DETERMINING FACTORS OF GEN-Z VOTERS' PREFERENCES IN REGIONAL ELECTIONS: A CASE STUDY OF THE 2024 ACEH TENGGARA REGENCY ELECTION

Fasrah Indah [a*)], Katimin [a)], Syukri [a)]

[a)] Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia

[*)]Corresponding Author:fasrahindah@gmail.com

Abstract. This study analyzed the factors influencing the political preferences of Generation Z (Gen-Z) voters in the 2024 Regent Election (Pilkada) of Southeast Aceh. Employing a qualitative approach through an intrinsic case study, the research explored the subjective experiences and socio-political dynamics of Gen-Z in shaping their political choices. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and digital documentation involving 30 respondents selected through purposive sampling. The findings revealed that Gen-Z's political preferences were shaped by issue-based rationality, candidate capability, and perceptions of personal branding and leadership integrity. Social media platforms—particularly TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube—emerged as the primary channels for political socialization, while local figures such as teachers and religious leaders (ustadz) continued to hold influence within limited social contexts. Challenges to participation included low levels of political literacy, the spread of misinformation, and limited internet access in rural areas. Nonetheless, Gen-Z demonstrated active, selective, and critical engagement with political messages. This study affirmed the relevance of rational choice theory and cognitive domains in explaining young voter behavior and recommended campaign strategies that were educational, value-based, and inclusive of digital generation voices.

Keywords: Gen Z; political preference; Aceh Tenggara election; social media; rational choice theory.

I.   INTRODUCTION

Regional head elections (Pilkada) represent a critical juncture in shaping the direction of regional development and governance. The 2024 Southeast Aceh Regent Election carries particular importance due to the significant role of young voters, especially Generation Z (Gen Z), in this democratic process. Gen Z, defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012, exhibits political characteristics that differ notably from previous generations. Their strong dependence on social media and digital technology is a key trait in acquiring political information and forming perceptions of leadership candidates [1] Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter have become the primary sources of political information for Gen Z, offering visual, interactive, and fast-paced content in delivering current issues [2], [3].

Although access to information has expanded, challenges still arise, particularly due to the low level of political literacy among Gen Z. They are more vulnerable to disinformation and hoaxes circulating on social media[4], which underscores the need for adaptive political literacy strategies through digital approaches [5]. The disparity between Gen Z's more pragmatic and digitally oriented political character and the previous generations' more idealistic tendencies also requires

campaign strategies that are relevant and resonant [6], [7]. Moreover, social values such as sustainability and gender equality significantly influence their political preferences [8], [9], while the rising popularity of TikTok continues to strengthen social media's role as a primary tool in shaping political awareness [10], [11].

A major challenge in the context of Gen Z's political participation is the spread of disinformation, which can influence their voting decisions. The phenomenon of political buzzers and fake content on social media often distorts young voters' perceptions of political candidates [12]. In this context, digital literacy becomes a crucial element for strengthening information resilience and helping Gen Z discern valid content [13]. Nevertheless, although social media has the potential to expand the space for political participation, the challenges of opinion polarization and hoaxes remain significant [14], thus requiring cross-sector collaboration to foster informed and high-quality political engagement [15].

A common solution proposed to address this issue is the utilization of social media as a platform for political campaigns that are informative, inclusive, and grounded in values aligned with the character of Gen Z. The use of innovative digital campaign strategies can enhance the

effectiveness of political messaging, especially when framed with narratives that resonate with Gen Z values such as transparency, justice, and sustainability [16], [17]. Therefore, political candidates seeking Gen Z support must adopt a campaign approach that is not only digital but also substantive and based on authentic personal branding [18], [19].

Previous studies have identified the crucial role of social media in shaping Gen Z's political preferences. Digital campaigns designed with Gen Z's preferences in mind have proven to be more effective than conventional approaches. For instance, a study by Hutabarat et al. demonstrated that campaigns utilizing digital platforms with visual strategies and personal branding narratives successfully foster emotional connections between political candidates and young voters [7]. Creatively packaged campaign content that directly relates to relevant social issues is a key factor in shaping Gen Z voters' affection and trust.

Research by Simanjuntak & Djuyandi and Suryawijaya et al. explicitly reinforces these findings by showing that the effectiveness of social media in conveying a political candidate's vision and mission depends on the candidate's ability to adapt to the language and communication formats used by Gen Z [2], [3]. The use of short video formats, interactive captions, and issue-based campaigns—such as those focusing on gender equality and environmental concerns—are key to reaching young voters. Such campaigns not only enhance engagement but also broaden the reach of political messages to audiences who are typically less exposed to conventional media.

