



Women as Proxies of Power: Gender Representation in Local Dynastic Politics

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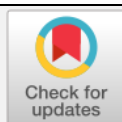
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ABSTRACT

The presence of women in the political sphere is often celebrated as an achievement in the agenda of gender equality and democratization. However, such representation does not always reflect true political independence. In many cases at the local level, women's involvement forms part of a dynastic political strategy that relies on kinship ties to maintain power. This research examines how women are used as proxies of power within the context of dynastic politics rooted in patriarchal structures. Using a qualitative approach and a case study design, this research explores the symbolic representation practices of a female political actor in a region in South Sulawesi. She advanced in the political contest with strong support from a family power network that has long dominated the local political landscape. Through a theoretical framework on dynastic politics and power proxies, this study reveals that women's involvement does not always strengthen empowerment agendas but can instead serve as an instrument for perpetuating family power dominance. These findings highlight the ambiguity between representation and empowerment, as well as the importance of distinguishing women's symbolic presence from participation based on individual autonomy and capacity. This study contributes to a critical understanding of the relationship between gender, power, and the persistence of dynastic politics in local electoral democracy.

Keywords: Dynastic Politics; Local Politics; Patriarchal Structure; Power Proxies; Women's Representation

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, the political landscape in Indonesia has undergone a striking transformation: more women are entering the halls of power than ever before. The reforms of 1998, often celebrated as a democratic turning point, also opened opportunities for women to become more visible in politics. One of the boldest steps was the introduction of affirmative action through a 30 percent quota for women on legislative candidate lists, first implemented in the 2004 elections (Hillman, 2018; Robinson, 2008; Suryakusuma, 2011). Since then, the numbers have grown steadily. In 2004, women held just 11.5 percent of seats in the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR RI); by the 2024 elections, that proportion had doubled to 22 percent (Margret, 2025). These figures are often heralded as signs of progress, reflecting not only greater female participation but also a broader policy shift toward inclusivity in the democratic process (Blackburn, 2004; Clayton, 2021).

Yet behind these statistics lies a more complex and less optimistic reality. The celebration of numerical gains often obscures the quality of women's political representation. A growing body of research reveals that many female legislators do not emerge from independent political struggles, but rather from family ties to entrenched elites (Htun, 2016; Kenawas, 2023). The 2019 election serves as a striking example: nearly half of the women who won seats in the national parliament (44 percent) came from political dynasties (Aspinall et al., 2021; Wardani & Subekti, 2021). In such cases, women's entry into politics is less about personal capacity or vision and more about perpetuating the dominance of political families through new faces (Butt, 2015; Mietzner, 2020).

This trend has further clarified the emergence of the concept of political proxies, forms of political representation in which women function as extensions of male power within patriarchal structures. Women often appear as symbolic representatives rather than political actors with autonomous capacity (Paxton, 1997). Contemporary literature emphasizes the importance of critiquing this form of representation, as it has the potential to blur the line between substantive empowerment and symbolic representation (Aspinall et al., 2021).

Several previous studies have identified dominant patterns underpinning political proxy practices. First, female candidates rely on gender-based social networks to build "homosocial capital." Second, candidates obtain political support and resources from male relatives, particularly husbands or fathers, who have previously held political office (Aspinall et al., 2021; Slater, 2004; Williams, 2016). This second pattern is the focus of this research because it demonstrates how political dynasties employ women as vehicles for legitimizing power. This finding is also supported by national survey data showing that 97 percent of respondents still consider men the head of the household, and 93.6 percent believe women must seek their husband's permission to work (Aspinall et al., 2021; Prihatini, 2020).

Other studies reinforce this picture. Wardani and Subekti found that women frequently appeared as proxies for established political families in the 2019 elections, where women's vote shares, 22.45% in 2009 and 23% in 2014, were largely driven by dynastic networks (Wardani & Subekti, 2021). Low female representation is not only the result of electoral barriers but also reflects the prevalence of female candidates who enter politics through kinship rather than individual merit (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2014; Shair-Rosenfield & Hinojosa, 2014).

