

Analysis of invalid votes in the village head elections in Purbalingga Regency, Indonesia

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Abstract

This study analyzes the causes of the large number of invalid votes during village head elections. Political scientists have pay little attention to this phenomenon. This study uses a case study method to examine why and how this situation occurred. Data were obtained through in-depth interviews with 17 people in three villages and document studies. Informants included village head candidates, election committees, election supervisors, and winning teams. The study found that the number of invalid votes was very high, at 18%, 21%, and 29% because of symmetrical votes, i.e., two parallel holes. Invalid votes occurred due to three factors: sociological factors, such as low voter knowledge; political protest as a means of political criticism; and institutional factors, such as weak regulations and low committee competence. This occurred due to institutional factors, such as diverse interpretations of regulations regarding valid votes, poor ballot design, and incompetent election committees. This research contributes to promoting improvements in voting regulations that accommodate symmetrical votes, designing secure ballots for voters, and encouraging committees to intensively socialize voting procedures.

Keywords: invalid votes, ballot paper, village head elections, election committee

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Introduction

Disputes and protests over the results of village head elections continue to persist in Indonesia (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019; Berenschot et al., 2021). Conflicts can arise due to alleged procedural weaknesses, a lack of neutrality among election organizers, political rivalries, or refusal to accept election results. Nevertheless, the procedure for electing village heads remains simple. The Village Law limits the number of candidates to between one and five. Voting is conducted using a single ballot paper, and voters select one candidate by marking their name or photo.

Compare this with the difficulty of national elections where voters have to spread out 5 types of ballot papers for the Presidential election, the Election of the Regional Representative Council, the Central People's Representative Council, the Provincial People's Representative Council and the Regency People's Representative Council then followed by dozens of political parties and hundreds of names of legislative candidates on the ballot paper.

Behind the simplicity of this procedure, many problems unexpectedly arose in the implementation of the 2018 simultaneous village head elections in Purbalingga Regency. The simultaneous village head elections were attended by 184 villages and 125 of them left problems and 40 Village Head Candidate filed disputes over the results of the village head elections. The three villages we researched were Candiwulan Village, where residents occupied the village office for 10 hours because they were disappointed with the results of the village head election and demanded a recount.

Furthermore, hundreds of residents of Limbasari Village also demanded re-election of the village head. A similar incident in Cipawon village saw the number of invalid votes almost match the votes of the elected village head. The main problem in these three villages is that many ballots have been symmetrically punched through and declared invalid by the Committee based on the Purbalingga Regent Regulation. Therefore, this study aims to explain the causes of the high number of invalid votes in the village head elections in Purbalingga Regency.

Indonesia still faces several problems in village head elections that are prone to conflict and even violence, one of which is caused by procedural weaknesses in village head elections. (J. Kingsley, 2012). The study of the causes of the occurrence of invalid votes in elections in Indonesia has begun to attract the attention of a number of researchers, although research on this phenomenon is still relatively small. Some studies of invalid votes include the 2017 Yogyakarta mayoral election where the phenomenon of symmetrical through votes was found, but the committee categorized it as an invalid vote (Rahmawati & Budi, 2018).

In the Presidential election, there was scribbling on the ballot paper as a form of voter protest at the chaotic politics in Indonesia (Prasetyo, 2017). Apart from the interpretation of the rules and the tone of the protests, invalid votes also occurred because the design of the ballot paper was too complex. The number of invalid votes in the 2019 national election in Indonesia was due to too many candidates, illiteracy and disability (Fahrulisa, 2022). The complexity of this design is the cause of many invalid votes, so the ballot paper design should be simplified (Dedi, 2019; Istianda & Zastrawati, 2021; Muryanto Amin, 2020). Unfortunately, this complex ballot paper design issue is beyond the control of voters (Herrnson et al., 2012; Pachón et al., 2017; Reynolds & Steenbergen, 2006).

Unfortunately, many of the above studies capture invalid votes in national and provincial elections, which are relatively complex because there are many types of ballot paper, many political parties and many lists of candidates on the ballot paper. The election mechanism in the village is very simple because there is only one ballot paper, there are only 1-5 candidates and voters only need to vote in one of the candidate's picture columns. Unfortunately, invalid votes still occur in large numbers.

