



Sitti Sutinah Suhardi's Political Communication Strategy in Defeating the Incumbent in the 2020 Mamuju Regional Elections

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the political communication strategy employed by Sitti Sutinah Suhardi in defeating the incumbent candidate in the 2020 Regional Head Election (Pilkada) of Mamuju Regency, Indonesia. The study is motivated by the phenomenon in which a challenger candidate with relatively lower initial popularity and electability was able to overcome the structural advantages typically possessed by an incumbent. This condition indicates that political communication strategies play a crucial role in shaping public political preferences in local electoral contests. This research adopts a qualitative approach using a case study method. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with key informants involved in the campaign process, observations, and documentation related to political communication activities during the campaign period. The theoretical framework applied in this study includes Aristotle's rhetorical theory ethos, pathos, and logos as well as Nimmo's political communication model that emphasizes the interaction between political actors, political media, and political publics. The findings reveal that Sitti Sutinah Suhardi's political communication strategy was implemented through three main stages: planning, implementation, and evaluation. This study concludes that the success of a challenger candidate in defeating an incumbent is not solely determined by political resources or structural advantages, but also by the ability to design and implement effective, adaptive, and context-sensitive political communication strategies.

Introduction

Elections are a celebration of democracy in which the state grants citizens the right to determine who is entitled to become head of state/region and representative of the people. The definition of elections according to Law Number 8 of 2012 is a means of implementing people's sovereignty carried out directly, generally, freely, secretly, honestly, and fairly in the Unitary State of Indonesia based on Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia. In the book Election Law in Indonesia (2023) Elections as expressed by Harahap & Miharja (2024) can be interpreted as an instrument formulated as: (1) a mechanism for delegating part of the sovereignty from the people to election participants and/or candidates for members of the DPR, DPD, DPRD, President/Vice President and Regional Head/Deputy Regional Head to make and implement political decisions in accordance with the will of the people; (2) a mechanism for political change regarding the pattern and direction of public policy, and/or regarding elite circulation, periodically and orderly; (3) a mechanism for transferring various differences and conflicting interests from the community to legislative and executive institutions for open and civilized discussion and decision-making (Sabrina, 2024; Agoes,

2025). In addition to Iriani et al. (2023) also stated that elections are a method used to democratically elect representatives of the people. Suparto et al. (2024) approach stems from the concept of popular sovereignty through a representative system, also known as representative democracy. In practice, the people's representatives, who serve in a representative body called parliament, exercise popular sovereignty. These representatives act on behalf of the people, and these representatives determine the nature and method of government, as well as the goals to be achieved, both in the long and relatively short term (Tobing & Astutik, 2023; Fauziah & Esfandiari, 2024). For these representatives to truly act on behalf of the people, they must be determined by the people themselves, namely through general elections (Zhou & Ma, 2024). Considering the various definitions above, it can be concluded that elections represent popular sovereignty, a legal framework that involves various elements of society in the country in question, providing the widest possible access to fulfill the people's rights to establish a state based on law. In other words, elections are a means for the people to exercise sovereignty and constitute a democratic institution.

Regional Head Elections are a manifestation of democracy that allows the public to directly elect their regional heads, including governors, mayors, and regents. In the book *Legal Problems in Regional Head Elections* by Umasangaji (2023), Article 1 Paragraph (4) of Law Number 22 of 2007 explicitly defines regional elections as follows: "Regional Head and Deputy Regional Head Elections are elections to directly elect regional heads and deputy regional heads within the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia based on Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia." With these regional elections, the state grants autonomy to residents, as previously, under the New Order, regional heads were determined centrally or with the approval of the central government. In the context of electoral political contestation, a candidate's success in winning over voters is determined not only by their vision and work program but also depends heavily on their ability to convey political messages strategically, strategically, and contextually (Fadillah, 2024; Syahril et al., 2024; Anisyah & Harahap, 2024; Sianipar & Pinem, 2025). This is where political communication becomes crucial, serving as a key instrument in building image, influencing public opinion, and mobilizing electoral support. In general, a political communication strategy is the systematic and directed process of planning and implementing communication by political actors to achieve specific political goals, particularly within the framework of a campaign (Denton et al., 2023; Ranjan & Upadhyay, 2024).

According to Wolfsfeld (2022), political communication is a form of communication that carries political content, takes place in the public sphere, and is intended to influence the political actions of others. Political communication strategy encompasses various elements, from determining key messages, audience segmentation, media selection, to managing public image and issues (Pezzullo & Cox, 2025). According to Davis (2023), political communication is any message deliberately crafted to influence the distribution or use of power in society. Meanwhile, Klinger et al. (2023), defines political communication as the means and implications by which politicians attempt to communicate their messages to skeptical and disengaged voters. Foster emphasizes political communication more on the issue of choosing and being chosen in elections. Based on the two opinions above, it can be concluded that political communication is the art of communication aimed at gaining influence. In its implementation, political communication strategies cannot be separated from three main components: the sender (source), the message (message), and the delivery medium (channel). These three components work within an interrelated theoretical framework to produce a persuasive effect on the target audience (Druckman, 2022; Zarouali et al., 2022; Pfaff & Schmitt, 2023). Effective political communication is communication that bridges the political interests of candidates with public aspirations, while adapting campaign messages to the

