

Political Cartelization and the Empty Ballot Box Phenomenon in Regional Elections

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Abstract: The phenomenon of "empty box" ballots in Indonesia's regional head elections (Pilkada) reflects public dissatisfaction with single candidates endorsed by political party coalitions. This highlights challenges within the local democratic system, which may hinder political participation and contribute to social instability.

Purpose: This research aims to understand how the phenomenon of "empty box" ballots reflects the practice of political cartelization in Indonesia, as well as to explore the factors contributing to the emergence of single candidates and large coalitions in elections.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The methodology employed in this research includes a qualitative analysis of national and local political dynamics, as well as an observation of voter behavior in the context of regional elections (Pilkada). The study also examines the implications of the "empty box" phenomenon for democratization and political representation at the regional level.

Findings: The research findings indicate that the "empty box" phenomenon is not merely a matter of failed elections but also reflects a crisis of public trust in political institutions. Deep dissatisfaction with the available candidates has the potential to trigger radicalization and protest movements. Furthermore, the dominance of major political parties in candidate nomination disregards local

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aspirations, creating conditions where the nominated candidates fail to reflect the diversity of the community.

Originality/value: This research offers new insights into the relationship between the "empty box" phenomenon and political cartelization practices in Indonesia, emphasizing the need for electoral system reforms to create a more inclusive space for public participation. By enhancing political awareness and strengthening smaller political parties, it is hoped that public dissatisfaction can be reduced, and the legitimacy of the political system can be improved.

Keywords: Empty box; Pilkada; Democracy; Political cartelization

Paper Type: Article-Research

Introduction

The phenomenon of the "empty box" in Indonesia's regional head elections (Pilkada) has garnered increasing attention in recent years. The term "empty box" does not refer to an actual empty ballot box, but rather to an option on the ballot that allows voters to reject the sole candidate pair running in the election (Indarto and Fikri 2022). The existence of the empty box was introduced as a solution regulated by the Constitutional Court (MK) for situations where only one candidate pair registers and no other candidates emerge after the registration is reopened. Since its introduction in the 2015 Pilkada, this trend has continued to rise, reflecting the complex dynamics of local politics and the presence of dominant forces in the nomination process (www.bbc.com 2024).

The origin of the "empty box" can be traced to a Constitutional Court (MK) ruling addressing an impasse in the electoral system. In situations where only one candidate pair registers, the MK ruled that elections should not be canceled outright. To ensure the continuity of the democratic process, the "empty box" option was provided on the ballot as an alternative for voters who do not wish to support the sole candidate. This allows the election to proceed even if only one candidate participates. According to data from Perludem (Perkumpulan untuk Pemilu dan Demokrasi), the number of elections featuring

the empty box increased from three cases in 2015 to 25 cases in the 2020 Pilkada, indicating that this phenomenon is becoming more prevalent in local Indonesian politics (Ratnaningsih 2024).

The emergence of the "empty box" phenomenon is often the result of large coalitions formed by political parties at the regional level (www.bbc.com 2024). When the majority of political parties decide to unite and support a single candidate pair, the remaining smaller parties are often unable to nominate their own candidates because they do not meet the nomination threshold. Other factors contributing to the rise of the empty box include cartel politics, where parties or potential candidates choose not to run, perceiving the dominant candidate as already certain to win. The high political costs and the low likelihood of victory serve as disincentives for smaller parties or independent candidates to compete, further reinforcing the empty box trend.

Despite the Constitutional Court's recent ruling, Decision No. 60/PUU-XXII/2024, which lowered the nomination threshold for regional head elections (Fikri 2024a), the "empty box" phenomenon remains widespread. This reduction in the threshold was expected to facilitate political parties in independently nominating candidates without relying on large coalitions (Fikri 2024a). However, in practice, political parties appear not to have fully utilized this policy to empower their cadres, resulting in the continued prevalence of the "empty box" trend. This reflects the challenges political parties face in organizing nominations and competition at the local level.