In the local context, there is a strong emphasis on the importance of campaign strategies that are grounded in local values and regional culture, integrated with digital technology approaches [16]. These studies highlight that success in regional elections (Pilkada) is significantly influenced by how well candidates align their political messages with voters' social realities, and how effectively those messages are communicated through social media platforms actively used by Gen Z. This suggests that the specific solution offered by the literature is a combination of digital approaches and a deep understanding of the values and social dynamics of local voters.

Although various studies have examined the role of social media in the political behavior of younger generations, in-depth investigations into how social media influences Gen Z's political preferences in the context of local elections—particularly in regions with specific socio-political characteristics such as Southeast Aceh—remain limited. Previous research has largely focused on national elections or urban areas, without accounting for the distinctive social dynamics of local regions. Additionally, there is a lack of exploration into how perceptions of political candidates' personal branding, shaped through social media, can emotionally and rationally influence Gen Z's political decisions. Most existing studies have also yet to integrate social factors such as peer influence and the phenomenon of Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) as determinants in shaping Gen Z's political decision-making. This aspect is crucial, given

Gen Z's strong attachment to their social groups when making decisions. Therefore, there is an urgent need for research that not only captures how Gen Z utilizes social media but also examines the psychosocial factors influencing their political preferences in a comprehensive manner, particularly within the context of regional elections in areas such as Southeast Aceh.

The primary objective of this study is to analyze the factors influencing the political preferences of Gen Z voters in the 2024 Southeast Aceh Regent Election (Pilkada). Special attention is given to the impact of social media, digital campaigns, perceptions of political candidates, and the role of personal branding in shaping their political decisions. This research also aims to assess the extent to which social media and digital campaigns contribute to directing Gen Z's political preferences toward local candidates. The novelty of this study lies in its contextual focus on the Southeast Aceh Pilkada, a region with political and social dynamics that have not been extensively explored in previous studies on Gen Z voter behavior. The study introduces new variables, such as Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) and peer influence, in relation to political preferences, and examines how political candidates' personal branding on social media shapes emotional responses and voting intentions. The scope of this research includes an analysis of Gen Z voter behavior in Southeast Aceh during the 2024 Pilkada, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative approaches. This study is expected to make a theoretical contribution to the literature on young voter behavior and serve as a practical guide for political candidates and campaign teams in designing more effective strategies aligned with Gen Z's values and characteristics.

Voter Behavior Theory

Voter behavior is a crucial aspect of political science that aims to understand the dynamics of individual decision-making in electoral contexts. In the case of the 2024 Southeast Aceh Regent Election, the political behavior of Gen Z has drawn particular attention, given their unique characteristics as digital natives who are rational and independent. Four main theoretical approaches can be used to analyze Gen Z's voting behavior: the sociological model, the psychological model, the rational choice model, and the cognitive domain approach.

The *Psychological Model* emphasizes affect and perception toward parties or candidates. Although party loyalty has weakened among younger generations [20], psychological aspects such as candidate image and value alignment continue to play a significant role [21]. Gen Z tends to evaluate candidates based on emotional compatibility, empathy, and symbolic communication. The *Rational Choice Model*, as explained by Downs, posits that voters will choose the candidate who offers the greatest benefit to them. In Gen Z's context, rationality is reflected in their evaluation of vision, track record, and concrete programs [22]. Research by Alwi & Ram also indicates a trend of pragmatism in political choices based on tangible benefits rather than ideology [23].

Meanwhile, the *Cognitive Domain Approach* integrates psychological, rational, and sociological dimensions to explain Gen Z's political motivations [21]. This approach

considers relevant issues, candidate image, personal experiences, and social identity as the basis for decision-making. It is regarded as the most comprehensive method for understanding Gen Z voters, who are multi-interpretable, adaptive, and complex in their electoral behavior.

Political Communication Theory and Social Media

Political communication in the digital era has undergone a significant transformation. Social media has replaced the dominance of conventional media and become the primary channel of political communication, especially for Gen Z [24], [25]. The interactive nature of social media allows Gen Z not only to receive but also to shape and disseminate political messages. Their engagement with political content often begins with incidental exposure—through algorithms or influencers—and evolves into active participation when the issues presented are perceived as personally relevant [26], [27].

In this process, the evaluation of content relevance and participation motivation becomes key in shaping Gen Z's political behavior. However, a major challenge emerges in the form of disinformation and filter bubbles [28]. Gen Z is highly vulnerable to informational bias due to social media algorithms that reinforce echo chambers and narrow the space for public discourse. Therefore, enhancing digital literacy is a strategic necessity for fostering high-quality political participation.
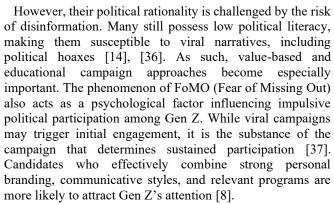
Digital Campaigning and Political Personal Branding

Digital campaigning has become a key strategy for reaching Gen Z, the majority of whom are active on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter. Social media serves not only as a channel for political message distribution but also as an interactive space capable of fostering political affection and loyalty directly [29], [30]. Data indicates that digital platforms are now more effective in reaching young voters than traditional media [31].