sociocultural and psychological context of voters. Regional Head Elections are a crucial arena in Indonesia's local democratic system, reflecting not only the dynamics of electoral politics but also the primary platform for the contestation of political communication strategies between candidates (Falah, 2025; Sufirman & Kambo, 2025). One Interesting Phenomenon in Pilkada Is When a challenger successfully defeats an incumbent, who theoretically possesses structural advantages, resources, and a higher level of popularity. This success is often inseparable from the candidate's ability to design and execute an effective and adaptive political communication strategy to the local sociopolitical context. In the context of the 2020 Mamuju Regency Pilkada, Sitti Sutinah Suhardi's victory over the incumbent is a case worthy of academic analysis.

As a first-time female candidate for Regent, Sitti Sutinah Suhardi's success not only reflects a new dynamic in local politics but also serves as a concrete example of the effectiveness of political communication in mobilizing mass support, shaping image, and managing public perception amidst fierce electoral competition. This sets a precedent for the significant impact of political communication efforts. Indopoling Network survey data conducted in 2019 to assess the electability potential of prospective candidates in the 2020 Mamuju regional elections shows that from the start, Sitti Sutinah Suhardi did not receive much attention. To understand political communication strategies in regional elections, analysis can be carried out using Aristotle's Classical Rhetoric approach, which emphasizes the importance of three main elements: ethos (credibility), pathos (emotion), and logos (logic). According to (Arisa, 2025; Subedi, 2025), the effectiveness of persuasion depends on how a communicator establishes moral authority (ethos), resonates emotionally with the audience (pathos), and delivers rational and structured arguments (logos).

Sitti Sutinah Suhardi, in this case, successfully utilized all three, both through her personal narrative as a representative of a young and progressive woman and through the delivery of a structured work program that addresses the needs of the grassroots community. The approach of Political Communication by Sianturi & Megasari (2023) states that political communication is a symbolic process in which political meaning is created, maintained, and transformed through verbal and nonverbal messages. In practice, Sutinah uses various communication media from face-to-face campaigns and social media to interpersonal communication strategies based on family and local community networks to convey her political message. This aligns with the concept of integrated political communication, where candidates don't rely solely on a single communication channel but instead orchestrate multiple channels to reach different voter segments (Denton et al., 2023). The phenomenon of Sutinah's victory can also be analyzed through Agenda-Setting (Yunita et al., 2025), which explains how media including social media and local media play a crucial role in shaping public issue priorities.

The success of Sutinah's team in framing local issues such as public services, women's empowerment, and clean governance in their campaign demonstrates how communication strategies are used to manage discourse and shift the public's focus from the incumbent's superiority to the changes offered by the new candidate. This also demonstrates the ability to understand political communication on social media. According to Okechukwu (2023) research, *The Use of social media as a Political Communication Tool*, states that social media has the power to influence public opinion. Gathering support through social media has become a faster way to convey messages. Sutinah Suhardi's victory becomes even more significant when viewed in the context of Mamuju Regency, where kinship and patron-client politics remain the norm. The success of a non-incumbent candidate in defeating established power networks indicates the power of political communication strategies that appeal not only to the rational, but also to the emotional and symbolic aspects of voters.

Method

Research Approach and Design

This study employs a qualitative research approach utilizing a descriptive case study design. The qualitative approach was selected because the objective of this research is not to measure variables quantitatively but rather to understand, interpret, and explain the political communication strategies employed by Sitti Sutinah Suhardi during the 2020 Mamuju Regional Election. Qualitative research enables researchers to explore social phenomena in their natural settings and to uncover the meanings attached to actions, interactions, and experiences from the perspectives of the actors involved. Qualitative research produces descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words and observable behavior, allowing researchers to obtain a holistic and contextual understanding of social reality.

A descriptive case study design was adopted because the research focuses on a particular political phenomenon, namely the victory of a challenger candidate over an incumbent candidate in a local electoral contest. The case study method facilitates an intensive and comprehensive investigation of contemporary phenomena within their real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly evident. Through this design, the study seeks to examine how political communication strategies were planned, implemented, and evaluated throughout the campaign process, as well as how these strategies contributed to shaping voter perceptions and electoral outcomes. The case study approach is particularly appropriate because political communication is embedded within social, cultural, and political contexts that require in-depth exploration rather than statistical generalization.

Research Paradigm

This research is guided by the constructivist paradigm, which assumes that social reality is socially constructed through human interaction, communication, and shared interpretation. Within this perspective, political reality is not viewed as an objective and fixed phenomenon but as a product of meaning-making processes among political actors, campaign teams, media institutions, community leaders, and voters. The constructivist paradigm is relevant to this study because political communication strategies involve the creation, negotiation, and dissemination of meanings intended to influence public perceptions and political behavior.

