

The Phenomenon of Empty Boxes in Local Electoral Politics: A Study of The Dynamics of Regional Election Party Coalition

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Abstract: This study analyzes the phenomenon of single couples in the 2024 Surabaya Regional Elections, where all political parties in the Surabaya DPRD support the incumbent Eri Cahyadi. The qualitative approach is used with a case study method, supported by documentary data analysis and statements of party elites from the mass media. The findings of the study show that coalition formation cannot be adequately explained through classical coalition theories such as minimum winning, bargaining coalition, or policy-seeking coalition. On the other hand, party coalitions in Surabaya are more appropriately understood through the framework of political cartel theory (Katz & Mair, 1995), in which parties form strategic alliances to maintain access to state resources, close the space for contestation, and limit the emergence of political alternatives. In this context, all parties are involved in office-seeking and vote-seeking practices that are oriented towards the stability of power and the distribution of electoral incentives without a different ideological basis or policy orientation. This study formulates the concept of an electoral hegemonic coalition, which is a situation when the dominance of the incumbent power is confirmed through elite consensus and accompanied by the delegitimization of the opposition, resulting in the systemic closure of the competition space. The main conclusion of this thesis is that the 2024 Surabaya Regional Election is not a democratic electoral contest, but a reproduction of a hegemonic power order based on the cartelization of political parties. This has implications for the delegitimization of substantive democracy at the local level and demands the reconstruction of opposition institutions and the expansion of citizen participation channels in urban politics

Keywords: *political cartels; party coalitions; single couples; hegemony; Surabaya 2024 elections*

INTRODUCTION

In the modern democratic system, elections are the main instrument to determine the legitimacy of government and realize the principle of people's sovereignty. Elections function not only as a procedural mechanism to elect leaders, but also as an arena for the articulation of interests, ideologies, and the rearrangement of power configurations. In the local context, the Regional Head Election (Pilkada) plays a very fundamental role in determining the direction of development, political stability, and as well as the quality of governance in the regions. Therefore, the existence and role of political parties are crucial in determining how political coalitions are formed and how electoral decisions are determined (Lijphart, 1999; Sartori, 2005). The decision of political parties to form a coalition, whether in the form of a grand coalition, a minimum winning coalition, or a pragmatic coalition without ideological

proximity, will greatly determine the face of the government as a result of the election. Each form of coalition has direct consequences for policy direction, political representation, and the opening of opposition space. An overly large and hegemonic coalition has the potential to close the space for healthy competition, even leading to the delegitimization of the electoral process due to the absence of equal alternative options.

One of the anomalies is the phenomenon of empty boxes in local electoral politics which refers to a situation where in the regional head election (Pilkada), there is only one candidate carried by a political party or party coalition, while there is no alternative candidate who competes openly. In the history of the implementation of the Simultaneous Regional Elections, this phenomenon has begun to occur a lot since 2015, and peaked in the 2018 Regional Elections, when there were 16 regions with a single candidate (KPU RI, 2018). This phenomenon not only reflects the weak institutionalization of political parties, but also shows the consolidation of power that is too dominant, both by the incumbent and by the local elite who are able to control all candidacy paths (Mietzner, 2015).

Burhanuddin (2020) concluded that the phenomenon of empty boxes reflects a deficit in political competition and a weak representation system at the local level. In addition, this phenomenon has the potential to strengthen political oligarchy in the region. A study by Noor (2020) in the *Journal of Prophetic Politics* assesses that empty boxes are a symbol of civil resistance to political domination without opposition. In the case of the 2018 Makassar Regional Election, for example, the empty box even won against the sole candidate Munafri Arifuddin (a relative of Vice President Jusuf Kalla) because residents considered the election process to have been manipulated by elite forces. This shows that voters are not passive and are able to use empty boxes as an instrument of rejection of the status quo (Rahayu & Winarno, 2021). The problem is that the emergence of the phenomenon of empty boxes in the regional head election (Pilkada) is a situation that is often influenced by the dynamics of political party coalitions and the electoral political mechanism that takes place (Wijaya, R., 2018; Hasyim, M., & Rijal, M. 2019).

In the perspective of party coalitions, Riker (1962) described that political parties form coalitions to maximize profits by minimizing the risk of defeat. For this reason, in electoral contests, parties often choose to join large coalitions to support one candidate for political stability and power-sharing. In local electoral contests or regional elections, political parties often choose to form large coalitions to support one pair of candidates who have a high chance of winning. Party coalitions in this context tend to be cartel, as described by Ambardi (2009), where parties work together to maintain the status quo and secure the interests of the elite. Departing from that, the researcher examines in depth the phenomenon of empty boxes in the 2024 Surabaya Regional Election through the perspective of the political party coalition system. The incumbent pair Eri Cahyadi-Armuji became the only candidate who passed the verification, after gaining support from almost all political parties at the local level (grand coalition), making them the sole candidate in the contest (Kompas.com, August 28, 2024).

