

## Clan Identity as a Determinant in the 2024 Regional Elections Among the Mandailing Community in Simangambat District

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyse the role of clan identity in shaping the political preferences and orientations of the Mandailing community in the 2024 Regional Head Elections. The study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with data collection techniques including participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The research informants consist of traditional leaders, religious leaders, youth figures, women, and the general public from various clans in Simangambat District. The results of the study indicate that clan identity continues to function as strong social and cultural capital in building solidarity, social legitimacy, and political loyalty. Regional head candidates use clan networks, participation in traditional activities, and cultural symbols and narratives as electoral strategies. However, there has been a shift in political orientation among young people and the educated community, who are beginning to prioritise rational considerations such as candidates' integrity, vision, and work programs. This study confirms that Mandailing local politics is in a transitional phase, moving from the dominance of genealogical identity politics to more rational political participation within the framework of modern democracy.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

<sup>4</sup> Regional Head Elections (Pilkada) are one of the main instruments of local democracy, which not only reflect the rational political preferences of the public, but are also influenced by social, cultural, and collective identity factors. In the context of Indonesia's multicultural society, voting behaviour is often not entirely determined by a candidate's program, vision, mission, or capacity alone, but also by primordial ties such as religion, kinship, ethnicity, and clan identity [1]. This phenomenon shows that local politics remains deeply imbued with sociological dimensions rooted in the local community's cultural structure.

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The Mandailing people are an indigenous community with a strong social and kinship system, particularly through the concept of marga as a genealogical identity, a symbol of honour, and a marker of social position within the customary structure. Marga not only functions as an indicator of family origin but also serves as a basis for solidarity, loyalty, and social relations in community life. In Mandailing customary life, relationships between individuals and groups are greatly influenced by the principle of dalihan na tolu, which places kinship relations at the core of social attitudes and social decisions, including in the political sphere [2].

Simangambat District, as one of the areas with a majority of residents from the Mandailing ethnic group, presents a distinctive local political dynamic. In the 2024 regional elections, community involvement in political decision-making cannot be separated from the influence of clan identity, which is deeply embedded in their social structure. Regional head candidates from certain clans, especially those from dominant clans or those with extensive kinship networks, tend to gain support through emotional bonds and customary solidarity. This situation makes clan identity one of the determining factors in shaping the political preferences of the Mandailing community in Simangambat.

This phenomenon is worth examining critically, given that, in principle, local elections are expected to be arenas of rational, democratic competition focused on the public interest. However, in practice, clan-based identity politics can shift voter rationality toward emotionally and primordially driven patterns of support. On the one hand, this can strengthen political participation by fostering a sense of social closeness between voters and candidates. On the other hand, the dominance of clan identity in local elections risks obscuring objective assessments of prospective regional leaders' capacity, integrity, and work programs.

Studies on voting behaviour in local elections (Pilkada) in Indonesia have developed rapidly, particularly those that highlight the influence of identity politics on voter preferences. Research by Zaini, Sumirat, and Ridho shows that social identities such as religion, ethnicity, and cultural affiliation significantly shape the community's political orientations, especially at the lol level [3]. Identity politics often becomes an effective tool for electoral mobilisation because it is rooted in voters' emotional bonds and collective solidarity.

However, previous research by Aprillia, Ibrahim, and Hidayat still positioned identity at the macro level, such as religion and ethnicity, while more micro dimensions of identity, such as clan or genealogical kinship, have not been studied in depth. Clan identity is often understood merely as part of ethnic identity, without being analysed as an independent socio-political variable that has a determinative influence on voting behaviour [4]. In fact, in certain indigenous communities, including the Mandailing, clans play a very strong social role in regulating power relations, fostering solidarity, and conferring social legitimacy.

In addition, previous research by Suhariyanto tends to adopt a rational-instrumental approach that emphasises program factors, vision and mission, and candidate performance as the main determinants of voter choice [5]. This approach has not fully explained the political reality in communities governed by customary law, where cultural considerations, emotional bonds, and genealogical loyalty often outweigh purely rational ones. Thus, there

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is a research gap: a lack of studies that integrate a socio-cultural perspective into the analysis of voting behaviour at the local level.

Research gaps are also evident in terms of the study area. Studies on Mandailing local politics generally focus on the Mandailing Natal region or Mandailing in general, while the Simangambat District is still rarely used as a specific research locus. In fact, Simangambat has distinctive social characteristics with certain dominant clan configurations and close kinship relations intertwined with local power structures. This condition has the potential to produce electoral dynamics that differ from those in other Mandailing areas.