Through this paradigm, political communication is understood as a process through which candidates construct credibility, mobilize emotions, articulate policy solutions, and establish symbolic relationships with the electorate. Consequently, the researcher seeks to understand how these meanings were produced and interpreted throughout the electoral process rather than merely examining communication as a transmission of information. The constructivist perspective therefore provides an appropriate philosophical foundation for analyzing the dynamic interaction between political actors, communication media, and the public within the context of local electoral competition.

Research Setting

The study was conducted in Mamuju Regency, West Sulawesi Province, Indonesia, which served as the setting for the 2020 Regional Head Election. Mamuju Regency was selected because it presents a significant case in local political communication studies, particularly regarding the successful electoral performance of a challenger candidate against an incumbent who possessed structural and political advantages. The political environment of Mamuju is characterized by strong social networks, kinship relations, local elite influence, and increasing

utilization of digital communication platforms, making it a relevant context for examining contemporary political communication practices. Data collection was undertaken in both physical and digital environments. Physical research settings included the official residence of the Regent of Mamuju, the private residence of Sitti Sutinah Suhardi, campaign-related venues, and locations where direct interactions between the candidate and community members occurred. In addition, digital spaces such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, and other social media platforms were included as research settings because they functioned as strategic channels for campaign communication and voter engagement. The inclusion of both offline and online settings allowed for a comprehensive examination of communication activities across multiple platforms and audience segments.

Research Participants and Informants

The participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique commonly employed in qualitative research to identify individuals possessing relevant knowledge and experience related to the phenomenon under investigation. The selection of participants was based on their direct involvement in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of political communication activities during the 2020 Mamuju Regional Election.

The primary informant was Sitti Sutinah Suhardi as the central political actor whose communication strategies constitute the focus of the study. Additional informants included campaign managers, members of the digital communication team, political consultants, community leaders, religious leaders, local journalists, political observers, and selected voters who actively participated in or closely followed the electoral process. These participants were chosen because they could provide diverse perspectives regarding campaign communication strategies, voter engagement mechanisms, media utilization, and public responses to campaign messages. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning that no substantial new information emerged from subsequent interviews.

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary research instrument responsible for collecting, interpreting, and analyzing data. Researchers in qualitative studies function simultaneously as planners, observers, interviewers, analysts, and interpreters throughout the research process. Consequently, the quality and depth of the findings depend significantly on the researcher's ability to interact with participants, understand contextual factors, and interpret meanings accurately.

In this study, the researcher actively engaged in conducting interviews, observing communication activities, examining campaign documents, and analyzing social media content. During interviews, the researcher adopted a flexible and responsive approach that allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences and perspectives. During observations, the researcher systematically recorded communication practices, interaction patterns, and contextual factors relevant to the study objectives. To ensure objectivity and minimize personal bias, reflexive practices were employed throughout the research process, including maintaining field notes, reflective journals, and analytical memos documenting methodological decisions and emerging interpretations.

Data Sources

The study utilizes both primary and secondary sources of data to ensure comprehensive understanding and analytical depth. Primary data were obtained directly from individuals involved in the electoral process through interviews, observations, and digital communication

analysis. These data include participants' experiences, perceptions, interpretations, and evaluations regarding the communication strategies employed throughout the campaign. Primary data also include campaign speeches, public statements, social media posts, campaign advertisements, photographs, videos, and other communication materials generated during the election period.

Secondary data were collected from books, scholarly journal articles, research reports, electoral commission documents, campaign archives, survey reports, online news articles, government publications, and other relevant sources. These materials were utilized to provide contextual background, support theoretical interpretation, and facilitate comparison between empirical findings and existing literature. The integration of primary and secondary data enhanced the richness and credibility of the analysis.

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection was conducted through four complementary techniques: in-depth interviews, observation, documentation, and digital observation. In-depth interviews constituted the primary method of data collection. Semi-structured interview guides were developed to ensure consistency across interviews while maintaining flexibility for participants to discuss issues considered important from their perspectives. Interview questions focused on communication planning, campaign messaging, media strategies, voter engagement approaches, communication challenges, and evaluations of campaign effectiveness. All interviews were conducted face-to-face or through digital communication platforms when necessary, recorded with participant consent, and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Observation was employed to examine communication practices directly within their natural settings. The researcher observed campaign activities, public meetings, community visits, and interactions between the candidate and voters. Observation enabled the researcher to capture communication behaviors, symbolic actions, audience reactions, and contextual factors that could not be fully understood through interviews alone. Detailed field notes were maintained throughout the observation process.

