Political positioning and local issue salience in the digital age: Evidence from regional elections in an archipelagic province

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Abstract

This study analyses the influence of political positioning on voter preferences, with local political issues functioning as a mediating variable within the framework of digital political marketing. Using a quantitative explanatory survey design, data were collected from 349 eligible voters in the Riau Archipelago Province and examined using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (SEM–PLS) via WarpPLS 8.0. The results show that political positioning significantly affects voter preferences and that the salience of local political issues partially mediates this relationship. These findings highlight that positioning strategies are more effective when aligned with context-specific issues in geographically fragmented regions, thereby strengthening both emotional and cognitive voter evaluations. Theoretically, the study advances digital political marketing and issue-based voting frameworks, and, practically, offers guidance for designing contextually relevant political narratives in archipelagic settings.

Keywords: *Archipelagic region, Digital political marketing, Local political issues, Positioning, Voter preferences*

JEL Classification: D72, M31, M37, O33

INTRODUCTION

The advancement of digital technology has fundamentally transformed the construction and perception of political communication in contemporary society. Social media has emerged as a primary platform for political candidates to shape their public image, articulate key issues, and influence voter behaviour. This transformation is particularly evident in Indonesia's local political landscape, notably in the Regional Head Election (Pilkada) of the Riau Islands (Kepri), a region characterised by an archipelagic geography and high social diversity. In this context, the main challenge lies not only in how candidates position themselves but also in how their political messages can transcend geographical boundaries and resonate with local issues.

Empirical evidence indicates a decline in political participation among the people of the Riau Islands over the past decade. According to the General Election Commission (KPU, 2024), voter turnout decreased from 78.07% in the 2019 election to 60.2% in the 2020 Pilkada and is projected to fall further to 56% in the 2024 Pilkada. This decline

reflects increasing political apathy and diminishing public trust in candidates' and political parties' ability to address local concerns effectively. A similar trend is evident at the national level: a survey conducted by the Indonesian Survey Institute (2023) found that 47% of young voters reported having "no fixed preference for political parties," indicating a growing number of swing voters among the digital generation.

Furthermore, the phenomenon of political disengagement is highlighted by a survey conducted by Indikator Politik Indonesia (2023), which revealed that only 34.7% of Kepri residents believe local candidates are connected to regional issues. In contrast, 65.3% perceive that candidates' narratives are predominantly national in focus and fail to address island-specific concerns such as infrastructure disparities, imbalanced economic development, and marine governance. This indicates a perceptual gap between the political messages candidates convey and the substantive issues faced by the local community.

Regarding information behaviour, data from the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII, 2024) show that internet penetration in the Riau Islands stands at 89.2%, with 76.8% of users actively engaging on social media. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok serve as primary sources of political information for 71% of respondents aged 17 to 35 (We Are Social, 2024). However, this heavy reliance on digital media does not necessarily correspond to a high-quality understanding of public issues. Social media algorithms often create political "filter bubbles," confining voters within homogeneous information environments that may undermine rational decision-making (Raynol, 2020; Liu et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2023).

Theoretically, political positioning is understood as a strategy to shape a candidate's image and distinctiveness in voters' minds through unique messages, symbols, and values (Kotler et al., 2021; Stahl et al., 2012; Gusatti et al., 2022; Hiqmah et al., 2025; Pich et al., 2024). A candidate with strong positioning can achieve strategic differentiation and enhance public credibility. However, the effectiveness of such positioning depends heavily on the alignment between political messages and locally relevant issues (Van Erkel, 2023; Ortega & Oñate, 2024). In archipelagic regions, where access to information and political participation are uneven, local issues serve as a crucial link between positioning and the formation of voter preferences (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

While theories of political marketing and issue voting have been extensively discussed internationally (Sophocleous, 2024; Hair et al., 2021; Dufresne & Ouellet, 2021; Franz et al., 2020), research in Indonesia has tended to focus more on candidate image or branding, leaving the role of local political issues as a mediating variable largely underexplored (Ramli et al., 2021; Fitriani et al., 2021). The unique geographic characteristics of Indonesia as an archipelagic nation introduce distinct dynamics: regional fragmentation leads to varying access to political information and differing exposure to local issues. Consequently, voter preferences across regions display diversity that cannot be explained solely by candidate image or ideology.