The consequences of an "empty box" victory carry significant implications for regional governance. In cases where the "empty box" option secures more than 50% of the valid votes, the regional election must be rescheduled for the next electoral cycle (Mutiarasari 2024; Junaidi 2023; Hirmawan 2022). During this interim period, regions without a definitive head of government are administered by an interim official (Pj) (Yantomi 2022). While the primary purpose of appointing an interim official is to maintain the continuity of governance, there are concerns regarding the potentially extended tenure of such officials, which can last up to five years if a re-election is not conducted in a timely manner. This raises significant questions about the legitimacy and

effectiveness of long-term regional leadership under interim officials. A particularly notable case of an "empty box" victory occurred during the 2018 mayoral election in Makassar (Harianto, Darmawan, and Muradi 2020). In this instance, the sole candidate pair, Munafri Arifuddin and Andi Rachmatika Dewi, failed to win the election after their opponents were disqualified by the Supreme Court. Consequently, the "empty box" option garnered the majority of votes, resulting in the appointment of an interim official to govern the city until the re-election in 2020 (Harianto, Darmawan, and Muradi 2020). This case serves as a critical precedent in understanding the legal and political ramifications of the "empty box" phenomenon.

The "empty box" phenomenon highlights significant challenges within local democracy in Indonesia. While this option is intended to preserve public participation and democratic processes, there is a risk that the "empty box" reflects unhealthy political practices, such as oversized coalitions and political cartels. On the other hand, the "empty box" provides a platform for the public to express dissatisfaction with the single candidate backed by a coalition of political parties. Therefore, it is crucial for political parties to make more serious efforts in strengthening cadre development and fostering healthier competition in regional elections. Only through these efforts can the "empty box" become part of a more transparent and accountable democratic system.

This study aims to understand how the "empty box" phenomenon in regional elections reflects political cartelization practices in Indonesia. By exploring the factors that lead to the formation of oversized coalitions and single candidates, as well as analyzing the connections between national and local political dynamics, this research seeks to provide insights into the implications of this phenomenon on democratization and political representation at the regional level. Through this investigation, the study aims to contribute to the development of strategies that promote healthier and more democratic political competition at the local level.

Methods

The methodology employed in this research includes qualitative analysis of national and local political dynamics, as

well as observations of voter behavior in the context of Pilkada. This study also examines the implications of the "empty box" phenomenon for democratization and political representation at the regional level.

Discussion and Findings

The "Empty Box" Phenomenon in Regional Elections: A Reflection of Political Cartelization Practices in Indonesia

The existence of the "empty box" reflects the dilemma of local democracy in Indonesia, where candidate options are often limited by dominant political forces. This phenomenon first emerged in the 2015 regional elections after the MK ruled that in situations where only one candidate pair is registered, the election should not be canceled. To ensure the continuity of the democratic process, the MK mandated that ballots in regional elections include the "empty box" as an alternative for voters who do not wish to support the sole candidate pair. This measure was taken to guarantee the availability of an option for voters, even though the expected political competition has not materialized ideally. In a broader context, the "empty box" reflects the failure of the local political system to present a healthy and competitive political pluralism (Fikri 2024b).

According to data from Perludem, the number of regional elections featuring the "empty box" option has steadily increased from three cases in 2015 to 25 cases in the 2020 elections (Ratnaningsih 2024). This trend indicates that the phenomenon is not merely a temporary occurrence but rather a widespread symptom within local politics in Indonesia (Putranti 2021). This increase is closely linked to several factors, particularly those related to political dynamics at the local level, including the formation of large political party coalitions, the dominance of local political power, and the high political costs associated with participating in regional elections (Yunus 2018). One of the primary causes of the "empty box" phenomenon is the practice of political cartelization occurring at the local level. Political cartelization refers to the collusion among political parties to form large coalitions that support a single candidate pair, thereby complicating the ability of smaller parties or independent