Documentation analysis was conducted to collect and examine materials relevant to political communication activities. These documents included campaign brochures, posters, speeches, policy documents, photographs, videos, media reports, electoral data, and official campaign publications. Documentary evidence served to corroborate information obtained from interviews and observations while providing additional insight into communication strategies and message construction. Digital observation was conducted to analyze campaign communication within social media environments. This process involved systematic examination of social media content, audience engagement patterns, campaign narratives, visual communication strategies, and interactions between the candidate and online audiences. Given the growing significance of digital media in political campaigns, digital observation provided valuable evidence regarding contemporary forms of political communication and voter mobilization.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis was conducted using the interactive model developed, consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. These analytical activities were carried out continuously and simultaneously throughout the research process rather than being performed sequentially after data collection had been completed. Data condensation involved selecting, simplifying, organizing, and transforming raw data obtained from interviews, observations, and documents into meaningful analytical units. During this stage, transcripts and field notes were carefully reviewed, coded, and categorized according to themes

relevant to political communication strategies. The second stage involved data display, whereby organized information was presented through thematic narratives, matrices, tables, conceptual diagrams, and analytical summaries. Data displays facilitated systematic comparison among sources and enabled the identification of recurring patterns, relationships, and emerging themes. The final stage involved drawing conclusions and verifying interpretations. Throughout the analytical process, emerging findings were continuously compared with available evidence and theoretical perspectives to ensure validity and consistency. Verification was conducted through repeated examination of data sources, cross-checking among participants, and comparison with relevant literature. This iterative analytical process enabled the development of a comprehensive and theoretically grounded understanding of political communication strategies in the studied electoral context.

Thematic Coding Procedures

To strengthen analytical rigor, this study employed thematic coding as a systematic procedure for identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning across the dataset. Coding was conducted manually and involved multiple stages of analysis. The first stage consisted of open coding, during which significant statements, concepts, and communication practices were identified and assigned preliminary labels. The second stage involved axial coding, in which related codes were grouped into broader categories reflecting meaningful relationships among concepts. The final stage involved selective coding, whereby categories were integrated into overarching themes explaining the dynamics of political communication strategies. Major themes included ethos construction, pathos mobilization, logos articulation, interpersonal communication, social media utilization, network mobilization, campaign adaptation, voter engagement, and communication effectiveness. These themes provided an analytical structure for understanding how communication strategies contributed to electoral success.

Result and Discussion

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of how political communication strategies contributed to Sitti Sutinah Suhardi's success in defeating the incumbent candidate in the 2020 Mamuju Regional Election. The analysis focuses on three interconnected dimensions: the planning of political communication strategies, the implementation of communication activities through various channels, and the effectiveness of these strategies in influencing voter perceptions and electoral outcomes. Drawing on Aristotle's rhetorical framework and Nimmo's political communication model, the results reveal how credibility, emotional engagement, rational policy arguments, interpersonal communication, digital media utilization, and social network mobilization were strategically integrated to build political legitimacy and secure electoral support.

Sitti Sutinah Suhardi's Political Communication Strategy Planning

Political communication strategy planning is a fundamental phase in the electoral contestation process. It is at this stage that political actors formulate message construction, build candidate images, and design communication approaches tailored to the socio-political characteristics of voters. In the context of the 2020 Mamuju Regency Pilkada, Sitti Sutinah Suhardi's political communication strategy planning demonstrates a systematic effort to build political legitimacy while challenging the incumbent's symbolic and structural dominance. The analysis of this planning stage utilizes Aristotle's classical rhetorical framework, which emphasizes three key elements of political persuasion: ethos, pathos, and logos. This approach is relevant because political communication is essentially a rhetorical practice aimed at influencing public attitudes and political behavior through the construction of persuasive messages, which are illustrated in three main areas: 1. Ethos Construction (Legitimacy of Leadership and Candidate

Credibility), 2. Pathos Mobilization (Producing Emotional Resonance with Voters), 3. Logos Articulation (Program Rationalization and Policy Argumentation).

From an Aristotelian perspective, ethos refers to the credibility of the communicator, which forms the basis for the audience to trust the message. In the case of Sitti Sutinah Suhardi, ethos development became a strategic aspect, given that she faced two challenges simultaneously: her status as a challenger candidate and public perception of female leadership in a local political context still influenced by a strong patriarchal culture. Research findings indicate that the ethos development strategy was implemented through two main channels. First, through narratives of bureaucratic competence and technocratic capacity. Bureaucratic experience is constructed as evidence of administrative capacity and understanding of regional governance.

This aligns with the interview results of informant 1, who asserted,

"I want to show that I have sufficient experience in bureaucracy." (Informant 2, Code: ETH-1 – Experience & Competence)

This experience is constructed within political communication as evidence of administrative capacity and understanding of regional governance. Second, ethos is also built through the construction of a symbolic identity as a progressive young female leader. In this context, gender identity is not positioned as a weakness, but rather as a political differentiation that offers a new perspective on regional leadership. This was conveyed directly by the team leader, "In fact, we raise women's issues as a strength, not a weakness." (Informant 2, Code: ETH-2 – Leadership Image)

To construct this symbolic differentiation, the Sitti Sutinah Suhardi Digital Communication Team designed the Perspektif digital bulletin. An image-building bulletin distributed through social media networks. This strategy aligns with Nimmo's view that political communication often utilizes identity symbols to build psychological closeness between candidates and voters. Thus, ethos building not only serves to increase the candidate's credibility, but also to create political differentiation against the incumbent who dominates the local power structure.

