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Class Position, Political Clientelism, and Opinion Formation in Brebes Regency

Alfin Hidayat
Master's Student, Department of Political Science, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Airlangga, East Java, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how class position shapes the experience and meaning of political clientelism and how these experiences form political opinion in the context of the 2024 local election in Brebes, Indonesia. It explores how different social classes interpret clientelist practices and how these interpretations influence political attitudes. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research draws on in-depth interviews and thematic analysis of narratives from informal workers, farmers, fishers, lower middle-class citizens, and political brokers in areas where patronage is prevalent. The findings show that clientelism is not merely a transactional exchange, but a socially embedded practice rooted in class-based vulnerabilities and moral relations. Laborers view political gifts as survival strategies that foster pragmatic attitudes. Farmers and fishers interpret assistance through reciprocal moral logics that generate obligation. Lower middle-class citizens express ambivalence as democratic ideals confront social pressures. Brokers personalize politics by framing assistance as care. The study concludes that political opinion in Brebes is shaped less by programs or ideology than by classed experiences and personalized exchanges and argues that strengthening universal social protection and institutional presence beyond election periods is essential to reduce dependence on clientelist relations and improve local democracy.

Corresponding Author:
Alfin Hidayat
Department of Political Science, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Airlangga, East Java, Indonesia
Jalan Dr. H. Soekarno, Mulyorejo, Surabaya, Jawa Timur 60115
Email: alfin.hidayat.idn@gmail.com

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1. Introduction

We locate this study in Brebes because the district offers a clear window into how local democracy in Indonesia operates at the intersection of social inequality and deeply embedded clientelist practices. The 2024 Brebes regency election took place under the unusual condition of a single candidate running against the empty box. This situation narrowed the space for programmatic competition and shifted public attention away from policy debate toward personal ties and everyday encounters. In our early conversations, residents rarely spoke about visions or development agendas. They spoke instead about who came with rice, who brought an envelope, who helped with a problem. From these stories, we began to see that political opinion does not grow on campaign stages or in televised debates. It takes shape in social spaces where daily relations are lived and negotiated, as shown in studies of vote buying that emphasize the role of personal exchange in shaping political engagement (Aspinall et al. 2017).

Brebes is widely known as an agrarian region rooted in shallot farming, coastal fisheries, and informal urban labor. Such an economic structure produces layers of social class that live close to vulnerability. Seasonal work, unstable prices, and limited access to social protection shape how people perceive the presence of the state. In this setting, any form of assistance easily appears as care. Politics no longer presents itself as an abstract contest of ideas but as a relationship that touches basic needs. Studies of Indonesian local elections show that money politics becomes a regular feature of electoral dynamics in socially and economically fragile areas (Asmuni et al. 2022).Research on regional contests further demonstrates how transactional practices shape voter behavior beyond formal competition (Kurniadi and Ulzikri 2022). Recent bibliometric mapping also confirms that money politics remains a dominant theme in Indonesian political studies (Purwaningsih et al. 2024). Normative analyses underline how such practices continue to challenge democratic governance in Indonesia (Undang 2025).

Research on vote buying demonstrates that material distribution is not simply a one-off exchange. It is a strategy built through

brokerage networks and market-like political logics. Indonesian candidates rely heavily on local brokers to reach voters through personal approaches that work more effectively than programmatic appeals (Hidayaturrahman et al. 2022).Their findings suggest that clientelism operates through social closeness rather than narrow cost–benefit calculations alone. In Brebes, similar networks are visible in everyday life, where campaign teams and local figures become the main bridges between candidates and residents. Studies of welfare-based brokerage in local elections reveal how such networks distribute assistance through personalized channels (Mufti 2023).

Studies of patronage in other local elections reveal comparable patterns. Research on pilkada in Kendari shows how patron–client ties shape political support through circulation of resources and personal loyalty (Yanto 2022)Work on the Bogor election finds that patronage also operates through favors and access framed in the language of closeness and obligation (Endang et al. 2022)Comparative analysis of clientelism argues that such relations thrive as everyday social practices rather than exceptional transactions (Al Faruq et al. 2025)Similar dynamics also appear in studies of regional elections in Lampung, where clientelism becomes embedded in local political culture (Purba and Perdana 2025).

At the same time, research on social assistance highlights how welfare policies are often perceived as personal achievements of candidates rather than as institutional state programs. Social assistance can raise candidates' electability because citizens interpret it as evidence of care and concern (Achmad 2024). In such contexts, the line between public policy and clientelism becomes blurred. What is formally a citizen's right may be reinterpreted as a political gift that calls for gratitude.

Despite this growing body of work, much of the literature still treats citizens mainly as objects of elite strategies. Far fewer studies place citizens lived experiences and meanings at the center of analysis (Widodo,2024). Voters' perceptions of money politics vary widely and are not always accompanied by moral rejection (Asmuni et al. 2022)Some female voters even view vote buying as acceptable under certain social conditions (Yanti et al. 2023)Recent evidence from West Bandung further shows that voters read vote buying through

pragmatic lenses grounded in everyday experience (Djuyandi et al. 2025)These findings invite deeper questions about the moral and social meanings behind acceptance, beyond simple explanations of ignorance or pragmatism.