This gap between theory and empirical conditions serves as the basis for this research. First, there is a mismatch between candidates' political positioning strategies and public perceptions of the relevance of local issues. Second, a theoretical gap exists in studies that examine local political issues as mediating factors between positioning and voter preferences. Third, the archipelago's social and geographical characteristics pose new challenges to the effectiveness of digital political communication. Accordingly, this research seeks to answer the question: how does political positioning directly or indirectly influence voter preferences through local political issues in the context of the 2024 Riau

Islands regional elections?

This study offers a novel contribution by integrating spatial fragmentation and unequal digital access—core characteristics of archipelagic regions—into the theoretical relationship between political positioning, issue salience, and voter preferences. Existing studies in political marketing and issue voting typically assume relatively homogeneous information environments and overlook how geographic discontinuity shapes voters' cognitive processing of political messages. By demonstrating that local political issues mediate between symbolic positioning and meaningful voter evaluations, this study introduces a new explanatory framework that extends political marketing theory beyond urban or continental settings. This spatially embedded perspective has been largely absent from prior research, making the present study a distinctive contribution to the global literature.

This study aims to examine how political positioning influences voter preferences, both directly and indirectly, through local political issues in the Riau Islands. This approach seeks to deepen understanding of the relationship between political marketing strategies and voter behaviour in a geographically and socio-culturally fragmented region. Academically, the study contributes to the expansion of political marketing and issue voting theories within the context of a decentralised, archipelagic nation. Practically, its findings are expected to assist candidates, political parties, and electoral authorities in developing data-driven, issue-oriented, and geographically adaptive political communication strategies for the Riau Islands community.

To achieve this aim, the study develops a conceptual model linking positioning to voter preference, with local political issues functioning as a mediating mechanism. The model is grounded in political marketing and issue voting theories, which posit that voter behaviour is shaped not only by the credibility and distinctiveness of a candidate's image but also by the extent to which political messages align with issues that the public considers salient (Walgrave et al., 2020; Carrieri et al., 2023; Okolikj & Quinlan, 2021). In the context of local elections, positioning strategies are designed to construct favourable perceptions of candidates by differentiating their values, agendas, and political identities. However, the effectiveness of these strategies depends on their relevance to the local context, where political issues function as the interpretive lens through which positioning is received and evaluated.

Previous research supports this perspective, demonstrating that positioning can directly shape voter preferences, influence public perceptions of issue relevance, and interact with local issues as a mediating factor in voter decision-making (Bodet et al., 2019; Ortega & Oñate, 2024; Van Erkel, 2023). Accordingly, the model proposed in this study posits that: (1) political positioning directly affects voter preferences; (2) political positioning influences perceptions of local political issues; (3) local political issues significantly affect voter preferences; and (4) local political issues mediate the relationship between political positioning and voter preferences. This conceptual model thus reflects a layered causal process in which local issues serve as a perceptual bridge between candidate positioning and voter behaviour.

Based on this conceptual reasoning, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Political positioning has a significant direct effect on voter preferences.
H2: Political positioning significantly affects perceptions of local political issues.
H3: Local political issues have a significant effect on voter preferences.
H4: Local political issues mediate the relationship between political positioning and voter preferences.

METHODS

Research design

This study employs a quantitative explanatory research design to examine the causal relationships among positioning, local political issues, and voter preferences in the context of the 2024 Regional Head Election in the Riau Islands Province. Data were collected from June to December 2024, during the political campaign period, to capture voter perceptions as political messages and issues circulated.

