

## Platformed Patronage in Indonesian Elections: WhatsApp Groups, Digital Intermediaries, and Clientelistic Mobilization

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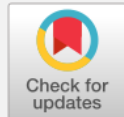
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### ABSTRACT

This article examines how clientelistic political practices are reorganized through digital platforms in Indonesian electoral politics. Existing studies of patronage and clientelism in Indonesia have largely emphasized face-to-face brokerage, vote-buying, local elite networks, and material exchange, while the platform-based mediation of these practices has received less systematic examination. Drawing on a qualitative interpretive case study combined with digital ethnography, this study analyses in-depth interviews with 40 informants, digital observations, social media content, and anonymized digital campaign archives collected in the context of the 2024 electoral cycle and related campaign activities. The informants consisted of campaign team members, digital volunteers, WhatsApp group administrators, political influencers or buzzers, and active social media voters. The findings show that digitalization does not replace conventional patronage but extends, reorganizes, and partly obscures it through platform-based communication networks. WhatsApp groups operate as semi-private spaces for campaign coordination, message circulation, political instruction, loyalty reinforcement, and subtle support monitoring. Digital volunteers, influencers, buzzers, and group administrators perform brokerage functions by connecting candidates with voters, amplifying narratives, managing online communities, and translating offline political exchanges into shareable digital content. Political incentives also circulate in more flexible forms, including internet quota, e-wallet transfers, operational funds, endorsement fees, content-production support, and logistical assistance for digital campaign work. These practices blur the boundaries between voluntary participation, paid promotion, campaign financing, and clientelistic mobilization. The article contributes to the

*literature on patronage-clientelism and digital political communication by conceptualizing platformed patronage as a hybrid electoral practice shaped by digital infrastructures, affective visibility, networked intermediation, incentive circulation, and loyalty formation.*

**Keywords:** *Clientelism; Digital Intermediaries; Electoral Mobilization; Platformed Patronage; WhatsApp Groups*

## 1. Introduction

Electoral politics in Indonesia can no longer be understood solely through conventional campaign practices based on face-to-face encounters, local elite networks, material distribution, and physical mass mobilization. Over the past decade, electoral competition has increasingly been shaped by the expansion of internet access, the intensification of social media use, and the normalization of platform-based political communication. In 2024, Indonesia had 221.56 million internet users, representing an internet penetration rate of 79.5 percent (APJII, 2024). DataReportal also recorded 139 million active social media user identities in Indonesia in January 2024 (DataReportal, 2024). These figures indicate that the digital sphere has become an important socio-political infrastructure for shaping public opinion, circulating political messages, coordinating supporters, and organizing electoral mobilization.

Within this context, political patronage has not disappeared; rather, it has adapted to changing communication environments. Classical literature defines patronage and clientelism as asymmetrical political exchange relationships in which political actors provide resources, access, assistance, money, goods, or protection in return for electoral support from voters or specific social groups (Stokes, 2005; Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007; Nichter, 2008; Hicken, 2011). In practice, such relationships are not always explicit. They are often embedded in social assistance, community activities, religious networks, local organizations, and personal ties between candidates, brokers, and voters (Szwarcberg, 2015; Kramon, 2018). Patronage, therefore, should not be reduced merely to direct vote buying. It also involves fostering loyalty, monitoring support, and creating political dependency.

In Indonesia, patronage has long been central to understanding post-Reformasi electoral democracy. Studies on money politics and clientelism show that electoral competition at both local and national levels is frequently sustained by informal networks, vote brokers, community figures, social organizations, and the distribution of material benefits to voters (Aspinall, 2014; Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2016; Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Muhtadi, 2019). These studies demonstrate that Indonesian electoral democracy is often shaped more by personal networks, informal brokerage, and access to distributive resources than by programmatic party competition. However, much of this literature still places face-to-face interaction, local brokerage, and direct material exchange at the center of analysis.

This focus remains important, but it is no longer sufficient to explain contemporary electoral practices that are increasingly mediated by WhatsApp groups, influencers, buzzers, digital volunteers, community accounts, live streaming, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and closed conversational networks. Brokers may still visit voters' homes, candidates may still attend social gatherings, and material benefits may still be distributed through identifiable local networks. Yet these practices are increasingly accompanied by digital coordination, online narrative circulation,

content amplification, and platform-based loyalty management. In other words, digital technology does not merely alter campaign techniques; it also reshapes how patronage is organized, circulated, monitored, and normalized in everyday political life (Chadwick, 2017; Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Tufekci, 2017; Kreiss, 2016; Karpf, 2016; Jungherr, 2016).

This article refers to these changing practices as platformed patronage: a hybrid form of digital patronage in which older clientelistic relations are reproduced, extended, and partly obscured through platform-based communication infrastructures. Platformed patronage differs from ordinary digital campaigning. Digital campaigning generally refers to message dissemination, image-making, candidate branding, and public persuasion. Platformed patronage, by contrast, involves reciprocal political relationships that link incentives, loyalty, access, emotional proximity, and networked intermediation. WhatsApp groups, for example, do not function merely as communication channels. They may also operate as semi-private spaces for volunteer coordination, support mapping, message discipline, group identity formation, and subtle loyalty monitoring.

In Indonesia, this phenomenon is particularly relevant because social media has become a significant arena of political campaigning across several electoral cycles, including the 2014 election, the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, the 2019 election, and the 2024 election. Lim argues that digital media in Indonesia is ambivalent: it may open participatory spaces, but it can also intensify polarization, hate speech, and identity-based mobilization (Lim, 2013; Lim, 2017). Tapsell similarly demonstrates that media power and digital platforms in Indonesia cannot be separated from elite relations, business interests, and electoral competition (Tapsell, 2017; Tapsell, 2021). The rise of buzzers, political influencers, micro-celebrities, volunteer accounts, and closed messaging groups indicates that political actors no longer rely only on party structures or traditional brokers. They increasingly use digital intermediaries that leverage social influence, emotional proximity, network reach, and the capacity to rapidly shape public perception.

Nevertheless, the digitalization of patronage does not fully replace older practices. What emerges is a hybrid process. Face-to-face patronage continues through social assistance, community events, religious leaders, youth groups, women's organizations, and kinship networks. Yet these practices are now extended through digital channels. Assistance can be publicized on social media, loyalty can be reinforced in messaging groups, digital volunteers can amplify candidate activities, and voter sentiment can be monitored through online interaction. Digital patronage therefore functions both as an extension of older networks and as a new mechanism for managing political support.

