

Understanding the “Empty Box” Phenomenon in Indonesian Electoral Politics: A Study of Simultaneous Regional Elections

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Abstract

This article examines the dilemma surrounding the use of “empty columns” in Indonesia’s local elections (Pilkada). Empty columns were introduced during the 2017 simultaneous regional elections in response to the rising number of uncontested races, where only a single candidate pair appeared on the ballot. Such races have increased in each electoral cycle, with 25 single-candidate contests occurring in 2020. Although empty columns were designed to preserve democratic contestation by ensuring voters have at least two options, the regulatory and political framework governing them remains fragile. This study aims to explain why empty columns have become a dilemma within contemporary electoral political discourse. This research employs a qualitative methodology with an exploratory analytical approach, drawing on empirical patterns identified through an extensive review of relevant literature. The findings indicate that the empty column represents a fundamentally contradictory mechanism: while it is formally intended to sustain competition, it lacks the political infrastructure necessary for effective contestation and thus functions as a nominal rather than substantive electoral alternative. As a result, empty columns are structurally disadvantaged and struggle to counterbalance the dominance of single-candidate pairs, ultimately undermining their intended role in strengthening democratic practice.

Keywords:

electoral competition; empty column mechanism; Indonesian pilkada; local democracy; uncontested elections

Introduction

The emergence of single candidates in Indonesia’s local elections (Pilkada) has become a distinctive political phenomenon that reflects the inability of political parties to nominate alternative candidate pairs for voters. Previous electoral regulations required a minimum of two candidate pairs, and elections were postponed if this requirement was not met. However, recent developments in local political dynamics indicate a growing trend toward single-candidacy races across various regions. Between 2015 and 2020, the number of single candidates continued to increase, including twenty-five instances in the 2020 Pilkada. This development raises questions about electoral competition, political participation, and the protection of citizens’ political rights. The key debate concerns whether regions with only one candidate pair should proceed with the election or postpone it. Policymakers responded by introducing the empty column as a mechanism intended to resolve this debate and allow elections with a single candidate pair to continue.

The rise of single candidates signifies the presence of elections without contestation. Uncontested elections occur when a candidate does not face significant opposition.

Contestation is an essential component of democratic elections because it ensures healthy competition for public office. Scholars argue that without more than one candidate, electoral competition cannot meaningfully take place (Carson, 2003; Hogan, 2004; Maestas et al., 2006). The empty column was therefore introduced to provide an alternative option for voters who do not support the candidate pair. It is designed to preserve contestation and participation, both of which represent fundamental principles of democratic elections (Dahl, 1971). The presence of an empty column can encourage candidates to strengthen their political support among parties and voters (Tawakkal and Garner, 2017).

Single candidacies are not unique to Indonesia and can be found in many countries, including well established democracies such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia (Burden and Snyder, 2021; Hicks, 2019; Sharman, 2003; Wrighton and Squire, 1997). However, in these countries single candidates are more common in legislative elections, and candidates without opponents typically win automatically. The Indonesian case differs in two respects. First, single candidacies occur more frequently in executive elections at the local level. Second, the current Pilkada design does not guarantee automatic victory for single candidates because they must compete against the empty column. At a glance, local elections with a single candidate in Indonesia may appear to retain some degree of contestation. This unique context makes the issue of the empty column an important subject of further scholarly inquiry. The key debate concerns how the empty column can introduce an element of contestation even though the election is empirically uncontested because it involves only one candidate pair.

Research on empty columns remains limited. Existing studies focus primarily on the emergence of single candidates and the local political conditions that contribute to this phenomenon, such as elite and party pragmatism, money politics, and structural factors that facilitate uncontested candidacies (Ekowati, 2019; Lay et al., 2017; Rahmanto, 2018; Romli, 2018; Tawakkal and Garner, 2017). Other studies examine the rise of empty column movements initiated by civil society groups that campaign for voters to choose the empty column as a form of political resistance, often rooted in dissatisfaction with incumbent candidates who seek reelection without opposition (Darmawan, 2017; Pranyoto, 2019; Soeharmono, 2019).

