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# Pesantren as Spaces of Political Communication: Candidate Visits and First-Time Voters in Indonesia's 2024 Election

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# Abstract

This study aims to understand how direct encounters between presidential candidates and first-time voters in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren)* shape political perceptions in the context of Indonesia's 2024 presidential election. Amid the growing dominance of digitally mediated political communication, face-to-face interaction between political actors and citizens remains an important experience for first-time voters in recognizing candidates and understanding political leadership. This study employed a qualitative case study approach conducted in three *pesantren* in Surabaya that were visited by presidential candidates during the campaign period. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 12 *santri* as first-time voters and three *pesantren* administrators, supported by observation and documentation. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to understand *santri*'s experiences of political communication. The findings show that presidential candidates' visits to *pesantren* help first-time voters recognize candidates, build political proximity, and form perceptions of candidates' leadership character. These perceptions were shaped through interpersonal communication experiences, including how candidates interacted with *santri* and the *pesantren* community. The study highlights that direct political encounters remain an important element in shaping first-time voters' political perceptions, particularly within religious educational environments.


# Introduction

First-time voters constitute an important group in the dynamics of electoral democracy, particularly because they are at an early stage in forming political orientations and preferences (de Kadt, 2017; Harrison, 2023; Schäfer et al., 2020). In the context of Indonesia's 2024 presidential election, young voters represent a highly significant electoral segment. Data from the General Election Commission (KPU) indicate that approximately 55% of voters in the 2024 election are dominated by young generations, including millennials and Generation Z, making this group a key actor in determining the direction of national politics (Komisi Pemilihan Republik Indonesia, 2023). Given this strategic position, the first experience of voting makes the processes of recognizing candidates, evaluating character, and interpreting political communication important components of first-time voters' political decision-making.

Religion has a strong influence on the dynamics of Indonesian politics, including political mobilization, the formation of political identity, and electoral practices. Religious leaders often utilize social capital and public trust to influence political opinion, including through digital media and socio-religious networks (Rosana et al., 2025). In electoral contexts, religion is frequently used as a political instrument by both religious and nationalist actors to gain electoral support (Assyaukanie, 2019). Although Islamic-based political parties do not always dominate political power, religious political aspirations remain integrated into the national political system through various parties and social organizations (Tanuwidjaja, 2010). At the same time, the relationship between religion and politics in Indonesia is shaped by a long historical negotiation between religious identity, democracy, and the Pancasila state, resulting in a form of religious politics that is relatively moderate and pragmatic (Munhanif & Ihsan, 2023;

Thaha et al., 2024). Thus, religion functions not only as a system of belief but also as a source of social legitimacy, collective identity, and political symbolism in Indonesia's democratic life (Haryanto, 2020).

Religious educational environments such as *pesantren* provide a unique social context for the formation of first-time voters' political perceptions. In Indonesian politics, religion and politics are closely intertwined in political communication practices, political mobilization, and the formation of social identity. As religious educational institutions, *pesantren* function not only as spaces for religious learning but also as social environments that shape values, norms, and *santri* perspectives on social life, including their understanding of democracy and political participation (Kong, 2005; Roqib, 2021). In this context, visits by political candidates to *pesantren* represent a form of interpersonal political communication that allows first-time voters to experience direct interaction with political actors, which may influence how they recognize and evaluate candidates.

Research on first-time voters' perceptions of presidential candidates shows that political preferences are shaped by political campaigns, media exposure, and candidate characteristics. Studies indicate that election campaigns function as a medium of political socialization that shapes first-time voters' preferences (Hermawan et al., 2020). Meanwhile, media coverage and political debates can reinforce voters' perceptions of candidate image (Baboš & Világi, 2018; Warner et al., 2011). In addition, personal traits such as honesty, competence, and reliability play an important role in shaping trust and voting preferences among first-time voters (Shockley-Zalabak et al., 2019; Warner et al., 2011). Other research also shows that political experience and voter knowledge influence the extent to which political campaigns shape voters' perceptions of candidates (Gherghina & Rusu, 2021).