The main analytical problem is not simply that patronage has moved online, but that the interaction between clientelistic exchange, digital intermediation, and platform-based electoral mobilization remains insufficiently examined in Indonesian political studies. Research on patronage generally focuses on vote buying, brokers, local networks, and material distribution. Meanwhile, studies on digital campaigning tend to emphasize disinformation, polarization, candidate branding, online participation, and youth political engagement. This separation creates an analytical gap because, in practice, the two processes are increasingly intertwined. Digital volunteers may operate as platform-based brokers, influencers may function as emotional intermediaries between candidates and voters, WhatsApp groups may serve as coordination spaces for patronage networks, and social media content may legitimize or obscure the distribution of political resources.

Based on this gap, this article examines how clientelistic political practices are reorganized through digital platforms in Indonesian electoral politics. The main focus is not simply the use of social media in campaigns, but also how digital platforms reshape political exchange, electoral

mobilization, the circulation of incentives, loyalty formation, and the relationships among candidates, brokers, digital volunteers, influencers, group administrators, and voters. The article asks: how are clientelistic patronage practices extended through digital platforms, and how do digital intermediaries reshape electoral mobilization, loyalty formation, and political exchange in Indonesia?

By combining patronage-clientelism theory with digital political communication, this article argues that digitalization does not eliminate patronage. Instead, it produces a hybrid form of platformed patronage in which face-to-face networks, material exchanges, affective narratives, digital visibility, and online coordination operate together. Understanding this transformation is essential for assessing the quality of Indonesia's electoral democracy, especially as the boundaries between political participation, paid promotion, campaign financing, and clientelistic mobilization become increasingly blurred in digital political environments.

## 2. Literature Review

This article situates platformed patronage at the intersection of patronage-clientelism theory, political brokerage theory, digital political communication, and hybrid media mobilization. These perspectives are useful for explaining how older clientelistic relations are not simply replaced by digital campaigning but are extended and reorganized through platform-based communication infrastructures, digital intermediaries, and networked electoral mobilization.

Patronage and clientelism are commonly understood as asymmetrical exchange relations in which political actors provide resources, access, assistance, protection, money, goods, or symbolic benefits in return for electoral support from voters or social groups (Stokes, 2005; Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007; Nichter, 2008; Hicken, 2011). From this perspective, patronage is not limited to vote buying during elections. It is a broader socio-political mechanism that links resources, loyalty, dependency, and power within unequal political relationships. Clientelistic exchange may involve votes, campaign attendance, public endorsement, participation in political mobilization networks, or expressions of political loyalty (Stokes, 2005; Nichter, 2008; Stokes et al., 2013).

A central feature of clientelism is the attempt to manage reciprocity. Stokes (2005) emphasizes that clientelism often works through monitoring and sanctioning, whereby patrons or brokers seek to ensure that clients deliver the expected political support. However, in contemporary electoral settings, monitoring does not always operate through direct surveillance. It may also occur through social networks, community conversations, group membership, public expressions of support, and repeated symbolic performance. This insight is important for understanding platformed patronage because digital platforms can extend mechanisms of loyalty formation and support monitoring into semi-private and networked spaces.

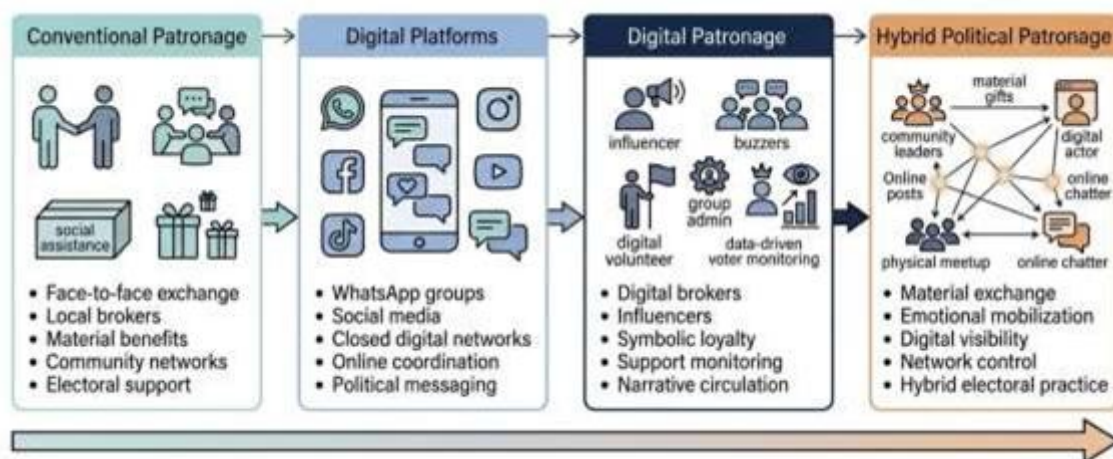
Political brokerage theory is equally important because patronage rarely operates directly between political elites and individual voters. Candidates and parties often require intermediaries who possess social access, local credibility, and the capacity to mobilize voters. Brokers connect patrons and voters by identifying support bases, distributing resources, organizing attendance, translating political messages, and maintaining voters' political commitments (Stokes et al., 2013; Szwarcberg, 2015; Kramon, 2018). In the Indonesian context, brokers may include community leaders, neighborhood figures, religious actors, local activists, campaign team members, or socially influential individuals. Studies of Indonesian electoral politics show that post-Reformasi democracy has been strongly shaped by informal networks, personal campaign teams, and access to distributive resources rather than by programmatic party

competition alone (Aspinall, 2014; Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2016; Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Muhtadi, 2019).

However, digital technology has transformed the arena in which brokerage and patronage operate. Digital political communication theory explains that the internet and social media have changed how political actors produce messages, construct public images, manage networks, and mobilize support (Chadwick, 2017; Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Tufekci, 2017; Kreiss, 2016; Karpf, 2016; Jungherr, 2016). Chadwick’s concept of the hybrid media system is particularly relevant because contemporary politics cannot be understood through a strict separation between offline and online media. Electoral mobilization increasingly occurs through the interaction of face-to-face networks, traditional media, social media platforms, closed messaging groups, political parties, campaign teams, activists, influencers, and citizens.