Several scholars have begun questioning the regulatory framework that governs empty columns, noting a lack of clarity in their legal and procedural design within Pilkada administration (Burhanuddin, 2018; Nazriyah, 2016). Hikmania (2018) explores the conceptual tension between contested and uncontested elections, although the analysis is limited to a single case in Pati during the 2017 Pilkada. The present article seeks to expand this literature by examining the empty column as a dilemma within electoral political discourse through a broader analysis of cases from multiple regions. This wider scope strengthens the argument that the conceptual ambiguity surrounding the empty column contributes to administrative challenges in electoral implementation.

The dilemma centers on the idea that the empty column creates a situation that is contested but remains essentially uncontested. On one hand, the empty column is intended to preserve contestation, ensure participation, and guarantee citizens' political rights. On the other hand, the political infrastructure provided for the empty column is insufficient to support genuine electoral competition. The lack of clear and detailed regulation results in unequal access and limited facilities for the empty column compared with candidate pairs. This conceptual dilemma has significant implications for electoral administration, often resulting in practical challenges during Pilkada implementation. This article examines how this dilemma

emerges and assesses its consequences for the broader landscape of electoral contestation in local elections.

Literature Review

Elections constitute an essential barometer of democratic performance. Schumpeter conceptualized elections as a form of minimalist democracy that emphasizes the procedures through which citizens select candidates to occupy public office. In this conception, candidates must engage in competitive struggles to secure voter support. Dahl (1971) expanded Schumpeter's argument by identifying two minimum dimensions of democratic elections. These include contestation and participation, which must be simultaneously present and robust. This article focuses primarily on the first dimension. Contestation concerns the extent to which competition occurs among individuals or groups seeking public office in a fair and equal environment without intimidation. The presence of multiple candidates in the political recruitment process is often associated with a higher degree of competition and thus a stronger element of electoral contestation.

However, contestation is not determined solely by the number of candidates but also by the quality of electoral administration. Many candidates does not necessarily guarantee meaningful competition when electoral systems and institutional arrangements enable manipulation or fraud that undermines electoral integrity (Birch, 2011; Norris, 2014). Elections that feature only one candidate pair can already be considered uncontested. Uncontested elections arise when a single candidate faces no meaningful opposition. This situation often develops because candidates possess significant advantages in political resources and privileged access that make it difficult for challengers to compete effectively (Burden and Snyder, 2021; Squire, 1989).

Democratic systems require electoral contestation to ensure that those who obtain strategic public offices remain accountable to voters. Without this accountability mechanism, elected officials may lack incentives to perform their duties effectively, as their positions were acquired without meaningful competition. Studies by Ladwig (2010) and Konisky and Ueda (2011), conducted in legislative constituencies, demonstrate that candidates who run without opponents tend to exhibit weaker performance compared with those elected through competitive races.

The emergence of single candidates has become increasingly common in electoral politics. Many countries experience this phenomenon, particularly in legislative elections where certain parliamentary seats are left uncontested, as documented in Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada (Hicks, 2019; Rogan, 2020; Sharman, 2003). Single candidates are more frequently found at the local level due to smaller jurisdictions and the dominance of political actors or parties. Such dominance often discourages other parties from entering the contest unless they join the dominant coalition to endorse the preferred candidate (Simpson, 2019). Single candidacies are also closely associated with incumbents who seek reelection and benefit from strong party support along with economic, social, and political capital (Burden and Snyder, 2021). This pattern is evident in Indonesia, where single candidates predominantly appear in local executive elections for district and municipal leadership positions, and where many of them are incumbents backed by multiple political parties.

Although single candidacies are observable in many parts of the world, the electoral procedures used to manage uncontested elections vary across political systems. Uncontested elections may be conducted in several ways. They may proceed as normal elections, be canceled or postponed for budgetary efficiency, be held merely as formalities, or adopt an acclamation

mechanism in which the candidate wins automatically without voter input. Countries such as Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Singapore, Scotland, and Iceland employ acclamation mechanisms that grant automatic victory to unopposed candidates. Indonesia differs significantly from these systems. Elections involving a single candidate pair are conducted as regular elections with full voter participation. The ballot includes an empty column that represents an alternative for voters. As a result, a single candidate can still be defeated. This approach is often considered more democratic than acclamation procedures because it preserves an opportunity for voter choice (Nazriyah, 2016). Nevertheless, whether elections involving one candidate pair competing against an empty column genuinely operate within an ideal framework of free and fair contestation remain an open question that requires deeper examination.