Recent studies highlight the strength of political patriarchy that continues to subordinate women. White et al.'s (2024) study, *Voting Against Women: Political Patriarchy, Islam, and Representation in Indonesia*, demonstrates that patriarchal values still strongly shape women's nomination and electability (White et al., 2024). Gender bias among young Indonesian voters

reinforces proxy practices, with nearly 75 percent preferring male candidates due to gaps in gendered political knowledge (Parawansa, 2002; Prihatini, 2018; Rinaldo, 2014).

Age, political experience, and ballot position significantly affect a female candidate's chances of winning, again illustrating reliance on inherited political connections (Clayton et al., 2017; Norris & Lovenduski, 1995; Prihatini, 2019). Taken together, these studies suggest that political proxy patterns in Indonesia are sustained by four major factors: political dynasties that use women as extensions of family power, patriarchal structures that limit women's political autonomy, gender-biased voter preferences, and female candidates' reliance on inherited political capital (Aspinall, 2014; Mietzner, 2015).

Historically, dynastic politics is not new in Indonesia. It existed during the kingdom era, the Old Order, the New Order, and continues into the Reform era (Klinken, 2007; Tomsa, 2014). Political dynasties are generally understood as concentrations of power within family or kinship circles that systematically exploit biological and social relationships to maintain dominance (Noak, 2024; Querubin, 2016). Under certain circumstances, women are used as alternatives when male family members face legal, political, or electoral obstacles (Choi, 2019; Mendoza et al., 2016). This situation raises public concerns about the quality of women's political representation, especially when they are perceived as lacking capacity or independent agendas (White et al., 2024).

Based on this background, this study addresses two main questions: (1) How do political dynasties strategize to construct women's representation as proxies of power at the local level? (2) To what extent can women's involvement in political dynasties be understood as substantive representation, or merely symbolic representation, within the framework of electoral democracy? These questions aim to examine the paradox between the increasing number of women in politics and the limited substantive representation they often produce (Fenichel Pitkin, 1967; Paxton, 1997).

The novelty of this research lies in proposing the concept of proxy representation as an analytical category that transcends the descriptive–substantive dichotomy. This concept focuses on symbolic and relational dynamics, viewing women's representation not simply as physical presence in parliament, but as a political construction that positions women as instruments of dynastic power (Franceschet & Piscopo, 2008; Lovenduski, 2002). In doing so, this study offers a more critical analytical framework for understanding electoral practices in Indonesia, while also highlighting the ways patriarchy adapts to democratic demands through symbolic mechanisms (Waylen, 2007; Weldon, 2002).

The theoretical framework draws on Anne Phillips' theory of political representation, particularly the concept of the politics of presence (Phillips & Asenbaum, 2023), which underscores the importance of women's presence in democratic institutions. However, this study critiques its limitations by demonstrating that presence alone does not guarantee substance (Sarah & Mona, 2008; Young, 2002). Thus, the analysis is strengthened through critical feminist perspectives and studies of political dynasties (Choi, 2012, 2019), incorporating the concept of "symbolic compliance" (Clayton et al., 2014) to understand how procedural democracy becomes fertile ground for patriarchal adaptation (Celis & Childs, 2018; Rai, 2003).

Using this theoretical framework, the study seeks not only to explain women's representation quantitatively but also to critically examine the hidden power relations behind women's presence in politics. This analysis is expected to enrich the literature on gender politics in Indonesia and contribute to broader debates on electoral democracy and the resilience of political dynasties in patriarchal societies (Krook, 2009; Murray, 2010).

2. Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative approach with a single case study design to examine in depth the phenomenon of female political proxies within the context of political dynasties in Indonesia. This design was chosen for its ability to explore complex dynamics embedded in real-life contexts, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon under study and its broader environment are not clearly delineated (Gerring, 2006). An instrumental case study was used to analyze the representation of female political proxies through one informative case: the political career of a prominent female figure in local politics in South Sulawesi (Creswell, 2018; Johnson & Stake, 1996). The case was selected purposively, taking into account its direct relevance to the research focus, the availability of data, and its capacity to illuminate broader patterns in contemporary dynastic political proxy practices in Indonesia.