Mobilizing Pathos: Producing Emotional Resonance with Voters

The second element of Aristotelian rhetoric is pathos, the communicator's ability to evoke emotions in the audience, thereby creating an emotional attachment to the message. In political communication, pathos is often used to build symbolic solidarity between candidates and voters. The research shows that pathos mobilization in Sutinah Suhardi's communication strategy was carried out through a narrative of political change and new hope for the people of Mamuju. "I want people to feel that there is new hope for Mamuju." (Informant 1 – Code: PAT-1 – Narrative of Change) This narrative was packaged by the team into the campaign slogan Mamuju KEREN (Creative, Educational, Friendly, and Comfortable), which emphasizes a more progressive and inclusive vision for regional development. Its flagship program is the KMK (Mamuju Keren Card).

"We designed Mamuju Keren as a symbol of hope and change that is easy for people to remember." (Informant 2 – Code: PAT-2 – Campaign Slogan)

Sitti Sutinah Suhardi's selection of the Cool Mamuju Card (KMK) program as one of her flagship programs in the 2020 political contest in Mamuju Regency is inextricably linked to the need to deliver policies that are not only populist but also provide solutions to fundamental community issues, particularly those related to targeted aid and limited socioeconomic data. Her primary inspiration, however, was the then-trendy cards used as campaign tools, such as those used by Jokowi in the Jakarta gubernatorial election. The Mamuju Keren Card (KMK) is designed as an integrated service program that serves as a community database for distributing

various forms of assistance, such as healthcare services, support for MSMEs, and assistance in the agricultural and plantation sectors.

This program is supported by an app-based data collection system administered directly by officers to residents' homes, resulting in more accurate and up-to-date data. Thus, the KMK serves not only as a service card but also as an instrument for systematically collecting and managing community socio-economic data. These findings demonstrate a pattern that this flagship program goes beyond simply helping but also builds a system that integrates data and services within a single policy framework. This demonstrates that the approach used is structural, not partial. This program is designed to address a classic problem in regional governance: inaccurate targeting of aid due to weak databases. The selection of the KMK as a flagship program reflects an effort to shift the policy paradigm from simply distributing aid to strengthening a data-driven public service system. In this context, data becomes both an instrument of power and a tool for policy legitimacy. Candidates not only offer programs but also propose new mechanisms for managing community welfare.

From the perspective of political communication theory, particularly the concept of logos in Aristotle's rhetoric, KMK functions as a powerful form of rational argumentation. This program provides concrete answers to the problems facing society, thereby increasing voter confidence in the candidate's leadership capacity. Sociologically, this strategy can be understood as an attempt to create an alternative political frame that positions the candidate as a representative of change to the status quo of the previous administration. Within the framework of agenda-setting theory, this framing strategy serves to shift the public's focus from the incumbent's structural advantages to the issues of change offered by the challenger candidate. The pathos approach is also reinforced through interpersonal communication practices during face-to-face campaign activities. Direct interaction with the public serves not only as a means of conveying political messages but also as a medium for building emotional closeness that strengthens voter identification with the candidate. Articulation of Logos: Program Rationalization and Policy Arguments

The logos element in Aristotle's rhetoric refers to the use of rational argumentation based on logic and empirical evidence. In the context of political campaigns, logos is usually manifested through the presentation of work programs, development visions, and policy arguments that can rationally convince voters. Research findings indicate that Sutinah's political communication strategy also contains a strong logos dimension. This is evident in the delivery of development programs focused on improving public services, strengthening the community's economy, and developing regional infrastructure. Therefore, the MAMUJU KEREN program was born.

"I don't just want to make promises, but programs that are clear and can be felt by the community." (Informant 1 – Code: LOG-1 – Work Program)

The vision and mission formulated by the Sitti Sutinah Suhardi ticket in the 2020 Mamuju Regency Pilkada were not formulated normatively or merely as a political formality but rather constituted a program construction based on the real needs of the community and the objective conditions of Mamuju Regency. This is reflected in the use of the acronym "KEREN" (Creative, Educational, Friendly, Energetic, and Comfortable), which serves not only as a campaign slogan but also as a conceptual framework for formulating the direction of regional development. Each element of the "COOL" concept represents strategic sectors that are a primary focus in regional development. The Creative dimension emphasizes strengthening productive economic sectors such as agriculture, fisheries, MSMEs, and the development of locally based industries. This demonstrates that the vision and mission were designed in

response to the economic structure of Mamuju's community, which still relies on the primary sector and micro-enterprises.

Therefore, the program's orientation toward strengthening research-based production and marketing and supporting digital MSMEs reflects efforts to transform the local economy toward a more modern and competitive system. Furthermore, the educational dimension demonstrates a commitment to human resource development by improving access to and the quality of education. Programs such as scholarships up to doctoral level, addressing out-of-school children, and strengthening village literacy demonstrate that this vision and mission were formulated as a response to fundamental issues in the education sector, particularly regarding disparities in access to and quality of education in the regions. In this context, education is viewed not merely as a service sector, but as a strategic instrument for long-term development. The Friendly dimension within this vision and mission also demonstrates a development approach based on the social and cultural values of the community. Programs such as strengthening traditional institutions, developing religious tourism, and creating green open spaces reflect efforts to maintain social harmony while strengthening local identity. This indicates that the formulated vision and mission are not solely oriented toward physical development, but also social and cultural development.

