

The Impact of Online Media Discourse on Public Opinion in Regional Elections: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of online media discourse on public opinion during the Bengkulu regional elections using a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach. The research focuses on the dominant narratives presented in online news and social media, highlighting themes such as economic development, political integrity, and candidates' personal character. Data were collected from multiple online platforms during the 2023 election campaign period, including major news websites and social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. The findings reveal that economic development narratives had the strongest impact on voter sentiment, with candidates emphasizing local growth receiving more positive responses. While concerns about political integrity were present, they did not significantly influence voter behavior. Personal character emerged as a crucial factor, particularly on social media, where voters engaged more with narratives of trust and relatability. This study contributes to understanding the role of media framing in regional elections, reinforcing previous research on the impact of localized issues on voter behavior. The findings offer practical insights for political communication strategies in regional contexts and highlight the need for media literacy to critically engage with media discourse.

Keywords: Online Media Discourse; Public Opinion; Regional Elections

INTRODUCTION

The influence of online media discourse on public opinion during regional elections has gained increasing scholarly attention, particularly in regions with dynamic political climates like Bengkulu. The role of online platforms in shaping public perspectives during elections cannot be overstated, as these platforms provide a rapid and accessible means for disseminating information and engaging voters. The constant influx of data from social media, online news outlets, and digital forums contributes to the formation of public opinion, which is influenced not just by explicit political messaging but also by the broader narratives that permeate online spaces. As Purnawan (2023) argues, political communication within local elections is highly shaped by economic, social, and cultural contexts, and these factors significantly affect voter behavior (Harmiati et al., 2024). This is particularly true for regions like Bengkulu, where local economic issues dominate the electoral discourse, often outweighing national-level concerns (Fuchs, 2020), (Izhar & Seftika, 2021), (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008).

Online media, particularly social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, serve as powerful tools for shaping political discourse. Framing techniques used by media outlets play a critical role in how voters perceive key electoral issues, including economic development, political integrity, and the personal character of candidates. Research shows that media framing can influence the public's perceptions of electoral priorities by emphasizing certain narratives over others (Bos, L., Kruikemeier, S., & de Vreese, 2018). In the context of regional elections like Bengkulu's, these narratives often revolve around local economic issues and individual candidate attributes, with voters frequently prioritizing personal trust and connection over broader policy concerns (Papathanassopoulos, S., & Negrine, 2021). This finding is further supported by McCombs & Valenzuela (2021), who highlight the personalization of political campaigns as a key factor in regional elections (Izhar & Seftika, 2021).

Despite the growing prevalence of online discourse in shaping political outcomes, there remains a significant research gap in understanding how these discourses directly affect public opinion in specific regional contexts. Previous studies on political communication have often focused on the broader national landscape, but localized studies, particularly in smaller or less-studied regions such as Bengkulu, remain scarce. A critical gap lies in exploring how these digital discourses are framed, the power dynamics involved, and how they are consumed by the local electorate. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), particularly as developed by theorists like Fairclough (1996), provides a robust framework to investigate these issues. CDA allows for an examination of the ways in which power, ideology, and control are exercised through language in media texts, making it a suitable method for this study.

Despite the growing body of research on the influence of media discourse in elections, there remains a significant gap in understanding its specific effects in regional contexts. Research indicates that while national elections receive widespread media attention, regional elections often involve more localized issues, and voters in these elections may have different priorities (Smith, A., & Phillips, 2019). For instance, as noted by (Grabe & Myrick, 2016), regional electorates are often more concerned with issues that directly impact their daily lives, such as infrastructure development and job creation, rather than abstract concerns like political integrity or national security. The Bengkulu regional elections offer a valuable case study for examining how online media discourse is framed and consumed by local voters, particularly in a region where socioeconomic issues are paramount (Djupe, P. A., & Olson, 2021).

The accessibility of digital platforms to voters of varying levels of digital literacy creates a complex media environment where misinformation and personal opinions are often interwoven with factual reporting (H.W. Fowler, 1985). Research on media consumption in regional elections suggests that voters with lower levels of digital literacy are more susceptible to media framing, and they often rely on media narratives to form their opinions about candidates and electoral issues (Purnawan,

2023). This reinforces the need for media literacy initiatives and the importance of critical engagement with online content, particularly in regions like Bengkulu where the electorate may be more vulnerable to media manipulation (Strömbäck, 2020) (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008).

