Research Square

Preprints are preliminary reports that have not undergone peer review.
They should not be considered conclusive, used to inform clinical practice,
or referenced by the media as validated information.

Political Elites Clientelism and Intergroup Relations in Indonesia's 2024 Presidential Election through a Socio Psychological Lens

Muhammad Fath Mashuri
Universiti Sains Malaysia
Firdausi Muhammad Akhmad
Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang
Suzanna Awang Bono
suzanna.bono@usm.my

Universiti Sains Malaysia

Research Article

Keywords: clientelism, elite political behaviour, organizational identity, intergroup relations, Indonesia's 2024 presidential election

Posted Date: November 9th, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-10928686/v1

License: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
Read Full License

Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

This study examines how political elites understand hierarchy, organizational identity, intergroup relations, and clientelistic practices during Indonesia's 2024 Presidential Election. Drawing on Social Dominance Theory, Social Identity Theory, and Deutsch's Theory of Cooperation and Competition as interpretive frameworks, the study employed in-depth interviews with 10 political elites representing major parties associated with the three presidential candidate pairs. Thematic analysis identified three interrelated patterns. First, political competition strengthened organizational identity, cadre formation, loyalty, and hierarchical continuity, illustrating how organizational cohesion may simultaneously support political stability and reproduce unequal power relations. Second, intergroup boundaries among political elites remained adaptive, with intense electoral competition followed by post-election cooperation shaped by shared interests, interpersonal relationships, and pragmatic adjustment. Third, clientelism operated as a relational mechanism of political power in which reciprocity, loyalty, trust, and resource distribution sustained enduring political networks. These findings suggest that elite political behaviour cannot be adequately explained through institutional incentives alone. Instead, political power is reproduced through the interaction of organizational identity, hierarchy, adaptive intergroup relations, and relational exchange. The study contributes a socio-psychological perspective to understanding elite politics and democratic governance in transitional democracies.

Introduction

General elections constitute socio-psychological arenas in which group processes and intergroup dynamics become particularly salient. Political competition activates social identities, encourages strategic behavior, and may intensify intergroup tensions [1]. Social psychology therefore provides a valuable perspective for understanding how identity salience, voting behavior, favoritism, and discrimination emerge during electoral contests [2, 3]. In political settings where ideological competition intersects with cultural and identity structures, psychological constructs such as Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), and Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) offer useful conceptual lenses for examining how individuals and groups perceive hierarchy, legitimacy, and social relations [4].

Indonesia's 2024 presidential election represents a particularly important case for examining these dynamics. The nomination of Gibran Rakabuming Raka, son of the incumbent President Joko Widodo (Jokowi), as Prabowo Subianto's vice-presidential running mate, following a controversial Constitutional Court ruling [5], together with Jokowi's perceived political support, generated extensive public debate concerning political dynasties, constitutional legitimacy, and democratic backsliding. These developments intensified political polarization and raised concerns regarding electoral fairness and institutional integrity. Within this context, political actors mobilized identities, legitimacy claims, and perceptions of threat that are consistent with issues addressed by Social Dominance Theory [6]. Indonesia's collectivist culture and socio-religious diversity further shape these political processes [7, 8], while identity-based cleavages involving religion, ethnicity, and ideology continue to serve as important

resources for electoral mobilization [9], often reinforcing perceptions of injustice and intergroup division [10].

The election involved three candidate pairs representing different political coalitions and social constituencies. The Prabowo-Gibran ticket, frequently perceived as closely associated with the incumbent administration, illustrates broader debates concerning elite power, institutional legitimacy, and democratic governance. Public discussions surrounding Jokowi's political role have raised questions regarding distributive and interactional justice [11, 12, 13], while comparable concerns regarding elite dominance and electoral manipulation have also been documented in other democratic contexts, including Sri Lanka and Brazil [14, 15]. Rather than treating these debates as established facts, this study approaches them as part of the political narratives and elite perceptions that surrounded Indonesia's 2024 presidential election.

As a hybrid democracy, Indonesia provides an important setting for understanding how institutional processes interact with cultural values and group-based political behavior [16]. Political strategies such as dynastic succession, youth mobilization, and familial patronage suggest the continuing importance of collectivist norms and group loyalty in elite politics. Likewise, clientelism and pork-barrel politics, including the politicization of social assistance programs, remain significant features of Indonesian electoral competition [17, 18]. These practices have been widely associated with patterns of in-group favoritism and unequal resource distribution [19, 20], making them relevant contexts for examining how political elites understand hierarchy, cooperation, and intergroup relations.

Despite intense electoral competition, the post-election period was characterized by political reconciliation and coalition formation. Prabowo's effort to build a broad governing coalition, including former electoral rivals, illustrates the fluidity of political alliances following electoral contestation. Deutsch's [21] theory of cooperation and competition provides a useful framework for interpreting this process, particularly through the concepts of substitutability, inducibility, and cathexis, which help explain how previously competing actors may engage in strategic cooperation. Although such political flexibility may contribute to governmental stability, it also raises questions regarding elite convergence, democratic accountability, and the potential suppression of critical dissent [22].