Population and sample

The population consists of 2,183,300 registered voters listed in the 2024 Permanent Voter List for the Riau Islands Province (KPU Riau Islands, 2024). A cluster sampling procedure was adopted based on the seven administrative regions: Bintan, Karimun, Natuna, Lingga, Anambas Islands, Batam, and Tanjungpinang. Within each region, sub-districts were randomly selected, and respondents were allocated proportionally according to the number of registered voters in each area.

The minimum required sample size was calculated using the formula of Isaac and Michael (1981) with a 5% margin of error, resulting in 349 respondents. This sample size is also consistent with SEM requirements of 5–10 respondents per indicator (Hair et al., 2019). Proportional allocation ensured that the final sample reflected the province's geographic population structure.

A summary of the proportional sample distribution across the districts and cities of the Riau Islands Province is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of respondent samples

Regency/City	Number of Voters	Proportion (%)	Sample
Bintan	123,355	8.21	29
Karimun	191,416	12.75	44
Natuna	57,504	3.83	14
Lingga	75,088	5.00	17
Kepulauan Anambas	34,921	2.32	8
Batam City	851,614	56.73	198
Tanjung Pinang City	167,076	11.13	39
Total	2,183,300	100.00	349

Data collection

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire distributed through both online and offline modes. The online instrument was administered via Google Forms, while printed questionnaires were used in areas with limited internet access. The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended items measured on a five-point Likert scale.

Before conducting the full survey, the instrument underwent expert review by three scholars in political marketing and voter behaviour to assess content relevance and clarity. A pilot test with 30 respondents was then carried out to evaluate item comprehension and response consistency, resulting in minor wording adjustments.

The final survey was administered from June to December 2024. Enumerators assisted with data collection in districts with lower digital access. Primary data were used to measure perceptions of positioning, local political issues, and voter preferences. In contrast, secondary data were sourced from official electoral records and public political reports to contextualise the findings.

Variable measurement and indicators

Three latent constructs were measured in this study: Positioning (PS), Local Political Issues (LPI), and Voter Preference (VP). All indicators were adapted from established measurement frameworks in prior research and assessed using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

Positioning (PS) was adapted from Stahl (2012) and Kotler & Keller (2021) and captures perceived uniqueness, differentiation, and innovation. Local Political Issues (LPI) were measured using indicators of issue relevance, visibility, and governmental responsiveness, adapted from McCombs & Shaw's (1972) agenda-setting framework. Voter Preference (VP) followed Harrop and Miller's (1987) multidimensional evaluation model, covering sociological, socio-psychological, economic, and rational considerations.

The detailed measurement indicators for each variable are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Operationalization of research variables

Variable	Code	Main Indicator	Reference Source
Positioning	PS	1. Uniqueness (PS1) 2. Distinctive characteristics (PS2) 3. Difference (PS3) 4. Novelty/Innovation (PS4) 5. Dynamism (PS5)	Stahl (2012) ; Kotler & Keller (2021); Smith (2019)
Local Political Issues	LPI	1. Issue relevance (LPI1) 2. Underlying issue (LPI2) 3. Issue impact (LPI3) 4. Issue visibility (LPI4)	McCombs, E., & Shaw, D. L. (1972)
Voter Preferences	VP	1. Sociological & demographic approach (VP1 2. Party/Candidate identification (VP2) 3. Economic approach (VP3) 4. Rational approach (VP4)	Harrop & Miller (1987)

Data analysis and model testing

Data were analysed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) with WarpPLS version 8.0. The analysis consisted of two stages: measurement model evaluation and structural model evaluation.

In the measurement model evaluation, convergent validity was assessed using factor loadings and Average Variance Extracted (AVE), while construct reliability was evaluated through Composite Reliability (CR) and Cronbach's Alpha. Discriminant validity was examined using the Fornell–Larcker criterion and cross-loadings. Multicollinearity was assessed using full collinearity VIF.

In the structural model evaluation, path coefficients and p-values were estimated using bootstrapping. Model explanatory power was assessed using the coefficient of determination (R^2), and predictive relevance was evaluated using Q^2. The mediating effect of Local Political Issues (LPI) on the relationship between Positioning (PS) and Voter Preference (VP) was examined using indirect-effect testing.