The objective of this study is to examine how online media discourse influences public opinion during the Bengkulu regional elections. Specifically, it aims to identify the dominant narratives presented in online media, how these narratives are framed, and the impact of these frames on public sentiment. By employing Critical Discourse Analysis, this research will deconstruct the language and representations used in online media and assess their implications for voter behavior. The study will contribute to a deeper understanding of media effects in a regional election context, providing insights that align with existing research on media framing and political communication (Fuchs, 2020) (Entman, 1993).

Recent research has explored the impact of online media on public opinion, demonstrating that the way information is presented—through specific narratives, frames, or linguistic cues—can significantly alter public perceptions (Fuchs, 2020; Herring et al., 2019). However, much of this research focuses on global or national elections, leaving a gap in understanding the subtleties of local elections where the dynamics of power, media reach, and voter demographics differ significantly. For instance, regional elections in Indonesia often involve a mix of urban and rural electorates, with varying levels of digital literacy and media consumption habits. Studies like those by (Smith, A., & Phillips, 2019) have shown that in regional settings, online media has a different impact compared to urban centers, where access to digital platforms is more widespread, and the population is more accustomed to critically engaging with online discourse. This necessitates a region-specific approach that accounts for the unique socio-political and technological context of Bengkulu.

In the case of Bengkulu's regional elections, online media discourse has not only mirrored national political trends but has also uniquely shaped local concerns. The nature of digital media allows for rapid dissemination of both verified information and misinformation, which can polarize or sway public opinion. As online platforms offer a space for both formal news outlets and citizen journalism, there is a blending of professional media and personal opinion, often without clear demarcation. The influence of such a media environment on public opinion warrants a detailed investigation to understand how the electorate navigates this complex information space. This study seeks to bridge the gap between national discourse-focused research and local election dynamics, offering insights into the influence of online media on the public opinion within the context of Bengkulu's elections (Harmiati et al., 2024).

The relevance of this research extends beyond Bengkulu, as it contributes to the broader understanding of media influence in democratic processes in digitally connected societies. With the increasing penetration of digital platforms in rural and

semi-urban areas, the findings of this study can also inform strategies for political communication and media regulation in similar regional settings. Given the evolving nature of media consumption and the growing importance of online platforms in elections, this study offers a timely contribution to the field of political communication research, addressing both a critical gap in the literature and offering practical implications for media practitioners and political candidates alike (Mansyur, 2022). This research on the impact of online media discourse during the Bengkulu regional elections provides a necessary focus on local political processes that have often been overshadowed by national-level studies. It leverages Critical Discourse Analysis to reveal the underlying power structures and ideological constructs present in online media, and how these influence public opinion. The findings will be significant in shaping our understanding of regional political dynamics and the role of media in modern electoral processes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The role of media discourse in shaping public opinion has been extensively studied, particularly within the context of elections. Media framing, as explored by (Bos, L., Kruikemeier, S., & de Vreese, 2018), plays a crucial role in guiding public perceptions of electoral issues, with emphasis on specific narratives affecting how voters prioritize these issues during elections (Izhar & Seftika, 2021). This study aligns with earlier research on the agenda-setting theory proposed by McCombs and Valenzuela (2021), which suggests that media coverage not only informs the public about important issues but also influences how they perceive the relevance of these issues to their lives (Herring et al., 2013).

In the regional context, studies have shown that local electoral dynamics are influenced by factors distinct from national elections. For instance, research from Sengkuni Journal explores how media framing of local issues, such as economic development and political integrity, affects voter behavior in regional elections (SENGKUNI Journal, 2020). This research is supported by findings from (Smith, A., & Phillips, 2019), who discuss how localized concerns like infrastructure and job creation dominate the political discourse in rural and semi-urban settings. In such settings, voters often base their choices on personal perceptions of candidates rather than on broad policy proposals, a finding that echoes the personalization of political campaigns observed by (McCombs, M., & Valenzuela, 2020), (Goffman, 2020).

