

Reframing money politics in local electoral debates: evidence from Southern Sulawesi, Indonesia

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How to Cite This Article: Hayat, N. & Sazali, H. (2026). Reframing money politics in local electoral debates: evidence from Southern Sulawesi, Indonesia *Jurnal Studi Komunikasi*, 10(1). doi: 10.25139/jsk.v10i1.11355
Received: 17-12-2025, Revision: 17-01-2026, Acceptance: 19-02-2026, Published: 22-03-2026

Abstract Local mayoral debates fulfil a strategic function in shaping public perceptions of political agendas and democratic processes at the subnational level. Empirical research on candidates' framing of public issues in formal debate contexts within Indonesian local elections remains scarce. This study redresses this lacuna through a qualitative framing analysis of the 2024 mayoral election debates in Makassar and Parepare—two urban centres in South Sulawesi exhibiting distinct political dynamics. Drawing on debate transcripts from official recordings, the analysis elucidates how candidates select, emphasise, and organise interpretive frames in articulating public policy issues. A systematic coding procedure, grounded in established framing typologies, was employed. The findings delineate three interrelated pathways: economic narratives that moralise welfare; digital narratives equating transparency with integrity; and moral narratives converting piety into political capital. These symbolic substitutions evince the endurance of symbolic patronage in contemporary discursive forms, conceptualised herein as a discursive moral economy of democracy. Theoretically, the study reconceptualises money politics as a representational mechanism for legitimacy construction, rather than merely a behavioural practice.

Keywords: local election; money politics; political communication

INTRODUCTION

Local elections (*Pilkada*) in Indonesia represent a vital arena for assessing the quality of democratic consolidation at the subnational level. Beyond mere electoral competition, *Pilkada* debates serve as formal communicative forums in which candidates articulate policy priorities, construct political identities, and negotiate public legitimacy. In recent electoral cycles, these debates have increasingly emerged as sites where issues about economic development, governance efficacy, and public accountability are symbolically framed to resonate with urban electorates. Consequently, comprehending the discursive construction of such issues in local political debates is indispensable for evaluating the communicative facets of democracy in Indonesia.

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In urban centres such as Makassar and Parepare—two politically competitive and digitally pervasive cities in Southern Sulawesi—the 2024 local elections evinced a marked shift. Candidates eschewed explicit allusions to money politics in public debates yet subtly embedded the phenomenon within narratives of economic empowerment, digital transparency, and moral integrity. This transformation indicates that money politics is not abating but metamorphosing into novel linguistic and symbolic guises that more closely conform to mediated democratic norms. The empirical analysis presented hereafter explicitly substantiates how these forms align with mediated democratic norms.

While extensive scholarship has examined Indonesian money politics through behavioural, institutional, and structural perspectives (Azhari & Dedi Hasriadi, 2023; Permata & Khasanah, 2020; DePaula, 2022), fewer studies have interrogated its discursive transformation. Foundational works document the mechanics of vote buying, the persistence of patronage networks (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019), and the centrality of brokers in clientelist exchanges (Ana, 2024; Stokes et al., 2013). However, these approaches rarely consider how transactional politics is narrated, justified, or symbolically reframed in mediated settings. Recent research in political communication highlights the rise of moralised populism (Bodó & Janssen, 2022; Thompson, 2016), the growing influence of digital infrastructures on political legitimacy (Marañón, 2021; Naranjo-Vinueza et al., 2025; Ong & Tapsell, 2020; Papathanasious & Giannouli, 2025; Wijayanto et al., 2024), and the emergence of online populism as a new symbolic economy (Marañón, 2021; Sinpeng & Tapsell, 2021). Global scholarship likewise emphasises the discursive construction of transparency (Ekström & Firmstone, 2017; Fischli & Muldoon, 2024), the mediated shaping of political reality (Couldry & Hepp, 2018; Fahrisky & Rahmawati, 2025; Sukendar et al., 2025), and the algorithmic reframing of public issues (Erikson & Mahnke, 2025; Lim, 2024). Yet, despite this progress, little is known about how money politics is linguistically rearticulated within candidate debates as an important arena where political actors must navigate persuasion, legality, and moral positioning simultaneously.

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To situate this study more precisely within existing scholarship, the gap addressed here is not empirical in the sense of the absence of studies on money politics, nor theoretical in terms of the lack of dominant explanatory frameworks. Rather, this research identifies a discursive-analytical gap in the literature. While previous studies have extensively examined money politics through behavioural, institutional, and structural lenses—focusing on vote-buying mechanisms, patronage networks, and broker-mediated exchanges—these approaches have largely treated political communication as a secondary or instrumental dimension. Consequently, how money politics is discursively narrated, symbolically legitimised, or rhetorically transformed in public communication arenas remains underexplored.] Thus, while prior research has elucidated what money politics entails, few studies have investigated how it endures symbolically through language.

Debate transcripts are rarely utilised in studies of Indonesian clientelism, yet they offer unique insights into how candidates transform stigmatised transactional logics into socially

legitimate discourses that resonate with democratic values and contemporary expectations of governance. Accordingly, the research questions are: (1) How is money politics framed in mayoral debate discourses in Makassar and Parepare? And (2) What discursive strategies are employed to legitimise or obscure transactional political practices within these debates?