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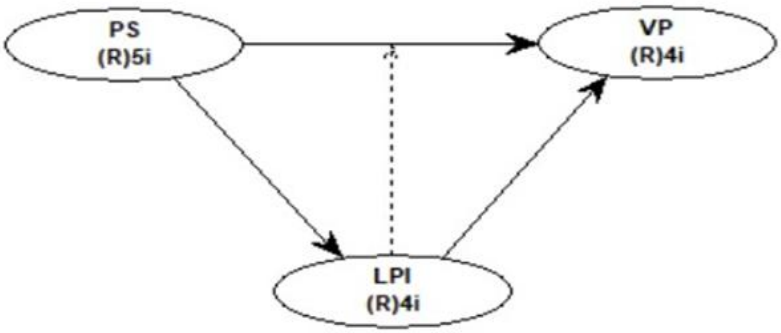

Figure 1. Research framework model

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This section presents the empirical findings derived from the quantitative analysis. The results are organised sequentially, beginning with the demographic characteristics of respondents, followed by descriptive statistics of the main constructs, and subsequently the evaluation of the measurement and structural models. This structure ensures a clear, systematic presentation of how the data support the proposed hypotheses and the overall research framework.

Respondent characteristics

A total of 349 respondents from seven districts/cities in the Riau Islands Province participated in the survey. Table 3 presents the demographic profile of the sample. Overall, respondents were predominantly male (60.2%) and relatively young, with 53.6% aged 17–36 years. Most respondents had completed high school or held an undergraduate degree (59.8%). The demographic composition aligns with the regional voter structure, indicating that the sample adequately represents the target population.

Table 3. Respondent characteristics

Demographic Variable	Total	Percentage
Gender		
Male	210	60.2
Female	139	39.8
Age		
17 – 26	106	30.4
27 – 36	81	23.2
37 – 46	51	14.6
47 – 56	15	4.3
57 – 66	88	25.2
67 and above	8	2.3
Education		
Primary School	16	4.6
Junior High School	26	7.4
High School	101	28.9
Diploma	29	8.3

Demographic Variable	Total	Percentage
Bachelor's Degree	108	30.9
Master's Degree	56	16.0
Doctoral Degree	13	3.7
Occupations		
Civil Servants	45	12.9
Retired Indonesian	9	2.6
National Armed Forces/ Police		
Private Sector Employees	85	24.4
Self-Employed	51	14.6
Professionals	34	9.7
Others	125	35.8
Income		
Less than 3,500,000 (UMP)	159	45.6
3,500,000 to 8,500,000	144	41.3
8,500,000 to 13,500,000	31	8.9
Above 13,500,000	15	4.3

Description of research variables

Descriptive statistics were used to summarise respondents' perceptions of each construct. Tables 4–6 report the distribution and mean values for all indicators.

Table 4 summarises respondents' evaluations of the five indicators measuring positioning. Overall, perceptions were positive, with an average score of 3.93. "Novelty/Innovation" recorded the highest mean (4.40), suggesting that voters responded strongly to new ideas or fresh political messaging. In contrast, "Difference" (3.72) and "Uniqueness" (3.78) were rated lower, indicating that respondents perceived candidates as insufficiently differentiated—an issue that may contribute to low voter enthusiasm or indistinct candidate profiles. These findings indicate that innovative communication is more salient to voters than traditional differentiators such as personality traits or stylistic cues.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for positioning (PS)

Indicators	1		2		3		4		5		Mean
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	
Uniqueness	11	3.2	28	8	78	22.3	142	40.7	90	25.8	3.78
Distinctive characteristic	4	1.1	18	5.2	65	18.6	172	49.3	90	25.8	3.93
Difference	10	2.9	35	10	63	18.1	174	49.9	67	19.2	3.72
Novelty/Innovation	1	0.3	5	1.4	25	7.2	141	40.4	177	50.7	4.4
Dynamism	5	1.4	35	10	57	16.3	174	49.9	78	22.3	3.82
Average positioning											3.93