Based on this research gap, this study offers a novel approach by positioning clan identity as the primary determinant in analysing voting behaviour in the 2024 Regional Elections. This study views clan not only as a symbolic identity but also as social and political capital that actively shapes voter preferences, mobilises electoral support, and provides social legitimacy to certain candidates.

Another novelty lies in the study's temporal context, namely the 2024 Regional Head Election, which took place amid increasing local political competition and digital media penetration. This study analyses how clan identity interacts with contemporary political dynamics, including modern campaign strategies and digital political communication, to shape the voting behaviour of the Mandailing community in Simangambat District. Thus, this research not only enriches the theoretical study of identity politics but also provides empirical contributions that strengthen local democracy grounded in cultural wisdom.

## 2. <sup>10</sup> METHOD

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive approach to gain an in-depth understanding of how clan (marga) identity shapes political behaviour among the Mandailing community during the 2024 Regional Head Election (*Pilkada*) in Simangambat Subdistrict. The qualitative approach was chosen because this research focuses on the meanings, processes, and socio-cultural values underlying political actions, rather than merely measuring phenomena statistically, in line with the view that qualitative research provides space for researchers to examine social experiences and community perspectives naturally within their real-life contexts [6].

The research was conducted in Simangambat Subdistrict, North Padang Lawas Regency, North Sumatra Province, which is one of the areas where the Mandailing population continues to maintain a clan-based kinship system. This location was purposively selected because during the 2024 *Pilkada*, clan identity issues emerged prominently and became an important factor influencing support for regional head candidates. These conditions make Simangambat a relevant site for investigating how traditional kinship values continue to shape political behaviour in the modern era.

The research subjects consisted of Mandailing community members who actively participated in the 2024 *Pilkada*, including voters, customary leaders, religious leaders, and youth figures who play social roles at the local level. Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on specific criteria, namely, individuals who understand and are involved in political dynamics and possess in-depth knowledge of the Mandailing kinship system. In this regard, the study involved informants from various clans, including Nasution,

Lubis, Harahap, and Daulay, to obtain diverse perspectives on the role of clan identity in shaping political preferences.

Data were collected through three main techniques: observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Participatory observation was conducted to directly examine how clan identity manifests in various social and political activities, such as community meetings, clan gatherings, and campaign events. In-depth interviews were carried out using semi-structured guidelines to explore participants' experiences, views, and motivations regarding the relationship between clan identity and political choice. Documentation was used to obtain secondary data, including *Pilkada* results, clan activity archives, local news reports, and official documents from election organisers [7].

Data analysis was performed using the interactive analysis model, which consists of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. During the reduction stage, the collected data were selected and focused on aspects directly related to the influence of clan identity on political behaviour. The selected data were then presented in narrative form to illustrate social patterns and cultural meanings comprehensively. Finally, conclusions were drawn by interpreting the data and verifying the findings against field observations [8].

To ensure data credibility, this study applied triangulation techniques, including source, method, and time triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information from various informants, such as customary leaders, religious leaders, and community members. Method triangulation was carried out by combining the results of observation, interviews, and documentation. Time triangulation involved collecting data at different points in time to ensure consistency of information [9].

The entire research process consisted of several stages: the preparation stage (proposal development and research instrument design), field data collection, data analysis, and report writing. Throughout the research process, ethical considerations were maintained by respecting the customs and local values of the Mandailing community [10]. Through this methodology, the study is expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of how clan identity influences the political behaviour of the Mandailing community in Simangambat Subdistrict. The findings are expected not only to contribute to the development of culturally grounded local political studies but also to inform political actors and policymakers in fostering democratic practices more deeply rooted in local social and cultural values.

### <sup>13</sup> 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. Results

##### 3.1.1. Voter and Candidate Surname Identity in Regional Head Elections

Based on observations conducted in Simangambat Subdistrict, it was found that clan (*marga*) identity continues to play a significant role in shaping the political orientation and behaviour of the Mandailing community, both among voters and regent candidates in the 2024 Regional Head Election (*Pilkada*). Within Mandailing society, the *marga* is not merely a genealogical marker but also a symbol of solidarity, trust, and collective pride deeply embedded in everyday life. This phenomenon was clearly evident during the campaign period and political socialisation activities, in which kinship relations and clan networks

frequently served as the main channels for the dissemination of influence and the formation of political support.