Although studies on political communication and first-time voters have expanded, most research continues to focus on media-driven campaigns, digital political communication, and electoral persuasion in shaping young voters' political understanding. Studies examining direct political encounters between candidates and first-time voters remain relatively limited, particularly within socio-religious environments such as *pesantren*. Existing discussions of political proximity also tend to emphasize media visibility, campaign communication, or symbolic representation, while overlooking how proximity may be constructed through interpersonal interaction in religious educational spaces. In the context of Indonesia's 2024 presidential election, presidential candidate visits to *pesantren* provide an important setting for understanding how political proximity is socially constructed through direct encounters, symbolic engagement, and socio-religious interaction. Therefore, this study contributes to political communication literature by examining how presidential candidate visits to *pesantren* function as forms of interpersonal political communication that construct political proximity between candidates and first-time voters.

This study examines how presidential candidate visits to *pesantren* function as forms of interpersonal political communication that construct political proximity between candidates and first-time voters during Indonesia's 2024 presidential election. Specifically, the study explores how direct encounters within *pesantren* environments create experiences of social closeness, symbolic engagement, and

candidate recognition among *santri* as first-time voters. By focusing on candidate visits in socio-religious spaces, this study seeks to explain how political proximity is constructed through face-to-face interaction beyond media-mediated political communication.

## Theoretical Framework

# Political Proximity

Political proximity is an important concept in political communication that refers to the perceived closeness between political actors and the public, which can influence political attitudes, public trust, and electoral support (Baugut et al., 2017; Sheafer et al., 2014; Splendore & Curini, 2020). Political proximity is not limited to geographical distance or physical interaction, but also includes symbolic, cognitive, and emotional dimensions that are formed through political communication and voters' social experiences (Kellerman, 2022; Wallace et al., 2014). In modern political campaigns, building a perception of closeness with the public has become an important strategy for candidates to increase social legitimacy and develop trust-based relationships with voters (Lilleker, 2014).

The first dimension of political proximity is physical and symbolic proximity (Wiseman, 2016). The presence of candidates in social spaces such as local communities, educational institutions, or religious groups can create the perception that candidates understand voters' social realities and care about community life (Hill Collins, 2010; Susila et al., 2020). The physical presence of candidates is often interpreted as a form of direct engagement with the public, strengthening their image as approachable and people-oriented leaders (Enríquez Cruz & Gómez Navas, 2021). At the same time, symbolic proximity is constructed through political communication that emphasizes shared values, social identity, and common interests between candidates and voters, thereby creating a sense of social and political connectedness (Kreiss et al., 2020).

Political proximity also includes cognitive and emotional dimensions (Cortina, 2024; Krueger & Pedraza, 2018). Cognitive proximity emerges when voters perceive that candidates share similar political views, moral values, or social backgrounds (Dean & Croft, 2009; Falkowski & Cwalina, 2012). This perceived value alignment can increase acceptance of candidates' political messages. Emotional proximity, meanwhile, develops through personal and human-centered communication experiences, such as direct interaction, personal storytelling, or political personal branding that highlights candidates' human qualities (E Silva & Leandro, 2026). Emotional proximity plays an important role in building political trust, particularly among voters who have not yet developed strong political orientations (Hooghe & Kern, 2013).

Contemporary political communication developments indicate that the demand for closeness between political actors and the public continues to grow, especially with the expansion of communication technologies that enable more direct interaction between candidates and citizens. In this context, political proximity becomes a communication strategy aimed at reducing representational distance

between political actors and citizens while strengthening perceptions of candidate authenticity (Innerarity, 2015). Visual media, political storytelling, and campaign communication practices based on social experience have become important tools in building this sense of proximity (Pype, 2011). A proximity-based approach in politics also suggests that perceived closeness can influence how voters evaluate candidate credibility and increase the likelihood of political support (Huber, 2020).

In the context of this study, political proximity is understood as a perception of closeness formed through presidential candidates' visits to *pesantren* as socio-religious spaces. Direct interaction between candidates and first-time voters creates personal and symbolic political communication experiences that may influence how first-time voters understand candidate character, evaluate candidates' concern for society, and build political trust. For first-time voters who are still in the early stages of political socialization, such experiences of proximity can become an important source in shaping political perceptions of presidential candidates in Indonesia's 2024 presidential election.

## Political Socialization

Political socialization refers to a lifelong process of social and political learning through which individuals acquire political values, attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors through interaction with their social environment. This process begins in childhood and continues to develop through various agents of socialization such as family, education, peer groups, media, and other social institutions (McDevitt, 2015; Regalia, 2016). Through political socialization, individuals construct political identities, understand political systems, and develop orientations toward political participation and democracy (Hansen & Fieldhouse, 2025).