By conceptualising money politics as a discursive moral economy, this study advances theoretical debates on mediated populism, symbolic legitimacy, and the transformation of clientelism in emerging democracies.] It contributes to the literature in three principal ways. First, it extends scholarship on the mediatization of politics by demonstrating how transactional logics persist through linguistic adaptation rather than explicit vote buying in mayoral debates. Second, it positions South Sulawesi—specifically the cities of Makassar and Parepare—as a critical empirical site for understanding discursive innovation in Indonesia’s local democracies, where candidates must navigate persuasion, legality, and moral accountability amid heightened public scrutiny. Third, it furnishes a methodological contribution by integrating framing analysis and narrative discourse analysis using candidate debate transcripts, a dataset that remains underutilised in studies of money politics at the local level. Ultimately, the article contends that economic, digital, and moral reframing do not signal the demise of money politics but rather its reconfiguration into communicative strategies attuned to Indonesia’s contemporary mediated electoral environment.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative Comparative Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explore how narratives of economic, digital, and moral legitimacy reframe the issue of money politics in two urban mayoral debates in South Sulawesi, Makassar and Parepare. This CDA aligns with a constructivist-interpretivist tradition, as CDA accommodates diverse epistemological orientations. The qualitative design is appropriate, given that the research seeks not to quantify attitudes or frequencies but to interpret meanings, moral evaluations, and linguistic strategies embedded in candidates’ discourse. The comparative dimension facilitates the identification of both shared symbolic patterns and context-specific variations in legitimacy construction across two urban political milieus.

Following Fairclough’s (2023) three-dimensional model of discourse textual analysis, discursive practice, and sociocultural context, the study examines how candidates’ language functions concurrently as a textual artefact, a communicative practice mediated by electoral debate, and a reflection of broader transformations in urban political culture. This approach coheres with Entman’s (1993) framing theory and the narrative paradigm (Riessman, 2008), both of which underscore how meaning is constructed and rendered persuasive through selective emphasis and moral storytelling.

Makassar and Parepare were selected as emblematic urban centres in South Sulawesi, embodying distinct yet comparable social and political dynamics. Makassar, a metropolitan hub with elevated digital penetration and a heterogeneous electorate, exemplifies technocratic and modernist discourse. Parepare, though smaller, evinces communitarian and moralistic discourse anchored in social cohesion and religiosity. Both cities contested the 2024 local elections under uniform electoral regulations yet divergent sociocultural contours. The urban setting is pivotal: relative to rural locales, urban voters are more predisposed to engage with mediated political debates and less immersed in cash-for-votes transactions (Muhtadi, 2023). Thus, any persistence of money politics is anticipated to manifest symbolically through language and narrative, rather than direct exchange. The debates in both cities were nationally televised and streamed on social media platforms, affording access to highly mediated political performances.

Accordingly, this study employs a qualitative research design, augmented by audience reception data from an online survey encompassing respondents from Makassar ($n = 18$) and Parepare ($n = 18$). The primary data comprise transcripts of mayoral candidate debates, systematically coded using Entman’s (1993) framing dimensions: problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation. To bolster analytical validity, the discourse analysis was triangulated with focus group discussions (FGDs) (involving 22 participants in total—12 in Makassar and 10 in Parepare—selected to encapsulate diverse voter perspectives. Both survey and FGD data served to evaluate) how audiences interpreted and responded to economic, digital, and moral narratives in the debates, thereby anchoring the

analysis of symbolic reframing in empirical evidence of voter reception and augmenting interpretive rigour, See Table 1.

Table 1. Informants' background.

	Employee	Student	Entrepreneur	Grand total
Makassar	8	3	1	12
Parepare	4	4	2	10
Grand Total	12	7	3	22

Source: Author's fieldwork FGD Makassar and Parepare, (2025).

The primary data consist of full transcripts and recordings of official candidate debates during the 2024 local elections: two debate sessions from Makassar, involving four candidate pairs; and one debate session from Parepare, involving four candidate pairs. Each transcript was sourced from the official election commission archives and cross-verified with video recordings to ensure linguistic accuracy and contextual fidelity. Supplementary data were gathered from 36 online questionnaires distributed to young voters (aged 17-30) in both cities, elucidating audience interpretations and evaluations of the debates. Though not statistically representative, these responses furnished reception-level insights that enriched the interpretive analysis.

Secondary materials—such as media coverage, campaign manifestos, and candidates' social media statements—were deployed for contextual triangulation, confirming that discursive patterns in the debates cohered with broader communicative practices throughout the campaign period.

The analysis unfolded in three iterative stages, integrating frame analysis and narrative discourse analysis. Stage 1: Textual and thematic coding. Each transcript was imported into NVivo 12 software and segmented into utterance-level units (speaker turns). A hybrid deductive-inductive coding strategy was adopted. Deductively, Entman's (1993) four framing dimensions—problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation—furnished the initial structure. Inductively, emergent themes were permitted to arise, particularly linguistic markers of economic, digital, and moral legitimacy.

Stage 2: Discursive and narrative structuring. Here, the analysis scrutinised how frames were embedded within narrative architectures, delineating orientation (context), complication (issue tension), evaluation (moral stance), and resolution (proposed action). This adhered to Riessman's (2008) approach to narrative positioning. The objective was to elucidate how the moral logic of money politics was rearticulated, rather than merely delineated.

Stage 3: Comparative interpretation. Discursive findings were juxtaposed across cities, with particular attention to how contextual disparities—digital modernisation in Makassar versus moral collectivism in Parepare—shaped dominant reframing pathways. Comparative mapping disclosed both convergences, manifesting as shared symbolic substitutions for money politics, and divergences in cultural vocabularies of legitimacy.

Throughout, reflexive notetaking ensured analytical transparency and interpretive rigour. Continuous comparison among debate transcripts, researcher notes, and audience interpretations facilitated theoretical saturation while mitigating researcher bias, in accordance with criteria advanced by Rees (2024) and Tracy (2010). The analytical focus centred on identifying discursive reframing, construed as the process whereby money politics is transmuted into alternative symbolic vocabularies. This was operationalised through three interconnected indicators derived from the theoretical framework: economic narratives, digital narratives, and moral narratives.