Field observations indicate that the majority of voters in Simangambat Subdistrict still regard shared clan affiliation as a primary consideration in their political choices. In various community activities, such as clan gatherings, customary meetings, and wedding ceremonies, discussions about the *Pilkada* often emerged and were frequently linked to the candidates' clan identity. Members of the same clan generally supported regent candidates from their own *marga*, with the intention of upholding *hamoraon*, *hagabeon*, and *hasangapon*—core values in Mandailing culture that emphasise honour, prosperity, and extended family solidarity.

The observations further reveal that the social structure of the Simangambat community remains strongly influenced by kinship organisations known as *punguan marga* (clan associations). These organisations function not only as social institutions but also as informal political arenas. In several *punguan* activities, clan leaders were observed attempting to direct members' political preferences toward candidates who share blood ties or common lineage. Moreover, some regent candidates were found to deliberately utilise clan forums to strengthen their political support base by emphasising shared identity, unity, and the preservation of the clan's good name.

The observations also demonstrate differences in support patterns between older and younger generations. The older generation tends to maintain stronger loyalty to clan identity and perceives political choice as a form of social responsibility toward kinship ties. In contrast, a segment of the younger generation has begun to display a more rational orientation, showing greater openness to candidates' performance records and political visions, though the influence of clan identity has not entirely disappeared from their decision-making. This indicates a gradual shift in local political values from a genealogical basis to a more aspirational, performance-based orientation.

Furthermore, the observations show that the relationship between regent candidates and the community is not purely political but also socio-cultural. Candidates from particular clans often attend traditional ceremonies such as *mangupa*, *mangulosi*, and *horja godang* as part of a strategy to strengthen emotional ties with the community. Their presence at such events is usually warmly welcomed, as it is perceived as a sign of respect for customary traditions and clan solidarity. Such practices indirectly reinforce the notion that politics in Simangambat remains deeply intertwined with cultural symbols rooted in the collective identity of the Mandailing people.

Thus, the observational findings indicate that clan identity remains a strong determinant factor in the dynamics of local politics in Simangambat Subdistrict. Political support is built not only on candidates' programs or visions, but also on kinship networks rooted in genealogical and emotional ties among clan members. Although there is an emerging tendency toward changing patterns of political behaviour among the younger generation, clan identity continues to serve as a central pillar in shaping political support and legitimising regent candidates in the 2024 *Pilkada*. These observational findings are also consistent with the interview results presented in the following section.

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**Interview with a Customary Leader (Mr. I.A. Hasibuan)**

*In Mandailing customary tradition, a marga is not merely a family name, but also a symbol of honour and social responsibility. Therefore, when a regent candidate comes from the same clan, the community feels a moral obligation to support him. This is not purely a political matter, but rather an effort to maintain the clan's good name. In Simangambat, inter-clan relationships remain very strong. During the recent Pilkada, it was evident how pungan marga (clan associations) gathered their members to unify their political choices. This has become an integral part of the way our community thinks.*

**Interview with a Female Community Representative (Mrs. N. Hasibuan)**

*Among women's groups, discussions about the Pilkada are always engaging. When there is a candidate from our clan, we usually become very enthusiastic in discussing the issue and encouraging one another to offer support. It feels as if we are struggling for our own family. However, we also observe the candidate's behaviour within the community. If he is polite, generous, and caring, then the support becomes even stronger. Thus, although clan identity is the main factor, the candidate's character and social closeness also play an important role.*

**Interview with a Community Leader (Mr. J. Nasution)**

*In our village, people tend to trust candidates from their own clan more. The reason is simple: they are considered better at understanding local customs and the community's needs. For example, if the regent comes from our clan, he will surely remember his origins and help his village. This belief is widely held among people in Simangambat. However, some have begun to evaluate candidates based on their performance, especially the younger generation. Therefore, it can be said that the influence of clan identity remains strong, but perspectives are gradually changing.*

**Interview with a Member of the Election Committee (Mr. H. Nasution)**

*Young people today tend to think more openly. In the past, older generations chose candidates mainly because of clan affiliation, but now we pay more attention to candidates' visions, missions, and performance. Nevertheless, when there is a candidate from one's own clan, a sense of closeness still exists, as if we are represented by someone who understands our customs and origins. However, in my observation, among the youth, the influence of clan identity is no longer as strong as it used to be. We are more inclined to support candidates who genuinely seek to bring about change.*

Based on the five interviews, it can be concluded that clan (*marga*) identity remains a dominant factor in shaping the political behaviour of the Mandailing community in Simangambat Subdistrict. The community continues to perceive the *marga* as a symbol of solidarity, pride, and social responsibility; therefore, sharing the same clan with a regent candidate is often used as a basis for determining political choice. Nevertheless, the interviews also indicate a shift in values among the younger generation, who have begun to consider more rational aspects such as candidates' work programs and integrity. This finding

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suggests that clan-based politics in Simangambat remains strong but is gradually shifting toward a more open and critical orientation.