Political personal branding is a crucial element that enhances a candidate's appeal [32]. Gen Z evaluates not only ideas and programs but also the authenticity of communication, visual style, and consistency in digital narratives [33], [34]. A strong, transparent brand that aligns with Gen Z's values—such as justice, integrity, and diversity—increases the likelihood of a candidate being accepted and chosen. However, digital campaigns also face significant challenges, including personal attacks, hoaxes, and algorithmic manipulation [21]. Therefore, the success of a campaign strategy lies not merely in virality, but also in sensitivity to local dynamics and the sustainable management of digital reputation.

Gen Z and Elections in Indonesia

Gen Z exhibits political characteristics that differ markedly from those of previous generations. They are pragmatic, rational, and highly selective about political information. Social media has become the primary arena for shaping their political opinions and identities [23], [35]. Gen Z tends to select candidates based on competence and personal values rather than mere political affiliation.

However, their political rationality is challenged by the risk of disinformation. Many still possess low political literacy, making them susceptible to viral narratives, including political hoaxes [14], [36]. As such, value-based and educational campaign approaches become especially important. The phenomenon of FoMO (Fear of Missing Out) also acts as a psychological factor influencing impulsive political participation among Gen Z. While viral campaigns may trigger initial engagement, it is the substance of the campaign that determines sustained participation [37]. Candidates who effectively combine strong personal branding, communicative styles, and relevant programs are more likely to attract Gen Z's attention [8].

This literature review highlights that Gen Z voter behavior in the 2024 Southeast Aceh Pilkada cannot be understood through a single theoretical lens. It requires an integration of voter behavior theories, digital political communication, value-based campaigning, and a deep understanding of Gen Z's character as rational and digital-native voters. A combination of psychological, rational, and cognitive domain approaches is deemed most relevant. Campaign strategies that deliver authentic, substantial, and consistent messages via social media have strong potential to positively and sustainably shape Gen Z's political preferences.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach using an intrinsic case study design aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of Gen Z voters' political behavior in the context of the 2024 Southeast Aceh Regent Election (Pilkada). The qualitative approach was chosen as it allows the researcher to explore the subjective experiences and social meanings constructed through individuals' political actions within a specific local context [38]. The intrinsic case study design was applied because the focus of the research is not to generalize findings, but to comprehend the specific dynamics occurring within the case of Gen Z political preferences in the region.

The research was conducted in Southeast Aceh Regency, Aceh Province, considering its distinctive demographic and political context. This location is relevant for illustrating youth political behavior in a complex rural-urban setting. The research process spanned from February to June 2024 and included preparation, data collection, analysis, and validation phases. Informants were selected purposively with criteria including: aged 17–27, registered as voters in the 2024 Pilkada, active on social media (such as TikTok, Instagram, Twitter/X), engaged with local political issues, and from diverse social, religious, and ethnic backgrounds. The estimated number of informants ranged from 20 to 30, but remained flexible based on the principle of data saturation [39].

Data collection was conducted using three primary methods. First, semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to explore informants' political perceptions and experiences, including voting motivations, information sources, the role of

social media, perceptions of digital campaigns, and social influences. Second, participatory observation took place in both physical spaces (such as community forums and public discussions) and digital spaces (social media), to capture Gen Z's political expressions and interaction patterns. Third, documentation involved gathering campaign content from candidates' social media, digital materials, screenshots of online discussions, and official documents from the General Election Commission (KPU) and political parties. Triangulation of techniques was employed to validate the data across sources.

The collected data were analyzed thematically using the approach of Miles et al. [40]. The analysis process included data reduction, data display in the form of narratives and thematic matrices, and drawing conclusions reinforced through verification methods such as member checks. Initial themes explored included TikTok as a source of political information, the influence of candidates' personal branding, perceptions of digital campaigning, and concerns over hoaxes. Data credibility was ensured through source and technique triangulation, confirmation of interpretations with informants, systematic documentation of the research process (audit trail), and peer debriefing.

This study also adhered to strict ethical standards, including obtaining informed consent, maintaining informant confidentiality, respecting the right to decline participation, and clearly explaining the purpose and use of the research results. The study's limitations include the lack of generalizability due to its qualitative nature, potential bias in informant narratives, and restricted access to deleted digital content. Nevertheless, the in-depth approach is expected to offer substantial contributions to understanding Gen Z's political behavior in regional electoral contexts.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Characteristics

This study involved a total of 30 respondents from Generation Z (aged 18–25) residing in various sub-districts across Southeast Aceh Regency. Respondents were drawn from both urban areas, such as Babussalam and Bambel, and rural areas like Bukit Tusam, Lawe Alas, and Ketambe. All respondents had participated in the 2024 Southeast Aceh Regent Election, with the majority being first-time voters. The distribution of respondent characteristics is presented in the following table 1.