Table 5 displays descriptive results for Local Political Issues. All indicators scored strongly, with an overall mean of 4.11. "Underlying Issue/Issue Understanding" received the highest score (4.27), reflecting a well-informed electorate that recognises core regional concerns such as infrastructure inequality and maritime governance. "Issue Impact" (4.16) and "Issue Visibility" (4.06) also scored high, suggesting that voters were highly aware of and responsive to issue salience during the election period. This pattern illustrates a politically attentive environment in which local issues play a significant role in shaping voter cognition.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics for local political issues (LPI)

Indicators	1		2		3		4		5		Mean
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	
Issue relevance	4	1.1	13	3.7	57	15.3	186	53.3	89	25.5	3.98
Underlying issue	3	0.9	7	2	37	10.6	149	42.7	153	43.8	4.27
Issue impact	2	0.6	12	3.4	36	10.3	178	51	121	34.7	4.16
Issue visibility	5	1.4	13	3.7	37	10.6	196	56.2	98	28.1	4.06
Average Local Political Issues											4.11

Table 6 reports descriptive findings for voter preferences. The mean score for this construct was 3.75. "Party/Candidate Identification" had the highest mean (4.22), indicating that affective and identity-based attachments remain dominant in local elections. The "Sociological/Demographic Approach" also scored high (4.11). In contrast, the "Rational Approach" received the lowest mean (3.07), suggesting that voters placed less emphasis on rational-evaluative considerations. These findings indicate that emotional, social, and identity-based cues outweigh purely rational decision-making processes in regional elections.

Table 6. Descriptive statistics for voter preferences (VP)

Indicators	1		2		3		4		5		Mean
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	
Sociological & demographic approach	3	0.9	11	3.2	50	14.3	167	47.9	118	33.8	4.11
Party/Candidate identification	3	0.9	8	2.3	32	9.2	173	49.6	133	38.1	4.22
Economic approach	16	4.6	48	13.8	56	16	166	47.6	63	18.1	3.61
Rational approach	50	14.3	67	19.2	82	23.5	108	30.9	42	12.0	3.07
Average Voter Preference											3.75

Evaluation of measurement model (Outer model)

The reliability and validity of the latent constructs were assessed before structural model testing. Convergent validity was evaluated using the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). As shown in Table 7, all constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.50, indicating adequate convergence of their respective indicators.

Table 7. AVE value for each construct

Variables	Average Variance Extraction (AVE)
Positioning	0.515
Voter Preferences	0.513
Local Political Issues	0.656

Discriminant validity was examined using the Fornell–Larcker criterion and cross-loading analysis. Table 8 presents the Fornell–Larcker results, showing that the square root of each construct's AVE exceeds its correlations with other constructs, confirming adequate discriminant validity.

Table 8. Fornel-Larcker Criterion

Variables	PS	VP	LPI
PS	0.718	0.576	0.540
VP	0.576	0.719	0.599
LPI	0.540	0.599	0.810

Cross-loading results in Table 9 further confirm that each indicator loads higher on its corresponding construct than on the others, demonstrating that the indicators uniquely

represent their respective constructs.

Table 9. Cross-loading results (Factor extraction)

Indicator	PS	VP	LPI
PS1	**0.782**	0.071	0.024
PS2	**0.775**	0.080	0.096
PS3	**0.667**	0.287	0.074
PS4	**0.670**	0.295	0.249
PS5	**0.685**	0.180	0.034
VP1	0.136	**0.724**	0.409
VP2	0.005	**0.755**	0.335
VP3	0.044	**0.765**	0.450
VP4	0.112	**0.610**	0.334
LPI1	0.016	0.090	**0.800**
LPI2	0.043	0.256	**0.814**
LPI3	0.001	0.065	**0.837**
LPI4	0.059	0.105	**0.788**

Table 10 presents the Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) values. All constructs satisfied the minimum thresholds ($\alpha > 0.60$; $CR > 0.70$), demonstrating strong internal consistency.