In the context of first-time voters, the process of political socialization becomes particularly important because they are at an early stage of forming political understanding and experiencing electoral participation for the first time. Educational environments, particularly schools and religious educational institutions, function as spaces of both formal and informal political socialization that introduce democratic values, political participation, and civic responsibility (Gershtenson et al., 2013; Hahn & Alviar-Martin, 2010). Political discussions within educational settings can increase political interest and readiness to participate in democratic processes (Shala & Grajcevci, 2018). In addition, social networks and peer groups play a role in shaping political attitudes during adolescence and early adulthood, which later influence political behavior (Settle et al., 2011).

In this study, political socialization is understood as the process through which first-time voters' political perceptions are formed within the *pesantren* environment as a religious and social educational institution. *Pesantren* function not only as spaces for religious learning but also as environments for social and democratic value formation that shape how *santri* understand politics and electoral participation. Direct communication experiences with presidential candidates through visits to *pesantren* become part of the political socialization process that may strengthen perceptions of political proximity, trust, and candidate evaluation. Thus, political socialization helps explain how direct interaction within

socio-religious spaces can influence the formation of first-time voters' political perceptions in Indonesia's 2024 presidential election.

## Impression Formation Theory

Impression Formation Theory explains how individuals develop judgments and impressions of others through cognitive and social processes that involve interpreting information, interaction experiences, and observations of behavior and personal characteristics. The process of impression formation is dynamic, as individuals continuously update their evaluations based on new social experiences and information obtained from their environment (Amodio, 2025). In social interaction, impressions of others are formed through a combination of verbal and nonverbal information, behavioral observation, and interpretations of moral character and personality (Brambilla et al., 2019; Prager et al., 2018).

Impression formation is also influenced by the interaction context and by the information individuals perceive as relevant. Information about moral traits, competence, and social warmth plays an important role in shaping social perception and interpersonal trust (Brannon et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2025). In addition, direct interaction experiences allow individuals to construct what are known as person models, or mental representations of a person's character and personality that serve as a basis for evaluating their behavior in the future (Mohr & Kenny, 2006). In this process, a negativity bias may occur, in which negative information often has a stronger influence than positive information in updating impressions of others (Brambilla et al., 2019).

In the context of political communication, impression formation is important for understanding how voters construct perceptions of political candidates. Direct interaction between candidates and citizens allows voters to observe candidates' behavior firsthand, including communication style, nonverbal expression, and responses to social situations. These face-to-face communication experiences can shape impressions of candidate character, such as social warmth, closeness to the public, and leadership competence. Compared with media-mediated information, direct interaction experiences often provide a stronger foundation for forming social perceptions of political actors (Quadflieg & Penton-Voak, 2017).

In this study, Impression Formation Theory is used to explain how first-time voters in *pesantren* environments construct perceptions of presidential candidates after experiencing direct interaction through candidate visits. These encounters become moments of impression formation that allow first-time voters to interpret candidate character based on their communication experiences, which in turn influence their political perceptions and evaluations of candidates in Indonesia's 2024 presidential election.

## Method

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design to understand how direct interaction between presidential candidates and first-time voters in *pesantren* environments shapes political perceptions in the context of Indonesia's 2024 presidential election. A case study approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore political communication phenomena in depth within a specific social context, namely *pesantren* as religious and social educational spaces that play a role in the political socialization of first-time voters (Yin, 2018). Through this approach, the study seeks to understand the meaning of presidential candidates' presence in *pesantren* and how these experiences are interpreted by *santri* as first-time voters.

This study involved 15 participants consisting of 12 *santri* as first-time voters and three *pesantren* administrators (see Table 1). Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their involvement in the *pesantren* environment and their relevance to the research focus (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025). The *santri* participants were between 17 and 21 years old, had the right to vote in the 2024 election, and had participated in *pesantren* educational activities for at least two years. Meanwhile, the ustadz who participated in the study were figures who play important roles in shaping moral values, social awareness, and civic understanding among *santri*.

The study was conducted in three *pesantren* in Surabaya, East Java. The research locations were selected purposively by considering presidential candidates' visits to each *pesantren* as part of direct political communication with *santri* communities during the campaign period of Indonesia's 2024 presidential election. *Pesantren* At-Tauhid was visited by Anies Baswedan (presidential candidate number 1), *Pesantren* Miftachus Sunnah was visited by Prabowo Subianto (presidential candidate number 2), and *Pesantren* Raudhotul Muta'allimin was visited by Ganjar Pranowo (presidential candidate number 3). The three *pesantren* were selected not solely because they were visited by presidential candidates, but because these visits provided meaningful socio-religious contexts for examining how political proximity was constructed through direct encounters between candidates and first-time voters. Each *pesantren* represented a distinct interactional setting in which *santri* experienced face-to-face political communication during the campaign period. The comparative selection of *pesantren* associated with different presidential candidates also enabled the study to explore similarities and variations in how political proximity was interpreted across socio-religious environments.

