

## The Dominance of Single Candidates and Its Implications for the Quality of Local Democracy: An Analysis of Competition, Political Participation, and the People's Freedom of Choice

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### Abstract

The 2024 Maros Regency Regional Head Election (Pilkada) presents a unique phenomenon of single-candidate dominance, raising critical concerns about the quality of local democracy. This study employs a qualitative phenomenological approach to examine the experiences and perceptions of political actors, voters, and civil society regarding the implications of single-candidate leadership. Field findings indicate that nearly all political parties in the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) supported the incumbent pair, effectively eliminating competition and reducing substantive political choice. Voter participation, particularly among young citizens, declined due to perceived predictability and limited alternatives, while the blank ballot option proved ineffective due to low political literacy. The dominance of a single candidate has contributed to structural depoliticization, weakened representative institutions, and eroded the checks and balances system, fostering political oligarchy and apathy. Analysis integrates theories of substantive democracy, political participation, and freedom of choice, revealing that elections function more as a formality than a mechanism for meaningful public engagement. The study recommends transformative reforms, including revitalizing political parties, strengthening community-based political education, reforming nomination systems, expanding public discourse forums, and enhancing institutional checks and balances. These measures aim to restore inclusive, deliberative, and substantive democratic practices in Maros, ensuring genuine representation, critical citizen participation, and accountable local governance.

**Keywords:** *Single Candidate Dominance, Local Democracy, Political Participation, Quality of Democracy, Control of Power.*

### Introduction

Regional Head Elections (Pilkada) are a key pillar of local democracy in Indonesia, supposedly providing space for political competition and active public participation. However, the phenomenon of single candidates in Pilkada raises critical questions about the quality of democracy at the regional level, especially when only one candidate pair qualifies to compete.

The 2024 Maros Pilkada is a clear example of this situation, with only one candidate pair approved by the General Elections Commission (KPU). This situation reflects a lack of political contestation, giving the impression that the election mechanism is more of a formality than a means of substantive democracy (Zeng, 2016).

The phenomenon of single candidates does not emerge suddenly, but rather results from a complex interaction between electoral institutional mechanisms, political party behavior, patronage culture, and the level of public political literacy. Party support for dominant figures is often reinforced by electability surveys, financial data, and analysis of potential victory.

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Alternative candidates with limited resources often lose ground. Even extending the registration period does not always produce new candidates. As a result, the empty column becomes the only option for "opponents," who historically rarely outperform single candidates (Maymin, 2017; Chen et al., 2018).

Voter turnout is a crucial concern in the context of single candidates. The previous regional election in Maros recorded 70–75% turnout, but the sustainability of this figure is threatened if the public feels they lack a real choice (Maalim, 2023; Mudau & 'Nyane, 2023). The apathy of rural residents and the passivity of some urban residents indicate the potential for low participation in the 2024 regional elections.

Low attendance at the General Elections Commission (KPU) socialization and minimal enthusiasm for public debates are indicators that single candidates are influencing voter motivation. Without opponents, debate forums are difficult to organize substantively, reducing the opportunity for citizens to obtain comparative information.

The phenomenon of single candidates also poses methodological challenges for researchers. How can we capture public opinion when faced with a single choice? Random sampling-based surveys need to be complemented by in-depth interviews to capture critical or apathetic views of citizens, including party elites who may follow the trend for pragmatic interests (Damanik, 2013; Sutisna & SH, 2024).

The long-term implications of single candidate dominance are significant. Regional governments led by a single figure without opposition can be vulnerable to policymaking without public scrutiny. The involvement of community forums, religious organizations, and youth groups relies heavily on the goodwill of the regional head, potentially weakening the deliberation process (Hayati, 2021; Jati et al., 2024; Kiss et al., 2022).

The political stability resulting from incumbent dominance, while attractive to investors, does not necessarily reflect responsive governance. Internal political party survey data indicates that party support for incumbents is largely based on their success in attracting investment and maintaining a conducive business climate.

Cross-regional research shows a correlation between economic growth and the trend of single-candidate leadership. Relatively stable and prosperous regions tend to accept single-candidate leadership, while regions with prolonged conflict are more likely to exhibit more diverse political competition (Maškarinec, 2025).