Table 10. Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability
Positioning	0.763	0.841
Voter Preferences	0.680	0.807
Local Political Issues	0.825	0.887

Overall, the measurement model satisfies all criteria for convergent validity, discriminant validity, and internal reliability, supporting the adequacy of the constructs for subsequent structural analysis.

Structural model evaluation (Inner model)

Structural model evaluation examined the relationships among the latent constructs using a bootstrapping procedure with 349 cases at the 5% significance level. The analysis assessed both the direct effects and the mediating role of Local Political Issues. Model explanatory power was evaluated using the R^2 values of the endogenous variables (Table 11).

Table 11. R^2 values of endogenous constructs

Endogenous Construction	Exogenous Construction	R^2	Information
Local Political Issues	Positioning	0.307	Moderate
Voter Preferences	Positioning, Local Political Issues	0.451	Strong

The R^2 value of 0.307 for Local Political Issues indicates that Positioning explains 30.7% of its variance, which is classified as moderate explanatory power. Meanwhile, the R^2 value of 0.451 for Voter Preferences indicates that Positioning and Local Political Issues jointly account for 45.1% of its variance, which is strong by Cohen's (1988) criteria.

Figure 2 displays the full structural model, including path coefficients, effect directions, and significance levels, summarising how Positioning influences Voter Preferences both directly and indirectly through Local Political Issues.

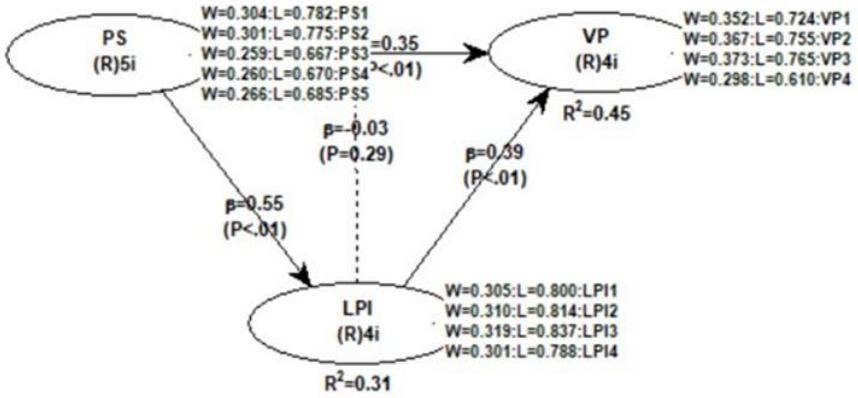

Figure 2. Structural model

Hypothesis Test Results

The significance of the structural relationships was assessed using the bootstrapping procedure, with results summarised in Table 12. All direct effects were statistically significant at the 5% level.

Table 12. Direct effects between constructs

Relationship Path	t Statistics	Path Coefficient (β)	p-value	Information
PS -> VP	3.12	0.350	0.001	Accepted
PS -> LPI	3.32	0.554	0.001	Accepted
LPI-> VS	3.88	0.389	0.001	Accepted

The results in Table 12 show that Positioning (PS) has a positive and significant influence on both Voter Preferences (VP) and Local Political Issues (LPI). In addition, LPI significantly influences VP, indicating that voters who perceive local issues as salient and relevant are more likely to support candidates with favourable political positioning. These findings reinforce the central role of political positioning and issue salience in shaping voter decision-making (Borgeat, 2025).

The mediating effect of Local Political Issues was assessed through the significance of the indirect path. Table 13 presents the mediation results.

Table 13. Indirect effect (Mediation test)

Relationship Path	t-Statistics	Path Coefficient (β)	p-value	Information
PS -> LPI -> VP	2.33	0.215	0.001	Accepted

The indirect effect of PS on VP through LPI is statistically significant, confirming partial mediation. This indicates that political positioning enhances voter preferences not only through direct evaluative mechanisms but also by increasing the salience, perceived relevance, and visibility of local political issues. In other words, effective positioning strategies influence how voters interpret and prioritise local issues, thereby strengthening their political support (Munis & Burke, 2023; Spoon & Nonnemacher, 2025).

