

## Religion And Ethnicity as Political Power in the 2019 Dolok Manampang Village Head Election

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**Abstract.** This study aims to see the religious and ethnic political power used during the 2019 Dolok Manampang village head election. The problem in this study is that religion and ethnicity are often used as political tools to divide society. Still, in this election, it is used as a positive political force. After the existence of Law No. 6 of 2014, the selection of village heads is now considered a good and prestigious political battle. This made local political actors start racing for power. But to be able to get public support requires a political force. The political forces used are religion and ethnicity to influence voter behavior. The research method used is qualitative with a descriptive approach. Data collection was carried out using interviews, observations, and literature studies. Data analysis is carried out by the triangulation method. As for the results of this study, first, the candidate for village head still uses religion and ethnicity as political forces. Second, the political behavior of the people of Dolok Manampang village is still influenced by religious and clan issues.

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**Keywords:** *Religious; Ethnic; Political Forces*

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### INTRODUCTION

This study aims to look at the political power of religion and ethnicity used by Dolok Manampang village head candidates during the 2019 village head election. This research provides a different space from previous studies where this study shows that the political power of religion and ethnicity used by village head candidates is only limited to influencing voter behavior and does not cause conflict in the community. So that the political power used by village head candidates does not damage the quality of local democracy in Dolok Manampang village. The problem in this study is that religion and ethnicity are no longer used as moral forces but as political forces. However, as political power, religion and ethnicity often divide the community. In

this study, it was found that ethnicity and religion have not only a negative impact but also a positive impact on society. The political power of religion and ethnicity is used as a way to influence the political behavior of the people of Dolok Manampang village.

Although many previous studies have examined village head elections, this research still provides a novelty about the political power used in village head elections. As in the research conducted by the Faculty of Sharia, Uin Raden Intan Lampung, it was found that religious and ethnic symbols are often used as political tools ahead of elections. Identity politicization in the form of religion and ethnicity is considered effective in gaining support from the majority of religious and ethnic communities (Sharia & Raden Intan

Lampung, 2021). In addition, Burhanuddin Muhtadi also sees a similar thing that voter behavior in Indonesia is still influenced by primordial and divisive identity factors (Muhtadi, 2018). Based on some of these studies, religion and ethnicity are often used as political tools that have a negative impact on society. However, this study found different results, where religion and ethnicity became a positive political force. This is what makes this research different from previous studies.

The dynamics of village head elections in Indonesia are interesting to discuss. Dolok Manampang village is no exception. Especially since the passing of the Village Law in 2014. Through this law, villages are expected to become independent, autonomous, strong, and democratic areas (Gultom, 2021). This law strengthens the position of villages in Indonesia's government structure. One of them is through village head elections that involve the community directly. Therefore, the direct election of village heads is expected to bring improvements in local democracy at the village level. Villages are the original and oldest democratic media in Indonesia. However, after the reformation, the seeds of democracy led to a consolidated conflict between the undercurrent and the local elite (Wirasandi, 2018). Although in the government structure, villages are in the lowest position, they have a significant role in the framework of democratic development. That is the reason why villages need to be

prioritized in government.

As a miniature of Indonesia, good development should start from the village first. The life of the village community, which is identical to traditional things with strong customs and religion, is a characteristic found in the life of the village community (Syamsu, 2008). However, the entry of a modern government system has slightly changed the cultural characteristics that prioritize communalism towards individualism.

Judging from its definition, a village can be interpreted as a legal community unit with territorial boundaries is authorized and manages its government affairs (Retno, 2019). Before the existence of the Village Law, the village was an independent territory. Almost 60% of Indonesian people live in rural areas (Anam, 2013). Most villages are on Java island, while the rest are divided into other regions, including North Sumatra (Agusta, 2007).

However, after the issuance of Law No. 6/2014, villages are now emerging as more autonomous regions. Through this law, villages are authorized to manage their regions. One of the authorities granted by the central government through the law is the implementation of direct village head elections. The village community is now involved in determining the implementation of local village democracy. This is the reason why the election of village heads is now much different from the election of village heads

before the Village Law. Before the Village Law, the community was not fully involved in the election of village heads.

However, if we look at the impact of direct village head elections, the political competition in the village is heating up. The position of village head is considered a 'hot seat' that is worth fighting for. In fact, the current village head elections are almost equal to the implementation of regional head elections such as regents, mayors and governors. So that everyone starts to compete to become a village head. Along with the increasingly fierce competition, a political force is needed to influence voter behavior. Many political forces can be used, such as figures, political parties, NGOs, religion, ethnicity, and others. These political forces are used to support existing political strategies. So with strong political power and strategy, it can influence people's political behavior.

