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Mobilizing the Minority: Church Networks and Political Participation in Muslim-Majority

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Abstract: *Electoral mobilization in Indonesia is frequently influenced by informal religious networks alongside formal political parties. This article examines the capacity of a minority church network to function as a non-party actor during the 2024 Semarang mayoral election. Utilizing a qualitative single instrumental case study design and reflexive thematic analysis, this research analyzes data gathered from in-depth interviews with five key organizational leaders at Grace Community Church, triangulated with internal documents and official electoral records. The findings demonstrate that the church network strategically operationalized centrality, community, and connectivity. By integrating mechanisms of civic mobilization, the study reveals how pastoral leadership skills, homophilous social networks, and external institutional linkages fostered high political awareness. This value-driven mobilization contributed to a fourteen-year peak voter turnout of 71.25% within the municipality. The empirical evidence highlights a distinct phenomenon of political volunteerism that actively resists entrenched clientelism and money politics. The research concludes that informal faith-based associations can operate effectively as autonomous moral networks. These insights provide contextualized analytical propositions on how minority religious social capital strengthens citizen participation and local democratic quality in developing polities without relying on transactional incentives.*

Keywords : *church networks; Indonesian election; political participation; religious factors; minority mobilization.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

We often hear about how the majority religion, such as Islam, influences vote-gathering in Indonesian general elections (Assyaukanie, 2019) . The story of how non-majority networks, specifically churches, influence voter behavior in this Muslim-majority country has rarely been told. Existing electoral scholarship frequently focuses on national party dynamics or dominant religious organizations, leaving the informal political work of minority religious institutions underexplored (Yuniarto et al., 2024). Examining these non-majority networks provides crucial insights into how local democracy functions beyond formal party structures and majority identity politics (Septiana & Wardana, 2024) .

Scholarship on religion and elections has long moved beyond the question of whether faith matters in political life. In the United States, Calhoun-Brown (1996), McKenzie (2004),

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and Brown and Brown (2003) show that Black churches function as vital civic and political networks, where informal political talk and committee involvement build civic skills and political participation. Comparative studies extend this insight to minority and non-Christian settings, where Jamal (2005), Oskooii & Dana (2018), and Sobolewska et al. (2015) demonstrate that mosques and minority religious institutions can increase both electoral and non-electoral participation. Recent work by Schaaf et al. (2025) further underscores the importance of religious and personal networks for ethnic-minority political mobilization across diverse political regimes.

Comparative research across Latin America and Southeast Asia illustrates that religious organizations adopt diverse political roles depending on leadership, theology, and institutional context. Studies in Brazil and Chile show that churches can operate as moral networks, political machines, or partisan mobilizers during elections (Cammett et al., 2026; Castillo & Medel, 2025; Smith, 2019; Tuñón, 2026). In the Indonesian context, Lussier (2019) as well as Lussier and Ahnaf (2024) examine mosques and churches in Yogyakarta, finding that houses of worship offer uneven civic-skill opportunities and often project political neutrality publicly prior to elections. Places of worship function as complex arenas where moral principles and civic awareness intersect, shaping how citizens evaluate public choices (Sihotang et al., 2023; Williams et al., 2024).

Understanding the political role of non-party actors in local electoral contests requires examining specific demographic dynamics. Data from the Semarang City Central Statistics Agency in 2024 reveals that the population is predominantly Muslim at 87.09%, while the Christian community constitutes a minority of 10.45%, comprising 7.38% Protestants and 3.07% Catholics (Semarang City Central Statistics Agency, 2024). Despite operating within a predominantly Muslim environment, the Christian minority maintains a concentrated congregational base distributed across various urban sub-districts. This demographic landscape provides a structural foundation for faith-based social networking and localized civic coordination (Bakar & Wahyu, 2022).

Social cohesion within this minority group positions Christian congregations as a highly strategic voting bloc in the competitive landscape of local elections. A shared religious identity in a predominantly Muslim setting intensifies internal connectivity among church members, transforming routine congregational activities into organic avenues for political awareness (Choong, 2023). Political candidates recognize the efficiency of engaging with these closely knit networks to secure concentrated electoral support (Tawakkal et al., 2020). Hierarchical respect and established trust toward religious leaders provide a direct channel for political socialization, making places of worship vital arenas for grassroots civic engagement (Djupe & Neiheisel, 2022).

Contemporary Indonesian electoral dynamics are frequently entangled with pragmatic approaches and transactional practices (Ibrahim et al., 2024). Political forces often exploit social networks as mere mobilization tools through material incentives or money politics, overshadowing spiritual ethics with pragmatic interests (Favian Aryanda, 2026). This transactional culture compromises voter independence and fundamentally contradicts democratic principles (Eveland & Gee, 2025). Network momentum formed within church congregations offers a compelling counter-narrative by operating as a moral foundation that fosters genuine political volunteerism (Arifianto, 2024). Central church actors utilize emotional closeness and shared trust to guide political awareness without relying on material rewards (Nagy, 2025; Ronda et al., 2025).