Although previous studies have examined Indonesian elections primarily through institutional and political economy perspectives [23, 24], comparatively little attention has been devoted to the socio-psychological processes underlying elite political behavior. Existing studies have explored intergroup tensions and populism in Indonesian politics [9, 10], yet relatively few have examined how elite actors themselves interpret hierarchy, group loyalty, political competition, and post-election cooperation through a social psychological perspective. Rather than treating psychological constructs such as SDO, and RWA as directly measurable outcomes within this qualitative study, this research employs these concepts as interpretive frameworks for understanding elite narratives and political practices. Drawing on qualitative interviews with political elites from different parties, this study explores how perceptions of hierarchy,

identity, clientelism, and strategic cooperation contribute to power consolidation and the management of intergroup relations within Indonesia's contemporary democratic context.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed an exploratory qualitative design to investigate how political elites interpreted hierarchy, political identity, clientelism, and post-election cooperation during Indonesia's 2024 Presidential Election. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations within a complex political context rather than to quantify psychological constructs. The approach enables researchers to capture context-specific meanings and nuanced socio-political processes that may not be adequately represented through standardized quantitative measures [26].

Rather than directly measuring psychological constructs such as Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) and Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA), this study uses these concepts as interpretive frameworks for understanding how political elites described their experiences, decisions, and interactions during the election process. Consequently, psychological concepts were employed to interpret emerging themes after the analysis rather than serving as predetermined coding categories.

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the *Komisi Etik Penelitian Psikologi*, Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang, Indonesia, under approval number E.6.m/079/KE-FPsi-UMM/II/2024, following the ethical principles, standards, and CIOMS-WHO guidelines specified by the committee, and from the *Jawatankuasa Etika Penyelidikan Manusia* Universiti Sains Malaysia (JEPeM-USM), also known as the Human Research Ethics Committee USM (HREC), under protocol code USM/JEPeM/PP/24020160, in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, ICH Guidelines, GCP Standards, CIOMS Guidelines, WHO standards and relevant local regulations and ethical review procedures.

Participants and Recruitment

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with ten political elites representing the principal political parties supporting the three presidential candidate pairs: Anies Baswedan - Muhaimin Iskandar, Prabowo Subianto - Gibran Rakabuming Raka, and Ganjar Pranowo - Mahfud MD. Participants were affiliated with Partai Nasional Demokrat (NasDem), Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (PKB), Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS), Partai Gerakan Indonesia Raya (Gerindra), Partai Golongan Karya (Golkar), and Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan (PDIP) (Table 1).

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling followed by snowball sampling, a strategy commonly employed when studying elite or difficult-to-access populations (Noy, 2008). Initial participants were identified based on their strategic positions within political parties and their direct

involvement in campaign activities and organizational decision-making. Subsequent participants were recruited through referrals from earlier participants to obtain perspectives from different political affiliations while maintaining access to elite networks.

To ensure that participants possessed sufficient political experience, eligibility criteria required individuals to occupy at least regional leadership positions (*Dewan Pimpinan Daerah*) and to have actively participated in electoral strategy, coalition building, campaign coordination, or party decision-making during the 2024 presidential election. This composition allowed the study to capture perspectives from competing political camps and facilitated political triangulation across ideological positions, thereby strengthening the credibility of the findings [27].

Thematic saturation was evaluated continuously throughout the data collection process. After the eighth interview, no substantially new conceptual categories emerged from the data. The ninth and tenth interviews primarily reinforced previously identified patterns concerning hierarchy, political loyalty, clientelistic practices, and post-election cooperation. As the final interviews generated confirmation rather than novel conceptual insights, the research team concluded that thematic saturation had been achieved.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Political Party
Ahlan	Male	51	Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (PKB)
Sonya	Female	45	Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (PKB)
Alif	Male	40	Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (PKB)
Pahlevi	Male	42	Partai Nasional Demokrat (Nasdem)
Risa	Female	53	Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS)
Gilang	Male	38	Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS)
Garda	Male	58	Partai Gerakan Indonesia Raya (Gerindra)
Galih	Female	43	Partai Golongan Karya (Golkar)
Wati	Female	55	Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan (PDIP)
Ardito	Male	39	Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan (PDIP)

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in Bahasa Indonesia. The interview guide was designed to explore participants' experiences and perceptions regarding political hierarchy, identity, cooperation and competition, perceived justice, clientelistic practices, and electoral strategies. Although informed by relevant social psychological literature, the interview questions were

intentionally open-ended to encourage participants to describe their experiences in their own words rather than respond to predefined theoretical constructs.

Each interview lasted approximately 90-150 minutes and, where necessary, was conducted over multiple sessions to accommodate participants' schedules and allow for deeper exploration of emerging issues. With participants' informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and supplemented by detailed field notes documenting contextual information, non-verbal communication, and researchers' observations during the interviews.