This study begins from that unease. We do not aim merely to show that clientelism exists. We seek to understand how different social classes experience it and how they make sense of it in everyday life. We believe that informal laborers, farmers, fishers, and the lower middle class do not attach the same meanings to gifts and assistance. Differences in work, income, and social networks produce different ways of understanding what is called help, reward, or entitlement.

Broader scholarship on clientelism reinforces this view. Clientelism thrives in contexts of inequality because it offers informal routes to resources that are difficult to access through formal institutions (Gellert 2025)This perspective helps explain why such practices persist even when legal rules prohibit them. Where the state appears distant, personal ties become the most realistic path to support in the eyes of citizens. In Brebes, this logic seems deeply embedded in daily interactions.

Research on voter opinion also suggests that attitudes toward money politics are shaped by lived conditions. Voters often judge vote buying through pragmatic lenses tied to their economic realities (Ode et al. 2022).Money politics also produces patterns of behavior that cannot be explained solely by rational choice because moral values and social relations play central roles (Kurniadi and Ulzikri 2022).These insights underline the need to read political opinion as a social product rather than as a purely individual preference.

The context of the 2024 Brebes election adds another layer to this analysis. With only one candidate competing against the empty box, formal choice was severely limited. In such a setting, clientelist relations gained greater weight. Citizens no longer compared programs between candidates. They assessed who was present in their lives and who reached them through personal networks. Under these conditions, political opinion became closely tied to direct experience with candidate-linked networks. Opinion did not only concern who to vote for, but also how to judge democracy itself, how

to see the state, and how to interpret the conduct of local elites (Higashijima and Washida 2024).

Recent studies confirm that clientelism remains strong in village and local elections. Clientelism in village head elections operates through cash, goods, and services framed as care (Azzahra et al. 2025)Similar dynamics appear in Karawang, where patronage structures shape village electoral outcomes (Atthahara et al. 2025).At the urban level, money politics continues to influence voter choice in the 2024 Padang local election (Putra 2025).At the national scale, clientelist exchange formed a consistent pattern in the dynamics of the 2024 election (Komarudin et al. 2025).Normative discussions also confirm that vote buying remains a challenge to democratic governance in Indonesia (Undang 2025).These works suggest that Brebes is not an exception but part of a wider pattern in contemporary Indonesian local politics.

Yet an important gap remains. Much of the existing research explains mechanisms, electoral effects, or normative implications of clientelism. Far less attention is paid to how citizens' class positions shape their experiences and how these experiences, in turn, form political opinion from within. This study seeks to fill that gap by placing citizens' subjective narratives at the center of analysis. We aim to understand how clientelist practices are translated into languages of fortune, entitlement, or moral obligation, and how these languages shape views of candidates and the state.

From this point, we formulate our main research question: how do social classes experience and make sense of clientelism in shaping political opinion in the 2024 Brebes election? This question guides us to explore citizens' stories of receiving money, goods, or assistance perceived as political. We ask what values operate behind acceptance or refusal. We examine how such experiences influence views of elites and institutions. We also investigate how brokers and campaign intermediaries frame gifts and guide citizens' interpretations.

As an initial analytical guide, we carry several working assumptions. We suspect that vulnerable groups such as informal workers tend to read clientelism as part of survival strategies in uncertain conditions. We expect farmers and fishers, embedded in tight local communities, to interpret gifts as moral relations that

produce feelings of obligation. We assume that the lower middle class faces tensions between democratic values and social pressures, leading to ambivalent attitudes. We also assume that brokers play a crucial role in turning material distribution into narratives of care that shape political opinion.

To address these questions, we adopt an interpretive qualitative approach through a case study of Brebes. We believe that meaning cannot be captured through numbers alone. It requires conversations that open lived experience. We collect data through in-depth interviews with informants from different class positions, including informal laborers, farmers, fishers, lower middle-class residents, and political brokers or campaign workers. We complement interviews with observations in local social spaces and an examination of campaign communication materials. We analyze the data through thematic coding to identify recurring patterns of meaning and then compare narratives across classes.

This approach resonates with calls in the literature to read local politics from citizens' experiences. Vote buying studies show electoral effectiveness (Aspinall et al. 2017).Research on social assistance shows its impact on perception (Achmad 2024).Studies of voter perception reveal that attitudes toward money politics grow out of social and economic experience. Recent findings also confirm that such perceptions are grounded in lived realities rather than abstract norms (Djuyandi et al. 2025).Yet without understanding the meanings citizens attach to these practices, we cannot fully explain why clientelism endures. We believe that the key lies in social relations and moral economies that frame everyday political action.

This study pursues several objectives. We aim to map how clientelist practices appear in the lived experiences of Brebes citizens during the 2024 election. We seek to explain the logics of meaning attached to those experiences across different class positions. We aim to show how such meanings shape political opinion about candidates, elites, and the state. We examine the role of brokers as mediators of meaning in clientelist relations. We also seek to contribute to Indonesian political studies by showing that political opinion at the local level grows from the meeting of material experience, moral values, and social networks.

We hope this research will enrich debates on the quality of local democracy. Clientelism is often treated as a deviation from democratic norms. We do not deny this. Yet we seek to complement it with an understanding of why such practices make sense within citizens' lifeworld. By grasping that logic, democratic reform can move beyond rules and touch the roots of social experience, as also argued in recent discussions on social strategies to counter money politics (Kurniawan and Hermawan 2019).