Method

This study adopts an exploratory analytical approach to examine selected print and online media sources that address the empty column in electoral political discourse. The empirical focus of this article is the emergence of the empty column phenomenon in Indonesia's local elections between 2017 and 2020, a period that generated a conceptual and practical dilemma within electoral politics. Specifically, this article aims to capture and analyze how this dilemma manifests both conceptually and operationally in the administration of local elections. The primary materials for analysis include a range of national media sources such as BBC News (2018), Kompas.com (2015 and 2020), KPU.go.id (2018), Media Indonesia (2020), and Detiknews.com (2018).

Data collection involved gathering information from at least six print and online media outlets as well as relevant scholarly articles. These data were accessed through conventional methods using printed media and through digital searches of online platforms. All collected data were subsequently screened to assess consistency and credibility. Only information deemed accurate and relevant was retained for analysis. Data triangulation was conducted by comparing information across multiple sources, validating factual accuracy, and ensuring the reliability of the evidence. Triangulation is critical for confirming data accuracy and strengthening the analytical foundation of the study. This method enables the researcher to identify substantive perspectives from various reference sources. The analysis was carried out using a narrative analysis approach, which involves describing events, phenomena, and specific incidents and subsequently elaborating these descriptions into a coherent narrative within the written text (Creswell, 2014).

Results and Discussion

Single Candidates in Indonesia's Electoral Contestation

The emergence of single candidates in Indonesian local elections has become a recurring and increasingly prominent phenomenon. This situation is largely driven by candidates who possess exceptional political strength, often reinforced by broad support from multiple political parties. The high financial costs associated with securing party nominations further discourage potential challengers from entering the race. As a result, alternative candidates are reluctant to compete, leading to elections that involve only one candidate pair. Since the 2015 simultaneous local elections, several regions have experienced this condition (Rumesten, 2016).

During the 2015 Pilkada, eleven regions initially registered single candidates (Kompas.com, 2015). Because the legal framework at the time, specifically Law Number 8 of 2015, did not yet recognize single candidates, the General Election Commission extended the

nomination period for three stages. Even after the first extension, seven regions still had only one candidate pair, including Tasikmalaya, Surabaya, Blitar, Pacitan, Mataram, North Central Timor, and Samarinda. After the second extension, four regions remained with a single candidate and were therefore required to postpone their elections until the 2017 cycle, given the legal requirement for at least two candidate pairs (Rumesten, 2016).

The postponement triggered widespread criticism from candidates, political parties, and democracy advocates. They submitted a judicial review to the Constitutional Court arguing that delaying elections due to the presence of only one candidate violated citizens’ political rights. The Constitutional Court accepted the review and ruled that preventing elections when only one candidate exists would create a legal vacuum and undermine citizens’ right to vote and be elected. The Court’s decision, issued as Ruling Number 100/PUU-XIII/2015, allowed regions with a single candidate pair to proceed with elections while involving voter participation.

