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Electoral Abstention among Student Activists in Pekanbaru as Political Protest amid Low Political Trust in the 2024 Indonesian Election

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Abstract

This study examines whether electoral abstention (*golput*) among student activists in Pekanbaru during Indonesia's 2024 elections can be understood solely as political apathy. Using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, it combines a questionnaire (N = 75; 60 voters and 15 non-voters) with interviews with six non-voting informants (I1–I6). Mann-Whitney tests show that non-voters report markedly lower political trust than voters (2.06 vs 2.92; p = 0.001, significant after Bonferroni correction) and lower external political efficacy (3.08 vs 3.58; p = 0.037, not significant after correction), while internal efficacy (3.71 vs 3.86), political apathy (2.10 vs 2.23), and political dissatisfaction (3.84 vs 3.64) do not differ significantly. Non-voters are thus no more apathetic than voters. Given the small non-probability sample, these results are read as associations rather than evidence of causal effects. The interviews help explain these patterns: informants describe distrust grounded in their own perceptions of electoral irregularities, a paradox in which votes are considered important yet ineffective, and passivity ("*malas*", "*nggak peduli*") that follows disappointment rather than disinterest. Abstention in this sample takes several forms: technical or administrative, mixed, deliberate, and protest-oriented. The study argues that *golput* here is motivationally diverse, and that some, but not all, non-voters display a protest orientation or protest motive. The findings apply only to the respondents and informants studied and cannot be generalised to student activists in Pekanbaru.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Elections remain the principal institutionalised channel through which citizens in electoral democracies express their political preferences and confer legitimacy on those who govern (Bourdin and Tai 2022). In a working meeting with Commission II of the House of Representatives (DPR RI) on 25 March 2024, the Chair of the General Elections Commission (KPU RI), Hasyim Asy'ari, reported that national voter turnout in the 2024 presidential election reached 81.78%, slightly down from 81.97% in the 2019 presidential election, while turnout in the 2024 legislative election (Pileg) was recorded at 81.42%, also down from 81.69% in 2019 (Komisi Pemilihan Umum 2024). At first glance, these figures suggest a high-participation and relatively stable democracy. However, aggregate turnout is a blunt instrument: it reports only how many citizens voted, without saying anything about the composition or the motivations of those who did not. This is particularly relevant for young voters: according to the KPU's determination of the 2024 Permanent Voter List (DPT), Generation Z numbers 46,800,161 people, or about 22.85% of the 204,807,222 registered voters (KPU 2023), and, together with the millennial generation, accounts for more than half of all registered voters. Student activists are a distinct segment of this very large cohort, one whose members may have direct experience of campus organising and street-level protest. A cohort of this size cannot be treated as monolithic; nor, as the argument of this study goes, can the student activists within it, or the non-voters among them.

Disciplinarily, this study is positioned within political science, specifically in the field of political behaviour and, more narrowly, electoral behaviour as it relates to political participation and electoral participation. Within this framework, voting and electoral abstention (*golput*) are understood as two possible outcomes of the same process of electoral participation. However, contemporary studies of political behaviour increasingly question the assumption that non-voting automatically reflects political apathy—a long-standing and intuitively appealing assumption that continues to shape public discourse as well as part of the scholarly literature on *golput* in Indonesia (Adan et al. 2024; Nur et al. 2026). On this view, non-voting is not a single behaviour but an umbrella for a set of behaviours with different antecedents (the typology is set out in Section 2.1).

In Indonesia, the empirical picture of young voters, including Generation Z, is likewise varied and does not confirm a single narrative. Alfaruqy (2025) found that most of the Generation Z respondents surveyed in Central Java still voted in the 2024 presidential election, even though they criticised the Constitutional Court's ruling, candidate neutrality, and the manoeuvres of political elites, which shows that political dissatisfaction and electoral participation are not necessarily mutually exclusive for many young voters. Other studies document lower engagement related to particular organisational or informational contexts, or note that news exposure shapes political attitudes without treating abstention as the main variable under study (Wijayanti et al. 2024). Fernando et al. (2024) provide the empirical contribution closest to the topic of this study: they specifically examine the abstention preferences of urban students in Indonesia's 2024 election. This contribution is important because it isolates abstainers as a distinct object of study; however, that study does not explicitly distinguish the motives for abstention (apathetic, technical, or protest) nor integrate the frameworks of political trust and political efficacy as explanatory factors a space that the present study seeks to fill, not as a correction of that study's shortcomings but as a continuation that starts from the point already reached. Rahmah and Fauzi (2024) offer a qualitative account of how Indonesian students construct the meaning of becoming a *golput* voter, valuable qualitative evidence that has not yet been integrated with the trust–efficacy framework proposed here. Two recent systematic literature reviews one mapping political apathy among Generation Z in Indonesia (Nur et al. 2026) and the other mapping studies of student *golput* specifically (Fikrotunnisa et al. 2026), show that political apathy and political protest are generally still discussed as separate phenomena in the Indonesian *golput* literature rather than integrated into a single analytical model.

Pekanbaru offers a relevant empirical context for examining this issue. Cahyani and Wardana (2026) report that the 2024 Riau gubernatorial election recorded a provincial turnout of 58%, down from 61.31% in 2018, and a non-participation rate of 53.77% in Pekanbaru for that election. Based on Decision of the Pekanbaru City General Elections Commission No. 864 of 2024 concerning the Determination of the Results of the 2024 Pekanbaru Mayor and Deputy Mayor Election, determined in an open plenary meeting on 4 December 2024 on the basis of the Model D.Hasil Kabko-KWK recapitulation, turnout in the 2024 Pekanbaru mayoral election was recorded at 45.99% (363,786 of 791,034 voters registered in the 2024 regional election DPT), so that non-participation was approximately 54.01% (KPU Kota Pekanbaru 2024). This 2024 regional election DPT differs from the DPT of the 2024 presidential and legislative

elections of 771,497 voters (KPU Provinsi Riau 2023) because the two were determined at different voter-list updating dates. The mayoral non-participation figure is close to, but not identical to, the figure reported by Cahyani and Wardana (2026) for the Riau gubernatorial election, because the two elections differ in object even though they were held simultaneously on 27 November 2024. This relatively low and declining participation in this large provincial capital still makes Pekanbaru a relevant site for testing whether the trust–efficacy–apathy–dissatisfaction framework applies beyond the national capital context that has so far dominated Indonesian electoral research (Ayu and Ghofur 2026).

1.2 Research Gap

Taken together, the literature reviewed above points to several areas that have so far received limited attention, and these define the position of this study. First, research on young voters and Generation Z in Indonesia has largely addressed political participation in general, while relatively little attention has been paid to student activists specifically and to whether abstention among them is heterogeneous. Second, studies of abstention in Indonesia have not always distinguished abstention by its underlying motives. Third, political apathy and political protest tend to be discussed as separate phenomena in the Indonesian *golput* literature rather than integrated. Fourth, the relationship of political trust and political efficacy with different forms of abstention has not been widely tested in an integrated manner in the context of Indonesia's 2024 elections. Fifth, international studies that have treated abstention as a possible repertoire of protest (Bourdin and Tai 2022; Carrión-Yaguana and Carroll 2024; Fasano and Natale 2025; Portos et al. 2020) have so far been tested only to a limited extent in Indonesia and in the wider Southeast Asian context. Sixth, the context of Pekanbaru, a provincial capital that has relatively rarely been the focus of *golput* research compared with Jakarta, can provide local-level empirical evidence that has so far been scarce.

