

Public-Deliberative Participation Model: Socio-Cultural Mechanisms Shaping Political Participation in the 2024 Gorontalo City Mayoral Election

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Abstract

Through a qualitative case study of the 2024 Gorontalo City mayoral election, this article demonstrates that declining local voter turnout does not necessarily reflect apathy or a weakening of civic engagement. Instead, the phenomenon reflects a structural and deliberative mismatch between citizens' socio-political capacities and the procedural design of local electoral institutions. By integrating the Civic Voluntarism Model, deliberative democracy theory, and the 3A³ framework (Actors, Arenas, Aims), this article proposes the Public-Deliberative Participation Model (PDPM) as a theoretical contribution to the study of democratization in Global South contexts. Research findings indicate that citizen political participation in Gorontalo City is largely shaped by socio-cultural actors within informal deliberative arenas, whereas formal electoral institutions are perceived to possess limited deliberative capacity. In this context, the act of not voting often emerges as a reflective and normatively significant choice conceptualized here as "deliberative withdrawal"—rather than a symptom of democratic decline. By highlighting the "conversion gap" between civic capacity and electoral participation, this article argues that the primary challenge facing local democracy in Indonesia is best understood as a crisis of institutional recognition rather than a crisis of citizen participation. Theoretically, the article contributes to debates within the journal **Democratization** by extending the deliberative perspective beyond institutional arenas and offering an alternative framework for analyzing participation within culturally embedded democracies.

Keywords: Public Participation; Voter Turnout; Public-Deliberative.

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Introduction

In the comparative study of democracy and democratization, voter turnout has long held a central position as an indicator of democratic health (Nadeau et al., 2023). Turnout is frequently used to measure political legitimacy, citizen inclusion, and the level of public engagement in the political process. A decline in turnout particularly in national elections is often interpreted as a sign of apathy, eroding public trust, or even democratic backsliding. However, in recent decades, this assumption has been increasingly challenged, especially within the context of evolving democracies where civic political engagement is not always articulated through formal electoral mechanisms (Gauja, 2021; Mansouri, 2022; Bauer et al., 2026).

This article contributes to that debate by examining a paradox within Indonesia's local democracy. During the 2024 election cycle, national and legislative elections saw relatively

high voter turnout across various regions, including Gorontalo City (Hidayaturrahman et al., 2025; Pulango et al., 2025; Jaya et al., 2025). In contrast, the Regional Head Elections (*Pilkada*) held that same year experienced a significant drop in turnout, falling even below the levels recorded in previous local elections. This discrepancy raises a crucial theoretical question: why do citizens who possess the capacity, knowledge, and experience to participate in national elections choose not to participate in local elections?

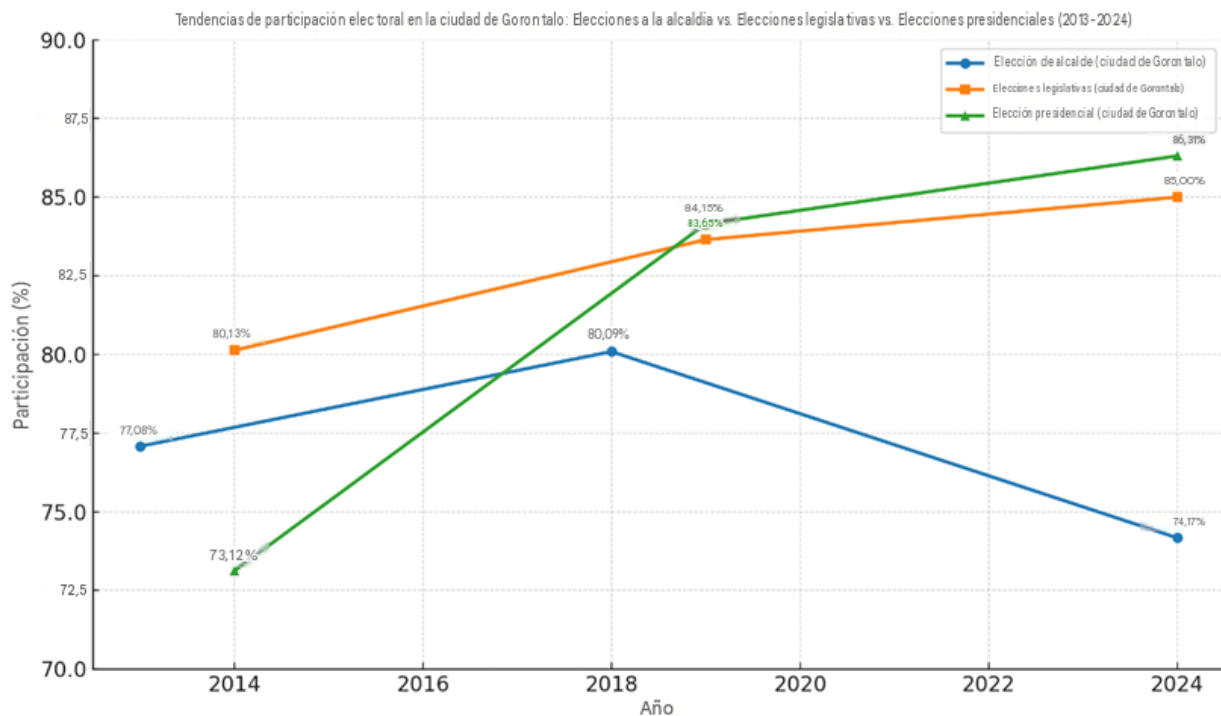


Figure 1. Trends in Electoral Participation in Gorontalo City across Mayoral, Legislative, and Presidential Elections, 2013–2024

When examined side by side visually, the graph above highlights a clear divergence: the Pilkako curve tends to fluctuate (77.08 → 80.09 → 74.17), whereas the Legislative Election curve tends to remain high and relatively stable (80.13 → 83.65 → 85.21). In other words, the “city anomaly” observed in the 2024 Pilkako does not represent generalized participation fatigue, because in the Legislative Election held in the same year, Gorontalo City residents continued to participate at a very high proportion (Kadji, 2022; Zukri et al., 2025; Sofiyah et al., 2025). The initial pattern indicates a specific trend: Pilkako participation increased between 2013 and 2018, followed by a sharp decline toward 2024. In contrast, the Legislative/Presidential Elections showed a strong upward trend between 2014 and 2019 and remained high in 2024. Consequently, the decline in Pilkako participation in 2024 is contextual and specific to the local contest, rather than simply reflecting nationwide voter fatigue.