However, single-candidate leadership risks reducing the local government's ability to adapt to external shocks, such as economic fluctuations, natural disasters, and public health challenges. The lack of internal criticism can hinder effective collective decision-making (Berekméri & Zafeiris, 2020).

Gender perspectives are a crucial concern in the context of single-candidate leadership. The lack of alternative candidates reduces the opportunities for the emergence of female leaders. This phenomenon can reinforce patriarchal dominance in the local political arena, even though women's representation among legislative candidates is regulated at a minimum of 30%.

Internal dynamics of the candidacy also influence the emergence of single-candidate leadership. The change in the vice-regent candidate, for example, forces the incumbent to quickly find a replacement to maintain administrative legitimacy. This strategy reflects the political flexibility of local actors in maintaining their chances of victory even without real competition.

However, this internal decision-making process is often criticized for its lack of transparency and lack of public communication. The lack of clarity regarding the reasons for changing candidates can reinforce the perception that political contestation is merely a formality, thus limiting public participation.

Overall, the phenomenon of single candidates in Maros highlights serious challenges in local democracy: reduced competition, limited choices for citizens, and the potential weakening of checks and balances. This calls for regulatory reform, participatory oversight, and strengthening public political literacy to avoid a "ceremonial" democracy.

With this background, this study aims to analyze the dominance of single candidates and its implications for the quality of local democracy, particularly in terms of political competition, voter participation, and freedom of choice. This study is expected to provide in-depth understanding and recommendations for strengthening substantive democratic practices at the district level.

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

This research uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design, aiming to deeply understand the subjective experiences of political actors and citizens regarding the phenomenon of single candidates in the 2024 Maros Regency Pilkada. The phenomenological approach was chosen because it allows researchers to capture the essence of individual experiences within a complex socio-political context, where the phenomenon is understood as something "lived" by the subjects. Research subjects include political party elites, election organizers, voters, and civil society actors with direct experience of the Pilkada process. This design is based on the assumption that the phenomenon of single candidates is not simply an electoral formality, but rather a manifestation of a consolidated power structure through patronage, the dominance of figures, and political parties' power accumulation strategies. In other words, the dominance of incumbents and the lack of political opponents emerge as a result of the interaction between elite political rationality, local patronage structures, and the community's cultural construction of local leadership. The phenomenological approach allows researchers to go beyond electability figures and understand how the meaning of power and democracy is socially constructed. Within the framework of this design, the research will examine three main focuses. First, the rationale for political parties to form large coalitions without opening the door to alternative candidates. Second, how the public interprets regional elections with a single candidate pair. Third, the public's perception of the effectiveness of the blank ballot as a channel for political correction. Therefore, the experiences and perceptions of informants serve as the primary data analyzed within the context of theory and local dynamics.

### **Research Location and Timeline**

The research was conducted in Maros Regency, South Sulawesi Province, which was chosen because it experienced the unique phenomenon of a single candidate in the 2024 regional elections, supported by a large coalition of almost all local political parties. Maros Regency has a dynamic political history, with a tradition of high competition, but in the 2024 regional elections, it faced minimal political competition. The research was conducted over five months, from April to August 2025, a period deemed adequate for intensive and in-depth data collection and a comprehensive analysis of local political dynamics and public perceptions of the single candidate phenomenon.

### **Data Sources**

The research data were obtained from two main sources: primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained directly from informants through in-depth interviews and field observations, while secondary data included official and unofficial documents relevant to the single-candidate phenomenon. Secondary data included election results reports from the Maros Regency General Elections Commission (KPU), election supervision reports from the Elections Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu), regional election regulations from the KPU and the Constitutional Court, political survey results related to voter dynamics and participation, candidate pair nomination archives, and local and national media reports. This data was used to enrich understanding of the historical context and analysis of the single-candidate regional election phenomenon.