In the Energetic aspect, the program focus is directed at improving health services and strengthening the youth sector. Programs such as "1 Village 1 Ambulance," "1 Village 1 Midwife," and improving the quality of health services demonstrate that this vision and mission were formulated in response to limited access to health services, particularly in rural areas. Thus, this dimension emphasizes that health development is a priority in improving the quality of life for the community. Meanwhile, the Comfort dimension emphasizes infrastructure development and regional spatial planning. Programs for the construction of roads, bridges, drainage, clean water, and modern waste management demonstrate that this vision and mission were formulated to address fundamental issues related to infrastructure and the environment. This reflects efforts to create livable, safe, and supportive regional conditions for economic activity. This policy argument is positioned not only as a political promise but also as a form of criticism of the previous administration's performance.

"We show what hasn't been achieved and what solutions we offer." (Informant 2 – Code: LOG-3 – Criticism of the incumbent).

Thus, logos serves as a tool to build rational legitimacy for the leadership alternative offered by the candidate. The integration of ethos, pathos, and logos in political communication planning demonstrates that Sutinah's campaign strategy does not rely solely on one dimension of persuasion but rather utilizes a combination of various rhetorical elements to strengthen the effectiveness of political communication. The research results show that during the planning stage, Sitti Sutinah Suhardi's political communication strategy focused not only on program delivery but also on constructing a self-image as an alternative candidate to the incumbent. Based on interview data and campaign documentation, the candidate consistently presented herself as an energetic young woman, close to the community, and possessing adequate leadership capacity.

These findings suggest a pattern in which candidate credibility is not solely based on formal experience but also through identity symbolization relevant to voters' psychological needs. Identity as a woman and representation of a new generation are utilized as differentiation strategies against the incumbent. Interpretatively, this suggests that the communication strategy designed is not only informative but also symbolic, with the goal of building alternative legitimacy amidst the dominance of the incumbent power structure. The candidate's credibility is constructed through a narrative that builds public trust and provides new hope for voters.

This finding aligns with the concept of ethos in Aristotle's rhetorical theory, which emphasizes the importance of the communicator's character in the persuasion process.

However, in the context of this research, ethos is not simply interpreted as a personal quality, but rather as a social construct formed through political communication. These results also reinforce the research findings of (Pratiwi, 2024; Hasibuan et al., 2025), which stated that political communication strategies in regional head elections are implemented not only by the candidate but also by the campaign team, using simple and easily understood messages. Nevertheless, this research demonstrates both a difference and a novelty, in that the focus of the strategy is not solely on teamwork, but also on how the female candidate's personal figure is constructed as the center of political communication.

Furthermore, in terms of emotional appeal, research data shows that campaign messages tend to emphasize narratives of change, hope, and community engagement. Direct interaction with voters and the use of campaign slogans are crucial in building this emotional connection. From these findings, a pattern can be identified that the communication strategy employed places greater emphasis on mobilizing emotions than on direct political confrontation. Messages are delivered using a persuasive approach that taps into voters' emotional well-being, thereby building a psychological bond between the candidate and the community. This pattern suggests that emotions are a crucial instrument in influencing voting behavior. Voters consider not only rational aspects but also respond to feelings of representation and hope fostered through political communication. This aligns with the concept of pathos in Aristotle's rhetoric, which states that the success of persuasion is greatly influenced by the communicator's ability to evoke emotions in the audience.

On the other hand, in terms of rational appeal, data shows that campaign programs are presented as solutions to problems faced by the community. Programs are delivered in simple, easy-to-understand language and often juxtaposed with actual conditions experienced by the community. This finding echoes Mukarom (2022) research, which found that the success of female candidates in regional elections was significantly influenced by a systematic political communication strategy. However, while Pranathi & Kamraju (2023) emphasized teamwork and party structure in mobilizing support, this study suggests that the primary strength lies in the candidate's individual persona as the center of political communication. These findings indicate a pattern of using rational arguments to reinforce emotional messages. Criticism of the incumbent is not delivered directly, but rather through program comparisons and the offering of alternative solutions. Thus, this study demonstrates that effective political communication strategy planning depends not only on team structure but also on the candidate's ability to build a strong symbolic image.

Implementation of Political Communication Strategies

After the planning stage, political communication strategies are then implemented through various communication channels that reach different voter segments. In this study, the implementation of political communication strategies is analyzed using the Nimmo Political Communication Model, which emphasizes the interaction between political actors, political media, and the political public. Research findings indicate that interpersonal communication through face-to-face campaigns is a primary strategy for mobilizing political support. Candidates actively visit various areas in Mamuju Regency to interact directly with the community as part of a political communication approach that emphasizes personal closeness.

"I mostly go directly to the community, because that's the best way to understand and convince them." (Informant 1 – Code: KOM-1 – Face-to-Face Campaign)

In the context of local politics, interpersonal communication is highly significant because social relations are still heavily influenced by personal closeness and traditional social networks. Therefore, the candidate's physical presence at various social and community activities is an important means of building social legitimacy.