Previous studies examining the political influence of religious institutions in Indonesia focus primarily on regions where those institutions hold a demographic majority (Sembiring et al., 2023). Research by Aspinall and Sukmajati (2016) on the Minahasa Christian Evangelical Church in North Sulawesi demonstrates how a dominant religious group acts as a powerful

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political network to mobilize voters and increase candidate electability directly. The dynamics of religious networks operating as a demographic minority remain underrepresented in current academic literature. The Christian community in Semarang City presents a distinct context that contrasts sharply with majority-dominated cases, offering novel insights into how minority networks consolidate political support and resist transactional practices.

Despite this growing literature, studies on church networks as non-party actors in Indonesian local elections, especially in Muslim-majority cities with significant Christian minorities, remain scarce. Leaving this empirical gap uninvestigated risks producing a skewed understanding of Indonesian local democracy that falsely attributes all grassroots mobilization to either Islamic organizations or transactional party machinery. Failing to explore these minority dynamics conceals the critical mechanisms through which marginalized groups protect their political representation. Neglecting these informal structures blinds scholars and policymakers to alternative, value-driven models of civic engagement that successfully resist money politics. This article addresses that gap by examining how the JKI Agape Youth Congregation mobilized support during the 2024 Semarang mayoral election.

This article addresses the central research question: How do minority church networks operationalize centrality, community, and connectivity to mobilize political participation and counter transactional politics in a Muslim-majority urban election? Answering this question provides a twofold contribution to political sociology and electoral governance. Empirically, the study demonstrates that minority religious networks can achieve a 14-year peak voter turnout of 71.25% through internal structural density and moral authority rather than demographic dominance or formal party affiliation. Theoretically, the findings enrich current understanding of how non-party religious associations function as moral networks, demonstrating how shared ethical values can sustain political volunteerism and offer meaningful insights into counteracting transactional clientelism in local democratic processes.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Network Elements in Political Analysis

Political network analysis examines how relational structures shape individual choices, resource distribution, and collective political behavior (Patty & Penn, 2016). Rather than treating voters as isolated decision-makers driven solely by personal attributes or formal party platforms, network theory posits that political action is embedded within social architectures characterized by distinct structural ties (Patty & Penn, 2016). Social networks create structural opportunities and constraints that influence how citizens access political information, evaluate choices, and coordinate collective participation (Campbell, 2013; Patty & Penn, 2016). Analyzing electoral dynamics through a network perspective requires evaluating three primary structural elements: centrality, community homophily, and connectivity (Patty & Penn, 2016). Structural centrality defines the relative prominence, positional advantage, and power of an actor within a network (Borgatti et al., 2009; Freeman, 1979). Central nodes occupy strategic positions that facilitate control over information flows, coordination, and resource allocation across group members (Borgatti et al., 2009). Individuals occupying highly central positions possess extensive direct and indirect contacts, allowing them to act as primary opinion hubs and decision-making focal points (Freeman, 1979). Within political contexts, central actors exercise disproportionate social influence, utilizing their authority to lower information costs for others and frame electoral choices (Patty & Penn, 2016). Centrality grants these key actors the structural capacity to set normative expectations, guide group consensus, and mobilize collective action across congregational boundaries (Borgatti et al., 2009; Freeman, 1979).

Communal homophily describes the fundamental tendency of individuals to associate and form social ties with similar others, bounded by shared demographic attributes, religious

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beliefs, or normative values (Lawrence & Shah, 2020; McPherson et al., 2001). Homophilous interactions naturally generate cohesive subgroups and social circles characterized by deep mutual trust, emotional proximity, and high internal solidarity (McPherson et al., 2001). Individual-level homophily creates safe, familiar environments where participants engage in informal deliberation, reinforcing shared collective identity (Lawrence & Shah, 2020). In electoral settings, homophily operates as a stabilizing mechanism that aligns political preferences among group members, transforming shared faith or cultural identity into a powerful catalyst for group cohesion and political alignment (Lawrence & Shah, 2020; McPherson et al., 2001).

Network connectivity captures the structural density, frequency, and specific relational pathways through which communication diffuses across different segments of a social network (Granovetter, 1973; Park et al., 2018). High connectivity ensures that information, ideas, and normative guidance travel rapidly throughout the entire social structure (Granovetter, 1973). Interpersonal interactions within dense networks allow citizens to pool political knowledge beyond their individual resource limitations, mitigating personal information deficits and boosting political efficacy (Granovetter, 1973; Park et al., 2018). Strong connectivity bridges disparate micro-groups within a broader association, enabling rapid mobilization and ensuring that moral or civic messaging delivered at central hubs translates into coordinated grassroots activity (Granovetter, 1973; Park et al., 2018).

