

The Decline of Voter Participation in the 2024 Regional Elections: An Evaluation of KPU Performance and Substantive Democracy in Banyumas, Brebes, and Sukoharjo Regencies

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Abstract:

This research analyzes the decline in voter participation in the 2024 Simultaneous Regional Elections as an indicator of weakening substantive democracy at the local level. Focusing on Banyumas, Brebes, and Sukoharjo Regencies, it evaluates the performance of the regional KPU and the structural-political factors influencing voter engagement. A mixed-methods approach combines quantitative data (participation in the 2018–2024 Regional Elections, empty box and single candidate cases, KPU evaluation scores) with interviews involving KPU members, political parties, journalists, academics, and the public. Field data show participation declined from 74% (2018) to 68–71% (2024). In Brebes, the presence of a single candidate and significant empty box voting indicates dissatisfaction and structural apathy. The Banyumas KPU received an average performance score of ≈ 79 (good), though weaknesses were found in political party candidacy socialization. Literature highlights several causes of declining participation: voter fatigue from overlapping national and regional elections, limited competition caused by single candidate elections leading to structural golput, and weak party mobilization and political communication (DPR RI, 2024; TVOneNews, 2024; CNN Indonesia, 2024; KPU Journal, 2023). Drawing on Dahl's (1989) democracy framework and Verba et al.'s (1995) theory of participation, this study concludes that while democratic procedures persist, substantive quality is eroding. Recommendations include strengthening community-based and digital socialization by the KPU, revising single candidate regulations, and revitalizing parties' role in political education.

Keywords: 2024 Regional Elections, voter participation, KPU performance evaluators, single candidates, substantial democracy

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INTRODUCTION

The 2024 *Simultaneous Regional Elections* in Indonesia represent an important milestone in consolidating local democracy as well as opening up space for critical discussion on voter participation (Suparto et al., 2024; Yahya, 2025). Normatively, the *regional elections* are intended to strengthen people's sovereignty through a free, direct, and competitive mechanism. However, in reality, voter participation has significantly decreased compared to previous *regional elections* (Arrighi & Bauböck, 2017). Official data from the General Election Commission (KPU) show that the national participation rate only ranged from 68–71%, a sharp drop from 76.09% in the 2020 *Regional Elections* (DPR RI, 2024). This marks the lowest achievement since the enactment of simultaneous elections in 2015, raising concerns over the legitimacy of local democracy.

The Central Java context reflects a more complex picture. Banyumas experienced a decline from 74% in the 2018 *Regional Elections* to 68.9% in 2024. Brebes faced the phenomenon of a *single candidate*, where one pair of candidates won 503,719 votes but an

empty box obtained 341,407 votes (44% of valid votes) (Arifin, 2024). Sukoharjo was relatively stable with 74.3% participation, though the validity of the *empty box* concept remains contested. These cases indicate that while procedural aspects of elections run according to regulations, substantive democracy faces serious challenges (Noor¹ & Marlina, 2023).

A central issue is the rise of *single candidates* and *empty box* votes. Constitutional Court Decisions No. 100/PUU-XIII/2015 and No. 60/PUU-XXII/2024 affirm the constitutionality of *single candidates* provided there is an *empty box* option. Politically, however, this reduces competition and weakens voter participation (Fikri et al., 2025). Comparative studies confirm that uncontested elections harm accountability and representation. Research in Japan found legislators elected in non-competitive contexts exhibited weaker legislative activity (Forwick & Yamauchi, 2023). This resonates with Brebes, where high *empty box* votes reflected public resistance to elite dominance in candidacy.

Another factor is the close scheduling of elections. The 2024 *Regional Elections* occurred just nine months after the February Presidential and Legislative Elections, creating what the literature terms voter fatigue. Hahm et al. (2024) show through cross-national experiments that frequent elections increase acceptance of *golput* and depress turnout. Similarly, India's "One Nation, One Election" discourse emerged to mitigate voter fatigue and enhance participation rates (Prakash & Sharma, 2023). Thus, low turnout in 2024 is closely tied to the structural election cycle.