### **Data Collection Techniques**

Data collection in this study employed a descriptive phenomenological method that focused on the experiences, perceptions, and work patterns of political and community actors in the context of the 2024 Maros Regional Election. The primary techniques were in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. The in-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structured approach, allowing researchers to openly explore informants' narratives. Informants included political party elites, KPU and Bawaslu officials, community leaders, academics, as well as young voters and rural communities. Informants were selected through purposive sampling and snowball sampling until data saturation reached. These interviews aimed to understand informants' interpretations of incumbent dominance, party coalition strategies, the effectiveness of the blank column, and perceptions of local democracy. Observations were conducted systematically to record the behavior and interactions of political actors, as well as public responses, during the regional election process. Researchers observed political activities, interactions between actors, voter behavior, and the activities of election organizers. All observations were recorded in field notes, which were then analyzed to strengthen the interview data. Documentation was used to explore various official and unofficial documents relevant to the research. Official documents included election regulations, reports on the activities of the General Elections

Commission (KPU) and the Elections Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu), candidate pair nomination archives, and public opinion survey results. Unofficial documents included media articles and online publications related to the single candidate phenomenon. This documentation provided additional context for in-depth analysis of the primary data.

### **Data Analysis Techniques**

Data analysis was conducted using a phenomenological approach to understand the meaning of the informants' subjective experiences related to the single candidate phenomenon. This analysis was interpretive and reflective, emphasizing how individuals and groups give meaning to the political reality they experience, including party behavior, the effectiveness of the blank column, and the quality of local democracy. The analysis process began with verbatim transcription of the interviews, followed by identification of significant statements (horizontalization) that reflected the informants' values, beliefs, and political views. These statements were then grouped into main themes, such as the dominance of political power, strategic party decisions, public responses to limited choices, and the crisis of voter participation.

Based on these themes, the researcher developed textural and structural descriptions, explaining what the informants experienced and how those experiences were shaped within the local socio-political context. The final stage was an essential synthesis, which formulated the core meaning of the single candidate phenomenon and its implications for local democracy. With this analytical design, the research not only explained "what" happened, but also "why" and "how" the phenomenon was perceived, thus providing conceptual and practical contributions. The research results are expected to map the formation of power dominance at the local level, understand public perceptions of the quality of democracy, and offer strategic recommendations for reforming the regional election system to maintain political competition.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Presentation of Data and Findings**

After examining the political configuration of single candidates in the 2024 Maros Regency Pilkada, field findings indicate the systemic dominance of one candidate pair, which has a direct impact on the quality of local democracy. Nearly all political parties in the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) support the incumbent pair, Chaidir Syam-Muetazim Mansyur, preventing the emergence of alternatives, whether from non-coalition parties or independents. This closes the space for political contestation, transforming the Pilkada into a ritual for legitimizing power, and creating a procedural democracy devoid of substance. Voter participation has declined significantly, especially among young voters, who perceive election results as predictable and lacking meaningful political choices. The blank ballot mechanism, used as a tool of resistance, is also ineffective due to low public political literacy, while the absence of public debate and limited space for local media discourse limit citizens' ability to critically evaluate candidates.

This phenomenon underscores the deficit in democratic legitimacy in Maros, where political competition is virtually non-existent, participation is declining, and freedom of choice is formal without substantive autonomy. Local power structures controlled by a coalition of all parties create an electoral oligarchy, weaken the oversight function of the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD), and eliminate the system of checks and balances. Sociologically, the normalization of single-candidate dominance has the potential to foster a passive and apathetic political culture, reducing citizen participation to administrative routines. These findings emphasize that single-candidate dominance is not merely a technical issue but also an indicator of the deconsolidation of local democracy, requiring academic attention and reformist policies to strengthen competition, participation, and freedom of choice.

### **Analysis of Findings**

To more deeply understand the implications of single-candidate dominance on the quality of local democracy in the context of the Maros Regency Pilkada, this analysis integrates three main conceptual approaches: substantive democracy theory, political participation theory, and the theory of freedom of choice in democracy. These three approaches are positioned as theoretical lenses for evaluating how the presence of only one candidate in a regional head election can impact the legitimacy and substance of democracy itself.