1.3 Research Questions and Contributions

On the basis of this review, the study argues that electoral abstention among student activists should not automatically be understood as political apathy. Rather than treating abstention as a single, undifferentiated category, the study approaches it as a heterogeneous form of political behaviour that can range from technical/involuntary non-participation, through apathetic disengagement, to deliberate political protest. Whether and how political trust, internal and external political efficacy, political apathy, and political dissatisfaction relate to these forms of abstention remains an empirical question that this study is designed to answer, not a relationship assumed from the outset. On the basis of this argument, the study poses a main research question: under what conditions does electoral abstention among student activists in Pekanbaru in Indonesia's 2024 election reflect political apathy, technical non-participation, or deliberate political protest? This main question is elaborated into three sub-questions: (1) how are political trust, political efficacy, political apathy, and political dissatisfaction related to electoral abstention among student activists; (2) what distinguishes apathetic, technical, and deliberate/protest abstention among student activists; and (3) how do student activists non-voters politically interpret their decision not to vote?

Answering these questions provides three kinds of contribution. Conceptually/theoretically, the study positions electoral abstention as a heterogeneous form of political behaviour, not merely a residual category or an indicator of apathy alone an approach that links the international debate on abstention-as-protest to the Indonesian empirical context, in which it has been tested relatively rarely. Empirically, the study offers field-based evidence on the political behaviour of student activists in Indonesia's 2024 election from Pekanbaru, a provincial capital that has received relatively less research attention than Jakarta-centred contexts. Methodologically, the study uses an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, so that quantitative data are used to identify patterns or profiles of abstention according to political trust, political efficacy, political apathy, and political dissatisfaction, which are then explained further through qualitative data on the meanings and reasons behind those patterns. These contributions are proposed in proportion to the available evidence; the study does not claim to be the first on its topic but rather an effort to fill a space that the literature reviewed above has not specifically integrated.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Electoral Abstention

Non-voting is not a single behaviour but an umbrella for a group of behaviours with different antecedents: technical/involuntary abstention (the inability to vote because of administrative barriers, registration problems, or logistical constraints), apathetic abstention (the absence of interest in politics), and deliberate/protest abstention (abstaining as a deliberate form of political expression) (Bourdin and Tai 2022; Kemmers 2017). Comparative evidence from other contexts supports the relevance of this distinction, although it does not necessarily apply automatically to the Indonesian context. Portos et al. (2020) show that some abstainers remain involved in forms of non-electoral participation, so non-voting cannot automatically be assumed to reflect disengagement from political life more broadly.

In this study, electoral abstention is conceptualised following Portos et al. (2020) and Bourdin and Tai (2022) as a potentially heterogeneous behaviour: technical/involuntary, apathetic, or deliberate/protest abstention—but the actual classification of respondents into these categories is determined by the questionnaire items and the results of the analysis, not set in advance.

2.2 Political Trust

Political trust is treated in this study as an explanatory factor, not as a fact assumed to be occurring in Indonesia or in Pekanbaru. International literature shows a pattern that runs in the same direction as that for efficacy, although not entirely in parallel. Devine's (2024) meta-analysis of 61 studies and more than 3.5 million observations confirms that political trust is related to a range of political consequences, but describes these effects as heterogeneous rather than uniform (Devine 2024); Kutuk and Usturali (2023) report that the relationship between political trust and non-electoral participation is nonlinear, that is, low trust does not automatically turn into withdrawal or protest through a simple, one-directional path (Kutuk and Usturali 2023). On the basis of this review, the study deliberately avoids the premise that Indonesia

or Pekanbaru is experiencing a “crisis of political trust”, because such a claim requires direct measurement that is not available in this literature review. Instead, the study uses the formulation of political trust as a variable that varies (variation in political trust) and treats the direction and strength of its relationship with abstention as an empirical question to be answered by the data, not as a premise that precedes the data.

2.3 Political Efficacy

Two constructs recur in this literature as candidate explanatory factors for why citizens abstain: political efficacy and political trust. Political efficacy is conventionally divided into two dimensions that must not be conflated conceptually: internal political efficacy, namely an individual’s belief that he or she is able to understand, evaluate, and participate in politics; and external political efficacy, namely the belief that political institutions and government are responsive to citizens, and that citizen participation has a chance of influencing the political process (Oser et al. 2022). The multilevel meta-analysis by Oser et al. (2022), which synthesises 48 studies and more than 51,000 respondents, finds that political efficacy is positively associated with both online and offline participation, although the strength of the association varies by context. This contextual variation appears significant: in a study of voting and protest in authoritarian contexts, Uluğ et al. (2025) find that political efficacy does not consistently predict collective participation, and that personal versus collective efficacy produce different patterns depending on the level of political repression, cautioning against assuming that efficacy works in the same way in Indonesia as in the Western democracies from which much of this foundational literature originates (Uluğ et al. 2025). Among adolescents and young adults in particular, efficacy and non-institutional participation appear to be reciprocally related, although not always stably (Alscher and Jana 2025). This discussion of efficacy is directed at opening the question of why individuals ultimately vote, abstain because of apathy, or abstain deliberately, rather than at determining the answer to that question in advance, because the causal relationship between efficacy and particular forms of abstention can only be stated after the empirical data have been analysed.

2.4 Political Apathy

Political apathy is understood following Dahl et al. (2018), who define it as the absence of desire or motive to be interested in politics, distinct from alienation; its indicators include interest in political issues and motivation for engagement (Dahl et al. 2018). The assumption that non-voting automatically reflects political apathy is long-standing and continues to shape public discourse and part of the scholarly literature on *golput* in Indonesia (Adan et al. 2024; Nur et al. 2026).

2.5 Political Dissatisfaction

Political dissatisfaction is understood as a critical-evaluative attitude towards the performance of political actors/institutions, which is conceptually distinguished from political trust (which is more comprehensive and concerns the legitimacy of institutions) and from political apathy (the absence of interest) (Zymová 2024). Birch and Dennison (2019), who study protest voting rather than abstention, add a complementary point: citizens who are dissatisfied with mainstream politics do not always

withdraw from elections; some redirect their votes to anti-establishment alternatives (Birch and Dennison 2019). Taken together, these findings show that dissatisfaction can be associated with more than one type of behavioural outcome, depending on the context and the choices available a pattern that needs to be tested, not assumed, in the Indonesian context.