**Tabel 1. Information About Participants.**

| Informant Code | Age | Status | *Pesantren* Origin |
|---|---|---|---|
| Informant 1 | 17 | *Santri* | At-Tauhid |
| Informant 2 | 17 | *Santri* | At-Tauhid |
| Informant 3 | 17 | *Santri* | At-Tauhid |
| Informant 4 | 17 | *Santri* | At-Tauhid |
| Informant 5 | 38 | *Pesantren* administrator | At-Tauhid |
| Informant 6 | 18 | *Santri* | Miftachus Sunnah |
| Informant 7 | 19 | *Santri* | Miftachus Sunnah |
| Informant 8 | 17 | *Santri* | Miftachus Sunnah |
| Informant 9 | 17 | *Santri* | Miftachus Sunnah |
| Informant 10 | 32 | *Pesantren* administrator | Miftachus Sunnah |
| Informant 11 | 17 | *Santri* | Raudhotul Muta'alimin |
| Informant 12 | 17 | *Santri* | Raudhotul Muta'alimin |
| Informant 13 | 19 | *Santri* | Raudhotul Muta'alimin |
| Informant 14 | 17 | *Santri* | Raudhotul Muta'alimin |
| Informant 15 | 42 | *Pesantren* administrator | Raudhotul Muta'alimin |

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis within the case study approach. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and repeatedly reviewed to achieve familiarity with participants' experiences and the broader *pesantren* context. The analysis began with initial open coding to identify recurring patterns related to candidate visits, interpersonal interaction, and political proximity. Codes with conceptual similarities were then grouped into broader thematic categories, including candidate recognition, symbolic closeness, and interpersonal engagement. The themes were continuously refined through iterative comparison across participants and *pesantren* contexts to maintain analytical consistency and contextual interpretation. This iterative analytical process enabled the researchers to interpret how political proximity was socially constructed through direct political encounters during Indonesia's 2024 presidential election (Clarke & Braun, 2014).

Research rigor was strengthened through triangulation of interview data, field observations, and documentation related to presidential candidate visits. Repeated transcript review and iterative comparison across cases were also conducted to maintain consistency in coding and interpretation. In addition, the researchers engaged in analytical reflection throughout the research process to reduce overly subjective interpretation and maintain contextual sensitivity toward participants' experiences within *pesantren* environments (Yin, 2018).

## Result

# Direct Encounters and Candidate Recognition

The findings show that presidential candidate visits to *pesantren* functioned as important moments of political recognition among first-time voters. For many *santri*, direct encounters with presidential candidates provided a different experience from media exposure, as candidates were no longer perceived only as distant political figures represented through television, banners, or social media content. Instead, candidate visits created opportunities for *santri* to observe political actors directly within the social environment of *pesantren*.

Several participants explained that candidate visits became their first direct experience of encountering national political figures. This experience encouraged *santri* to seek broader political information and compare candidates beyond the immediate visit itself. A *santri* from *Pesantren* At-Tauhid stated:

“Mr. Anies came here once, so I got to know him… but because his visit was very crowded, my friends and I became curious and searched on TikTok and Instagram, and then all the presidential candidates appeared, so I learned about Mr. Prabowo and Mr. Ganjar.” (Informant 2)

This finding indicates that direct encounters with candidates did not merely strengthen recognition toward a single political figure, but also stimulated broader political curiosity among first-time voters. Candidate visits acted as an entry point through which *santri* began exploring political information more actively across digital platforms. In this sense, interpersonal political communication within *pesantren* environments interacted with media exposure rather than replacing it entirely.

Similar experiences emerged in *Pesantren* Miftachus Sunnah, where participants emphasized that direct encounters created stronger recognition compared to media-mediated communication. One *santri* explained:

“The one I know directly is Mr. Prabowo, because he visited this *pesantren*… so I know him firsthand.” (Informant 6)

Likewise, *santri* from *Pesantren* Raudhotul Muta’allimin distinguished between candidates encountered through media and candidates experienced through direct interaction:

“Mr. Ganjar came here before, the visit was very lively… I know Mr. Prabowo and Mr. Anies from banners and social media.” (Informant 11)

These accounts suggest that direct encounters produced forms of political recognition that were perceived as more concrete and socially meaningful than mediated exposure alone. Through physical presence within *pesantren* spaces, candidates became recognizable not only as political actors but also as individuals interacting within the *santri* community.