Economic reframing denoted how candidates portrayed materially oriented programmes as legitimate welfare interventions—such as capital assistance for small entrepreneurs—implicitly recasting transactional exchanges as empowerment. Digital reframing interrogated how invocations of technological modernisation, particularly e-government, digital transparency, and data-driven governance, served as proxies for integrity and the eradication of covert political costs. Moral reframing, meanwhile, examined how candidates mobilised religious values, ethical assertions, or moral commitments to forge images of untainted leadership, supplanting structural discourse on bribery with moralised claims to character and virtue.

These three reframing pathways enabled systematic detection of linguistic substitutions that veil the persistence of patronage relations while evoking symbolic transformation. To augment credibility and trustworthiness, validation strategies were implemented per Lincoln and

Guba's framework (Schwandt et al., 2007). Data from debate transcripts were triangulated with media reports and audience responses to verify interpretive consistency. Coding procedures and interpretive assertions underwent peer debriefing with two communication scholars, bolstering analytical coherence. Contextual corroboration was achieved by aligning insights with socio-political developments chronicled by journalists and civic observers, ensuring discursive interpretations mirrored empirical realities.

All data were publicly accessible, with no identifiable participant information collected. To uphold analytic neutrality and international publication ethics (Rees, 2024; Pearson, 2017), candidates were anonymised in the findings using generic labels such as 'Candidate A, Makassar'. Consonant with qualitative discourse research conventions, the study eschews statistical generalisability, privileging instead the profundity of contextual interpretation and illumination of how political actors strategically fabricate legitimacy via mediated discourse. Although debate performances may be scripted, such performativity holds analytical import, as it discloses candidates deliberate crafting of moral, economic, and technological narratives to resonate with urban voters in a mediated democratic milieu.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis of mayoral debates in Makassar and Parepare during the 2024 local elections reveals that money politics endures not as overt material exchange but as a discursive phenomenon mediated through symbolic reframing. Although candidates deliberately eschewed explicit references to money politics, they embedded its moral logic within economic, technological, and moral narratives.



Figure 1. Figure public perceptions of overexplicit vs. subtle references to money politics across both cities. Source: Processed by the author from online questionnaires (2025)

Empirical evidence corroborates this discursive shift. The online questionnaire revealed that 44.4% of respondents perceived money politics as 'not discussed explicitly', while 38.9% viewed it as 'disguised within economic and moral narratives' (See Figure 1). Focus group discussion (FGD) participants concurred, observing that candidates were prone to 'diverting the issue' and embedding sensitive topics within culturally and ethically resonant frames. This perception is buttressed by concrete instances from the debates. For example, in Makassar's debate, Candidate A averred: 'We will strengthen small-business capital through community-based credit schemes'—a formulation that recasts monetary distribution as empowerment rather than inducement. Likewise, Candidate C in Parepare proclaimed: 'Prosperity must be shared, not bought', deploying moral rhetoric to dissociate the campaign from vote-buying lexicon while preserving its affective reciprocity.

"The candidates never explicitly mention money politics, but they wrap it in softer terms—such as business capital, subsidies, or assistance. It sounds like programmatic discourse, yet people clearly understand what it implies' (FGD-ZN, student, Makassar, 29 October 2025).

These responses evince that the practice has not vanished; rather, it has undergone symbolic transformation, permitting candidates to retain transactional logic while upholding public respectability. Taken together, the survey and FGD findings affirm that the omission of explicit terminology does not denote the eradication of money politics. Instead, it betokens a

strategic pivot to discursive mitigation, wherein transactional significations are sustained via symbolic and morally cogent vocabularies that resonate across divergent local electoral contexts. This configuration coheres with the concept of reconceptualisation, whereby socially stigmatised practices are linguistically reconstituted to accord with emergent normative exigencies.

Economic narrative as moralised legitimacy

Across both cities, economic discourse emerged as the most enduring rhetorical stratagem for rearticulating patronage within morally palatable confines. Candidates framed economic assistance not as transactional barter but as empowerment, responsibility, and solicitude. In Makassar, pledges of microcredit and business training—encapsulated in utterances such as ‘No family should be left behind’—recast aid as a developmental imperative.

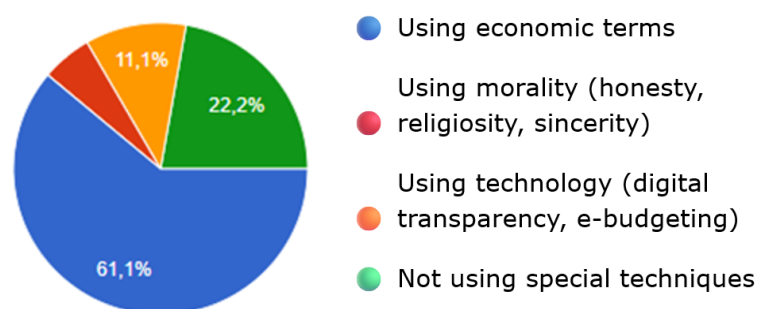


Figure 2. Categories of economic narratives and representative debate quotes across both cities.
Source: Processed by the author from online questionnaires (2025)

The Parepare debate evinced a more effective tenor. Locutions such as ‘When the people prosper, the leader prospers with them’ resonated with respondents, 61.1% of whom identified ‘assistance for micro, small, and medium enterprises’ (UMKM) and cognate programmes (See Figure 2) as implicit surrogates for conventional money politics. FGD participants-NMS said,

“Candidates never explicitly say ‘money politics’, but they wrap it in softer language. They talk about business capital, subsidies, and assistance. It sounds like programmatic policy, but people understand what it implies’ (FGD-NMS, student, Makassar, 29 November 2025).

This exemplifies the persistence of what Aspinall and Berenschot (2019) term the moral economy of clientelism. Thus, the economic narrative sustains reciprocity’s logic yet veils it in moralised parlance, transmuted ‘giving’ into an ethical prerogative of leadership.