Data collection was conducted through methodological triangulation to enhance the validity and credibility of the findings. Three primary techniques were employed: document analysis, process tracing, and political network analysis. Document analysis involved systematically identifying and reviewing official sources such as political track records, campaign materials, party publications, and media reports relevant to the political career of the figure examined, particularly during the period 2014–2024 (Bowen, 2009). Process tracing served as the main analytical technique to uncover the causal mechanisms connecting the husband's accumulation of political capital to the wife's political achievements. This technique enabled the researcher to identify sequences of events, strategic decisions, and power dynamics within the political family, using diagnostic evidence selected systematically and analyzed in accordance with the research questions and hypotheses (Beach & Pedersen, 2019; Collier, 2011). Political network analysis was then used to map the relationships between political actors and the roles they played in the transmission of power.

Data analysis drew on a theoretical framework of political proxies, operationalized through three core dimensions: (1) the transfer of political capital from husband to wife, (2) the division of strategic roles within the political family, and (3) gendered legitimacy within patriarchal power structures. Process tracing focused on identifying causal process observations (CPOs) to reveal the causal links between the husband's political position and the wife's political career development at each stage (Brady et al., 2010; Collier et al., 2010). In addition, a pattern-matching approach was used to compare empirical findings with theoretical expectations regarding political proxies, while an explanation-building technique was employed to construct a contextual account of how proxy mechanisms operate in the case studied (Yin, 2018).

To maintain methodological rigor, this study prioritizes thick description in presenting context and findings, and applies reflexivity throughout the analytical process to minimize potential researcher bias and strengthen the credibility of interpretations (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This approach not only enables an in-depth exploration of a specific case but also provides a conceptual contribution to understanding women's political proxies as an adaptive strategy within the dynamics of political dynasties in Indonesia.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Political Capital Transfer as a Strategic Basis of Proxy Representation

The phenomenon of women's representation in political dynasties cannot be separated from the long-standing practice of political capital transfer in Indonesia. In many instances, women become political actors not through the accumulation of individual experience, but through a structured transfer of capital from influential husbands, fathers, or other male relatives. This political capital encompasses social networks, economic resources, symbolic legitimacy, and

cultural influence. Through these mechanisms, political dynasties are able to maintain power while simultaneously fulfilling the formal requirements of electoral democracy.

Social capital, for example, is reinforced through deeply rooted family networks. A female candidate from a political family typically gains immediate access to community leaders, local bureaucracies, and religious or ethnic groups that already function as established bases of family support. This facilitates voter mobilization without requiring the candidate to build a political base from scratch. In such cases, social capital is inherited rather than independently cultivated.

Symbolic capital also plays a significant role. A prominent family name or a husband's long-standing political reputation constitutes an important source of electoral advantage, one that independent candidates often cannot match. Certain surnames generate a strong "coattail effect," whereby voters place greater trust in female candidates due to their association with male figures perceived as successful or influential. This dynamic is evident in the case of Fatmawati Rusdi, whose electability was strongly shaped by the reputation and political standing of her husband.

Economic capital is another crucial factor. Political dynasties generally possess greater access to financial resources, including campaign funds, logistical support, and patronage networks. Female candidates from dynastic families typically enjoy more substantial campaign financing than non-dynastic competitors, strengthening their strategic position. These resources originate not only from immediate family members but also from business networks tied to the dynasty.

Equally important is cultural capital. In patriarchal societies, a woman's identity as the "wife of" or "daughter of" a political figure is often perceived as a form of moral legitimacy. Public acceptance of women in politics is frequently based not on their personal abilities but on their loyalty and proximity to male power holders. Kinship ties thus function as a source of legitimacy while simultaneously normalizing women's political participation as extensions of male authority.

