POLITICAL CAMPAIGN STRATEGY OF TRI RISMAHARINI–ZAHRUL AZHAR IN THE 2024 EAST JAVA GUBERNATORIAL ELECTION

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A B S T R A C T

This research aims to analyze the campaign strategy of Tri Rismaharini and Zahrul Azhar in the 2024 East Java gubernatorial election that targets the teacher community in Surabaya. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, document studies, and literature review. The research used cybernetics theory and the campaign model as a research framework. The findings reveal that the Risma–Zahrul campaign strategy combined traditional and digital media, strengthened emotional engagement through social activities, and created two-way communication that enhanced public participation. The study also highlights the active role of teachers as key intermediaries in spreading political messages and building public trust. Based on the findings, it recommends several efforts to strengthen local democracy, including a more intensive dialogue between candidates, the election committee, and educational communities, as well as a school-based political education program and community-driven campaign model.

Keywords:
Political Campaign, Election, Teacher Community, Risma–Hans

1. INTRODUCTION.

Voter participation in the East Java Regional Election (Pilkada) is on the rise. In the 2024 East Java Gubernatorial Election, voter participation reached 70.06%, consisting of 20,732,562 valid votes and 1,204,640 invalid votes. The number was an increase from the previous East Java Gubernatorial Election, which recorded 19,002,030 valid votes and 756,245 invalid votes.

Despite the increase, the rate of voter abstention (Golput) remains high. According to the East Java Communication and Information Agency, the total number of registered voters in the province in 2024 was 31,280,418, with 21,937,202 using their voting rights and 9,343,216 abstaining (29.86%). Sahal (2024) reported that the abstention rate in Surabaya reached 30.15%, reflecting a significant challenge to local democracy.

Various factors cause abstention, including economic concerns and public disillusionment with political change (Averus & Alfina, 2020). Technical problems in voter registration have also been a recurring issue, often leading to voter frustration. Ideological factors and distrust toward candidates also contribute to high abstention (Intihan et al., 2024).

The composition of voters in East Java is shifting, with the 2024 election involving around 32 million voters, a significant increase from previous elections. Young voters now make up the majority, known for being more critical and responsive to modern issues like education (Juditha & Darmawan, 2018).

Despite their enthusiasm, many still face technical challenges and a limited understanding of election procedures (Setiawan et al., 2025). Therefore, intensive political education is essential. Pulungan et al. (2020) argue that technical education about voting procedures can help reduce invalid votes. Collaboration between the Election Commission (KPU) and political candidates is also vital to strengthen public outreach (Pulungan et al., 2020). The KPU should actively involve various community groups in socialization programs to improve citizens' technical understanding of elections (Wartoyo & Ginting, 2024). Such initiatives are key to fostering a more informed, democratic, and high-quality election process (Farid, 2023).

The interactions that occurred during this campaign greatly influenced the dynamics of local politics (Kurniawan & Michael, 2023). According to the same study, this phenomenon was also evident in Surabaya.

The campaign team of Tri Rismaharini and Zahrul Azhar (Risma–Gus Hans) utilized social media to spread their programs quickly and widely (Hakim & Izzatusholekha, 2023). Through these platforms, voters could directly engage with the candidates, fostering a stronger sense of public involvement and maintaining transparency throughout the campaign process.

The Risma–Gus Hans votes in Surabaya became the key to their overall success, gaining 882,414 votes, equivalent to 32.2% of the total valid votes. Across East Java, the pair collected 6,743,095 votes (East Java Communication and Information Agency, 2024). Public trust in Risma remained strong, largely due to her proven leadership experience as the former mayor of Surabaya. The city became their main voter base, and Risma's popularity extended beyond Surabaya, influencing voters in other regions. Her leadership, known for being compassionate and reform-driven, helped strengthen their image and campaign credibility.

Risma–Gus Hans campaign also aligned with efforts in political education, particularly by engaging with teacher communities. Teachers are seen as important social agents of change (Kurniawan & Michael, 2023). Rismaharini actively built relationships with educators to promote democratic awareness. Teachers played a strategic role as intermediaries between the candidates and the public (Hakim & Izzatusholekha, 2023), helping to educate voters, especially first-time voters, about political literacy. This program was further supported by KPU's collaboration with educational institutions to enhance voters' understanding of democracy.

Despite its effectiveness, there were still communication gaps that influenced public perception (Akmal et al., 2023). One notable case was Risma's kneeling incident, which sparked both praise and criticism (Tempo.co, 2020). Some viewed it as a sincere act of humility, while others saw it as excessive political dramatization. These mixed reactions revealed how emotional expression in politics can shape public opinion differently. Public perception of Risma's leadership thus varied widely, reflecting the diversity of viewpoints among voters.

Furthermore, educational policies also shaped public opinion, with teachers holding a crucial political role (Riswanda, 2022). Teachers occupy a respected position in society and act as moral guides (Hakim & Izzatusholekha, 2023). They are instrumental in instilling democratic values among young voters (Helena et al., 2023) and in disseminating local political information to increase civic awareness (Adelina Hutabarat & Yanny, 2025). Involving teachers in regional elections has therefore become a strategic approach to broadening political participation.