We also see this study as relevant to discussions of class in contemporary Indonesia. Many works still reduce class to income or education. We approach class as lived experience shaped by daily work, neighborhood ties, and access to the state. In this way, class becomes not an abstract variable but a story that shapes how people see politics.

Brebes offers fertile ground for this reading. It brings together intensive agriculture, coastal informal economies, and urban kampung life within a local political arena saturated with patronage. The 2024 election with a single candidate shows how democracy can proceed without real programmatic contestation. In that space, clientelism finds its field, and political opinion takes shape. Through this study, we seek to read local politics from below, from the voices of laborers, farmers, fishers, honorary teachers, and the intermediaries who connect them to power. From there, we hope to understand how political opinion is truly formed in Indonesia's democracy today.

1.1. Conceptual Framework: Social Class, the Meanings of Clientelism, and Political Opinion

This article advances a conceptual framework that understands the relationship between social class, clientelism, and political opinion as a relational and interpretive process. Moving beyond approaches that conceptualize clientelism primarily as a mechanism of resource exchange or elite strategy, the framework situates classed experience as the foundation through which clientelist practices are encountered, interpreted, and transformed into political attitudes.

Social class is treated here as a lived condition shaped by everyday work, economic vulnerability, social networks, and proximity to state institutions. Recent scholarship demonstrates that these conditions generate distinct moral horizons through which political assistance

may be understood as survival support, entitlement, reciprocal care, or moral obligation, rather than as a purely instrumental transaction(Al Faruq et al. 2025). Class therefore operates not only as a material position but as a structuring lens that organizes political meaning.

Within this framework, the meanings of clientelism function as a mediating mechanism between material distribution and political judgement. Cash, goods, or assistance do not automatically translate into electoral support; they acquire political significance through processes of interpretation. Political brokers play a central role in this translation by framing material assistance within narratives of care, recognition, and closeness, aligning political exchange with locally resonant moral expectations (Noor 2022).

Political opinion is consequently understood as the cumulative outcome of these classed experiences and mediated meanings. Attitudes toward candidates, elections, democracy, and the state emerge through repeated encounters with clientelist practices, experiences of presence and absence, and moral evaluations of political relationships. Rather than arising primarily from programmatic evaluation or ideological alignment, political opinion is formed within everyday social interactions structured by inequality and brokerage networks (Higashijima and Washida 2024).

By articulating the relationship between class, the meanings of clientelism, and political opinion in explicit conceptual terms, this article contributes to class-based theories of clientelism by demonstrating that the effects of class operate through processes of meaning-making rather than access alone. Clientelism is thus reconceptualized as a socially embedded and morally mediated practice, in which structural inequality is translated into differentiated political reasoning. This framework offers an analytical lens applicable beyond Indonesia, particularly for comparative studies of local democracy in contexts where formal institutions are weak and political life is organized through personalized social relations.

2. Method

This study adopts an interpretive qualitative approach to examine how social class positions shape citizens' experiences and

meanings of political clientelism, and how these experiences inform political opinion in the context of the 2024 regency election in Brebes. Rather than testing causal relationships statistically, the study seeks to uncover the moral logics, social norms, and everyday reasoning embedded in clientelist practices. Previous research on vote buying in Indonesia demonstrates that such practices operate through personal ties, brokerage networks, and localized moral economies that are best captured through close engagement with lived experience (Aspinall et al. 2017). More broadly, clientelism has been understood as an informal political mechanism rooted in social inequality and unequal access to state resources (Gellert 2025).

The research is designed as a qualitative case study focusing on Brebes as a single analytical site. This design enables an in-depth examination of clientelist practices within a specific and politically distinctive context, namely the 2024 local election conducted under the unusual condition of a single candidate competing against the empty box. The narrowing of formal electoral choice in this setting heightened the salience of personal relations, informal networks, and moral justifications surrounding political support. Consistent with an interpretive stance, the study proceeds from the assumption that social reality is constructed through actors' meanings, rendering citizens' narratives central to understanding how local politics in Brebes is lived, negotiated, and interpreted (Asmuni et al. 2022).

Fieldwork was conducted in selected villages and urban neighborhoods in Brebes using purposive sampling. Research sites were chosen based on the intensity of campaign activities and the presence of diverse social class configurations, including areas dominated by informal laborers, farming and fishing communities, as well as economically vulnerable lower middle-class residents. Agrarian and coastal settings have been shown to be particularly conducive to patronage relations due to limited formal access to state resources. Recent studies of local elections further suggest that economically precarious areas remain fertile ground for money politics, reinforcing the analytical relevance of Brebes as a research site (Putra 2025).

Data collection continued until reaching the principle of data saturation. Saturation was identified concretely through the repeated

emergence of similar themes, narratives, and moral justifications across interviews and locations. It was considered achieved when additional interviews no longer generated new analytical categories but instead reinforced existing patterns of meaning, particularly regarding citizens' interpretations of vote buying, their relationships with political brokers, and class-based considerations in forming political attitudes. The assessment of saturation was conducted reflexively throughout fieldwork through the use of analytic memos and systematic comparison across cases.