In addition, the political dynamics in implementing village head elections have also undergone significant changes. Before the Village Law, those who would become village heads were mostly respected people. It was usually dominated by clerics in the village (Solihah, 2015). But nowadays, anyone can run for village head as long as they fulfill the requirements. The openness to become a village head is much more flexible. This makes it easier for those who want to run for office.

Dolok Manampang Village is one of the villages that successfully held village head

elections in 2019. The village is located in Serdang Bedagai Regency, North Sumatra, and most of the population embraces Islam with an ethnic composition that is not too dominant in one tribe. The original inhabitants are ethnic Simalungun, but many ethnic migrants also inhabit the village. Javanese, Minang, Batak Karo, and others also inhabit the village. Geographically, the village is located not far from the city center but is still thick with the customs and culture adopted by the community. Some people are farmers, ranchers, civil servants/private employees, and others. However, the people of Dolok Manampang village are also famous for the management of tofu, so that this village is known as a tofu tourism village that is already quite well known. However, the management of tofu tourism still needs to be maximally utilized.

Dolok Manampang Village is not much different from other villages. Issues of uneven development, poverty, unemployment, and others are still hot to discuss. Delfiyan Widiyanto's research, which explains that the issue of poverty related to the low quality of life is one of the important issues in the village (Widiyanto et al., 2021). Likewise, the dynamics of local politics still cannot be separated from religious and ethnic issues. Referring to several research results that have been conducted previously, it is found that as a country with a heterogeneous community structure, religious and ethnic issues are still a

problem that is difficult to solve. Obet Nego, in his research, said that religious and ethnic issues will always arise in a heterogeneous country (Nego, 2020).

The issue of religion and ethnicity is still popular issue after the decentralization policy was implemented. For example, research conducted by Ricky Zulfauzan found that after political reform, ethnicity often appeared in regional expansion and regional head elections (Zulfauzan et al., 2019). However, a slightly different thing was found in Qodi's research, which saw from the perspective of primordialism that the elite construction map in regional expansion was different from the construction map of community minorities (Qodi, 2012). Based on the findings of these studies, it can be concluded that, indeed, the politics of ethnicity and religion has strengthened after the reformation. This is reinforced by the results of Widya Wati's research that religious and ethnic identity politics are increasingly showing their identity through the concept of freedom (Wati, 2021).

## RESEARCH METHODS

The research was the most important part of scientific development. Research places the most urgent position in science: to develop and protect it from extinction (Bungin, 2011). Researchers recognized the subject and felt what the subject felt in everyday life. The qualitative research involved researchers understanding the setting

of the phenomenon being studied (Basrowi & Suwandi, 2009).

This research used a qualitative method with a literature study. Data sources came from primary and secondary data. Primary data were researchers who conducted analysis in answering research questions, while secondary data were books, journals, and relevant research results. The data collection method was from various literature such as books, journals, and relevant research. Data analysis was carried out using the triangulation method. Triangulation was done by comparing the data that had been obtained (Sugiono, 2012).

## DISCUSSION

Dolak Manampang Village is one of the villages in Serdang Bedagai Regency with a pluralistic community structure. The majority of the village population is Muslim, with various ethnicities. Simalungun ethnicity, Javanese (mostly immigrants), Malay, Sundanese and others. No one ethnicity or religion dominates. This is what makes the community of Dolok Manampang easy to polarize. The community's diversity in Dolok Manampang Village also influenced the pattern of voting behavior. The similarity of ethnicity and religion is still a reason for villagers to choose their village head candidates.

The village head election in Serdang Bedagai Regency held on 30/10/2019 was attended by 121 villages in 16 sub-districts.

One of them is Dolok Manampang village. The political dynamics in the implementation of this village head election are interesting to study. Religion and ethnicity are still a *prima donna* in the local democratic party. However, in several villages that held village head elections, religion, and ethnicity were not used as a tool to divide the community. Instead, religion and ethnicity are used as political forces to influence voter behavior. This is what happened during the Dolok Manampang village head election in Dolok Masihul sub-district. There are 4 candidates for village head who will contest, namely T. Turnip (Islam/Toba Batak), S. Saragih (Christian/Simalungun), Z. Harahap (Islam/Mandailing), and SL (Islam/Java).