Teachers not only educate in classrooms but also play active roles in communities and extracurricular programs. They help implement community-based education initiatives and communicate local government education policies (Helena et al., 2023; Hakim & Izzatusholekha, 2023). In rural areas, however, teachers face significant challenges, such as limited access to adequate facilities (Syamsudduha & Nursalam, 2014),

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which can reduce their level of political engagement. Despite these challenges, their potential to influence local political awareness remains significant. Heavy workloads, however, often limit their involvement, and teachers are expected to maintain political neutrality in their educational roles.

According to Kaid (2004), political participation can be divided into traditional and non-traditional forms, each with different underlying structures. McQuail (2011) defines a community as a group of people sharing a common space, identity, and interaction. Teachers, as noted by Kamal (2013), play a central role not only in transmitting knowledge but also in shaping students' character and potential as future contributors to national development. In political campaigns, direct contact refers to face-to-face interactions between candidates and voters, while indirect contact involves the dissemination of political messages through mass media or digital platforms without direct interaction (McQuail, 2011).

Cybernetics, as a branch of science, is defined as the study of control and communication within human systems. According to Littlejohn et al. (2017), this discipline explores how systems interact and regulate themselves. The core principle of cybernetics lies in the use of feedback mechanisms to maintain control and stability within a system. Mindell (2000) further explains that this principle applies not only to machines but also to biological organisms and social systems.

The systemic approach in cybernetics views the world as a network of interconnected systems, each consisting of input, process, output, and feedback loops (Hui, 2024). In this research, the Cybernetic Theory is used to analyze the structure of the Risma–Hans political campaign through the Input–Process–Output (IPO) Model. Within this framework, the political campaign is seen as a system that operates in three main stages: input, process, and output.

This study aims to identify the forms and strategies of the Risma–Hans campaign targeted to the teacher community in Surabaya. The research evaluates the communication strategies used and provides an in-depth analysis of how the campaign was carried out among educators as a key professional voting group. This approach highlights the role of teachers as influential actors in enhancing public political participation. Ultimately, the study seeks to offer strategic recommendations to improve the effectiveness of future political campaigns.

2. METHODS

This research uses a qualitative method with a constructivist paradigm and a descriptive case study to examine the political campaign of Tri Rismaharini–Gus Hans directed toward the teacher community during the 2024 East Java Regional Election (Pilkada). Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 11 purposively selected informants, including campaign team members or field coordinators, volunteers, representatives from the Surabaya Election Commission, teachers, and residents, as well as through observation of campaign activities. Secondary data were obtained from the Election Commission documents, electability survey results, news coverage, press releases, campaign materials, and academic publications related to political communication and community-based campaigning (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Littlejohn et al., 2017).

Data analysis followed the Miles & Huberman framework, which includes data reduction, data display (in the form of narratives, tables, and diagrams), and conclusion drawing and verification to map out the campaign strategies, communication patterns, and voter responses (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The validity of the data was ensured through source and method triangulation (interviews, documentation, observation, and social media content analysis) as well as member checking with the informants to confirm that the researcher's interpretations aligned with their intended meanings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This approach allows

for a deep, flexible, and contextual understanding of how the Risma–Hans campaign was designed, communicated, and perceived by the teacher community.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Results

Interviews were conducted with eleven (11) informants selected based on specific criteria. All informants live in Surabaya and were actively involved in the 2024 local election process in the city. They participated either directly or indirectly, contributing meaningful support and involvement throughout the campaign. In addition, several informants were members of the Risma–Hans campaign team, assisting in various campaign activities, such as event organization, information dissemination, and strategy implementation to support the candidates' success.

Table 1. List of Informants

No	Informant	Age	Category
1	Imam Buckhori Cholil (IN1)	54 years old	Head of the Campaign Team
2	Bima (IN2)	23 years old	Volunteer
3	Popong Anjar Seno (IN3)	50 years old	Head of Public Relations, Participation, and Human Resources Division
4	Azizah (IN4)	53 years old	English Teacher, SMA Negeri 14 Surabaya
5	Titik (IN5)	50 years old	Civics & Sociology Teacher, SMA Negeri 5 Surabaya
6	Prapti (IN6)	45 years old	English Teacher, SMA Negeri 15 Surabaya
7	Mufidah (IN7)	40 years old	Indonesian Language Teacher, SMA Negeri 11 Surabaya
8	Listiani (IN8)	51 years old	Civics Teacher, SMA Negeri 20 Surabaya
9	Vanissa (IN9)	23 years old	General Public, Fresh Graduate, Surabaya
10	Faiz (IN10)	22 years old	General Public, University Student, Surabaya
11	Nensy (IN11)	31 years old	General Public, Merchant, Surabaya

Based on interviews with eleven informants, this study identified various forms of political campaigns carried out by Tri Rismaharini–Gus Hans during the 2024 East Java Regional Election (Pilkada), specifically targeting the teacher community in Surabaya.