From the table, it is evident that most respondents fall within the 20–23 age range, with a higher proportion of females compared to males. University students dominate the activity status, followed by high school students and participants in the informal sector. This social heterogeneity provides a wide spectrum of political perceptions for understanding Gen Z preferences in the local electoral context.

These findings confirm the relevance of the sociological model developed by Lazarsfeld et al., which posits that social background—such as occupation, education, and community environment—plays a role in shaping voters' political

orientations [41]. In this context, the diversity in respondents' social status—from students to young farmers—reflects the link between social reference and political preference. However, as Abdullah et al. noted, group loyalty among youth tends to decline [20]. This finding suggests that while social affiliation is no longer deterministic, collective references—such as student communities, informal work environments, and digital peer groups—still function as platforms for political discussion and choice validation. In essence, social ties remain a significant medium in the political decision-making process, even though final preferences are determined more independently and rationally.

TABLE I
DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

Category	Number of Respondents
Gender	
Female	17
Male	13
Status	
University Student	11
High School Student	5
Informal Worker	4
MSME Actor	4
Young Farmer	2
Teacher/Volunteer/ Community Member	4
Age	
18–19 years	6
20–21 years	7
22–23 years	9
24–25 years	8

In the context of young voters in Southeast Aceh, active involvement in activity-based social networks—such as volunteer organizations, MSMEs, and educational communities—provides a meaningful space for political discourse. These discussions serve not only as channels for disseminating political information but also as mechanisms for shaping perceptions of candidates, aligning with observations from the cognitive domain approach [21]. These findings have important implications for designing effective political campaign strategies targeting Gen Z voters. The social and demographic heterogeneity suggests that one-size-fits-all approaches are insufficient. Instead, campaign strategies must consider social segmentation and tailor communication based on the background and lived experiences of voters. Personalized, community-based approaches that highlight narratives relevant to young people's daily lives are likely to be more effective than generic political messaging.

Scientifically, this data enriches the literature on young voter behavior in non-urban areas by showing that social structure remains relevant in shaping political orientations—albeit in a more flexible form. Practically, political actors must pay attention to the influence of social environments

such as schools, campuses, digital communities, and informal work networks in spreading political messages. Thus, strengthening organic social relationships can serve as a strategic entry point for building both emotional connection and rational political judgment among Gen Z voters in the Southeast Aceh Pilkada.

Key Issues Influencing Gen Z's Political Preferences

Analysis of respondent perceptions reveals that Gen Z's political preferences in the 2024 Southeast Aceh Regent Election were strongly shaped by thematic issues relevant to their needs and lived experiences. Respondents did not choose candidates based solely on popularity or party affiliation, but rather on the candidates' ability to offer concrete solutions to their everyday problems. The tabulated data on key issues identified from interviews and questionnaires is presented below:

TABLE II
KEY ISSUES INFLUENCING GEN Z VOTER PREFERENCES

Key Issue	Number of Respondents
Education (scholarships, school quality, honorary teacher status)	10
MSMEs & Local Economy (skills training, digital marketing support)	8
Agriculture & Village Infrastructure	4
Modernization & Digitalization	2
Religion & Morality	2
Public Health & Social Issues	2
Environmental Concerns & Bureaucratic Reform	2

In detail, education was cited as a top priority by 10 respondents, involving access to scholarships, improved school quality, and the resolution of honorary teacher status. MSMEs and the local economy were highlighted by 8 respondents, who hoped for skills training and support for digital marketing. Agricultural and rural infrastructure issues were raised by 2 respondents, emphasizing the need for region-based development. In addition, there was attention to public health, environmental conservation, and bureaucratic modernization.

These findings align with the *rational choice model* proposed by Downs, which posits that voters make decisions based on a calculation of direct benefits [22]. Gen Z voters in this study consistently evaluated candidates' programs based on their relevance to personal and community needs, such as education access, MSME training, and maternal-child health. This supports the findings of Amrullah et al., who observed that young voters increasingly rely on data-driven rationality and concrete experiences in their decision-making [42].

In contrast, these findings diminish the significance of the classic *psychological model*, which emphasizes long-term emotional loyalty to political symbols or parties, as described by Campbell et al. [43]. In this context, Gen Z is no longer emotionally bound to parties or established figures, but is instead more drawn to substantive programs and tangible outcomes offered by candidates. Their decision-making reflects issue-based evaluations that are personalized, suggesting a tendency toward reflective and pragmatic choices. Furthermore, the variety of issues raised illustrates a high level of social and political awareness among Gen Z voters, particularly in their support for environmental concerns, equality, and digitalization. These findings indicate that Gen Z's political rationality is contextual and responsive to social changes—not merely individualistic or self-serving.