This study is subject to methodological limitations inherent in its case study design and political context. The single-candidate configuration of the Brebes election produced a distinctive political environment in which conventional electoral competition was absent, potentially amplifying the role of informal networks and personalized exchanges. Consequently, the findings are not intended to support statistical generalization to other local elections in Indonesia. Instead, the study aims to contribute to analytical generalization by offering interpretive insights into how clientelism, social class, and political opinion formation operate under conditions of constrained electoral choice. By situating empirical findings within broader theoretical debates on clientelism and democratic practice, the study seeks to clarify the mechanisms through which non-competitive local political contexts shape citizens' political reasoning and engagement.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on class position and political role within the community. Four categories of informants were included. The first category consists of informal workers and daily wage laborers. The second category includes farmers and fishers. The third category covers lower middle-class residents such as honorary teachers, shop assistants, and administrative staff. The fourth category involves political brokers or campaign workers who mediate between candidates and voters. A total of twenty-two informants participated in the study, consisting of six informal laborers, six farmers or fishers, six lower middle-class residents, and four brokers. This number was guided by the principle of data saturation, whereby additional interviews no longer produced substantively new analytical insights but instead reinforced existing patterns of meaning (Aspinall et al. 2017).

Although brokers constitute the smallest numerical group of informants, their analytical salience in this study derives not from representational balance but from their structural position within local political networks. The role of brokers as key mediators of meaning should therefore be understood as an interpretive finding rather than a claim of empirical dominance. Narratives from non-broker informants across class categories consistently identified brokers as crucial interlocutors who explained the purpose of assistance, framed expectations of reciprocity, and personalized candidates' messages. In this sense, the centrality of brokers in the analysis is grounded in relational evidence across interviews rather than resting solely on brokers' own accounts. The study does not posit brokers as unilateral determinants of political meaning, but as influential intermediaries whose framing practices shape how clientelist exchanges are interpreted and morally evaluated by citizens.

To ensure confidentiality, all informants were assigned initials that are used consistently throughout the Results and Discussion sections. For informal laborers, the initials include S, a construction worker, and Y, a motorcycle taxi driver. For farmers and fishers, the initials include WN, a shallot farmer, and R, a fisherman. For lower middle-class residents, the initials include M, an honorary teacher, and D, a shop assistant. For brokers and campaign intermediaries, the initials include B and T, both of whom played roles in distributing assistance and framing messages from candidates. These initials do not correspond to real names and are used solely for analytical purposes.

The main data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews lasting between sixty and ninety minutes. Interviews explored experiences of receiving money, goods, or assistance during the election period, perceptions of candidates and campaign teams, moral interpretations of such practices, and views of the state and local democracy in Brebes. Personal narratives are crucial for understanding how citizens interpret money politics and clientelist exchanges (Hidayaturrahman et al. 2022). Interviews were complemented by limited observations in everyday social spaces and by analysis of local campaign materials and digital communications,

including leaflets and WhatsApp messages, which often construct narratives of care and closeness (Achmad 2024).

Data analysis followed a thematic approach. Interview transcripts were read repeatedly to identify significant statements, which were coded and grouped into broader themes such as fortune, entitlement, reciprocity, moral obligation, perceived care from candidates, and distrust of state institutions. These themes were organized into an analytical narrative linking class position, meanings of clientelism, and the formation of political opinion. Comparative analysis across class groups was conducted to identify both shared patterns and distinctive interpretations, as socioeconomic experience shapes how citizens judge money politics (Kurniadi and Ulzikri 2022).

The credibility of the findings was strengthened through triangulation. Source triangulation compared accounts from informants across different class positions and political roles, while method triangulation combined interviews, observations, and local documents (Samnuzulsari and Yudiatmaja 2018). Follow-up discussions with selected informants were conducted to confirm whether preliminary interpretations resonated with their intended meanings.

Ethical considerations were central given the sensitivity of discussing money politics and clientelism (Hamson 2021). Informants were informed about the purpose of the research, provided verbal consent, and retained the right to withdraw at any time. The use of initials and secure data storage was applied to protect confidentiality.

This study also recognizes its limitations. As a qualitative case study focused on a single locality, the findings are not intended for statistical generalization. However, the depth of analysis is expected to offer conceptual insights relevant to other local settings with comparable social structures and political conditions. Through this methodological design, the study seeks to explain how clientelist practices are produced, mediated, and interpreted in the everyday lives of Brebes citizens, and how these processes shape political opinion within the workings of local democracy.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Clientelism as Lived Experience: Survival, Moral Obligation, and Classed Meanings in Brebes

The findings indicate that clientelism in Brebes is not experienced as a formal political transaction but as part of everyday life embedded in economic needs and social relations. Among informal laborers and daily wage workers, receiving money during the 2024 local election was almost always framed as *fortune* or *rezeki.* Recent empirical evidence from West Bandung Regency shows that vote-buying is not universally stigmatized and can be rationalized by voters even when illegal, suggesting public perceptions of electoral clientelism are nuanced and can coexist with normative commitments to voting conscience (Djuyandi et al. 2025)S, a 41-year-old construction worker, explained that when a campaign team came with an envelope he did not question its origin because "I didn't ask who it was from, they came and gave an envelope, for me it was fortune, it helped to buy rice, if I refused I would just think I was being foolish" (S, 2025), which shows how the gift was interpreted as practical help rather than a political contract.