Historical voter participation data in the Gorontalo Mayoral Election (Pilkako) provide an interesting picture. In the 2014 Pilkako, voter participation was recorded at 77.08%, increasing to 80.09% in the 2018 Pilkako, before declining sharply to only 74.17% in the 2024 Pilkako. This figure was even below the national voter participation target stipulated in the RPJMN, which was set at 79.5%. This fluctuating trend indicates complex sociopolitical dynamics that have yet to be comprehensively explained. This phenomenon is consistent with the perspective of Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) in the Civic Voluntarism Model, which emphasizes

that political participation is influenced by three main factors: resources, such as time, money, and skills; engagement, referring to involvement and motivation; and mobilization, referring to invitations and organizational efforts (Vercauteren et al., 2025; Ostrander et al., 2021; Boldt et al., 2021). The decline in participation in the 2024 Pilwako may reflect a deficit in one or even all three of these factors.

The local context of Gorontalo City provides a relevant setting for further research. The decline in participation from 80.09% in 2018 to 74.17% in 2024 indicates the presence of specific local factors that require further investigation. Political fatigue, declining public trust in political elites, limited innovation in voter outreach by election organizers, and the growing number of apathetic voters may constitute potential explanations. Through the 3A3 Framework (Actors, Arenas, Aims), emphasizes that the quality of democracy is strongly determined by the effectiveness of authority, openness of access, and accountability (Maman, 2022; Hofer & Kaufmann, 2023; Gonçalves et al., 2025). The decline in participation in Gorontalo may reflect problems in one of these pillars.

Rather than viewing non-voting as a form of civic failure or deficit, this article proposes an interpretive approach that regards non-voting as a meaningful political practice. In the context of Gorontalo City, many citizens remain involved in political discussions, leadership evaluations, and moral considerations regarding the direction of local government through social and cultural networks, even though they consciously distance themselves from formal electoral participation.

To understand these dynamics, this article raises three main questions. First, which actors have the greatest influence in shaping citizens' political participation at the local level? Second, in which arenas do citizens develop political judgments and make participatory decisions? Third, what normative purposes and meanings do citizens attach to political participation, including the decision not to vote?

Empirically, this article is grounded in a qualitative case study in Gorontalo City, selected not because of its extreme characteristics but because of its theoretical relevance for understanding the dynamics of local democracy. Analytically, the study integrates the Civic Voluntarism Model, deliberative democracy theory, and the 3A³ framework (Actors, Arenas, Aims). Based on this integration, the article proposes the Socio-Deliberative Participation Model (SDPM) as its principal conceptual contribution.

This article makes three contributions to the study of democratization. First, it challenges approaches that position voter turnout as the sole indicator of participation by demonstrating that non-voting can coexist with active political engagement. Second, it extends deliberative democracy theory by emphasizing the importance of informal and culturally embedded deliberative arenas. Third, it proposes SDPM as an analytical framework for understanding participation in local democracy in the Global South.

Methods

This study examines public participation in the 2024 Regional Head Election in Gorontalo City. Rather than investigating how broad or extensive voters' political participation was in the election, the study seeks to understand the depth of meaning that voters attached to political participation before and after casting their votes in the 2024 Gorontalo City Regional Election. Accordingly, this study employs a descriptive qualitative research design. The data collected are not numerical but consist of interview transcripts, field notes, literature, personal documents, memorandum notes, and other official documents.

This study seeks to describe the empirical reality underlying the phenomenon in a comprehensive, detailed, and thorough manner. Through this descriptive research method, the researcher attempts to describe and portray in detail the meaning attached by voters to the exercise of their political rights in the 2024 Gorontalo City Regional Election. The researcher approaches the research object by gathering information according to the perceptions of both the researcher and the informants, allowing the findings to develop in accordance with the interactions that occur during the interview process. The researcher continuously seeks to appreciate and interpret both the explicit and implicit meanings conveyed through informants' explanations, field observations, and personal notes.

Data Analysis Techniques

To comprehensively explore the subjective meaning of public participation in the 2024 Gorontalo City Regional Election, this study applies the interactive data analysis model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). Data analysis is not positioned as a separate stage at the end of data collection but is conducted cyclically, interactively, and continuously until data saturation is achieved. The analytical process consists of three main stages that take place concurrently.

Data Condensation

Data condensation refers to the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming raw data obtained from field notes, interview transcripts, and supporting documents. The data condensation process includes transcription and data scaling, thematic coding, and abstraction and filtering. Qualitative data obtained from in-depth interviews with election organizers, including the Gorontalo City KPU and Bawaslu, political party activists, community leaders, and voters, are transcribed verbatim to facilitate comprehensive understanding. The researcher then conducts first- and second-level coding to organize the data into analytical categories, including voting motivations, perceptions of political efficacy, sociocultural influences, and post-voting evaluations. Data that are not relevant to the focus on the meaning of participation are set aside so that the analysis remains focused on the essential dimensions of the study.

Data Display

Data display is conducted by organizing the processed information into a structured framework to facilitate contextual understanding and conclusion drawing. The data are presented primarily through descriptive analytical narratives and comparative cross-regional matrices. The descriptive analytical narratives present data-based information systematically and comprehensively to describe the social context and dynamics of voters' interpretations in Gorontalo City. The comparative matrices organize the data into analytical tables to compare patterns in the meaning of participation between subdistricts with the highest and lowest levels of voter participation.