In this hybrid media environment, patronage does not simply move online. Instead, older practices are extended through digital channels. Candidate visits, community assistance, local brokerage, and social gatherings may still occur offline, but their political effects are increasingly amplified through WhatsApp groups, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and other digital platforms. Offline assistance can be transformed into visual evidence of care; local encounters can be turned into shareable campaign narratives; and political loyalty can be reinforced through repeated messages, group conversations, and online expressions of support. Digital platforms therefore operate not only as communication tools but also as infrastructures for organizing visibility, proximity, coordination, and loyalty.

The transformation from conventional patronage to digital patronage can be understood as a hybrid process in which face-to-face exchange, local brokerage, material benefits, and community networks are increasingly mediated by digital platforms. Through WhatsApp groups, social media, closed digital networks, and online coordination, patronage practices are extended into digital spaces and reorganized through influencers, buzzers, digital volunteers, group administrators, symbolic loyalty, support monitoring, and narrative circulation. This process produces a hybrid form of political patronage that combines material exchange, emotional mobilization, digital visibility, network control, and offline-online electoral practices.



**Figure 1. Transformation from Conventional Patronage to Hybrid Political Patronage in Indonesian Elections**

Source: developed by the authors.

As shown in Figure 1, digitalization does not replace conventional patronage. Rather, it expands the channels, actors, and mechanisms through which patronage is organized and

maintained. This framework helps explain why platform-based political communication should be analyzed not only as campaign communication but also as part of the changing infrastructure of clientelistic electoral mobilization.

Bennett and Segerberg's (2013) concept of connective action helps explain why digital mobilization does not always depend on formal organizations. Mobilization may occur through personalized networks, individual identity frames, emotional narratives, and easily shareable political content. This perspective is useful for understanding the roles of digital volunteers, influencers, buzzers, group administrators, and community accounts in electoral mobilization. These actors are not always formally embedded in party structures, yet they may function as mobilizing nodes that circulate narratives, shape collective emotions, connect candidates with voters, and direct public conversations. In the context of patronage, however, connective action is not necessarily autonomous or civic-oriented. It may also be shaped by elite interests, material incentives, informal political contracts, or transactional relations that appear as voluntary participation.

The literature on digital platforms also emphasizes that social media is not a neutral political space. Platforms are shaped by algorithmic visibility, attention economies, interaction structures, and affective circulation, all of which may intensify polarization, personalization, and strategic information dissemination (Tufekci, 2017; Margetts et al., 2015; Jungherr, 2016; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021). In patronage politics, these platform logics allow candidates and campaign actors to reach voters more quickly, personally, and repeatedly. Messages can be adapted to specific communities, circulated through trusted groups, amplified by influencers, and reinforced by volunteer testimonials. As a result, political exchange becomes more dispersed, personalized, and difficult to trace through formal campaign structures.

WhatsApp groups occupy a particularly important position in platformed patronage because they are closed, personal, and trust-based communication spaces. Unlike open social media platforms, WhatsApp enables political communication to occur in semi-private networks that are difficult for broader publics, journalists, researchers, and election supervisors to monitor. In electoral politics, WhatsApp groups may serve as spaces for volunteer coordination, campaign messaging, political instruction, loyalty reinforcement, support mapping, and informal monitoring. The concept of digital clientelism is useful here because it explains how patrimonial or clientelistic relations can be reproduced through closed digital communication networks rather than only through direct face-to-face exchange.

This distinction helps clarify the difference between ordinary digital campaigning and platformed patronage. Ordinary digital campaigning focuses on persuasion, candidate branding, information dissemination, public visibility, and voter engagement. Platformed patronage, by contrast, centers on reciprocal relationships involving incentives, loyalty, access, emotional proximity, and network control. A political influencer does not merely promote a candidate; they may operate as a symbolic broker connecting candidates with specific voter segments. A digital volunteer does not merely share content; they may manage communities, circulate instructions, monitor voter responses, amplify narratives, and link online mobilization with offline campaign activities. A WhatsApp administrator does not merely manage a group; they may regulate conversation, reinforce group identity, and maintain political discipline.

In Indonesia, platformed patronage must also be understood as a hybrid electoral practice. Digitalization does not eliminate money politics, local networks, or face-to-face mobilization. Instead, digital technology expands their reach and changes their form. Social assistance can be publicized on social media, gift distribution can be framed as evidence of political care, campaign volunteers can construct narratives of candidate proximity, and political conversations can be

directed through closed messaging groups. At the same time, incentives may circulate in more flexible forms, such as internet quota, e-wallet transfers, operational funds, endorsement fees, content-production support, and logistical assistance for digital campaign work. These practices blur the boundary between legitimate campaign activity, paid promotion, volunteer support, and clientelistic mobilization.

Based on this review, this article develops the concept of platformed patronage as a hybrid form of digital patronage in which older clientelistic relations are reproduced through platform-based communication infrastructures. The concept rests on four analytical dimensions. First, clientelistic exchange explains how resources, benefits, access, or symbolic recognition are linked to electoral support. Second, digital intermediation explains how influencers, buzzers, digital volunteers, group administrators, and community accounts perform brokerage functions in platform-based environments. Third, platform-based coordination explains how WhatsApp groups and social media networks organize messages, supporters, instructions, and campaign visibility. Fourth, loyalty formation explains how repeated exposure, group belonging, emotional narratives, and perceived proximity to the candidate help sustain political support.

The synthesis of patronage-clientelism theory, political brokerage theory, digital political communication, and hybrid media mobilization suggests that the transformation of patronage is not merely a technical change in campaign tools. It represents a broader reconfiguration of electoral power relations. Patron-client relations no longer depend only on direct material distribution or face-to-face brokerage. They are increasingly mediated by digital visibility, affective narratives, semi-private communication spaces, digital intermediaries, and networked forms of coordination. Platformed patronage therefore, provides an analytical lens for examining how clientelistic politics adapts to the digital infrastructure of contemporary Indonesian elections.

### **3. Conceptual Framework**

This study develops a conceptual framework of platformed patronage to explain how clientelistic electoral relations are extended, reorganized, and partially obscured through digital platforms. Platformed patronage refers to a hybrid form of political patronage in which conventional face-to-face exchange, local brokerage, material assistance, and community-based mobilization are mediated by platform infrastructures, digital intermediaries, and networked communication practices. The concept does not assume that digitalization replaces conventional patronage. Rather, it emphasizes how older clientelistic relations are reproduced through new channels of coordination, visibility, incentive circulation, and loyalty formation.