The legal vote rule is closely related to the creation of rules, norms and procedures for electoral work. Rules must be made carefully in order to create elections with integrity and legitimacy by the people. The government should continuously improve rules and procedures to improve the quality of elections (Tan, 2004). The more ideal the electoral institution in the village, the greater the commitment of residents to implement it (Tan & Qiushui, 2007; Zhang & Liu, 2022; Zweig & Fung, 2007). Fair election procedures are the reason villagers are committed to respecting election results (Landry et al., 2010; Wilking & Zhang, 2018). Therefore, the formulation of rules and the implementation of elections with independence and professionalism are important in order to minimize the potential for fraud that can lead to protests, violent conflicts and rebellion (Sjoberg, 2016).

The phenomenon of invalid votes has received less attention in elections than studies of voter behavior because it sometimes occurs in specific countries and locations and is less representative of the electoral problems that often arise in many countries. However, the reality is that invalid votes can occur in any country, including developed countries (Fatke & Heinsohn, 2017). Some examples of invalid votes are if the voter leaves the ballot paper blank, writes only numbers with no other choices, uses ticks or crosses, writes slogans or words or makes other marks on the paper but does

not write a valid choice, writes his name or other identification on the paper, scribbles on the paper so that his vote is not legible, does not write his choice, or uses non-consecutive numbers (Economou, 2021; Smith et al., 2018).

Invalid votes typically result from three main factors: political protest movements, sociological influences, and institutional issues. In some cases, citizens cast invalid votes to express dissatisfaction with political parties or the government (Lefkofridi et al., 2014; Lehrer & Lin, 2020). Invalid votes occur as a form of political protest due to voter fatigue and low information about candidates (Pierzgalski et al., 2020; Reidy & Buckley, 2015). Another form of protest is voters not attending the voting location because voters are disappointed in the performance of democracy (Katz & Levin, 2018). Voters deliberately spoiled ballot papers as a form of protest to the government over issues of corruption and election fraud (Carrión-Yaguana & Carroll, 2024; Cohen, 2018). If political party promises are not credible then rational voters choose to spoil their votes. High corruption cases and simultaneous election systems tend to increase invalid votes for presidential elections, but not for lower house elections. Another important factor is the inequality of development in underdeveloped regions (Goelzhauser & Konisky, 2019; Sellers, 2019).

The next cause is sociological, focusing on factors such as ethnic fragmentation, literacy rates, urbanization, and some measures of socioeconomic development (I Coma & Werner, 2019). Invalid votes and voter absenteeism occurred in Brazil, triggered by the lack of citizen education and low political knowledge, which made them less likely to vote or to complete the voting process properly (Katz & Levin, 2018).

The next cause was institutional factors, namely confusing electoral rules and ballot paper design. If the electoral district is large and the education level is high, the number of invalid ballots will be smaller (Kouba & Lysek, 2019; Lundell & Högström, 2021). Residents are not interested in the mandatory voting rules so they choose to make their votes invalid (I Coma & Werner, 2019; Lysek et al., 2020). Elections in Latin America are often characterized by high rates of blank and spoiled ballots. The main causes are compulsory voting rules, electoral disproportionality, the combination of large districts with voting systems based on hundreds of candidates. In addition, political violence and the direction of democratic change also contribute to invalid votes (Power & Garand, 2007). Too many candidates instead of providing voters with many options confuse voters.

A further institutional cause is the influence of ballot design and is also correlated with certain socio-demographic characteristics such as education. By improving the ballot design, the number of spoiled ballots can be reduced and socio-demographic factors can be overcome (Pachón et al., 2017). Invalid votes often occur due to faulty equipment and confusing ballot designs (Pierzgalski et al., 2020). Damaged ballots can occur due to poor ballot design and lead to voter voting errors. Complicated or ambiguous ballot designs can increase the chance of invalid votes (Pierzgalski et al., 2020). Invalid votes also occur due to complex and simultaneous electoral systems, voters prefer a simple electoral design (Kouba & Lysek, 2019). Institutional factors also include a clash of legal logics when rules are ambiguous or multi-interpreted, leading to debate; electoral systems that do not support elections with integrity; inadequate electoral administration rules; untrained election administrators and a lack of electoral information to voters (Alihodzic, 2011).

Voting is a series of technical work that requires clarity of rules and precision. The slightest mistake can have political implications, namely public distrust of the committee's performance and election results. This study contributes to filling the gap

of election studies in villages that rarely examine the phenomenon of invalid votes. This study can be a consideration for the government to improve the rules, procedures and technical preparations for village elections in order to protect voters' votes and maintain the legitimacy of elections.