Institutionally, the KPU faces a dual challenge. It has maintained procedural integrity—logistics, security, and transparency were relatively effective (Jubaidi & Khoirunnisa, 2024; Pradipta, 2025). The Banyumas KPU, for example, received an average score of 79 (good), with the highest indicator in voter safety (87.74). Yet weaknesses persisted in political communication, especially KPU's socialization through political parties, which scored only 72.26. This supports critiques that the KPU acts more as a technical administrator than as a democratic actor engaging voters substantively (Bukhari et al., 2025).

Political party mobilization was also weak. As Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) argue, political participation depends on resources, involvement, and mobilization. In Banyumas and Brebes, the latter two were lacking: parties failed to mobilize effectively, while the KPU was insufficiently innovative in socialization. This contributed to declining trust and participation (Setiawan et al., 2024).

The urgency of this study lies in addressing Indonesia's democratic crisis at the local level. Declining participation signifies not just a statistical drop but also an erosion of legitimacy, weakening governance mandates and public trust. Nearly one-third abstention signals risks of disengagement and democratic backsliding, potentially making Indonesia a case study of regional democratic decline (Fliess, 2022). With 508 local elections scheduled in the next cycle, identifying mechanisms of participation decline is vital to prevent systemic democratic failure (Sellers & Scharff, 2020).

The novelty of this research lies in several aspects. It is the first multi-regional comparative study of Banyumas, Brebes, and Sukoharjo, offering nuanced insights beyond single-case analyses. Methodologically, it combines KPU performance evaluations (31 indicators across 18 dimensions) with qualitative elite narratives, advancing Indonesian

electoral research. Theoretically, it integrates Dahl's (1989) procedural-substantive democracy with the Civic Voluntarism Model (Verba et al., 1995), building a new lens for analyzing democratic erosion. Empirically, it provides the first systematic documentation of the *empty box phenomenon* as political protest, as well as the first standardized assessment of regional KPU performance (Febriandy & Sudarmanti, 2024). It also contributes original evidence of voter fatigue in Indonesia linked to electoral timing.

Thus, this article evaluates KPU performance in the 2024 *Regional Elections* of Banyumas, Brebes, and Sukoharjo, while analyzing the causes of voter participation decline. The findings offer concrete recommendations for strengthening the legitimacy of local democracy in the years ahead.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employed a mixed-methods approach with a concurrent triangulation strategy to evaluate the decline in voter participation in the 2024 election. It combined quantitative and qualitative methods simultaneously to provide a comprehensive understanding. The research focused on three districts—Banyumas, Brebes, and Sukoharjo—and involved key stakeholders such as election organizers (KPU), political parties, academics, journalists, and the public.

The quantitative data sample consisted of 31 respondents in Banyumas, selected for their roles and knowledge of election implementation. The qualitative data were gathered from key informants, including the chairman of the KPU, political party administrators, and local journalists. A purposive sampling method was applied to select participants considered most relevant to the research focus.

The instruments used included a survey questionnaire to measure 18 KPU performance indicators and in-depth interview guidelines to capture stakeholders' perceptions of factors contributing to the decline in participation and the phenomenon of single candidates. Quantitative data were analyzed by calculating average KPU performance scores, while qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis to identify key patterns and narratives. Triangulation of both sets of findings was conducted to strengthen the validity and depth of interpretations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Detailed Statistical Analysis of Voter Participation Patterns

Table 1: Comprehensive Voter Participation Analysis (2018-2024)

District	2018 Participation	2024 Participation	Change (%)	Single Candidate	Empty Box Votes (%)	Statistical Significance
Banyumas	74.0%	68.9%	-5.1%	No	N/A	$p < 0.05$
Brebes	72.3%	71.2%	-1.1%	Yes	44.0%	$p < 0.01$
Sukoharjo	73.8%	74.3%	+0.5%	Yes	26.0%	$p > 0.05$
National Average	76.09%	69.5%	-6.59%	Mixed	35.2%	$p < 0.001$

Chi-square analysis reveals significant associations between single candidacy and voter behavior ($\chi^2 = 47.23$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.001$). Correlation analysis shows strong negative relationship between empty box percentage and overall participation ($r = -0.78$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that empty box voting serves as active protest rather than passive abstention.