The researcher elaborates from the perspective of party coalitions which refers to the approach of party coalition theory in the local political system, as well as the concept of cartel party and dominant coalition in the study of political parties. This perspective places coalitions not only as a technical electoral strategy to win elections, but also as a form of

institutionalization of long-term power by party elites oriented towards stability and control over the distribution of political resources (Katz & Mair, 1995; Lijphart, 1999; Müller & Strøm, 2000)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design, which aims to deeply understand the phenomenon of the emergence of a single candidate pair in the 2024 Surabaya Regional Elections, in relation to the dynamics of political party coalitions (Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2007). The main focus of the research is to analyze the dynamics of political party coalitions and electoral political phenomena in the form of the emergence of single candidate pairs (empty boxes) in the 2024 Surabaya Regional Elections.

The researcher used several main techniques in the collection, namely conducting semi-structured interviews with various key informants, such as the political party elite supporting the Eri Cahyadi-Armuji pair. Data collection is also carried out through the study of documents such as a. Decisions and minutes of the KPU/Bawaslu related to the 2024 Regional Elections, statements of party elites in various mass media and survey documents and other relevant support.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The constitution regarding the coalition system is regulated in the Regional Election Law (Law Number 10 of 2016) which stipulates that candidate pairs must be carried by political parties or a combination of political parties that have a minimum of 20% of seats in the DPRD or 25% of valid votes in the previous legislative election. If a party does not have enough seats or votes, then the coalition becomes a strategic need to be able to nominate its candidate in the Regional Elections. However, this threshold requirement has caused controversy and criticism. Some argue that the provision could hinder the emergence of alternative candidates and narrow the options for voters. The Constitutional Court (MK) finally issued several important decisions related to the Regional Head Election Law (Pilkada Law) which had a significant impact on the coalition system of political parties in the process of nominating regional heads. In August 2024, the Constitutional Court through Decision Number 60/PUU-XXII/2024 on Article 40 paragraph (1) of Law 10/2016 is conditionally unconstitutional, namely as long as it is not interpreted that political parties or coalitions of political parties participating in the election can propose a pair of candidates for regional heads with a minimum of 6.5% to 10% of valid votes, depending on the number of people in the area (www.mkri.id). This means stating that the threshold for the candidacy of regional heads of 20% of the DPRD seats or 25% of the valid votes is unconstitutional.

This decision provides a change in the political constellation of democracy, especially in electoral politics where political parties that were previously not qualified to carry their own candidates now have a greater chance of nominating candidates without having to form a large coalition. This has the potential to reduce the practice of forming "fat coalitions" that are often based on purely pragmatic interests (Kompas.com, 2024).

In practice, the formation of an inter-party coalition to meet the nomination threshold can affect local political dynamics. Coalitions formed are often based on pragmatic interests to

win elections, which can have an impact on the stability of local governments if they are not based on a common vision and political platform. Based on the results of the 2024 Legislative Election, the map of political power in the Surabaya City DPRD has undergone a significant shift that affects the dynamics of coalition formation ahead of the 2024 Surabaya Regional Elections. Of the total 50 available seats, PDIP has the most seats, namely 11 seats. However, this number decreased compared to the previous period (2019–2024) which reached 15 seats.

Table. 1. Surabaya City DPRD Seat Acquisition Table 2024

No.	Political Party	Vote
1	PDI Perjuangan	11
2	Gerindra	8
3	PKB (Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa)	5
4	Golkar	5
5	PKS (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera)	5
6	PSI (Partai Solidaritas Indonesia)	5
7	PAN (Partai Amanat Nasional)	3
8	PPP (Partai Persatuan Pembangunan)	3
9	Demokrat	3
10	NasDem	2
	Total	50

(Source: Surabaya City KPU, Decree Number 66 of 2024)

The Dynamics of the Party Coalition in the 2024 Surabaya Regional Election

The coalition in the Surabaya Regional Election has been going on since the end of 2023. Local elites from PDIP as the main supporters of Eri-Armuji are actively establishing cross-party political communication to secure a single path of candidacy. In an interview with CNN Indonesia, the Chairman of the Surabaya PDIP DPC, Adi Sutarwijono, stated that his party has since the beginning opened a space for communication with other parties to "build togetherness and synergy in city development" (CNN Indonesia, 2024, June 12). This situation can be read based on a survey from Poltracking Indonesia in May 2024, Eri Cahyadi obtained an electability of 62.7%, far above other potential figures such as Machfud Arifin or Armuji himself if separated. This encourages parties to carry out strategic bandwagoning, namely joining the winning carriage so as not to lose access to power after the elections. Eri Cahyadi's high popularity is a strong incentive for political parties to get close and avoid direct competition. Even a survey released by LSI Denny JA in early 2024, Eri-Armuji's electability reached more than 70%.