The framework begins by distinguishing between conventional political patronage and digital political patronage. Conventional patronage is commonly organized through face-to-face meetings, local elites, material assistance, brokers, and physical mobilization. These practices rely on direct interaction, community leadership, mediation, logistical support, and in-person campaign activities. Digital political patronage, by contrast, operates through WhatsApp groups, influencers, buzzers, digital volunteers, e-wallet incentives, and social media amplification. These mechanisms allow political actors to coordinate support, shape opinion, circulate narratives, provide digitally mediated incentives, and expand political messages through platform-based networks.



Figure 2. Comparing Conventional and Digital Political Patronage in Indonesia

Source: developed by the authors.

As shown in Figure 2, the transformation from conventional to digital patronage should not be understood as the replacement of offline mechanisms by online mechanisms. Instead, digital patronage expands and reworks conventional practices. Face-to-face meetings are extended through closed group communication; local elites are complemented by influencers and digital intermediaries; material assistance is supplemented by e-wallet incentives and operational support; brokers are joined by buzzers and digital volunteers; and physical mobilization is amplified through social media narratives. This comparison provides the conceptual basis for understanding platformed patronage as a hybrid process.

The framework then identifies four interconnected components of platformed patronage. The first component is conventional patronage, which includes face-to-face exchange, local elites, brokers, material assistance, community networks, and physical mobilization. These practices continue to provide the social foundation for electoral exchange by fostering familiarity, obligation, dependency, and expectations of reciprocity among candidates, intermediaries, and voters. The second component is digital platform infrastructure, which includes WhatsApp groups, social media platforms, closed digital networks, online coordination, and political messaging. These platforms extend patronage practices into digital spaces by enabling campaign actors to circulate messages, coordinate supporters, amplify candidate visibility, and maintain communication beyond direct physical encounters.

The third component is digital intermediation. In platformed patronage, brokerage is no longer performed only by traditional local brokers. It is also carried out by influencers, buzzers, digital volunteers, WhatsApp group administrators, community account managers, content creators, and amplifier accounts. These actors connect candidates with voters, circulate narratives, manage online groups, reinforce collective identity, monitor voter responses, and amplify campaign messages. Their influence may derive not from formal party positions or territorial authority, but from platform visibility, follower networks, emotional credibility, digital literacy, and the ability to shape online conversations. The fourth component is hybrid political patronage, which emerges from the interaction of conventional patronage, digital platforms, and

digital intermediaries. This hybrid form combines material exchange, symbolic loyalty, emotional mobilization, digital visibility, network control, and offline-online electoral practices.

Figure 3 illustrates the networked structure of digital patronage. It shows how candidates, local brokers, voter pools, digital hubs, digital volunteers, online groups, social content hubs, amplifier nodes, logistics, and funds are connected within a platform-based campaign ecosystem. The figure emphasizes that digital patronage does not operate through a single linear channel. Rather, it works through multiple nodes and flows. Candidates and campaign teams remain important, but their influence is mediated by both offline brokers and digital actors. Digital hubs coordinate message circulation, online groups organize supporters, social content hubs transform political activities into shareable narratives, amplifier nodes expand message reach, and logistics and funds support the circulation of campaign resources and incentives.



**Figure 3. Digital Patronage Network Connecting Candidates, Brokers, Influencers, Digital Volunteers, and Voters**

Source: developed by the authors.

Based on this framework, the study analyzes platformed patronage through four analytical dimensions. First, platform-based coordination refers to how WhatsApp groups and social media platforms are used to organize campaign messages, political instructions, volunteer activities, supporter networks, and election-related mobilization. Second, digital intermediation refers to how influencers, buzzers, group administrators, digital volunteers, and community accounts perform brokerage roles between candidates and voters. Third, incentive circulation refers to how material and symbolic resources are distributed through digital campaign networks, including operational funds, internet quota, e-wallet transfers, endorsement fees, content-production support, and logistical assistance. Fourth, loyalty formation refers to how repeated exposure,

group belonging, emotional narratives, symbolic recognition, and perceived candidate proximity shape voter support and political attachment.

This conceptual framework helps distinguish platformed patronage from ordinary digital campaigning. Ordinary digital campaigning focuses mainly on persuasion, candidate branding, message dissemination, and public visibility. Platformed patronage involves a deeper structure of reciprocal relations in which digital communication is connected to expectations of support, loyalty management, access to resources, emotional attachment, and coordinated mobilization. Therefore, the key indicators of platformed patronage are not merely the use of WhatsApp or social media, but the presence of exchange, intermediation, incentive circulation, loyalty reinforcement, and support monitoring within digital political networks.

The framework guides the empirical analysis by examining how WhatsApp groups, social media content, digital volunteers, influencers, buzzers, group administrators, and digital incentives reshape electoral mobilization and patron-client relations in Indonesian digital democracy. It positions platformed patronage as a hybrid electoral practice that combines offline and online mechanisms, material and symbolic exchanges, formal and informal actors, and voluntary and transactional forms of political participation.

#### **4. Research Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative approach, combining an interpretive case study design with digital ethnography. This approach was selected because the study seeks to understand how clientelistic patronage practices are extended, reorganized, and partly obscured through digital platforms in Indonesian electoral politics. The focus is not to measure the statistical effect of digital campaigning on voting behavior, but to examine the meanings, strategies, interaction patterns, incentives, and power relations through which platformed patronage operates in everyday electoral mobilization.

The research was conducted in the context of Indonesian electoral politics during the 2024 electoral cycle and related local campaign activities. The case was bounded by campaign-related digital practices involving WhatsApp groups, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, digital volunteer networks, influencer or buzzer activities, and social media-based voter engagement. The study focused on digital campaign spaces in which political messages, campaign instructions, support appeals, volunteer coordination, candidate promotion, and incentive-related communication were circulated. These boundaries were established to distinguish the study from a general analysis of social media campaigning and to focus specifically on practices that showed indications of clientelistic exchange, digital intermediation, loyalty reinforcement, or coordinated mobilization.