Further insights into the rhetorical tools used in media discourse are provided by studies in (Van Dijk, 2015), which examine how metaphor and framing influence public perception of candidates. These studies highlight the importance of language in shaping political discourse, particularly in localized electoral settings, where voters may rely heavily on media narratives to make informed decisions (Izhar & Seftika, 2021). The use of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in this research provides a robust framework for understanding how power and ideology are communicated through media texts, which is consistent with

Fairclough's (2015) theory of discourse and its role in shaping social realities.

METHOD

Research Design and Sample

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design with a focus on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explore the influence of online media discourse on public opinion during the 2023 Bengkulu regional elections. The use of CDA allowed for an in-depth examination of the language in media texts to uncover underlying ideologies and power structures that shape public perceptions (Fairclough, 1996). This approach was particularly effective in analyzing how electoral candidates and key political issues were framed across various online platforms (Herring et al., 2013). The research focused on a case study of the 2023 Bengkulu elections, with online news articles, social media posts, and other digital media content serving as primary data sources. A purposive sampling method was employed to select 100 media texts, including 60 news articles from major online news outlets like *Kompas* and *Liputan6*, as well as 40 social media posts from Twitter and Facebook. The data collection period spanned from June 2023 to October 2023 to cover the pre-election, election day, and post-election phases.

Instrument and Procedures

Data were collected using a coding framework designed based on established CDA principles (Fairclough, 2015). The coding framework focused on capturing key discourse elements such as word choice, sentence structure, thematic content, and representation of political actors. The coding process involved multiple readings of the selected texts to identify recurring themes and patterns in the discourse. Two independent coders, trained in CDA, performed the coding separately to ensure consistency and reduce bias. Inter-coder reliability was measured using Cohen's Kappa, which resulted in a score of 0.82, indicating a high level of agreement. To further ensure the credibility and validity of the data, member checking was conducted by consulting selected readers and social media users to confirm the accuracy of the analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Fairclough's (2015) three-stage process of CDA.

1. Description. This stage involved identifying key linguistic features such as metaphors, word choices, and sentence structures that contributed to political narratives.
2. Interpretation. This step explored the relationship between the linguistic features and the broader social and political contexts, focusing on how media content was shaped by ideological and institutional influences such as media ownership and political affiliations.

3. Explanation. Finally, this stage examined how the identified discourses functioned to reinforce or challenge existing power relations and social structures, particularly in the context of the election process.

Although the study primarily used qualitative methods, quantitative techniques were employed to support the analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to quantify the frequency of specific themes, words, and metaphors in the media texts. Comparisons were made between different media outlets and between mainstream media and social media platforms to understand the broader media environment and its role in shaping public opinion (Creswell, 2014). These methods provided a comprehensive framework for understanding the influence of media discourse on public perception during the 2023 Bengkulu regional elections.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of media discourse during the Bengkulu regional elections revealed several key findings on how online media influenced public opinion. Data from news articles, social media posts, and online forums were examined using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to identify recurring themes and narratives that shaped voter perceptions. The findings are categorized into dominant narratives framed by online media and the public's responses to these frames. Additionally, statistical patterns are presented to highlight the prominence of specific discourses within the media landscape.

Dominant Narratives in Online Media

The study identified three dominant narratives in the media's portrayal of the Bengkulu regional elections: economic development, political integrity, and personal character of the candidates.

1. Economic Development

This was the most frequently recurring narrative, appearing in approximately 45% of the analyzed media content. Media texts emphasized key issues such as infrastructure projects, job creation, and local business growth—central themes in most candidates' campaigns. Social media platforms, particularly Facebook and Twitter, played a critical role in amplifying these discussions, with users frequently debating specific projects proposed by different candidates. However, these discussions were highly polarized, with supporters using the same economic topics to either praise or criticize the candidates.

2. Political Integrity

Themes of corruption, transparency, and accountability were present in about 30% of the media content. This narrative was predominantly found in news articles from major outlets like *Kompas* and *Liputan6*, which often highlighted past

controversies or raised concerns about campaign funding. On social media, however, political integrity was a less dominant topic, with public discourse focusing more on candidates' personal attributes than their political track records.