Previous qualitative research suggests that studies involving knowledgeable elite participants commonly achieve thematic saturation within approximately six to twelve interviews [28]. Given the participants' direct involvement in high-level political decision-making, the interviews yielded rich and detailed accounts of campaign strategies, coalition dynamics, identity politics, and post-election political developments.

Data Analysis

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed following Saldaña's coding procedures [29]. The analysis adopted an inductive approach in which themes were developed from participants' narratives rather than imposed from existing theories. The analytical process consisted of several stages. First, transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the data. Second, initial codes were generated to capture meaningful segments describing political experiences, organizational practices, interpersonal relationships, and electoral strategies. Third, conceptually related codes were grouped into broader categories through iterative comparison across participants. Finally, these categories were refined into overarching themes representing recurring patterns across political parties and participant groups.

Only after these themes had been established were they interpreted using Social Dominance Theory [6,7,30], Social Identity Theory [31], and Deutsch's Theory of Cooperation and Competition [21]. Accordingly, the psychological theories functioned as analytical lenses for interpreting the empirical findings rather than as coding frameworks that predetermined the analysis. To enhance analytical rigor, coding was independently reviewed by members of the research team through an inter-rater process. Coding discrepancies were discussed until consensus was achieved, and thematic interpretations were continuously refined through iterative comparison with the interview transcripts. Throughout the analytical process, reflexivity was maintained by acknowledging researchers' assumptions and critically examining how these might influence interpretation. The research team adopted the role of external observers and maintained analytical distance from all political parties represented in the study to minimize potential bias and conflicts of interest.

Results

The analysis generated three interrelated themes describing how political elites interpreted political competition, cooperation, and resource distribution during Indonesia's 2024 Presidential Election. These themes emerged inductively from participants' narratives following iterative coding and cross-case comparison and represent recurring patterns across political parties. The three themes comprise (1) Political Competition as Organizational Strengthening; (2) Political Reconciliation and Coalition Formation; and (3) Clientelistic Practices in Elite Political Strategy.

Theme 1. Political Competition as Organizational Strengthening

Participants consistently described electoral competition as extending beyond the contest for political office. Across political parties, competition was perceived as an organizational process that encouraged internal evaluation, strengthened party structures, stimulated innovation, and improved political preparedness. Rather than viewing rival parties solely as adversaries, participants frequently described political competition as an incentive to improve organizational performance.

"Political party rivals as motivation to improve our performance, make us more innovative, increase internal party and supporter engagement, and make us stronger to adapt." (Male, 51 years old)

Beyond organizational improvement, participants emphasized the importance of developing future political cadres. Several parties viewed youth mobilization as a strategic investment in organizational continuity, particularly because younger voters represented an increasingly influential electoral constituency. Youth organizations were therefore strengthened not only to support campaign activities but also to prepare future generations of political leaders.

"We know that most voters are from the younger generation. Therefore, facing the 2024 presidential election, we are solidifying Gerindra Masa Depan (Young Gerindra)." (Male, 58 years old)

Participants also described cadre formation as extending beyond formal party structures to include family members and close relatives. Such recruitment practices were generally perceived as strengthening trust, organizational stability, and ideological continuity because long-standing interpersonal relationships facilitated loyalty and commitment to party objectives.

"Cadres of family and close relatives are a long-term investment for the party. Strong family ties make the party more cohesive and maintain the continuity of the party's ideology and programs." (Female, 43 years old)

Although family-based cadre recruitment was often regarded as beneficial for maintaining organizational cohesion, participants also acknowledged potential drawbacks. Several participants expressed concern that the concentration of leadership within political families could encourage dynastic succession and reduce opportunities for broader political participation.

"The practice of nepotism in the 2024 election occurred recklessly. The election of President Joko Widodo's son, Gibran Rakabuming Raka, as vice president of Prabowo Subianto cannot be separated from violations of the constitution, unethical attitudes, and the desire to perpetuate power. Of course, this violates the principles of democracy in Indonesia." (Male, 38 years old)

Notably, perspectives regarding family-based political recruitment were not entirely uniform. While some participants regarded familial networks as mechanisms for maintaining organizational continuity, others interpreted the same practices as contributing to political dynasties and the concentration of power. These contrasting perspectives illustrate that organizational cohesion and democratic inclusiveness were often perceived as competing considerations within contemporary Indonesian electoral politics.

Across political parties, participants consistently portrayed electoral competition as serving two complementary organizational functions. First, competition stimulated internal innovation, strategic adaptation, and leadership development. Second, it reinforced organizational cohesion through long-term cadre formation and interpersonal loyalty. At the same time, participants recognized that these strategies could also generate tensions concerning political inclusiveness, leadership succession, and democratic accountability. These findings suggest that political competition was understood not merely as electoral rivalry but as a broader organizational process through which parties strengthened their internal capacity while negotiating competing expectations regarding continuity and democratic representation.