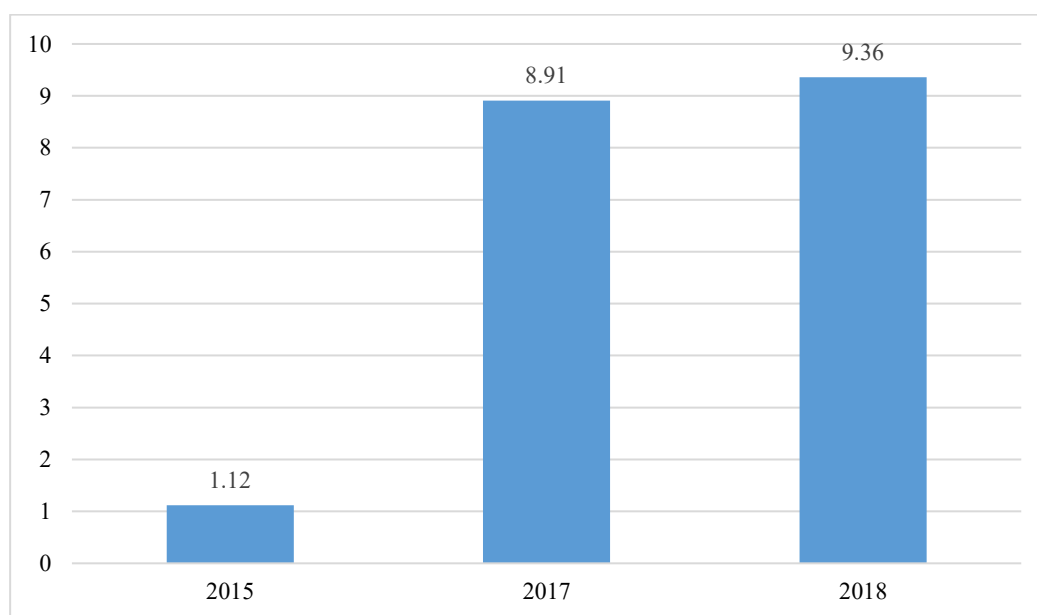


Figure 1. Percentage of Single Candidates in the 2015-2018 Regional Elections
Source: kpu.go.id (2018)

Subsequent election cycles continued to show increases in single candidacies. In 2017, nine regions had single candidates, all of whom were incumbents (Nugroho, 2017). In 2018, thirteen regions recorded single candidates (Susilo, 2018). The 2020 Pilkada showed an even more significant escalation, with twenty five regions experiencing single candidacies (Aditya, 2020). This trend highlights the deepening entrenchment of single candidate races in Indonesia’s electoral landscape.

The continuing rise of single candidates has generated various political dynamics. When the 2015 legal framework still required at least two candidates, some regions witnessed the emergence of artificially constructed opponents, often termed “shadow candidates.” These candidates were strategically presented by elites and political parties solely to meet the administrative requirement for contestation. For example, Nurprojo’s study of Purbalingga’s 2015 Pilkada demonstrates how elites orchestrated the presence of a nominal challenger to avoid election postponement. This practice led to public resistance among citizens who viewed such strategies as incompatible with substantive democracy and detrimental to democratic quality (Nurprojo, 2016).

The dominance of incumbents explains much of the difficulty in generating alternative candidates. Since 2015, most single candidates emerged from incumbent networks, supported by extensive institutional advantages. Cases from Blitar, Surabaya, Tasikmalaya, Pacitan, and other regions illustrate that incumbents frequently became single candidates due to strong political machinery and accumulated economic, social, and political capital.

The increasing presence of incumbents as single candidates was further strengthened by unified political party support. From 2015 to 2020, political parties often consolidated behind a single candidate pair, leaving challengers with no viable entry points. This phenomenon was visible in several regions, including Lebak in Banten during the 2018 Pilkada, when the incumbent Iti Jayabaya secured support from all major political parties. The only possible route for challengers was the independent candidacy pathway, which was difficult to achieve due to stringent signature requirements (Rifa'i, 2018).

Table 1. Single Candidate in 5 Provinces in the 2018 Regional Elections

| No | Regional | Name of regional head candidate | Work of prospective regional heads | Name of Deputy Regional Head Candidate | Occupation of Deputy Regional Head Candidate | Types of electoral candidates |
|----|------------------------------------|---|------------------------------------|--|---|-------------------------------|
| 1 | Deli Serdang (North Sumatra) | H. Ashari Tambunan | Regent | H. M. Ali Yusuf Siregar | Civil Servant | Political Party |
| 2 | Padang Lawas Utara (North Sumatra) | Andar Amin Harahap, S.STP, M.Si | Mayor of Padang Sidempuan | H. Hariro Harahap, SE, M.Si | District Legislative Council (DPRD) Member | Political Party |
| 3 | Bone (South Sulawesi) | Dr. H. Andi Fashar Mahdin Padjalangi M.Si | Regent | Drs. H. Ambo Dalle | Deputy Regent | Political Party |
| 4 | Makassar City (South Sulawesi) | Munafri Arifuddin | Entrepreneur | Rachmatika Dewi | Deputy Speaker of the South Sulawesi Regional Legislative Council | Political Party |
| 5 | Enrekang (South Sulawesi) | Drs. H. Muslimin Bando, M.Pd | Regent | Asman, SE | District Legislative Council (DPRD) Member | Political Party |