The study combined offline and online sites of observation. Offline data were obtained from interviews with actors involved in or exposed to campaign mobilization, while online data were obtained from digital communication spaces linked to electoral campaigning. The digital platforms selected for observation were WhatsApp, TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook. WhatsApp was selected because it functions as a semi-private space for campaign coordination, political instruction, group-based mobilization, and support monitoring. TikTok and Instagram were selected because they are widely used for candidate image-making, short-video campaigning, influencer promotion, and emotional narrative circulation. Facebook was included because it remains important for community-based political discussion, local campaign pages, and older voter networks. Platform selection was therefore based on relevance to the mechanisms of platformed patronage identified in the conceptual framework: coordination, intermediation, incentive circulation, and loyalty formation.

The research involved 40 informants selected through purposive and snowball sampling. The informants consisted of 8 campaign team members, 8 digital volunteers, 8 WhatsApp group administrators or digital political group administrators, 6 political influencers or buzzers, and 10 active social media voters.

**Table 1. Profile of Research Informants**

<b>Informant category</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Role in the study</b>
Campaign team members	8	Provided information on campaign strategy, support mobilization, volunteer coordination, platform use, and the management of digital campaign networks.
Digital volunteers	8	Explained practices of content distribution, message amplification, online supporter engagement, narrative circulation, and social media-based political work.
WhatsApp group administrators / digital political group administrators	8	Provided information on closed-group communication, political instruction distribution, interaction patterns, loyalty reinforcement, and member coordination.
Political influencers / buzzers	6	Explained opinion-shaping strategies, candidate promotion, audience targeting, endorsement practices, compensation, and relationships with political teams.
Active social media voters	10	Explained experiences of receiving political messages, support appeals, digital incentives, campaign narratives, and the influence of repeated exposure on political preferences.
<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>	

Campaign team members were included because they could explain digital campaign strategy, volunteer coordination, and the use of online platforms for mobilization. Digital volunteers were included because they were directly involved in content distribution, message amplification, and online supporter engagement. WhatsApp group administrators were included because they managed closed or semi-closed communication spaces where campaign instructions, loyalty narratives, and support coordination circulated. Influencers and buzzers were included because they participated in opinion shaping, candidate promotion, audience engagement, and narrative amplification. Active social media voters were included because they experienced digital campaign messages, support appeals, incentive-related communication, and repeated exposure to candidate narratives.

Informants were selected based on five criteria. First, they had direct experience with electoral communication or campaign-related digital activities. Second, they had been involved in or exposed to political communication through WhatsApp, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, or other social media platforms. Third, they had knowledge of campaign coordination, digital volunteer work, influencer promotion, group administration, voter mobilization, or voter responses to digital political messages. Fourth, they were willing to participate voluntarily and provide informed consent. Fifth, for campaign actors, volunteers, group administrators, influencers, and buzzers, priority was given to those who had participated in campaign activities

for candidates, parties, volunteer groups, or political communities. Snowball sampling was used to access informants who were difficult to reach, particularly group administrators, buzzers, informal campaign actors, and digital volunteers operating in closed or semi-private networks.

Data were collected through four techniques: in-depth interviews, digital ethnographic observation, social media content analysis, and digital documentation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 40 informants to explore their experiences, strategies, perceptions, and interpretations of digital patronage practices. Interviews with campaign team members focused on platform use, campaign coordination, volunteer management, digital messaging, influencer engagement, and support mapping. Interviews with digital volunteers focused on message circulation, content sharing, online supporter engagement, instructions received from campaign actors, and forms of logistical or material support. Interviews with WhatsApp group administrators focused on group rules, message types, interaction patterns, coordination mechanisms, and forms of loyalty reinforcement. Interviews with influencers and buzzers focused on candidate promotion, compensation, endorsement practices, audience targeting, and narrative amplification. Interviews with active social media voters focused on their experiences of receiving political messages, campaign narratives, support appeals, and incentive-related communication.

Digital ethnographic observation was conducted by observing campaign-related interactions in WhatsApp groups, TikTok comments and videos, Instagram posts and stories, Facebook pages and groups, volunteer channels, and public online conversations related to candidates or electoral issues. The observation focused on interaction patterns rather than individual identities. The observed elements included message frequency, forwarded campaign materials, calls for support, voting reminders, symbols of loyalty, candidate-related narratives, volunteer instructions, testimonial content, incentive-related language, and forms of group pressure or support monitoring. For WhatsApp groups, observation was conducted only when access was granted by administrators or members. Private conversations were not used without consent. Identifying information such as names, phone numbers, profile photos, account names, group names, and specific political affiliations was removed or disguised.

Social media content analysis was conducted on campaign posters, short videos, captions, hashtags, comments, memes, testimonials, influencer posts, volunteer content, and candidate-related digital narratives circulated on TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp. Content was selected when it was relevant to the analytical dimensions of platformed patronage, namely platform-based coordination, digital intermediation, incentive circulation, and loyalty formation. The analysis examined not only the presence of campaign messages but also their meaning, emotional framing, political symbols, appeals to loyalty, representations of candidate proximity, and the relationship constructed between candidates, intermediaries, and voters. For example, posts showing assistance distribution were analyzed not merely as campaign publicity, but as potential digitalized patronage when they framed material assistance as evidence of care, obligation, or political closeness.

Digital documentation was collected to support interview and observation data. The documentation included anonymized screenshots, campaign posters, public posts, short videos, digital pamphlets, broadcast messages voluntarily provided by informants, and relevant campaign-related digital archives. Public materials were analyzed with attention to research ethics, while private or semi-private materials were used only when voluntarily provided and anonymizable. Raw screenshots containing identifiable personal information were not displayed in the manuscript. When necessary, digital messages were paraphrased to protect informant privacy while preserving their substantive meaning.

Data analysis followed an iterative qualitative process combining the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña model, thematic analysis, and digital discourse analysis. The analysis began with data condensation, in which interview transcripts, observation notes, screenshots, digital archives, and social media materials were organized according to platform, actor category, content type, and relevance to the research focus. Initial coding was then conducted using codes such as “WhatsApp coordination,” “group instruction,” “voting appeal,” “candidate loyalty,” “volunteer content,” “influencer promotion,” “buzzer amplification,” “e-wallet incentive,” “internet quota,” “operational funds,” “support monitoring,” “assistance narrative,” and “digital proximity.” These codes were then grouped into broader themes corresponding to the conceptual framework: platform-based coordination, digital intermediation, incentive circulation, and loyalty formation.