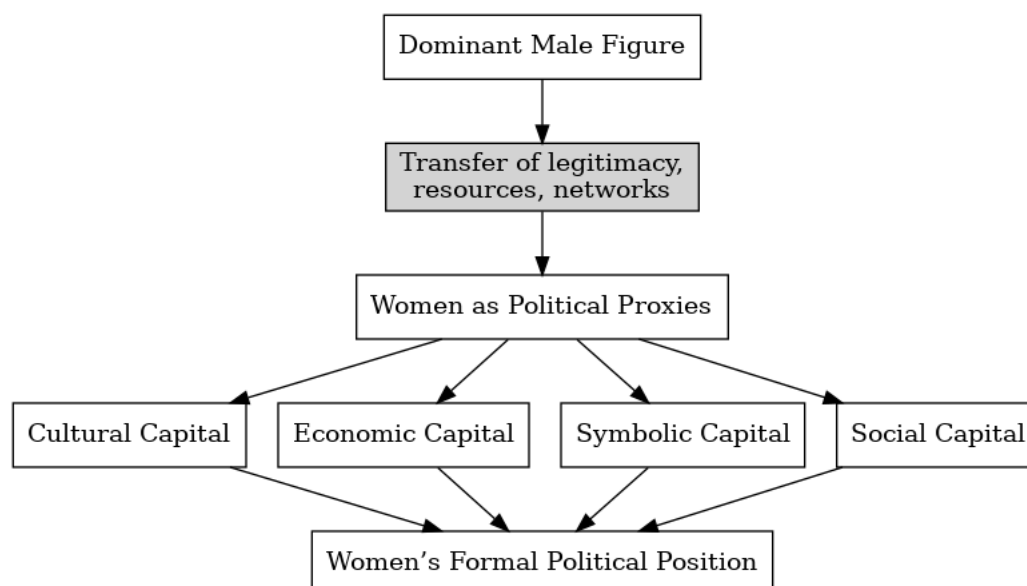


Figure 1. Women's Formal Political Position

Source: Processed from various sources

This strategy of capital transfer reveals that women's representation in dynasties is largely instrumental. Rather than expanding opportunities for women to develop political capacity, dynasties utilize female figures as vehicles for perpetuating family dominance. Women's political presence thus emerges less from autonomous struggle than from deliberate power strategies.

Within the broader literature, this strategy can be interpreted as a form of patriarchal adaptation to democratic conditions. A procedural democratic system that emphasizes numerical representation inadvertently creates opportunities for dynasties to reinvent and reproduce power through new channels. Women may appear on the political stage, but often as symbols of managed succession rather than as autonomous political agents.

This finding aligns with the research of Wardani and Subekti, who show that women's involvement in the 2019 elections was largely driven by dynastic ties. Their study concludes that the electoral success of many female candidates was shaped more by their connections to established political families than by their personal qualifications (Wardani & Subekti, 2021). This indicates that political capital transfer operates not merely at the local level but represents a systemic pattern in Indonesian politics.

Viewed through Anne Phillips' theory of representation, particularly the politics of presence, this phenomenon reveals a fundamental paradox. Although the numerical presence of women in formal politics has increased, much of this growth stems from mechanisms of political inheritance rather than substantive political struggle. This trend blurs the distinction between symbolic and substantive representation, raising critical questions about the actual quality of democratic participation.

Overall, the dynastic strategy of political capital transfer provides a structural foundation for understanding women's representation as proxies of power. It demonstrates how political families mobilize multidimensional forms of capital to secure continuity of influence, while also underscoring that women's political roles in dynastic contexts remain deeply embedded within patriarchal power structures.

3.2. Marital Relations and the Institutionalization of Patriarchal Power

Marital relations play a strategic role in consolidating women's involvement as proxies of power within political dynasties. Marriage is not merely a private bond but an effective political mechanism for transferring legitimacy and political capital. Through the status of being the "wife of" or "daughter-in-law of" a political figure, women gain immediate entry into highly competitive and often exclusionary political arenas. In this sense, marital relations function as an institutional channel through which patriarchal patterns are reproduced inside formal political systems.

Political dynasties frequently exploit marriage as a tool of social legitimacy. In many local communities, particularly those deeply rooted in patriarchal values, women's political participation is viewed as more acceptable when they carry a family name or are married to a man with political credentials. This reinforces the perception that politics remains a male-dominated domain and that women may enter only as representatives or extensions of powerful male figures. Thus, marriage becomes a cultural mechanism that strengthens patriarchy even within the democratic framework.

