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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Religious Authority Fails to Mobilize Voters in Indonesian Local Politics

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Abstract: Religious authority has long been considered an influential factor in shaping electoral behavior in Indonesia. However, the effectiveness of religious endorsements in contemporary local elections remains contested. This study examines the failure of religious authority to mobilize voter support in the 2024 Kampar Regency Election, despite the endorsement of Ustadz Abdul Somad (UAS), one of Indonesia's most prominent Islamic preachers. Previous studies have primarily highlighted the success of religious leaders in influencing electoral outcomes through patronage networks, clientelistic relationships, and religious legitimacy. Limited attention, however, has been paid to cases in which religious authority fails to generate electoral gains. To address this gap, this research employs a mixed-methods approach that combines a survey of 200 respondents with semi-structured interviews with younger and older voter groups in Kampar Regency, Riau Province. Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively, while qualitative data were examined using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that although UAS enjoys widespread recognition and strong religious credibility, his endorsement had little influence on voting decisions. Instead, regional identity, candidate track records, ethnic proximity, and socio-political connections emerged as more decisive factors. This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating the limitations of symbolic religious legitimacy in electoral mobilization and highlighting the importance of embedded social and political networks in shaping voter preferences.

Keywords:

Religious Authority, Electoral Mobilization, Voting behavior, Indonesia.

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1. Introduction

Compared to the last decade's election, the 2024 Indonesian election is an important event, as most of which informs voter preferences in general, is not clear. General elections, such as the 2014, 2019, and 2017 Jakarta Presidential Elections, have involved numerous religious authorities. To some extent, this can be understood as, for some, their roles and positions are not limited to religious issues, and for others, it includes political aspects. They frequently act as a source of political legitimacy in shaping political orientation and preferences, and somewhat ironically, they act as an intermediary in ensuring their political candidates.

Given those crucial effects in Indonesia, the role of religious authority also happened in secular countries. In Italy, for example, a qualitative study by [Pulejo \(2024\)](#), found that the relationship between politicians and Catholic bishops resulted in a 27% increase in individual preference votes for their candidates. Similarly, in the United States, the relationship of nationalist Christian pastors in Trump's 2016 presidential election ([Whitehead et al., 2018](#)). The role of religious leaders during the 2020 parliamentary and presidential elections in Uganda has produced a significant vote for Museveni ([Alava & Ssentongo, 2018](#)). Therefore, this involvement has had a serious effect on many countries of the world.

Despite the political events, there are differences of opinion regarding the mechanism of religious authority in mobilizing voters. Most of the existing studies, however, focus on political patronage networks and clientelistic networks. First, several studies have thoroughly explored the involvement of ulama in the institutionalization of semi-institutional religions represented by the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), ulama affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah ([Fealy and Bush 2014](#); [Nashir et al. 2019](#)). Second, there are also studies that examine the involvement of scholars in mobilizing voters through deep genealogical ties with the community ([Putri & Herawati, 2023](#)). Lastly, a large amount of literature that focuses only on network-based research from Islamic boarding schools ([Mahali, Sobari, and Tawakkal, 2019](#); [Sinarsari & Adnan, 2025](#)). It is unfortunate that the discussion around this topic has been ignored, particularly by religious authorities, who have not succeeded in mobilizing the voters, by the previous researchers.

Table 1. Candidate Pairs in Kampar Regency Election 2024

No	Candidate	Party Politics	Votes
1	Repol-Rahmad Jevari Juniardo	Golkar dan Partai Ummat	25,22
2	Yuyun Hidayat- Edwin Pratama Putra	PAN, PSI, PKS, PPP	28,73
3	Yusri-Rinto Pramono	Demokrat dan Gerindra	15,80
4	Ahmad Yuzar-Misharti	PDI-P, Gelora Nasdem, PKB, PBB	30,44

Sources: Election Commission Kampar Regency, 2024

In this article, we focus on the 2024 Kampar Regency Election. UAS, as a popular cleric and preacher in Indonesia, is a little strange when this involvement was less effective and influential in supporting Repol-Rahmad Jevari Juniardo ([Table 1](#)). So, it has not told us what the causes of those failures are? By following this question, we will focus on three important aspects. First, this study explores respondents' perception of the UAS, by presenting four quantitative data. Second, this study seeks to reveal the extent of its influence on voters' political attitudes in relation to the Repol-Rahmad Jevari Juniardo pair by presenting three quantitative data. Third, we explored the socio-cultural nature of Kampar society, by interviewing these voters in two categories: (1) the younger generation of voters aged 17 to 35 years and (2) the group of voters aged 35 years and above.

We argue that this failure lies on the nature patronage-clientelistic network is not embedded and structured with Kampar society. Thus, we hope to contribute to expanding the discourse on religious authorities in the dimension of failure to secure political victories in local politics in Indonesia.