Theme 2. Political Reconciliation and Coalition Formation

Following the presidential election, participants consistently described a noticeable transition from electoral competition to political cooperation. Although political parties had competed intensively during the campaign period, participants viewed the post-election phase as requiring dialogue, negotiation, and coalition building to ensure governmental stability. Rather than maintaining prolonged political confrontation, inter-party relationships were perceived as becoming increasingly pragmatic after the official announcement of the election results.

One participant explained that post-election cooperation represented an expected stage of Indonesia's democratic process. Political rivalry during the campaign was regarded as temporary, while collaboration after the election was considered necessary for future governance and national development.

"After being appointed as President-elect by the General Election Commission, Mr. Prabowo Subianto visited our party and met the party chairman. We are open to various forms of cooperation in future nation-building. We at PKB are ready to support that. The presidential election is over, and it is time to measure and consider the best opportunities for our party and this nation." (Female, 45 years old)

Participants further described reconciliation as involving a gradual shift in relationships between political actors. Although differences in political preferences remained, they emphasized that these differences should not prevent future communication, collaboration, or mutual respect among party members.

Maintaining interpersonal relationships across political parties was viewed as an important aspect of political maturity and democratic stability.

"During elections, we enjoy the existing political dynamics. We are not reactive to issues that attack our party. After that, we must accept defeat and every difference, appreciate the winner, and maintain interpersonal relationships with members of other parties." (Male, 38 years old)

Several participants also suggested that coalition formation was influenced by pragmatic political considerations rather than solely by ideological similarities. Cooperation among former political rivals was commonly described as a mechanism for facilitating governance, accommodating diverse political interests, and ensuring policy continuity following the election. Although participants generally viewed reconciliation positively, some also acknowledged potential challenges associated with broad political coalitions. They noted that extensive cooperation among political parties could reduce the intensity of parliamentary opposition and limit opportunities for alternative political voices to influence policy debates. Nevertheless, these concerns were expressed as potential consequences of coalition politics rather than as reasons to reject post-election cooperation altogether.

Across participants, post-election reconciliation was consistently portrayed as a dynamic process of rebuilding political relationships after electoral competition. Rather than eliminating political differences, reconciliation involved managing disagreement through dialogue, negotiation, and coalition formation. These findings indicate that participants perceived political competition and political cooperation not as contradictory processes but as sequential phases within Indonesia's democratic electoral cycle.

Theme 3. Clientelistic Practices in Elite Political Strategy

Participants consistently identified clientelistic practices as an important feature of Indonesia's 2024 Presidential Election. Across political parties, participants described clientelism not only as the exchange of political support for material benefits but also as a broader strategy involving political appointments, access to state resources, and institutional influence. Although participants differed in their evaluations of these practices, they commonly perceived clientelism as shaping political competition and post-election power distribution.

One participant argued that the consolidation of political influence occurred through strategic appointments and institutional decision-making prior to the election. From this perspective, political authority was perceived as extending beyond electoral competition into the organization of state institutions.

"President Joko Widodo committed an abuse of power to perpetuate his power, which was planned in a structured manner before the 2024 presidential election. He assigned and transferred positions to regional heads deemed to suit his political preferences, which he could control so that they could be empowered to win votes in the election. Apart from that, he also placed his family as chairman of the Constitutional Court,

which then changed the age limit regulations for presidential and vice-presidential candidates so that Gibran Rakabuming Raka, Joko Widodo's son, could run as vice-presidential candidate." (Male, 39 years old)

Other participants highlighted the allocation of strategic economic resources following the election. They perceived these decisions as reflecting reciprocal political relationships between governing elites and organizations that had provided electoral support.

"After the 2024 election and before the end of his presidential term, President Joko Widodo made new regulations by granting mining land concession permits to mass organizations. There is a tendency to bagi-bagi kue (sharing political resources) among organizations supporting particular political preferences while maintaining influence through the elected President and Vice President." (Female, 55 years old)

Beyond interview data, documentary materials reviewed as contextual evidence illustrated that similar concerns had also emerged within broader public discourse. For example, the Dirty Vote [18] documentary questioned the distribution of social assistance programmes during the election period and raised concerns regarding the relationship between public welfare programmes and electoral competition. In the present study, these documentary materials were used to contextualize participants' perceptions rather than as independent empirical findings.

"Social assistance is a state facility. The authority to distribute social assistance belongs to the Ministry of Social Affairs. It should not become personal political assistance associated with particular political actors." (18)

Additional documentary sources also reflected continuing public debate concerning institutional appointments and the role of state institutions following the election. For example, public reports discussed proposals concerning the placement of military and police personnel in civilian positions, while media reports described public concerns regarding democratic accountability and institutional independence. These documentary sources did not constitute primary data in this study but provided contextual evidence that complemented issues raised during the interviews.