### ***First Aspect: Political Competition in Substantive Democracy***

The phenomenon of a single candidate in the 2024 Maros Regency Pilkada indicates a significant narrowing of political competition, with almost all DPRD parties forming a coalition to support the incumbent pair Chaidir Syam-Muetazim, preventing alternatives from other parties or independents. This situation creates a procedural democracy devoid of substance, where elections continue to take place legally but lose their selective and deliberative function, the public space for policy debate and evaluation is lost, and the moral and political legitimacy of elections becomes ambiguous. The dominance of incumbents, the consolidation of elite support, and the weakness of public resistance reflect the phenomenon of electoral oligarchy, where control over competition renders elections a mere formality. As a result, voter participation declines, freedom of choice becomes illusory, and the substantive functions of democracy—competition, participation, and deliberation—are structurally reduced. The 2024 Maros Pilkada reflects the weaknesses of local democracy, which emphasizes compromise over power rather than public representation or a healthy exchange of ideas.

### ***Second Aspect: Political Participation and Perceptions of Democratic Efficacy***

The dominance of single candidates in the 2024 Maros Regency Election significantly impacted political participation, eroding both citizens' internal and external political efficacy. Many voters, especially the younger generation, felt their votes had no impact and participation became a formal ritual devoid of substantive meaning. This condition signifies sociological depoliticization, where elections, which should be a deliberative arena for the exchange of ideas and political learning, have become administrative procedures, while public spaces and local media have failed to foster critical discourse. This phenomenon reflects what Pateman calls passive democracy and Schedler calls democracy without engagement, where citizens become resigned to the status quo and a political culture permissive of local authoritarianism is formed. Thus, the 2024 Maros Election not only reduces political competition but also weakens the quality of substantive participation, confirming that elections without credible choices diminish citizens' ability to feel empowered, critical, and engaged in the development of authentic and sustainable local democracy.

### ***Third Aspect: Freedom of Choice in the Substantive Dimension***

In an ideal democratic system, freedom of choice is not only formal but also substantive, enabling citizens to make meaningful political choices based on the various available alternatives. The phenomenon of single candidates in the 2024 Maros regional elections demonstrates a serious distortion of this positive freedom. Although the "empty box" option is available, the majority of voters do not understand its significance, and real choice is absent. This creates a simulacrum of democracy, where democratic procedures are maintained but the essence and substantive values of democracy are lost. Voters lose the ability to express political preferences authentically, the legitimacy of election results becomes illusory, and the plurality of ideas essential to deliberative democracy is absent. This results in structural depoliticization and a false consensus that reinforces the dominance of a single elite.

The dominance of single candidates also narrows the spectrum of political representation, erodes the function of free choice as a mechanism of check on power, and gives rise to political cynicism that weakens public participation and trust in democratic institutions. In the context of this dissertation's problem formulation, these findings confirm that the right to vote is only meaningful if credible and institutionally equal alternatives are available. The absence of political competition, the dominance of a single narrative by the elite, and the low level of public political literacy diminish voters' agency, rendering them more objects than subjects of politics. Thus, the 2024 Maros regional elections not only limit citizens' choices but also substantively weaken the foundations of local democracy, demonstrating how the consolidation of power can create a democracy that appears formally legitimate but is internally fragile.

## **Discussion and Interpretation**

This discussion aims to critically interpret previously analyzed empirical findings within the framework of theories of democracy, political representation, and the institutionalization of political parties. The primary focus is on deepening three fundamental aspects of democracy—competition, participation, and freedom of choice—in order to comprehensively understand the impact of single-candidate dominance on the quality of local democracy in Maros Regency.

### ***Reduction of Political Competition and Threats to Substantive Democracy***

Political competition is a key element of substantive democracy, ensuring not only a mechanism for selecting leaders but also the accountability of power and the democratic circulation of elites (Dahl, 1989). The phenomenon of a single candidate in the 2024 Maros Regency Election marks a decline in this fundamental principle, as the absence of a challenger candidate reflects the consolidation of hegemonic power by local elites with the full support of political parties, the media, and social institutions. Elections have lost their function as arenas for the contestation of ideas, transforming into formal mechanisms for legitimizing already locked-in power. This condition aligns with the concept of electoral authoritarianism (Schedler, 2002), where elections are held but fair and open competition is absent, creating a simulation of democracy rather than a substantive practice. Political parties, which should serve as intermediaries between the people and the state, have become tools for legitimizing the dominant elite, as explained in the Cartel Party Theory (Katz & Mair, 1995), resulting in the loss of internal control and the loss of genuine public representation.