candidates to compete. When the majority of political parties in a region form coalitions, smaller parties often lack the necessary resources or support to field their own candidates. Consequently, only one candidate pair emerges, leaving the public with a severely limited choice: either to support the sole candidate or to opt for the "empty box" (Zulfiqar 2019). This practice of cartelization introduces several problems into the local democratic process (Ammelia and Kosandi 2020). First, cartelization undermines healthy political competition. Democracy should provide a space for diverse entities to compete fairly, offering a range of choices to the public. However, when political cartels form, competition becomes imbalanced. The coalition parties tend to monopolize the nomination process, reducing the likelihood of alternative candidates emerging for voters. This not only poses representation issues but also constrains the dynamics of local democracy. Second, cartelization escalates political costs. To participate in regional elections, candidates must possess substantial resources, both financial and political. Large political coalitions typically demand significant material support from the candidates they endorse, resulting in high nomination costs. Smaller parties or independent candidates lacking such resources become reluctant to participate, given their slim chances of winning. These high political costs represent a substantial barrier to the democratization process at the local level.

In a broader context, the "empty box" phenomenon reflects fundamental issues within the local political system in Indonesia, where political power tends to be concentrated among certain groups with significant influence (Panjaitan and Hulu 2021). When the majority of political parties in a region unite to support a single candidate pair, this reflects an oligarchic political structure, wherein access to power is restricted to a handful of political elites (Hannan and Munari Kustanto 2024). This situation contradicts the principles of democracy, which should provide equal opportunities for all parties to participate. The reduction of the nomination threshold as stipulated in Constitutional Court Decision No. 60/PUU-XXII/2024 aims to address this issue. By lowering the threshold, it is hoped that political parties can more easily field candidates without the need to form large coalitions.

However, in reality, political parties remain reluctant to leverage this policy to empower their cadres. The prevalence of the "empty box" option remains high, as political parties tend to prefer securing victories through large coalitions rather than facilitating more open competition.

The phenomenon of the "empty box" generates debate regarding the quality of democracy in Indonesia. On one hand, the empty box option provides a choice for the public who are dissatisfied with the sole candidate presented by political party coalitions (Lestari 2019). This can be viewed as an important form of political participation, where citizens can actively reject candidates they deem unworthy. However, on the other hand, the high number of local elections featuring empty boxes indicates a crisis within the political nomination system at the local level. The dominance of political party coalitions in the nomination process reduces options for voters, leading to dissatisfaction that is ultimately expressed through the empty box. To address this issue, more serious efforts are needed from political parties to strengthen cadre development and create healthier competition in local elections. Political parties must take a more active role in nurturing potential candidates who can compete independently without relying on large coalitions. Strong cadre development can ensure that more options are available for voters in local elections, so that the empty box no longer becomes the primary solution for dissatisfied citizens with the sole candidate. Additionally, reforms in the local election nomination system are necessary to prevent the occurrence of political cartel practices. One measure that can be taken is to strengthen regulations concerning coalition formation and nomination thresholds, thereby making it more difficult for political parties to easily form large coalitions that obstruct competition. Simultaneously, efforts must also be made to lower political costs, allowing smaller parties and independent candidates greater opportunities to participate in Pilkada.

Factors Contributing to the Formation of Large Coalitions and Single Candidates in Pilkada

The phenomenon of large coalitions and single candidates in local elections (Pilkada) in Indonesia reflects the complex dynamics of politics that involve the interaction between party

strength, community aspirations, and the underlying social structure (Mara 2018). It is essential to explore the various factors that contribute to the formation of large coalitions and the presence of single candidates, as well as the implications they have for the democratic system at the local level. Democracy often becomes trapped in a dualism between power and the aspirations of the people. Large coalitions typically emerge from the need to maintain power, where major parties congregate to eliminate the risk of losing votes (Rishan 2020). In an effort to achieve political dominance, these parties collaborate to create a strong candidate pair, which is expected to secure victory. This process can be interpreted as a form of power consolidation, where a shared goal fosters a collective aspiration, even at the expense of the diverse aspirations that should be an integral part of democracy.