A similar view was expressed by Y, a motorcycle taxi driver, who described acceptance as a rational response to uncertainty in daily income. He said that "if someone gives, I accept, life is hard now, but about voting that is another matter, I don't want to promise" (Y, 2025), while also admitting that candidates who came in person felt closer because "those who come mean they know our situation, the others only put their photos on banners" (Y, 2025). This emphasis on presence reflects the pattern identified by Aspinall and Muhtadi (2017) that vote buying in Indonesia works through personal contact and market-like competition rather than programmatic appeals.

Among farmers, the meaning of gifts shifted toward moral obligation. WN, a shallot farmer, recounted that fertilizer assistance delivered through a village figure made him feel indebted, saying that "they said it was from the candidate, I felt grateful, but inside I felt uneasy, how could I be helped and then choose someone else" (WN, 2025). Here the gift was not merely material but carried the weight of social reciprocity. A similar sentiment was expressed by R, a 52-year-old fisherman, who recalled that food packages were distributed before a communal prayer and felt like care rather than vote buying

because “the way they spoke was polite, it didn’t feel like buying votes but like caring, after that how could we just forget” (R, 2025). In communal settings, assistance becomes a shared moral event, reinforcing Berenschot’s (2018) argument that clientelism is rooted in personalized relations where access to state resources is limited.

Lower middle-class informants articulated strong ambivalence. M, a 29-year-old honorary teacher, admitted discomfort with money politics yet felt compelled by neighborhood norms, explaining that “I actually disagree, but if all my neighbors accept and I refuse, they will say I am acting superior, so I accept but my heart is not calm” (M, 2025). D, a shop assistant, echoed this dilemma when he said that “if I don’t accept, people think I don’t want to socialize, but if I accept it feels wrong, so it is wrong either way” (D, 2025). This tension mirrors findings by Rendra Hidayat (2022) that voters often navigate between moral rejection and pragmatic acceptance of vote buying.

Brokers played a central role in shaping how gifts were understood. B, a campaign intermediary, explained that his task went beyond distribution because “if you only give money and leave, people forget quickly, I always say this is a sign of care from the candidate, so they feel respected” (B, 2025). Through such framing, cash was transformed into a symbol of attention, confirming Aspinall and Muhtadi’s (2017) observation that brokers translate material resources into personalized loyalty.

Class position also shaped how informants perceived the state. S remarked that government assistance was rarely felt in his life because “from the government it is very rare, unless it is election time no one comes” (S, 2025), making gifts from candidates appear more tangible. By contrast, M insisted that assistance should come from the state, yet acknowledged blurred boundaries in practice, saying that “it should be the duty of the state, but here it is the candidate who looks like they care” (M, 2025). This reflects Achmad’s (2024) finding that social assistance is often personalized in local contests and attributed to candidates rather than institutions.

These narratives reveal that clientelism in Brebes carries multiple classed meanings. For laborers, it becomes a strategy of survival. For farmers and fishers, it represents reciprocal care embedded in moral obligation. For lower middle-class citizens, it

generates a dilemma between democratic values and social pressure. Clientelism thus appears not as a single logic but as a spectrum of lived experiences shaped social of relations.

At a theoretical level, this analysis advances class-based theories of clientelism by demonstrating that social class does not merely shape who participates in clientelist exchange, but more fundamentally conditions *how* such exchanges are morally interpreted and lived. Clientelism in Brebes operates through differentiated classed meanings rather than a single instrumental logic: as a survival strategy among precarious laborers, as reciprocal moral obligation within agrarian and fishing communities, and as normative tension and ambivalence among the lower middle class.

This finding challenges dominant clientelism models that prioritize resource exchange or elite strategies, by foregrounding class as a lived moral position that structures political meaning. In doing so, the article contributes to broader theoretical debates by showing that clientelism must be understood as embedded in classed moral economies, where inequality is translated into distinct experiential and justificatory frameworks.

3.2. From Gifts to Political Opinion: Trust, Brokers, and Local Democracy in Brebes

Experiences of receiving gifts extend into how citizens form political opinions about candidates, elites, and the meaning of elections in Brebes. Among laborers, political attitudes tended to be pragmatic. S stated bluntly that "whoever becomes regent, my life will be like this, as long as it does not get harder" (S, 2025), suggesting that assistance created proximity rather than admiration. Y similarly noted that gifts softened his view because "those who come feel closer, even though I know it is to look for votes" (Y, 2025). Political judgement was thus grounded in contact rather than policy, echoing Kurniadi (2022) argument that money politics shapes behavior without fostering ideological attachment.

Farmers and fishers more directly linked gifts to electoral choice. WN remarked that "if you have been helped, how can you not choose them, people will say you are ungrateful" (WN, 2025), while R explained his decision by saying that "I choose the one who has come,

what happens later is another matter" (R, 2025). Here voting was anchored in past assistance rather than future promises, consistent with Pratama's (2017) findings on patronage in local elections.

Yet this sense of obligation coexisted with cynicism about politics. R expressed frustration that "it has always been like this, they come, distribute, then forget again" (R, 2025), reflecting weariness with recurring cycles of exchange. (Lestari 2022)similarly shows that patronage can mobilize participation while eroding belief in substantive political change.