### 3.1.2. Candidate Strategy in Leveraging Family Identity as a Determinant in Regional Head Elections

Based on field observations conducted in Simangambat Subdistrict during the 2024 Regional Head Election (Pilkada), it was identified that clan (*marga*) identity plays a highly significant and strategic role in shaping political orientation and directing public support. Within the socio-cultural context of the Mandailing community, the *marga* functions not only as a genealogical marker but also as a symbol of solidarity, emotional attachment, and strong social legitimacy. Accordingly, regent candidates originating from the Mandailing region consciously and systematically utilised clan-based kinship ties as one of the primary instruments to build electoral bases, expand support networks, and consolidate their socio-political positions within the community.

One of the most prominent strategies observed was engagement through *punguan marga*, or clan-based social organisations. These associations serve not merely as forums for extended family interaction but also as influential social spaces in shaping political opinions and preferences. Regent candidates were actively involved in various customary events and *punguan* gatherings, such as traditional wedding ceremonies, mourning rituals (*siluluton*), customary rites, and annual extended family meetings. In these forums, candidates did not merely appear as guests but positioned themselves as integral members of the clan community, reaffirming their genealogical identity while constructing narratives of shared destiny and collective struggle. Such presence served a dual function: symbolising respect for tradition while simultaneously acting as a subtle yet continuous means of consolidating political support.

Furthermore, candidates strategically employed cultural and historical clan narratives as political rhetoric. During campaign activities, they frequently referred to clan origins, ancestral struggles, and Mandailing customary values as the moral foundation of their leadership. Values such as *hasuhuton* (responsibility and communal ownership), *marsialap ari* (mutual assistance and cooperation), and the principle of *dalihan na tolu* (balance in social relations) were framed as symbolic capital to construct an image of leadership deeply rooted in local traditions and norms. In this way, candidates presented themselves not only as modern political actors but also as cultural figures deemed capable of safeguarding the honour, dignity, and continuity of Mandailing social order.

In addition to cultural symbolism, another dominant strategy involved mobilising kinship networks and customary leaders. Candidates actively engaged *raja adat*, *hatobangon*, *punguan* leaders, and other influential figures within clan structures to coordinate support down to the village and neighbourhood levels. Customary leaders functioned as mediators between candidates and the community and as sources of moral legitimacy with high symbolic authority. Endorsements from such figures were often perceived as collective guidance, transforming political preferences from individual choices into shared decisions reflecting the interests and honour of the clan.

Cultural approaches were further reinforced through the strategic use of identity symbols in public spaces. Observations indicate that several candidates consistently used

Mandailing in campaign speeches, quoted traditional proverbs, and wore traditional attire at official events and community meetings. These symbolic practices were intended to create psychological proximity to voters, foster collective pride, and project an authentic image as "sons of the region" who understand local values and social needs.

Interestingly, differences in strategic patterns were observed between candidates from major and minority clans. Candidates from major clans tended to emphasise collective approaches, highlighting internal clan solidarity and the electoral strength derived from large kinship networks. This strategy proved relatively effective due to the extensive and well-established social structures that supported it. Conversely, candidates from minority clans adopted cross-clan strategies, emphasising universal issues such as infrastructure development, equitable welfare distribution, public services, and regional progress. This approach aimed to broaden support beyond narrow genealogical boundaries and construct an image of inclusive leadership oriented toward the public interest.

Overall, the observations indicate that the utilisation of clan identity in the 2024 *Pilkada* in Simangambat Subdistrict cannot be understood merely as an exclusive form of identity politics, but rather as a social strategy to build legitimacy, trust, and emotional proximity between candidates and the community. Clan identity functions as a source of social and political capital that is consciously mobilised to generate support, strengthen networks, and cultivate collective loyalty.