Source: kpu.go.id, 2018

The data presented above provides a clearer understanding of how incumbents in various regions have produced local elections with minimal opposition, resulting in contests in which candidates compete only against the empty column. In the 2020 Pilkada, the number of single candidates increased significantly to twenty five. Beyond incumbency advantages, many of the single candidate pairs in the 2020 elections received exceptionally strong backing from political parties. Nearly all of these candidate pairs were supported by an average of more than ten political parties. This situation is concerning because political parties, as key pillars of democracy, are expected to compete by offering alternative candidates. Instead, their collective support for a single candidate has contributed directly to the rise of uncontested elections.

Since the initial appearance of single candidates in the 2015 Pilkada, their presence has generated several notable implications, including the emergence of shadow candidates as a strategic response to regulatory requirements. Following the legal recognition of single candidate participation, the number of such candidates has continued to increase each year. These developments create a dilemma for substantive democratic practice, particularly when political parties fail to demonstrate ideological commitment and refrain from presenting alternative choices. As a result, local elections increasingly lack meaningful contestation, weakening the democratic character of the electoral process.

The Emergence of the Empty Column

The empty column first appeared in Indonesia's simultaneous regional elections in 2017. Prior to this period, electoral regulations required a minimum of two candidate pairs for local elections to proceed. This requirement was removed in the 2017 elections, allowing regions with only one candidate pair to conduct elections in which the single candidate competed against an empty column. In that year, nine regions conducted Pilkada with a single candidate pair, all of whom were incumbents supported by strong party coalitions. In 2018, these nine regions became the first to implement elections that formally included the empty column as the sole alternative choice for voters. The predominance of incumbents in these contests aligns with the findings of Burden and Snyder (2020), who note a strong relationship between incumbency and the emergence of uncontested candidacies. Thus, the appearance of the empty column in 2017 was not incidental but rather a direct consequence of legal reforms enacted in 2016 that formally recognized single candidate participation.

The empty column serves as a mechanism intended to preserve democratic norms by maintaining voter participation and contestation. Whereas many countries respond to single candidacies through acclamation, procedural confirmation, or election postponement, Indonesia's adoption of the empty column represents a distinctive electoral strategy. In principle, this mechanism allows contestation to remain possible even with only one candidate. The simplest illustration of this logic is that a single candidate may lose to the empty column, although this outcome is exceedingly rare. In the history of Indonesian Pilkada, the empty column has secured victory only once, in the 2018 Makassar election. That outcome reflected public dissatisfaction with perceived electoral unfairness and disappointment with political parties that were viewed as failing to represent constituent interests (Syahril and Herdiana, 2019).

Although the empty column is intended to ensure that voters retain a meaningful choice, its implementation raises important questions regarding the adequacy of existing political infrastructure. Substantively, the empty column cannot be considered an ideal mechanism because democratic values such as equality, political participation, and fairness become compromised when only one candidate competes. From a principled standpoint, the empty column appears to emphasize effectiveness and efficiency. Postponing elections is viewed as inefficient because it disrupts local leadership succession and requires additional financial resources.

The empty column was also introduced to safeguard the democratic rights of both voters and prospective candidates by maintaining a procedurally legitimate electoral contest. The existence of an empty column does not automatically diminish democratic quality, since the integrity of an election depends not only on the number of candidates but also on fairness and honesty throughout the process (Birch, 2011; Norris, 2014). Nevertheless, a central issue remains: whether the process by which single candidates emerge and subsequently compete against an empty column is capable of producing the best possible elected leaders.