The case of Fatmawati Rusdi illustrates this dynamic. Fatmawati, a prominent political figure from South Sulawesi, former member of the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR RI) in 2014, former Deputy Mayor of Makassar for the 2020–2024 period, and currently serving as Deputy Governor of South Sulawesi for 2024–2029, is married to Rusdi Masse, an influential

politician, former Regent of Sidrap, and Chairman of the Nasdem Party's South Sulawesi Regional Leadership Council (DPW). Their marriage opened extensive access to political resources. Fatmawati benefited from established party structures, bureaucratic networks, and mass support bases cultivated by her husband. This marital relationship provided instant legitimacy, lowered electoral barriers, and strengthened the political family's dominance. Her success was therefore not solely a product of personal struggle, but also a reflection of how dynasties strategically mobilize marital relations to perpetuate power.

Marriage also serves as a control mechanism in the distribution of political roles. In many dynastic configurations, wives who contest elections continue to operate within the shadow of their husbands' political strategies. Narratives, visions, missions, and even policy priorities often remain guided by male family members. This creates a paradox of representation: women may occupy formal political positions, yet substantively remain embedded within patriarchal frameworks. Consequently, women's representation becomes symbolic rather than substantive.

Furthermore, marital relations demonstrate how patriarchy adapts to electoral democracy. The 30 percent gender quota in legislative nominations, for instance, is often filled not with independent female candidates but with female family members who can be "trusted" to safeguard dynastic interests. In this way, gender-affirmative policies may inadvertently serve to reinforce male dominance through women. Procedural democracy thus becomes a space where patriarchy is not challenged but re-institutionalized through more publicly acceptable mechanisms.

Table 1. Forms of Women's Political Capital Derived from Marital Relations

Type of Political Capital	Primary Source	Operational Forms in Local Politics
Social Capital	Political family network	Support from local figures; access to bureaucratic elites
Symbolic Capital	Family name / husband	Name-based popularity; coattail effect
Economic Capital	Access to family resources	Campaign financing; mass mobilization
Cultural Capital	Patriarchal norms and loyalty	Legitimacy as the "leader's wife"

Source: Secondary data processed from research

This aligns with previous findings (Aspinall et al., 2021; Wardani & Subekti, 2021), which show that women in political dynasties are often positioned as replacement candidates when husbands or male relatives are unable to run due to term limits or legal constraints. In other words, marital relations not only provide political access but also create patterns of substitution that ensure dynastic continuity, even when public appearances suggest leadership change.

From a critical feminist perspective, the marriage-politics nexus reflects the reproduction of gender inequality within democratic spaces. Democracy, which ideally guarantees equal access, becomes an arena through which patriarchy sustains its hegemony by mobilizing symbolic forms of representation. Women may be positioned to fulfill normative expectations, yet remain constrained from articulating independent political agendas. This phenomenon can be categorized as *symbolic compliance* (Clayton et al., 2017), whereby adherence to democratic norms occurs only superficially, while patriarchal foundations remain intact.

The result is limited opportunity for women to demonstrate autonomous political capacity. Their political involvement is frequently perceived as part of a dynastic strategy rather than a manifestation of personal agency. This reinforces stereotypes portraying women as mere “placeholders” or “quota fillers,” making it increasingly difficult for non-dynastic women to gain public trust or electoral legitimacy. In the long term, these perceptions undermine the broader gender equality agenda, as society tends to generalize women’s political representation as inherently symbolic.

Nevertheless, some women who initially enter politics through marriage eventually develop independent support bases. After securing office, they may leverage their positions to expand networks, shape policy agendas, and, in certain cases, advocate gender-related issues. However, such trajectories remain exceptions rather than the norm. Most remain closely tied to dynastic narratives and dependent on the legitimacy granted by male relatives.

Overall, marital relations illustrate how patriarchy does not diminish with the presence of women in politics; rather, it evolves and strengthens through new modalities. Electoral democracy, often envisioned as a pathway to equality, can instead become a mechanism through which patriarchy is institutionalized via family-based proxy strategies. This raises important questions about whether women’s representation in dynastic contexts should be regarded as a democratic achievement or as an illusion of progress that conceals deeper structures of patriarchal domination. Marital relations thus function both as channels of political access and as mechanisms of control that embed women within inherited power structures, rendering their political roles more instrumental than substantive.