This large coalition creates a situation where smaller parties, which possess different ideas and visions, are marginalized. They are confronted with the reality that their voices go unheard, and in many cases, these smaller parties struggle to advance as candidates. In many respects, they lack sufficient resources to compete with the larger parties, which possess financial strength, networks, and support from various societal elements (Ahmat Sholihin and Heri Kurnia 2022). With high nomination thresholds, they often choose not to participate, believing they have little chance of winning.

Cartel political practices also serve as a major driver behind the formation of large coalitions, wherein political cartels refer to agreements among major parties to mutually support each other in elections, resulting in a single candidate deemed most competitive. In this context, political agreements blur ideological boundaries and produce candidates that are more products of political consensus than representations of diverse voices within society. When large parties opt to collaborate, they create an atmosphere in which the willingness to offer alternatives diminishes. Consequently, the single candidate emerges as a symbol of dominance, and the existence of limited choices generates dissatisfaction among voters (Yunus 2018). The process of forming large coalitions and single candidates is also influenced by practical considerations regarding political costs. Gaining votes

in elections requires significant investment in terms of time and financial resources. Smaller parties are often hindered by their inability to bear the costs necessary to campaign for their candidates. In contrast, larger parties find it easier to shoulder these expenses and mobilize the resources needed to achieve victory. As a result, smaller parties become alienated, and opportunities to advocate for their ideas continue to shrink.

Furthermore, it is essential to consider the social and cultural dimensions influencing large coalitions and single candidates. Society often prefers to vote for a single candidate rather than having multiple options that could potentially split the vote. This phenomenon reflects a pragmatic viewpoint among the public, where they are more inclined to support a candidate perceived to have a higher chance of winning. In other words, in situations where voters are faced with a single candidate, they tend to go with the flow, abandoning the courage to choose alternative options. This creates a cycle in which the single candidate is further reinforced, while the diversity of voices is neglected. However, despite the strategic appeal of large coalitions and single candidates, the long-term implications of this phenomenon are detrimental to the health of democracy. With a single candidate, voters are trapped in a limited choice, creating the risk that the public will feel increasingly unrepresented. The phenomenon of empty boxes that arises in local elections illustrates the dissatisfaction of the public with the existing system, where they feel they have no viable options. In this context, the empty box becomes not only a symbol of protest but also a reflection of the failure of the political system to create a climate of healthy competition. Based on observations of various local elections, it is evident that this situation exacerbates public trust in the political process. When voters feel that their choices are extremely limited, especially when there is only one candidate, feelings of apathy and distrust toward political institutions emerge. In the long run, this phenomenon can lead to a decline in voter participation, as the public feels their voices no longer matter. Such dissatisfaction may culminate in social disintegration, where people feel alienated from the political

process and increasingly distanced from the very goals of democracy itself.

It is important to remember that the phenomenon of large coalitions and single candidates is not merely a result of political party actions but also reflects broader social conditions. Public dissatisfaction with existing leaders and the powerlessness of smaller parties create an environment where large coalitions can easily thrive. In this context, society needs to be given space to participate in a broader political process, ensuring that their aspirations are effectively represented. Despite the complex challenges, there are opportunities to improve this situation. Reforms in the political system, including lowering the thresholds for candidacy and strengthening smaller parties, can create avenues for alternatives to emerge in elections. Larger parties must recognize their responsibility to foster an inclusive political climate where the voices of various societal elements can be heard and valued. Only by creating a more open and transparent political atmosphere can we avoid being trapped in a cycle of large coalitions that limit public choice. Large coalitions and single candidates in local elections in Indonesia reflect profound challenges within the democratic system. Various factors, including power consolidation, political costs, and voter culture, contribute to the emergence of this phenomenon. While large coalitions may be seen as efforts to ensure victory, it is crucial not to overlook that diversity of voices and fair representation are key elements of a healthy democracy. If we continue to allow large coalitions and single candidates to dominate the political arena, we risk losing the essence of democracy itself, where every voice should be valued, and every aspiration deserves to be pursued. Thus, collective efforts are required to improve this situation and create a more just and inclusive political system, where every citizen has the opportunity to participate and cast their vote in determining our shared future.