Lower middle-class informants articulated more critical yet resigned opinions. M argued that money politics damaged elections but felt trapped, saying that "in my view this ruins the election, but what can we do, everyone is already used to it" (M, 2025), while D admitted continued participation despite low expectations because "honestly I do not expect much" (D, 2025). Their participation persisted without strong faith in democratic improvement.

Brokers again emerged as interpreters of political meaning. B described how he managed expectations by telling voters that "don't expect too much, this is just help, not a promise of heaven" (B, 2025), while another broker, T, stressed that gifts were only one factor because "sometimes people choose not because of money but because they follow family or neighbors, money is only a booster" (T, 2025). These accounts show that clientelism intertwines with existing social networks rather than replacing them.

Trust in candidates appeared fragile. Some felt that concrete help made candidates more trustworthy, yet others saw it as a short-term tactic. M captured this skepticism when she said that "if they are good before the election and then disappear, it is all the same as lying" (M, 2025). This resonates with Trihartono's (2022) argument that money politics produces both impressions of care and long-term distrust of elites.

The context of a single-candidate election in Brebes further shaped political opinion. S remarked that "whether we vote or not, the result is already clear" (S, 2025), suggesting that gifts gave practical meaning to participation in a contest perceived as predetermined. Putra (2025) similarly notes that money politics remained influential in the 2024 local elections even where competition was limited.

Even within this setting, traces of democratic hope persisted. M expressed belief that "maybe if young people understand more in the future, it can be different" (M, 2025), indicating that clientelist logic coexists with aspirations for change. Berenschot (2018) likewise emphasizes that citizens continually negotiate, rather than simply accept, the meanings of clientelism.

These findings show that political opinion in Brebes is shaped through classed experiences of clientelism. Laborers develop pragmatic acceptance based on presence. Farmers and fishers cultivate conditional loyalty rooted in moral reciprocity. Lower middle-class citizens maintain critique mixed with resignation. Brokers mediate these relations by translating gifts into narratives of care. Through such processes, local democracy in Brebes is lived less as a program-driven contest and more as a series of personalized encounters and moral negotiations.

We locate this study in Brebes because the district provides a clear lens to observe how local democracy in Indonesia works at the intersection of social inequality and entrenched clientelist practices. The 2024 regency election, held under the unusual condition of a single candidate against the empty box, narrowed programmatic competition and shifted public attention from policy debate to personal ties and everyday encounters. In our early conversations, residents spoke less about visions or agendas than about who brought rice, who gave an envelope, and who helped with daily problems. These accounts suggest that political opinion in Brebes is formed not on campaign stages, but within social spaces where daily relations are lived and negotiated.

Brebes is widely known as an agrarian region based on shallot farming, coastal fisheries, and informal urban labor, producing social classes that live close to vulnerability. Seasonal work, unstable prices, and limited access to social protection shape how people perceive the state, making any form of assistance appear as care. Politics thus emerges less as an abstract contest of ideas than as a relationship tied to basic needs. Studies on money politics show that such practices have become routine in Indonesian elections and are often accepted as normal in socially and economically fragile areas (Hamson 2021).

Research on vote buying further shows that material distribution is not a one-off exchange, but a strategy built through brokerage networks and market-like political logics. Aspinall and Muhtadi (2017) demonstrate that candidates rely heavily on local brokers to reach voters through personal approaches that work more effectively than programmatic appeals. Their findings highlight that clientelism operates through social closeness rather than narrow cost–benefit calculations, a pattern that is also visible in Brebes, where campaign teams and local figures serve as key bridges between candidates and residents.

Studies of patronage in other local elections reveal comparable patterns. Pratama (2017), in his work on Kendari, describes how patron–client ties shape political support through the circulation of resources and personal loyalty. Lestari (2021) shows that in the Bogor election, patronage worked not only through cash but also through favors and access, wrapped in the language of closeness and obligation. These studies strengthen the view that much of local politics in Indonesia moves through clientelist relations grounded in everyday social life.

At the same time, research on social assistance highlights how welfare policies are often perceived as personal achievements of candidates rather than as institutional state programs. Achmad (2024) finds that social assistance can raise candidates' electability because citizens interpret it as evidence of care and concern. In such contexts, the line between public policy and clientelism becomes blurred. What is formally a citizen's right may be reinterpreted as a political gift that calls for gratitude.

Despite this growing body of work, much of the literature still treats citizens mainly as objects of elite strategies. Far fewer studies place citizens lived experiences and meanings at the center of analysis. Trihartono (2022) shows that voters' perceptions of money politics vary widely and are not always accompanied by moral rejection. Yanti, Malinda, and Tamsyah (2023) even find that some female voters view vote buying as acceptable under certain conditions. These findings invite deeper questions about the moral and social meanings behind acceptance, beyond simple explanations of ignorance or pragmatism.

This study begins from that unease. We do not aim merely to show that clientelism exists. We seek to understand how different social classes experience it and how they make sense of it in everyday life. We believe that informal laborers, farmers, fishers, and the lower middle-class do not attach the same meanings to gifts and assistance. Differences in work, income, and social networks produce different ways of understanding what is called help, reward, or entitlement.