Conclusion Drawing and Verification

Conclusion drawing involves formulating meanings, relational patterns, and structures of interpretation from the analyzed data. Initial conclusions formulated during the early stages of data collection remain tentative and continue to develop throughout the analytical process.

To maintain the credibility and confirmability of the findings, conclusions are periodically verified through source and technique triangulation and theoretical confirmability. Source and technique triangulation involves comparing voter interview transcripts with information

obtained from the KPU and Bawaslu, community leaders, and official Regional Election documents. Theoretical confirmability involves examining empirical conclusions derived from the field against theoretical frameworks of political participation and voter behavior in order to produce a theoretically and academically valid analytical construction.

Result and Discussion

General Overview

Contextually, Gorontalo City serves as the administrative, economic, and educational hub of the Tomini Bay region, covering an area of 79.59 km² divided into 9 districts and 50 urban villages. Based on 2024 BPS (Statistics Indonesia) data, the population stands at 205,400, with an average density of 2,580 people/km² (peaking in the South City District at 7,265.72 people/km²). The demographic structure indicates the potential for a demographic bonus, with 69.7% of the population falling within the productive age range (15–64 years). Socioculturally, community dynamics are shaped by religious (Islamic) and customary values—integrated into the philosophy of "**Adati hula-hula'a to syara'a, syara'a hula-hula'a to Kitabullah**" (custom is grounded in religious law, and religious law is grounded in the Book of Allah) as well as the traditional **pohala'a** kinship structure and the **huyula** tradition of mutual cooperation.

Institutionally, the local political system operates within a decentralized framework involving the Mayor, the Regional House of Representatives (DPRD), and the local bureaucracy. In practice, this formal arena interacts closely with patronage networks, local elites, and customary and religious leaders who mediate political legitimacy at the community level.

Voter Classification Data in the Final Voters List (DPT)

Data regarding generational classification within the Final Voters List (DPT) for the 2024 Gorontalo City Regional Election reveals a compelling cross-generational distribution, carrying significant implications for political mobilization, campaign strategies, and the dynamics of public deliberation.

Table 1. Voter Classification by Generation in the Final Voters List (DPT)

DISTRICT	GEN Z			MILLENNIAL			GEN X			BABY BOOMER			PRE BOOMER		
	<28			28–43			44–59			60–78			>78		
	1997–2012			1981–1996			1965–1980			1946–1964			before 1945		
	L	P	Grand Total	L	P	Grand Total	L	P	Grand Total	L	P	Grand Total	L	P	Grand Total
DUMBO RAYA	1918	1838	3756	2322	2305	4627	1725	1860	3585	708	924	1632	35	76	111
DUNGINGI	2637	2578	5215	3086	3299	6385	2466	2676	5142	933	1141	2074	27	66	93
HULONTHALANGI	1873	1597	3470	2160	1998	4158	1685	1692	3377	649	745	1394	28	65	93
KOTA BARAT	2534	2395	4929	2919	2939	5858	2334	2501	4835	917	1159	2076	55	86	141
KOTA SELATAN	2065	1881	3946	2233	2333	4566	1997	2106	4103	818	1222	2040	71	138	209
KOTA TENGAH	2629	2575	5204	3147	3382	6529	2432	2824	5256	1036	1358	2394	63	109	172
KOTA TIMUR	2684	2460	5144	3094	3258	6352	2552	2756	5308	1072	1408	2480	60	154	214
KOTA UTARA	2090	1938	4028	2565	2787	5352	1978	2078	4056	718	922	1640	47	62	109
SIPATANA	1914	1919	3833	2252	2365	4617	1923	1970	3893	717	881	1598	30	46	76
Grand Total	20344	19181	39525	23778	24666	48444	19092	20463	39555	7568	9760	17328	416	802	1218

Source: Report on the 2024 Regional Head Election Stages, Gorontalo City General Election Commission (KPU)

Voter Classification and Generational Participation

The classification of voters in Gorontalo City consists of five main generational groups: Gen Z (1997–2012, age <28), Millennials (1981–1996, age 28–43), Gen X (1965–1980, age 44–59), Baby Boomers (1946–1964, age 60–78), and Pre-Boomers (before 1945, age >78).

Gen Z represents a challenge in terms of access and new forms of participation. Voters under 28 years of age constitute a significant number but often face challenges in accessing information and developing political literacy. Their participation tends to occur through digital platforms, community movements, and new forms of creative and collaborative participation. Meanwhile, Millennials represent the largest voter group and are the dominant voting population. They play a decisive role in determining the direction and outcome of the Regional Head Election through active engagement in digital spaces, communities, and sociopolitical activities.

Gen X has mature life experience and political awareness. They serve as a balancing force between younger and older generations and play an important role in maintaining the stability of rational political choices. Meanwhile, although Baby Boomers are smaller in number than younger generations, this group remains an important political force because of the consistency of its values, experience, and loyalty to political references. The Pre-Boomer group, aged over 78 years, although the smallest in number, still possesses a meaningful electoral voice. Their participation demonstrates the commitment of senior citizens to the democratic process and the continuity of civic values. Understanding the generational structure of the electorate is important for designing public participation strategies that are inclusive, sustainable, and relevant to the sociodemographic characteristics of Gorontalo City.

These data are distributed across nine subdistricts: Dumbo Raya, Duingingi, Hulonthalangi, Kota Barat, Kota Selatan, Kota Tengah, Kota Timur, Kota Utara, and Sipatana. Two examples that are clearly visible in the data output are Kota Tengah and Kota Timur Subdistricts, which demonstrate the general pattern of generational distribution in densely populated urban areas.

For example, in Kota Tengah Subdistrict, there are 5,204 Gen Z voters, 6,529 Millennial voters, 5,256 Gen X voters, 2,394 Baby Boomer voters, and 172 Pre-Boomer voters.