The Interconnection between National Political Dynamics and the Emergence of the Empty Box Phenomenon at the Local Level

The national and local political dynamics in the context of elections in Indonesia are often inseparable. The relationship between the existence of large coalitions at the central level and

the empty box phenomenon at the local level reflects how this complex political structure shapes the interaction between societal aspirations and existing power (Romli 2018). To understand this relationship more deeply, it is essential to explore the various layers surrounding the political process in Indonesia, from the national to the local level, as well as the implications it has for democracy and political participation. On one hand, the presence of large coalitions at the central level is often viewed as a political strategy aimed at creating stability and securing power (Rishan 2020). These coalitions are formed in response to the need for broad support, particularly in the context of increasingly fierce competition in the political arena. The parties within these coalitions tend to prioritize pragmatic interests over ideology, resulting in the voices of the people often being overlooked, and political decisions being based more on calculations of power and influence than on the genuine aspirations of society (Prihatmono and Nugroho 2021). This dynamic extends to the local level, where local elections become arenas of power struggles that reflect broader interests. The empty box phenomenon, wherein voters lack adequate choices, leading to the absence of suitable candidates (Nurhalimah 2019), is often a direct consequence of the influence of large coalitions at the central level. When large parties unite in a coalition, they frequently disregard the voices of smaller parties that should represent various segments of society. Consequently, in many local elections, voters are confronted with extremely limited options, often resulting in a single candidate or even situations where no candidates are available at all.

On the other hand, large coalitions also create a deeper impact on smaller and independent parties at the local level. When large parties dominate the political arena, smaller parties are often forced to either form coalitions or become marginalized. In many cases, they feel compelled to support candidates from large parties to ensure their political survival. This creates a situation in which available choices become homogenized, and the potential diversity of voices within society is buried beneath the pragmatic interests of the large parties. Consequently, the public faces increasingly narrow choices, where their aspirations are poorly represented, and only candidates aligning with the coalition's

broad outlines can advance. It is crucial to understand that the empty box phenomenon is not merely a result of the absence of candidates but also a manifestation of public dissatisfaction with the existing political system. When voters perceive that there are no suitable choices, they begin to feel that their voices are undervalued. This dissatisfaction can lead to apathy, where the public is reluctant to participate in the electoral process because they believe that the outcomes have already been predetermined by non-transparent political dynamics. In this context, the empty box becomes a symbol of the community's powerlessness in determining their own fate, reflecting the failure of the political system to create space for diverse voices and aspirations (Romli 2018).

This phenomenon can be viewed from the perspective of the relationship between power and legitimacy. When the public is confronted with candidates deemed unrepresentative, the legitimacy of power gained through elections becomes questionable (Rumesten RS 2016). As a result, voters feel that the candidates put forward by large coalitions do not reflect their needs and aspirations. This creates a gap between leaders and the community, where leaders are perceived as figures detached from the realities of everyday life. Consequently, political legitimacy becomes increasingly fragile, and public trust in political institutions declines.

At the local level, the phenomenon of the empty box illustrates how local politics cannot be separated from the context of national politics. When large coalitions at the central level decide to support specific candidates in regions, these decisions are often based on broader political considerations. Such decisions frequently overlook local dynamics, and the aspirations of the local community are often neglected. This creates an imbalance between national and local political interests, where the needs of the community are not represented in the political decision-making process. This interconnection can also be observed in the context of the influence of political elites who play a role in determining candidates. Political elites at the central level play a crucial role in determining candidates who are put forward at the local level. They often utilize their networks to control the

nomination process, disregarding small parties and independent candidates who may be more representative of the community. In this context, the voices of the public are again marginalized, and the political process becomes centered around elite interests.