The legal basis for the empty column is found in Law Number 10 of 2016. Article 54B, paragraph 1 outlines the conditions under which single candidate pairs may arise. Paragraph 2 specifies that the ballot must contain one image of the single candidate pair and one empty column, both of which are valid options. Conceptually, the empty column functions similarly to an opposing candidate. If the empty column receives more votes, no candidate is elected and the Pilkada is rescheduled in the following year or the next simultaneous election cycle. The winning requirement is the same for both options, with each needing to obtain at least fifty percent plus one of all valid votes.

Mathematically, the regulation appears to treat the single candidate and the empty column equally. However, this article argues that the regulatory framework falls short in addressing the substantive needs of the empty column constituency. For instance, campaign provisions do not clearly define how the empty column can conduct an effective or equitable campaign. Public outreach regarding the meaning and implications of the empty column also remains limited, largely relying on regional election commissions whose capacity to conduct widespread voter education is constrained. Consequently, many voters remain unaware of the purpose of the empty column or the consequences of its victory or defeat.

Law Number 10 of 2016 replaced Law Number 1 of 2015, which required that elections with only one candidate be postponed until the following year. The introduction of the empty column was intended to protect the democratic rights of citizens by ensuring that elections could proceed while still offering an alternative choice that preserves participation and contestation.

The Dilemma of the Empty Column Concept: Contested but Uncontested

The emergence of the empty column within elections dominated by single candidates is frequently perceived as a more democratic mechanism because it provides voters with an alternative choice. The empty column forces single candidates to engage in political mobilization in order to secure electoral victory, even though they face no substantive competitor. This pattern aligns with Tawakal and Tawakkal (2017), who argue that although single candidates often possess a very high probability of winning, they still establish campaign teams, conduct extensive outreach, and spend substantial financial resources, including the use of money politics, to maintain voter support. These practices illustrate that single candidates do not feel entirely secure. The victory of the empty column in the 2018 Makassar Pilkada confirms the presence of contestation. Even in elections with only one candidate, a form of opposition remains and continues to threaten the candidate's chances of winning. Thus, the absence of a candidate does not necessarily mean the absence of resistance. This resistance is symbolically represented through the empty column, which provides an alternative outlet for voters who reject the candidate.

In this sense, elections that pit a single candidate against the empty column may be considered more democratic than systems of automatic acclamation used in Singapore, Iceland, Canada, the United Kingdom, Scotland, and the United States, where a candidate without opposition wins by default (Nazriyah, 2016). Within the Indonesian context, the presence of the empty column still provides space for opposition and therefore preserves at least a nominal degree of contestation.

Both the candidate pair and the empty column are legally recognized as valid choices. Ideally, the rights and obligations of the candidate pair should therefore be equivalent to those of the empty column, as reflected in the technical regulations issued by the General Election Commission. However, since the 2018 simultaneous Pilkada, no detailed technical regulation has been issued to govern the empty column as an electoral option equal to the candidate pair

(Buhanuddin, 2018). The absence of clear and comprehensive regulations produces an electoral dilemma. In principle, the empty column introduces contestation because it offers a competitive alternative. In practice, however, the lack of political and institutional infrastructure to support the empty column renders the election effectively uncontested. Although both the candidate pair and the empty column appear as participants in the election, only the candidate possesses the legal and institutional recognition needed to participate fully. As a result, elections tend to operate in an uncontested manner, creating significant challenges for electoral implementation.

During the pre-election period, regulatory gaps become particularly evident. Law Number 10 of 2016 does not stipulate how the empty column may compete on equal terms with a single candidate. The candidate pair is permitted to form a structured and officially registered campaign team, mobilize supporters, and conduct political outreach. In contrast, the empty column is not afforded equivalent institutional mechanisms. Campaigns are formally permitted only for candidates, political parties, registered campaign teams, and certified volunteers. Supporters of the empty column therefore lack legal standing to conduct campaign activities because the empty column is not formally categorized as an electoral participant.