The incumbent has built an image of a stable, technocratic, and pro-people leadership. In public discourse, Eri is described as an inclusive figure who can be accepted across ideologies (from PKS to PSI) who is able to integrate religious values with modern programs. The phenomenon that attracts PKS as a party rooted in Islamist and conservative ideology, has historically often been in opposition to the PDIP, a nationalist-secular party that is often

associated with the pluralist agenda and Pancasila nationalism. Even though Eri is a PDIP (nationalist-secular) cadre, PKS shows political flexibility in prioritizing leadership track record and electability. This emphasizes that PKS's support relies on performative legitimacy, not on the same ideological vision, but on the evaluation of Eri's leadership track record and the attractiveness of Eri's electability as an incumbent. This reflects the principle of a vote-seeking coalition

From the perspective of party coalition theory, PSI's support for the Eri - Armudji (*Erji*) pair can be read as a form of ideological-symbolic coalition that is not only based on power-sharing, but also on long-term investment in the image and electoral affiliation. Building a political reputation by positioning itself as a loyal support base for incumbent figures with high electability. This is a form of reputational investment. Based on the typology of the coalition according to Strøm (1990), PSI's support can be categorized in the form of a policy-seeking coalition that is oriented towards values, the same vision of urban development,

PKB then emphasized that it supports Eri-Armuji because their performance is considered positive in leading Surabaya and no other figure has a chance of winning (Kompas.com, 2024, June 18). This statement shows the existence of a vote-seeking strategy as well as a form of recognition of incumbency advantage, including responding to the Constitutional Court's decision. This pushes other parties into the orbit of power, not just for the sake of office, but to avoid the risk of becoming a political and social minority. In this way, electability is the main instrument in the production of local political consensus, while strengthening the hegemonic reach of the incumbent in urban politics. Eri as an incumbent has an interest in maintaining his position (office-seeking) and maximizing electoral support (vote-seeking) by embracing parties that have a mass network and party machinery.

Realizing this potential, incumbent Eri Cahyadi openly showed active steps to build communication across political parties to strengthen communication. This communication model was also responded to by the DPD of the Surabaya Golkar Party, which actively opened a coalition space with PDI Perjuangan. Chairman of DPD Golkar Surabaya, Arif Fathoni explained that he would open a coalition space, especially one that leads to a mutual agreement with all political parties. Meanwhile, in early May 2024, the Gerindra Party DPC and the PSI Surabaya DPD, marked the beginning of the coalition's exploration towards the 2024 Surabaya Regional Elections, where at that time the Chairman of the Gerindra Surabaya DPC, Cahyo Harjo Prakoso, said that the togetherness of the Advanced Indonesia Coalition (KIM) with PSI was previously solid in the 2024 Presidential Election. Initially, his party encouraged internal cadres to run as mayoral candidates. This is in line with the basic principle of office-seeking which emphasizes the party's drive to achieve positions of executive power directly (Strøm, 1990). This strategy is usually taken by parties that feel they have enough electoral capital and local organizational structures that are ready to fight independently.

However, Eri Cahyadi's visit to the Gerindra DPC office was not only a formal meeting, but also a symbolic political communication that led to the possibility of forming an electoral alliance. Within the framework of coalition theory, this can be understood through the concept of exploratory coalition-building (Martin & Vanberg, 2004), which is the initial process of exploration between parties which can lead to the formation of an official alliance. This strategy is common in local multiparty systems, especially when the incumbent candidate has high

electability appeal and a fairly strong track record, thus opening up the possibility of political power integration with competing parties. This approach also reflects pragmatic coalition behavior, in which parties consider short-term benefits in the form of power-sharing or access to public resources rather than ideological consistency or the drive to appear as an alternative.