The interview findings and supporting documentary materials indicate that participants understood clientelism as extending beyond conventional vote-buying practices to encompass broader processes of political resource distribution, institutional appointments, and reciprocal relationships between political elites and supporting organizations. While interview participants expressed differing political evaluations of these developments, recurring narratives across political parties suggest that clientelistic practices were widely perceived as an important component of Indonesia's contemporary electoral landscape.

Discussion

This study demonstrates that elite political behaviour during Indonesia's 2024 Presidential Election is shaped not only by institutional incentives but also by socio-psychological processes involving organizational identity, hierarchy maintenance, reciprocal trust, and adaptive intergroup relations. While

previous studies have primarily interpreted Indonesian elections through political economy, patronage, and institutional perspectives [17, 23, 25], the interview findings indicate that political actors themselves understand electoral competition, coalition formation, and clientelistic practices through shared identities, organizational norms, and long-term interpersonal relationships. Rather than replacing institutional explanations, the present findings complement them by explaining the psychological mechanisms through which political power is reproduced.

The first finding shows that electoral competition functions beyond the pursuit of electoral victory. Participants consistently described elections as opportunities to strengthen organizational cohesion, regenerate leadership, and reinforce party identity. These findings support Social Dominance Theory, which argues that hierarchical systems are maintained through legitimizing institutions and organizational practices [6, 30]. Rather than viewing cadre succession and familial leadership simply as mechanisms of domination, participants regarded them as legitimate strategies for ensuring organizational continuity and political stability. This distinction illustrates that hierarchy maintenance may simultaneously be experienced as organizational responsibility by political insiders while remaining contested as democratic inequality from an external perspective.

The findings also reinforce Social Identity Theory [31]. Political parties were consistently portrayed as enduring social groups that cultivate shared values, collective commitment, and organizational loyalty rather than temporary electoral vehicles. Such identification strengthens cohesion and organizational resilience [22, 31, 32], yet it may also reinforce established leadership structures and reduce openness to internal dissent. Consistent with Haslam et al. [33], participants evaluated political leadership primarily through the ability to represent collective interests and maintain organizational unity. Likewise, youth organizations were described as important settings for political socialization and leadership development, supporting Malafaia et al. [34], who argue that political participation among young members facilitates identity formation and organizational commitment. Together, these findings indicate that political continuity is reproduced not only through institutional succession but also through the gradual internalization of shared organizational identities. Although this study did not directly measure Social Dominance Orientation or Right-Wing Authoritarianism, participants' emphasis on loyalty, continuity, and organizational discipline is consistent with previous research linking hierarchy preferences to conservative political orientations [35].

The second finding demonstrates that political competition among elites remains highly adaptive. Although electoral campaigns intensified partisan identities, participants consistently viewed political rivalry as temporary and coalition building as a necessary stage of democratic governance. This differs from studies showing that elections often intensify affective polarization, ideological hostility, and intergroup conflict among voters [36,37,38,39). Instead, elite political actors distinguished between electoral competition and governing responsibilities, allowing organizational identities to remain sufficiently flexible for post-election cooperation.

This adaptive pattern is consistent with Deutsch's [21] Theory of Cooperation and Competition, which proposes that competitive relationships become cooperative when actors recognize shared goals and mutual dependence. Participants described coalition formation as a pragmatic adjustment to changing political realities rather than ideological convergence. Long-standing interpersonal relationships among political elites appeared to facilitate this transition by preserving trust and communication across party boundaries. These observations are also consistent with intergroup contact research demonstrating that repeated interaction can reduce intergroup tension and facilitate cooperation [40]. Furthermore, the findings resonate with research on electoral momentum showing that political actors adapt strategically to changing political environments. Lammers et al. [41] distinguish heuristic-driven bandwagon effects from fairness-based underdog effects, while Unkelbach et al. [42] demonstrate that perceived electoral momentum influences political behaviour beyond ideological commitment. Similarly, participants described coalition formation as a rational adaptation following the institutional acceptance of election results.

While political science commonly explains coalition politics through institutional bargaining and office-seeking incentives, the present findings suggest that coalition durability also depends on reciprocal trust, adaptive identities, and sustained interpersonal relationships. Nevertheless, extensive elite cooperation may reduce democratic contestation by weakening opposition and narrowing ideological alternatives. This observation is consistent with Tarmo and Issa [43], who argue that strong organizational cohesion within collectivist contexts may unintentionally encourage conformity and reduce critical deliberation.

The third finding extends existing understandings of clientelism by positioning it as both an institutional and socio-psychological process. Participants described clientelistic relationships as long-term reciprocal partnerships characterized by organizational loyalty, interpersonal trust, and enduring obligations rather than short-term electoral exchanges. This complements political science perspectives that conceptualize clientelism as reciprocal exchanges between political actors and citizens [17, 20, 44, 45]. The present findings suggest that institutional explanations describe how clientelism operates, whereas socio-psychological processes explain why these relationships remain resilient across electoral cycles.