The next stage involved comparing data across informant groups and data sources. Statements from campaign team members were compared with accounts from digital volunteers, group administrators, influencers or buzzers, and active social media voters. Interview findings were also compared with digital observation notes, social media content, and digital archives. This cross-source comparison helped determine whether particular practices represented ordinary digital campaigning, general political mobilization, or platformed patronage involving exchange, intermediation, incentive circulation, loyalty reinforcement, and support monitoring. Digital discourse analysis was used to interpret how language, symbols, emotional narratives, and candidate representations were constructed in online spaces. Particular attention was given to how terms such as “operational funds,” “volunteer support,” “internet quota,” “appreciation,” “solidarity,” and “care” were used to frame potentially transactional relations in less explicit political language.

Trustworthiness was maintained through source triangulation, method triangulation, member checking, an audit trail, and reflexive memoing. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing data from campaign team members, digital volunteers, group administrators, influencers or buzzers, and active social media voters. Method triangulation was conducted by comparing interviews, digital observation, social media content analysis, and digital documentation. Member checking was conducted with selected key informants to confirm factual accuracy and avoid misinterpretation of specific practices. The audit trail was maintained by storing interview guides, field notes, coding decisions, observation notes, anonymized digital materials, and analytical memos. Reflexive memos were used to record the researchers’ assumptions, positionality, and potential biases when interpreting politically sensitive digital interactions.

Because the study addresses politically sensitive issues, including campaign strategy, money politics, digital identities, influencer work, buzzer activities, and private messaging groups, ethical precautions were taken throughout the research. All informants participated voluntarily and provided informed consent. Informants were informed about the purpose of the study, the type of data collected, their right to refuse to answer questions, and their right to withdraw from participation. Real names, account names, phone numbers, group names, specific locations, and political affiliations were anonymized or disguised. Private WhatsApp messages and closed-group materials were used only with consent and were not reproduced in ways that could identify participants. Sensitive materials were not displayed in raw form. The ethical principle guiding the study was to obtain an academic understanding of platformed patronage without exposing informants to social, legal, or political harm.

## 5. Results and Discussion

This section presents the study's findings based on qualitative data from 40 informants, including campaign team members, digital volunteers, political WhatsApp group administrators, political influencers or buzzers, and active social media voters. The findings show that political patronage in Indonesia has not disappeared in the digital era. Instead, it has undergone a significant transformation from conventional face-to-face practices into more flexible, networked, and platform-mediated forms of patronage. The transformation is not linear. Face-to-face patronage continues to exist through community meetings, direct visits, social assistance distribution, local brokers, and neighborhood-based mobilization. However, these conventional practices are increasingly supported, expanded, and sometimes disguised through digital media. WhatsApp groups, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, influencer networks, and digital volunteer communities now function as new infrastructures for political coordination, voter persuasion, loyalty management, and the circulation of political incentives.

The first major finding shows that patronage has shifted from a predominantly face-to-face model to a hybrid patronage model. In the conventional model, patronage was mostly organized through direct meetings between candidates, brokers, local elites, and voters. These practices included attending community gatherings, visiting religious or neighborhood events, distributing goods, providing financial assistance, and relying on trusted local figures to mobilize support.

However, the findings indicate that these practices are now increasingly mediated by digital platforms. Campaign team members explained that offline mobilization is often followed by digital reinforcement. For example, after a candidate visits a community or provides assistance, the activity is documented, edited into short video content, and distributed through TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp groups. This process changes the meaning of patronage. Assistance is no longer experienced only by direct recipients but is also transformed into a public narrative of care, generosity, and political closeness.

This finding suggests that digital patronage does not replace conventional patronage. Instead, it expands its visibility and emotional reach. Physical encounters remain important because they create trust and direct contact. Yet digital platforms allow those encounters to be reproduced repeatedly through images, videos, captions, forwarded messages, and testimonial narratives. In this sense, patronage becomes both material and symbolic. It is material because it may involve assistance, money, goods, or logistical support. It is symbolic because it is framed digitally as evidence of political concern and leadership responsiveness.

The second finding reveals that WhatsApp groups play a central role in the organization of digital patronage. Unlike public social media platforms, WhatsApp groups operate in relatively closed and intimate spaces. Informants from campaign teams and group administrators described WhatsApp as the most effective medium for direct coordination because it is fast, familiar, and trusted by users across different age groups. WhatsApp groups are used for several purposes. First, they function as channels for distributing campaign materials, including posters, short videos, candidate profiles, slogans, and voting instructions. Second, they serve as spaces for coordinating campaign activities, such as volunteer meetings, door-to-door visits, online content-sharing schedules, and election-day mobilization. Third, they are used to maintain group loyalty through repeated messages, emotional narratives, religious or communal symbols, and reminders about collective political commitments. The findings also show that WhatsApp groups can create subtle forms of social pressure. Members may feel expected to support a particular candidate because they are part of a group led by respected local figures, community leaders, or politically active administrators. Even when no direct coercion exists, the repeated circulation of

political messages may normalize support for a candidate. In this context, WhatsApp groups become not only communication tools but also mechanisms of social monitoring and loyalty formation.

This finding is important because it shows that digital patronage often works in semi-private spaces that are difficult to monitor from outside. Unlike public campaign posts, WhatsApp communication is less visible to election supervisors, journalists, and researchers. Therefore, patronage practices mediated through WhatsApp may be more difficult to identify, regulate, and document. The third finding indicates that political money practices have also adapted to the digital environment. The informants did not always use the term “money politics” directly. Instead, they often referred to “operational funds,” “transportation money,” “volunteer support,” “content production costs,” “internet quota,” “digital campaign expenses,” or “appreciation for supporters.” This linguistic shift shows that monetary exchange in digital politics is often framed in softer and less legally risky terms. Digital money politics does not always take the form of direct cash-for-votes transactions. It may appear in several forms, such as mobile credit, e-wallet transfers, transportation reimbursement, content production fees, endorsement fees for influencers, logistical support for volunteers, or small incentives for sharing campaign materials. In several cases, incentives were not given directly to ordinary voters but to digital intermediaries who helped circulate political messages and mobilize online support. This finding demonstrates that digital patronage changes the circulation of political resources. In conventional patronage, resources often flow from candidates or brokers directly to voters. In digital patronage, resources may flow through multiple layers of actors, including content creators, influencers, buzzers, group administrators, and digital volunteers. As a result, the boundaries between campaign financing, volunteer compensation, political endorsements, and digital patronage become increasingly blurred.