Nevertheless, local political dynamics also reveal signs of transformation, particularly among younger and more educated voters, who increasingly consider factors such as vision, policy programs, track records, and leadership capacity. Despite this trend, the appeal of clan identity remains an important variable influencing overall political preferences within the community. These observational findings are also consistent with the in-depth interview results, which will be elaborated in the following section to strengthen the empirical analysis and theoretical interpretation of this study.

#### Interview with a Mandailing Traditional Leader

*In the recent regional election, we saw many regent candidates attend traditional ceremonies in villages. They understand that the Mandailing community still highly respects the values of Dalihan Na Tolu and clan (marga) ties. Usually, when a candidate from the same clan attends a traditional event, people feel a sense of closeness and pride. That is why many candidates use clan associations (punguan marga) as a channel to introduce themselves and build support. However, not everyone automatically gives support simply because of shared clan identity. Some people also evaluate candidates based on their performance and good intentions.*

#### Interview with a Village Head in Simangambat District

*From my observations, the strategies of regent candidates here are strongly characterised by a clan-based approach. They make use of clan leaders in each hamlet to mobilise residents. Usually, candidates convey their messages through respected elders within the clan, encouraging the community to offer support. I also see that they frequently attend traditional ceremonies or marunjuk events in order to be perceived as caring about*

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*Mandailing cultural values. This type of strategy is quite effective, especially in villages where people still highly uphold kinship relations.*

Interview with a Mandailing Youth (University Student from Simangambat)

*Among young people, clan affiliation still influences, but not as strongly as among the older generation. Many of my friends make their choices not because of shared clan identity, but because they consider the candidates' programs and visions. However, I admit that candidates who can combine their clan identity with development ideas are usually more favoured. For example, they emphasise the values of cooperation and togetherness, which are part of the Mandailing tradition. This shows that they do not merely use clan identity for campaigning, but also attempt to revitalise its underlying values.*

Interview with a Local Social Activist

*The phenomenon of utilising clan identity in the regional election in Simangambat represents a form of cultural politics characteristic of Mandailing society. Based on my observations, this strategy is not only about genealogical identity but also about how candidates activate social networks and traditional solidarity as political capital. However, this also indicates challenges for local democracy. When clan identity becomes too dominant, the space for political rationality may be reduced. Ideally, candidates should use clan identity as a bridge to build cultural communication, not as an exclusive tool to gain votes.*

Overall, the interviews from the five sources indicate that candidates' strategies for utilising clan identity in the 2024 regional election in Simangambat District are diverse and adaptive to the local social context. For most residents, clan identity remains an important element in shaping emotional closeness and social legitimacy for candidates. Nevertheless, there is a growing tendency among the younger generation to evaluate candidates based on their programs and capacities rather than solely on shared clan affiliation.

### **3.1.3. The Relevance of Family Names as Determinants in Regional Elections**

Based on field observations conducted in several villages in Simangambat District, it was found that clan identity (*marga*) remains highly relevant in shaping community political preferences in the 2024 regional election. Within the socio-cultural context of Mandailing society, the clan is not merely a genealogical symbol but also a social instrument that binds community members in solidarity, fostering a sense of togetherness and loyalty. This phenomenon is clearly reflected in residents' tendency to support regent candidates who share the same clan or have close kinship ties.

Observations during the campaign period indicate that each candidate attempted to highlight their clan background in various social and political activities. For instance, candidates from the Nasution or Lubis clans frequently emphasised their lineage in political speeches and community meetings to build emotional closeness with voters. At several traditional events, such as *horja godang* and *marunjuk* ceremonies, the presence of candidates displaying specific clan attributes attracted public attention and generated a sense of collective pride among community members of the same clan. This demonstrates that clan

identity continues to function as both a symbol of social identity and a means of mobilising political support.

Furthermore, field observations also reveal that *punguan marga* (extended family associations based on clan affiliation) play a significant role in directing community political choices. In several *punguan* meetings, discussions about regent candidates frequently arose, and political support was often directed toward candidates with genealogical ties to the majority of group members. In some cases, collective decisions made within the *punguan marga* became a determining factor in shaping political support at the village level. This phenomenon illustrates how kinship values and genealogical loyalty remain integral to the political behaviour of Mandailing communities in Simangambat.

However, the relevance of clan identity as a political determinant is not absolute. Observations across several villages with higher levels of education and social mobility indicate a growing tendency for people to consider factors beyond candidates' party affiliations, such as candidates' track records, integrity, and work programs. This suggests a shift in values among younger voters and educated groups, who increasingly view politics more rationally without entirely abandoning their cultural identity.