Table 1 : Religion & Ethnicity composition of Dolok Manampang village election 2019

No.	Name	Religion	Ethnicity
1	T.Turnip	Islam	Toba Batak
2	S.Saragih	Kristen	Simalungun
3	Z. Harahap	Islam	Mandailing
4	SL	Islam	Java

Source: Author's Analysis

Based on the table above, it can be seen that the religious and ethnic composition of the 2019 Dolok Manampang village head candidates is not striking. Of the four village head candidates, only one comes from a religious minority group in the Dolok Manampang village community, namely S. Saragih (Christian/Simalungun). This means that three other candidates have the same religion but different ethnicities. This means that the three other candidates share the same

religion but have different ethnicities. The candidates must utilize this condition for village head to gain public sympathy. One way is to use the political power of religion and ethnicity.

As a village with a heterogeneous community structure, the unnoticeable distribution of ethnicity and religion makes this village easy to polarize. So that each community is free to express their respective identities. Based on the results of research conducted by Mukmin BA on North Sumatra Politics: Analysis of Community Political Choice Based on Population Distribution, Religion and Ethnicity in the 2018 North Sumatra Pilgub found that religious, ethnic, and clan similarities are still a strong influence in influencing voter behavior (Mukmin & Damanik, 2018). Yoggi Alvi Hamdani's research also found something similar. The study found that ethnicity influenced the community's political behavior in the implementation of the 2018 Sawahlunto regional election (Hamdani, 2022). Based on some of these studies, it can be seen that religious and ethnic issues are still a priority in influencing a person's political behavior. Both in the implementation of elections, regional elections, and village head elections. However, few studies can provide solutions to overcome these problems. However, one solution that can be used to overcome conflicts caused by religious and ethnic issues is not to use these variables as 'political tools' to gain public

sympathy. Religion and ethnicity can still be a hot issue in the implementation of elections, local elections, and village head elections if it is not aimed as a tool to divide the community.

The solution departs from the problems of religion and ethnicity that are increasingly widespread after the reformation and can threaten the quality of local democracy. For example, research conducted by Windawati Pinem found that local democracy after the reformation led to the mobilization of religious and ethnic forces (Pinem, 2022). This is what makes every election of governors, regents, mayors, and village heads still consider ethnic and religious representation to be power-sharing between dominant ethnic groups (Manan, 2004).

When viewed from the variables of religion and ethnicity, the four candidates for village head are representatives of the ethnic and religious groups in the village. Hence, the community is given various choices to determine their political choices.

Uniquely, the political power used by the 4 candidates for village head is the same, namely, both using religion and ethnicity as political power. This political power can be seen in the run-up to the village head election. The success teams and supporters of each candidate deliberately spread issues about religion and ethnicity to the community. Issues of religion and ethnicity are used as 'fuel' to create a heated atmosphere in the community. This is considered the most effective strategy

to influence voter behavior. This strategy is commonly used in various regions in Indonesia. However, the political ammunition used by the village heads is not intended as a 'tool of war' that causes racial conflict.

Regional head candidates who come from various ethnicities and religions turn out to be a special attraction for voters. Based on the results of interviews conducted in the field, it was found that the majority of Dolok Manampang villagers voted due to religious and ethnic similarities. There is an assumption that choosing a village head candidate with the same ethnicity and religion will improve their village.

Indeed, the dynamics of ethnicity in the North Sumatra region are already visible in ethnic divisions based on religion, economics, and politics (Damanik, 2018). This is what later gave birth to clan, ethnic and cultural sentiments. These sentiments are deliberately used as political issues for regional interests, such as expansion or regional head elections. Previously, social division in society occurred due to ethnicity (Bruner, 2014). The absence of a dominant culture or religion in North Sumatra makes each ethnic group free to develop its own identity. This is supported because the North Sumatra region contains an explosive ethnic mix because various ethnic, ideological, and class diversities form a complex social environment (Pelzer, 1988). Therefore, the social divisions that occur are more often caused by ethnic issues.

Table 2. Demographic table of Dolok Manampang village community, Dolok Masihul sub-district, Serdang Bedagai district

Group	Total	Male	Female
Islam	86.11%	44.2%	41.86%
Kristen	13.66%	6.98%	6.68%
Catholic	0.04%	0.02%	0.02%
Hindu	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Buddhism	0.21%	0.10%	0.11%
Confucianism	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Total	100%	51,3%	48.67%

So that the results found in this study are, first, the 2019 Dolok Manampang village head election is still influenced by religious and ethnic issues. Religion and ethnicity are political forces used by all candidates for village head. Second, voters in Dolok Manampang village still vote based on ethnic and religious similarities. This makes it easier for religious and ethnic identity politics to take place in Dolok Manampang village.