This construct is buttressed by primary data. Survey findings indicate that 61.1% of respondents discerned UMKM assistance and analogous welfare initiatives as oblique substitutes for traditional money politics. FGD data further substantiate this perception. As one young entrepreneur from Makassar remarked:

‘Money politics’ is no longer named directly; it is reframed as capital, aid, or subsidies—appearing programmatic but functioning transactionally. (FGD-YS, student, Makassar, 29 November 2025).

Collectively, the debate transcripts, survey responses, and FGD insights attest that economic narratives constitute a pivotal mechanism for reframing transactional expectancies. This discovery illuminates the endurance of Aspinall and Berenschot’s (2019) moral economy of clientelism, wherein reciprocity is upheld through relational and affective idiom rather than overt exchange. Herein, economic succour is symbolically exalted as an ethical manifestation of leadership, enabling candidates to perpetuate patronage logics while attenuating reputational and juridical perils.

The normalisation of welfare discourse as moral leadership also mirrors a wider communicative inflexion toward what Paget (2020) delineates as developmental nationalism; wherein material uplift pledges are cast as collective moral imperatives. In both Makassar and

Parepare, candidates aligned economic propositions with compassion, familial welfare, and communal fortitude. This stratagem resonates profoundly amid economic precarity, where electorates construe policy lexicon through moral and relational prisms rather than institutional or structural metrics. Ergo, the amalgamation of solicitude and empowerment functions as an affective discursive instrument, reconfiguring transactional politics as empathy and moral custodianship, thereby perpetuating clientelist dynamics in culturally sanctioned guises.

Digital Transparency as Automated Virtue

Makassar evinced a pronounced predilection for technological discourse, positing digital systems as bulwarks of probity and transparency. Parepare deployed analogous yet less technologically sophisticated rhetoric, emphasising online budget disclosures and public access to administrative records. Survey findings disclosed moderate public credence, with 50% of respondents registering midpoint confidence levels (See Figure 3).

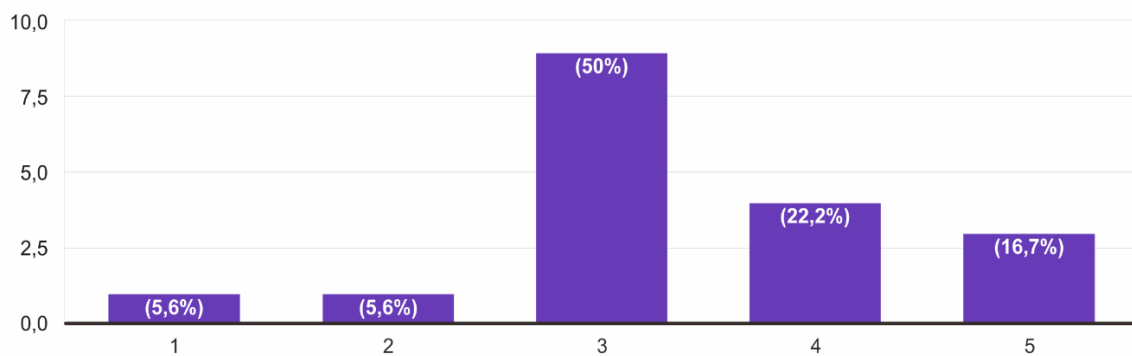


Figure 3. Public trust scales toward digital transparency narratives and moral-religious sincerity across both cities.
Source: Processed by the author from online questionnaires (2025)

While FGD participants demurred, those digital pledges devolved into formality. ‘Digital transparency sounds good, but it often becomes mere formality. It doesn’t automatically guarantee integrity’, (FGD-NRM, Makassar, 29 November 2025). Notwithstanding such caveats, the digital narrative parallels global trajectories of algorithmic legitimacy (Couldry & Hepp, 2018; Garajamirli, 2025; Lim, 2024; Widodo & Kristiyono, 2025), transmuting transparency into a performative political commodity. The allure of digital transparency in both cities further mirrors burgeoning institutionalisation, wherein citizens are exhorted to repose faith in information systems as artificers of integrity rather than ethical governance per se (Bodó & Janssen, 2022; Hidayah et al., 2025).

In Makassar, ambitious proposals for real-time monitoring platforms and automated financial reporting were cast as structural panaceas obviating human discretion. Parepare’s more restrained emphasis on accessible documents and simplified online portals nonetheless presupposed that visibility equates to accountability.

This framing construed transparency as an administrative artefact rather than a personal devoir. Yet, as FGD responses attest, public ambivalence persists; participants conceded the symbolic potency of such systems while impugning their operational efficacy, particularly amid feeble enforcement apparatuses. This ambivalence illuminates a cardinal paradox in Indonesia’s digital governance discourse, wherein technological instruments are rhetorically apotheosised as moral infrastructure, albeit their efficacy hinges on political resolve and institutional sinew rather than digitisation alone. This reframing resonates with Hastuti et al.’s (2025) strictures on datafication and technological mediation, whereby ethical authority is progressively devolved from accountable political agents to systems, protocols, and instrumentalities. Within this paradigm, ostensible moral governance manifests through technical visibility rather than substantive ethical accountability.

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Moral and religious sincerity as political currency

The Parepare debates featured pronounced recourse to moral and religious allusions, construing leadership as an adjunct of divine accountability. Utterances such as 'A leader must be honest before God' exemplify the performative ethics delineated by Wrench (2016). Respondents from both cities exhibited ambivalence towards these appeals, with 50% deeming them strategic and only 16.7% deeming them sincere, as depicted in Figure 3.

FGD participants observed that moral narratives cohered with cultural expectancies yet oft lacked substantive policy moorings: 'When it comes to morality, the candidates sound similar. They speak from the heart, but the public wants evidence, not just sentiment' (FGD-YF, Parepare, 12th October 2025). Nonetheless, such invocations accrue as symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991), empowering candidates to transmute spiritual virtue into political legitimacy. Allusions to benediction and alms effaced the demarcation between largesse and reciprocity, sanctifying political barter and enshrining clientelist logic within religious idiom.