Participants also perceived public resource distribution, particularly social assistance programmes, as politically significant during the election. Similar dynamics have been documented internationally, where welfare programmes become incorporated into electoral strategies [46, 47]. However, these accounts should be interpreted as participants' perceptions rather than verified evidence of electoral misconduct. Documentary materials, including Dirty Vote [18], media reports, and Constitutional Court proceedings [48], were used solely to contextualize these perceptions and not as primary empirical evidence. This distinction strengthens the methodological separation between interview findings and secondary documentary sources.

Viewed through Social Dominance Theory and Social Identity Theory, clientelism emerges as more than material exchange. Political loyalty develops through repeated interaction, shared organizational

experiences, and reciprocal obligations that reinforce collective identity and normalize hierarchical relationships [6, 30, 31]. Rather than relying solely on economic incentives, clientelistic relationships become psychologically meaningful because they strengthen belonging, trust, and organizational continuity. This perspective advances existing literature by conceptualizing clientelism as a relational identity process through which institutional arrangements and psychological mechanisms jointly reproduce political power.

The findings indicate that institutional and socio-psychological perspectives should be understood as complementary rather than competing explanations of elite political behaviour. Institutional approaches explain the structural conditions under which clientelism, coalition politics, and patronage emerge [17, 44, 45], whereas social psychology explains how political actors construct legitimacy, maintain organizational identities, negotiate intergroup boundaries, and reproduce hierarchical relationships over time. By integrating Social Dominance Theory, Social Identity Theory, and Deutsch's Theory of Cooperation and Competition, this study provides a more comprehensive explanation of elite political behaviour in transitional democracies than either perspective alone.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The findings are based on interviews with ten elite political actors and therefore provide analytical rather than statistical generalization. The study also relies on participants' interpretations of political processes rather than direct observation of decision-making, while documentary sources were included only as contextual evidence. Future research should integrate qualitative inquiry with quantitative measures of Social Dominance Orientation, organizational identification, political trust, and intergroup attitudes, and employ comparative and longitudinal designs to examine whether similar socio-psychological mechanisms operate across different democratic contexts.

Conclusion

This study explored how political elites interpreted hierarchy, organizational identity, intergroup relations, and clientelistic practices during Indonesia’s 2024 Presidential Election. Three interrelated patterns emerged from the interviews. First, electoral competition was understood as a process of organizational strengthening through cadre development, youth mobilization, organizational loyalty, and leadership continuity. These processes strengthened collective identity and organizational cohesion while also raising concerns about familial recruitment, political dynasties, and the concentration of power. Second, political competition was perceived as a temporary intergroup relationship that could shift toward cooperation after the election. Post-election reconciliation and coalition formation were shaped not only by institutional and political considerations but also by interpersonal relationships, mutual trust, shared interests, and pragmatic adaptation. Third, clientelism was understood by participants as extending beyond conventional electoral exchange to include political appointments, access to resources, institutional influence, and reciprocal relationships between political elites and supporting organizations.

These findings demonstrate that elite political behaviour cannot be adequately understood through institutional incentives alone. Political power is also reproduced through socio-psychological processes involving organizational identification, hierarchy legitimization, interpersonal trust, and the negotiation of intergroup boundaries. Social Dominance Theory, Social Identity Theory, and Deutsch's Theory of Cooperation and Competition provide complementary perspectives for interpreting these processes, while the qualitative design highlights how such processes are understood by political actors themselves.

The study contributes to the literature by bringing the perspectives of political elites into the analysis of Indonesian electoral politics and by connecting socio-psychological processes with broader institutional and political dynamics. The findings also suggest that strengthening democratic governance requires political organizations to balance organizational continuity and collective cohesion with inclusive leadership, internal deliberation, and meaningful political contestation. Future research should examine whether the socio-psychological processes identified in this study operate similarly across different political contexts, electoral cycles, and democratic settings.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the *Komisi Etik Penelitian Psikologi*, Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang, Indonesia, under approval number E.6.m/079/KE-FPsi-UMM/II/2024, and the *Jawatankuasa Etika Penyelidikan Manusia* Universiti Sains Malaysia (JEPeM-USM), also known as the Human Research Ethics Committee USM (HREC), under protocol code USM/JEPeM/PP/24020160. The ethical review was conducted in accordance with the relevant principles, standards, and guidelines specified by the respective committees, including the CIOMS-WHO guidelines, Declaration of Helsinki, ICH Guidelines, GCP Standards, WHO standards, and applicable local regulations. Prior to participation, all participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw from the study without consequence. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews were conducted.

Consent for Publication

Informed consent was obtained from all participants for the publication of anonymised quotations and findings derived from their interviews. Participants were informed that their responses would be anonymised and used for scholarly publication. No real names identifiers are reported in this manuscript.

Data Availability

The qualitative interview data generated and analysed during the current study are not publicly available because they contain potentially identifiable information concerning political participants and were collected under conditions of confidentiality. The data may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical, confidentiality, and participant-consent restrictions.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Competing Interests

The author declares no competing interests.