2. Methods

This study uses a quantitative-descriptive approach. According to [Creswell & Creswell \(2017\)](#), quantitative methods and techniques focus on statistical measurements to identify patterns and relationships using numerical data. By doing so, we set the UAS Index to measure how respondents view UAS and the extent to which it influences political attitudes in the 2024 Kampar Regency Regent Election. The index is divided into three parts. First, it explores in a simple way the extent of their familiarity and involvement with UAS, including the level of personal knowledge and the level of familiarity and involvement intensity of respondents in participating in UAS lectures and da'wah offline and online. Respondents were given multiple lists of questions in the response column and asked to choose which aligned with their perspective. A similar approach was applied to measure the extent to which UAS figures were able to see their perception of UAS—(1) UAS is a role model for Indonesian Muslims, (2) I like UAS's Islamic lectures, (3) UAS lectures have given a bit of advice to Muslims that invite amar ma'ruf nahi munkar (commanding the good and forbidding the evil), and (4) UAS should be actively involved in government to prevent corruption and abuse of power ([Table 3](#)). The margin of error in our survey is 5%, and the confidence interval is 95%. The main consideration why our survey focuses on this region is that the region is an area where there is a large gap between votes for Repol-Rahmad Jevari Juniardo.

Apart from that, we conducted semi-structured interviews with selected respondents to gain deeper insights into their political preferences and socio-political views on UAS. We only focus on the age between younger generation voters and older generation voters, which represents a dynamic and brings a different perspective to the electoral process. One of the important questions asked was whether they felt a social and political connection with UAS. This allows us to further assess the attachment of voters' socio-political relationships to UAS itself, which may influence their political choices towards UAS candidates.

3. Result and Discussion

Characteristics of Reponen

This population composition is critical to examining differences in respondents' mindsets, attitudes, and behavior toward UAS's failure to produce victories. They were voters living in Kampar Regency, aged from 17 to 50 years old, with a total of 200 samples ([Table 2](#)). The sample, which was conducted from August to October 2024, used a survey method to distribute the study questionnaire through the questionnaire distribution method. According to available data, the proportion of men (51%) exceeds that of women (49%). Age groups consisting of individuals between the ages of 17 and 25 (35%), as well as those in the 35 to 45 age range (23%), have emerged as the most frequent respondents. Respondents with a bachelor's degree (34%) had the highest number among high school (33%) and post-graduate (6%) levels of education, representing a variety of professions such as students (21%), traders or self-employed (20%), accomplished housewives (13%), and farmers/fishermen (11%).

Table 2. Characteristics of the study respondents

Character	Categories	Percentage
Gender	Male	49%
	Women	51%
Age	17-25	35.7%
	26-35	20.3%
	36-45	23,3%
	>45	20,7%
Religion	Islam	98,3%
	Catholicism	0,3%
	Protestant	1,3%

Tribe	Malay	57,3%
	Minang	15%
	Batak	6,3%
	Javanese	13%
	Banjar	1%
	Bugis	0,7%
	Nias	0,3%
	Others	6,3%
Education	Not in school	2,7%
	Elementary School	7%
	Junior High School Equivalent	9,3%
	High School Equivalent	33,3%
	Diploma I, II, III	7,7%
	Bachelor	34,3%
	Master	5%
	Doctoral	0,7%
Jobs	Not Working	9%
	Farmer/Fisherman	11,3%
	Driver	3,3%
	Trader/Entrepreneur	20,7%
	Students/students	21,7%
	Honorary	5,3%
	Civil Servant	5%
	Professional	3,7%
	Housewives	13%
Others	7%	
Revenue	Still Funded by the Orion	29,3%
	< 1 million	13,3%
	1 million - 2 million	16%
	2 million - 4 million	23,3%
	5 M -7 M	11,3%
	7m -10m	4%
	>10 million	2,7%

Source: Processed by researcher, 2026

One of the factors contributing to UAS's popularity is his distinctive preaching style, which combines humor, strong argumentation, and accessible language. This communication approach strengthens the psychological attachment between audiences and the preacher, fostering a sense of cultural and religious closeness that could potentially be translated into political support. To assess this influence, respondents were asked about their familiarity and engagement with UAS. The findings show that 99% of respondents recognized UAS, indicating an exceptionally high level of public awareness and symbolic religious legitimacy. Moreover, 60% had attended at least one of his religious lectures, suggesting that his influence extends beyond mere recognition and reaches direct engagement with the community. However, a closer examination reveals a more nuanced pattern. Although UAS enjoys widespread popularity, only 26.7% of respondents regularly attended his offline lectures, while 40% followed his sermons through YouTube and other social media platforms. These figures indicate a shift in the consumption of religious knowledge from traditional face-to-face interactions toward digital religious engagement. The relatively low participation in offline activities suggests that voters selectively consume religious content based on personal interests and convenience rather than maintaining a strong organizational or personal attachment to the preacher. This finding is important because it demonstrates that visibility and popularity do not necessarily generate deep social embeddedness. While digital platforms have successfully expanded UAS's audience, they appear to create a more individualized and less politically mobilizable relationship with followers. Consequently, the strong recognition of UAS among voters did not automatically translate into collective political support, highlighting the limitations of digital religious influence in shaping electoral behavior.