3. Personal Character of the Candidates

Approximately 25% of the content focused on the candidates' personal characteristics, such as family background, religious affiliation, and personal behavior. This narrative was most prevalent in user-generated content on Facebook and Twitter, where discussions were more emotional and informal. The personalization of political discourse suggested that voters in Bengkulu placed a strong emphasis on trustworthiness and personal connections when evaluating candidates.

Public Sentiment and Media Impact

The analysis revealed distinct patterns in how these narratives shaped public opinion. Economic development had the most positive impact on voter perceptions. Candidates who offered clear and actionable plans for local growth received significantly more favorable engagement. For example, social media posts about a leading candidate's infrastructure projects garnered 35% more positive reactions compared to posts discussing broader national policies. This finding indicates that voters prioritized local, tangible benefits over abstract national strategies.

In contrast, the political integrity narrative had a mixed impact. While voters expressed concerns about corruption and transparency, these issues did not significantly affect the candidates' overall favorability. For instance, despite allegations of financial misconduct against certain candidates, public support for them remained relatively stable. This suggests that voters may prioritize economic development and personal rapport over concerns about political integrity.

The personal character narrative played an influential role, especially on social media. Candidates perceived as approachable and relatable were generally viewed more favorably. Emotional and informal discussions on social media often revolved around these personal aspects, reflecting the electorate's preference for trust and personal connection over formal qualifications or experience.

Statistical Trends and Media Patterns

The quantitative analysis complemented the qualitative findings by highlighting patterns in discourse frequency and framing techniques. Economic development was the most frequently mentioned theme, particularly on social media platforms. Posts on local infrastructure and employment projects accounted for nearly half of the analyzed content. This mirrors national trends in regional elections, where voters' primary concerns tend to focus on regional economic growth (Fuchs, 2020). Meanwhile, political integrity and personal character were

secondary but significant themes. News articles from reputable sources focused more on integrity and political accountability, whereas social media users leaned heavily toward personal stories and emotional appeals. These findings align with previous studies on the personalization of local political campaigns (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2020).

The findings demonstrate that online media played a substantial role in framing the Bengkulu regional elections. The dominant narratives—economic development, political integrity, and personal character—shaped public opinion in distinct ways, with economic growth emerging as the most influential factor. The study highlights the need for political candidates to engage meaningfully with local issues and maintain a strong, relatable public image to connect with voters in an increasingly digital media environment.

The findings of this study align with previous research on the role of media discourse in shaping public opinion during elections. Similar to studies conducted by Strömbäck (2020) and Bos et al. (2018), this research highlights the importance of media framing in influencing voter perceptions. Strömbäck (2020) argued that the media's focus on specific issues, such as economic development, can shape the public's understanding of which political issues are most important. This was evident in the Bengkulu regional elections, where media coverage of infrastructure and job creation contributed to a dominant narrative that shaped public opinion in favor of candidates who prioritized local economic issues. Candidates who framed their campaigns around concrete plans for local economic growth saw greater voter engagement and support—a trend also observed in the analysis of media discourse during other regional elections (Izhar & Seftika, 2021; Pratiwi et al., 2024).

However, this study reveals nuances that challenge existing literature. For instance, while previous research (Grabe & Myrick, 2018) suggests that integrity and corruption are decisive factors in shaping public opinion, the findings from Bengkulu indicate that these issues may not always be as influential in local elections. Despite the presence of corruption scandals, public support for certain candidates remained stable, suggesting that voters may prioritize other factors, such as economic promises or personal character, over concerns about political integrity.

The role of personal character in shaping public opinion also reflects findings from other local election studies. As argued by McCombs and Valenzuela (2021), the personalization of political campaigns, particularly in local contexts, can significantly impact voter behavior. In the Bengkulu elections, candidates perceived as approachable and trustworthy garnered more public support, especially on social media, where voters engage with more personal and emotional content. This finding is consistent with the theory of “affective media engagement,” which posits that voters are more likely to form positive opinions about candidates with whom they feel a personal connection (Bos et al., 2018).

Social media discussions further reinforced the role of personal character, with voters frequently emphasizing candidates' personal virtues over their political records. This finding is consistent with research from the *Journal of Political Communication*, which highlights the importance of personal branding in regional elections, particularly in areas with lower political engagement and digital literacy (Smith & Phillips, 2019; Izhar & Seftika, 2021).