References

1. Thompson DF. Electoral Simultaneity: Expressing Equal Respect. Democracy and Disenfranchisement. Volume 64. Blackwell Publishing Ltd; 2009. pp. 487–501. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444307337.ch4.
2. Devroe R. Voters' evaluation of (contra-)prototypical political candidates. An experimental test of the interaction of candidate gender and policy positions cues in Flanders (Belgium). Electoral Stud. 2020;68. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2020.102240.
3. Hoerst C, Drury J. Social norms misperception among voters in the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Analyses Social Issues Public Policy. 2021;21(1):312–46. https://doi.org/10.1111/asap.12269.
4. Dhont K, Van Hiel A, Hewstone M. Changing the ideological roots of prejudice: Longitudinal effects of ethnic intergroup contact on social dominance orientation. Group Processes Intergroup Relations. 2014;17(1):27–44. https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430213497064.
5. Muhtadi B, Muslim K. (2023, December 6). The Prabowo-Gibran pairing: Wise or foolish? (ISEAS Perspective No. 95/2023). ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2023-95-the-prabowo-gibran-pairing-wise-or-foolish-by-burhanuddin-muhtadi-and-kennedy-muslim/
6. Sidanius J, Pratto F. Social dominance: an intergroup theory of social hierarchy and oppression. Cambridge University Press; 1999.
7. Hefner RW. Islam and Citizenship in Indonesia: Democracy and the Quest for an Inclusive Public Ethics. Taylor and Francis; 2023. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781032629155.
8. Rakhmani I, Saraswati MS. Authoritarian Populism in Indonesia: The Role of the Political Campaign Industry in Engineering Consent and Coercion. J Curr Southeast Asian Affairs. 2021;40(3):436–60. https://doi.org/10.1177/18681034211027885.
9. Soderborg S, Muhtadi B. Resentment and Polarization in Indonesia. J East Asian Stud. 2023;23(3):439–67. https://doi.org/10.1017/jea.2023.17.

10. Rosyidin M. Promoting a home-grown democracy: Indonesia's approach of democracy promotion in the Bali democracy Forum (BDF). Asian J Political Sci. 2020;28(3):312–33. https://doi.org/10.1080/02185377.2020.1814361.
11. Ali I. (2024, April 25). President Jokowi Offers Full Support to Prabowo-Gibran's Transition to Power. Jakarta Globe. https://jakartaglobe.id/news/president-jokowi-offers-full-support-to-prabowogibrans-transition-to-power
12. Mashuri MF. (2024, February 05). Keberpihakan istana runcingkan disintegrasi bangsa. Jawa Pos. https://www.jawapos.com/opini/014125310/keberpihakan-istana-runcingkan-disintegrasi-bangsa
13. Muhid HK. (2024, November 12). Jokowi Terang-terangan Dukung Paslon di Pilpres 2024, Prabowo Blak-blakan Endorse Paslon di Pilkada 2024. Tempo. https://www.tempo.co/politik/jokowi-terang-terangan-dukung-paslon-di-pilpres-2024-prabowo-blak-blakan-endorse-paslon-di-pilkada-2024-1166949
14. Franco AB, Pound N. The foundations of Bolsonaro's support: Exploring the psychological underpinnings of political polarization in Brazil. J Community Appl Social Psychol. 2022;32(5):846–59. https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.2599.
15. Keethaponcalan SI. Electoral Politics in Sri Lanka: Presidential Elections, Manipulation and Democracy. Taylor Francis. 2022. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003304685.
16. Mietzner M. Flirting with Autocracy in Indonesia: Jokowi's Majoritarianism and its Democratic Legacy. J Curr Southeast Asian Affairs. 2025;44(3):1–19. https://doi.org/10.1177/18681034251318053.
17. Berenschot W. The Political Economy of Clientelism: A Comparative Study of Indonesia's Patronage Democracy. Comp Polit Stud. 2018;51(12):1563–93. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414018758756.
18. Dirty Vote. (2024, February 11). DIRTY VOTE - Full Movie (OFFICIAL Channel) [Video file]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRgLZ66NCmE
19. Bono SA, van der Schalk J, Manstead ASR. The Roles of Social Value Orientation and Anticipated Emotions in Intergroup Resource Allocation Decisions. Front Psychol. 2020;11(July):1–13. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01455.
20. Kramon E, Posner DN. Who Benefits from Distributive Politics? How the Outcome One Studies Affects the Answer One Gets. Perspect Politics. 2013;11(2):461–74. https://doi.org/DOI.
21. Deutsch M. A Theory of Cooperation and Competition. Hum Relat. 1949;2(2):129–52. https://doi.org/10.1177/001872674900200204.
22. Reicher SD, Haslam SA. (2015). Tyranny. In International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences: Second Edition (pp. 710–715). https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-097086-8.24101-9
23. Mietzner M. Money, power, and ideology: Political parties in post-authoritarian Indonesia. NUS; 2013.
24. Muhtadi B. Politik uang dan new normal dalam pemilu paska-orde baru. Integritas: Jurnal Antikorupsi. 2019;5(1):55–74. https://doi.org/10.32697/integritas.v5i1.413.