From these figures alone, it can be seen that Millennials are the largest generation. A similar pattern also appears across all subdistricts, with Millennials dominating the voter profile. In several subdistricts, the number of Gen Z voters is even greater than the number of Gen X voters. This indicates that the dominance of younger generations is a defining characteristic of the Gorontalo City electorate, which differs considerably from rural areas where Baby Boomers or Gen X may still constitute the dominant groups.

The above data provide an important basis for connecting theory with field realities: how *Actors*, *Arenas*, and *Aims* (3A3 Framework) operate differently across generations; how *Resources*, *Mobilization*, and *Motivation* (Civic Voluntarism Model) shape voting behavior; and how each generation contributes to the quality of Habermasian deliberation within the public sphere of Gorontalo City.

Dynamics of Gorontalo City Regional Election Participation (2013–2014)

The Regional Election contests in Gorontalo City over the last three periods demonstrate fluctuations in political participation and dynamic transformations in campaign arenas

2013 Regional Election (Turnout 77.0%)

Characterized by the dominance of political party machinery, intense competition among four candidate pairs, and post-election elite disputes that contributed to fragmentation in bureaucratic support.

2018 Regional Election (Turnout 80.09%)

Recorded the highest level of participation, driven by voters' *political efficacy* toward three former/current regional leaders, major party mobilization, and the effectiveness of early digital campaigning. However, this period was marked by intensive electoral disputes that continued to the Constitutional Court level.

2024 Regional Election (Turnout 74.17%)

Experienced a decline in participation of approximately 6%. This decline may have been influenced by *electoral fatigue* resulting from the crowded 2024 electoral calendar, issues concerning the accuracy of the voter list (DPT), and public fatigue with the policy options offered by candidates. Nevertheless, this period marked a transformation of the campaign arena from conventional patterns toward a *hybrid* form (digital–cultural).

Election Administration and the Legitimacy of Results

The 2024 Regional Election was conducted based on PKPU No. 2 of 2024, supported by a regional grant budget (NPHD) amounting to IDR 23.12 billion. The voting process was administered across 255 polling stations (TPS) throughout the urban villages. Aneta et al. (2025) emphasize that regional fiscal governance needs to be situated within a framework of decentralization and participation while remaining grounded in the principles of justice, equality, and the rule of law, so that the management of public resources does not stop at administrative compliance but is directed toward substantively fulfilling citizens' interests and rights.

During the electoral contest, the Gorontalo City KPU managed four candidate pairs, including one candidate pair from the independent route (RAMAH). The final recapitulation process, based on Gorontalo City KPU Decision No. 569 of 2024, was conducted on December 3, 2024, in the Gorontalo City KPU Hall. The process was attended by representatives of all candidate pairs, Bawaslu, and representatives of Forkopimda as a form of public transparency. The Gorontalo City KPU recapitulation established Adhan Dambea–Indra Gobel (AIR) as the winner with 39,696 votes. The electoral legitimacy of this determination was further strengthened after the Constitutional Court officially rejected the petition concerning the election results dispute through Decision No. 40/PHPU.WAKO-XXIII/2025. The following presents the recapitulation results after the hierarchical recapitulation process.

Table 2. Recapitulation of the 2024 Gorontalo City Regional Election Results

No.	Candidate Pair	Votes Obtained
1	DR. Drs. Hi. Idris Rahim, MM – Andi Ilham, SE	27,104
2	Mohamad Ramli Anwar Ahmad – Ana Supriyana Abdul Hamid, S.H., M.Kn.	14,095
3	Hi. Adhan Dambea, SH, S.Sos., MA – Indra Gobel	39,696

4	Ryan Fahricksan Kono, B.Com., M.Ap – dr. Charles Budi Doku	24,904
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Source: Gorontalo City KPU Report, 2024

This stage confirms the function of the Regional Election as a legitimizing arena within the 3A3 Framework. The acceptance of the election results by all parties indicates that the Regional Election process in Gorontalo City proceeded with a high level of public trust. This achievement cannot be separated from the KPU's efforts to uphold the principle of accountability, including the digital publication of recapitulation results and the periodic submission of reports on the election stages to the public.

Research Findings

The research findings demonstrate that public participation in the 2024 Gorontalo City Regional Election took a more complex form than merely the presence of voters at polling stations (TPS). Interview data from election organizers, election monitors, academics, cultural figures, as well as voters and non-voters, reveal differences in how participation is understood. These differences are particularly evident in who shapes political decisions, where those decisions are formed, what objectives citizens pursue through engagement, and why some citizens continue to vote while others distance themselves from the electoral process.

Participation Is Shaped by Multiple Actors

The first finding demonstrates that the formation of citizens' political decisions does not occur individually. Families, kinship relations (*pohalaa*), communities, customary leaders, community leaders, and the social environment are important actors in shaping citizens' political orientations. Information from electoral institutions continues to play a role but is not always the primary source in determining political decisions.

This finding is clearly reflected in the experience of Fatmawati Napu. She explained that in the previous election, she voted because there was a candidate figure who had a family relationship with her and because she received encouragement from her family. She stated, "Mostly from my family, because we tend to follow our family when there is someone who should be chosen." In the 2024 Regional Election, when there was no candidate figure with such a connection, her motivation to go to the polling station weakened. She also emphasized that she would be more motivated to vote if a candidate had a family or community relationship with her.

This finding is reinforced by the views of cultural figures. Alim Niode described *pohalaa* as a factor that remains highly influential in determining the direction of political support, even stronger than the candidates' visions and missions. Ishak Bumulo also indicated that family loyalty can become a social obligation for voters. Under certain conditions, blood or clan relationships may be more influential than assessments of a candidate's programs.