**Table 2. Forms of Digital Patronage Identified in the Study**

<b>Form of Digital Patronage</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Main Actors Involved</b>
WhatsApp-based coordination	Distribution of campaign messages, voting instructions, and support coordination through closed groups.	Group administrators, campaign teams, volunteers
Digital incentive circulation	Provision of internet quota, e-wallet transfers, operational funds, or endorsement fees.	Campaign teams, influencers, volunteers
Content-based patronage	Publication of assistance, charity, or candidate visits as campaign content.	Campaign teams, content creators, influencers
Influencer-mediated loyalty	Use of influential figures to build emotional closeness between candidates and voters.	Influencers, buzzers, voters
Volunteer network mobilization	Online and offline coordination of supporters through digital platforms.	Digital volunteers, group administrators, campaign teams
Narrative amplification	Repetition of candidate-related narratives through posts, comments, hashtags, and forwarded messages.	Buzzers, volunteers, supporters

The fourth finding shows that digital actors increasingly perform brokerage functions. In conventional patronage, brokers are usually local figures who connect candidates with voters. In the digital context, this role is increasingly performed by influencers, buzzers, digital volunteers, group administrators, and community account managers.

Political influencers play a symbolic role. They do not always distribute material incentives directly, but they help build emotional proximity between candidates and voters. Through personal storytelling, testimonials, humor, religious expressions, local identity, or lifestyle content, influencers can make candidates appear more relatable and trustworthy. Their role is particularly important among young voters and active social media users who may not attend conventional campaign events. Buzzers, on the other hand, tend to operate as narrative amplifiers. They spread repeated messages, respond to criticism, attack opponents, promote hashtags, and create the impression that a candidate has broad public support. Unlike influencers, who often rely on personal visibility, buzzers may operate through anonymous, semi-anonymous, or coordinated accounts. Digital volunteers occupy a more flexible position. Some are genuinely motivated by ideological support, personal admiration, or local solidarity. Others may receive logistical support or incentives. Their activities include sharing campaign content, inviting others to join groups, responding to viral issues, managing comment sections, and circulating candidate narratives. In many cases, digital volunteers also connect online mobilization with offline activities, such as community meetings or election-day coordination.

This finding confirms that the broker role has not disappeared. Rather, it has expanded into the digital sphere. Political brokerage is no longer limited to neighborhood leaders or local intermediaries but now includes actors who possess digital visibility, platform literacy, and network influence. The fifth finding reveals that patron-client relations are increasingly formed through digital interaction. In conventional patronage, loyalty is built through repeated face-to-face contact, assistance, kinship ties, or local dependency. In digital patronage, loyalty can be built through continuous exposure to political content, emotional narratives, group participation, influencer endorsement, and perceived access to candidates.

Active social media voters stated that repeated exposure to candidate content may create a sense of familiarity. Candidates who frequently appear in social media feeds, respond to public concerns, or are promoted by trusted figures may be perceived as more accessible. This perception can create what may be called digital proximity, namely a sense of closeness produced not by direct interaction but by repeated mediated presence. Online patron-client relations are also shaped by group belonging. Voters who are members of political WhatsApp groups may experience a sense of collective identity. They are not only exposed to campaign messages but also participate in a community of supporters. Within this community, loyalty is reinforced through shared symbols, jokes, slogans, religious expressions, local identity narratives, and repeated reminders about the importance of supporting a particular candidate. However, this relationship is not always based on rational programmatic evaluation. In many cases, it is shaped by emotional attachment, social pressure, symbolic recognition, and the expectation of future access. This suggests that digital patronage may reproduce old forms of clientelism in new communicative environments.

**Table 3. Main Thematic Findings**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Key Finding</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>
Hybrid patronage	Offline patronage is reinforced through digital platforms.	Patronage is transformed, not eliminated.

Theme	Key Finding	Interpretation
WhatsApp coordination	WhatsApp groups function as closed spaces for mobilization and loyalty management.	Digital patronage often works in semi-private networks.
Digital incentives	Incentives appear as operational funds, quota, transfers, or endorsement fees.	Money politics becomes more flexible and less visible.
New brokers	Influencers, buzzers, and volunteers perform brokerage roles.	Political brokerage expands into platform-based networks.
Online loyalty	Voters develop loyalty through repeated exposure and group belonging.	Patron-client relations become emotionally and digitally mediated.
Democratic risk	Digital patronage blurs the line between participation and transaction.	Electoral democracy faces new accountability challenges.

The findings demonstrate that digitalization does not eliminate patronage politics. Instead, it reorganizes patronage through new platforms, actors, and communication practices. This supports the argument that clientelism is adaptive rather than static. Classical studies define clientelism as a contingent exchange of resources and political support (Stokes, 2005; Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007; Hicken, 2011). The present findings extend this argument by showing that the mechanisms of exchange, monitoring, and loyalty formation are increasingly mediated by digital platforms. The transformation from face-to-face patronage to digital patronage should not be understood as a complete shift from offline to online politics. Rather, it reflects the emergence of a hybrid patronage system. This finding is consistent with the hybrid media perspective, which argues that contemporary political communication operates through the interaction of old and new media logics (Chadwick, 2017). In the Indonesian electoral context, candidates still rely on offline networks, local brokers, and community events, but these practices are amplified through digital channels. A candidate's visit to a village, distribution of assistance, or attendance at a religious event may become more politically valuable when transformed into shareable digital content.

This finding also strengthens previous studies on Indonesian patronage and electoral clientelism. Aspinall and Berenschot (2019) argue that Indonesian democracy is deeply shaped by informal networks, personalistic politics, and access to distributive resources. Muhtadi (2019) further shows that vote buying remains relevant in Indonesian elections, particularly in competitive electoral contexts. However, the current findings suggest that the infrastructure of patronage has changed. Patronage no longer depends only on physical brokers and direct distribution. It increasingly depends on digital intermediaries, platform visibility, and networked communication. The role of WhatsApp groups is especially significant. WhatsApp allows political communication to occur in closed, intimate, and trusted spaces. This makes it highly effective for mobilization but also difficult to monitor. In patronage politics, such closed spaces can function as arenas for loyalty reinforcement, message discipline, and informal coordination. This finding resonates with the concept of digital clientelism, which explains how traditional patron-client relations can be reproduced through digital communication platforms (Fisher et al., 2023). WhatsApp groups may not always contain explicit vote-buying instructions, but they can normalize support, circulate political obligations, and create subtle expectations of loyalty.