The Risma–Hans campaign program was designed as a strategic effort to respond to public aspirations through an inclusive approach focused on real change, combining formal, non-formal, and informal strategies. Formal campaign activities included visits to Islamic boarding schools (*pondok pesantren*), pilgrimages to local figures, and community donation events (*sedekah bumi*). Meanwhile, non-formal approaches were carried out through community exercise events, Mobile Legends (ML) competitions, and webinars or media literacy training sessions.

A formal campaign refers to a structured form of political communication that follows official regulations and is usually supervised by authorized institutions (McQuail, 2011). This type of campaign is governed by rules regarding timing, location, content, and execution methods, providing a clear legal framework. Formal campaigns operate within an external and institutional governance system, where the government and regulatory bodies establish standards, boundaries, and procedures that candidates and campaign teams must follow. The purpose of this approach is to ensure fairness, order, and transparency, prevent legal violations, protect public interests, and guarantee that all candidates have equal opportunities to present their visions, missions, and programs to

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voters (McQuail, 2011).

> "This Discussion House is not just an ordinary chat room, but a forum for exchanging ideas and building healthy political awareness among teachers..." (IN4)

The statement reflects that the "*Rumah Diskusi*" (Discussion House) initiated by the Risma–Hans campaign team was not just an informal gathering but rather a structured forum designed to promote education-based political awareness. This activity served as a space for sharing information, discussing strategic educational issues, and bridging communication between the candidates and the teacher community. The Discussion House functioned as a participatory platform where participants were not just passive listeners but active contributors in developing ideas aligned with the campaign's vision.

The formation of the Discussion House began with identifying key issues relevant to teachers—such as educator welfare, curriculum development, and learning digitalization. The campaign team then coordinated with teacher organizations, education figures, and literacy activists to ensure that discussions were inclusive and focused. Meetings were held in the same discussion spaces used by volunteers. The format was interactive, combining short presentations from speakers, Q&A sessions, and small group discussions, allowing ideas to be recorded directly for follow-up.

Choosing the Discussion House as a campaign strategy had a strong foundation. This forum allowed the candidates to build emotional and intellectual closeness with the teacher community through open and meaningful dialogue. It became a platform for idea exchange, not only about political visions and missions but also about teachers' aspirations. Moreover, the forum emphasized values of openness, intellectual collaboration, and respect for all participants' opinions.

The Discussion House campaign had a significant impact on teachers, volunteers, and the Risma–Hans campaign team itself. By creating a participatory space, this strategy strengthened the sense of belonging among teachers toward the campaign's programs. The main goals of this activity were to:

1. Build two-way communication between the candidates and the teacher community.
2. Strengthen teachers' capacity to engage actively in public policy discussions.
3. Generate innovative ideas that could be integrated into campaign programs.
4. Foster solidarity and collaboration among educators.

However, the implementation of the Discussion House faced some challenges. The main obstacles were participants' limited time —as most teachers had busy work schedules— and the difficulty of keeping discussions focused on strategic topics without turning into unproductive debates. Another challenge was the potential negative perception from outsiders who viewed the forum as exclusive to certain groups. To counter this, the campaign team adopted an open communication strategy, inviting local media coverage and emphasizing that the Discussion House was inclusive and open to anyone concerned about educational issues.

Meanwhile, informal campaigns operate in a more flexible space, often using informal networks or social media interactions to deliver political messages (McQuail, 2011). This may include personal conversations, social media exchanges, daily activities infused with political messages, or even symbols and habits associated with the candidate. Such campaigns are harder to monitor by authorities since they take place within personal and cultural expressions. Nonetheless, they remain highly influential, as the messages tend to feel authentic, relatable, and emotionally engaging, shaping public opinion subtly without relying on official campaign tools (McQuail, 2011).

> "Meeting at the market feels more relaxed. It feels like Mrs. Risma is chatting with ordinary people, not like it's at an official political event. So we're more willing to share our concerns..." (IN11)

The statement reflects that the market visits conducted by the Risma–Hans

campaign team were not merely ceremonial or purposeless walkabouts (*blusukan*), but rather an informal strategy that utilized public spaces as meeting points between the candidates and the community. Markets were chosen because they are natural centers of social interaction, where a familiar atmosphere allows for more casual and direct communication. These visits served as a way to listen to citizens' aspirations spontaneously, observe the dynamics of the people's economy, and build emotional closeness outside the framework of formal campaigning.

The implementation process of the market visits began with mapping traditional markets that had high activity levels and represented diverse community groups. The campaign team then coordinated with market administrators and local vendors to ensure that the activity ran smoothly without disrupting trading activities. These visits usually took place in the morning during peak hours, where the candidates interacted directly with vendors, buyers, and market workers.