25. Muhtadi B. (2019). Vote Buying in Indonesia: The Mechanics of Electoral Bribery. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-6779-3
26. Creswell JW, Poth CN. Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches. 4th ed. SAGE; 2018.
27. Patton MQ. Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods. 4th ed. SAGE; 2015.
28. Guest G, Namey E, Taylor J, Eley N, McKenna K. Comparing focus groups and individual interviews: Findings from a randomized study. Int J Soc Res Methodol. 2020;23(6):693–708.
29. Saldaña J. The coding manual for qualitative researchers. SAGE; 2009.
30. Sidanius J, Cotterill S, Sheehy-Skeffington J, Kteily N, Carvacho H. (2017). Social Dominance Theory: Explorations in The Psychology of Oppression. In The Cambridge handbook of the psychology of prejudice. (pp. 149–187). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316161579.008
31. Tajfel H, Turner JC. An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In: Austin WG, Worchel S, editors. The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations. Brooks/Cole; 1979. pp. 33–47.
32. Stangor, C., Jhangiani, R., & Tarry, H. (2022). Obedience, Power, and Leadership.In Principles of Social Psychology-1st … opentextbc.ca. https://opentextbc.ca/socialpsychology/chapter/obedience-power-and-leadership/
33. Haslam SA, Reicher SD, Platow MJ. The new psychology of leadership: Identity, influence and power. The new psychology of leadership: Identity, influence and power. Psychology; 2011.
34. Malafaia C, Menezes I, Neves T. Living, doing, and learning from politics in a youth wing of a political party. Qualitative Rep. 2018;23(1):49–79. https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol23/iss1/5/.
35. Harnish RJ, Bridges KR, Gump JT. Predicting economic, social, and foreign policy conservatism: The role of right-wing authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, moral foundations orientation, and religious fundamentalism. Curr Psychol. 2018. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-016-9552-x.
36. Mason L. Political Identities. The Oxford handbook of political psychology. 3rd ed. Oxford University Press; 2023. pp. 886–917. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197541302.013.23.
37. Šerek J, Mužík M. Who does not protect democracy? Examining the role of right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation. Pers Indiv Differ. 2021;181. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2021.111027.
38. Van Bavel JJ, Pereira A. The Partisan Brain: An Identity-Based Model of Political Belief. Trends Cogn Sci. 2018;22(3):213–24. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2018.01.004.
39. Fuochi G, Voci A, Boin J, Miles H. Affective generalization from intergroup contact: Associations between contact-related and outgroup-related empathy, anxiety, and trust. Group Processes & Intergroup Relations; 2021. https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430220932662.
40. Ioannou, M., Ramiah, A. Al, & Hewstone, M. (2018). An experimental comparison of direct and indirect intergroup contact. Journal of Experimental Social … https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0022103116307235

41. Lammers J, Bukowski M, Potoczek A, Fleischmann A, Hofmann W. Disentangling the factors behind shifting voting intentions: The bandwagon effect reflects heuristic processing, while the underdog effect reflects fairness concerns. J Social Political Psychol. 2022;10(2):676–92. https://doi.org/10.5964/jspp.9241.
42. Unkelbach F, John M, Vogel V. Jumping on the Bandwagon: The Role of Voters' Social Class in Poll Effects in the Context of the 2021 German Federal Election. Politische Vierteljahresschrift. 2023;64(1):51–78. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11615-022-00417-3.
43. Tarmo CG, Issa FH. An analysis of groupthink and decision making in a collectivism culture: the case of a public organization in Tanzania. Int J Public Leadersh. 2022;18(1):15–29. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPL-08-2020-0072.
44. Hicken A. Clientelism. Annual Rev Political Sci. 2011;14:289–310. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.031908.220508.
45. Mares I, Young L. (2019). Conditionality & Coercion: Electoral clientelism in Eastern Europe. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198832775.001.0001
46. Diaz-Cayeros A, Estévez F, Magaloni B. (2016). The Political Logic of Poverty Relief: Electoral Strategies and Social Policy in Mexico. In the Political Logic of Poverty Relief: Electoral Strategies and Social Policy in Mexico. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316492710
47. Chenge DAA, Oigbochie AE. Cash and ballots: Unearthing the nexus between conditional cash transfers (CCTS) and voter's electoral behavior in Nigeria. Int J Political Sci Gov. 2023;5(2):94–100. https://doi.org/10.33545/26646021.2023.v5.i2b.262.
48. Mahkamah Konstitusi. (2024, April 22). Sidang Perkara Nomor 1/PHPU.PRES-XXII/2024 dan 2/PHPU.PRES-XXII/2024. Senin, 22 April 2024. [Video file]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KptRBr1qpKo