The findings also show that digital patronage blurs the boundary between voluntary participation and transactional mobilization. Digital volunteers may describe their activities as

voluntary support, yet some may receive operational funds, internet quota, transport money, or other forms of logistical support. Influencers may frame political promotion as personal endorsement, but their involvement may also be connected to compensation or political access. This ambiguity is central to the operation of digital patronage. It allows political actors to maintain the appearance of participatory politics while still relying on transactional relationships. From the perspective of political brokerage theory, the findings indicate that brokers have not disappeared. They have changed form. Stokes et al. (2013) emphasize that brokers play an essential role in connecting patrons and voters, distributing resources, and monitoring support. In the digital context, this brokerage function is performed not only by local elites but also by influencers, buzzers, administrators, and digital volunteers. These actors may not have formal party positions, yet they possess access to audiences, online communities, and digital communication channels. Their influence is based less on territorial authority and more on visibility, credibility, network reach, and platform literacy.

The emergence of influencers as symbolic brokers is particularly important. Unlike traditional brokers, who often rely on direct social authority, influencers operate through affective and symbolic power. They shape perception by making candidates appear relatable, caring, modern, religious, youthful, or close to ordinary people. This confirms the importance of emotional and personalized communication in digital politics (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Tufekci, 2017). In the context of patronage, emotional proximity can become a substitute for direct personal contact. Voters may feel close to candidates not because they have met them, but because they repeatedly encounter curated representations of them online.

The study also reveals that digital money politics is more complex than conventional cash-for-votes practices. It may involve financial incentives given to intermediaries rather than voters, such as payments to influencers, operational funds for volunteers, or logistical support for content distribution. This means that political money in the digital era may circulate through campaign ecosystems rather than through direct voter transactions. Such practices are difficult to classify because they may appear as legitimate campaign expenses, volunteer support, or content production costs. Nevertheless, when these resources are used to produce loyalty, mobilize support, or create dependency, they become part of digital patronage. This has significant implications for electoral accountability. Conventional election supervision often focuses on visible violations, such as direct vote buying, illegal campaign materials, or overt misuse of state resources. Digital patronage, however, often operates through private messages, informal payments, coded language, and networked amplification. As a result, it may escape formal monitoring. The challenge is not only legal but also conceptual. Election regulators, researchers, and civil society actors need clearer frameworks to distinguish between legitimate digital campaigning, political participation, paid political promotion, and digital patronage.

The findings further suggest that digital patronage can affect the quality of democracy in at least three ways. First, it may weaken programmatic competition because voters are mobilized through loyalty, identity, incentives, and emotional proximity rather than policy evaluation. Second, it may strengthen unequal political competition because candidates with greater financial and digital resources can build larger networks of influencers, buzzers, and volunteers. Third, it may reduce transparency because political transactions can occur in closed digital spaces that are difficult to observe. However, it is also important not to treat all digital political participation as patronage. Not every volunteer is paid, not every influencer is a broker, and not every WhatsApp group is a clientelistic network. Some forms of digital mobilization may reflect genuine political enthusiasm, ideological commitment, or civic participation. Therefore, the concept of digital patronage must be applied carefully. The key indicators are the presence of

exchange, loyalty management, incentives, dependency, and coordinated mobilization. Without these elements, digital activity should be understood as ordinary political communication rather than patronage. Overall, this study contributes to the literature by offering a conceptual bridge between studies of patronage-clientelism and studies of digital political communication. Previous research on Indonesian patronage has emphasized money politics, brokers, and local networks (Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2016; Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Muhtadi, 2019), while research on digital politics has often focused on social media campaigns, polarization, disinformation, and online participation (Lim, 2017; Tapsell, 2021). This study shows that these two fields should not be separated. In contemporary Indonesian elections, patronage and digital communication increasingly operate together.

The main argument emerging from the findings is that digital patronage represents the platformization of clientelistic politics. It transforms the medium of patronage from direct encounter to digital interaction, expands the role of brokers from local intermediaries to platform-based actors, changes political incentives from direct cash distribution to more diverse digital and symbolic rewards, and reshapes loyalty from personal dependency to networked emotional attachment. Therefore, digital patronage should be understood as a new configuration of old political practices within the infrastructure of digital democracy. In conclusion, the transformation of political patronage from face-to-face to digital forms does not indicate democratic modernization in a purely positive sense. Instead, it reveals the adaptability of clientelistic practices within changing technological environments. Digital platforms provide new opportunities for participation, but they also create new channels for manipulation, dependency, and unequal influence. For Indonesian democracy, the central challenge is not merely how to regulate online campaigns, but how to understand and address the deeper transformation of patronage relations in the digital era.

## 6. Conclusion

This study concludes that the transformation of political patronage from face-to-face practices to digital patronage does not eliminate clientelism in Indonesian electoral democracy; rather, it changes its medium, actors, and mechanisms. Patronage that was previously based on direct meetings, local brokers, material distribution, and physical mass mobilization has now expanded through WhatsApp groups, social media, political influencers, buzzers, and digital volunteers. In this context, digital platforms function as spaces for coordination, narrative distribution, loyalty reinforcement, incentive circulation, and the construction of emotional proximity between candidates and voters. The findings indicate that digital patronage operates in a hybrid manner by combining older political practices with new communication infrastructures. Patron-client relations are no longer built solely through direct material exchange, but also through digital visibility, narratives of care, influencer promotion, social pressure within groups, and digital incentives such as operational funds, mobile credit, e-wallet transfers, or content compensation. Therefore, digital patronage poses a serious challenge to democratic quality by blurring the boundaries between political participation, digital campaigning, and electoral transactions. This study emphasizes the need for a renewed understanding of digital clientelism to enable more critical, transparent analysis of electoral political practices in line with the development of digital democracy in Indonesia.

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## 8. Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

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