Thus, it can be concluded that clan identity remains powerfully relevant in the 2024 regional election in Simangambat District, particularly as a social factor that reinforces kinship-based political solidarity. Nevertheless, its influence is now contextual—more dominant in rural areas and traditional communities, while among urban populations and the younger generation, it has begun to transform into a cultural identity symbol combined with rational considerations of candidates' capacities. These observational findings are also consistent with the interview results presented in the following section.

#### Interview with a Mandailing Traditional Leader

In Mandailing society, a clan (*marga*) is not merely a family name, but also a symbol of honour and identity. Therefore, it is natural that in regional elections, many people first consider a candidate's clan background. When a candidate is from the same clan, the community often feels an immediate sense of closeness and trust, especially if the candidate frequently engages with the public and attends traditional events. In the last regional election, I observed that many candidates clearly understood this dynamic. They attended traditional feasts, *horja godang*, and *punguan* gatherings to ensure the community perceived them as part of their own social group.

#### Interview with a Hamlet Head in Mandasip Village

*The clan factor still has a strong influence here. During the campaign period, several candidates came and introduced themselves by mentioning their clan names, which immediately generated enthusiasm among residents. For example, when a candidate from the Lubis clan visits an area where many residents also belong to the Lubis clan, support can flow quickly. However, I also see that people have begun to think more critically; they now also evaluate candidates' programs and honesty. Thus, clan identity remains important, but it is no longer the sole reason for making electoral choices.*

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**Interview with a Mandailing Youth (Local Community Activist)**

*The younger generation is somewhat different. We remain proud of our clan identity, but when choosing a leader, many of us want to see the candidate's competence and vision. Nevertheless, I cannot deny that clan affiliation still plays an emotional role. When two candidates have relatively similar capabilities, people often tend to choose the one from the same clan. Therefore, the influence of clan identity still exists, but it is now more symbolic and cultural than a primary determinant.*

**Interview with a Female Community Leader**

*For women, clan identity is also important because we often gather in punguan boru associations. In these forums, discussions about regent candidates commonly arise. When a candidate comes from the same clan, there is a particular sense of pride, as if we have a "representative" of our clan in government. However, I observe that many women now also consider the candidate's character and tangible achievements. Thus, although clan identity remains a strong factor, we also want leaders who are capable of bringing real change to society.*

**Interview with a Local Academic**

*From a sociological perspective, the relevance of clan identity in the Simangambat regional election reflects the strength of kinship-based identity politics. This cannot be separated from the Mandailing social structure, which continues to uphold the principles of Dalihan Na Tolu. However, my observations indicate a transition in political values within the community. Clan identity now serves a dual function: as a symbol of social solidarity and as cultural capital candidates use to build legitimacy. The challenge lies in how candidates employ clan identity ethically—not merely as a tool for vote mobilisation, but also as a means of strengthening collective values and regional development.*

Overall Conclusion: Interviews with the five informants indicate that clan identity remains significantly relevant in the 2024 regional election in Simangambat District. For most community members, the clan functions as a marker of emotional closeness and a source of political solidarity. However, the interviews also reveal a shift in thinking among younger generations and educated groups, who increasingly evaluate candidates based on capacity, programs, and integrity. Thus, clan identity remains an important determinant in local Mandailing politics, but its influence is increasingly cultural and contextual.

**3.2. Discussion**

**3.2.1. Voter and Candidate Surname Identity in Regional Head Elections**

The findings regarding the role of clan identity as a determinant of political behaviour among the Mandailing community in Simangambat District are consistent with previous studies examining the relationship between local culture and the dynamics of identity politics in Indonesia. Several relevant journals indicate that in societies that continue to uphold strong kinship values, local politics is often constructed upon solid socio-cultural foundations, including the clan system as a symbol of genealogical ties and social solidarity.

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Research by Rifki & Mujaeni, grounded in the principle of *Dalihan Na Tolu*, creates a closely knit social structure that significantly influences political decision-making. Inter-clan relations not only determine social positions but also serve as symbolic capital for candidates in gaining public legitimacy [11]. This finding is consistent with observations in Simangambat District, which show that *punguan marga* function as effective informal political arenas in shaping support for regent candidates.