Figure 1. *Documentation of Market Visits*

Markets are egalitarian public spaces, where the boundaries between candidates and citizens become minimal. Through direct interactions without excessive protocol, the candidates could demonstrate their concern for grassroots economic issues while also building an image as approachable leaders. Furthermore, markets served as effective observation grounds for gathering real-time information — from the prices of basic goods and distribution challenges to policies affecting people's livelihoods.

The market visit campaign had a positive impact on public perception. The relaxed and personal atmosphere strengthened the emotional connection between residents and the candidates. The main objectives of this activity included:

1. Bringing candidates closer to the community through natural face-to-face interactions.
2. Gathering citizens' aspirations directly at the center of economic activity.
3. Demonstrating the candidates' commitment to strengthening the local economy.
4. Building an image of leaders who are caring and responsive to citizens' daily problems.

However, conducting campaigns in markets also came with challenges. The crowded environment often hindered the team's mobility, while spontaneous interactions could lead to sensitive topics that required careful responses. There was also a risk that some people might perceive the visits as image-building efforts rather than genuine outreach. The campaign team maintained authentic communication, ensured that visits did not disrupt trading, and involved local media to provide balanced coverage so that the campaign message could be conveyed objectively.

Meanwhile, non-formal campaigns refer to political communication activities

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conducted outside formal regulatory frameworks (McQuail, 2011). These can include community social interactions, participation in cultural events, informal dialogues on social media, or candidate attendance at non-political gatherings that still contribute to building public image and support. Non-formal campaigns rely more on internal awareness, ethics, and strategy from the candidates and their teams, rather than being governed by strict legal regulations (McQuail, 2011).

"This pilgrimage is not merely symbolic, but a form of respect for the values of the struggle of local figures who inspired our program..." (IN2)

The statement reflects that the pilgrimage carried out by the Risma–Hans campaign volunteers was not merely a symbolic act, but a meaningful tribute to the values and struggles of local heroes who inspired the campaign's programs. This activity was seen as an effort to introduce and instill the spirit of perseverance, unity, and moral values embodied by these local figures into the community, serving as a foundation for a value-based campaign.

The planning process for the pilgrimage began with identifying the relevant values and teachings of local figures that aligned with the vision and mission of the Risma–Hans campaign. The campaign team coordinated with community leaders and religious figures to ensure that the event served as both a moment of respect and an educational opportunity to promote the values of diversity and tolerance. The Sunan Ampel Cemetery was chosen as the location due to its strong historical and spiritual symbol, believed to create an emotional connection with the public, among teachers, and local voters.

Figure 2. *Documentation of Pilgrimage to Sunan Ampel Cemetery*

The decision to hold the pilgrimage at Sunan Ampel's tomb was intentional. Sunan Ampel is one of the most respected Islamic scholars and preachers in Indonesia, especially in Surabaya. His resting place in the Ampel area has long been a center of religious and cultural activity. The site holds deep historical meaning and serves as a symbol of unity and perseverance, values that align with the essence of the campaign. Moreover, Sunan Ampel's teachings centered on peace, inclusivity, and harmony—resonate strongly with various layers of society, making him an ideal figure of inspiration for a campaign engaging local communities.

This campaign had a significant impact on the community, the volunteers, and the Risma–Hans team itself. By using Sunan Ampel's cemetery as a starting point for the campaign, it successfully fostered a sense of unity and collective spirit among the people. The main purposes of the pilgrimage campaign were to:
1. Honor and preserve the values and legacy of local heroes.
2. Strengthen togetherness and mutual cooperation among community members.
3. Build awareness of diversity and tolerance in society.
4. Inspire the younger generation to care more for others, uphold togetherness, and actively contribute to building a more inclusive and harmonious society,

regardless of background.

However, organizing the pilgrimage also came with logistical and coordination challenges, particularly involving cemetery authorities and security arrangements during the event. There was also a risk of public perception that the activity politicized a sacred religious space, which could lead to rejection from groups who prefer such sites to remain neutral from politics. To address this, the campaign team prioritized transparency, sensitivity, and open communication to ensure that the event maintained its spirit of respect, unity, and shared values throughout the process.

> "We see that Islamic boarding schools are important pillars of society. By visiting them in person, Risma-Hans demonstrated their commitment to religious-based education." (IN1)

The statement shows that the visits to Islamic boarding schools were a strategic move to build stronger relationships with the community, especially those connected to religion-based education. The Risma–Hans campaign demonstrated their commitment to the education sector, particularly in promoting religious values, through direct visits to several boarding schools. This indicates that their focus was not only on talking about education in theory but also on showing genuine concern for religious educational institutions and how these values can play an important role in community development.

The visit to the Bumi Sholawat Boarding School was designed as a form of the campaign's commitment to faith-based education, emphasizing character building and moral development among the younger generation. The planning process involved direct coordination with the school administrators to create an agenda that was both educational and social in nature. These visits also served as a platform to establish long-term relationships between the campaign and the religious education community, which holds a significant influence in the region.