At the same time, citizens are not entirely passive objects of mobilization. They demonstrate the ability to assess campaign quality, distinguish between ideas and symbols, and independently determine whether a political process is worth participating in. Rosalin, for example, continued to exercise her right to vote despite considering the campaign insufficiently enlightening. Nurmawan Gusasi explicitly stated, "I voted, but honestly, the Regional Election campaign was more about attacking each other than ideas."

Thus, the data demonstrate a layered configuration of actors. Electoral institutions play a strong role in regulating the process, while families, communities, and cultural actors play important roles in shaping the meaning and decisions associated with participation.

The Sociocultural Arena Is More Determinative in Shaping Attitudes than the Polling Station

The second finding demonstrates that the arena of participation does not end in the formal electoral space. Family conversations, communities, kinship relations, social activities, and cultural spaces constitute important settings in which citizens develop political assessments.

In interviews, cultural figures indicated that family activities and collective prayers can become spaces for conveying political appeals. Alim Niode noted that gatherings at family events or collective prayers can serve as mechanisms for community mobilization. Ishak Bumulo also stated that prayer gatherings and thanksgiving events can provide opportunities to convey appeals to support the successful implementation of the Regional Election.

These social arenas also become spaces in which citizens evaluate candidate behavior. Assessments are based not only on programs but also on propriety, responsibility, honesty, and the consistency of elite behavior. Within the cultural context of Gorontalo, the values of *lipu*, *tanggomo*, *adab*, *pohalaa*, and *huyula* form part of citizens' political considerations.

Conversely, polling stations primarily serve as the place where decisions that have already been formed are actualized. The research data indicate that the decision to attend or not attend the polling station results from an accumulation of family conversations, political experiences, community influences, and assessments of candidates. The polling station becomes the endpoint of the decision-making process rather than the primary space in which preferences are formed.

This finding demonstrates that the arena of participation is plural. Formal electoral arenas remain important, but citizens' political decisions are largely formed within social spaces that are not always visible to electoral institutions.

The Objectives of Participation Are Plural

The third finding demonstrates that citizens do not share a single objective when participating. For some citizens, voting represents a civic obligation. For others, participation is related to expectations regarding government, support for candidates, the maintenance of social relationships, or the expression of criticism toward the political process.

Rosalin, for example, views voting as both a right and a civic obligation, although she considers the campaign insufficiently enlightening. Siffaurahma Suwandi connects her choice with hopes for a leader capable of administering government honestly, fairly, and wisely. Meanwhile, Rahmah Saleh emphasizes that her vote is important in determining the direction of government and that voting therefore constitutes a form of civic responsibility.

On the other hand, some citizens use their absence from polling stations as an expression of dissatisfaction. Wirna Idrus stated, "I did not vote. It was a form of protest because the Regional Election campaign was more about symbols and attacks among candidates." Abdul Wahid Dai associated his decision with a loss of trust resulting from political promises that were perceived as repeatedly made. Fatmawati Napu added the unattractiveness of the candidates, weak programs, the absence of family ties, and work-related commitments as reasons for not voting.

These data demonstrate that voting and non-voting have different reasons, but both emerge from processes of political assessment. Therefore, the objectives of participation cannot be reduced to simply winning a candidate or producing votes.

Civic Capacity Does Not Automatically Produce Electoral Participation

The fourth finding demonstrates a gap between citizens' capacity to participate and the actualization of that capacity through attendance at polling stations. Citizens possess basic knowledge of elections, follow political developments, have social networks, and are capable of assessing candidates. However, this capacity does not always result in electoral participation.

From the perspective of election organizers, voter outreach has been conducted through various approaches. However, several informants acknowledged that public participation is still largely understood as attendance at polling stations. Endang Indawaty Hunou stated that organizer training has focused more heavily on regulations and technical matters, while participatory aspects and social communication remain limited. Bayu also observed that some citizens are reluctant to become involved because they do not feel that the Regional Election brings direct changes to their lives.

At the citizen level, this issue is even more apparent. Fatmawati understands the importance of voting, but her decision to attend depends heavily on the presence of a figure with a close family or community connection. When such motivation is absent and no candidate is considered attractive in programmatic terms, the political capacity she possesses does not translate into attendance at the polling station.

Thus, the problem is not merely a lack of capacity, information, or access. The data demonstrate the existence of a conversion gap, namely a gap between citizens' capacity and willingness to convert their civic capacity into electoral participation.

Deliberative Deficit and Withdrawal from the Electoral Arena

The fifth finding concerns the quality of political communication during the 2024 Regional Election. Informants consistently criticized campaigns that were perceived as displaying symbols, personal images, and attacks between candidates rather than exchanges of ideas concerning public issues.

Nurmawan Gusasi stated that campaigns contained more mutual attacks than ideas. Wirna Idrus viewed campaigns as largely symbolic and disconnected from community needs. Rosalin also distinguished between campaigns containing substantive ideas and campaigns characterized by attempts to bring one another down.

Similar criticism emerged from academics. Eka Putra B. Santoso assessed that public discourse in Gorontalo had not fully demonstrated healthy deliberative discourse because it was heavily dominated by elite narratives and superficial social media content. Ramli Mahmud considered that citizens had not been provided with sufficient space to discuss political choices rationally.

Under these conditions, some citizens continued to attend polling stations but did so with a critical attitude. Others distanced themselves from the electoral process. Data concerning Wirna Idrus, Abdul Wahid Dai, and Fatmawati Napu indicate that non-attendance may be associated with disappointment toward candidates, campaigns, political promises, and the limited relevance of political programs.

Empirically, these findings occurred within the context of a decline in Gorontalo City Regional Election participation from 80.09% in 2018 to 74.17% in 2024. This decline occurred as the

political arena was also undergoing transformation, particularly through the use of digital media and the increasing diversity of political communication spaces.

Overall, the research data demonstrate that public participation in the 2024 Gorontalo City Regional Election operates along a spectrum ranging from voting as an obligation, voting with criticism, and non-voting as a form of withdrawal. This pattern demonstrates that presence or absence at polling stations is the result of social, cultural, and evaluative processes that take place before election day.