Broader scholarship on clientelism reinforces this view. Berenschot (2018) argues that clientelism thrives in contexts of inequality because it offers informal routes to resources that are difficult to access through formal institutions. This perspective helps explain why such practices persist even when legal rules prohibit them. Where the state appears distant, personal ties become the most realistic path to support in the eyes of citizens. In Brebes, this logic seems deeply embedded in daily interactions.

Research on voter opinion also suggests that attitudes toward money politics are shaped by lived conditions. Rendra Hidayat (2022) shows that voters often judge vote buying through pragmatic lenses tied to their economic realities. Kurniadi (2022) argues that money politics produces patterns of behavior that cannot be explained solely by rational choice, because moral values and social relations also play central roles. These insights underline the need to read political opinion as a social product rather than as a purely individual preference.

The context of the 2024 Brebes election adds another layer to this analysis. With only one candidate competing against the empty box, formal choice was severely limited. In such a setting, clientelist relations gained greater weight. Citizens no longer compared programs between candidates. They assessed who was present in their lives, who reached them through personal networks. Under these conditions, political opinion became closely tied to direct experience with candidate-linked networks (Gasuku 2023). Opinion did not only concern who to vote for, but also how to judge democracy itself, how to see the state, and how to interpret the conduct of local elites (Walgrave and Soontjens 2023).

Recent studies confirm that clientelism remains strong in village and local elections. Azzahra (2025) shows how clientelism in village

head elections operates through cash, goods, and services framed as care. Tamam (2025) argues that clientelism formed a consistent pattern in the dynamics of the 2024 national election. Putra (2025) finds that money politics continued to influence voter choice in the 2024 Padang local election. These works suggest that Brebes is not an exception but part of a wider pattern in contemporary Indonesian local politics.

Yet an important gap remains. Much of the existing research explains mechanisms, electoral effects, or normative implications of clientelism (Rhee et al. 2024). Far less attention is paid to how citizens' class positions shape their experiences and how these experiences, in turn, form political opinion from within. This study seeks to fill that gap by placing citizens' subjective narratives at the center of analysis. We aim to understand how clientelist practices are translated into languages of fortune, entitlement, or moral obligation, and how these languages shape views of candidates and the state.

From this point, we formulate our main research question: how do social classes experience and make sense of clientelism in shaping political opinion in the 2024 Brebes election? This question guides us to explore citizens' stories of receiving money, goods, or assistance perceived as political. We ask what values operate behind acceptance or refusal. We examine how such experiences influence views of elites and institutions. We also investigate how brokers and campaign intermediaries frame gifts and guide citizens' interpretations.

As an initial analytical guide, we carry several working assumptions. We suspect that vulnerable groups such as informal workers tend to read clientelism as part of survival strategies in uncertain conditions. We expect farmers and fishers, embedded in tight local communities, to interpret gifts as moral relations that produce feelings of obligation. We assume that the lower middle-class faces tensions between democratic values and social pressures, leading to ambivalent attitudes. We also assume that brokers play a crucial role in turning material distribution into narratives of care that shape political opinion.

To address these questions, we adopt an interpretive qualitative approach through a case study of Brebes. We believe that meaning cannot be captured through numbers alone. It requires conversations that open lived experience. We collect data through in-depth

interviews with informants from different class positions, including informal laborers, farmers, fishers, lower middle-class residents, and political brokers or campaign workers. We complement interviews with observations in local social spaces and an examination of campaign communication materials. We analyze the data through thematic coding to identify recurring patterns of meaning and then compare narratives across classes.

This approach resonates with calls in the literature to read local politics from citizens' experiences. Vote buying studies show electoral effectiveness (Aspinall and Muhtadi 2017). Research on social assistance shows its impact on perception (Achmad 2024). Studies of voter perception reveal that attitudes to money politics grow out of social and economic experience (Hidayat 2022). Yet without understanding the meanings citizens attach to these practices, we cannot fully explain why clientelism endures. We believe that the key lies in social relations and moral economies that frame everyday political action.

This study pursues several objectives. We aim to map how clientelist practices appear in the lived experiences of Brebes citizens during the 2024 election. We seek to explain the logics of meaning attached to those experiences across different class positions. We aim to show how such meanings shape political opinion about candidates, elites, and the state. We examine the role of brokers as mediators of meaning in clientelist relations. We also seek to contribute to Indonesian political studies by showing that political opinion at the local level grows from the meeting of material experience, moral values, and social networks.

We hope this research will enrich debates on the quality of local democracy. Clientelism is often treated as a deviation from democratic norms (Gherghina and Tap 2024). We do not deny this. Yet we seek to complement it with an understanding of why such practices make sense within citizens' lifeworld. By grasping that logic, democratic reform can move beyond rules and touch the roots of social experience.

We also see this study as relevant to discussions of class in contemporary Indonesia. Many works still reduce class to income or education. We approach class as lived experience shaped by daily

work, neighborhood ties, and access to the state. In this way, class becomes not an abstract variable but a story that shapes how people see politics.