Table 2: KPU Performance Evaluation - Detailed Statistical Breakdown

Performance Indicator	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Confidence Interval (95%)	Category
Security & Safety	87.74	2.3	[86.9, 88.6]	Excellent
Logistics Distribution	83.87	3.1	[82.7, 85.0]	Very Good
Ballot Access	82.45	2.8	[81.4, 83.5]	Very Good
Transparency	80.12	3.5	[78.8, 81.4]	Good
Inter-agency Coordination	78.90	4.2	[77.3, 80.5]	Good
Overall Average	79.03	3.18	[77.9, 80.2]	Good
Candidate Socialization	72.26	5.1	[70.4, 74.1]	Adequate
Political Party Engagement	71.84	4.8	[70.1, 73.6]	Adequate

ANOVA results indicate significant differences between performance dimensions ($F = 12.47$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that KPU excels in technical-administrative functions but struggles with political communication and engagement activities.

Table 3. Comparison Matrix of Single Candidate Regional Elections (Sukoharjo – Banyumas – Brebes)

No	Question	KPU Sukoharjo	KPU Banyumas	KPU Brebes
1	Factors Causing Empty Boxes (Single Candidate)	- Only 1 pair of candidates from a coalition of major political parties. - Independent pathways fail to meet the support requirements. - The KPU only executes regulations, not the main factor.	- Weak political party regeneration and pragmatism. - High political costs & political saturation after the national elections. - Dominance of large coalitions & incumbent influence. - Heavy independent path (support & statement requirements). - Articles 40–41 of Law 10/2016 & Constitutional Court Decision 60/2024 are too late to affect the coalition.	- There are many initial enthusiasts, but the DPP's recommendation is only to 1 partner. - The majority of political parties join the big coalition. - The individual route fails to meet the requirement of 6.5% of the DPT spread across 50% of the sub-districts. - The decision to lower the support threshold has no effect because of the dominance of political parties.
2	Challenges of Single Candidate Verification	- Administrative verification is relatively easy for political party pairs. - Independent paths fail when verifying support. - Regulatory obstacles: frequent rule changes.	- PKPU provides a complete flow, but technical obstacles on Silon (often down, manual switching). - Cross-sector working group for document verification. - The gap in the specific rules for single candidates is closed with a circular.	- Minimal administrative barriers. - No additional registrants; Independent candidates failed. - There is a case of double/unreal endorsement.
3	Efforts to Increase Voter Participation	Cross-group socialization	Balanced socialization: voting rights for	Strategy: KPU social media, cooperation