Furthermore, Riska emphasises that in the context of regional head elections in South Tapanuli, clan identity serves as a mechanism for strengthening collective identity [12]. Communities tend to support candidates from the same clan because they believe such candidates will uphold the hamoraon, hagabeon, and hasangapon values of honour, prosperity, and dignity in Mandailing culture. This finding aligns with the interview results from traditional leaders in Simangambat, who stated that clan-based political support represents a moral responsibility to maintain the clan's good name and public standing.

On the other hand, Pertiwi & Widodo highlight a shift in the political orientation of younger generations within Mandailing society. According to his study, although clan identity remains an element of cultural pride, young people increasingly prioritise political rationality by considering candidates' programs, visions, and track records [13]. This finding corresponds with interviews with youth figures in Simangambat, which indicate a more open and performance-based political perspective, even though emotionally driven clan affiliation continues to function as a reinforcing factor.

Meanwhile, Gaspersz, Basuki, and Maspaitella explain that genealogically based identity politics is a distinctive phenomenon among Batak societies, including the Mandailing. In the context of regional elections, clan identity is often used to confer social legitimacy and facilitate mass mobilisation. However, this phenomenon may pose risks of social polarisation if it is not balanced by inclusive political approaches [14]. This is also reflected in observations in Simangambat, where regent candidates utilise traditional forums and clan-based activities as strategies to expand political support while maintaining balance to avoid inter-clan tensions.

Moreover, research by Ibrahim, Bedriati, and Tugiman finds that clan-based politics in Mandailing society has transformed into a form of cultural politics that integrates emotional, social, and rational elements. Candidates who succeed in gaining public support do so not solely because of shared clan identity, but also because they can demonstrate social concern, respect for customary traditions, and commitment to maintaining intergroup harmony [15]. These findings are highly relevant to observations in Simangambat, where regent candidates frequently attend traditional events such as *horja godang* and *mangulosi* ceremonies to strengthen social ties while affirming their respect for Mandailing cultural values.

From the overall discussion, it can be concluded that the findings from Simangambat District reinforce existing theories and empirical evidence regarding the strong role of cultural identity in local politics within the Mandailing region. However, this study also contributes novelty in the form of empirical evidence of a transitional phase from a kinship-based political system toward a more aspirational and rational form of politics. Although clan identity remains a central pillar in shaping political support, communities are

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increasingly integrating moral considerations, performance, and candidates' visions into their political judgments. Thus, clan-based politics in Simangambat should not be viewed merely as primordialism, but rather as a reflection of how local cultural values adapt to the evolving dynamics of democratic politics.

### 3.2.2. Candidate Strategy in Leveraging Family Identity as a Determinant in Regional Head Elections

The discussion of the role of clan identity as a political determinant in the 2024 regional election in Simangambat District is consistent with various findings in the literature on cultural politics in traditional Indonesian societies, particularly in the Mandailing region, which continues to uphold the values of *Dalihan Na Tolu* and strong genealogical ties. Based on observations and interviews, it is evident that clan identity functions not only as a symbol of kinship but also as a socio-political instrument strategically utilised by regional head candidates to gain public support and legitimacy. This phenomenon is further reinforced by previous studies that highlight the close relationship between local culture and political behaviour.

Research by Zaini, Sumirat, and Ridho demonstrates that within Mandailing society, the social system based on *Dalihan Na Tolu* serves as the foundation for the formation of political trust and solidarity. Candidates who can present themselves within the customary social structure tend to gain support more easily, as they are perceived to understand the values of honour (*hasangapon*), prosperity (*hamoraon*), and generational continuity (*hagabeon*) [3]. This is consistent with the findings in Simangambat, where regent candidates who actively attended traditional ceremonies and clan gatherings succeeded in fostering significant emotional closeness among voters.

Meanwhile, Bakar, Hidayat, and Malik emphasise that clan identity is frequently employed as "symbolic capital" in local political contests. Clan-based politics functions not merely as a tool for vote mobilisation but also as a means of strengthening candidates' moral and social legitimacy [1]. In the Simangambat regional election, this was evident in the involvement of traditional leaders and *punguan* leaders as intermediaries between candidates and the community. These figures played a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of candidates as members of the extended family, worthy of support.

Furthermore, Sembiring & Nainggolan highlight a shift in political orientation among Mandailing youth, who increasingly evaluate candidates based on their visions, programs, and performance. Nevertheless, cultural values such as *marsialap ari* and clan solidarity continue to serve as moral frameworks influencing their political decisions [2]. Interviews with young people in Simangambat reinforce this finding, as they indicated that clan identity remains important as a symbol of cultural closeness, but is no longer the sole basis for political choice.