In practice, various regions have witnessed the emergence of empty column supporters who attempt to mobilize voters, because many citizens reject the candidate pair. Effective mobilization requires campaigning. Empirical evidence demonstrates that empty column supporters have conducted campaign-like activities, including the formation of organized groups similar to campaign teams (Widyasari et al., 2019; Harianto et al., 2020). In the 2017 Pati Pilkada, for instance, the group Aliansi Kawal Demokrasi Pati attempted to organize empty column campaign activities but were denied permission by electoral and security institutions on the grounds that no regulation authorized empty column campaigns (Darmawan, 2017).

In contrast, the 2018 Pilkada in Lebak Regency allowed the group Bajukoko to declare support for the empty column and install banners in public spaces once approval for public gatherings was obtained from the police. These activities were categorized as public outreach rather than campaign activities because only candidate pairs are legally allowed to campaign. The Regional Election Commission and Election Supervisory Body refrained from regulating such activities, arguing that they had no authority over empty column supporters. Monitoring focused solely on ensuring that the content did not violate prohibitions related to ethnicity, religion, race, or inter-group relations (Mahpudin, 2021).

These inconsistencies in regulatory interpretation reveal significant legal deficiencies. The empty column is a constitutionally valid choice and should therefore be treated as an electoral participant. Yet supporters of the empty column lack adequate legal standing to engage in campaign activities. This has resulted in inconsistent practices across regions. In some areas, empty column outreach is permitted, while in others it is restricted. The absence of a detailed legal framework prevents the empty column from competing on equal terms with the candidate pair.

A similar dilemma arises during the voter information stage. The General Election Commission is responsible for public outreach, which includes providing information on electoral procedures and educating voters about the profiles and programs of candidates. In elections involving a single candidate competing against the empty column, the Commission is expected to treat both options equally. However, in practice, outreach has been insufficient, and many voters do not fully understand the concept of the empty column or the implications of its victory. Studies by Kurniawan and Wawanudin (2019) in Tangerang and Mara (2018) in

Jayapura show that insufficient outreach has led to low voter understanding and declining participation rates. In Lebak, some voters perceived the empty column as a taboo choice, equating it with selecting a non-human entity (Mahpudin, 2021). These findings highlight the inadequacy of public outreach regarding the empty column.

Regulatory shortcomings also shape the voting and post-election stages. During voting, single candidates are supported by official witnesses and campaign teams who supervise polling stations. The empty column has no such representation. Although monitoring is carried out by the Election Supervisory Body, the absence of empty column representatives makes it difficult to detect violations that may disadvantage the empty column. Law Number 10 of 2016 does not provide mechanisms for empty column representatives to monitor polling stations. This imbalance creates a structural vulnerability that may enable electoral irregularities, particularly if supervisory officials fail to enforce strict oversight.

The 2018 Makassar Pilkada demonstrates the severity of this issue. According to Media Indonesia (2020), electoral regulations on violations governed by Regulation Number 13 of 2018 only apply to candidate pairs, making it difficult to investigate violations that affect the empty column. The absence of legally recognized representatives for the empty column prevented effective follow-up by supervisory officials. As a result, the very mechanism intended to create contestation was unable to function substantively.

The dilemma continues in the post-election dispute process. Supporters of the empty column lack legal standing to submit electoral disputes to the Constitutional Court, unlike candidate pairs who are explicitly recognized as eligible petitioners. In the 2017 Pati Pilkada, empty column supporters filed a dispute petition alleging extensive irregularities. However, the Court rejected the petition because the group was not legally recognized as a participant or certified observer (Widyasari et al., 2019). This illustrates how the absence of legal standing reinforces an uncontested electoral environment.

Because of these regulatory weaknesses, single candidates almost always win. Between 2017 and 2020, no Constitutional Court petitions filed by empty column supporters were accepted. The concentration of political, social, and economic power in single candidates creates further imbalances, especially when legal protections for the empty column are lacking. Such conditions undermine electoral fairness and weaken democratic accountability. As Konisky and Ueda (2010) note, candidates who run without meaningful competition tend to perform worse in office than those who face competitive elections. This pattern is consistent with the Indonesian experience, where regulatory bias during the pre-election period creates opportunities for unhealthy electoral practices.