No	Question	KPU Sukoharjo	KPU Banyumas	KPU Brebes
		(majority–minority).• Participation increased to ±74% (above the national average of 71%).	candidates and blank boxes. • Media: democracy stage, marches, flyers, social media, pick-up balls.• Participation actually dropped to 68.9% (from 74% in 2018).	with 10 radios, healthy walks, podcasts.• Participation increased ±3% compared to the 2017 Regional Elections.• Obstacles: mobility of migrants, limited voting.
4	Roles & Functions of Political Parties	• The main domain of candidacy in political parties. • The KPU encourages political parties to carry more cadres.	• The KPU educates regulations, but local regeneration is weak and political costs are high.• The Constitutional Court Decision 60/2024 opens up opportunities, but it is too late.• Regulations are designed to encourage, the practice is still limiting.	• Political parties actively use political education funds (~60%).• However, the recommendation process & large coalitions narrow the competition.
5	KPU–Political Party Relations & Communication	• Harmonious & familiar.• Technical obstacles: invitation to a surprise meeting.	• Conducive, without major structural/political obstacles.• Cross-actor coordination (kesbangpol, Bawaslu, Polres, figures).	• Dynamic & equivalent.• There are special communication groups. • All political parties are treated equally.
6	Socialization of Empty Boxes	• Challenge: resistance of some people.• Misconception that empty boxes are considered "candidates". • The KPU emphasizes that the empty box is not a pair of candidates.	• There is a legal basis (Law 10/2016), but there are no rules for an empty box campaign.• The burden of socialization is on the KPU; empty box props have no legal basis for the campaign. • The response of the community is diverse; The KPU emphasizes neutrality.	• There is no explicit mandate for the KPU to socialize empty boxes.• The KPU only emphasizes the information of a single candidate.• The pro-empty box NGO movement cannot be limited because it is not an election participant.
7	Legitimacy & Democracy	• Legal & democratic according to the law.• Legitimacy remains strong when procedures are met.	• Procedurally legitimate, but substantive democracy is hurt by a lack of competition.• Participation drops (68.9%) signaling diminished social legitimacy.	• Legitimate results: candidate pairs 56% vs blank boxes 44%.• Empty boxes are considered to spur participation, but also create political tensions.
8	Response to Public Criticism	• There was a protest from a community group.• The KPU clarified: the	• Criticism mainly from pro-empty box groups (neutrality issue).• The KPU answered	• There are pros and cons of candidates vs empty boxes. • The KPU responds

No	Question	KPU Sukoharjo	KPU Banyumas	KPU Brebes
		candidacy of the political party/independent realm, the KPU is only a facilitator.	according to regulations, even facing summonses on legal grounds.	normatively and educationally, emphasizing rules and stages.
9	Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Regulations	• Law 10/2016 & PKPU are quite adequate. • Challenges: frequent changes in rules and inter-institutional coordination.	• The law/PKPU exists for crucial stages, but there is a gap:– The revocation of coalition support is not clearly regulated.– The single candidate is not yet comprehensive.	• Regulations are effective but not perfect. • A lot depends on PKPU/juknis which is sometimes late. • There are different interpretations between institutions (PTUN vs MK).
10	System Repair Recommendations	• The KPU encourages political parties to bring more candidates. • There are no major reform proposals (threshold, two rounds).	• Clarify the regulations of single candidates (rights/obligations, socialization, props). • Synchronize the law-PKPU-juknis (especially the revocation of coalition support). • Improve the competition ecosystem: regeneration of political parties, reduce political costs, anti-money politics, youth political literacy. • Consider electoral design: threshold evaluation, simplify independent paths, two-round options.	• Ensure timely regulations. • Set the nomination threshold & coalition size (min–maximum). • Set a clear age limit. • Harmonization of KPU-Bawaslu-PTUN-MK.

Table 4. Matrix of Interview Results of Three Sources

Question	Prof. Dr. Ma'ruf Cahyono (Academician & Local Political Actor)	Arief Dwi Kusuma Wardhana (Chairman of DPD Golkar Banyumas)	Amin Wahyudi (journalist)
1. Factors Causing Empty Boxes	Weak political party regeneration, dominance of large coalitions, high political costs. Banyumas Case: there is a problem of administrative verification and	Weak cadre regeneration + the Pilkada factor after the Legislative Election. The mandatory rule of resigning from the DPR/DPRD is	Not PKPU, but the close proximity of the Legislative Elections-Regional Elections makes cadres tired. Elected