3.3. Symbolic Compliance and the Limits of Substantive Representation

Women’s involvement in political dynasties is often promoted as evidence of the success of procedural democracy and gender-affirmative policies. However, upon closer examination, such involvement reflects a form of *symbolic compliance*, a pseudo-adherence to democratic norms and gender equality rather than the realization of substantive representation. While democracy requires the presence of women in political institutions, what is produced instead is a symbolic space dominated by dynastic logic.

This symbolic representation is visible in the way female candidates are constructed within campaign narratives. Their family name, moral image, or domestic roles as “wife” or “mother” are often emphasized more than their political vision or personal track record. Women are projected not as carriers of new political agendas but as symbols of continuity and familial loyalty. As a result, the public is encouraged to perceive women’s political presence not as transformative, but as a guarantee of dynastic stability and legitimacy.

Table 2. Comparison of Symbolic and Substantive Representation

Representation Dimension	Symbolic (Proxy Representation)	Substantive (Independent Representation)
Basis of Legitimacy	Family relations; husband/father’s status	Individual capacity; political track record
Role of Women	Face of the dynasty; quota fulfilment	Independent agency; gender advocacy
Decision-Making	Dominated by male family members	Determined directly by female candidates
Implications for	Reinforces patriarchal status quo	Promotes inclusive political

Representation Dimension	Symbolic (Proxy Representation)	Substantive (Independent Representation)
Democracy		transformation

Source: Secondary data processed from research

Within Anne Phillips' theoretical framework on the politics of presence, women's political presence should enable the articulation of women's substantive interests. Yet the dynamics of dynastic politics reveal that presence is not always proportional to substance. Women's increased numerical representation in legislative or executive bodies does not automatically translate into gender-advancing agendas. Instead, their political priorities are often subordinated to the interests of the families that sponsor them.

This produces a paradox of representation: the number of women increases, but the substance of gender advocacy remains stagnant. Margret's research shows that although women's representation in the Indonesian House of Representatives reached 22 percent in 2024, this numerical increase was not accompanied by meaningful changes in gender-responsive policymaking. Thus, quantitative representation can mask substantive stagnation (Margret, 2025).

This pattern of *symbolic compliance* is also evident in party mechanisms. Rather than developing female cadres systematically, parties frequently nominate women from politically prominent families. This allows parties to meet quota requirements while maximizing electoral chances. However, it results in a form of false representation: women appear on ballots or in legislative seats, but their presence arises not from independent political merit but from inherited family symbols.

In electoral contexts, this symbolic representation produces a dual effect. On one hand, women provide a new face that helps dynasties adapt to democratic expectations. On the other hand, their presence diminishes the substantive meaning of democracy, as these women often act as conduits for family interests rather than as agents of social change. Consequently, the political space available to women, ideally a platform for advancing equality, is redirected to reinforce the existing status quo.

Symbolic representation also shapes public perception. When most female candidates emerge from dynastic backgrounds, society increasingly associates women's political participation with family inheritance rather than capability. This reinforces stereotypes that women can enter politics only through kinship, restricting opportunities for non-dynastic women to gain political legitimacy. In the long term, such perceptions weaken the overall gender equality agenda.

Furthermore, the symbolic framing of dynastic women often relies on constructing images of morality and religiosity. Female candidates are portrayed as polite, pious, and protectors of family values, aligning with patriarchal expectations of femininity. This not only limits substantive representation but also reinforces conservative gender roles, positioning women as guardians of domestic norms rather than transformative political leaders.

However, symbolic representation does not entirely preclude substantive outcomes. Some women who initially entered politics through dynastic pathways later develop independent support bases and policy agendas. Yet such trajectories are exceptions. Most remain constrained by dynastic narratives and dependent on legitimacy derived from male relatives. Structural pressures within families and political parties further limit their ability to break from symbolic roles.