Beyond recognition, direct encounters also enabled *santri* to form initial interpretations of candidate character through observation of communication style and interpersonal behavior. One participant explained:

“Since Mr. Ganjar came here, I feel like I know his character directly, different from other candidates I only see on social media.” (Informant 13)

This finding demonstrates that candidate recognition among first-time voters was constructed through interactional experiences that combined observation, social atmosphere, and interpersonal communication within *pesantren* settings. Direct encounters therefore functioned not only as moments of political visibility, but also as communicative experiences that reduced symbolic distance between presidential candidates and first-time voters during Indonesia’s 2024 presidential election.

## Constructing Political Proximity Through Candidate Visits

The findings further show that candidate recognition developed into forms of political proximity through direct interaction within *pesantren* environments. Presidential candidate visits were interpreted by *santri* not merely as campaign activities, but as expressions of social closeness, symbolic recognition, and candidates’ willingness to engage directly with *pesantren* communities. Through these encounters, *santri* perceived candidates as more socially approachable and attentive to the lives of ordinary people, particularly within religious educational spaces.

Several participants interpreted candidate visits as signs that presidential candidates respected *pesantren* communities and attempted to build closer relationships with *santri*. An informant from *Pesantren* Miftachus Sunnah explained:

“In my opinion, he came to the *pesantren* to maintain social ties and to get to know *santri* more closely.” (Informant 7)

This statement suggests that political proximity was constructed not only through physical presence, but also through symbolic meanings attached to the visit itself. The act of visiting *pesantren* was interpreted as a form of acknowledgment toward *santri* communities, creating impressions of interpersonal attentiveness and social engagement.

A similar interpretation emerged in *Pesantren* At-Tauhid, where candidate presence was associated with feelings of social closeness:

“When a candidate comes directly to the *pesantren*, it feels closer because we can see him in person.” (Informant 3)

Direct encounters enabled *santri* to experience forms of proximity that differed from communication mediated through television or social media. Physical interaction within *pesantren* spaces reduced the

perceived distance between political actors and first-time voters, allowing candidates to appear more accessible and relatable.

In *Pesantren* Raudhotul Muta'allimin, candidate visits were also interpreted symbolically as recognition toward *pesantren* communities themselves. One participant stated: "For me, it shows that *pesantren* are also being acknowledged." (Informant 12). This finding indicates that political proximity in *pesantren* contexts was constructed not only at the interpersonal level between candidates and *santri*, but also through symbolic engagement with *pesantren* as socio-religious institutions. Candidate visits therefore carried broader social meanings related to recognition, respect, and inclusion within national political life.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that political proximity among first-time voters emerged through interactional experiences situated within *pesantren* environments. Proximity was constructed not merely through campaign messages or political promises, but through direct encounters that enabled *santri* to interpret candidates as socially present, approachable, and symbolically connected to *pesantren* communities during Indonesia's 2024 presidential election.

## Interpersonal Interaction and Symbolic Engagement

Direct interaction within *pesantren* environments enabled *santri* to interpret presidential candidates through everyday interpersonal experiences. Rather than relying solely on media representations, first-time voters evaluated candidates based on communication style, social behavior, and interactional attitudes observed during candidate visits. These encounters became important communicative moments through which *santri* interpreted whether candidates appeared socially approachable, respectful, and attentive toward *pesantren* communities (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1 illustrates the process through which direct encounters between presidential candidates and santri enabled first-time voters to construct political proximity within *pesantren* environments. Through interpersonal observation, symbolic engagement, and interactional evaluation during candidate visits, *santri* interpreted candidates' communication style, social behavior, and leadership character, which subsequently shaped their understanding of political leadership and social closeness.

Several participants explained that candidates' communication styles influenced how they interpreted candidates' closeness to ordinary people. A *santri* from *Pesantren* At-Tauhid stated:

"When he came, the way he spoke was relaxed and pleasant to listen to, so he seemed friendly and close to the *santri*." (Informant 1)

This interaction suggests that political proximity was constructed not only through candidates' physical presence, but also through communicative cues that created impressions of familiarity and interpersonal accessibility. The way candidates spoke and interacted became an important symbolic element through

which *santri* interpreted whether candidates were socially connected to younger voters within *pesantren* environments.