In facing these political dynamics, it is crucial to consider efforts to create a more inclusive and representative political system. Political reforms, including lowering nomination thresholds, strengthening small parties, and enhancing transparency in the political process, can open up space for the emergence of more diverse alternatives. The community needs to be given the opportunity to participate in the political process, ensuring that their aspirations are effectively represented. Only by fostering a more open political atmosphere can we avoid getting trapped in a cycle of dissatisfaction and apathy that leads to the phenomenon of the empty box. It is important to understand that political dynamics are an evolving process, and the challenges faced cannot be addressed instantly. A collective commitment from all stakeholders is required to bring about positive change. Large coalitions at the central level must recognize their responsibility to listen to voices from the regions and create space for small parties to participate. In this context, a new paradigm in politics is necessary, one where the diversity of voices and aspirations of the community is valued as an integral part of the democratic system. The interconnection between national political dynamics and the phenomenon of the empty box at the local level reflects the complexity of the interaction between power, community aspirations, and the existing political structure. Large coalitions at the central level often contribute to the limited choices available at the local level, creating a situation where the voices of the community are marginalized. To create a healthier political system, collective efforts are needed to improve these conditions and provide space for diverse voices. Only then can we ensure that every individual has the opportunity to participate in shaping their political future, upholding the democratic values that should serve as the foundation of every electoral process.

The Impact of the Empty Box Phenomenon on Democratization and Political Representation at the Local Level

At its most fundamental level, the empty box phenomenon highlights a gap between voters and the candidates available. When the community fails to find candidates deemed suitable, qualified, and representative of their interests, it fosters a sense of despair and disappointment with the political process. The empty box serves as a reflection of deep dissatisfaction with the existing political elite (Tanjung and Saraswati 2020). This disappointment can be systemic, where the public perceives that all available candidates are merely representatives of specific interest groups, rather than true representations of the people's voice. Consequently, this can lead to low voter participation rates, with many individuals opting not to vote at all, thereby diminishing the legitimacy of the democratic process.

From a democratization perspective, the empty box phenomenon has the potential to hinder the development of democracy itself (Tanjung and Saraswati 2020; Rumesten RS 2016; Romli 2018). A healthy and functioning democracy requires active participation from the community. When the available choices do not reflect the diversity of opinions and aspirations within society, participation is likely to decline. The empty box serves as a reminder that democracy is not only about voting but also about providing meaningful choices. A community that feels unrepresented may become apathetic and skeptical toward political institutions, thereby diminishing their trust in the system. This is a perilous condition for the health of democracy, as the legitimacy of the government is threatened without trust and participation.

Furthermore, the empty box phenomenon can have implications for political representation at the local level (Mamonto and Setiyono 2021). Effective representation requires channels for the aspirations of the community to be translated into concrete public policies. When voters are faced with an empty box, they lack the means to express their needs and hopes. This creates a situation where their voices are ignored, and in the long term, it can lead to the marginalization of certain groups that are unrepresented in the political process. Ultimately, the empty box

phenomenon reinforces the existing dominance of political elites, as they are able to maintain power without adequately addressing the needs of the community.

As a result of the dissatisfaction generated by the empty box phenomenon, there emerges the potential for radicalization or broader protest movements. When communities feel that their voices are not being heard, they may seek alternative means to express their discontent, whether through social actions, demonstrations, or even in the form of alternative political movements. This indicates that the empty box is not merely a failure of the electoral process but has the potential to create political and social instability. When communities are compelled to take action outside the existing formal channels, this can weaken the political institutions that are supposed to represent the people. The empty box phenomenon can also be viewed as a reflection of the challenges faced by political parties and the electoral system in Indonesia. In many cases, large political parties tend to dominate the electoral arena, sidelining smaller parties and independent candidates. When large coalitions at the national level dominate the nomination process, they often neglect local aspirations, creating conditions in which the candidates put forward do not reflect the diversity and complexity of the local community. Consequently, the empty box phenomenon serves as a warning sign that if the political system fails to provide space for diverse voices, the legitimacy and sustainability of the system itself will be threatened (Tanjung and Saraswati 2020). Considering that the democratization process is heavily influenced by social and cultural contexts, the empty box phenomenon also reflects the realities of everyday life for the community. The dissatisfaction that arises is not solely rooted in politics but also stems from the economic, social, and cultural conditions that underlie it. When communities feel marginalized in the political process, this is often related to social injustices and dissatisfaction with existing public policies. Therefore, addressing the empty box phenomenon requires a holistic and inclusive approach, where community voices are heard and considered in political decision-making. Changing the perspective on politics and elections is also key to understanding the impact of the empty