In Parepare, this transposition manifested principally through moral-religious narratives, wherein ethical legitimacy was anchored in invocations of personal piety, sincerity, and moral exemplarity. By contrast, Makassar's debates disclosed a cognate yet discrete trajectory, whereby ethical responsibility was symbolically devolved to digital infrastructures, transparency apparatuses, and automated governance systems.

The prominence of moral-religious rhetoric in Parepare mirrors a wider motif in South Sulawesi politics, where piety wields potent symbolic valence and frequently supplants explicit governance pledges. This coheres with the notion of 'cultural moralism', wherein religious parlance serves as a communicative synecdoche for trustworthiness amid institutional frailty (Herzfeld, 2016; Hidayah et al., 2025). In this milieu, candidates wield moral discourse not merely to avow personal probity but to intimate consonance with communal ethos, privileging sincerity, humility, and spiritual reckoning. Yet this symbolic allure tends to obfuscate discourse on policy efficacy.

FGD data from Parepare indicate that voters evince growing cognisance of this dissonance: whilst moral appeals resonate affectively, citizens are increasingly exigent of tangible competence and robust anti-corruption contrivances. Thus, the religious narrative, far from redressing transactional politics, imperils entrenching an attenuated, sacralised variant of patronage that legitimises political barter beneath the mantle of spiritual devoir.

Comparative semiotics of Makassar and Parepare

Although Makassar privileged digital modernity and Parepare accentuated moral humanism, both cities evinced convergence in their semiotic strategies. Each deployed symbolic surrogates for political benefaction—such as welfare as solicitude, technology as probity, and piety as virtue. This convergence reflects regional currents of moralised populism (Thompson, 2016), wherein authenticity and virtue accrue as political capital. The findings posit that linguistic transmutation functions as an adaptive survival stratagem for transactional politics within ascendant mediated electoral milieus, effected through textual narration in the mayoral debates—now archived on YouTube.

The semiotic juxtaposition across Makassar and Parepare attests that, despite divergent emphases—digital modernity advanced as symbolic transparency in Makassar and moral humanism in Parepare—both cities enlist symbolically equivalent strategies to reframe the logic of money politics (See Table 2). Economic assistance is narrated as empowerment or communal solicitude; digital transparency is cast as automated integrity or public visibility; and moral appeals emerge either as administrative virtue or religious sincerity. These shared semiotic functions accord with Thompson's (2016) notion of moralised populism, wherein authenticity and virtue function as political capital in mediated contexts. FGD participant IP (Parepare)

reinforced this convergence, noting that ‘the practice may still exist, only the language is more refined’, signifying that linguistic purification operates as an adaptive mechanism permitting transactional politics to subsist beneath morally and technologically legitimised narratives.

Table 2. Semiotic matrix of economic-digital-moral narratives across cities.

Narrative category	Makassar (digital modernity)	Parepare (moral humanism)	Shared semiotic function
A. Economic narrative	Welfare framed as <i>empowerment</i> (microcredit, training); economic support positioned as developmental rather than transactional.	Welfare framed as <i>care</i> and communal responsibility; assistance described as moral duty and shared prosperity.	Welfare as symbolic substitute for political giving , transforming material patronage into moralised redistribution.
B. Digital narrative	Technology framed as <i>automated honesty</i> (e-budgeting, transparency dashboards); morality delegated to digital systems.	Digital tools framed as <i>public visibility</i> rather than technical reform; openness emphasised as ethical conduct.	Technology as symbolic honesty , turning digital systems into moral agents that “cleanse” transactional politics.
C. Moral narrative	Less dominant; morality appears through integrity claims tied to good governance and clean leadership.	Highly dominant; piety, sincerity, and divine accountability presented as core legitimacy resources.	Piety as symbolic virtue , converting spiritual credibility into political capital.
D. Discursive outcome	Modernist rationality and technocratic credibility.	Emotional resonance and moral authenticity.	Linguistic purification that preserves transactional logic
E. Empirical indicator	<i>“The language is modernised—transparent, digital, efficient.”</i> (FGD-NS, Makassar, 29 th October 2025)	<i>“The practice may still exist, only the language is more refined.”</i> (FGD-IH, Parepare, 12 Nov 2025)	A shared semiotic strategy that reframes money politics without addressing its structural roots.

Source: Author’s fieldwork (FGD Makassar and Parepare, 2025); Debate transcripts (KPU, 2024).

From transactional to representational politics

The data evince a transition from material exchange modalities to representational stratagems, wherein candidates enact legitimacy via symbolic narratives. Welfare is moralised as solicitude; transparency is rendered as automated virtue; piety is transmuted into ethical identity. These narratives coalesce into what this study conceptualises as a symbolic moral economy, wherein legitimacy is trafficked through discourse rather than currency.

Application of Entman’s (1993) framing model elucidates how candidates strategically delineate problems (poverty, opacity, moral decay), ascribe causal ascriptions, and proffer solutions that rhetorically launder the transactional provenance of their narratives. Money politics endures, albeit recoded through contemporary moral lexicons.

As delineated in Table 3, the reframing of money politics across Makassar and Parepare is neither abstract nor uniform, but manifests through candidate-specific framing stratagems that transmute transactional practices into representational enactments of legitimacy. In Makassar, Candidates A and C construed money politics principally as a consequence of poverty and citizens’ reliance on rudimentary economic succour, morally appraising welfare provision as a leadership devoir. This framing yielded programmatic exhortations—such as microcredit schemes, UMKM support, and household assistance—that recoded material exchange as empowerment narratives. By contrast, Candidate B situated the malaise within bureaucratic opacity, imputing transactional politics to hermetic administrative systems; here, transparency was morally conflated with untainted governance, with digital panaceas (e-government platforms, digital auditing, open budgeting) proffered as correctives. Candidate D, meanwhile, espoused a moral lens, defining money politics as ethical turpitude wrought by indulgent elites, and advancing integrity-driven leadership alongside moral appeals as emendations. This inflection from material to symbolic barter further exemplifies candidates’ recourse to what Mazzarella (2024) terms ‘affective governance’, wherein affective resonance and moral semiotics supplant overt inducement as persuasive instruments.