Informants also emphasized candidates' attitudes during interactions with *santri* and *pesantren* administrators. A *santri* from *Pesantren* Miftachus Sunnah explained:

"He looked firm but still polite when speaking with the ustadz and *santri*, so he appeared like a leader." (Informant 8)

This statement indicates that political proximity in *pesantren* contexts was interpreted relationally through culturally valued forms of interaction, including politeness, respectfulness, and appropriate social conduct. Rather than evaluating candidates solely through political programs or campaign messages, *santri* interpreted closeness through observable interpersonal behavior during face-to-face encounters.

Direct interaction also enabled *santri* to compare mediated political representation with personal observation. A participant from *Pesantren* Raudhotul Muta'allimin stated:

"Seeing them directly feels different, because we can observe their attitude, not only from the news." (Informant 14)

Similarly, another participant explained:

"After meeting him in person, it feels like I understand what kind of person he is." (Informant 13)

These experiences demonstrate that direct encounters provided forms of symbolic engagement that could not be fully obtained through media-mediated political communication. Through observation of candidates' tone of speech, interactional behavior, and responsiveness within *pesantren* spaces, *santri* developed impressions that reduced symbolic distance between political actors and first-time voters.

Political proximity in *pesantren* environments emerged through interactional experiences occurring during candidate visits. Communication style, politeness, attentiveness, and willingness to engage directly with *santri* became important symbolic resources through which candidates were interpreted as socially approachable figures. In this context, political proximity was constructed not merely through campaign visibility, but through interpersonal experiences that connected presidential candidates with the socio-religious environment of *pesantren* during Indonesia's 2024 presidential election.

# Integration and Comparison of Candidate Perceptions across Three Pesantren

Political proximity emerged across all three *pesantren* contexts, although the forms of closeness interpreted by *santri* varied according to candidates' interactional styles and the meanings attached to their visits (see Table 2). Direct encounters enabled first-time voters to compare presidential candidates

not only through campaign narratives or media representation, but also through interpersonal experiences observed during visits to *pesantren* environments. Through these encounters, *santri* interpreted candidates relationally based on communication style, social behavior, and symbolic engagement with *pesantren* communities.

Table 2
Comparison of Presidential Candidate Perceptions across Three *Pesantren*

| ***Pesantren*** | **Presidential Candidate** | **Dominant *Santri* Perception** | **Basis of Interpretation** |
|---|---|---|---|
| At-Tauhid | Anies Baswedan (1) | Friendly and communicative | Conversational interaction with *santri* |
| Miftachus Sunnah | Prabowo Subianto (2) | Firm and authoritative | Leadership demeanor and interactional attitude |
| Raudhotul Muta'allimin | Ganjar Pranowo (3) | Modest and close to the public | Willingness to engage directly with *santri* |
| Source: Researcher's analysis (2025) | | | |

At *Pesantren* At-Tauhid, political proximity was interpreted through communicative informality and conversational interaction between the candidate and *santri*. Participants emphasized that the candidate's relaxed communication style created impressions of familiarity and social accessibility. One *santri* explained:

"When he came to the *pesantren*, he greeted the *santri* and spoke casually, so it felt close." (Informant 3)

This interactional style allowed *santri* to interpret political proximity as openness and communicative closeness, particularly toward younger voters within *pesantren* spaces.

In *Pesantren* Miftachus Sunnah, political proximity was interpreted differently. Rather than emerging through conversational informality, closeness was associated with firmness, politeness, and leadership demeanor during interaction with *santri* and *pesantren* administrators. One participant stated:

"When he spoke with the ustadz and *santri*, he appeared firm but still polite." (Informant 8)

This finding suggests that political proximity in this context was constructed through culturally valued forms of respectful and authoritative interaction. Candidates were interpreted as socially close not because they appeared informal, but because they demonstrated attitudes considered appropriate within *pesantren* culture.

Meanwhile, in *Pesantren* Raudhotul Muta'allimin, political proximity was associated with simplicity and willingness to engage directly with *santri* in everyday social settings. One participant explained:

"Mr. Ganjar looked modest when he came to the *pesantren* and was willing to interact with *santri*." (Informant 14)

This interaction created impressions of humility and social accessibility, which strengthened perceptions of closeness between candidates and *pesantren* communities.