2.6 Political Protest

Comparative studies have treated abstention as a possible repertoire of protest. Kemmers (2017) found that deliberate non-voters in the Netherlands are not low in efficacy on two of the three dimensions tested; their abstention reflects an assessment of where political power actually lies rather than the absence of political competence (Kemmers 2017). Carrión-Yaguana and Carroll (2024) found that blank and invalid votes can function as a deliberate repertoire of protest in the context of compulsory voting in Ecuador (Carrión-Yaguana and Carroll 2024), while Fasano and Natale (2025) describe abstention in Italy as the result of three intermingled factors: demobilisation, protest, and apathy, rather than a single representation of any one of them (Fasano and Natale 2025). Bourdin and Tai (2022) place abstention between disengagement and protestation. In this study, the questionnaire includes items on protest orientation (the view that not voting can be a form of protest or political expression) and on deliberate, protest-tinged abstention completed by non-voters.

3 Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study uses an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (QUAN → QUAL). The quantitative phase was conducted and analysed first to identify patterns of association among political trust, political efficacy, political apathy, political dissatisfaction, and electoral abstention; these results were then used to select the focus and the informants of the qualitative phase (a connecting strategy), which in turn served to explain (explaining) the meaning behind these patterns, before the two types of data were integrated at the interpretation stage (Ivankova et al. 2006). This design was chosen because it is consistent with the conceptual position of the article: abstention is not assumed in advance to be either apathy or protest but is tested empirically.

3.2 Research Location and Population

The study was conducted in the city of Pekanbaru, Riau Province, in the context of Indonesia's 2024 election. The population comprised student activists residing in Pekanbaru who were eligible to vote in the 2024 election. In this study, student activists were operationally defined as students who had taken part in at least one student or youth organization (e.g., student executive board, student senate, or extra-campus student organizations). Respondents were identified through the questionnaire item: "Have you ever taken part in a student or youth organization?" Because the respondents are also of Generation Z age, the operational upper age limit was set at 29 years, since the KPU's own publications are not consistent in specifying the range of birth years.

3.3 Sampling and Respondents

Because individual-level data on voting/abstention status in the 2024 election are not published by the KPU, no sampling frame was available that would permit probability sampling; the study therefore used purposive/non-probability sampling with the following criteria: (1) being a student activist within the Generation Z age range as defined in Section 3.2; (2) being a resident of the city of Pekanbaru, including residents studying at universities outside the city; (3) being eligible to vote in the 2024 election; and (4) being willing to participate. The questionnaire received 195 responses between 16 September and 1 October 2026. Data cleaning removed one test response, seven duplicate responses (identified by name or email address), 18 respondents who were not eligible to vote in the 2024 election (mostly because they were under the voting age at the time; all respondents were aged 18 or older at the time of the survey), and 94 respondents who had never taken part in a student or youth organization. The analytic sample therefore comprised 75 student activists: 60 voters and 15 non-voters (20.0%). Answers in the section on reasons for not voting given by respondents who stated that they had voted were disregarded.

3.4 Informants and Interviews

The qualitative-phase informants numbered six (I1–I6), all of whom were survey respondents who did not exercise their right to vote and who were selected purposively. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews on the reasons for voting/not voting, political experiences, and the meaning of the abstention decision for the informants. Five informants (I1–I5) were interviewed in one group session and one informant (I6) was interviewed individually. Transcripts were generated using an automatic transcription tool; the quotations included in the article were corrected as necessary for readability without changing their meaning, with omissions marked […]. Informant identities were anonymised with the codes I1–I6.

3.5 Instruments and Measurement

Quantitative data were collected through a structured Likert-scale questionnaire containing demographic data, voting/non-voting status, and items measuring the four explanatory constructs. Political trust was measured as a multidimensional construct with respect to several election-related institutional objects, following Schneider (2017) and van der Meer and Ouattara (2019), both of whom reject the assumption that trust is unidimensional. Political efficacy was separated into internal political efficacy, adapting the scale of Niemi et al. (1991), and external political efficacy, adapting Scotto et al. (2021); the two dimensions were not combined into a single construct. Political apathy was measured with reference to Dahl et al., who define it as the absence of desire or motive to be interested in politics, distinct from alienation; the indicators include interest in political issues and motivation for engagement (Dahl et al. 2018). Political dissatisfaction was measured as a critical-evaluative attitude towards the performance of political actors/institutions, conceptually distinguished from political trust (which is more comprehensive and concerns the legitimacy of institutions) and from political apathy (the absence of interest) (Zymová 2024). Electoral abstention was conceptualised following Portos et al. (2020) and

Bourdin and Tai (2022) as a potentially heterogeneous behaviour—technical/involuntary, apathetic, or deliberate/protest abstention—but the actual classification of respondents into these categories was determined by the questionnaire items and the results of the analysis, not set in advance. All construct items were measured on a 1–5 Likert scale, and the score for each construct was computed as the mean of its items. Besides the four constructs, the questionnaire contained items on protest orientation (the view that not voting can be a form of protest or political expression) and items on deliberate, protest-tinged abstention completed by non-voters; reasons for not voting were grouped hierarchically by the researchers on the basis of multiple-choice and open-ended answers.

3.6 Reliability and Validity

Reliability was tested with Cronbach's alpha, and validity was examined through corrected item-total correlations and exploratory factor analysis. In the analytic sample (N = 75), Cronbach's alpha was 0.90 for political trust, 0.89 for internal political efficacy, 0.58 for external political efficacy, 0.94 for political apathy, and 0.88 for political dissatisfaction; the protest orientation index (0.91) and the deliberate abstention index (0.83) were computed among non-voters (n = 15). Corrected item-total correlations ranged from 0.38 to 0.87, except for one external efficacy item (0.15). Because the analytic sample is too small for a stable factor analysis, exploratory factor analysis was run on all 195 questionnaire responses received (KMO = 0.87; Bartlett's test $\chi^2 = 4{,}487.6$; $p < 0.001$; varimax rotation) showed that the trust, apathy, dissatisfaction, and internal efficacy items clustered according to their theoretical constructs, whereas external efficacy was less clearly separated from internal efficacy and one of its items loaded on the trust factor; the results for external efficacy were therefore interpreted more cautiously, all the more so because its reliability in the analytic sample falls below the conventional threshold of 0.70. The ratio of respondents to items (approximately 6:1) and the high inter-item correlations make this factor analysis exploratory.

3.7 Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis comprised descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages for respondent characteristics and the distribution of voting/abstention status) and comparison of the mean scores of each construct between voters and non-voters using the Mann-Whitney U test. Because five constructs were tested simultaneously, the results were also read with a Bonferroni correction (α approximately 0.01). The logistic regression and Latent Class Analysis that had originally been considered were not carried out in this article, so the quantitative results are read as descriptive patterns, not as evidence of cause-and-effect relationships. Qualitative data were analysed through thematic analysis using open coding and axial coding, with a framework of political trust, political efficacy (internal and external), political apathy, political dissatisfaction, electoral abstention, and political protest. In addition, a word frequency query was run in NVivo on the interview transcripts as an exploratory, descriptive complement to the coding, to give a lexical overview of the vocabulary used by informants; word counts were read alongside the coded transcripts and not as evidence of themes in themselves. Each informant was then categorised as voting, technical abstention, apathetic abstention, or deliberate/protest abstention on the basis of evidence from his or her answers; statements that were insufficient for categorisation were

marked as not definitively categorisable, and informants' direct statements were distinguished from the researchers' interpretation. Each informant's questionnaire scores were matched with his or her interview narrative for the purposes of integration.