Religious Networks as Mobilization Institutions

Religious associations function as traditional mobilization institutions that cultivate civic skills, social capital, and democratic participation through non-party channels (Choi & Shin, 2017). Norris (2002) establishes that faith-based networks drive civic mobilization through five distinct mechanisms: social networks, leadership skills, political awareness and identity, party linkages, and campaign resources. Houses of worship provide structured organizational environments where citizens participate in routine administrative activities, committee life, public speaking, and event management (Campbell, 2013). These participatory opportunities allow congregants to develop practical leadership skills and social networks that enhance activist confidence and organizational competence (Campbell, 2013; Norris, 2002). Engagement in church committees serves as a crucial training ground, equipping individuals with transferable skills that facilitate active political participation during electoral cycles (Campbell, 2013; Choi & Shin, 2017).

Spiritual authority intersects with civic socialization when religious organizations frame political engagement as a moral mandate (Dahan & Monogan, 2016). Human beings exist simultaneously as spiritual and political entities, making faith-based institutions effective intermediaries between individual citizens and state governance (Dahan & Monogan, 2016). Religious leaders utilize sacred spaces, sermon platforms, and fellowship gatherings to demystify political processes, encourage informed voting, and instill ethical obligations regarding public welfare (Dahan & Monogan, 2016). By embedding democratic principles within spiritual discourse, religious organizations cultivate deep political awareness and identity, guiding responses to evolving political dynamics without necessarily converting places of worship into formal partisan campaign stages (Dahan & Monogan, 2016; Norris, 2002). Moral socialization within faith networks fosters a strong sense of civic duty, elevating political participation from a routine bureaucratic act to a conscientious expression of shared ethical values (Choi & Shin, 2017; Dahan & Monogan, 2016).

Integrated Conceptual Framework

Integrating network structural elements with Norris's (2002) mobilization mechanisms provides a comprehensive analytical framework for interpreting how non-party actors organize

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political participation in local elections. Structural centrality enables pastoral leaders and church administrators to deploy leadership skills and manage party linkages, functioning as central opinion hubs that channel moral guidance throughout the congregational hierarchy (Borgatti et al., 2009; Freeman, 1979). Communal homophily, anchored in shared Christian faith and collective identity, binds congregants into trust-based social networks where political awareness forms organically (Lawrence & Shah, 2020; McPherson et al., 2001). High network connectivity ensures that campaign resources and moral messaging delivered from central nodes diffuse rapidly across informal congregational ties, transforming civic awareness into coordinated grassroots volunteerism (Granovetter, 1973; Park et al., 2018). Figure 1 illustrates this integrated conceptual framework

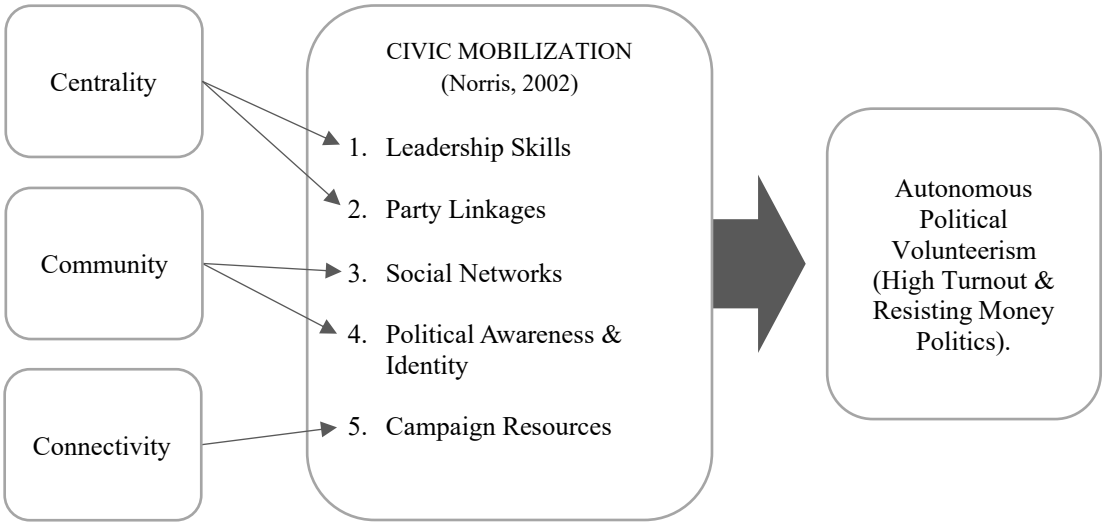


Figure 1. Integrated Conceptual Framework
Source: Compiled by author based on the references above.