Direct encounters also enabled *santri* to compare candidates more critically based on their interactional experiences. As one participant stated:

“Seeing them directly makes it possible to compare them with other candidates.” (Informant 13)

These findings indicate that political proximity was not constructed uniformly across the three *pesantren* contexts. Although all candidate visits generated perceptions of social closeness, the meanings attached to proximity differed according to communication style, symbolic interaction, and the socio-cultural atmosphere within each *pesantren* environment. In At-Tauhid, the relatively informal interactional atmosphere allowed communicative and conversational styles to be interpreted positively as forms of social closeness. In Miftachus Sunnah, where respectfulness and leadership demeanor were strongly emphasized, santri interpreted firmness and politeness as indicators of appropriate leadership character. Meanwhile, in Raudhotul Muta’allimin, simplicity and willingness to interact directly with santri were interpreted as important forms of symbolic accessibility. These variations suggest that political proximity emerged as a relational and context-dependent process shaped not only through direct interaction between presidential candidates and first-time voters, but also through the institutional culture and interactional expectations embedded within each *pesantren* environment during Indonesia’s 2024 presidential election.

## Discussion

Direct encounters between presidential candidates and first-time voters in *pesantren* environments demonstrate that political proximity is constructed not merely through campaign visibility or media exposure, but through interpersonal interaction situated within socio-religious spaces. Unlike media-mediated political communication, face-to-face encounters allow *santri* to interpret candidates through direct social experiences, including communication style, interactional behavior, and symbolic engagement within *pesantren* communities. In this context, presidential candidate visits function not only as campaign activities but also as communicative processes that reduce symbolic distance between political actors and first-time voters through socially meaningful interaction (Denton Jr et al., 2023; Fariza et al., 2026).

These findings extend discussions of political proximity by showing that proximity in *pesantren* contexts is interpreted relationally through socio-cultural and moral interaction. Existing studies generally explain political proximity through physical presence, campaign communication, and symbolic representation (Cortina, 2024; Sheafer et al., 2014). However, this study suggests that proximity within *pesantren* environments is also constructed through culturally valued forms of engagement, such as politeness, attentiveness, humility, and respect toward *santri* communities. The presence of presidential candidates within *pesantren* therefore creates not only physical closeness, but also symbolic recognition that positions candidates as socially approachable figures within religious educational spaces.

The findings also demonstrate that interpersonal communication experiences shape how first-time voters interpret political actors through impression formation processes occurring during direct encounters (Amodio, 2025; Yang et al., 2025). *Santri* evaluated candidates not solely through campaign narratives or media representation, but through observable communicative cues, including tone of speech, interactional attitude, and responsiveness during visits. Through these encounters, candidates became socially recognizable figures whose character could be interpreted more personally compared to mediated political communication. This finding supports arguments that interpersonal communication provides important social contexts through which citizens interpret political actors and leadership characteristics (Gilkerson & Southwell, 2015, 2016).

The *pesantren* environment also played an important role in shaping how political proximity was interpreted by first-time voters. As socio-religious educational spaces, *pesantren* contain social and moral values that influence how *santri* evaluate communication, leadership, and interpersonal behavior. In this context, political socialization occurred not only through formal education or media exposure, but also through direct interaction with political actors (Hansen & Fieldhouse, 2025; McDevitt, 2015). Presidential candidate visits introduced political experiences that enabled *santri* to connect political leadership with everyday social interaction within religious community settings. Thus, *pesantren* functioned not only as educational institutions but also as interactional spaces where political communication, moral values, and first-time voters' social experiences intersected.

From a comparative perspective, political proximity across the three *pesantren* contexts emerged through relatively similar interactional processes, although the meanings attached to closeness varied according to candidates' communication styles and symbolic engagement. In At-Tauhid, proximity was interpreted through communicative informality and conversational interaction. In Miftachus Sunnah, proximity emerged through respectful and authoritative demeanor, while in Raudhotul Muta'allimin closeness was associated with simplicity and social accessibility. These variations indicate that political proximity is not interpreted uniformly, but relationally according to socio-cultural expectations within each *pesantren* environment. Nevertheless, all three contexts demonstrate that face-to-face political communication remains important in constructing relationships between political actors and first-time voters (Klinger et al., 2023; Okour & Alhammad, 2025).