3.8 Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Data

Integration of the two types of data was carried out through connecting (quantitative results guided the selection of informants), building (quantitative findings informed the interview questions), and explaining (the qualitative narrative explains, rather than merely repeats, the statistical patterns); for example, if the quantitative results showed an association between political dissatisfaction and abstention, the interviews were used to explain whether the decision to abstain was interpreted by informants as disengagement or as a deliberate political expression, without concluding in favour of either interpretation before the qualitative data supported it.

3.9 Research Ethics

This study was reviewed by the Directorate of Research, Community Service, and Publication (DPPM), Universitas Islam Riau, Pekanbaru, Indonesia, and was granted an exemption from full Research Ethics Committee review in accordance with the guidelines and regulations set forth by the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association) and the research procedures of Universitas Islam Riau. The reference number for this determination is 242/A-UIR/4-DPPM/2026. The exemption was granted because the study is non-interventional, minimal-risk research with adult participants, with informed consent and anonymised reporting. All methods were carried out in accordance with relevant guidelines and regulations. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection, and the anonymity and confidentiality of respondent and informant data were maintained. All participants were aged 18 years or older at the time of data collection.

4 Results

This section presents the questionnaire results as general patterns and then uses the interviews to explain and deepen those patterns. All findings apply only to the respondents and informants of this study and do not represent student activists in Pekanbaru as a whole.

4.1 Respondent Characteristics

After data cleaning, the analytic sample comprised 75 student activists, consisting of 60 voters (80.0%) and 15 non-voters (20.0%). Almost all were currently enrolled students (73), most were in the 21–25 (47 respondents) or 17–20 (26 respondents) age bands of the questionnaire, and more were female (44) than male (31). The figure of 20.0% describes the composition of the sample, not an estimate of the rate of *golput* among student activists in Pekanbaru, because the sample was selected non-probabilistically.

One descriptive pattern is worth noting: the proportion of non-voters appears higher among men (9 of 31 respondents, 29.0%) than among women (6 of 44, 13.6%), although this difference was not tested. The

interviews also show that the distance between home domicile and place of study shaped part of the abstention: I1's home domicile is Rokan Hulu and I2 is registered according to his/her identity card (KTP) in Kuantan Singingi. The questionnaire item on domicile was not used to compare groups. In the qualitative phase, the six informants (I1–I6) all did not vote, but with different backgrounds: one informant experienced a clear administrative barrier (I2), one informant combined an administrative barrier with reluctance to vote (I5), and four informants showed a conscious decision with varying degrees of protest orientation (I1, I3, I4, I6).

4.2 Quantitative Results

4.2.1 Comparison of construct scores between voters and non-voters

Political trust among non-voters (2.06) was markedly lower than among voters (2.92), and both were below the neutral point of the 1–5 scale (Table 1). The difference was significant ($p = 0.001$) and remained significant after Bonferroni correction for five tests (α approximately 0.01). External political efficacy among non-voters (3.08) was lower than among voters (3.58; $p = 0.037$), but this difference did not survive Bonferroni correction, and internal political efficacy hardly differed (3.71 vs 3.86; $p = 0.74$). Two points can be noted descriptively. Non-voters do not appear to lack confidence in their ability to understand politics (their internal efficacy scores were well above the neutral point), and the gap was larger for external efficacy (0.50) than for internal efficacy (0.15).

Political apathy did not distinguish the two groups (non-voters 2.10; voters 2.23; $p = 0.41$), and both were well below the neutral point. Among non-voters, the item on following political developments obtained a mean of 4.27, and only 2 of the 15 non-voters (13.3%) cited disinterest or indifference as a reason. Political dissatisfaction was above the neutral point in both groups and, if anything, slightly higher among non-voters (3.84 vs 3.64; $p = 0.23$). Among non-voters, the group whose reasons were political without an element of indifference had the highest dissatisfaction score (4.47, $n = 7$), but the small numbers call for caution.

Table 1
Comparison of construct scores between voters and non-voters (1–5 scale)

Construct	Non-voters (n = 15)	Voters (n = 60)	p (Mann-Whitney)	After Bonferroni correction (α ≈ 0.01)
Political trust	2.06	2.92	0.001	Significant
Internal political efficacy	3.71	3.86	0.74	Not significant
External political efficacy	3.08	3.58	0.037	Not significant
Political apathy	2.10	2.23	0.41	Not significant
Political dissatisfaction	3.84	3.64	0.23	Not significant

Source: research questionnaire data (N = 75), processed by the authors. Construct scores are item means.

4.2.2 Reasons for not voting and forms of abstention

The grouping of reasons for not voting in the questionnaire shows heterogeneity of motives (Table 2). Of the 15 non-voters, 7 (46.7%) gave political reasons without an element of indifference, 3 (20.0%) cited only technical reasons, 3 (20.0%) cited technical reasons together with political reasons, and 2 (13.3%) cited disinterest or indifference. The protest orientation of non-voters averaged 3.58 and the deliberate abstention index 3.42, both above the neutral point; five respondents (33.3%) indicated that they deliberately did not vote as a form of protest, and 10 of the 15 stated that the decision not to vote was a political expression, whereas 5 did not. The highest scores on both indices were found in the political-reasons group (4.14 and 4.02), while the technical group had the lowest deliberate abstention index (2.42). Reasons were first grouped by keyword and then checked manually against a written coding rule; the manual check agreed with the keyword grouping in 14 of 15 cases (Cohen's κ = 0.90). The one borderline case, a respondent who cited both a technical constraint and limited knowledge of the candidates, was retained in its original group because reassigning it does not change the pattern.

Table 2
Non-voters' reason groups and mean scores (1–5 scale)

Reason group	n	%	Protest orientation	Deliberate abstention	Apathy	Dissatisfaction
Political reasons without an element of indifference	7	46.7	4.14	4.02	2.18	4.47
Technical reasons only	3	20.0	3.17	2.42	1.67	4.05
Cited disinterest or indifference	2	13.3	3.75	3.75	2.62	3.29
Technical and political reasons	3	20.0	2.56	2.83	2.00	2.52
All non-voters	15	100	3.58	3.42	2.10	3.84

Source: research questionnaire data, processed by the authors. The grouping is hierarchical (the apathy group takes precedence) and keyword-based and manually checked (agreement in 14 of 15 cases; κ = 0.90).

4.3 Qualitative Results

Before turning to the themes, a word frequency query in NVivo gives a lexical overview of the interview data (Fig. 1). The two most frequent words are *masyarakat* (society; 38) and *pemerintah* (government; 34), followed by *memilih* (to vote; 29) and *suara* (vote/voice; 28), which suggests that informants talked about voting largely in relation to society and the government rather than only as a personal act. Words associated with the evaluation of political institutions are also prominent: *politik* (politics; 22), *pemilu* (election; 20), *sistem* (system; 17), *percaya* (trust; 16), *janji* (promises; 15), and *kebijakan* (policy; 12). *Presiden* (president; 18) and *DPR* (10) point to the national institutions that informants referred to, and *bawah* (lower class; 12) echoes I1's reference to a lower-middle-class position, although a word count does not show the context in which the word was used. These frequencies are read as an exploratory pattern that is broadly consistent with the themes of trust, efficacy, and dissatisfaction developed in Sections 4.3.1 to 4.3.4; they do not measure sentiment, and ambiguous words such as *suara* and *kurang* (lacking/not; 18) can only be interpreted by returning to the transcripts.