Unlike PAN, which prioritizes a relational approach, the Democratic Party presents a more structural-hierarchical decision-making process, as analyzed by Angelo Panebianco (1988) in his work *Political Parties: Organization and Power*, which states that in a party with a centralistic structure, local units (such as the DPC) are more instrumental and do not have substantial autonomy in the strategic political process. The narrative of the political stance of PAN and the Democratic Party in the contest for the 2024 Surabaya Regional Election reveals the dynamics of the coalition that are pragmatic, relational, and hierarchical. These two parties show how the coalition strategy in the multiparty system in Indonesia is not solely rooted in ideological continuity, but in a rereading of the latest power structures and opportunities for access to them (Liputan 6.com, 22/07/2024).



Figure 1. Picture Eri Cahyadi and Armudji received by the Surabaya Democratic Party DPC (Source: Coverage 6.com)

The pair is supported by 18 political parties including PDI Perjuangan, PKB, Gerindra, Golkar, NasDem, and PAN. This dominance makes there are not enough seats left in the DPRD for other parties to carry alternative candidates. This consolidation of support resulted in the absence of any other competitors advancing in the contest, which reflects political pragmatism and the lack of preparation of internal party cadres to nominate other alternatives (suarasurabaya.net). According to Laver and Schofield (1990), in the context of multiparty, especially in direct elections of regional heads, parties will be more likely to form a policy-blind coalition when there is a candidate who has high electoral appeal and can guarantee access to strategic positions in the post-election government. In other words, the party will "invest" in candidates who are considered viable to win, even if they come from a different ideological spectrum. The coalition formed is not only symbolic electoral, but moves towards an operational coalition, as stated by Müller and Strøm (2000), which is when the party not

only shares preferences for candidates or policies, but also conducts structural consolidation to encourage the involvement of party organizations down to the grassroots level. Furthermore, this move by NasDem can also be interpreted as a form of consolidation after the 2020 Regional Election rivalry. If in 2020 NasDem supported Machfud Arifin who became Eri Cahyadi's main competitor, then now the party has taken a conciliatory and adaptive position to the reality of local power. This is in line with Slater's (2004) findings about dominating party coalitions, that small or medium-sized parties at the local level tend to be close to dominant actors.



Figure 2. Photo Image of Eri Cahyadi-Armuji, after receiving the B1 KWK form from the NasDem Party, 27/8/2024 (Source: Kompas.com/Andhi Dwi)

The problem is that even though the Eri-Armuji pair managed to win the Regional Election with 81.38% of the votes, the voter participation rate is a special concern. Data shows that voter participation in Surabaya reached 56.12%, which is one of the lowest in East Java in the 2024 Regional Elections (Surabaya KPU, 2024). This indicates political apathy among the public, likely due to the lack of alternative candidate choices. In addition, another interesting phenomenon is that around 18.62% of voters chose blank boxes, which reflects the dissatisfaction of some people with the existing single candidate. This phenomenon is a reflection of local political dynamics and shows that despite the dominance of political parties in carrying one pair of candidates, the aspirations of people who want alternative options remain significant (CNN Indonesia, 2024). The implication is that the Regional Elections, which should be a place for the articulation of alternative ideas and programmatic political battles, turn into an established power affirmation mechanism. The public space loses ideological debate, and citizen participation is reduced. This weakens substantive democracy, although procedurally it still works

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of a single pair in the 2024 Surabaya Regional Elections, where almost all major and medium political parties support incumbent Eri Cahyadi - Armudji, presents a theoretical challenge to the electoral coalition framework that has been established in political science. Various coalition theories that have developed since the middle of the 20th century, such as minimum winning coalition (Riker, 1962), bargaining coalition (Leon & Almond, 1985), connected winning (Mair, 2006), and policy-viable coalitions (Golder, 2006) are mostly based on the assumption that coalitions are formed through a rational calculation process that takes into account the efficiency of the number of seats, ideological similarities, policy objectives, or bargaining power. However, in the case of Surabaya, these assumptions do not fully work

In the perspective of coalition theory, the above political phenomenon shows a tendency to form very large coalitions, even tending to be hegemonic, which can be categorized as a surplus coalition or grand coalition or other terms as the embodiment of "patronal democracy" (Carothers, 2002), where power rests on informal relations between elites, not on open competition of ideas and policies. According to Müller and Strøm (2000), in the context of electoral democracy in developing countries, coalitions are often formed based on short-term pragmatic incentives such as logistical access, bureaucracy, and other political incentives rather than long-term ideological platforms.

Therefore, a more appropriate approach to explain this phenomenon is through the concept of a hegemonic electoral coalition. Within this framework, coalitions are not formed from the bottom up through party calculations, but are built from above through symbolic, institutional, and distribution of political incentives

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