Bumi Sholawat Boarding School in Surabaya was chosen as the location because it is one of the most influential religious educational institutions in the area. The boarding school is well-known not only for teaching Islamic studies but also for its vital role in shaping students' character and moral integrity. Choosing this institution as part of the campaign was not just a symbolic gesture of support for Islamic education but also a recognition of its historical and cultural importance in Indonesian society. In addition, Bumi Sholawat has a long-standing reputation and a wide network of alumni across various sectors, making it the ideal place to strengthen connections and show a genuine commitment to religion-based education.

The visit had a significant positive impact on the Risma–Hans campaign. It helped enhance their image as leaders who care about faith-based education, while also opening opportunities for more inclusive, value-driven programs in the future. The main goals of the visit were to:

1. Strengthen public support for religion-based education.
2. Demonstrate Risma–Hans's genuine commitment to the education sector.
3. Appreciate the important role of boarding school in shaping character and morality.
4. Build closer relationships with religious communities.

However, several challenges also emerged. There was a potential for public skepticism, as some might view the visit as a political move to gain support from Islamic communities. Moreover, the strict internal rules and traditions of the institutions could limit the type of activities that could take place during the visit. Therefore, the campaign team needed to approach this effort with cultural sensitivity and deep respect, ensuring that interactions remained harmonious and genuine throughout the process.

> "This exercise is an effective way to build closeness. Residents feel more relaxed, and two-way communication becomes more open…" (IN2)

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This statement shows that the SICITA (Love the Homeland Gymnastics) event in Rungkut, Surabaya, was used as a way to create a closer and more relaxed connection between the Risma–Hans campaign team and the local community, especially teachers. The choice of location in Rungkut was intentional, aimed at strengthening ties with educators and residents in the area. Through this activity, the typically tense or formal atmosphere of political campaigns could be transformed into something friendlier and more engaging. The event also allowed for two-way communication, giving residents the comfort and freedom to express their thoughts and aspirations without pressure.

The planning of the SICITA event began with identifying the need to build a casual connection and open dialogue between the candidates and citizens, particularly the teacher community in Rungkut. The campaign team designed the gymnastics session not only as a fun physical activity but also as an informal discussion space, making it easier for campaign messages to be delivered naturally.

Figure 3. *Documentation of SICITA Gymnastics*

The decision to hold the SICITA gymnastics event in Rungkut aligned with the goal of building a stronger bond with teachers and residents. Besides promoting health and fitness, the activity created a friendly, stress-free environment where teachers could comfortably discuss the campaign programs introduced by Risma–Hans. Involving teachers was a strategic choice since they play a crucial role in education and nation-building, and can act as effective agents of change in spreading government programs. Therefore, this activity functioned not only as a communal exercise session but also as a platform for dialogue, enabling participants to exchange ideas on important issues and fostering productive discussions.

The impact of the SICITA event for Risma–Hans was significant it helped build their image as approachable and people-oriented leaders, especially among teachers who hold an influential role in education. The main goals of this campaign activity were to:

1. Build closer and more relaxed relationships with the community.
2. Appreciate and honor teachers' contributions.
3. Introduce campaign programs informally and engagingly.
4. Encourage public participation in the campaign.

However, several challenges arose during the event. The team needed to maintain a light and relaxed atmosphere without losing focus on the campaign's core messages. They also faced time and participation constraints, as both teachers and residents often had tight schedules. Additionally, there was a risk that the event could be perceived as mere entertainment without political substance, which required a clear communication strategy to ensure that the campaign messages were effectively delivered.

Through this kind of activity, Risma–Hans were able to show genuine concern for teachers' well-being and promote collaboration between educators and the government. The follow-up to this initiative could include teacher development programs, such as professional training and welfare improvement. Teachers' involvement in this event was crucial, as it allowed them to directly experience and respond to policies that affect them, while expressing their aspirations in a more open and relaxed setting.

"We want to engage young people on their terms. ML isn't just entertainment, but can be a space for relaxed discussions about the future of the city." (IN1)

This statement highlights the Risma–Hans campaign strategy to engage with young voters in a way that feels relevant and aligned with their interests. *Mobile Legends (ML)*— one of the most popular mobile games in Indonesia—was chosen not only as a form of entertainment but also as a relaxed platform for discussing the city's future. By organizing a Mobile Legends competition, the campaign aimed to create opportunities for young people to participate in political conversations in a space they already enjoy.

The formation of the Mobile Legends competition was driven by the desire to reach the younger generation through a medium they love and understand, making the campaign more relatable and engaging. The campaign team collaborated with gaming communities and tournament organizers to host an event that went beyond fun—it also served as an informal dialogue space about Surabaya's development and future. This event allowed direct interaction between young participants, Gus Hans, and the campaign team, creating a sense of connection and approachability.

Figure 4. *Banner of Mobile Legends Competition*

The choice to use the Mobile Legends East Java competition as part of the campaign was a strategic decision. ML is extremely popular among Indonesian youth, especially in East Java, making it the perfect medium to attract the attention of younger audiences who might otherwise be disengaged from politics. Through this event, Risma– Hans were able to speak directly to players, answer their questions, and discuss urban development issues in a more informal, interactive, and friendly setting. The dialogue session with Gus Hans during the event further emphasized the campaign's human-centered approach, presenting political programs in a way that felt fresh and engaging, helping young voters feel more involved and heard.