Source: interview transcripts, NVivo word frequency query, processed by the authors. Words are shown in the original Indonesian with English glosses added by the authors; the values in panel (b) are word counts.

4.3.1 Political trust

The interviews explain where distrust comes from. All informants expressed low to moderate trust in the election organisers, with figures that they themselves cited ranging from less than 10% (I4) to 50% (I6), and most based this on direct experience or observation. I1, who had served as a member of the polling

station committee (KPPS), recounted witnessing blank ballot papers being punched by other parties and concluded: “Let alone at the highest level at the centre, even at the lowest level it is already possible to play around.” I2 referred to a mismatch between data at the polling station (TPS) and the recapitulation, I3 stated “I saw with my own eyes the fraud at that polling station”, and I5 pointed to the vote count he/she had observed. All of these are the informants’ perceptions and experiences, which were not verified in this study, and are therefore understood as the basis of attitudes, not as facts about how the election was administered. Distrust was also directed at candidates; I4 stated that he/she “does not trust the promises of these presidential and vice-presidential candidates”, and I5 was “very, very doubtful about those candidates”.

The relationship between trust and the decision to vote appeared non-linear. I4 and I6 linked it explicitly to their decisions; I6 described the “50 percent 50 percent” doubt as having a major influence. I2 stated that distrust affected his/her own decision but also affirmed that he/she would have voted had there been no administrative error. For I3, the transcript contains two statements that are not fully consistent: he/she stated that he/she did not vote because of seeing fraud at the TPS, but when asked whether that observation was what made him/her not vote, he/she answered “I had already not voted before that”, and elsewhere he/she mentioned the poor candidate debate. The informants’ questionnaire scores were partly consistent with their narratives (I3 1.00; I1 and I2 1.75; I4 1.88; I6 3.12), but I5, who said his/her trust was below 30%, obtained a score of 2.88.

4.3.2 Political efficacy

The interviews reveal a paradox that is not visible in the mean scores: the vote is judged important normatively but ineffective instrumentally. I2, I3, I4, and I5 stated that the vote is important; I5 affirmed “if you ask whether it is important or not, it is very important”, and then added that his/her vote “is going to be modified, is going to be cheated [...] so [I am] lazy (*malas*)”. I3 described the people’s voice as like a “small advertisement” that is ignored by the government and concluded “there is nothing at all that we can do”. I1 and I6 judged that a single vote has no influence; I1 specifically linked this to a lower-middle-class position that, in his/her view, lacks the power to guard votes. Perceptions of low responsiveness also came from experience: I1 recounted taking part in a campus demonstration, seeing a DPR representative meet the crowd, but not seeing the demands change, and I5 judged that the government only moves after an issue goes viral (“Wait until it goes viral, only then do they open their eyes”).

Evidence on internal efficacy from the interviews is very limited; only I6 touched on it, describing the matter as “not my field”, so the data are insufficient to draw conclusions. It should also be noted that the narrative of low responsiveness is not fully reflected in the informants’ questionnaire scores (external efficacy: I1 1.50; I2 and I5 2.75; I3 3.25; I4 and I6 3.50), a gap that cannot yet be explained from the available data.

4.3.3 Political apathy

No informant stated that he/she was uninterested in politics. I2 stated “I am really interested in politics” and wanted to vote; I4 and I5 both stated that they were very interested, and I5 affirmed “I did not vote,

but that does not mean we do not care about politics". I3 judged his/her interest to be "maybe not so much because it is not my major", but he/she "often follows political developments through TV news". I1 admitted to being very interested at the beginning because of the ambition of one of the candidates, and then this changed: "the interest was only at the beginning, and in the end it ended in disappointment". I6 rejected the apathetic label ("if it is because of not caring about politics, well, not really, because I often get news from various news media"), but on the questionnaire he/she ticked the reasons of not being interested and not caring about the election result, an inconsistency that remains unresolved.

Elements resembling apathy are nevertheless present, but they come after disappointment, not before. I1 closed his/her account of an election perceived as not serious with "so it just felt like, oh well, I don't care"; I5 arrived at the word "lazy" (*malas*) after judging that his/her vote would be manipulated; I6 said "Just lazy and just don't trust much".

4.3.4 Political dissatisfaction

In the interviews, dissatisfaction was directed at three things: the quality of the debates and the pattern of candidates tearing one another down, campaign promises judged unrealistic, and government responsiveness. I3 described the turning point: "that very day I wanted to vote. But after thinking it over again, it seemed I'd better not", with the debate, which he/she considered poor, as a main consideration. I6 stated, "I just don't like that kind of system". Some of the criticism of the government, such as the MBG programme, Kopdes, and the 600-day performance evaluation, was expressed after the election and therefore cannot be treated as a reason at the time the decision was made. The dissatisfaction scores of five of the six informants (4.14 to 4.86) were above the non-voter average (3.84), and only that of I6 (3.57) was below it, which indicates that the interview informants are not an average portrait of non-voters.

4.3.5 Categorisation of informants and forms of abstention

The interviews clarify the forms of abstention (Table 3). Technical abstention is clearest in I2: "I did not vote not because [...] I am not pro politics, but because there was indeed an administrative error", and his/her name was not registered at any TPS. He/she is interested in politics and judges the vote to be important. However, elsewhere he/she admitted that "actually I could have reported it but I was reluctant because it was better for me not to vote", and stated that by being a *golput* he/she "could voice my opinion" about political conditions. This statement adds an element of choice to an abstention that began with an administrative barrier, but it is not sufficient to call it protest abstention: I2 did not state it as his/her own motive, interpreted protest as an act after casting a vote ("as long as we have given our right, in my view, we can protest if there is a policy we feel is inappropriate"), and his/her questionnaire scores (orientation 2.67; deliberate 2.25; not a political expression) are consistent with this. I5 is harder to categorise. He/she mentioned an administrative problem but also "even if I had been registered, I would also have been too lazy to vote", doubted the candidates, stated agreement with I4, and said he/she often shows protest through demonstrations, whereas his/her questionnaire recorded political

reasons without technical reasons. I5 was therefore categorised as neither pure technical abstention nor pure protest.