Research Method

The research was carried out in three villages selected due to the high incidence of invalid votes, intense competition among candidates, and strong protests from both candidates and community members toward the committee. The research was conducted in 2020 and 2021 using qualitative methods and research design, namely case studies to find out why and how social phenomena occur through one or several cases in natural situations (Balandin, 2007). This design seeks to explain events in more detail and completely about the circumstances, situations and nature of the lives of individuals, organizations and so on, Data collection technique with purposive sampling technique, namely informant selection technique based on certain criteria based on research objectives. With this method, the research is expected to get the right information and in accordance with the purpose of the research, because it has sorted out a sample that really understands the case taken.

We interviewed 17 informants consisting of 6 people from Candiwulan Village, 6 people from Cipawon Village and 5 people from Limbasari Village. The duration of the interviews varied from a minimum of 23 minutes, 45 minutes to 1 hour and 30 minutes with most of them using Indonesian and a few local languages. We selected key informants from the village head candidates, the election committee, election supervisors and success teams because of their experience and roles as important actors directly involved in the event. They were involved from the beginning of the problem to the problem-solving stage. They also had the knowledge and courage to describe the event in detail and completely and were able to provide examples of how to fold the ballot papers that were suspected of being the cause of many invalid votes during the election. Given the sensitivity of this issue, it was difficult to conduct interviews with the community. As per the informant's request and ethical considerations, the identity of the informant is not conveyed in the writing. We also obtained data from document studies of village laws and local regulations on village head elections. Further data sources were television and online media. Each in-depth interview was transcribed, deepened with field notes, discussion of findings and data writing. The collected data were analyzed with data analysis procedures and data reduction then data were organized and data were interpreted. In this process the researcher filters, confirms, looks for similarities in patterns, consistency and compiles generalizations. We conducted discussions and open coding with the researchers to reveal the core patterns of each informant's data. We looked at the patterns of arguments that predominantly emerged and had a degree of congruence with each other with the informants. We analyzed this pattern as the answer to the research problem.

Results and Discussion

Ambiguity of Legal Vote Rules

In the election of the Village Head, rules and procedures play an important role in regulating the roles and actions of each actor in the election. Therefore, the chaos of village head elections can be unraveled by examining the anatomy of rules from regional regulations and Regent regulations on village head elections to the rules of

the implementing committee in the field. This logic is also emphasized by the position of the Regency in Law No. 23/2014, which states that autonomy only stops at the regency/city. Thus, further regulation of the village is carried out by the regency/city, including the implementation of village head elections (Masyitah, 2019). The crucial moment during the village head election is voting. simple and short but sensitive for all parties. A slight mistake or shortcoming will be debated, especially among candidates and supporters.

Article 81 of Regent Regulation of Purbalingga Number 63 of 2018 concerning Guidelines for the Implementation, Election, Inauguration, and Dismissal of Village Heads in Purbalingga Regency regulates the validity of voting. A ballot paper is considered valid if it is signed by the Chairman of the Election Committee and the vote is cast using the official voting tool provided by the committee. The vote is deemed valid when there is only one rectangular box containing one candidate and the voting mark is placed in that box, which includes the candidate's number, photograph, and name. Furthermore, if there is more than one voting mark but still within the same rectangular box of a single candidate, the vote remains valid. Similarly, a vote is also considered valid if the mark is placed on one of the lines of the rectangular box containing the candidate's number, photograph, and name.

In practice, three villages experienced conflict because the election results showed a high number of invalid votes. Residents and candidates did not accept and were disappointed when the organizers declared the voting paper invalid because it did not comply with the election regulations. The data on invalid votes can be seen in the following table 1.

Table 1. The data on invalid votes

Village	DPT	Present	Valid	Not Valid	Not Valid (%)	Top Candidate (Votes)	Margin	Main Cause
Candi Wulan	4,043	3,387	2,649	738	21.8%	Agus Sucipto (1,208)	66	Symmetrical through ballot
Limbasari	2,760	2,125	1,730	395	18.6%	Halimah (680)	159	Ambiguous fold design. a symmetric ballot puncture
Cipawon	4,769	3,846	2,695	1,151	29.9%	Segyo Setiadi (1,156)	288	Voters do not open the fold, vote through the simteris

*% Invalid = (Invalid / Present) × 100%

Source: simultaneous village head election results of Purbalingga Regency, 2018

One important thing that happened in the three villages was the high number of invalid votes due to symmetrical through ballots. A symmetrical through ballot is a ballot that goes through the folds of the paper that are in line or symmetrical position and results in two votes on the ballot paper. In Candiwulan Village, 21% of the votes were invalid because voters cast symmetrical through votes and voted for two candidates. In Limbasari Village, 18.59% of the votes were invalid because of the symmetrical through ballot and then there were two ballot paper designs, namely the version of 4 horizontal candidates in a row and the version of 3 horizontal candidates in

a row plus 1 candidate on the bottom fold. The invalid votes in Cipawon Village were even higher at 29.93%. Only 5 votes difference with the winner of the election. The reason for this was that voters did not open the ballot paper wide and tried to pass through symmetrically.

The Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance report cited in Ridho Al-Hamdi & Sakir, (2021) states that increasing rates of invalid votes undermine election legitimacy. According to this report, 53 countries have more than 5% invalid votes and 24 countries have more than 10% invalid votes. In contrast, the number of invalid votes in these three villages reached 18-29%, which is considerably higher and indicates a significant issue for a village-level election.

When the village head election committee counted the votes and found the fact that the symmetrical through ballot appeared, there were differences of opinion. First, this pattern is still considered valid because the vote is symmetrical or in line from the first vote. This pattern had occurred in the 2017 Central Java Governor election and the rules state that symmetrical translucency is a valid vote. The provisions of this interpretation of validity have also been explained by General Election Commission (Aminah, 2015). However, in the vote counting process, this interpretation was disregarded due to criticism that it was based on the Regent's Regulation, not the committee's rules and election experience at other levels. The second pattern, the committee firmly called this voting pattern invalid. Voters can only give one vote to one of the candidate pictures.

This incident shows a clash of legal logic, namely when two or more rules or legal interpretations contradict each other, causing legal uncertainty and uncertain. Conflicts occurred between the Regent Regulation, the rules of the organizing committee and the experience of residents participating in previous elections. Of the four criteria for valid votes according to the Regent Regulation, it does not regulate when there are ballot papers that are symmetrically translucent. The Candiwulan Village Executive Committee's Code of Conduct initially detailed this rule more technically and said that symmetrical through ballots were declared valid votes. However, this regulation was protested by other parties because it was considered contrary to the Regent Regulation. It should be interpreted that a symmetrical through-ballot to the empty area of the ballot paper fold is a valid vote because it is still symmetrical with the position of the previous vote, the vote consistently chooses one candidate, does not hit the object of another candidate and the voter does not intend to deliberately cancel his vote by not randomly damaging the ballot paper.

This event caused great losses to voters. In the principles of democracy according to Dahl, (2008) there is a guarantee that the assessment of each choice is counted equally where voters' rights must be fulfilled in a kaffah manner. The vagueness of the invalid vote count rules shows the weakness of the electoral administration rules. Electoral administration during the transition was fraught with challenges, including administrative efficiency, political neutrality and public accountability (Mozaffar, 2002). The election of the Purbalingga village head suggests that one component of democracy is missing: many votes cannot be accumulated into valid votes due to the limited interpretation of electoral rules.

The voting rules have not been able to accommodate and anticipate voting patterns that have been practiced by residents in previous elections which have relatively the same character as village head elections. Symmetrical through ballots were declared valid in the Governor's election because this election was also only followed by a few candidates, just like the village head election. On the other hand, the

valid vote rule became an arena for conflict between the committee and candidates and voters who felt disadvantaged by the multiple interpretations of the election rules and demanded that the rules be reviewed.

Ballot Design

A stage that is closely related to the number of invalid ballots is examining the way the committee designs the folds of the ballot paper. This process is important in terms of preventing voters from making voting mistakes. This stage is crucial because it is the source of many disputed complaints filed in every election due to alleged fraud (Lahera et al., 2000). Research on the impact of letter design on vote validity has been studied in many other countries and is beginning to develop in Indonesia for national and local elections. Ballot design must consider several elements, namely graphic design, content, location of voting instructions and layout of candidate names and positions (Kimball & Kropf, 2005).

The ballot paper design in this village head election consists of 3 folds. At the very top of the paper as well as the first fold contains the letterhead or symbol of the village government institution. This is the top part that voters will first see if they open the ballot paper. Furthermore, the second or center fold of the ballot paper contains a long row of candidate photos. This second fold will be seen immediately after the first fold of the letterhead is opened. Furthermore, the third or final part of the ballot paper is folded to the back. This fold is not easily visible and palpable if the voter is not careful. As a result, once the photo of the candidate in the center is clicked, it will redeem the third fold at the back. There is a symmetrical through ballot. This vulnerable fold design can be described as follows:

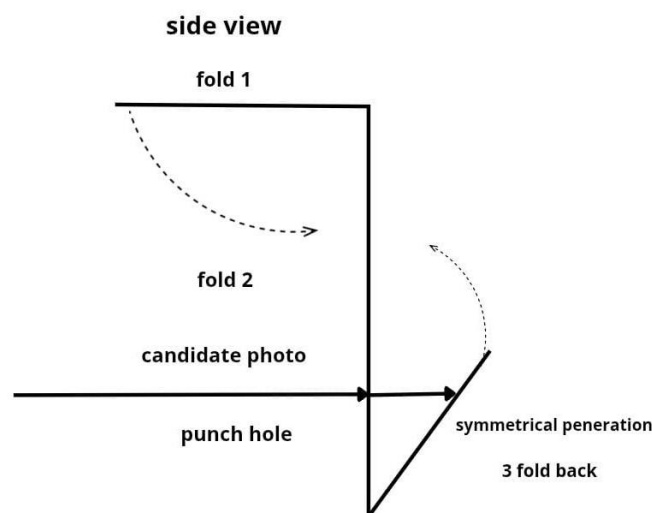


Figure 1. Vulnerable Ballot paper design

Source: design image processed from research interviews

Voters consider that they only need to open one fold to be able to vote for the candidate's photo. The risk was that the third fold, which was folded inward, was also symmetrical through. This vote was called invalid by the committee because there were two symmetrical voting holes. One hit the candidate's photo and one penetrated the final fold of the paper.

The design of the ballot paper folds should be made easy to open completely so that voters can see the entire contents and faces of candidates without any folds left behind or unseen. From this incident, a ballot paper fold design that is safe from the possibility of a symmetrical through ballot can be described. The fold design is as follows figure 2.

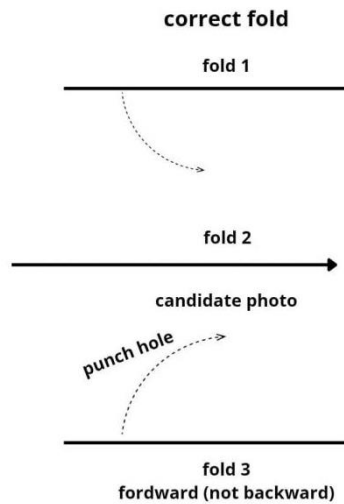


Figure 2. Illustration based on the author's opinion
Source: design image processed by authors

From this description, it can be understood that the vulnerability arises from the improper design of the ballot paper folds, rather than from voters' lack of experience or education that leads to voting errors. Mistakes caused by the design of ballot paper folds are beyond the control of voters. It is the responsibility of the government, as the rule-maker and election organizer, to correct this error.

Committee Competencies

The election committee at the district and village levels is the committee in charge of preparing and facilitating the implementation of elections based on the rules, stages, procedures and preparing the technical needs of elections. The committee's performance is supervised by the election supervisory committee based in the sub-district. Some crucial stages of election implementation are the design of ballot papers and the voting process. Election supervisors have realized that the ballot paper folding design is prone to being punched through and has a negative impact on the validity of voters' votes. The election supervisor reminded the committee to give the ballot paper in an open state.

Ideally, based on national election procedures and experience, ballot papers should be given in folded condition to prevent them from being damaged intentionally or unintentionally. What needs to be considered is that the committee must intensely socialize voting procedures and intensely remind voters to unfold the entire ballot paper before entering the polling station.

The design of this fold comes from the election committee at the district level and is then trained to the village level committee. The committee should ideally not only pay attention to the elements of neatness and convenience but also pay attention to the elements of vulnerability to voting errors. Folding simulations are also important during the committee's technical guidance by involving candidates, success teams, committees, election actors, village government and community representatives. This simulation should also involve experienced national election implementers such as the General Election Commission, Sub-district Election Committee, Election Supervisory Agency, Sub-district Supervisory Committee, academics and community leaders. they can provide input on ballot paper folding techniques that are safe for voters.

Conclusion

Based on the theory of the occurrence of invalid votes, there are three factors that cause invalid votes, namely sociological factors, political protest factors and institutional factors. From the findings of this village head election, the main factor of invalid votes is the institutional factor. Invalid votes occurred due to ambiguous rules on valid votes, poor ballot paper design and incompetent committees.

The Regency government should enhance the substance of the valid vote rules in village elections by accommodating various patterns of valid voting, including the validity of symmetrical through ballots, as long as the vote is still symmetrical, i.e., it still votes for one candidate and does not select another candidate's column.

The committee should improve the design of ballot papers that are safe for voters and should conduct voting trials to test the feasibility of the folding design for voters. The committee should improve its competence, especially in reminding voters of the correct voting procedures. The government should maximize the involvement of parties with electoral implementation experience such as community leaders, regional election organizers, academics and civil society in the public testing of village election regulations to minimize errors in the rules and technicalities of village elections.

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