads consider money politics to be inseparable from local elections. However, such practices carry significant risks, including the election of unqualified candidates and the restriction of competition to those with substantial financial resources. Moreover, the interests of elected candidates may become co-opted by donors rather than being aligned with the will of voters. There is also the danger that illicit money will further corrupt the political system and weaken the rule of law (Ward et al., 2003). Ultimately, these practices undermine the democratic ideals of political freedom at the local level. When elections lose their competitive nature, they risk devolving into pseudo-political rituals, serving merely as symbolic performances to secure legitimacy (Wahyudi, 2009).

Conclusion

Our research proves that money politics occurred in all the villages we studied, including Village K, Village C, and Village M. Despite their different characteristics as agrarian, coastal, and industrial communities, each was marked by a deeply embedded culture of patronage and clientelism. The forms of patronage observed across these villages were strikingly similar. Vote buying through cash handouts during dawn attacks, the distribution of basic goods such as rice, cooking oil, and sugar to individuals, as well as collective gifts to groups like recitation forums, neighborhood associations (RT/RW), and local NGOs, were widespread. Candidates also provided health services and financed infrastructure projects, whether from personal wealth or public funds. With backgrounds as businessmen, former civil servants, and landlords, village head candidates were willing to spend significant resources to secure voter support. This spending was driven not by the modest salary of a village head, but by the prestige of holding the top leadership position within their home communities. Furthermore, the availability of village funds and substantial financial assistance from central and regional governments reinforced their ambition to occupy the position of village head.

Patronage and clientelism represent forms of corruption in *village head election* that, if left unaddressed, will undermine the ideals of democratic development at the village level, where citizens are expected to rationally choose the most capable leader. Cultural assumptions within communities further exacerbate this practice: candidates often perceive money politics as a necessary means to secure victory, while voters tend to interpret it in moral terms—such as alms, favors, or mementos—thereby normalizing the practice. This study, however, is not without limitations. Further research is required to explore the dynamics of patronage and clientelism across a wider range of villages and within more complex electoral contexts in order to better understand how these practices shape local democracy.

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