Table 3: Preference for UAS

Questions	Answer	Percentage
I know UAS	Yes	99%
	No	1%
I once attended a UAS lecture.	Yes	60%
	No	40%
I actively participate in UAS lectures offline	Yes	26,7%
	No	73,3%
Actively participate in UAS lectures on Youtube and other social media	Yes	40%
	No	60%

Source: Processed by researcher, 2026

Furthermore, the study examined the extent to which UAS influenced voters' political choices and whether his endorsement contributed to the electoral success of the Repol–Rahmad Jevari Juniardo pair. As presented in Table 4, 68% of respondents were aware that UAS publicly supported the candidate pair. This finding indicates that the endorsement was widely disseminated and successfully reached a large proportion of voters in Kampar Regency. However, awareness of the endorsement did not translate into political participation or electoral support. Only 18.7% of respondents reported attending campaign activities organized by the Repol–Rahmad Jevari Juniardo pair, and an identical proportion (18.7%) stated that they voted for the candidates endorsed by UAS. Conversely, 81.3% of respondents chose other candidates despite being exposed to UAS's political preference.

This discrepancy suggests that religious endorsement alone was insufficient to shape voting behavior. While UAS retained substantial symbolic influence as a respected religious figure, voters did not automatically transfer their religious trust into political support. The data indicate that voters were able to distinguish between religious authority and political decision-making, evaluating candidates based on considerations beyond religious recommendations. The large gap between awareness (68%) and actual voting support (18.7%) demonstrates that the persuasive power of religious authority weakened when confronted with other factors such as candidate quality, regional identity, political experience, and personal evaluations of leadership. Therefore, these findings reveal that recognition of religious authority does not necessarily lead to electoral mobilization, highlighting the limits of symbolic religious legitimacy in contemporary local politics.

Table 4: Support preferences in the Repol-Ardo pair

Questions	Reply	Percentage
I know that UAS supports the Repol-Ardo pair in the 2024 Kampar Regency Election	Yes	68%
	No	32%
Have I Attended the Repol-Ardo Pair Campaign Supported by UAS?	Yes	18,7
	No	81,3%
I chose the Repol-Ardo pair in the 2024 Kampar Regency Election	Yes	18,7%
	No	81,3%

Source: Processed by researcher, 2026

Taken together, the findings presented in Table 2 and Table 3 reveal an important distinction between religious influence and political influence. Although UAS enjoys exceptionally high levels of public recognition (99%) and substantial engagement through both offline and online religious activities (60%), this social and religious influence does not translate into equivalent political support. While 68% of respondents were aware of UAS's endorsement of the Repol–Rahmad Jevari Juniardo pair, only 18.7% ultimately voted for the candidates. This significant gap suggests that voters regard UAS primarily as a source of religious guidance

rather than as a decisive political authority. These findings indicate that UAS has been successful in shaping a framework of Islamic values, moral perspectives, and religious awareness among his followers. However, when making electoral decisions, voters appear to rely on broader political considerations, including candidate competence, political experience, regional identity, and perceived leadership capacity. In other words, religious legitimacy remains influential in the cultural and moral sphere but becomes less dominant in the political sphere. Therefore, the evidence suggests that UAS continues to occupy an important position as a respected religious authority, yet his influence is insufficient to lead or determine voters' political choices. This finding highlights the growing autonomy of voters in separating religious admiration from electoral decision-making in contemporary local politics.

The involvement of Islamic religious authorities (Ulama/Kiai dan religious scholars) in Indonesian political contestation has been an inseparable dynamic that has not resulted in endless results. Since the Indonesian people agreed to replace the authoritarian regime system in 1998, numerous Islamic religious authorities have increasingly coloured political dynamics at the national and local levels. For example, in the 2019 presidential election, UAS gave legitimacy and influence to voters for Prabowo's electoral votes in Riau (Saputra, Setiawan & Herpina, 2022). In the 2024 Kampar regency election, the involvement of UAS in the mobilization of voters was not significant in producing the victory of Repol-Rahmad Jevari Juniardo. They can only secure in the third position among their four competitors. Our study found that only (18.7%) voted for Repol, despite (99%) knew the figure of UAS, and (60%) had attended UAS lectures and actively listened to UAS lectures on various social media.