Democracy requires contestation to ensure that candidates who occupy strategic political offices remain accountable to voters (Cain, 2011). Although the empty column was designed to provide contestation between single candidates and an alternative, it has not yet produced substantive contestation in practice. The concept therefore remains structurally contested in principle but uncontested in implementation.

The Existence of the Empty Column: Strengthened or Abolished?

An examination of Indonesia's local elections since the introduction of the empty column in 2017 shows that the empty column has almost always been defeated. The sole exception, the 2018 Makassar election, required a large and sustained grassroots movement driven by widespread public dissatisfaction with political parties and the candidate. Even in that case, allegations of electoral violations involving the candidate pair could not be processed by electoral authorities or the Constitutional Court because the legal framework does not recognize mechanisms to protect the interests of the empty column. These patterns indicate

that substantial reform of the Pilkada design is necessary. The empty column has encountered obstacles at every stage of the electoral process, including the pre-election period, voting day, and post-election dispute settlement. These obstacles weaken its ability to foster substantive contestation.

If the empty column is to remain a mechanism for preserving contestation, its existence must be supported by detailed regulations that address all stages of the electoral process, including outreach, campaigning, electoral violations, and dispute resolution. Such a framework is essential if the empty column is intended to serve as a meaningful alternative for voters who do not wish to support the candidate pair. Under strengthened regulations, the empty column would provide voters with an opportunity to seek alternative leadership when they reject a candidate, which would make contestation more equitable. This is especially relevant when candidates originate from political dynasties, display unsatisfactory performance as incumbents, or lack adequate leadership capacity. Cases from Makassar, Pati, and Lebak demonstrate substantial voter resistance under such circumstances (Darmawan, 2017; Widyasari et al., 2019).

However, if the empty column functions only as a formal mechanism while empirically producing uncontested elections, its continued existence becomes questionable. Under such conditions, the empty column may be eliminated and replaced with a referendum model in which voters indicate agreement or disagreement with the candidate pair. This approach would provide greater procedural clarity. The current arrangement is ambiguous because the empty column appears alongside candidates on the ballot, implying equal status as an electoral participant. Yet the legal framework does not explicitly recognize the empty column as a formal participant. This inconsistency undermines the principle of equality in contestation.

We also recommend establishing a minimum vote requirement for candidate pairs to secure victory. The specific percentage can be discussed through further policy deliberation. Such a rule would require candidates to work more actively and creatively in developing policy proposals and persuading voters. It would also encourage the General Election Commission to enhance voter education efforts so that participation is not merely a formality. Currently, elections require only fifty percent plus one of valid votes for victory. This rule becomes problematic if voter turnout is extremely low relative to the number of registered voters. For instance, a region with five hundred thousand registered voters may experience participation of only five thousand voters. If the candidate pair wins with fifty percent plus one of these votes, the legitimacy of the result would be questionable because the margin of authority would be extremely small.

Conclusion

The presence of the empty column in Indonesia's electoral discourse generates a fundamental dilemma that can be described as contested but uncontested. On one hand, the empty column is intended to preserve electoral contestation, sustain voter participation, and protect citizens' political rights. Its existence prevents single candidates from automatically securing victory, since voters may express opposition through the empty column, as shown in the 2018 Makassar election where the empty column defeated the candidate pair. In this respect, elections with only one candidate retain the possibility of political contestation. On the other hand, the existing institutional and regulatory framework reveals that the empty column ultimately produces an uncontested electoral environment because it lacks clear and detailed regulations that ensure equal access, authority, and facilities comparable to those granted to candidate pairs. This regulatory gap creates practical challenges, evidenced by the difficulties faced by empty column supporters in conducting campaign activities, reporting electoral

violations, and submitting petitions to the Constitutional Court, since they are not formally recognized as electoral participants. Yet the empty column is a valid electoral choice and should therefore possess equal rights and legal standing. To resolve this dilemma, this article recommends that if the empty column is to be maintained as a mechanism for enhancing contestation and providing voters with an alternative political option, it must be strengthened through comprehensive regulation; however, if it functions merely as a symbolic formality, it may be more appropriate to replace it with a referendum-style mechanism in which voters indicate agreement or disagreement with the sole candidate while ensuring that voter choice remains central.

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