This reinforces earlier findings regarding the influence of respondents' diverse social backgrounds on their political orientation. As previously noted, Gen Z preferences are largely shaped by personal experiences and social context. This analysis further confirms that the prioritization of specific issues is strongly influenced by respondents' daily realities, whether as students, MSME actors, young farmers, or high school learners. Thus, there is a consistent link between social background and issue preference, strengthening the validity of the rational approach in analyzing young voter behavior.

Practically, this offers a crucial signal to candidates in the Southeast Aceh Pilkada: issue- and data-driven campaign strategies are imperative. Populist approaches lacking substance will fail to engage critical young voters. Campaign narratives must be crafted based on a clear mapping of local needs and supported by measurable, concrete programs. Gen Z seeks candidates who not only excel in social media rhetoric but also present a clear program roadmap and demonstrate the capacity to address real-world issues such as education, local economy, and rural bureaucratic digitalization. Thus, Gen Z's high issue awareness and rational tendencies present both opportunities and challenges for local democracy. Candidates capable of articulating value-based and solution-oriented programs are more likely to gain support than those relying on symbolic popularity or traditional loyalties.

The Role of Social Media in Shaping Political Opinion

The findings indicate that all respondents (100%) accessed political information through social media. The most frequently used platforms for political content among respondents were TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. The distribution of social media usage for political opinion formation among Gen Z in Southeast Aceh is presented in the table below:

TABLE III
SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS USED BY GEN Z FOR POLITICAL INFORMATION

Social Media Platform	Number of Respondents
TikTok	11
Instagram	7
YouTube	4
Discord	4
WhatsApp	2
Facebook	2

A total of 11 respondents identified TikTok as their primary medium for following campaign videos and citizen testimonials. Instagram, particularly through IG Stories and

Reels, was cited by 7 respondents as a platform to observe direct interactions between candidates and the public. YouTube and Discord were used by digital communities to follow debates and discuss campaign programs in greater depth, especially among respondents affiliated with youth organizations and digital literacy forums. Although used more sparingly, Facebook and WhatsApp remained important channels, especially among respondents from rural areas, serving as informal forums for community discussions.

These findings reinforce the theory of intentional and incidental exposure in the social media-based political participation model proposed by Knoll et al., which suggests that social media enables users to encounter political information both actively (through content searches) and passively (via algorithmic recommendations and social networks) [44]. Most respondents did not merely consume political content passively, but actively engaged by interacting, discussing, and resharing campaign content they found relevant and convincing.

Moreover, the results support the arguments of Marquart et al. and Yasa, who assert that social media is the most effective tool for reaching young voters like Gen Z [25], [27]. Visually rich content packaged with emotional and narrative appeal has proven more effective in building political trust than traditional advertisements or institutional news. Respondents noted that field videos, citizen testimonials, and the direct communication styles of candidates on TikTok and Instagram felt more relatable and credible. On the other hand, the use of Discord as a discussion platform indicates the emergence of a deeper and more deliberative digital political communication ecosystem among Gen Z communities. This marks a significant shift from passive political consumption toward a more literate, active, and reflective participation—confirming the rise of community-based digital political dynamics. These findings also clarify the dominance of pragmatic issues and personal relevance in shaping Gen Z's political preferences. Social media acts as a vital bridge between political candidates and young voters for conveying strategic issues such as education, MSMEs, agriculture, and healthcare. Campaign visualizations on TikTok and Instagram make these issues more vivid and relatable for Gen Z voters.

The practical implication of this finding is the importance of designing digital campaigns that prioritize not only exposure but also substantive content. Candidates aiming to win Gen Z support must craft visual narratives that are authentic, emotional, and intellectually engaging. Utilizing features such as IG Stories, TikTok Live, YouTube vlogs, and Discord discussion channels should be integral to any political communication strategy. Furthermore, candidates and campaign teams must recognize that social media is not just a platform for message delivery—it is an active and dynamic space for political interaction. Building two-way engagement, responding to comments, and presenting educational and inspirational content will generate long-term effects in cultivating healthy political loyalty among young voters. Therefore, in the context of the Southeast Aceh Pilkada, social media functions not merely as an information medium but as

a new political ecosystem that directly shapes, guides, and influences the opinions and electoral behavior of Generation Z.

Preferred Candidate Figures and Characteristics

Based on interviews and questionnaire responses, the majority of Gen Z respondents in Southeast Aceh stated that they prioritized candidates' personal character and integrity in making political choices. Rather than popularity or political affiliation, it was personality traits and a tangible social track record that shaped their preferences. Respondents identified several key attributes of the candidates they favored:

1. Honesty and courteous communication, particularly candidates who are not arrogant and remain open to criticism [45], [46], [47].
2. Closeness to ordinary citizens, including those who frequently engage directly with farmers, teachers, and MSME actors [48], [49].
3. Decisive yet inclusive leadership, along with technical competence in addressing local issues [50], [51].
4. A concrete social track record, such as involvement in disaster relief, rural road construction, or support for youth and community activities [46], [52].