The absence of competition also impacts political regeneration and cadre formation, as there is no pressure for elites to open up space for new actors or competitively screen leadership, which reinforces patronage and clientelism structures. This increases the risk of the formation of monopolistic local oligarchies, reduces the effectiveness of checks and balances, and reduces the resilience of local democracy. In the context of this dissertation's problem formulation—concerning the influence of single-candidate dominance on the quality of local democracy—the competitive dimension suggests that local democracy has been reduced to a procedure devoid of substance. Citizens lose the opportunity to evaluate alternative policies and leaders, while democracy, which should be a vehicle for change, has instead become a tool for perpetuating power. This reduction in competition signals a systemic crisis, the weakening of representative institutions, the loss of deliberative public space, and the consolidation of power in the form of local political cartels, which threaten leadership regeneration and the future of inclusive and competitive democracy.

### ***Declining Political Participation and Rising Democratic Apathy***

Political participation is a vital indicator of the quality of democracy, reflecting the extent to which citizens are involved in the political process and the level of public trust and ownership in democratic institutions (Verba, Nie, & Kim, 1978). In the 2024 Maros Regency Election, the dominance of single candidates reduced voter participation, particularly among the younger generation, because the absence of alternative candidates made the election results appear predetermined, leading to structural political apathy and disengagement (Norris, 2002; Dalton, 2004). Elections, which should be an arena for political education and citizen socialization, have become formal rituals that do not reflect public aspirations, exacerbated by the weak role of political parties, the General Elections Commission (KPU) and the Elections Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) in encouraging active community involvement. As a result, citizens lost the opportunity to learn about policies, assess leaders, and engage in public discourse, leading to a delegitimization of participatory mechanisms, a crisis of representation, and an erosion of public trust. The dominance of single candidates not only hinders technical participation, but also changes the political orientation of citizens to be passive, apathetic, and cynical, emphasizing that improving local democracy requires more than formal procedures: political party reform, increasing political literacy, and revitalizing public space as a vibrant and inclusive arena for critical discourse.

### ***Distortion of Freedom of Choice and Erosion of Substantive Democracy***

Freedom of choice is a key pillar of democracy, encompassing not only citizens' formal rights but also the substantive capacity to make meaningful political choices, where available alternatives must be equal, credible, and rational (Berlin, 1958; Sen, 1999). In the 2024 Maros Regency Election, the dominance of a single candidate supported by a large coalition of political parties reduced the substantive freedom of choice: although voters procedurally retained the right to vote or select an "empty box," no real alternative was available, making the election more akin to a ratification of power than an expression of the will of the people. This situation created a simulacrum of democracy (Baudrillard, 1994) and electoral depoliticization (O'Donnell, 1994), where voters were physically present but lost the capacity to influence policy and vote autonomously. This distortion gave rise to a democratic paradox, where electoral procedures continued to operate but did not guarantee plurality, accountability, or public deliberation, thereby eroding substantive legitimacy, political awareness, and the function of citizen political education. In the long term, this phenomenon has the potential to normalize democracy without opposition, create a political culture permissive of single-party rule, and reinforce electoral stagnation at the local level. Therefore, the dominance of single candidates is not

merely a technical issue, but rather an indication of a substantial crisis in local democracy that demands structural reforms in the form of creating fair competition, strengthening the opposition, and massive political education to restore freedom of choice as an authentic political right.