One of the most plausible explanations that might make sense to reveal these findings is the fact that UAS's relationship with Kampar society is not structural and embedded. UAS is widely known and famous as a preacher in Riau, but he does not have biological ties to the Kampar district. UAS's strength only in moral legitimacy and the influence of social media. Therefore, it is not surprising that such symbolic strength does not automatically provide stable electoral support for Repol. The involvement of religious authority in Indonesian politics greatly contributes to significant votes for many candidates. For example, Jokowi-Ma'ruf Amin victory in the 2019 presidential election had a major impact on voters affiliated with NU (Pepinsky, 2019; Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2020), and Javanese ethnic voters (Shofia & Pepinsky, 2019). In a different area, Prabowo-Gibran's victory in the 2024 Presidential Election has an intimate relationship through the mobilization of the National Kiai Santri Network (Indonesian: Jaringan Kiai Santri Nasional: JKSN) in East Java (Sinarsari & Adnan, 2025). From these cases, it reveals that the success of religious authority support predominantly lies in the patronage and clientelist networks (Berenschot & Aspinall, 2022).

To get a more complete look at people's political preferences, we conducted interviews with several cross-generational voters who had other and very different factors in supporting their candidates. We group these two generations of voters into two groups: younger generation voters aged 17-35 years and older generation voters aged 35 years and above. In a study by Manese & Nurhamidin (2021), it was revealed that the older a voter is, the more he or she follows religious thought as a source of political choice. Older generation groups, in general, have long experience in local political contests, so they tend to be more pragmatic. They tend to consider aspects of regional identity, kinship relationships, socio-economic access, or even the exchange of help in the form of clients rather than the influence of clerics. At the same time, the experience of interacting with local elites, deep-rooted patron-client relationships, and involvement in practical politics has led them to no longer regard clerics as the main determinant of political choices. In an interview, several respondents expressed their dissatisfaction with the candidacy of Repol-Rahmad Jevari Juniardo. They are worried about the concentration of power in one region. Although UAS is a highly respected charismatic religious figure in Riau, and its effect is still strong in influencing certain voters, this group of voters does not see Repol-Rahmad Jevari Juniardo as a symbol of their region's representation, thus creating a risk of neglect of their region. Polling voters of this generation, we found that 35% of them supported candidates who had regional proximity and common identity. In this context, the consideration of regional proximity has a significant impact on shaping the preferences of older generational voters.

Unlike older generation groups, the younger generation of voters is mostly pursuing higher education, and already have a bachelor's degree, live in the suburbs of Pekanbaru, with a relatively stable level of internet connectivity. With these environmental conditions, it has a lot to do with the power of legitimacy of UAS, which relies heavily on social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. With millions of followers on these platforms, UAS often packs short, easy-to-share, and relevant lectures on socio-religious issues. They are the main audience of UAS in facilitating the religious values that it brings into the realm of political thought and behavior of the younger generation. In many cases, this generation of voters they maintain religious identity as part of their collective identity, in view that the ulama is not just a spiritual guide. Unfortunately, the power of da'wah and UAS lectures cannot significantly influence voters in their electoral choices. Younger generation voters prefer political candidates based on their track record and political experience. For this group, UAS still has influence, but the penetration of da'wah and lectures on social media is only a space for religious learning. From the voter polls we found, most support candidates who have a good track record and political experience. In this case, Ahmad Yuzar, with his track record as the Acting Regent of Kampar and his close relationship with his birthplace in Bangkinang, is seen as able to improve welfare and build better change. His partner, Misharti, as an intellectual and with a long political track record, gave them additional confidence in finding leaders with integrity and being able to improve the welfare of the people in Kampar Regency.

4. Conclusion

The involvement of religious authority in Indonesian politics greatly contributes to significant votes for many candidates. This trend is generally based on their involvement not only influencing campaign narratives and shaping political discourse, but also exerting a strong patron-client-based network. Without it, UAS ultimately was less effectively in mobilizing votes in Kampar Regency in 2024. Instead of that, regional and ethnic proximity and the political footprint of the candidates further shape the motivation of voters. Thus, it makes sense that the figure of UAS does not have a significant influence on voters' political behavior in choosing Repol pairs. In such conditions, the strategy of involving religious authority does not seem to provide a great opportunity for achieving the next political goal. If this strategy still continues to be carried out in conditions where religious issues and the exploitation of religious sentiments are not so visible, it is not a good sign, especially among the millennial and Generation Z voters who dominate. This group of voters has more material to assess the ideas, capacity, and ability of politicians to contest. Therefore, they pay more attention to and choose political candidates who are worthy to lead the government and bring prosperity to them.

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