From the perspective of electoral democracy, this phenomenon illustrates a gap between procedure and substance. Procedurally, Indonesia appears to meet standards of gender inclusivity through quotas and increased female representation. Substantively, however, the system fails to ensure that women's presence translates into policy influence. Democracy thus becomes trapped in a logic of quantity over quality.

The practice of *symbolic compliance* also affects political regeneration. Because dynastic female candidates are chosen for their connections rather than their competence, opportunities for young, qualified women outside political families are restricted. Political regeneration, ideally rooted in meritocratic principles, is replaced by symbolic inheritance, perpetuating oligarchic patterns and undermining democratic renewal.

This trend aligns with Choi's findings that across Southeast Asia, women's political involvement frequently emerges from dynastic pathways rather than women's movements or merit-based recruitment (Choi, 2019). Thus, *symbolic compliance* is not unique to Indonesia but reflects regional patterns of patriarchal adaptation within formal democracies.

From a societal perspective, the increasing presence of women in politics is often celebrated as progress. Without critical scrutiny, however, society risks embracing an illusion of representation, assuming that women's interests are addressed simply because more women occupy seats. This illusion is dangerous: it can obscure the reality of persistent inequalities and weaken feminist movements by suggesting premature victory.

Analytically, the phenomenon of *symbolic compliance* demonstrates that patriarchy does not always manifest through overt exclusion. Instead, it adapts by incorporating women into political structures in ways that preserve core male dominance. Dynastic women thus represent how democracy's symbolic tools can be used to enhance, not dismantle, patriarchal power.

In conclusion, women's involvement in political dynasties often remains confined to symbolic representation. The substantive representation expected in a democratic society, courage to advance equality and broad women's interests, continues to be constrained by dynastic logic and patriarchal structures. This underscores that while electoral democracy may appear inclusive, it remains vulnerable to symbolic manipulation that obscures deeper inequalities. The central challenge ahead is transforming symbolic spaces into substantive ones, enabling women to function not as dynastic extensions but as genuine agents of socio-political transformation.

3.4. Ambiguities and Potential Pathways Beyond Proxy Representation

The phenomenon of women in political dynasties cannot be reduced entirely to proxy politics. While the majority of cases demonstrate that women function as symbols and extensions of male relatives, this research identifies areas of ambiguity that create potential pathways toward substantive representation. Such ambiguity emerges because women's political involvement is not always confined to symbolic roles; under certain circumstances, they may develop independent political capacity.

First, women who enter politics through dynastic channels sometimes shift their position after attaining public office. By leveraging access to resources, bureaucratic networks, and political visibility, some women are able to build independent support bases. Although this trajectory remains relatively rare, it demonstrates the possibility of transitioning from symbolic to substantive representation. In this sense, proxy status may constitute an entry point, but it does not determine the final outcome.

Second, ambiguity is also shaped by public perception. Although many voters remain skeptical of dynastic women's capabilities, some perceive them as opportunities for more

inclusive political regeneration. Women are often considered to offer distinct leadership qualities, such as communicativeness or closer ties to grassroots communities. These perceptions can enhance their political capital, enabling them to move beyond mere dynastic symbolism even while remaining connected to the family network.

Third, the ambiguity of representation is influenced by women's personal political agendas. Some women who enter politics through kinship ties later advocate policy issues that diverge from those of their male relatives, including education, health, and women's empowerment. In such cases, their involvement produces substantive benefits despite their initial dependence on dynastic legitimacy. This illustrates that representation is neither static nor binary but is shaped by the continuous negotiation between symbolism and substance.

Nevertheless, opportunities for substantive political action are constrained by patriarchal party and family structures. The same familial support that facilitates access often becomes a mechanism for political control. Women who attempt to deviate from dynastic expectations risk losing financial backing, political networks, and internal legitimacy. Thus, attempts to transcend symbolic roles carry significant personal and political risks. Ambiguity, in this context, highlights not only potential opportunities but also the structural vulnerabilities women face within dynasties.

Theoretically, this condition can be understood as a form of negotiated agency. Women are neither wholly passive proxies nor fully autonomous actors; instead, they operate within a gray zone where their political agency depends on their ability to navigate constraints imposed by family and party structures. This challenges the dichotomy between descriptive and substantive representation, revealing instead a fluid and context-dependent continuum.