Operationalizing this integrated framework allows qualitative interview narratives to be systematically analyzed through defined structural network dimensions and civic mobilization lenses. Examining centrality explains how pastoral authority establishes non-partisan voting imperatives while maintaining sacred institutional neutrality. Analyzing homophily demonstrates how shared minority identity and mutual trust reinforce group solidarity and electoral alignment. Evaluating connectivity reveals how informal congregational channels sustain autonomous political volunteerism without material inducements. Synthesizing these dimensions provides a sharp analytical lens for understanding how minority church networks mobilize voter turnout, resist pragmatic money politics, and enhance democratic quality in Muslim-majority local elections.

3. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, single instrumental case study design grounded in an interpretive constructivist paradigm. Rather than employing a narrative approach centered on individual life histories or plot-driven storytelling, the study utilizes Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) to examine how an urban Christian church navigates non-partisanship during general elections. A single case study design is epistemologically suited for this inquiry as it enables an in-depth, contextualized investigation of organizational

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governance, internal communication networks, and institutional boundary-setting within a real-world sociopolitical environment.

Research Setting and Anonymization Protocol

To safeguard informant confidentiality and comply with qualitative research ethics (Creswell & Creswell, 2023), the focal organization is anonymized as Grace Community Church. Given the political sensitivities surrounding minority religious institutions within a Muslim-majority urban municipality in Indonesia, institutional markers and specific administrative titles have been generalized. Informants are identified solely through standardized alphanumeric codes based on their functional institutional roles, mitigating the risk of deductive disclosure within a relatively small religious network.

Table 1. Informant Profiles and Anonymization Coding

Informant Code	*Institutional Role*	*Years of Involvement*	*Primary Data Contribution*
INF-1	Senior Executive Pastor	> 15 Years	Executive policy, institusional boundaries, pulpit governance
INF-2	Associate Pastoral Staff	8 Years	Congregational care, routine sermon content, ministry coordinator
INF-3	Administrative & Legal Director	10 Years	Compliance with election regulations (KPU), institutional circulars
INF-4	Youth Ministry Coordinator	6 Years	Internal communication channels, youth political neutrality education
INF-5	Senior Lay Board Member	> 10 Years	Advisory oversight, congregational feedback, non-partisan stance monitoring

Source: Primary data, interviews (2025)

Informant Selection, Boundary Criteria, and Data Saturation

Informants were selected through purposive sampling based on three explicit inclusion criteria: active leadership or administrative roles within the church during the recent election cycle, direct involvement in formulating or enforcing institutional policies regarding political engagement, and an institutional tenure of at least five years to ensure familiarity with organizational culture. The sample size was bounded at five key organizational actors. This sample size is methodologically justified through the principle of data saturation (Dahal et al., 2024), which was reached by the fifth interview as no new analytical codes or institutional themes emerged regarding the non-partisan positioning of the church. External political actors, such as election candidates, political campaign personnel, or non-Christian residents, were deliberately excluded from the sampling frame. This boundary strategy was established because the analytical objective of this study focuses on the internal institutional logic, governance mechanisms, and intra-congregational communication dynamics through which a religious institution maintains a non-partisan posture.

Data Collection and Interview Protocol

Data were gathered during an intensive one-month fieldwork period immediately following the local election cycle. Primary data were derived from semi-structured, face-to-face qualitative interviews lasting between 60 to 90 minutes each. The interview instrument was structured around four main thematic modules: institutional policy regarding church facilities, homiletics and liturgy guidelines, ministry governance for handling candidate visits, and relational communication channels.

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Operationalization of Qualitative Network Concepts

Concepts derived from Social Network Analysis, specifically actor centrality, community homophily, and network connectivity, are applied strictly as qualitative analytical constructs (Froehlich et al., 2020) rather than quantitative sociometric measurements. Actor centrality refers to qualitative perceptions of institutional influence and moral authority held by key pastoral leaders in establishing non-partisan boundaries. Community homophily describes shared religious values and collective identity regarding the divide between sacred duties and secular politics. Network connectivity refers to qualitative communication channels through which non-partisan directives flow from central leadership to sub-ministries.

Data Analysis and Triangulation Procedures

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase framework for Reflexive Thematic Analysis. To ensure analytical rigor and trustworthiness, data triangulation was operationalized across three distinct sources (Creswell & Creswell, 2023): primary interview transcripts, internal institutional documents (such as written sermon outlines and church circulars), and external contextual data (including election commission regulations and local media archives). Interview statements regarding church neutrality were systematically cross-referenced against written sermon outlines and public announcements to verify consistency. Informed consent was explicitly obtained from all individual participants prior to data collection, ensuring their voluntary participation and permission to utilize anonymized qualitative insights for academic publication. Confidentiality and ethical research protocols were strictly maintained throughout the study in accordance with institutional guidelines.