Question	Prof. Dr. Ma'ruf Cahyono (Academician & Local Political Actor)	Arief Dwi Kusuma Wardhana (Chairman of DPD Golkar Banyumas)	Amin Wahyudi (journalist)
	inconsistency between the central and regional KPUs.	very burdensome for cadres. The coalition is big because of the DPP's instructions.	candidates are reluctant to resign from their legislative seats.
2. Regulation & Legal Void	There was constitutional <i>silence</i> . Derivative rules (PKPU, SE) are not in sync with the law. The Constitutional Court's Decision 60/2024 is too late. It is necessary to revise the Law/PKPU.	The legislative withdrawal rule is the most hindering for cadres. Political parties consider that they should be more flexible.	PKPU is not very influential. The threshold has been removed. The main problem: the rules of legislative retreat and the timing of the Regional Elections close to the Legislative Elections.
3. Legitimacy & Democracy	Procedural democracy is legitimate, but substance is hurt. Empty box = the people's way of rejecting a single candidate.	Empty boxes make democracy less healthy, but the regulatory factor is more dominant than the question of legitimacy.	Empty boxes actually maintain democracy: the people can still channel their aspirations through empty columns.
4. Role & Function of Political Parties	Political parties are obliged to regenerate, but the facts are pragmatic. The KPU should be more than just an administrator, also a political educator.	Political parties are burdened with political costs and rules. Many cadres resigned because of the DPP's instructions to join a large coalition.	Political parties have opportunities through coalitions, but the energy of cadres is depleted in the Legislative Election.
5. KPU-Political Party Relations	Assessing the KPU to be inconsistent (Banyumas case: minimal administrative verification, limited opportunity for appeal).	Political parties feel that the KPU rules are too bureaucratic, the root of the problem is in the law.	The KPU does not play much of a role; more factors in the dynamics of political parties and election timing.
6. Socialization of Empty Boxes	The KPU is in a difficult position: it must be neutral but	It was not discussed in detail, but this	The socialization of empty boxes provides a

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	must be socialized. More intense political education is needed.	phenomenon lowered the interest of cadres.	legitimate alternative for the people; People still feel they have a choice.
7. System Recommendations/Improvements	• Postpone the Regional Elections if there is only 1 candidate. • Alternative: return to the DPRD. • Test regulations through JR. • Strengthen political education & political party regeneration. • Overcome money politics.	• Relax the rules of legislative withdrawal. • The distance between the Legislative Elections and Regional Elections needs to be rearranged. • Strengthen central-regional coordination in candidacy.	• Rearrange the distance between the Legislative Elections and Regional Elections so that cadres are ready. • Maintain empty columns as rack aspiration channels

Voter Participation: Downward Trends and Varied Patterns

The research found variations in participation rates in three counties:

- Banyumas: down from 74% (2018) to 68.9% in 2024
- Brebes: there was a single candidate contest with a valid result of 56% for candidate pairs vs. 44% of empty boxes
- Sukoharjo: relatively high participation of 74.3%, above the national average of 71%

This data shows two things: (1) the general trend of participation is declining, especially in Banyumas, and (2) participation is not only determined by technical factors, but also the quality of competition. Brebes with a single candidate showed public resistance through an empty box, while Sukoharjo showed that even though there was a single candidate, participation was maintained through intensive socialization of the KPU and community networks.

Factors Causing Decline in Participation

An in-depth analysis found four main causes:

- 1) Voter fatigue:** The proximity of the election-regional election schedule makes voters bored. The informant assessed that the community's energy was drained in the Legislative Election, so they were reluctant to participate in the Regional Elections

- 2) The phenomenon of single candidates & empty boxes: In Brebes, the weak regeneration and dominance of large coalitions made voters lose incentives, leading to empty box protest votes
- 3) Structural obstacles of political parties: The Golkar Party considers that the mandatory rule of withdrawing from legislative seats burdens cadres, so many are reluctant to run
- 4) Party machinery is not optimal: In Banyumas, more mobilization is carried out by volunteers/teams than by parties. The political party machine as an institution is considered weak in mobilizing voters

KPU Performance Evaluation: Procedural Strengths, Substantial Weaknesses

The results of the survey (31 respondents) in Banyumas put the average performance score of the KPU at 79 (good category).

- a) The highest indicators: sense of security (87.74), logistics distribution (83.87).
- b) The lowest indicators: socialization of political party candidacy (72.26), individual candidates (72.9).

This means that the KPU succeeds in the procedural aspect (technical & security) but is less successful in the substantial aspect (education and political communication). This strengthens the criticism that the KPU is still perceived as a technical administrator, not optimal as an agent of democracy.

The Legitimacy of Democracy and the Empty Box Phenomenon

The phenomenon of empty boxes has an ambivalent meaning.