Discussion

The research findings indicate that the main issue of public participation in the 2024 Gorontalo City Regional Election is not merely the low level of voter turnout. The issue lies in the relationship between actors, arenas, aims, civic capacity, deliberative quality, and cultural context. The empirical pattern demonstrates that a participation model that places individuals and polling stations at the center of analysis is insufficient to explain citizens' behavior.

From Individual Voters to Multi-Actor Participation

The findings concerning the strong influence of families, *pohalaa*, and informal figures demonstrate that political participation in Gorontalo is relational. Citizens' political decisions are formed within networks of social relationships that are closely connected to everyday life. From the perspective of the 3A³ Framework, this finding expands the understanding of the *Actors* dimension. Participation actors are not limited to voters and electoral institutions but also include social and cultural actors who contribute to determining the direction of political decisions. Aneta et al. (2023) demonstrate that strengthening governance at the local level cannot be separated from the social context of society and the involvement of various actors outside formal bureaucratic structures. This perspective demonstrates that governance effectiveness is strongly influenced by institutions' ability to establish responsiveness and connectedness with their social environment.

The factual findings demonstrate that family encouragement can be a determining factor in whether an individual attends the polling station (Ravanilla, 2022). When a relative figure runs as a candidate, the family becomes a channel of mobilization. When such a figure is absent, this encouragement becomes weaker.

This pattern demonstrates that *recruitment* within Civic Voluntarism Theory does not always originate from political parties or formal institutions. Family and community networks can perform a recruitment function that is closer to citizens' experiences. However, dependence on these networks also makes participation situational. When social networks do not provide a figure or reason considered relevant, participatory capacity does not automatically translate into electoral action.

Thus, this study demonstrates that citizens are not individuals separated from their social structures. They are actors who make decisions within particular social relationships. This explains why approaches that assess only the individual characteristics of voters may overlook important factors operating at the community level.

Social Arenas as Infrastructure for Preference Formation

The finding that families, communities, and cultural spaces constitute sites for the formation of political attitudes expands the understanding of *arenas* within the 3A³ Framework. Political arenas are not necessarily identical to spaces formally established by electoral institutions.

Family conversations, religious activities, community meetings, and cultural interactions become spaces where citizens compare information, assess candidates, and develop political attitudes.

This finding is important for deliberative democracy theory. In the Gorontalo context, deliberation does not always take place in the form of formal debates. It also occurs through everyday conversations and social evaluations. However, this form of deliberation has characteristics that differ from Habermasian deliberation, which emphasizes open and argumentative exchanges of reasons. Within family and *pohalaa* arenas, power relations, loyalty, and social norms also influence the process of preference formation.

Therefore, social arenas have an ambivalent character. On the one hand, they provide spaces for communication that are closer to and trusted by citizens. On the other hand, they may constrain individual autonomy. Alim Niode's statement regarding excessive *pekerti* and the findings concerning strong genealogical loyalty demonstrate that social pressure can reduce citizens' critical space.

These findings establish an important position: local deliberation is not absent, but its form and quality differ from formal deliberation. The challenge is not to replace social arenas with formal arenas but to connect the two.

Culture as a Mechanism of Civic Engagement

The findings concerning *lipu*, *pohalaa*, *huyula*, *tanggomo*, and *adab* demonstrate that culture operates as a mechanism of participation. Culture determines whom citizens trust, which spaces are considered legitimate for speaking, which objectives are considered appropriate, and how citizens assess political behavior.

The perspectives of cultural figures interpret participation as a form of affection and service to *lipu*. At the same time, they criticize money politics because it is considered to undermine the values of responsibility and honesty.

These findings demonstrate that Cultural Civic Engagement should not be positioned merely as a social background. Culture operates as a mechanism that connects social experiences with political action. The value of *huyula*, for example, can provide social resources through voluntary work and solidarity in the administration of elections.

However, culture also has a constraining dimension. Family loyalty can encourage participation but, at the same time, make political choices less open to programmatic evaluation. Deference toward certain figures can preserve harmony but simultaneously reduce the courage to express criticism.

Therefore, culture in this study is not understood as a factor that automatically strengthens democracy. Culture operates ambivalently. It can become a civic resource, but it can also constitute a constraint on deliberation. This finding provides an important basis for positioning Cultural Civic Engagement as a contextual mechanism within the PDPM.

Conversion Gap: When Capacity Does Not Become Participation

Civic Voluntarism Theory explains participation through *resources*, *engagement*, and *recruitment*. The research findings support the importance of these three elements while simultaneously demonstrating the limitations of assuming a linear relationship among them.

Citizens possess electoral knowledge, social networks, political experience, and the ability to evaluate candidates. Nevertheless, some citizens still do not attend polling stations. Fatmawati

provides the clearest example. She understands the political process and has voted previously, but her participation is strongly influenced by the presence of a relative figure, candidate appeal, program relevance, and employment conditions.

Therefore, this study identifies a conversion gap, namely the gap between civic capacity and the actualization of electoral participation. In this context, the issue of participation is not only whether citizens *can do*, but whether they find reasons to *want to* and channels through which that capacity can be converted into action.

The conversion gap also explains why increased technical voter outreach does not always produce increased participation. If citizens do not perceive political relevance, do not trust formal arenas, or do not find candidates they consider meaningful, additional information does not automatically change their decisions.

Thus, this study shifts the focus from the question “why do citizens not vote?” to a more substantive question: why does the civic capacity available to citizens fail to be converted into electoral participation?

Deliberative Deficit and Deliberative Withdrawal

The findings concerning campaigns constitute an important part of explaining the decline in participation in 2024. Citizens did not merely state that campaigns were uninteresting. They identified a more substantive problem, namely the dominance of symbols, personal images, and attacks between candidates over programmatic ideas.