A cognate yet contextually nuanced configuration obtains in Parepare. Candidates A and C likewise framed money politics as structurally impelled by economic vulnerability—ascendant prices and depressed household incomes as causal stressors—casting welfare succour and capital aid for small enterprises as protective stewardship rather than enticement. Candidate B mirrored Makassar’s digital exegesis but accorded greater salience to transactional governance cultures bequeathed by opaque bureaucracies, championing digital transparency and public budget disclosure as ethical governance contrivances. Candidate D, for her part, articulated the most overt moral-religious framing, depicting money politics as a debasement of public dignity engendered by venal elites, and positing probity, piety, and ethical deportment as conjoint moral appraisal and remediation. Collectively, these candidate-specific framings evince a pivot from material exchange to symbolic moral economy, wherein legitimacy is trafficked discursively via welfare, transparency, and virtue rather than pecuniary inducement.

Table 3. Framing matrix of money politics across candidates and cities

City / candidate	Problem definition	Causal interpretation	Moral evaluation	Treatment recommendation
Makassar - Candidates A & C	Money politics as a consequence of poverty	Citizens reliant on financial succour to fulfil basic needs	Empowerment framed as ethical devoir	Microcredit programmes, UMKM support, household assistance
Makassar - Candidate B	Money politics as a product of bureaucratic opacity	Opaque administrative systems facilitate covert transactions.	Transparency equated with untainted governance	E-government, digital auditing, open budgeting
Makassar - Candidate D	Money politics as moral turpitude	Permissive elites and normalised corruption	Money politics framed as a moral transgression	Moral appeals, integrity-driven leadership
Parepare - Candidates A & C	Money politics precipitated by structural economic frailty	Economic vulnerability (elevated prices, subdued incomes) compels citizens	Leaders obliged to safeguard citizens’ welfare	Social assistance, capital support for small businesses.
Parepare - Candidate B	Money politics rooted in non-transparent bureaucracy.	Transactional governance ethos.	Open government synonymous with ethical governance	Digital transparency, public budget disclosure
Parepare - Candidate D	Money politics as moral debasement	Corrupt elites eroding social values	Money politics impugns public dignity.	Invocations of probity, piety, and ethical deportment.

Source: Author’s fieldwork (FGD Makassar and Parepare, 2025); Debate transcripts (KPU, 2024).

Public ambivalence and the democratic dilemma

The reframing of money politics engenders a democratic paradox: the modernisation of political idiom may obfuscate rather than redress ethical quandaries. Survey responses evinced equipoise: 33.3% professed heightened trust, 33.3% indifference, and 33.3% diminished trust following exposure to these narratives (Figure 4).

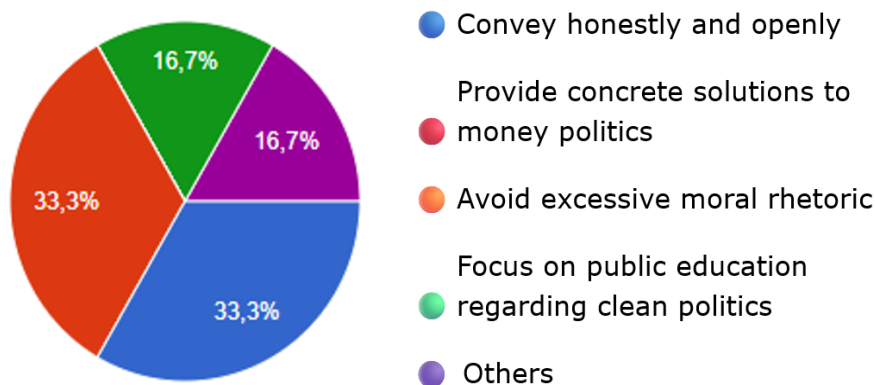


Figure 4. Respondents’ opinions on how candidates should communicate the issue of money politics in debates to strengthen the quality of democracy and public trust across both cities.

Source: Processed by the author from online questionnaires (2025)

FGD participants illuminated structural frailties—economic penury and lax oversight—wherein symbolic and material inducements prove equipotently persuasive:

People are struggling economically, and that renders them vulnerable—not only to cash proffers but also to promises arrayed as programmes or “care”. Whether money, sembako (basic needs/ groceries), or empowerment rhetoric, the effect obtains analogously, for institutions enforce rules perfunctorily. Amid feeble oversight, even symbolic gestures exert suasion’ (FGD-SE, Parepare, 12 October 2025)

Euphemistic parlance inexorably erodes public discernment of ethical derogation (Burridge, 2012). Linguistic refinement hazards engendering a semiotic simulacrum of reform, veiling clientelism’s perdurance behind moral and technological narratives. This ambivalence betokens a profounder democratic conundrum in contemporary Indonesian politics, wherein citizens, though better informed, remain structurally circumscribed in evaluative agency. As digital campaigning, moral lexicons, and welfare-inflected messaging burgeon mediatised, voters encounter what Couldry and Hepp (2018) and Kartini et al. (2025) term an ‘overproduction of meaning’, wherein symbolic reform outstrips institutional transmutation.