### Religion and Ethnicity as Political Power

Basically, political power is an interaction between political units that will form a political structure. In modern political studies, political power can be used as a source of economic and political power struggles.

This can be seen in the 2019 Dolok Manampang village head election which used religion and ethnicity as political power. The political power of each candidate can be seen starting from supporters who are mostly surnames or still have kinship relations until the winning team which is also the majority of the same clan background. Even if there are

those outside the village head candidate's clan, they are still the village head candidate ' family/relatives. Kinship relations are used as political power to win the village head election. The success team is deliberately recruited based on the similarity of clan (clan)/relationship, not based on quality or other abilities. Therefore, villagers who are not related to the village head are less likely to join the successful team. One of the reasons why they recruit those who have a kinship with them is the assumption that if they come from the same clan, they will have more responsibility in winning the candidate. So that clan differences become an important part of local political contestation in this village that affects people's political choices.

It cannot be denied that the role of the success team is so great in influencing the political choices of the village community. One of their duties is to help win the village head candidate. So that they do various ways to get public sympathy. For example, assisting the community needs to accommodate the return of students outside the village so they can vote. The four successful village head teams did this to get as many votes as possible. This is a common thing to do in a regional head election event. However, the main concern is that the people involved in the political vortex come from the same ethnic group.

## **Voter Behavior of Dolok Manampang Village Community**

Law No. 6 Year 2014 has provided authority to villages to become independent and prosperous. One of them is through the implementation of direct village head elections. The election of village heads has now involved the community to be able to choose their own village head candidates. Political participation of the village community is now a determinant in the implementation of village head elections. However, several factors influence voter behavior, namely sociology (religion, ethnicity, gender), psychology, and rationale (Ramadhan, 2020).

Religion is an important part of several types of social groupings in shaping voter behavior in Indonesia. Some studies have found a tendency for religious factors to decline as a shaper of voter behavior. Other studies, however, have come to the opposite conclusion. This is due to differences in the political climate over time. In Mulkhan's research (1995), it was found that the 1955 election supporters of Islamic parties were closely related to the level of voters' observance of worship. This is further strengthened by Gaffar's (1992) research on voter behavior in rural Java and voter behavior in urban communities in Bandar Lampung, where social religion has a relationship with PPP and PDI voter behavior (Mulkhan/A.M, 1995) (Gaffar, 1992).

In addition, issue orientation as one of the important factors in shaping voter behavior can be analyzed based on political development. During the New Order period, issue orientation did not significantly affect voter behavior. This statement is supported by Hornoe's research (1994) which shows that issue and program orientation do not strongly affect voter behavior formation. However, in the reform era, issues and programs strongly influence voter behavior, especially calculative voters (Hornoe, 1994).

Voter behavior in Dolok Manampang Village is similar to other voters. Primordial factors still influence voter behavior. Three approaches can be used to determine voter behavior (Nursal, 2004). The sociological approach is influenced by religion, ethnicity, age, and social class. This sociological approach is considered the forerunner of the birth of identity politics that often appears during elections, mayoral/regent elections, and elections. A psychological approach is an approach that is influenced by the variable of closeness to the village head candidate. Meanwhile, the rational approach usually depends on the rationality of voters in determining their political choices.

In the Dolok Manampang village head election, it is known that the behavior of voters still depends on the sociological approach. Religious and ethnic variables are still an influence in determining political choices. Clan and religious similarities are considered



absolute in determining political choices. The heterogeneous and non-dominant structure of the Dolok Manampang village community makes polarization based on ethnicity and religion the main choice.

## CONCLUSION

Religion and ethnicity were used as a political power in the 2019 Dolok Manampang village head election. However, religion and ethnicity are only used by village head candidates as a strategy to influence voter behavior. The pattern of the political behavior of the people of Dolok Manampang village, who still vote for reasons of religious and ethnic similarities, makes political power with religious and ethnic issues easy to use. In addition, religion and ethnicity are used as political power because of the heterogeneous community structure of Dolok Manampang village. This kind of community structure is very easy to polarize. So that religion and ethnicity are the forces that can be used during the 2019 Dolok Manampang village head election.

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