"People prefer to be visited in person; they feel more valued." (Informant 2 – Code: KOM-3 – Community Response)

From a political communication perspective, this practice reflects the use of a grassroots campaign strategy, where support mobilization is carried out directly through community social networks. Utilizing Social Media as a New Political Communication Channel

In addition to interpersonal communication, political communication strategies also utilize social media as a channel for disseminating campaign messages. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram are used to document campaign activities, convey political messages, and build interactions with the public.

"We utilize social media to reach a wider audience, especially young people." (Informant 1 – Code: MED-1 – social media).

This use of social media is then strategically managed by the communications team through structured content production. Social media programs include the TikTok Challenge, a competition format where the best content wins prizes, and a podcast on the Facebook fan page featuring an interactive dialogue streaming concept called Real talk. Sutinah Suhardi's media team recognizes TikTok as the most widely used social media platform by millennials and Gen Z, while Facebook is used to target baby boomers and millennials. To further emphasize social media as a new political channel, the declaration of the Sutinah Suhardi and Ado Mas'ud candidate pairs was also conducted virtually, with limited streaming and direct interconnection to each sub-district. The digital programs in this virtual space have been carefully designed by the team.

"We create content that is as engaging as possible and tailored to social media user analysis, so that our content is easily understood and accepted by the public." (Informant 2 - Code: MED-2 - Content strategy)

Furthermore, media management is carried out by a dedicated team responsible for distributing campaign messages.

"There is a media team that focuses on managing all digital campaign content." (Informant 2 - Code: MED-3 - Media team)

From the perspective of modern political communication theory, the use of social media enables disintermediation, a process by which candidates can communicate directly with voters without the intermediary of traditional mass media. This provides a strategic advantage for challenger candidates because it allows them to expand their political communication reach at a relatively lower cost than conventional campaigns. Activating Social Networks and Local Elites

The implementation of political communication strategies also involves activating the social networks of community leaders, religious leaders, and local elites. Within the social structure of Mamuju, these figures have significant influence on shaping public political opinion. Support from local figures not only serves as a channel for disseminating political messages but also as a source of social legitimacy that strengthens the candidate's position in the eyes of the public. Candidates recognize the importance of local figures in building public trust.

"The role of community leaders is crucial, because they are the ones most trusted by the residents." (Informant 1 – Code: JAR-1 – Role of Local Figures)

This was then optimized by the campaign team through a strategic approach to various social groups.

"We actively build political communication with local figures so they can provide support, both morally and by joining the campaign team, and act as a bridge to help connect and convey messages to the public." (Informant 2 – Code: JAR-1).

One well-known community figure in West Sulawesi, representing the Mandar people and with a large following, is Major General Ret. Salim S. Mengga gave his full support. As reported by the online media *Telegraph.id*, Salim S. Mengga said:

"My message to Sutinah is to go all out and don't do things half-heartedly. Compete fairly and avoid bad practices, because the results of the upcoming regional elections will reflect the future of the government and the fate of the Mamuju community. As parents, we certainly support and pray for young people who are as brave as Sutinah."

Salim S. Mengga is a retired military general who served as a member of the Indonesian House of Representatives for the West Sulawesi electoral district for two terms, 2009-2014 and 2014-2019. Known for his piety as a Sayyid and his chivalrous demeanor as a soldier, he successfully served as Deputy Governor of West Sulawesi for the 2024-2029 term. Salim is the son of the Regent of Polewali Mandar, S. Mengga Alatas, and the former chairman of the Mandar Family Association of West Sulawesi (KKMSB). At the beginning of 2026, Salim S. Mengga returned to the Creator's Day. Support from local elites also serves as a source of political legitimacy.

"If a figure like Puang Salim S. Mengga supports him, then his followers will also support him." (Informant 2 – Code: JAR-2 – Elite support).

From the perspective of political communication theory, this phenomenon demonstrates the importance of local political brokers in the process of mobilizing electoral support at the regional level. In the implementation phase, research results indicate that political communication strategies are implemented through a combination of interpersonal communication and media use. Face-to-face campaigning, direct visits to communities, and interactions with local figures are crucial in conveying political messages. The data revealed that interpersonal approaches are a key strategy for building public trust. Direct interaction allows candidates to create an emotional connection that is difficult to achieve through mass media or social media.

These findings demonstrate that, in the context of local politics, face-to-face communication still plays a significant role in influencing people's political choices. Personal closeness is a crucial factor in building voter trust and loyalty. This finding aligns with Nimmo's political communication model, which places political actors, the media, and the public as key elements in the communication process. In this case, direct interaction between candidates and the public is the most effective form of communication in building political relationships.

The use of social media is also part of the communication strategy employed. Social media is used to disseminate campaign information, strengthen the candidate's image, and reach a wider audience. However, research findings indicate that social media is not the primary strategy, but rather a complement to interpersonal communication. This suggests that in the local context, communication effectiveness is still significantly influenced by direct interaction rather than technology-based communication. This finding aligns with research by Suryani (2024), which demonstrated that social media is an effective means of conveying campaign messages directly and interactively.