Table 3
Categorisation of informants and questionnaire scores

Informant	Category	Main evidence from the interview	Questionnaire scores (Trust; Apathy; Dissat.; Orientation/Deliberate)
I1	Deliberate/protest abstention	States that golput is not apathy but protest and a message; initial reason (distance) not maintained; testimony from inside the system (KPPS); judges the vote to have no influence; takes part in demonstrations	1.75; 1.75; 4.71; 4.33/4.12
I2	Technical abstention (with an element of choosing not to report)	Not registered; “actually I could have reported it but I was reluctant”; interested in politics; judges the vote important; protest understood as after voting	1.75; 1.25; 4.29; 2.67/2.25
I3	Deliberate/protest abstention (sequence of triggers needs clarification)	Initially intended to vote; saw fraud at the TPS; did not want to bear responsibility for a wrong choice; judged the debate poor; calls the act a protest	1.00; 1.62; 4.71; 4.17/4.38
I4	Deliberate/protest abstention	Very interested in politics; does not trust candidates’ promises; calls golput “resistance”; very low trust in the KPU	1.88; 1.50; 4.86; 4.33/4.38
I5	Not definitively categorisable (technical and deliberate); strong protest orientation	Not registered, but “even if I had been registered, I would also have been too lazy”; very interested in politics; doubts the candidates; agrees with I4; protests through demonstrations	2.88; 1.75; 4.14; 4.00/4.00
I6	Deliberate abstention with an apathetic element; ambiguous protest	Low trust, dislikes candidates tearing one another down, “lazy”; follows the news; agreed with protest after a leading question	3.12; 2.75; 3.57; 3.83/3.88

Source: interviews and research questionnaire data, processed by the authors. Matching informants to questionnaire responses was done by the researchers.

The strongest protest tendencies were seen in I1, I3, and I4. I1 stated, “Golput is not apathy. Golput is a form of protest”, and linked this to his/her experience: “I had been inside the system, I had seen it directly from the inside [...] when I chose not to vote for any of them, that was my way of conveying a message.” He/she also showed non-electoral involvement (“we come to the demonstration site, we channel our aspirations”). I4 stated that not voting was “my form of resistance because I had already suspected those promises would not be realised” and that “taking part in voting only prolongs the life of that bad system”. I3 stated that he/she did not vote because “I saw with my own eyes the fraud at that polling station, so I felt I did not want to be involved”, adding that he/she did not want to be responsible for his/her right to vote for fear of choosing wrongly, and then described the act as a protest: “Today we will not vote for them. Not because we are lazy to go to the polling station, but because this is our protest.” For I3 there is an inconsistency with another part of the transcript, which mentions the candidate debate as a main consideration and contains the answer “I had already not voted before that” when he/she was asked whether the observation at the TPS made him/her not vote. The sequence of triggers is therefore not established here; what can be stated is that I3 initially intended to vote, then did not vote, and cited the poor debate, the perceived fraud, and reluctance to bear the consequences of a wrong choice as considerations. The questionnaire scores of I1, I3, and I4 on the orientation and deliberate abstention indices (4.12 to 4.38) provide additional support, and I4’s open-ended message on the questionnaire expressed dissatisfaction with the system and the candidates’ programmes.

It should be noted that the protest statements in the group session emerged in sequence and contained phrases that were similar across informants (for example, “had been inside the system” for I1 and I3, and “I’ve seen how rotten it is” for I4), while I3 had earlier described himself/herself as an observer of fraud at the TPS. This pattern indicates possible influence among informants, so these statements are more safely read as a shared orientation than as independent testimony.

The evidence on I6 cannot be used as strong support. His/her spontaneous answer mentioned disagreement with the system and with government “elements” (*oknum*); he/she confirmed that not voting is a form of protest only after the interviewer mentioned that the study is about *golput* as protest and asked a leading question. The elements of “lazy” (*malas*), “not my business”, and the inconsistency with his/her questionnaire answers add to the ambiguity.

4.4 Integration of Findings

In line with the explanatory sequential design, the quantitative patterns provide the general picture and the interviews explain their meaning (Table 4). First, the markedly lower trust and the lower external efficacy among non-voters are explained by the interviews as the result of perceived experiences and observations, but the interviews also show that this relationship is not linear. Second, the similar apathy and dissatisfaction scores in both groups are understood as a shared background: dissatisfaction is widely felt, and what differs is how it is translated into action, while elements of apathy among the informants appear as passivity after disappointment. Third, the heterogeneity of reasons in the questionnaire (technical, political, apathetic, mixed) finds its counterpart in informants who cut across

categories, including I2, who is technical, I5, who is mixed, and I1, I3, and I4, who are deliberate and protest-oriented.

Figure 2 **Questionnaire scores of informants I1–I6 compared with the mean of all non-voters (n = 15; 1–5 scale)**

Source: research questionnaire data, processed by the authors. Cell values are construct means; external efficacy values for informants are as reported in Section 4.3.2.

Table 4
Joint display of quantitative and qualitative findings

Theme	Quantitative finding	Interview explanation	Integrative interpretation
Political trust	Non-voters 2.06 vs voters 2.92 (p = 0.001; significant after correction)	Low trust among all informants, based on observation; I3 and I2 show a non-linear relationship	Low trust is clearly associated with golput, as a background rather than a proven causal path
Political efficacy	Internal 3.71 vs 3.86; external 3.08 vs 3.58 (not significant after correction)	The vote is important normatively but regarded as ineffective; responsiveness judged low	Normative-instrumental paradox; insufficient data on internal efficacy
Political apathy	2.10 vs 2.23 (p = 0.41); 13.3% cite disinterest/indifference	No informant states being uninterested; “lazy” (malas) appears after disappointment	Apathy is not the sole explanation; part of it is reactive
Political dissatisfaction	3.84 vs 3.64 (p = 0.23)	Dissatisfaction with debates, promises, and responsiveness; some of it retrospective	A shared background; differs in how it is translated into action
Forms of abstention	Political 46.7%; technical 20.0%; mixed 20.0%; apathy 13.3%; 33.3% indicated protest	Technical (I2), mixed (I5), deliberate/protest (I1, I3, I4), ambiguous (I6)	Diverse motives; protest is present among some non-voters
Divergent finding	A respondent ticked protest but wrote that golput is not a proper means of protest and that he/she abstained because of domicile constraints	I2 links protest to action after voting and chose not to report; I5 and I6 are ambiguous	Golput cannot automatically be equated with protest

Source: research questionnaire and interview data, processed by the authors.

The integration also reveals points that are not yet aligned. I5’s administrative reason in the interview was not recorded in the questionnaire; I6 denied indifference in the interview but ticked it in the

questionnaire; I2 admitted choosing not to report his/her administrative problem, so that his/her abstention is not purely technical; the informants' external efficacy scores do not always reflect the narrative of low responsiveness; the sequence of I3's triggers is not yet clear; and the protest statements in the group session may have been influenced by the answers of earlier informants. These matters set limits on the strength of the claims in this article and are acknowledged among the limitations in Section 6.

5 Discussion

The fact that *golput* in this study is not uniform is the starting point for the discussion that follows. The discussion interprets the quantitative patterns through the interview evidence and compares them with the prior literature; all findings apply only to the respondents and informants of this study and do not represent student activists in Pekanbaru as a whole.