In contrast, candidates who only appeared during campaigns, exhibited elitist behavior, or focused too heavily on digital image-building without real on-the-ground activity were viewed negatively. Respondents consistently emphasized that being down-to-earth and authentic was far more important than appearance or contrived messaging.

These findings reinforce the political personal branding theory, which asserts that Gen Z is highly responsive to authenticity and consistency in political communication [30], [33]. They assess candidates not only by the content of their programs but by how they build relationships, convey messages, and demonstrate commitment through real actions. Within the context of digital communication, it is crucial to highlight that social media enables the delivery of political narratives that are both personal and visual [25], [27]. Campaigns that show candidates interacting directly with citizens, participating in community events, and demonstrating empathy are seen as significantly more effective than rhetorical campaign ads or normative promises.

Respondents in this study consistently expressed greater trust in campaign content that showcased real-world activities—such as videos of candidates constructing village roads, speaking with honorary teachers, or aiding flood victims—than in mere digital posters or formal press releases. This suggests a multi-dimensional evaluation tendency, where emotional, visual, and substantive aspects converge in assessing candidates. This finding reinforces the notion that Gen Z's preferences are shaped not only by issue-based awareness and social media literacy, but also by the personal image of candidates formed through genuine activity and communication. While previous findings highlighted Gen Z's rational orientation toward public issues and their reliance on social media for political literacy, this section emphasizes how perceptions of integrity and leadership style are critical decision-making factors.

Practical implications include the need for candidates in the Southeast Aceh Pilkada to not only offer well-structured programs, but also to exhibit leadership qualities that are empathetic, firm, and capable of speaking in the language of the people. Personal branding must be authentically built through physical presence in the field and reinforced with consistent visual storytelling on social media. Campaigns based on direct interaction and personal narrative are more likely to resonate with young voters than symbolic or elitist approaches. Therefore, the authentic and sustained portrayal of candidates' personalities is one of the most decisive variables in shaping Gen Z's political preferences. This strategy is not only relevant for electability but also for cultivating long-term public trust among digital-native voters.

The Influence of Social Environment on Political Decision-Making

Although Generation Z is often viewed as an independent and data-driven voter group, this study reveals that social environment still plays a role—albeit not dominant—in shaping their political decision-making process. Respondents acknowledged that suggestions and discussions with close social actors remain important parts of their political consideration process.

Respondents identified several influential social figures, including:

1. Parents, teachers, peers, and religious/cultural leaders as sources of informal advice [53], [54], [55], [56].
2. Digital communities, such as school OSIS groups, MSME forums, or volunteer communities, which serve as active spaces for political discussion and information exchange [46], [57], [58].
3. Local figures, such as neighborhood clerics, women activists, and tech influencers, who act as key references for assessing candidate credibility [45], [51], [52]..

Approximately 60% of respondents stated that they had been influenced by social figures like teachers or religious leaders in shaping their political opinions. However, nearly all emphasized that their final decision was based on personal evaluation—especially influenced by direct experiences and political content consumed via social media. These findings reinforce the relevance of the *cognitive domain approach* proposed by Yusran & Sapar, which asserts that group identity motivation is one of the seven main domains in political decision-making [21]. While social environments such as educational, religious, or digital communities no longer act as absolute determinants, they continue to serve as reference frameworks in forming Gen Z's political preferences.

Respondents' tendencies to refer to local figures—such as village clerics, teachers, community activists, and tech influencers—demonstrate that social influence is localized and experience-based. This aligns with findings by Alwi & Ram in their study of the Buton Tengah regional election, which highlighted the importance of locality and non-elite figures in influencing political behavior [23]. Thus, the social environment no longer functions deterministically as in classic sociological models [41], but rather as a reflective

discursive space, where Gen Z verifies and re-evaluates information before making decisions. This reflects a blend of critical independence and collective social awareness.

This finding strengthens the overall narrative that social structures—such as educational status, community involvement, and professional affiliations—provide reference frameworks in shaping political preferences. Here, that influence is relational rather than coercive. Respondents treated teachers, clerics, and community groups as informational companions, not decision-makers. Practical implications suggest that political campaign strategies aimed at reaching Gen Z must involve community-based approaches and engagement with local figures. Candidates who can build coalitions with influential local figures—teachers, religious leaders, or community influencers—are likely to be more trusted by young voters. This approach can also enhance the horizontal delivery of political narratives, which Gen Z is more receptive to compared to vertical messaging from national elites.