Researcher Reflexivity and Positionality

Qualitative interpretive research positions the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. Maintaining reflexive transparency requires acknowledging an external positionality relative to the formal governance structure of the church. The research team holds an academic background in political science, government, and public policy, without maintaining formal employment or leadership roles within Grace Community Church. Formal access was secured through executive board approval. To address potential confirmation bias, the research team maintained a reflexive field journal, conducted peer debriefing, and performed member-checking with key informants to confirm descriptive accuracy.

Methodological Limitations

Methodological limitations must be explicitly acknowledged alongside the research findings. As a single-case study focused on leadership perspectives within one urban congregation, the empirical findings cannot be statistically generalized across all religious institutions in Indonesia. Potential elite bias, social desirability bias, and recall bias remain inherent factors when analyzing post-hoc leadership accounts. The intensive one-month fieldwork window provided a cross-sectional snapshot rather than longitudinal observation, while the socio-political dynamics reflect specific minority interactions within a Muslim-majority municipality.

4. RESULTS

The 2024 Semarang mayoral election presented a highly competitive political landscape marked by an unprecedented level of citizen engagement. Official data from the Semarang City General Election Commission (Table 2) revealed a voter turnout of 71.25%, representing the highest electoral participation rate in the city over the last 14 years. Out of 1,265,192 registered

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voters, 903,477 individuals exercised their voting rights across various polling stations. The electoral contest featured two candidate pairs, culminating in the victory of Agustina Wilujeng Pramestuti and Iswar Aminudin, who secured 57.24% of the vote with 486,423 ballots. The opposing pair, supported by a massive coalition of major political parties, attained 42.76%. This statistical outcome indicates a strong grassroots consolidation that bypassed traditional party machinery, pointing to the significant mobilization power of non-party actors at the local level.

Table 2. Distribution of Voter Participation in Semarang City Mayoral Election 2024

Category	*Total*	*Male*	*Female*
Permanent Voter List (DPT)	1.265.192	613.751	651.441
Voter Rights Users (DPT)	898.392	417.344	481.048
Voter Rights Users (DPTb)	2.303	1.330	973
Voter Rights Users (DPK)	2.782	1.413	1.369
Total Voting Rights Users	903.477	420.087	483.390
Registered Voters with Disabilities	4.453	2.296	2.157
Voters with Disabilities Exercise Their Voting Rights	1.790	820	970

Source: Semarang City General Election Commission, 2024

The social landscape of Semarang City provides a distinct demographic environment that shapes local political mobilization. Official statistics from the Semarang City Central Statistics Agency in 2024 indicate a clear majority-minority religious distribution across the municipality. Islamic adherents constitute the overwhelming majority at 87.09% of the total population. The Christian community forms the second-largest religious group at 10.45%, comprising 7.38% Protestants and 3.07% Catholics, while Hindu and Buddhist populations account for 1.67% and 0.71%, respectively. Table 3 details the complete religious composition of Semarang City. Despite operating within a predominantly Muslim environment, the Christian minority maintains a concentrated congregation base spread throughout various urban sub-districts, establishing a structural foundation for faith-based social networking and localized civic coordination.

Table 3. Number of Religious Compositions in Semarang City

Religion	*Number of Compositions*
Islam	87.09%
Christianity	10.45% (7.38% Protestant, 3.07% Catholic)
Hinduism	1.67%
Buddhism	0.71%

Source: Semarang City Central Statistics Agency, 2024

Empirical observations at the Indonesian Christian Church Agape provide a concrete example of this non-party mobilization. Established in 2002 under the JKI synod, the church maintains a robust organizational structure comprising a head pastor, three reverends, eight administrators, and a congregation numbering in the hundreds. Fieldwork conducted over a one-month period involved in-depth interactions with five key informants representing both the church hierarchy and grassroots members. The hierarchical arrangement places the pastor

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and administrators in central positions of authority, granting them significant control over the flow of information and community decisions. The daily interactions within this closed network demonstrate high levels of internal cohesion. Mobilization relied on specific mechanisms integrated into three network elements, namely centrality, community, and connectivity.