5.1 Political Trust

Political trust among non-voters (2.06) was markedly lower than among voters (2.92), and both were below the neutral point; the difference remained significant after Bonferroni correction for five tests. Trust is therefore the construct most clearly associated with abstention in this sample, although the cross-sectional, non-probability design does not allow the conclusion that low trust causes golput. This cautious reading is in line with Devine's (2024) finding of heterogeneous effects of trust and Kutuk and Usturali's (2023) finding of a nonlinear relationship between trust and participation. The interviews show that distrust is grounded in informants' own experiences and observations, and that its relationship to the decision to vote is not linear: I2's statement that he/she would have voted had there been no administrative error suggests that trust appears to shape attitudes without determining presence at the polling station. Overall, low trust emerges as a background related to the decision to abstain, not as a simple causal path.

5.2 Political Efficacy

Because the gap in external efficacy (0.50) was considerably larger than that in internal efficacy (0.15), the distinction between internal and external efficacy that underpins the framework of this study (Oser et al. 2022) appears to matter: non-voters doubt the responsiveness of the system more than their own competence, although the external efficacy difference did not survive Bonferroni correction. The interview findings reinforce the reading that efficacy needs to be distinguished by its object. The belief that voting is a right and a duty remains alive alongside the belief that the results can be manipulated, so that normative belief appears insufficient to hold back abstention when the perception of manipulation is strong. This pattern is consistent with Kemmers (2026), who describes deliberate abstention as an assessment of where power lies rather than the absence of political competence, and with the warning of Uluğ et al. (2025) that efficacy does not predict participation in a uniform way. The reliability of external efficacy was also lower (Cronbach's alpha 0.58) and this construct was less clearly separated

from internal efficacy in the factor analysis, so the findings on external efficacy need to be read more cautiously.

5.3 Political Apathy

The quantitative data therefore do not support the reading that *golput* in this sample derives mainly from apathy. The interviews show something similar, with nuance. The elements that resemble apathy remain present but come after disappointment rather than before it. The statements of I1, I5, and I6 can be read as passivity born of disappointment and loss of hope, in line with the distinction made by Dahl et al. (2018) between apathy as the absence of desire towards politics and other forms of passivity rooted in rejection or alienation. This is a researchers' interpretation that needs to be tested further. Apathy is thus not the sole explanation of *golput* here; it is better understood as one element, which in some informants appears as a consequence rather than a cause.

5.4 Political Dissatisfaction

Political dissatisfaction does not significantly distinguish non-voters from voters in this sample (it is slightly higher among non-voters) and is difficult to sustain as a cause of golput on its own. This finding is in line with Alfaruqy's (2025) picture that young voters can be highly critical of politics yet still vote, and with the conceptual distinction of dissatisfaction from trust (Zymová 2024). What distinguishes the informants is not the presence or absence of dissatisfaction but how that dissatisfaction is translated: into abstention (I1, I3, I4), into protest through other channels such as demonstrations (I1), or as something to be conveyed after voting (I2).

5.5 Golput as Technical, Apathetic, and Protest Abstention

The grouping of reasons in the questionnaire and the interviews both show a heterogeneity of motives, in line with the distinction between technical/involuntary, apathetic, and deliberate/protest abstention (Bourdin and Tai 2022; Kemmers 2017). I1's non-electoral involvement ("we come to the demonstration site, we channel our aspirations") is in line with the finding of Portos et al. (2020) that abstainers can continue to participate outside the ballot box. The results are also consistent with Fasano and Natale (2025), who see abstention as a mixture of demobilisation, protest, and apathy, and with Bourdin and Tai (2022), who place abstention between disengagement and protestation: in these data, the three elements are not mutually exclusive, and some informants carry more than one.

6 Limitations

The findings of this study apply only to the respondents and informants studied and cannot be generalised to student activists in Pekanbaru. This study has the following limitations: the sample is non-probabilistic and all interview informants are non-voters; the group interview allows influence among informants; the protest question in one interview was leading; the protest statements in the group session emerged in sequence with phrases that were similar across informants; the reliability of external efficacy is low (0.58); the grouping of reasons in the questionnaire relies on brief answers, and one case

was borderline; two respondents (both voters) gave identical answers to all construct items; and the analytic sample is small (75 respondents, 15 of them non-voters), which limits statistical power and makes group comparisons sensitive to individual cases. The inconsistencies between interview and questionnaire data described in Section 4.4 also set limits on the strength of the claims made.

7 Conclusion

This study shows that *golput* among student activists in this sample cannot be understood solely as political apathy. The apathy scores of non-voters are no higher than those of voters; no informant stated that he/she was uninterested in politics, and the elements of “lazy” (*malas*) or “not caring” among some informants emerged after disappointment. *Golput* in this study has diverse motives, and some non-voters show a political protest orientation or motive.

Answering the first sub-question, political trust is the construct most clearly associated with abstention: it is markedly lower among non-voters, and the difference remains significant after Bonferroni correction. Lower external efficacy points in the same direction but is not significant after correction, whereas internal efficacy, apathy, and dissatisfaction do not distinguish the two groups. Given the small non-probability sample and cross-sectional design, these relationships cannot be stated as cause-and-effect relationships. The interviews show how these factors work in layers in informants’ experience: distrust based on perceptions of how the election was administered, a paradox between the importance of the vote and the belief that the vote is ineffective, and dissatisfaction that is widespread.

Answering the second sub-question, technical abstention is marked by administrative barriers with interest and intention to vote that remain (I2), although I2 also chose not to report; deliberate abstention is marked by a decision made after assessing the candidates and the system, sometimes with a change of intention close to election day (I1, I3, I4); and apathetic elements, where present, tend to take the form of passivity that follows disappointment (I5, I6). The evidence for protest as a motive in its own right is strongest for I1, I3, and I4, who stated it explicitly; for I5 the protest orientation is strong (including through demonstrations) but the motive for abstention is mixed; for I2 it is only a general possibility; and for I6 it is ambiguous because of a leading question. Answering the third sub-question, informants interpret the decision not to vote differently: as a rejection of the system and the candidates (I1, I3, I4), as an administrative barrier (I2), or as a mixture of doubt and reluctance (I5, I6). The distinction between protest orientation (the view that *golput* can be a protest) and protest as a motive in its own right needs to be maintained.

Further research could conduct interviews with voters as a comparison, test the validity and reliability of the constructs, carry out sensitivity analyses, and verify the fraud perceived by informants through other sources without treating it as fact.

Declarations

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Ethics Approval: This study was reviewed by the Directorate of Research, Community Service, and Publication (DPPM), Universitas Islam Riau, and was granted an exemption from full Research Ethics Committee review in accordance with the guidelines and regulations set forth by the Declaration of Helsinki and the research procedures of Universitas Islam Riau (reference number 242/A-UIR/4-DPPM/2026). All methods were carried out in accordance with relevant guidelines and regulations.

Consent to Participate: The study applied informed consent and voluntary participation, and the anonymity and confidentiality of respondent/informant data were maintained.

Consent for Publication: All participants gave consent for their anonymized data to be published.