In the urban case studies of Makassar and Parepare, electoral dynamics are marked by economic vulnerability, personalistic leadership, and perdurable patronage nexuses that contour narrative construction and reception. This semiotic saturation begets conditions wherein citizens may ken discursive artifice yet deem such narratives ineluctable or compelling. The concurrence of scepticism and susceptibility thus constitutes not contradiction but symptomatology of a polity wherein structural constraints delimits substantive scrutiny, and ethical judgements are forged as much by economic precarity as communicative finesse. Consequently, public ambivalence signifies less apathy than the precarious equipoise between moral suasion and material necessity that indelibly characterises local democratic praxis.

Implications for theory and political communication discourse

The findings advance scholarship on mediatised populism, digital governance, and clientelism by promulgating the concept of discursive reframing of money politics—the transmutation of transactional logic into symbolic political communication. The study elucidates how economic welfare, digital transparency, and moral sincerity function as emergent currencies of legitimacy.

Table 4. Policy recommendations for political literacy and discursive reform.

Domain	Policy recommendation	Purpose / problem addressed	Link to article findings
Civic & media literacy	Integrate discursive literacy modules into universities and youth programmes: how to identify economic, moral, and digital reframing in political speech.	Citizens struggle to distinguish symbolic virtue from genuine accountability.	Survey: 50% evince moderate trust only; FGD: narratives perceived as ‘dibungkus’ / disguised.
Electoral debate governance	Require fact-based narrative scoring , real-time discourse monitoring, and explicit prompts on money politics during debates.	Debates permit candidates to evade explicit discussion, deflecting to welfare or morality.	44.4% averred money politics was ‘not discussed explicitly’; 38.9% deemed it ‘disamarkan’.
Digital governance reform	Ensure transparency systems (e-budgeting, digital reporting) incorporate independent audits and public verification mechanisms.	Digital transparency risks performativity (‘the system will keep us honest’).	Accords with findings on automated virtue (Couldry & Mejias, 2019b).
Anti-clientelism institutional strengthening	Strengthen local enforcement units, reporting mechanisms, and sanctions for symbolic patronage masquerading as welfare programmes.	Economic ‘care’ narratives hazard normalising patronage in linguistic guise.	FGD: aid perceived as ‘not political money, but concern’.

Source: Author’s fieldwork (FGD Makassar and Parepare, 2025); Debate transcripts (KPU, 2024).

Practically, these insights emphasise the necessity for augmented civic literacy, empowering citizens to differentiate rhetorical virtue from substantive accountability. Absent critical discernment, Indonesia hazards engendering a symbolic democracy wherein idiom modernises whilst institutions stagnate. The following recommendations derive from this study's findings as shown at Table 4.

The foregoing policy recommendations accentuate the exigent imperative to foster discursive literacy as a democratic competence, particularly in regions such as South Sulawesi wherein political communication is progressively contoured by economic lexicons, moral idioms, and digital performativity. The findings resonate with Cabañes' (2020) conception of moral populism; wherein affective and ethical narratives supplant programmatic perspicuity as persuasive instruments. Likewise, Erikson and Mahnke's (2025) theory of algorithmic framing elucidates why digital transparency in Makassar's debates manifested less as an accountability contrivance and more as a symbolic pageant of 'automated virtue'. Within this milieu, civic and media literacy initiatives assume indispensability—not merely to counteract disinformation, but to empower citizens to decipher insidious linguistic stratagems, such as transmuted pecuniary inducement into solicitude or patronage into transparency, which perdure notwithstanding institutional advancements. This coheres with wider Southeast Asian trajectories, wherein modernised political semiotics coexist with ingrained clientelist praxis, yielding what scholars term hybrid democratic communication.

The discursive mutation of money politics

The findings disclose that candidates in both Makassar and Parepare rearticulate the moral logic of money politics into linguistic registers consonant with emergent norms of digital ethics and affective populism. These findings substantiate the inflection delineated by Erikson and Mahnke (2025), wherein digital-age framing entails algorithmic moralisation that devolves ethical authority to technological apparatuses. When candidates aver that 'the system itself keeps us honest', they incarnate what is termed automated virtue, wherein morality is mediated through code rather than conscience.

The moral narrative in Parepare coheres with wider Southeast Asian configurations identified by Cabañes (2020), wherein populist leaders fabricate moral economies of compassion that transmute economic patronage into symbolic virtue. Likewise, allusions to solicitude and benediction in the debates exemplify the moralisation of trust anatomised by Ekström and Firmstone (2017), intimating that affective authenticity supplants structural accountability as legitimacy's bedrock.

Methodologically, the synthesis of Entman's (1993) four framing dimensions with narrative discourse analysis furnishes analytical granularity for deciphering how political elites linguistically sanitise transactional politics. This methodology accords with Fairclough's (2023) notion of re-conceptualisation, whereby socially delegitimised practices are linguistically reconstituted to sustain normative coherence. The multimodal orientation of this analysis likewise responds to Machin and Mayr's (2012) and Omair et al.'s (2025) exhortation for critical discourse approaches that trace how visual and verbal semiotics conjointly erect moral authority in mediated political enactments.

Theoretically, this study extends contemporaneous discourses on algorithmic legitimacy (Erikson & Mahnke, 2025; Hastuti et al., 2025; Papathanasious & Giannouli, 2025) and moral populism (Hidayah et al., 2025; Kartini et al., 2025; Mazzarella, 2024) by demonstrating how welfare, transparency, and piety operate as symbolic currencies in local democratic rituals. It contends that whilst the material instantiation of money politics may recede, its communicative logic persists, transmuted into digital, affective, and ethical idioms that preserve affective reciprocity between leaders and citizens.

This discovery coheres with Garajamirli's (2025), Marañon's (2021), Sinpeng and Tapsell's (2021), and Wijayanto et al.'s (2024) conception of democracy's moralisation, whereby democratic discourse is refashioned as a moral spectacle legitimising populist authority. In the local electoral contexts scrutinised herein, performative transparency and linguistic virtue function as contrivances of symbolic patronage rather than harbingers of substantive democratic reform.