From the perspective of deliberative democracy, this condition indicates the existence of a deliberative deficit. Formal arenas are available, including candidate debates, but the existence of formal arenas does not guarantee substantive exchanges of reasons. Citizens continue to receive information, but they do not always have sufficient opportunities to test arguments, compare programs, or raise questions on an equal basis.

As a result, some citizens continue to vote with a critical attitude. Others withdraw. Some citizens explicitly explain their absence as a form of protest against campaigns dominated by symbols and attacks. Others associate their absence with a loss of trust in repeatedly made political promises.

This phenomenon can be understood as deliberative withdrawal, namely withdrawal from the electoral arena when citizens perceive that the political process does not provide sufficiently meaningful deliberation. This concept is important because it demonstrates that the relationship between deliberation and participation is not always linear. High-quality deliberation can encourage participation, but a deliberative deficit can result in withdrawal.

Thus, non-voting in this study cannot automatically be categorized as apathy. For certain informants, the decision is the result of political evaluation. However, this finding does not mean that all non-voters are deliberative actors. Based on the data, what can be affirmed is that some forms of non-voting in the context of this study have reflective and critical reasons.

From Electoral Participation to Public-Deliberative Participation

When the five findings are considered together, a mismatch becomes apparent between the design of electoral participation and citizens’ actual participation practices. The electoral system primarily measures participation through attendance at polling stations. Meanwhile, citizens experience politics through social networks, cultural arenas, everyday experiences, moral evaluations, and informal discussions.

This gap produces three conditions. First, citizens may possess political capacity but not use it at polling stations. Second, citizens may attend polling stations while remaining critical of the political process. Third, citizens may not attend polling stations while continuing to actively evaluate and discuss politics.

These findings demonstrate that participation is more appropriately understood as a process connecting Actors, Arenas, and Aims with civic capacity, deliberative quality, and cultural context. Within this construction, culture is not merely an additional variable. It becomes a mechanism influencing how citizens' capacities are converted, which arenas are trusted, and which objectives are considered meaningful.

This is where the Public-Deliberative Participation Model (PDPM) becomes relevant. PDPM does not replace the 3A³ Framework, Civic Voluntarism Theory, or deliberative democracy. Instead, the model connects all three with Cultural Civic Engagement to explain the phenomena identified in the field.

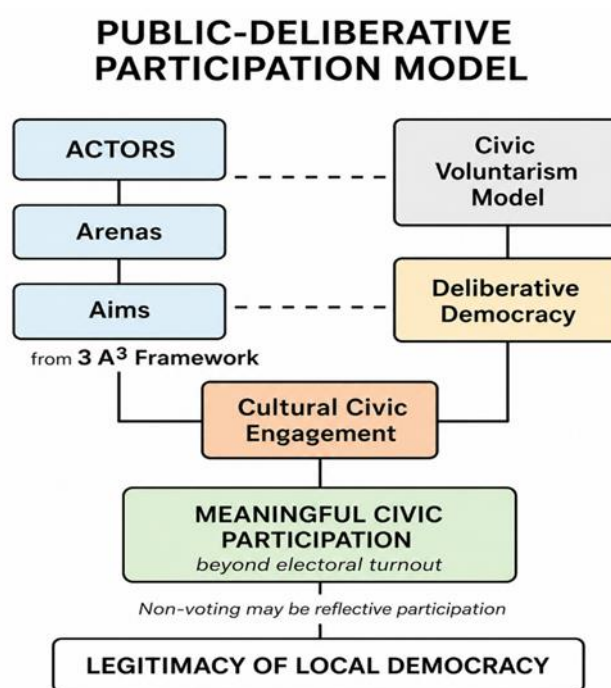


Figure 2. Public-Deliberative Participation Model

The figure above visualizes the Public-Deliberative Participation Model (PDPM) formulated in this study. The diagram illustrates how civic participation does not emerge directly from electoral procedures, but rather through interconnected social, cultural, and deliberative processes.

The left side of the diagram presents the three main components of the 3A³ Framework, namely Actors, Arenas, and Aims. These three components indicate that public participation is shaped by diverse actors, takes place across various arenas, and is directed toward plural aims. Therefore, participation never exists in a social vacuum, but is always connected to the social structures and cultural contexts surrounding it. The label “from 3A³ Framework” emphasizes that these elements constitute the initial foundation of the model.

On the right side, the diagram incorporates two major theories of participation, namely **Civic** Voluntarism Theory and Democratic Deliberation. Civic Voluntarism Theory explains the

availability of civic capacities, such as resources, engagement, and mobilization. Meanwhile, Democratic Deliberation emphasizes the importance of the quality of political discourse. These two theories provide the conceptual foundations for understanding why citizens possess civic capacities while simultaneously engaging in critical evaluations of political processes.

The center of the diagram presents the core concept of the study's novelty, namely Cultural Civic Engagement. This box is positioned at the intersection of the 3A³ Framework, Civic Voluntarism Model, and Democratic Deliberation. Its placement signifies that civic engagement is mediated by cultural values such as *lipu*, *huyula*, *adab*, and *pohalaa*. Through this mechanism, participation capacities, arenas, and aims are processed into meaningful political attitudes.

From *Cultural Civic Engagement*, the model flows toward the Meaningful Civic Participation box. This section includes the phrase “*beyond electoral turnout*” to emphasize that meaningful participation cannot be measured solely by attendance at polling stations. The note “*Non-voting may be reflective participation*” indicates that, in certain contexts, absence from the polling station may represent a reflective expression rather than merely apathy.

Thus, the main contribution of this study is not merely to offer a new way of explaining low turnout. Its contribution lies in explaining why social participation that remains active does not always translate into electoral participation. In the context of the 2024 Gorontalo City Regional Election, citizens did not completely withdraw from politics. Some continued to engage in discussions, assess candidates, maintain social relationships, and criticize political processes. What weakened was the connection between such engagement and the formal electoral arena.