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Data Availability: The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available to protect the confidentiality of the informants, but anonymized excerpts are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Figures

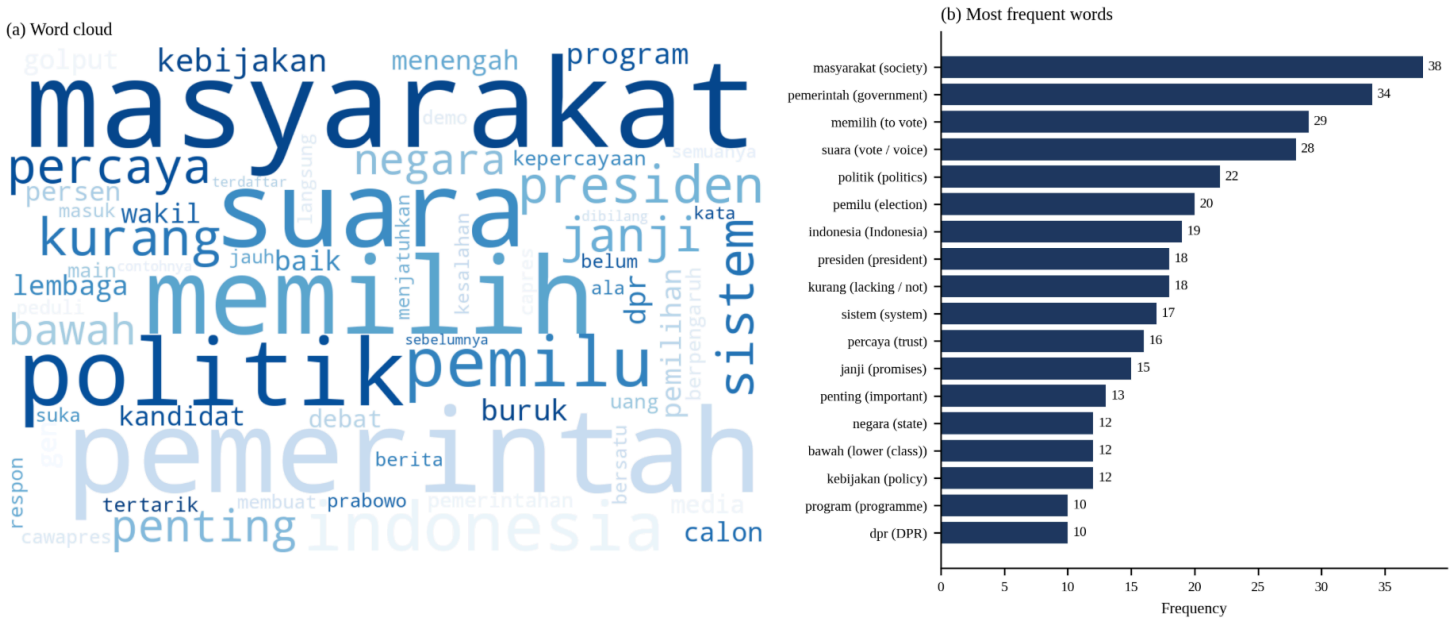

Figure 1

Word frequency of the interview transcripts in NVivo: (a) word cloud and (b) most frequent words

Source: interview transcripts, NVivo word frequency query, processed by the authors. Words are shown in the original Indonesian with English glosses added by the authors; the values in panel (b) are word counts.

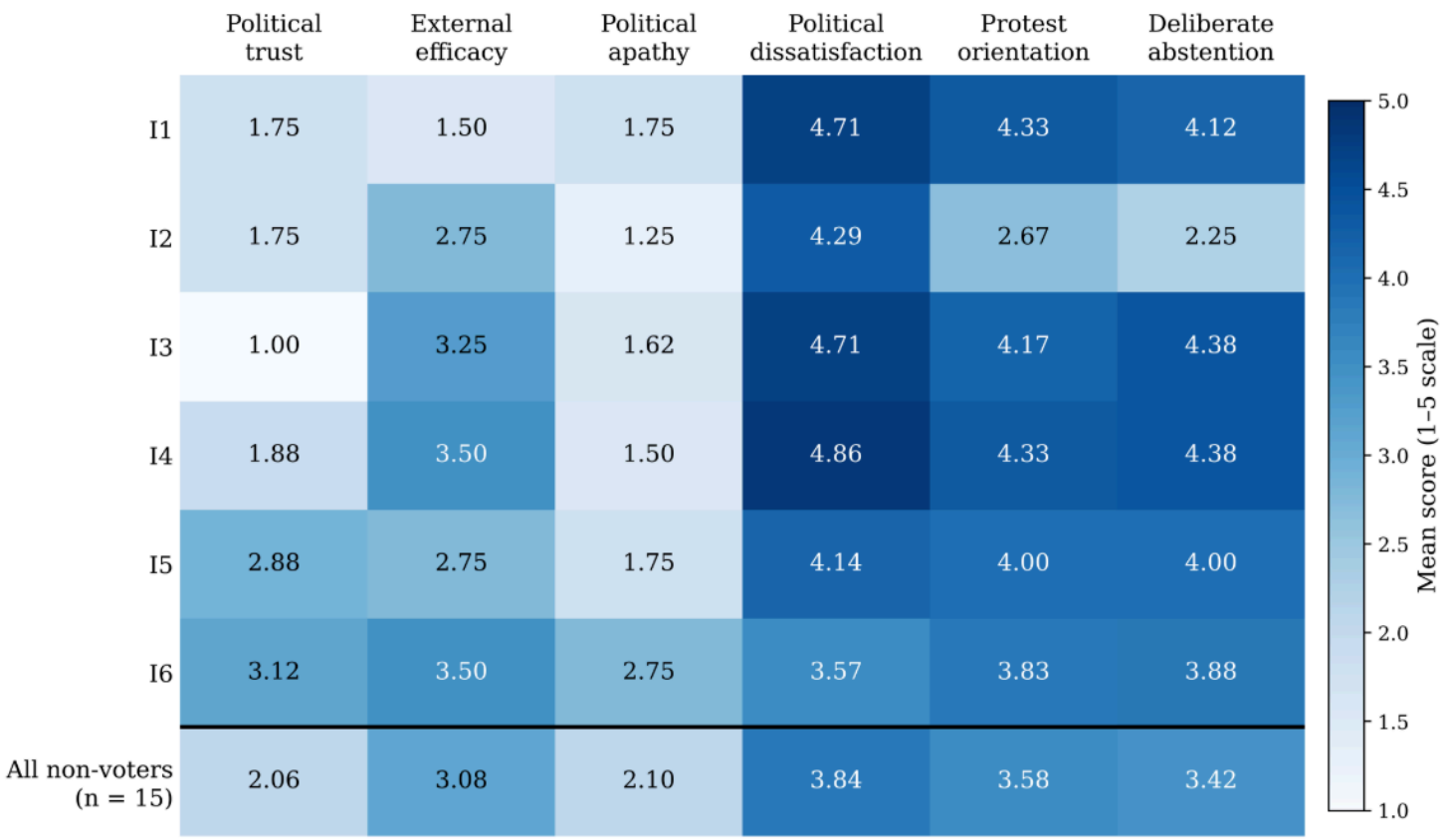

Figure 2

Questionnaire scores of informants I1–I6 compared with the mean of all non-voters (n = 15; 1–5 scale)

Source: research questionnaire data, processed by the authors. Cell values are construct means; external efficacy values for informants are as reported in Section 4.3.2.