Therefore, the social environment functions as a validation network in Gen Z's political process. Their decisions remain personal but are interwoven with social networks that provide input, broaden perspectives, and foster collective awareness. In the context of the Southeast Aceh Pilkada, campaign strategies that combine digital interaction, strong personal branding, and connection with local figures will be more effective in shaping Gen Z's political preferences in a sustainable and meaningful way.

Challenges to Gen Z's Political Participation

The research findings show that although Generation Z in Southeast Aceh demonstrates high enthusiasm for political participation, they continue to face several significant challenges. The most frequently cited obstacles include low political literacy, limited internet access, and the prevalence of hoaxes and media bias. Respondents expressed difficulty in understanding the political process comprehensively, which led to uncertainty in evaluating candidates objectively. Political information circulating on social media was often described as biased, non-neutral, and even manipulative—making it difficult for them to distinguish between image-building and actual performance [45], [49], [51].

In rural areas, poor communication infrastructure and internet connectivity were identified as major barriers to accessing up-to-date political information [52]. First-time voters, especially from vocational student backgrounds and non-urban communities, reported difficulties accessing details about candidates' programs and electoral procedures [54], [59]. Additionally, respondents highlighted the limited involvement of youth in public policy forums. While active in digital spaces, many felt their voices and aspirations were rarely considered substantively by policymakers. These findings align with concerns raised by Bradshaw et al., who warned that although social media expands political expression, it also creates risks of disinformation, filter bubbles, and echo chambers [28]. Despite being digitally active, Gen Z has not yet fully developed the political and digital literacy necessary to critically filter political

information. Hoaxes and biased narratives spread widely without verification, potentially leading to impulsive political preferences.

Azis emphasized that the level of digital literacy is a key differentiator between rational voters and those easily influenced by viral sentiment [36]. This study supports that assertion, as many respondents highlighted the need for political education that is not only normative but also contextual and applicable. Other challenges, such as generic programs, lack of attention to marginalized groups, and logistical constraints for out-of-area voters, indicate that public policy has yet to fully respond to the real needs of Gen Z in regional areas.

These findings further support the observations of Setiawan & Djafar and Fitriyani et al., who noted that Gen Z tends to be more pragmatic and selective in evaluating political offerings [6], [60]. They do not merely absorb information but also question political alignment and program implementation. The findings consistently demonstrate that Gen Z demands transparency, alignment with real grassroots needs, and integrity in leadership. While they show rational issue-based preferences and favor authentic candidates who engage directly with communities, this discussion highlights the structural and cognitive barriers that still hinder the effectiveness of their participation.

Practical implications of these findings underscore the need to integrate digital campaign strategies with sustained political and digital literacy programs. Candidates and campaign teams cannot rely solely on promises or image-building; they must ensure that information is accessible, understandable, and publicly verifiable. Programs such as vocational training, political education outreach, and the digitalization of village services are seen as relevant by Gen Z and can help boost electoral trust. Moreover, involving Gen Z in the policymaking process—through digital village forums, volunteer communities, or government internship programs—would increase their trust in the local political system. Gen Z's political participation should not be measured solely by voter turnout but also by how heard and valued they feel as subjects of democracy. Thus, overcoming the challenges to Gen Z's political participation is not just an educational task, but a systemic transformation to build political communication that is transparent, inclusive, and responsive to their digital and social realities.

Hopes for the Elected Leader

Respondents from Gen Z expressed clear and directed expectations for the elected leader in the 2024 Southeast Aceh Regent Election. They sought not only a communicative figure, but one capable of delivering concrete and applicable programs with direct impacts on community life. Key expectations included equitable scholarship distribution, skills training, and improvement of educational facilities—particularly in rural and vocational areas [45], [52], [54]. Additionally, respondents emphasized the importance of strengthening the MSME sector through entrepreneurship training, access to capital, and marketing digitalization [53], [61], [62]. Other priorities mentioned were basic

infrastructure development, such as rural roads and bridges [48], [49], and urgent concerns over environmental conservation [51]. The welfare of teachers and health workers, particularly honorary teachers and rural medical personnel, also received strong attention [56], [57], [63]. Lastly, respondents stressed the importance of transparent governance and youth involvement in regional development processes [46], [61].

These findings align with Fitriyani et al.'s depiction of Gen Z as pragmatic, independent, and selective voters [64]. They are not easily swayed by political symbolism or party rhetoric, instead evaluating candidates based on capability, track record, and concrete programs. Their desire for policies responsive to local realities—such as scholarships, rural infrastructure, and digital access for MSMEs—demonstrates a demand for solution-oriented and long-term leadership. Moreover, the emphasis on transparency and youth participation highlights Gen Z's aspiration to be active stakeholders, not just campaign targets.