Ambiguity also reflects the adaptive nature of patriarchy. Rather than excluding women outright, patriarchal systems often accommodate women in controlled ways. Yet this accommodation can produce unintended consequences. Once women enter politics, opportunities may arise for them to expand their influence and develop independent competencies, even if they were initially positioned as symbolic figures. Such dynamics help explain why some dynastic women eventually emerge as more autonomous political actors.

Potential pathways beyond symbolic representation also depend on women's interactions with actors outside the dynasty. Support from civil society organizations, women's movements, and media networks can strengthen their autonomy. External alliances can help women reduce reliance on dynastic legitimacy and broaden their political platforms. This highlights the importance of the broader political ecosystem in facilitating transitions from proxy to substantive representation.

Education and political experience further contribute to these pathways. Women with higher educational backgrounds or prior experience in civil society often possess stronger analytical capacities and policy insights, allowing them to articulate more substantive agendas. Even if their political entry is dynastic, such competence enables them to surpass symbolic roles.

However, it is critical to emphasize that these pathways remain exceptions rather than the norm. Most women in dynasties continue to occupy symbolic positions with limited room for substantive transformation. Their representation thus depends heavily on individual capacity, external support, and the ability to negotiate entrenched patriarchal structures.

Ultimately, this ambiguity demonstrates that women's representation in political dynasties cannot be understood through a simplistic binary lens. Instead, it exists along a spectrum between symbolism and substance, where women's roles evolve dynamically according to context and opportunity. This spectrum underlines the complexity of women's political

representation in Indonesia and the need for analytical frameworks that capture this nuance, rather than relying solely on descriptive or substantive categorizations.

Although most women in dynasties continue to function as proxies of power, the existence of ambiguous spaces offers the possibility, however limited, for substantive representation to emerge. This indicates that gender politics in Indonesia is not static but a contested arena where symbolism may, in rare cases, transform into substance. Such potential pathways represent significant opportunities for advancing meaningful women's political representation in the future.

The path toward substantive representation is therefore not closed, but contingent upon women's individual capacities, external support structures, and strategic navigation of patriarchal constraints. Recognizing these ambiguities is essential for avoiding oversimplified generalizations and for appreciating the diverse experiences of women within political dynasties.

4. Conclusion

This study finds that political dynasties in Indonesia strategically construct women's representation as proxies of power through the transfer of political capital. Social, symbolic, economic, and cultural resources, accumulated by dominant male figures, are passed on to female relatives, most commonly through marital ties. Such transfers grant women immediate legitimacy, lower electoral barriers, and ensure the continuity of family influence. Women's representation within this framework thus functions less as an expression of autonomous political capacity and more as an instrument for sustaining dynastic dominance.

Marital relations play a particularly crucial role in institutionalizing patriarchal power. Women often enter politics not as independent actors but through the legitimacy derived from being the "wife of" or "daughter of" an established political figure. Although their presence is frequently projected as a sign of democratic progress, decision-making authority and agenda-setting remain largely controlled by male elites within the family. This dynamic reflects a form of *symbolic compliance*, a procedural adherence to gender-inclusion norms that ultimately reinforces existing patriarchal structures rather than challenging them.

At the same time, the research reveals important ambiguities. Once in office, some women are able to negotiate their positions, expand independent networks, and pursue policy agendas that diverge from those of their male relatives. Such cases remain exceptions, but they demonstrate that women's representation within dynasties is not entirely static. Proxy representation can, under certain conditions, evolve into more substantive forms depending on individual capacity, political opportunities, and external support from civil society, social movements, or broader political ecosystems.

Overall, these findings show that women's involvement in political dynasties in Indonesia remains predominantly symbolic, serving as proxies of family power. Yet the existence of ambiguous pathways indicates that women are not merely passive placeholders. The challenge ahead is to strengthen the structural conditions that enable transitions from symbolic to substantive representation, through party-level cadre development, institutional reforms, and societal support for women's political leadership. Only then can electoral democracy move beyond numerical inclusion toward more meaningful gender representation that enhances both women's agency and the overall quality of democracy.

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6. Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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