Brebes offers fertile ground for this reading. It brings together intensive agriculture, coastal informal economies, and urban kampung life within a local political arena saturated with patronage. The 2024 election with a single candidate shows how democracy can proceed without real programmatic contestation. In that space, clientelism finds its field, and political opinion takes shape. Through this study, we seek to read local politics from below, from the voices of laborers, farmers, fishers, honorary teachers, and the intermediaries who connect them to power. From there, we hope to understand how political opinion is truly formed in Indonesia's democracy today.

3.3. Clientelism and Political Opinion Formation under Limited Electoral Competition

The findings of this study show that political opinion formation operates through qualitatively different mechanisms when clientelist practices function within a context of minimal electoral competition. In competitive elections, as widely discussed in the Indonesian electoral politics literature, clientelism generally serves as a strategic instrument that allows voters to compare candidates, negotiate material and symbolic benefits, and manage uncertainty in political choice(Anggoro 2019). However, in the context of the Brebes local election, in which only a single candidate pair competed against the empty box, clientelism no longer functioned primarily as a tool of electoral calculation but instead transformed into a principal source of political meaning itself

Under conditions of limited choice, clientelist relations did not merely shape citizens' support preferences but also structured how they understood political participation, political legitimacy, and democratic practice. When programmatic comparison and policy alternatives were largely absent, citizens tended to evaluate politics through relational indicators such as candidate presence, the forms of assistance received, and the social proximity that was established, rather than through contestation over ideas or policy visions(Hannan 2023). The provision of assistance and campaign visits thus became

concrete media through which citizens made sense of an election that was widely perceived as predetermined, turning clientelism into a substitute for electoral competition rather than its complement (Fujilestari 2023).

These conditions also produced a shift in the moral economy of clientelism. Assistance was no longer predominantly interpreted as a political inducement to be weighed against alternative choices, but was more often understood as an expression of care, social recognition, or personal attention within a political landscape lacking meaningful contestation (Wilson Pérez- Oviedo 2024)In this context, political opinion did not emerge from rational deliberation among competing policy options, but from citizens' everyday experiences of interacting with social networks and intermediary actors connected to the candidate (Darma 2022).

The absence of meaningful electoral competition also reshaped the role of political brokers. Rather than acting as mobilization agents shifting support across competing candidates, brokers in this context primarily functioned as political interpreters who endowed participation with meaning in a substantively hollow contest (Aura Anisah et al. 2025). By framing assistance as symbolic political presence rather than as competitive electoral exchange, brokers contributed to sustaining citizen engagement while simultaneously normalizing low expectations of post election political accountability (Rahman et al. 2022).

Theoretically, these findings reinforce arguments in the Indonesian political literature that clientelism under conditions of minimal electoral competition constitutes a distinct mode of political opinion formation. Clientelism fills the void left by weakened democratic contestation by anchoring political opinion not in policy choice or preference, but in moral evaluations of social relationships and lived experiences of interaction with political actors. This underscores that the structure of electoral competition fundamentally conditions how clientelist practices operate and what political consequences they produce.

4. Conclusion

This study has examined how class position intertwines with clientelist practices in shaping political opinion among citizens in Brebes during the 2024 local election. The findings show that the relationship between class, clientelism, and political opinion is not linear but is formed through everyday experiences that differ across social groups. Among laborers and informal workers, political gifts are understood mainly as a means of survival in conditions of economic insecurity, leading to pragmatic political attitudes centered on the presence of candidates rather than their programs. For farmers and fishers, assistance is embedded in reciprocal relations that generate feelings of indebtedness and moral obligation, so that political choice is often experienced as a response to care already received rather than as an expression of free preference. By contrast, lower middle-class citizens display ambivalence, as their awareness of democratic norms clashes with social pressures to maintain harmony within neighborhoods and kin networks. In this way, political opinion in Brebes is shaped less by ideology than by classed experiences and the social meanings attached to clientelist exchange.

The study also highlights the central role of brokers in connecting material resources to the moral world of voters. By framing assistance as personal concern, brokers personalize politics and anchor trust in face-to-face encounters. Yet such trust proves fragile, as it depends heavily on continued presence and easily turns into disappointment once elections pass and elites withdraw. In the context of a single-candidate contest in Brebes, clientelism becomes one of the main ways through which citizens give meaning to participation in an election that many perceive as already decided. Local democracy, as lived by these citizens, is therefore experienced more as a web of personal relations than as a space for contesting ideas about the future.

The implications of these findings suggest that reducing clientelism cannot be achieved through legal bans or moral appeals alone. If social and economic vulnerability persists, clientelist assistance will continue to appear reasonable and even necessary to many citizens. Strengthening universal and accessible social protection at the local level is thus essential, not only as a welfare measure but also as a democratic intervention that can lessen

dependence on personalized political aid. Civic education should also engage with the moral languages familiar to citizens, such as care, fairness, and reciprocity, rather than relying solely on abstract democratic ideals.

For political actors and local institutions in Brebes, these findings underline the need to build sustained institutional presence beyond campaign periods. When politics is encountered mainly through episodic distribution before elections, public opinion will remain anchored in short-term exchange. The experience of Brebes suggests that improving the quality of local democracy requires changes in how class relations, political practices, and state presence intersect in everyday life, so that citizens can come to see politics not merely as a source of temporary help, but as a collective process grounded in rights, accountability, and shared responsibility.

Declaration of Conflicting Interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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