This resonates with the literature describing Gen Z's transformation from passive voters to empowered digital political actors. Expectations for open and collaborative leadership further confirm that Gen Z values honesty, justice, and inclusivity in governance. The findings underscore a consistent pattern: Gen Z shapes political preferences through a combination of rational needs, digital literacy, and personal integrity values. While they reject empty political imagery and critique impractical programs, they call for transformational leadership that is solution-driven, participatory, and grounded in social justice.

Practical implications of these findings are strategic for candidates. To earn Gen Z's trust, leaders must go beyond symbolic or digital appearances and present concrete, verifiable work programs with tangible impacts. Collaborative approaches that include youth in policy formulation and implementation will strengthen the connection between government and the younger generation. Gen Z is not merely a voter base—they are active partners in shaping the region's future. The success of future leaders will depend on their ability to meet these real expectations with concrete action, and to establish governance that is transparent, inclusive, and focused on grassroots needs. In the context of Southeast Aceh, this reflects a maturing and sustainable direction for local democracy.

This study strongly affirms the validity of rational choice theory in explaining Gen Z's political behavior in the 2024 regent election. Respondents made rational analyses based on program relevance to their lives—education, MSMEs, rural infrastructure, and healthcare—consistent with Downs' theory, which posits that voters act as rational agents who calculate benefits and costs [22]. Additionally, the study shows that social media has become the primary channel for political socialization and literacy among Gen Z, reinforcing digital political socialization theory. Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube are not only distribution hubs, but also spaces where political opinions and images are shaped through visual, narrative, and interactive content. This

supports two-way communication and agenda-setting theories in digital contexts, where voters are not just recipients of information, but also producers and curators of political narratives [25], [27].

A comprehensive interpretation of the data demonstrates that a multi-model approach to voter behavior theory is essential for understanding Gen Z's complexity. The rational model (Downs) is evident in their selectiveness toward programs and tangible outcomes. The psychological model [43] still plays a role in perceptions of communication style and candidate honesty. The sociological model [41] continues to influence behavior through local figures like clerics, teachers, and community leaders. Yet, the most comprehensive is the cognitive domain theory by Yusran & Sapar, which integrates rational, emotional, social, and prospective elements [21].

Gen Z voters do not merely calculate policy costs and benefits—they consider who delivers the message, how it is communicated, and within what social context. For instance, while they independently verify political information, they also discuss it in school forums, community groups, and with local leaders. These dynamics debunk the assumption that Gen Z is apathetic. On the contrary, they emerge as critical, open, participatory, and selective voters who engage only with authentic, relevant, and meaningful political content. Scientifically, this study underscores the importance of interdisciplinary, multi-model approaches in youth political behavior research. Integrating voter behavior theory, digital political communication, and cognitive domain theory enables more accurate and contextual explanations of Gen Z's dynamics. It also opens avenues for further research into local influencer roles, community media, and algorithmic behavior in shaping political opinions.

Strategic practical implications include:

1. Election organizers should implement active and participatory digital political education programs in schools, campuses, and digital communities. Experience-based political literacy and interactive simulations will better engage Gen Z.
2. Candidates and political parties must craft educational, visual, and personalized campaign narratives. Political messages should go beyond information—they must resonate with Gen Z's values and realities within a digital ecosystem.
3. Public policy must create consultative spaces for youth in policy-making processes—through digital forums, youth village engagement programs, and representation in local development planning.

Candidates who fail to deliver authentic narratives, address local issues, and align their communication style with Gen Z's digital culture will struggle to gain trust. Conversely, those who balance program substance, two-way communication, and real community involvement will find it easier to win support and loyalty from this emerging backbone of local democracy.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

This study reveals that Gen Z's political preferences in the 2024 Southeast Aceh Regent Election were shaped by a combination of rational, affective, social, and digital factors. This generation tends to vote based on how well candidates' programs align with their everyday needs—such as access to education, support for MSMEs, rural infrastructure, and public health. They exhibited rational and critical voting behavior, actively verifying information via social media, and selectively assessing candidates' integrity and personal branding. Social media played a central role in their political socialization process, functioning not only as an information channel but also as a space for interaction, validation, and political opinion formation. The influence of the social environment—particularly from teachers, clerics, and digital communities—remains present but non-dominant, indicating a shift toward more independent and reflective political preferences. On the other hand, several barriers to participation persist, including low political literacy, misinformation, limited internet access, and the lack of youth involvement in public policy. These challenges must be addressed systemically to enhance Gen Z's political engagement. Conceptually, this research contributes by integrating rational, psychological, sociological, and cognitive domain models to explain Gen Z's political behavior. Practically, it recommends the implementation of issue-based campaign strategies, visual and educational approaches, and youth involvement in policymaking spaces as essential components of local democratic consolidation. Leaders seeking Gen Z support must be able to deliver authentic, relevant, and verifiable programs, communicated through first-hand engagement and participatory digital channels. This generation is not only the future of democracy but also an active force shaping its present.

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