The impact of the Mobile Legends competition on the Risma–Hans campaign was substantial. It helped shape their image as youthful, dynamic, and relatable leaders, bridging the gap between traditional politics and modern youth culture. The key objectives of this campaign activity were to:

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1. Engage with young audiences effectively.
2. Use entertainment spaces as platforms for meaningful discussions.
3. Foster active participation and involvement among the youth.
4. Build an innovative and progressive image for the candidates.

However, the campaign faced several challenges, such as ensuring that political messages were effectively communicated amidst the participants' focus on gaming and competition. Technical issues like event logistics, participant management, and moderating discussions also needed careful handling to avoid potential controversy or distractions from the campaign's core purpose.

Beyond its entertainment aspect, this initiative demonstrated the campaign's understanding of youth interests and their commitment to listening to young people's perspectives on city development. Future follow-up actions could include creating youth- and tech-friendly policies, such as developing digital public spaces and promoting youth participation in politics through interactive and creative platforms. Teachers also played a supporting role by helping introduce civic awareness to young people—showing them how they can engage politically through media they enjoy, such as gaming and digital platforms.

Direct engagement through activities like this reflects one of the most tangible forms of campaigning, where candidates actively build personal and authentic connections with their voters.

> "The most important campaign we undertake is visits, both to public figures and to communities..." (IN1)

IN1 stated that the main approach of the Risma–Hans campaign was carried out through direct visits to community leaders and local groups, emphasizing the importance of face-to-face interaction. This approach reflected a participatory campaign style that aimed to build emotional closeness and trust with the public.

The campaign activities of the Risma–Hans pair ran intensively from early to late November 2024, covering several strategic areas in East Java, such as Jember, Lumajang, Banyuwangi, Sidoarjo, and Madiun. Their activities were highly diverse—ranging from internal consolidation meetings, visits to market communities, Islamic boarding schools, and religious pilgrimages, to sholawatan (religious singing) and participation in cultural and religious gatherings.

The campaign also reached younger audiences through the involvement of influencers and focused on social issues, including flood management and traders' welfare. The campaign period concluded with a press conference as a formal communication channel to the public. These activities represented an inclusive and community-based strategy, combining both personal and symbolic approaches.

Technological developments also encouraged the campaign team to utilize digital media as a major tool for spreading political messages. Through social media, videos, and infographics, campaign information became easier to access and spread faster among voters.

> "Yes, through campaign media like social media, and through the dialogues the entire team engaged in. Then, during the presentation of the candidates' visions and missions and during the candidate debates, we conveyed all of this, especially Mr. Selon. Later, people will talk about it in the wild, in the regions." (IN1)

IN1 explained that social media and public dialogues were essential channels for communicating the candidates' vision and mission, especially during public debates.

"I've seen videos, infographics, and testimonials online. There are also news stories from local portals. The only campaign I've seen in person was when they passed through Kenjeran." (IN5)

IN5 added that they mostly received campaign information through videos, infographics, and online testimonials, showing how digital media played a crucial role in reaching young voters and internet users.

From the statements of IN1 and IN5, it can be concluded that digital media played a vital role in the Risma–Hans campaign strategy. Platforms such as social media, videos, infographics, and public dialogues served as effective tools to deliver their vision and mission, particularly in reaching younger generations and active online audiences who prefer receiving information through digital platforms.

Discussion

The political communication strategy of the Risma–Hans campaign aligns with McNair's (2011) perspective, which emphasizes the importance of agenda-setting and structured public opinion mobilization. The findings of this study demonstrate that the combination of conventional media (brochures, pamphlets, banners) and digital media (social media, infographics, videos) allowed the campaign's political messages to reach diverse voter segments, including teacher communities—a rational and strategic group. This supports Akmal et al. (2023), who argue that political communication is not merely about delivering information, but also about influencing public perception through channels that align with audience characteristics. The multi-channel communication strategy employed by Risma–Hans serves as a practical application of political communication theory, which highlights the need for differentiated approaches based on audience segmentation.

The findings on teacher involvement reinforce McNair's (2011) conceptual framework on target audience segmentation in political communication. Teachers, recognized for their critical thinking and broad social influence, were positioned not merely as voters but as strategic partners in realizing the candidates' educational vision. Although direct interaction with teachers was limited due to formal regulations, the campaign's narrative framing of education and teacher welfare issues successfully shaped the candidates' image without requiring intensive face-to-face engagement. The theoretical implication is that issue framing can serve as an effective substitute for limited physical interaction, still fostering emotional connection and electoral support among strategic groups.