Although this study emphasizes the significance of direct encounters, political interpretations among *santri* were not formed solely through candidate visits. Media exposure, prior political familiarity, and broader campaign dynamics also contributed to how first-time voters interpreted presidential candidates. Direct interaction therefore operated alongside digital and media-mediated political communication rather than replacing it entirely. Within the context of Indonesia's increasingly mediatized democracy, these findings suggest that interpersonal political communication remains significant, particularly within socio-religious environments where symbolic interaction and social recognition strongly shape how political actors are understood by first-time voters.

# Conclusion

This study suggests that political proximity between presidential candidates and first-time voters within the *pesantren* contexts examined in this research was constructed through direct interpersonal encounters situated in socio-religious environments. Presidential candidate visits to *pesantren* were interpreted not merely as campaign activities, but as communicative experiences that enabled *santri* to recognize and interpret candidates through communication style, interactional behavior, and symbolic engagement within *pesantren* communities. Through face-to-face encounters, candidates became more socially approachable figures whose closeness was interpreted through interpersonal and socio-cultural interaction rather than solely through media representation. These findings indicate that, for several first-time voters in the *pesantren* contexts examined in this study, direct political encounters remained meaningful in shaping how political actors were recognized and interpreted amid the increasing dominance of digitally mediated political communication.

The study also highlights the role of *pesantren* as socio-religious spaces where political socialization, moral values, and democratic experiences intersect. Political proximity in these contexts emerged not only through candidates' physical presence, but also through symbolic forms of recognition shaped by politeness, attentiveness, humility, and interpersonal engagement with *santri* communities. In addition, the findings suggest that political proximity was interpreted relationally according to the socio-cultural atmosphere and interactional expectations embedded within each *pesantren* environment. These findings contribute to discussions of political proximity by showing that closeness between political actors and first-time voters may be constructed through socially meaningful interaction within religious educational spaces.

Nevertheless, this study remains limited to three *pesantren* in Surabaya and should therefore be understood as context-specific rather than broadly generalizable to all first-time voters or *pesantren* communities in Indonesia. The interactional dynamics observed in this study may differ across other socio-cultural and educational settings. Furthermore, *santri* interpretations of presidential candidates were likely influenced not only by direct encounters, but also by media exposure, prior political familiarity, and broader campaign dynamics. Future research may therefore explore how political proximity is constructed across different regional, cultural, and educational contexts, as well as examine the relationship between digitally mediated political communication and face-to-face political interaction among young voters.

## Declarations

# Ethical Approval

This study was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Telkom University, Indonesia. All research procedures were conducted in accordance with the ethical principles for research involving human participants.

**Consent to Participate**

Informed consent to participate in the study was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and all participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the research procedures, and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences.

**Declaration of Competing Interest**

The author declares that there are no competing interests, financial, professional, or personal, that could have influenced the work reported in this study.

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# Author Contribution

Dedi Kurnia Syah Putra: Conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, data curation, visualization, project administration, writing—original draft, and writing—review and editing. Nifta Alifatul Khotijah: Investigation, data curation, and writing—review and editing. Muhammad Rio Fariza: Supervision and writing—review and editing. R. Yogie Prawira: Supervision and writing—review and editing.

# Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. To protect participants' privacy and confidentiality, de-identified survey data may be shared upon reasonable request, while interview transcripts are not publicly available because they contain information that could potentially identify participants.

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# Figures

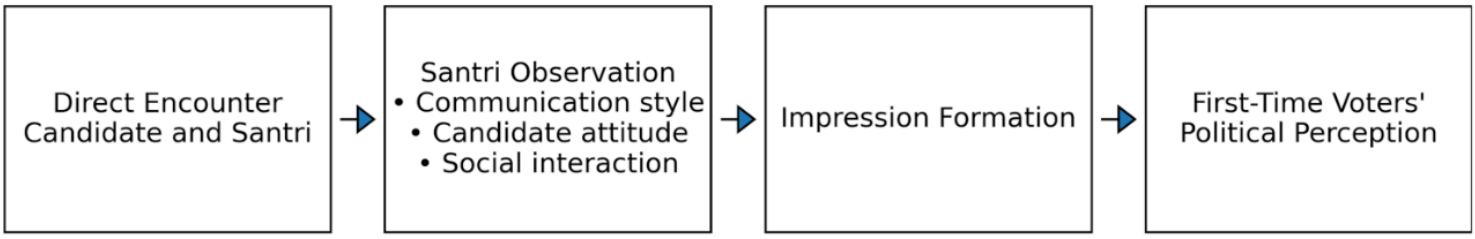


**Figure 1**

Impression formation process through direct political encounter