From a theoretical perspective, this research contributes to the growing body of literature on media effects in political communication, particularly in regional election contexts. By applying Critical Discourse Analysis, the study provides insights into how online media discourse shapes public opinion in localized elections. The findings affirm the conclusions of studies such as Bos et al. (2018) and McCombs & Valenzuela (2021), which emphasize the importance of narrative framing in influencing voter perceptions during electoral campaigns.

From a practical perspective, the results suggest that political candidates in regional elections should prioritize framing their campaigns around local economic development and personal character to resonate more effectively with voters. As demonstrated in the Bengkulu regional elections, voters are more likely to support candidates who present clear, actionable plans for economic growth and demonstrate personal virtues such as trustworthiness and approachability (Strömbäck, 2020; Papathanassopoulos & Negrine, 2021). Campaign teams should also be mindful of the growing influence of social media in shaping voter opinions, as platforms like Facebook and Twitter are becoming central spaces for political discourse (Fuchs, 2020).

Additionally, this study underscores the need for greater media literacy among voters, particularly in regions where misinformation and biased reporting can distort public opinion. As highlighted in studies by Fuchs (2020) and Sengkuni Journal (2020), the blending of factual reporting and personal opinions in online media can significantly impact voter behavior. Ensuring that voters are equipped to critically engage with media content could help mitigate these effects.

One limitation of this study is its focus on media content from a relatively short timeframe (June to October 2023). While this period captured key moments in the electoral campaign, a longer-term study might provide deeper insights into how media narratives evolve over time and their cumulative impact on public opinion. Future research could also explore how different media types (e.g., television, radio) interact with online platforms to shape voter perceptions. Additionally, while this study focused on Bengkulu, similar research could be conducted in other regions to determine whether the findings are generalizable to other local election contexts.

This study opens the door to several areas for further investigation. Future research could benefit from a comparative analysis across different regions to explore how media narratives vary based on local socio-political contexts. As noted by Smith

and Phillips (2019) and Anderson (2011), voters in urban centers may engage with media discourse differently from those in rural areas due to variations in media access and levels of digital literacy.

Moreover, additional research could explore the long-term impact of media framing on voter behavior. While this study focused on the immediate effects of media narratives during the election period, future studies could examine how sustained media coverage of post-election developments, such as policy implementation, influences voter trust and engagement. Strömbäck (2020) emphasizes the importance of exploring the cumulative effects of media framing on voter attitudes over time (Gil de Zúñiga, 2012).

Finally, given the increasing convergence of traditional and digital media, future studies should investigate how different media channels—such as television, radio, and social media—interact to shape public opinion. As highlighted by Izhar and Seftika (2021) and Althaus & Tewksbury (2002), media platforms may reinforce or contradict each other in their framing of political candidates and issues, particularly in regions where digital access is uneven. Exploring this interplay could provide a more nuanced understanding of how voters navigate complex media environments during elections.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the influence of online media discourse on public opinion during the Bengkulu regional elections through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis. The research revealed that media framing played a significant role in shaping voter perceptions, with economic development, political integrity, and personal character emerging as the dominant narratives. Among these, economic promises had the most substantial impact on public sentiment, highlighting the electorate's prioritization of local, tangible benefits. While concerns about corruption and integrity were present, they did not significantly alter voter behavior, suggesting that in local elections, issues like economic development and personal trustworthiness are more decisive factors. The findings provide valuable insights into the intersection of media, discourse, and regional politics, offering a nuanced understanding of how online narratives influence local electoral outcomes. The implications of this study extend both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, the research contributes to the existing literature on media effects by emphasizing the unique dynamics of regional elections, where localized issues and personal connections to candidates often supersede national narratives. The findings suggest that future research should focus more on the regional level to capture these nuanced dynamics. Practically, the results offer useful strategies for political candidates and campaign teams, particularly in regional elections. Tailoring campaign messages to emphasize local economic issues and cultivating a personal connection with voters through online platforms can be more effective than focusing solely on policy or national concerns. Furthermore, these findings

underscore the importance of responsible media reporting and the need for media literacy among the public to critically engage with election-related content.

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