box phenomenon. A healthy democracy should provide space for the community to explore various options and produce candidates that reflect the existing diversity. To achieve this, political parties need to be more responsive to the needs of the community and open channels for diverse aspirations. Additionally, electoral reforms that prioritize principles of fairness and inclusion need to be implemented so that the candidates produced are more representative and have stronger legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

From a philosophical perspective, the phenomenon of the empty box can be viewed as a reflection of a crisis of trust in political institutions. When communities do not feel represented, they lose faith in the system's capacity to meet their needs. This creates a negative cycle in which dissatisfaction breeds apathy, which in turn reduces political participation and legitimacy (Hannan 2023). To break this cycle, a genuine effort is required to rebuild trust and provide space for communities to actively participate in the political process.

The importance of political education and public awareness in addressing the phenomenon of the empty box cannot be overlooked. Communities need to be encouraged to better understand the political process, identify viable candidates, and engage in elections in a more proactive manner. By enhancing political awareness, it is hoped that communities can become active agents of change, participate in the electoral process, and advocate for more representative candidates. In this context, the phenomenon of the empty box can be seen as a call to awaken the collective awareness of society regarding the significance of their role in determining the political direction of their regions. The empty box phenomenon has a significant impact on the process of democratization and political representation at the local level (Ishak 2020). This phenomenon reflects public dissatisfaction with the available choices, hampers participation, and reinforces the dominance of existing political elites. As a symbol of the failure of the political system to provide adequate representation, the empty box serves as a reminder of the importance of creating inclusive spaces for all voices and aspirations of the community. With the right reforms and increased political awareness among the

populace, we can hope to improve this situation and ensure that every individual has the opportunity to contribute to a healthier and more sustainable democratic process.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of the empty box in Pilkada in Indonesia serves as an indicator of public dissatisfaction with the existing political system. This phenomenon arises when voters choose not to cast their ballots for the available candidates, often as a form of protest against leaders and political parties that are perceived to not represent their aspirations. The existence of the empty box, as regulated by the Constitutional Court, provides an opportunity for the public to express their dissatisfaction when only one pair of candidates is running. The empty box phenomenon reflects significant challenges in local democracy, where the dominance of large coalitions often overlooks the voices and aspirations of local communities. This creates a situation where the candidates presented do not represent the diversity and complexity of the local populace. This dissatisfaction is rooted not only in unhealthy political practices but also in the underlying social, economic, and cultural conditions. When communities feel alienated from the political process, they risk becoming trapped in a cycle of dissatisfaction and apathy, which may lead to radicalization or broader protest movements. To address the empty box phenomenon, reforms in the political system are needed to create space for smaller parties and independent candidates. The public needs to be encouraged to enhance their political awareness and actively participate in the electoral process. By fostering a more open and inclusive political environment, it is hoped that dissatisfaction can be reduced and the legitimacy of the political system can be improved. The empty box phenomenon is not merely a sign of a failed election, but also a reflection of a crisis of trust in political institutions. Therefore, it is crucial to rebuild public trust and ensure that every individual has the opportunity to contribute to a healthier and more sustainable democratic process. Thus, the empty box phenomenon can serve as a call for positive change within the Indonesian political system.

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