### ***Structural Implications: The Crisis of Representation and the Fragility of Local Democracy***

The phenomenon of single-candidate dominance in the 2024 Maros Regency Election reflects a structural crisis in local democracy that goes deeper than merely procedural or electoral issues. This situation marks a deficit in political representation, where large coalitions of parties support single candidates, reducing the party's function as intermediary institutions, recruiting cadres, and aggregating popular aspirations to a mere tool of elite legitimacy, in line with the concept of the hollowing of democracy (Mair, 2013). The absence of ideological or programmatic competition also results in the centralization of power, the weakening of the checks and balances of legislative institutions, and the blunting of the opposition's role, leaving political decisions to the prerogative of the elite without effective accountability mechanisms. The broader impact is the deconsolidation of local democracy, where the substantive elements of democracy—competition, representation, participation, and accountability—are systematically weakened, and communities lose the capacity to meaningfully choose, participate, or monitor power (Diamond, 1999; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). In this context, the dominance of single candidates is not merely an electoral anomaly, but rather a reflection of the regression of local democracy, which demands structural reforms in the form of strengthening the function of parties as representative institutions, revitalizing the legislature, opening up opposition space, and educating the public about political issues so that local democracy can once again become inclusive, deliberative, and function substantively.

### ***Towards Quality Democracy: Theoretical and Practical Recommendations***

After analyzing the implications of the dominance of single candidates in the 2024 Maros Regency Election on competition, participation, and freedom of choice, this study emphasizes the need for transformative improvements that are not only procedural but also substantive, based on the quality of democracy framework according to Diamond and Morlino (2005), which assesses democracy from eight main dimensions including the rule of law, participation, competition, accountability, civil and political rights, responsiveness, and progressive outcomes. The dominance of single candidates indicates structural weaknesses in political institutions and local democratic culture, so improvements must be strategic and comprehensive. First, revitalization of political parties is needed to restore their functions of representation, interest articulation, cadre development, and political education, including through regular evaluations and open candidate selection mechanisms that reduce elite patronage. Second, strengthening community-based political education is crucial to increasing political literacy and efficacy, especially for the younger generation, through collaboration between civil society, academics, local media, and the General Elections Commission (KPU). Third, reformulation of the nomination system must ensure healthy competition by lowering the nomination threshold, simplifying independent path requirements, and preventing monopolization of power by large parties. Fourth, the expansion and revitalization of public spaces as alternative discourse forums must be undertaken to ensure plurality of discourse and critical public participation, including strengthening local media, citizen forums, and civil society organizations. Fifth, institutional arrangements for checks and balances at the local level must be implemented by creating institutional opposition, both in the legislature and through independent oversight bodies, and providing incentives for parties that remain outside the executive coalition. With these steps, it is hoped that local democracy will not only operate procedurally, but also be high-quality, inclusive, and serve as a substantial mechanism for citizen representation, control, and participation.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the analysis of the phenomenon of single-candidate dominance in the 2024 Maros Regency Pilkada, it can be concluded that this situation is not merely a technical or procedural issue, but rather reflects a substantive crisis in local democracy. The dominance of a single candidate pair has led to a narrowing of political competition, a decline in voter participation—especially among the younger generation—and a distortion of freedom of choice, so that elections function more as a ratification of power than a means of expressing the will of the people. This situation has resulted in the delegitimization of substantive democracy, the normalization of local oligarchies, the weakening of parties' function as representative institutions, the consolidation of power in the hands of elites, and a reduced capacity for critical public participation. This phenomenon also marks a regression of local democracy, in which key elements such as competition, representation, participation, and accountability

are systematically diminished. To improve the quality of local democracy, this study emphasizes the need for transformative reform encompassing five main aspects: (1) revitalizing political parties to return to their functions of representation, cadre development, and political education through open candidate selection and periodic evaluation; (2) strengthening community-based political education to increase citizens' political literacy and efficacy; (3) reformulation of the nomination system to ensure healthy competition and prevent monopolization of power by large parties; (4) expansion and revitalization of public space as a forum for critical and inclusive discourse; and (5) strengthening the checks and balances mechanism through institutional opposition in the legislature and independent supervisory institutions. With these steps, local democracy in Maros is expected to not only run procedurally, but also be of high quality, inclusive, and substantive, so as to be able to realize legitimate political representation, critical citizen participation, and effective control over power.

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