Critical reflection: between moral rhetoric and structural reality

Whilst antecedent sections have elucidated how economic, digital, and moral narratives operate as discursive legitimising mechanisms, it is imperative to reflect critically upon the broader socio-political tension between symbolic transmutation and material perdurance. The persistence of money politics in Indonesia—particularly in South Sulawesi’s local elections—attests that linguistic modernisation does not ipso facto engender ethical reform. What is discursively reframed as empowerment or transparency may, in praxis, perpetuate the self-same transactional logics ingrained within Indonesia’s patronage culture.

Empirically, electoral clientelism remains structurally entrenched. Field observations, local media reportage, and ethnographic exegeses disclose that pecuniary inducements, material incentives, and reciprocal benefactions continue to contour voter comportment. In this light, the Makassar and Parepare debates are more perspicuously construed not as the extirpation of transactional politics but as its aesthetic reorganisation. Candidates have accommodated public expectancies by supplanting overt material barter with discursive gesturing, privileging digital probity and moral virtue as symbolic modalities of political benefaction.

This phenomenon resonates with Bourdieu’s (1991) conception of symbolic capital: the capacity to transmute economic puissance into moral legitimacy via linguistic performance. In these debates, candidates enact moral integrity not as ethical rectitude but as political specie trafficked within the economy of recognition that erstwhile sustained material patronage. Digital platforms and moral lexicons thus emerge as novel currencies of credibility, conserving the patron-client nexus within a semiotic ambit.

Critically, this unveils a profound communicative paradox. Linguistic modernisation may dissimulate, rather than dismantle, the puissance asymmetry between leaders and citizens. Whilst moral and technological idioms intimate reform, they often engender a transparency simulacrum devoid of accountability. What alters is discourse’s veneer, not exchange’s architecture. The moral economy of politics thus perduring as Indonesian democracy’s invisible infrastructure—a consensual apprehension that ‘help’, ‘service’, and ‘charity’ remain sanctioned conduits of political devoir.

Contextually, the perdurance of these practices in urban South Sulawesi exemplifies how local political culture mediates global governance and modernisation narratives. Makassar and Parepare, as digitally literate yet religiously anchored polities, incarnate moral modernity’s hybrid logic, wherein ethical virtue and technological rationality coexist as coterminous legitimacy founts. Candidates exploit this duality by framing economic succour as moral ministry and digital transparency as divine reckoning, forging a discourse at once modern and moral yet ultimately preservative of transactional rationality.

Ergo, the challenge for Indonesia’s democratic communication resides not in money politics’ eradication per se, but in disrupting the symbolic contrivances that normalise it. Authentic reform exigés interrogating language’s ideological technicity—how ‘clean’, ‘smart’, and ‘moral’ governance may linguistically reproduce inequity. This critical discernment repositions democracy’s contestation from electoral ethics to discursive ethics: the imperative to render political idiom itself accountable.

CONCLUSION

This study scrutinised how the discourse of money politics was reframed in the 2024 mayoral debates of Makassar and Parepare through triangulated analysis of debate transcripts, survey data, and focus group discussions (FGDs). Drawing upon Entman’s (1993b) framing theory and narrative discourse analysis, the findings attest that transactional political logic did not vanish from the debates but was symbolically rearticulated through economic, digital, and moral narratives. Scrutiny of debate transcripts discloses that candidates systematically eschewed explicit allusions to money politics, mobilising instead programmatic idiom that re-legitimised patronage within culturally palatable moral and technological lexicons. Survey results and FGD data corroborate that voters discerned these narratives as oblique surrogates for traditional money politics, notwithstanding their packaging as welfare, transparency, or ethical leadership.

This study advances the concept of discursive reframing of money politics, construed as the process whereby discredited electoral practices are reconstituted as morally and technologically legitimate modalities of political communication. Whereas antecedent scholarship predominantly conceptualised money politics as a behavioural phenomenon centred upon vote buying and material inducements, this research repositions it as a representational process of symbolic barter. Empirical evidence from both debates and audience reception elucidates how linguistic and performative stratagems function as mechanisms of moral substitution, transmuted cash into solicitude, opacity into transparency, and patronage into piety.

The comparative findings illuminate discrete yet convergent reframing configurations across the two cities. In Makassar, debate transcripts evince predominant recourse to technological narratives, wherein digital systems and administrative automation were cast as guarantors of probity and untainted governance. In Parepare, moral and religious idioms predominated, with candidates invoking ethical devoir and spiritual reckoning as founts of political legitimacy. Survey responses and FGDs disclose public ambivalence towards both approaches: whilst some respondents professed augmented trust, others appraised these narratives as symbolic or performative rather than substantively reformist. Collectively, these data intimate the emergence of a localised inflexion of moralised political communication, wherein affective authenticity and technocratic rhetoric partially supplant institutional accountability.

Normatively, the findings gesture towards the peril of a semiotic modality of local democracy, wherein ethical legitimacy is enacted linguistically and symbolically rather than structurally. The perdurance of clientelist logic in symbolic guise underscores the exigency of fortifying civic literacy and analytical acumen among voters, empowering them to critically appraise the moral and technological averable embedded in electoral discourse.

Future research might extend this analytical framework via comparative exegeses across supplementary local electoral contexts, and by deploying computational or AI-assisted discourse analysis to trace the circulation and evolution of moral and digital narratives within political debates. Further enquiry into how disparate voter cohorts—particularly youth and neophyte electors—interpret and negotiate these symbolic frames would profoundly comprehend discursive reframing's democratic ramifications at the subnational level. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that as money politics becomes progressively mediated through moral and technological idiom, democratic accountability hinges not solely upon institutional architecture but equally upon the polity's capacity to decode legitimacy's lexicon.

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