Discussion

The empirical results demonstrate that political positioning plays a decisive role in shaping voter preferences in the Riau Islands, both through its direct influence and through its mediating role in local political issues. The findings indicate that positioning strategies gain electoral relevance only when candidates articulate messages that resonate with the region's contextual realities. In effect, issue alignment becomes the central mechanism through which positioning translates into voter support in geographically fragmented environments. This reinforces the notion that political images are not evaluated in isolation; rather, they are filtered through voters' perceptions of how well candidates address substantive, place-based concerns.

The mediating role of local issues further suggests that voters do not respond merely to the distinctiveness or innovativeness of a candidate's public image. Instead, they assess the extent to which such positioning corresponds to pressing regional challenges, such as disparities in inter-island development, transportation accessibility, and the governance of marine resources. These findings reflect the socio-geographic characteristics of the Riau Islands, where residents of smaller or peripheral islands are particularly attuned to everyday problems shaped by physical isolation and uneven state presence. Consequently, positioning that fails to integrate these lived experiences risks being perceived as detached or superficial.

The results also imply that positioning strategies emphasising novelty, differentiation, or dynamism are not inherently effective unless they are meaningfully contextualised within the realities of local communities. In a province characterised by spatial discontinuity and infrastructural inequality, voters appear to place a higher value on political messages that demonstrate a clear understanding of local constraints and offer plausible, context-sensitive solutions. This suggests that the persuasive power of positioning is fundamentally contingent upon its substantive alignment with observable socio-economic conditions.

These findings support and extend earlier research demonstrating that coherent and distinctive positioning strengthens affective and cognitive connections between voters and political actors (Walgrave et al., 2019; Ortega & Oñate, 2024; Van Erkel, 2023; Shahid et al., 2024; Shin & Williams, 2025; Zimmerman et al., 2022). Studies by Liñeira et al. (2021), along with those by Pardos-Prado and Sagarzazu (2016) and Snow (2022), similarly indicate that voters respond more favourably when political cues are linked to salient public issues, thereby reinforcing issue-based evaluations. However, the present study diverges from observations by Munzert et al. (2020) and Harteveld & Van der Brug (2023), which suggest that the salience of local issues tends to diminish in information-rich urban settings. In contrast, the opposite dynamic emerges in the Riau Islands, where uneven access to digital infrastructure, transportation, and administrative services heightens citizens' reliance on locally grounded issues as primary evaluative tools. This pattern underscores the centrality of geographic fragmentation and information inequality in shaping voter behaviour—factors often underemphasised in mainstream electoral studies.

In this regard, the study contributes to the broader literature on political marketing and voting behaviour by demonstrating that the effectiveness of positioning is deeply context-dependent. The spatial configuration of the Riau Islands influences both the circulation of political information and the cognitive pathways through which voters interpret political messages. The findings, therefore, underscore the importance of incorporating geographic and infrastructural variables into analyses of political

persuasion, particularly in decentralised or archipelagic settings.

The theoretical contribution of this research lies in advancing the political marketing, agenda-setting, and issue ownership frameworks by demonstrating that the effect of positioning on voter preferences is neither linear nor unidirectional. Rather, it is mediated by voters' perceptions of local issues, which function as cognitive filters through which political cues acquire meaning. This mediating mechanism becomes more pronounced in archipelagic regions marked by spatial inequality and uneven access to communication channels. In such contexts, geographic conditions become substantive theoretical dimensions that actively shape citizens' political cognition. By integrating spatial fragmentation and differential information accessibility into the positioning–preference nexus, this study extends existing theories and introduces explanatory dimensions that have received limited scholarly attention.

From a practical standpoint, the findings carry significant implications for candidates, campaign strategists, and policymakers operating in geographically dispersed regions. First, political actors must localise their positioning strategies so that campaign narratives reflect island-specific concerns rather than generic slogans or national-level themes. Voters in the Riau Islands prioritise issues such as maritime connectivity, inter-island inequality, fisheries governance, and access to essential services—topics that require tailored communication rather than broad, undifferentiated appeals.