However, there are significant differences in context: that study was conducted at the national level with figures already possessing high levels of popularity, while this study focuses on local politics with relatively low levels of candidate recognition prior to the contest. Furthermore, when compared to Edison Luttrell (2025) research, which emphasized the use of a political marketing approach in the campaign phase, this study shows that the communication strategies employed were not entirely structured formally in the political marketing phase but rather were more adaptive and contextualized according to field dynamics. Thus, the implementation of the communication strategy in this study demonstrated a combination of traditional (face-to-face) and modern (social media) approaches, with interpersonal communication remaining dominant.

Effectiveness of Political Communication Strategy

The effectiveness of political communication strategy in this study was analyzed by examining changes in electoral support and voter response to campaign messages. Research data shows that in the early stages of the contest, Sutinah's electability was still relatively low compared to the incumbent. However, as the campaign progressed, political support for the candidate increased significantly. The candidate acknowledged that this change was inseparable from the consistent political communication process.

"It wasn't easy at first, but we continued to strive to convey messages directly and consistently to the public." (Informant 1 / Regent - Code: RES-4 - Change in Attitude)

This statement was reinforced by the campaign team, which actively monitored the development of political support on the ground.

"We saw an increase in support over time, especially after intensive outreach to the public." (Informant 2 / Team Leader - Code: DAM-1 - Electability) Furthermore, strategy evaluations were conducted periodically to adapt the communication approach to evolving societal dynamics. "We always evaluate every campaign activity to identify areas for improvement." (Informant 2 – Code: EVA-1 – Campaign Monitoring)

The candidate also emphasized that strategic flexibility is a crucial factor in maintaining effective political communication.

"Strategies can't be rigid; they must adapt to conditions on the ground."

(Informant 1 – Code: EVA-2 – Strategy Change) In terms of voter response, the research results indicate a shift in public perception of the candidate. Initial doubts gradually transformed into trust.

"Initially, many were skeptical, but after meeting him frequently, they began to trust him." (Informant 1 – Code: RES-1 / RES-4 – Perception & Attitude Change)

This is also evident in the increasing public participation in campaign activities.

"The closer the election gets, the more people are involved in campaign activities." (Informant 2 – Code: RES-3 – Participation)

The culmination of this process was seen in the results of the 2020 Mamuju Regency regional head election, where, according to realcount data from the Sutinah-Ado data center, the Sutinah-Ado ticket received 53.34 percent of the vote, while the incumbent ticket received 46.66 percent of the vote, with a margin of 7%, or 9,598,000 votes. The realcount data released by the Sutinah-Ado data center is actual field data that corresponds to the vote count results of the Mamuju Regency General Elections Commission (KPU). This victory demonstrates that the political communication strategy designed and implemented by the campaign team

effectively mobilized voter support. Theoretically, these findings reinforce the argument that in local political contests, the success of challenger candidates is not solely determined by their structural resources, but also by their ability to strategically manage political communication. In other words, political communication serves not only as a means of conveying messages but also as a mechanism for building legitimacy, constructing political identity, and shaping the public's electoral preferences. Based on the research findings, the effectiveness of political communication strategies can be seen in the vote count in the 2020 Mamuju Regency Pilkada, where the candidate pair led by Sitti Sutinah Suhardi secured 53.34% of the vote and successfully outperformed the incumbent. These results revealed a significant increase in electability from the initial election results to the final election results. This demonstrates that the communication strategies employed were able to effectively influence voter perceptions and preferences.

Interpretatively, these findings demonstrate that political communication plays a crucial role in determining the outcome of political contests, even offsetting and overcoming the incumbent's structural advantages. From the perspective of Aristotle's rhetorical theory, this success demonstrates the effectiveness of integrating *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* in communication strategies. Meanwhile, from a political communication perspective, these findings also demonstrate the effectiveness of interactions between political actors, the media, and the public. Compared to previous research, most studies, such as those by Rahat (2024), still emphasize the role of teams, party structures, and systematic approaches in political victory. However, this study demonstrates that communication factors based on candidate figures and symbolic approaches have a significant influence on determining victory. Thus, this research makes a new contribution to the study of political communication, particularly in the context of local politics, demonstrating that effective communication strategies serve not only as campaign tools but also as instruments for building legitimacy, shaping political identification, and changing voter preferences.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the success of Sitti Sutinah Suhardi in defeating the incumbent in the 2020 Mamuju Regional Election was strongly influenced by the effective implementation of an integrated political communication strategy. The strategy combined the construction of political credibility (*ethos*), emotional mobilization through narratives of change (*pathos*), and the communication of rational and programmatic policy solutions (*logos*). These rhetorical elements were reinforced through the strategic use of interpersonal communication, social media platforms, and the mobilization of local social networks, enabling the candidate to build trust, strengthen voter identification, and enhance political legitimacy. The findings demonstrate that electoral success in local political contests is not determined solely by organizational resources or political machinery but also by a candidate's ability to construct persuasive political meanings and maintain effective communication with diverse voter groups. Furthermore, this study contributes to the political communication literature by showing that the integration of rhetorical persuasion, relational communication, and digital engagement can serve as an effective framework for challenger candidates, particularly female political leaders, seeking to compete successfully against incumbents in local democratic elections.

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