These findings provide the empirical foundation for the PDPM to conceptualize public participation as a socio-deliberative process that takes place across arenas, involves multiple actors, has plural aims, and is influenced by cultural values. From this perspective, the success of local democracy cannot be assessed solely by how many citizens come to polling stations, but also by the extent to which the system is able to connect citizens' capacities, experiences, aspirations, and assessments to political processes that they perceive as meaningful.

Conclusion

This study concludes that public participation in the 2024 Gorontalo City Regional Election cannot be adequately understood solely through voter turnout or attendance at polling stations. Political participation is shaped through interactions among multiple actors, diverse social and cultural arenas, plural civic aims, citizens' participatory capacities, and the quality of political deliberation. Families, *pohalaa*, communities, cultural figures, and informal social networks play important roles in shaping political preferences, while values such as *lipu*, *huyula*, *adab*, *tanggomo*, and *pohalaa* mediate how citizens interpret political responsibility, legitimacy, and appropriate forms of engagement. The findings further reveal a conversion gap between citizens' civic capacity and its actualization through electoral participation, as well as a deliberative deficit in campaigns perceived as dominated by symbols, personal attacks, and limited substantive discussion. Consequently, non-voting cannot automatically be interpreted as political apathy; for some citizens, withdrawal from the polling station represents a reflective and critical response to political processes perceived as insufficiently meaningful or legitimate. These findings support the concept of Cultural Civic Engagement and the Public-Deliberative Participation Model (PDPM), which position participation as a socio-deliberative process extending beyond formal electoral procedures. Therefore, the quality of local democracy should be assessed not only by the number of citizens who vote, but also by the extent to which

electoral institutions can connect citizens' cultural values, civic capacities, aspirations, experiences, and political evaluations with participatory arenas they perceive as meaningful.

Suggestion

Based on the research findings, increasing public participation in Regional Elections cannot be achieved sufficiently through additional technical socialization or voter mobilization immediately before election day. Interventions need to be directed toward the factors that shape citizens' decisions before they reach the polling station. Therefore, several measures may be considered.

First, election organizers need to broaden voter education strategies from an institutional approach toward an approach based on social actors. Families, communities, community leaders, cultural figures, and kinship networks have been shown to occupy important positions in shaping citizens' political attitudes. They can be involved as partners in democratic education rather than merely as targets of socialization. This approach allows electoral messages to enter through the social spaces that citizens actually use to develop their political preferences.

Second, participatory arenas need to be expanded from formal spaces to social and cultural spaces. Citizen dialogue forums, community discussions, cultural spaces, and neighborhood-based meetings can be developed as spaces for more substantive political conversations. The purpose is not to replace official electoral forums, but to connect formal arenas with the spaces where citizens form their political assessments in everyday life. In this way, participation is directed not only toward increasing attendance at polling stations but also toward improving the quality of preference formation.

Third, voter education needs to place the quality of deliberation as a central concern. The research findings indicate that some citizens perceive campaigns as containing more symbols, personal images, and attacks between candidates than discussions of programs. Therefore, election organizers and participants need to promote campaign formats that enable citizens to compare programs, assess candidates' arguments, and communicate the problems they face. Public forums that facilitate two-way dialogue can provide an alternative to campaign patterns that are oriented solely toward conveying political messages.

Fourth, participation-enhancement strategies need to address the conversion gap. Socialization should not stop at increasing knowledge about electoral procedures. Election organizers need to understand why citizens who know and understand the electoral process still choose not to attend polling stations. Mapping non-participating groups based on the reasons for their absence can be used to design more specific interventions. This approach is more relevant than assuming that all non-voters are apathetic or lack political knowledge.

Fifth, local cultural values and practices need to be carefully integrated into democratic education. The values of *lipu*, *huyula*, *pohalaa*, *adab*, and *tanggomo* can serve as sources for strengthening civic engagement because of their close connection to community life. However, their use needs to be directed toward values of responsibility, equality, openness, and respect for individual choices. This is important because family and kinship networks can also generate social pressure regarding political choices. The integration of culture into democratic education should therefore strengthen participation without reducing citizens' political autonomy.

Sixth, election participants need to improve the quality of political communication. The research findings show that citizens' dissatisfaction is not only related to particular candidates, but also to campaign patterns perceived as lacking substance. Candidates and campaign teams

need to provide more concrete information regarding programs, policy priorities, and solutions to community problems. More programmatic political communication can strengthen citizens' reasons for becoming involved and reduce the tendency to withdraw from the electoral arena.

Seventh, post-election participation evaluation needs to use indicators broader than turnout. Attendance at polling stations remains important as an indicator of electoral participation, but it is insufficient to describe the entirety of public engagement. Evaluation also needs to consider the quality of citizen interaction, involvement in public discussions, levels of trust in political processes, citizens' experiences in obtaining information, and the reasons for choosing or not choosing to vote. Such an approach enables election organizers to understand whether low turnout is a problem of capacity, political relevance, deliberative quality, or a form of intentional withdrawal.

More specifically, the Public-Deliberative Participation Model (PDPM) can be used as an evaluation framework to examine public participation more comprehensively. The model enables mapping of the actors involved, the arenas in which preferences are formed, the aims of participation, civic capacities, the quality of deliberation, and the influence of cultural contexts. The use of this framework can help election organizers identify points at which participation encounters obstacles, particularly when citizens' capacities fail to be converted into electoral engagement.

Thus, the future agenda for increasing public participation needs to shift from merely mobilizing citizens toward polling stations to strengthening the participation ecosystem. The focus should not only be on ensuring that citizens attend on election day, but also on ensuring that citizens have information, spaces for dialogue, political reasons, and social environments that enable them to form choices consciously. This approach is more consistent with the research findings that citizens' political participation occurs through the interaction between actors, arenas, aims, capacities, deliberation, and culture.

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