The formal and non-formal campaign patterns identified in this research enrich McQuail's (2011) theoretical understanding of the duality of political communication channels. Formal campaigns—such as the *Rumah Diskusi* (Discussion House)—illustrate how structured frameworks can enhance legitimacy and credibility. In contrast, non-formal campaigns—like *SICITA aerobics*, *Mobile Legends* tournaments, *Sedekah Bumi* donation, and media literacy workshops—show that activities rooted in popular culture, sports, and informal social interactions can open more fluid and participatory spaces for political communication. The findings support the notion that effective political communication should integrate both formal and informal spheres to engage various social layers, strengthening candidate-voter attachment through culturally resonant interactions.

This study contributes to understanding how political communication adapts to dynamic field conditions. Continuous evaluation, strategy adjustments based on survey results, and volunteer engagement demonstrate the campaign's adaptability

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principle. This aligns with McNair's (2011) view that the success of political communication depends not only on message content but also on the political actor's ability to respond quickly to changing situations. An adaptive communication model, grounded in field research and combining structural and cultural approaches, can enhance campaign effectiveness—particularly in regions with high political dynamics like East Java's 2024 local election.

The results also reinforce Vowe & Henn's (2016) theory that campaign effectiveness lies in combining mass communication and personal communication. The Risma–Hans campaign effectively merged visual exposure through pamphlets, banners, and brochures with direct interactions and digital content on social media—proving the relevance of this theory in local politics. The campaign went beyond one-way communication by fostering emotional engagement through community activities such as *SICITA* aerobics and religious pilgrimages. This demonstrates that diversified campaign channels remain highly applicable in today's digital era, even amid the dominance of online platforms.

From the perspective of interactive social media campaign theory (Barokah & Hertanto, 2022), the study reveals that social media functions not only as an information distribution channel but also as a space for political participation, expanding the reach of campaign messages. Although some teacher communities engaged passively with campaign content, digital materials such as infographics, videos, and testimonials proved effective in building a positive candidate image. This supports Farid's (2023) findings that social media creates a broader space for political engagement, even for professional groups like teachers, who traditionally participate only within formal political settings.

The findings of this study also align with McNair's (2011) perspective that political discussions do not only occur in formal spaces but also take place in more informal and fluid forums. The "gutter troops" approach used by the Risma– Hans volunteers demonstrates that informal interactions, such as casual conversations within communities, can be highly effective in delivering campaign messages without triggering resistance. This finding supports Hidayah's (2023) argument about the potential of teachers as agents of political message dissemination through formats that feel natural and close to everyday life. This strategy shows that community-based political discussions can strengthen campaign legitimacy and expand support networks beyond formal political arenas.

Specifically, this research reinforces Mizala & Schneider's (2020) findings on the importance of substantive policy approaches in gaining the trust of strategic communities like teachers. Although not formally structured within policy networks like in Chile, the Risma–Hans campaign used education and teacher welfare issues as key pillars of their platform. This demonstrates that the relevance of issues tied to the professional interests of target audiences plays a crucial role in campaign effectiveness. Such a rational approach allows political messages to be perceived not merely as promises, but as credible policy offers grounded in public interest.

The findings also support Schneider's (2022) view that teacher communities hold strategic influence as interest groups capable of shaping local political directions. Similar to Latin American contexts, teacher communities in Surabaya showed significant potential as channels for mobilizing support, both through active participation and message reception. The Risma–Hans campaign, which emphasized teacher welfare, free education, and support for honorary teachers, proved that policy-based strategies can effectively build trust and credibility among professional groups. The role of such interest groups in local politics gained further validation through the outcomes of the 2024 East Java regional election.

This research expands understanding of how multi-channel campaign strategies, informal political discussions, and substantive policy issues can work synergistically to build broader political participation. The findings reaffirm the relevance of external

political efficacy theory (Kaid, 2004), which suggests that citizens' belief in the political system's responsiveness increases when issue-based campaigns are combined with community engagement efforts. The study reveals that the success of political campaigns in the digital era is not solely determined by media intensity but also by the ability to create meaningful and relevant interactions that respond to voters' real needs—particularly within strategic segments like teacher communities.

The results strengthen McQuail's (2010) argument that communities play a strategic role in shaping public opinion due to their social networks and moral authority. The findings show that teacher communities in Surabaya became a key strategic segment for the Risma–Hans campaign because they are perceived as rational and socially influential. Targeting these communities aligns with the theory that certain social groups can act as opinion leaders, amplifying political messages to grassroots audiences. This implies that in local politics, campaign success is determined not only by party strength or candidate popularity, but also by the ability to form strategic partnerships with socially legitimate communities.

The findings are consistent with Vowe & Henn's (2016) view that social media functions not just as an additional channel, but as a complex ecosystem for political interaction. Teachers and the broader public received campaign information primarily through digital media, such as videos, infographics, and live-streamed debates. Despite the limitations of direct interaction due to formal regulations, social media effectively facilitated wide and dynamic political communication. This supports the theory that social media can bridge communication gaps between candidates and strategic groups, allowing for political dialogue even in asynchronous or indirect forms. Overall, this study underscores the paradigm shift in modern campaigning—toward more participatory, interactive, and digitally engaged political communication.