Centrality: Strategic Positioning and Leadership Skills

Centrality established the structural foundation for political direction within the JKI Agape network. Pastors, reverends, administrators, and youth leaders occupied pivotal positions connecting the congregation to external political entities. The hierarchical arrangement placed the pastor and administrators in central positions of authority, granting them significant control over the flow of information and community decisions. Leadership skills became highly evident in how these figures coordinated meetings, set deliberative agendas, addressed the congregation, and managed campaign logistics. Church leaders utilized sermons, prayer meetings, and youth group gatherings to connect intensely with the congregation and consolidate network members. One interviewed pastor emphasized that the church deliberately avoided transforming the pulpit into a practical campaign stage, yet actively embedded democratic values into spiritual teachings. INF-1, serving as a senior pastor, stated, "Our leadership focus is to guide the congregation in understanding their civic duties. We structured town hall meetings outside worship hours to discuss local policies, ensuring our members evaluate candidates critically without feeling spiritually coerced." This statement illustrates how leadership skills curate political awareness safely.

Party linkages and campaign resources were manifested through formal and informal ties with candidate pairs. Central actors managed these linkages by utilizing worship spaces, volunteer labor, and internal communication networks as non-material campaign resources. Religious leaders explicitly directed the congregation to participate in the election, subtly channeling support for the Agustina Wilujeng Pramestuti and Iswar Aminudin ticket through moral framing rather than explicit partisan endorsements. INF-2, a church administrator, explained, "We did not accept campaign funds from any political party. We offered our hall for civic dialogues and used our internal WhatsApp groups to disseminate the schedule. Our volunteers managed all the logistics." The church effectively transformed its internal administrative infrastructure into potent campaign resources, allowing leaders to bridge the congregation with political actors while maintaining institutional purity.

Community: Social Networks and Political Identity

The community dimension transformed structural directives into collective civic action. Routine congregational activities served as the primary arena for transmitting political awareness leading up to the election. Prayer meetings, small groups, and social ministries fostered deep trust, solidarity, and a collective identity as a Christian minority within a Muslim-majority city. Social networks operated through intensive peer discussions and information dissemination, reinforcing a profound sense of belonging among members. Shared religious identity acted as a powerful catalyst in solidifying the church network's political preference. The mayoral candidate, Agustina Wilujeng, shares the Christian faith with the JKI Agape congregation, creating a strong sense of homophily and emotional closeness among network members.

Political awareness and identity thrived within these safe communal spaces. A youth congregation member expressed during the interview that supporting a candidate with a similar faith background provided a sense of security and hope that minority aspirations would be accommodated in future city policies. INF-3, a small cell group coordinator, noted, "During our weekly cell group prayers, we discussed our shared challenges as a minority. Our decision

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to vote was a collective realization of our responsibility to protect our community rights and religious freedom in this city." This shared identity facilitated rapid political socialization across the network, transforming regular faith-based activities into safe spaces where political consensus was built naturally.

Political appeals were accepted not due to coercion or material incentives, but rather through this shared consciousness. The congregation perceived their electoral participation not merely as a civic duty but as a vital extension of their communal solidarity. INF-4, a youth representative, stated, "We mobilized our peers because we understood the political stakes for our future, not because someone paid us to do it. Our social ministries taught us that voting is a tangible part of our social care for the city." The community element anchored the mobilization securely in moral awareness, ensuring that the network operated organically through established trust rather than external political pressure.

Connectivity: Outward Bridges and Electoral Mobilization

Connectivity outward ensured that the internal consensus reached the ballot box effectively on election day. Church networks connected outwardly to candidates, political parties, local media, other regional churches, and the general public. This external bridging facilitated a two-way flow of information, resources, and support. The mobilization of the church network produced a distinct phenomenon of political volunteerism that actively resisted the entrenched culture of money politics. Voter behavior in post-reform Indonesian elections has historically been heavily influenced by transactional practices and the distribution of material goods. The JKI Agape congregation demonstrated the exact opposite behavior by providing voluntary support without expecting or receiving any direct compensation from the candidates.

Campaign resources and party linkages came into play as the church acted as a vital bridge for electoral mobilization. Informants revealed that church members willingly contributed their time, energy, and ideas to support the campaign. A senior church administrator highlighted that congregants independently monitored the polling stations to safeguard the votes, driven purely by moral conviction. INF-5, a general congregation member involved in external ecumenical liaison duties, shared, "We formed volunteer squads to help elderly members reach the polling stations. We also communicated with other churches and local media to ensure our voting rights were protected and visible to the public." This two-way connectivity expanded the influence of the church far beyond its physical walls.

Documented evidence from local media archives highlights the peaceful and highly organized nature of this minority group's electoral participation. Media reports covered the inter-faith civic dialogues hosted by church members, showcasing their outward bridging capacity. This voluntary intellectual and physical contribution underscores the capacity of religious networks to cultivate autonomous political participation free from pragmatic financial incentives. Outward connectivity directly translated into the high voter turnout of 71.25% in the city, representing the highest peak in the last fourteen years. The network successfully bridged the gap between internal moral conviction and external democratic participation, proving that organizational linkages can effectively replace financial transactions in mobilizing voters.