Second, the study highlights the need for communication strategies that account for uneven levels of digital access across islands. While some communities may respond effectively to online political communication, others require offline engagement, community-based forums, or interpersonal mobilisation. Addressing these disparities is essential for ensuring equitable political participation. Strengthening local information infrastructure, therefore, constitutes an important agenda for regional policymakers, as reducing informational asymmetries is critical to fostering inclusive and informed electoral engagement.

Finally, the results emphasise the importance of bridging the symbolic and substantive dimensions of political representation. A compelling political identity or brand is insufficient without demonstrable responsiveness to local issues. Candidates who align their positioning with tangible, empirically grounded concerns are more likely to be perceived as credible, competent, and attentive to citizens' needs. Such alignment not only enhances voter trust but also contributes to a more substantive and context-aware form of electoral representation across the diverse island communities of the Riau Archipelago.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that political positioning exerts a significant influence on voter preferences in the Riau Archipelago, both directly and through the mediating function of local political issues. The findings indicate that the effectiveness of positioning depends on its alignment with substantive issues that resonate with the daily realities and priorities of island communities. While attributes such as uniqueness, differentiation, and innovation strengthen a candidate's perceived credibility, these qualities translate into voter preference only when they are meaningfully connected to local concerns that carry emotional and practical relevance for the electorate.

The analysis also reveals that the fragmented geographical character of archipelagic regions plays a decisive role in shaping political communication dynamics. Variations in

access to information, uneven media reach, and heterogeneous socio-economic conditions across islands create differentiated patterns of political interpretation and responsiveness among voters. These spatial disparities help explain why positioning strategies that perform strongly in urban or highly connected environments do not necessarily produce comparable effects in remote islands with weaker communication infrastructure. By demonstrating that geographical context shapes how political cues are processed, the study expands theoretical understandings of political marketing, particularly by foregrounding spatial heterogeneity as an analytical dimension in voter behaviour research.

Furthermore, the study reaffirms the applicability of agenda-setting theory in explaining how political positioning influences voter preferences through issue salience. Local issues serve as interpretive lenses through which voters evaluate political messages, functioning as a conceptual bridge that links symbolic positioning with concrete behavioural outcomes. This underscores that voter decision-making in geographically dispersed regions is shaped not only by candidate image but also by the perceived relevance, visibility, and urgency of local political issues.

Recommendations

The findings of this study highlight the need for further research that systematically incorporates geographical context, spatial fragmentation, and patterns of information accessibility into models of voter behaviour. Future studies should examine how territorial connectivity, transport infrastructure, and digital inclusion shape citizens' exposure to political messages and their interpretation of candidate positioning. In addition, research employing longitudinal designs or multi-level spatial analysis would be valuable for capturing how local political issues evolve and how their salience interacts with structural characteristics across islands.

From a practical perspective, the results underscore the importance of developing positioning strategies grounded in the substantive concerns of island communities—particularly maritime connectivity, inter-island inequality, and access to essential services. Political actors who contextualise their narratives within locally salient issues are likely to resonate more strongly with voters than those who rely solely on image-centric or generic campaign messages. These insights also indicate the need for governments to strengthen public communication infrastructure, especially on remote islands where digital penetration remains uneven. Enhancing local information ecosystems through community media, participatory forums, and hybrid online–offline engagement mechanisms will help ensure the equitable circulation of political information.

Finally, the study suggests that electoral governance in archipelagic regions should be designed with explicit recognition of information asymmetries and geographic disparities. Strengthening institutional capacity to support inclusive, island-sensitive political participation will not only improve voter engagement but also reinforce democratic legitimacy. In this regard, investments in both communication infrastructure and civic outreach are crucial steps toward achieving more spatially equitable and participatory political processes across the Riau Archipelago and similar regional contexts.

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