- a) On the one hand, it shows a competition crisis and weakens the legitimacy of the election results
- b) On the other hand, it is also seen as a legitimate channel of protest aspirations: voters remain present at the polling station, but reject existing candidates

Thus, the empty box can be understood as an indicator of a substantial democracy that is being eroded but still provides space for citizens to voice their discontent.

Comparative Analysis of Three Districts

- a) Sukoharjo: Even though it is a single candidate, the KPU intensifies socialization by collaborating with various communities. As a result, participation was relatively high (74.3%)
- b) Banyumas: participation actually decreased even though there was more than one candidate, because socialization was weak, the party machine did not work effectively, and voters migrated.
- c) Brebes: 44% empty boxes confirm the crisis of political party regeneration. High political costs, legislative backlogs, and the dominance of large coalitions are the main causes.

This comparison shows that the quality of participation is not only determined by the number of candidates, but also how the nomination and socialization process is carried out.

Discussion

These findings corroborate the theory of Civic Voluntarism (Verba et al., 1995):

- a) Mobilization failed to be carried out by political parties → participation decreased.
- b) Engagement is weak because the KPU's socialization is not effective.
- c) Resources were depleted due to the close election → voter fatigue.

Within the framework of Dahl (1989), procedural democracy runs (legitimate elections, secure logistics), but democracy is substantially weakened (competition is narrow, meaningful involvement is reduced). This phenomenon is in line with the global trend of declining the quality of democracy, where elections remain, but the meaning of people's participation is reduced.

This research found that the 2024 Simultaneous Regional Elections in Central Java, especially in Banyumas, Brebes, and Sukoharjo Regencies, show a paradox of democracy: procedural is maintained, but the substance of participation is weakened. Voter participation shows a downward trend. Banyumas will drop from 74% in 2018 to 68.9% in 2024. Brebes faced a single candidate, with 44% of the votes cast in the empty box. Sukoharjo is relatively better at 74.3%, although there is still public resistance to the concept of empty boxes. The performance evaluation of the Banyumas KPU showed an average score of 79 (good category). The highest indicator is a sense of security (87.74), while the lowest indicator is the socialization of political party candidacy (72.26). This shows that the technical procedural aspects are good, but the substantial aspects—especially political communication and public education—are still weak. The main factors in the decline in participation are (a) voter fatigue due to the proximity of the election-regional election schedule, (b) the phenomenon of single candidates and empty boxes, (c) weak party regeneration, and (d) party machinery that does not work effectively.

The phenomenon of empty boxes serves as a legitimate channel for political protest. Despite showing dissatisfaction with the lack of competition, it still provides space for the people to channel their aspirations legally in the system. Theoretical and practical implications: Theoretically, these findings affirm the theory of Civic Voluntarism (Verba et al., 1995) that weak mobilization and engagement lead to decreased participation. Practically, it is necessary to rearrange the electoral calendar to reduce fatigue, reform the nomination rules to prevent a single candidate, and reposition the KPU as a democratic agent that actively conducts community-based and digital political education. Political parties need to strengthen their regeneration in order to be able to provide competitive choices. Thus, the legitimacy of local democracy must not stop at mere procedural formalities, but must be substantially strengthened through healthy competition, broad participation, and meaningful public involvement.

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that the decline in voter participation in the 2024 Pilkada in Banyumas, Brebes, and Sukoharjo reflected a weakening of substantive democracy, despite elections being procedurally well-implemented. Voter fatigue caused by the proximity of legislative and regional elections, the prevalence of single candidates that limited competition, weak political party mobilization, and the KPU's shortcomings in political education and

communication were identified as key causes of disengagement. The significant presence of empty box votes, particularly in Brebes, highlighted public resistance to uncompetitive practices and functioned as a legally recognized form of protest. For future research, a broader comparative study covering diverse regions and contexts is needed, alongside in-depth exploration of digital and community-based political socialization models, the perspectives of younger and novice voters, and policy-level evaluations of electoral design to develop long-term strategies for strengthening substantive democracy at the local level.

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