The Synergy of a Moral Network

The elements of centrality, community, and connectivity do not operate in isolation but rather reinforce one another within the electoral landscape. Centrality provides the necessary strategic direction and leadership required to navigate complex political choices securely. Community fosters the internal cohesion, trust, and shared identity essential for collective

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action among a minority group. Connectivity extends the operational reach of the church, translating internal solidarity into measurable electoral outcomes at the polling stations.

Together, these three dimensions weave the mechanisms of leadership skills, social networks, political identity, party linkages, and campaign resources into a unified mobilization strategy. The synergy of these components enables the church network to function as a highly organized moral network. This moral network successfully mobilizes citizens for political participation without relying on the pervasive practice of money politics. The integrated operational framework demonstrates how faith-based non-party actors can fundamentally enhance the quality of local democracy.

5. DISCUSSION

Theoretical Implications: Social Networks, Religion, and Non-Transactional Participation

Political participation is commonly defined as citizen activity intended to influence public policy and the selection of government leaders (Amelung & Baumgarten, 2017; López González & De Santiago, 2020), and public involvement is widely treated as an indicator of democratic quality (Ma & Cao, 2023). The 71.25% turnout in the 2024 Semarang mayoral election, the highest in fourteen years, is difficult to explain through party-centric accounts alone. Fossati (2019) shows that informal structures shape electoral behavior in Indonesia, and the present findings are consistent with this view, since church networks appeared to link congregants with local authority. Campaign effects and candidate characteristics were not isolated in this study, so the church network is better read as a plausible contributing pathway than as a sole cause.

Centrality gives key actors an advantage over information flows, coordination, and group decisions, since actors in central nodes hold extensive contacts that channel resources and leadership (Ida et al., 2025; Ishfaq et al., 2022). In JKI Agape, pastors and senior administrators occupied such positions, which fits the view of religious leaders as traditional mobilizing agents who cultivate civic skills and political awareness (Choi & Shin, 2017; López González & De Santiago, 2020). Their sermons framed voting as a moral duty rather than a partisan endorsement, suggesting that moral authority can reshape how voters weigh the costs and benefits of participating (Anderson et al., 2024). This reading refines structural accounts that treat centrality mainly as a resource position. It also differs from studies that portray clergy as direct electoral brokers, because the pastors here maintained institutional neutrality.

Community formation in networks often follows homophily, whereby actors with shared attributes and norms cluster together (Abbasi et al., 2014). In JKI Agape, shared faith provided this basis, and the Christian identity of mayoral candidate Agustina Wilujeng likely reinforced it. The typology of Laumann and Peter, which distinguishes cliques, social circles, factions, and action sequences, helps explain how informal interaction sustains collective sentiment (Solo & Bishop, 2019), and prayer groups and youth ministries resembled social circles in which consensus formed. Norris (2002) argues that religious networks build political awareness and collective identity by offering safe spaces for deliberation, a mechanism that may have been intensified by the congregation's minority position. Homophily can also produce insular groups, so cohesion probably supported mobilization here because it was paired with civic messaging directed at public governance.

Connectivity, understood as the density of pathways linking actors, shapes the speed and reach of political communication (McCubbins & Weller, 2020). McClurg's network interaction theory holds that interpersonal exchange gives citizens access to political information beyond their own resources (Soares de Freitas & Ewerton, 2019), and church committee work builds organizational and public speaking skills that enhance activist competence (Campbell, 2013;

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Chen et al., 2016). Lussier (2019) likewise finds that places of worship in Indonesia offer civic skill opportunities, which aligns with the way youth members and administrators in JKI Agape coordinated grassroots activities and monitored polling stations without party funding. Religious institutions also act as agents of political socialization (Djupe & Neiheisel, 2022), and Dahan and Monogan (2016) describe people as political and spiritual beings with a moral mandate to engage in public life. Members contributed time and effort without material compensation from the candidate pair, which offers a counterpoint to clientelist accounts and extends the political culture tradition by suggesting that religious norms can offset transactional expectations (López González & De Santiago, 2020).

Comparative and Practical Implications: Global South, Electoral Integrity, and Strengthening Civil Society

Comparison with other settings clarifies how demographic position conditions network mobilization. Aspinall and Sukmajati (2016) describe the Minahasa Christian Evangelical Church in North Sulawesi as a dominant religious network that, enjoying majority status, can function as a power broker and campaign machinery for candidates tied to church leadership. Semarang differs, as Christians form a 10.45% minority within an 87.09% Muslim-majority population. The findings suggest that minority status does not remove the political relevance of religious networks but shifts the mode of mobilization toward internal connectivity, emotional proximity, and moral solidarity. Mobilization may therefore depend less on demographic dominance than on structural density and cohesion, although this inference needs testing across more cases.