The findings of this study also support McQuail's (2011) classification, which emphasizes that effective political campaigns require an integration of direct and indirect contact. Activities such as the *Rumah Diskusi* (Discussion House), visits to Islamic boarding schools, and the *SICITA* aerobics events created direct emotional connections with voters, while social media, pamphlets, and banners expanded message outreach to a wider audience. Interestingly, this research also identified hybrid communication forms, such as online forums that allowed real-time interaction between teachers and the campaign team. This expands theoretical understanding by showing that the boundaries between direct and indirect contact are becoming increasingly blurred due to technological advancement. Therefore, successful campaigns must be able to integrate and manage both modes of communication effectively.

The study also reaffirms the relevance of voter segmentation, emphasizing the importance of understanding the social, cultural, and professional characteristics of target audiences. The Risma–Hans campaign's strategy of combining PDIP's urban voter base in areas like Surabaya with NU's religious networks in Sidoarjo and Gresik demonstrates the application of community-based segmentation, aligning with McQuail's (2010) theories on political communication. This shows that an effective campaign in Indonesia cannot be homogeneous, but must blend party strength, religious social networks, and professional communities such as teachers. In a socially diverse country, political segmentation must take into account cultural and professional foundations to achieve resonance and legitimacy.

These findings are also consistent with Rahmayanti (2023), who highlights the role of teachers in political education for first-time voters. In this study, teachers acted as knowledge brokers, spreading campaign narratives within their communities even though their direct interaction with the candidates was limited. This pattern is similar to Amrillah's (2021) findings on the transformation of *Tuan Guru* figures in Central Lombok into local political actors. Within campaigns, educators can serve as communication

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bridges between candidates and the public, even when formal involvement within educational institutions is restricted. This broadens the concept of political education from being classroom-based to community-based, reflecting the evolving nature of civic engagement.

The results of this study further reinforce Rogers and Storey's (1987) perspective that political campaigns are planned, organized communication processes designed to create specific effects within a defined timeframe. The Risma–Hans campaign fulfills these criteria through a clear strategy, audience segmentation, and a structured series of formal and non-formal activities throughout the 2024 East Java regional election. The targeted approach toward the teacher community demonstrates that precise audience segmentation enhances message relevance and effectiveness. This confirms that successful campaigns must focus on strategic target groups to maximize the impact and success of political messaging.

Applying cybernetics theory, political campaigns can be understood as systems composed of input–process–output–feedback loops (Littlejohn et al., 2017). The inputs, such as printed and digital campaign materials, survey data, and feedback from volunteers were processed through strategic activities, including direct visits, social media outreach, and community-based programs. The outputs took the form of public responses, both positive and neutral, which then served as feedback for strategy adjustment. This adaptive cycle illustrates that the Risma–Hans campaign was dynamic and responsive to changing field conditions, aligning with the core principle of cybernetics.

The campaign's focus on teacher communities, Islamic schools, and PDIP voter bases also reflects the application of micro-targeting within the framework of Rogers and Storey's (1987) campaign theory. The study shows that precise segmentation such as targeting teachers as agents of social change increases the likelihood of positive message reception. However, the limited face-to-face interaction due to school regulations indicates that micro-targeting must be supported by alternative channels, such as social media, online forums, and informal communication, to maintain reach and engagement. Theoretically, this confirms that effective segmentation must consider structural constraints while enabling adaptive and multi-channel communication pathways.

Finally, this study emphasizes that campaign success heavily depends on the effective management of feedback loops. Public feedback on teacher welfare and free education issues became a critical input for refining campaign narratives. The Risma–Hans team routinely evaluated their strategy based on survey data, electability trends, and on-ground insights to adjust campaign focus. This aligns with adaptive regulation concepts in cybernetics theory (Mindell, 2000; Hui, 2024), which suggest that systems capable of integrating feedback rapidly are more likely to maintain stability and achieve their goals.

4. CONCLUSION

The Risma–Hans campaign in the 2024 East Java Regional Election (Pilkada) successfully implemented a political communication strategy that achieved wide outreach by utilizing both conventional and digital media to engage diverse communities, particularly the teacher community in Surabaya. By combining formal and non-formal activities and engaging directly through visits and social initiatives, the campaign built emotional closeness with the public. Although regulations limited direct interaction within schools, social media and informal dialogues became strategic channels for delivering the campaign's vision, mission, and key issues related to education and teacher welfare.

This strategy was analyzed using the cybernetics theory through the Input–Process–Output model, where inputs such as campaign materials were processed through collaborative efforts involving volunteers and digital media, resulting in varied public

responses as indicators of communication effectiveness. Public feedback was then used to continuously adjust and improve campaign strategies. In line with Rogers and Storey's (1987) campaign theory, the Risma–Hans campaign reflects a planned and structured communication process, emphasizing dialogue-based interaction and systematic organization that fostered active voter participation and strengthened the connection between the candidates and the community.

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