Scholarship on developing democracies emphasizes clientelism, vote buying, and broker-driven patronage as central drivers of turnout (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Hicken, 2011; Mares & Young, 2016), and such practices continue to be documented in Indonesian local elections (Favian Aryanda, 2026). Non-party structures are often analyzed as passive recipients of patronage or as brokers pursuing material concessions (Berenschot, 2018; Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007). Rally attendance and ballot casting are frequently conditioned on inducements distributed by brokers (Nichter, 2014). The Semarang case complicates this picture, because church members gave personal time and presence at polling stations without material rewards, which indicates that a faith-based association can operate as an autonomous moral network. Studies of religion and mobilization elsewhere, including Brazil, similarly caution against assuming that religious social capital inevitably leads to clientelist capture or sectarian polarization (Birnir & Overos, 2019; Smith, 2019).

These observations carry practical implications for electoral governance and civil society support. Electoral authorities in the Global South contend with money politics, voter cynicism, and unequal representation of minorities (Ibrahim et al., 2024), and the Semarang experience suggests that value-driven mediating structures may raise turnout without inflating campaign spending. Religious institutions that remain publicly non-partisan while socializing democratic responsibilities can address civic education gaps left by formal party systems (Djupe & Neiheisel, 2022; Lussier & Ahnaf, 2024). Such support must be handled carefully, since the same networks could be politicized, and findings from a single city do not establish transferability to other minority or multicultural contexts. Future research should examine how informal, value-driven networks interact with formal institutions to sustain civic participation.

6. CONCLUSION

This research concludes that the church network of Grace Community Church (JKI Agape) functioned as an active non-party actor in facilitating citizen political participation during the 2024 Semarang mayoral election. Through the structural lens of social network

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analysis, the empirical evidence demonstrates how localized informal networks operationalized elements of centrality, community, and connectivity. Central pastoral figures utilized their institutional standing to establish non-partisan deliberative spaces, while communal homophily grounded in shared minority identity fostered mutual trust and elevated civic awareness among congregants. High network connectivity ensured that moral messaging diffused rapidly across fellowship channels, contributing to a 14-year peak voter turnout of 71.25% within the observed electoral areas without relying on transactional money politics or material incentives.

Rather than offering a sweeping empirical generalization across all Muslim-majority urban contexts, these findings serve as grounded analytical propositions regarding the political behavior of minority religious networks. The observed case suggests that under conditions of demographic minority status, informal faith-based associations can operate as moral networks that foster political volunteerism. Structural density and shared ethical values within minority religious institutions can counteract pervasive clientelistic norms, providing an empirical counter-narrative to transactional politics models in developing polities. These theoretical insights offer a contextualized perspective on how religious social capital can support civic engagement while maintaining public non-partisanship in municipal elections.

Practical implications emerging from this study highlight the potential role of informal mediating structures in filling civic education vacuums and encouraging value-driven voter participation. Methodological limitations inherent to this inquiry must be explicitly emphasized. As a qualitative single instrumental case study centered on five key leadership informants within one Protestant congregation in Semarang during a post-election fieldwork window, the empirical findings reflect localized relational dynamics and cannot be statistically generalized. Future scholarly inquiries should treat these case-based observations as testable propositions. Researchers are encouraged to conduct comparative studies across diverse Christian denominations, other religious minority populations, and different multicultural urban centers in Indonesia and the Global South to rigorously evaluate the boundary conditions of non-party religious mobilization.

Author Contribution

Conceptualization, W.A. and P.S.M.; methodology, W.A., P.S.M., and M.Y.D.P.; formal analysis, W.A., P.S.M., and M.Y.D.P.; investigation, W.A., P.S.M., and M.Y.D.P.; writing – original draft preparation, W.A., P.S.M., and M.Y.D.P.; writing – review and editing, W.A. and D.L.W.; supervision, W.A.; project administration, P.S.M.; funding acquisition, W.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Data Availability Statement

All data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT-5 strictly for copy-editing, language polishing, and organizing the structural narrative of the text (Prompt: Refine the following paragraph from the Results section into an analytical narrative without em-

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dashes, ensuring seamless integration of Norris's civic mobilization mechanisms and network structural elements). This tool was used exclusively for editorial structuring and language enhancement. The authors critically reviewed, verified, and substantially edited all outputs, maintaining sole authorship and full responsibility for the final content of the publication in strict accordance with COPE guidelines.

Conflict of Interest Declaration

The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funding institution had no role in the design of the study, in the collection, analysis, or interpretation of data, in the writing of the manuscript, or in the decision to publish the results.

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