In addition, Gunawan reveals that clan-based identity politics has two dimensions: it strengthens social cohesion while simultaneously posing the risk of constraining political rationality if not managed wisely [16]. In the context of Simangambat, this phenomenon also emerged when some candidates from major clans relied on genealogical solidarity to consolidate their voter base. In contrast, candidates from minority clans adopted cross-clan

approaches by emphasising issues of development and collective welfare. This strategy reflects political adaptation to the plural social structure of Mandailing society.

Research Mukhlis, Ilmar, Maskun, Aswanto, & Tajuddin further adds that political transformation in Mandailing society demonstrates a pattern of "political syncretism," in which customary values and modern democratic principles interact dynamically. Clan identity no longer functions solely as a marker of blood ties, but rather as a medium of cultural communication that strengthens candidates' social legitimacy in the eyes of voters [17]. This is also reflected in observations in Simangambat, where candidates who combined traditional symbols (such as the use of the Mandailing language and traditional attire) with progressive development messages tended to gain broader sympathy from diverse segments of society.

Thus, the findings of this field research in Simangambat District reinforce earlier theories that clan-based politics constitutes a complex and dynamic social reality. On the one hand, clan identity serves as a cultural force that maintains social solidarity and enhances political participation; on the other hand, it also presents challenges to democracy when employed exclusively and pragmatically. However, this study also offers novelty by viewing clan-based politics not merely as primordial politics, but as a cultural adaptation to democratic political mechanisms. Clan-based politics in Simangambat illustrate how customary values can serve as a constructive source of legitimacy when integrated with a development-oriented vision, social inclusivity, and leadership accountability. In other words, clan identity in the 2024 regional election in Simangambat District does not only represent the genealogical past of Mandailing society, but also constitutes a living and transforming form of social capital within the context of modern politics.

### 3.2.3. The Relevance of Family Names as Determinants in Regional Elections

The findings on the relevance of clan identity in the 2024 regional election in Simangambat District indicate that kinship-based politics in Mandailing society remains a significant social force. These field research results are consistent with various previous academic studies that emphasise the strong role of social identity in shaping political behaviour in regions where traditional cultural structures remain firmly established.

Research by Rahmiaji, Dwiningtyas, and Rahardjo explains that in Mandailing society, the clan (*marga*) is not merely a marker of descent, but also a value system that regulates social relations and trust. In the political context, clan identity functions as an emotional bridge between leadership candidates and the community [18]. This finding is consistent with observations in Simangambat, where regent candidates utilised genealogical closeness to gain legitimacy and support, particularly through their presence at traditional events such as *horja godang*, *marunjuk*, and meetings of *punguan marga* associations.

Meanwhile, Putri, Ibrahim, and Hidayat found that clan-based politics in the Mandailing region tends to emerge as a form of social solidarity driven by the principle of *Dalihan Na Tohu*. Within this system, kinship ties serve as a moral foundation for collective action, including in determining political choices [19]. This phenomenon was also observed in Simangambat, where decisions on political support were often made collectively through *punguan* forums rather than based solely on individual preferences. The clan thus functions

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as a social entity that facilitates political communication and strengthens the legitimacy of candidates perceived as being "of the same blood" as the community.

Another study by Khair & Syafutra indicates that the role of clan identity in local politics has begun to transform. Although it remains strong in rural areas, its influence is gradually declining among educated groups and younger generations who adopt more rational considerations in making political choices [20]. This transformation is also evident in Simangambat, as revealed through interviews with Mandailing youth and female community figures who emphasised the importance of candidates' programs and integrity, while still acknowledging clan identity as a symbol of cultural pride.

Furthermore, Kimbal and Rompas assert that clan-based politics represents a distinctive expression of cultural politics in Mandailing society, where customary symbols and kinship networks are utilised as social capital in political competition [21]. However, Siregar adds that the effectiveness of clan politics largely depends on candidates' ability to balance the use of cultural symbols with the articulation of rational development visions. This was evident in Simangambat, where candidates who successfully combined traditional symbols with development-oriented narratives received positive responses from communities across different clans.

Moreover, Aprillia, Ibrahim, and Hidayat highlight the emergence of a transitional political phenomenon in which customary values are neither entirely abandoned nor fully integrated into modern democracy [4]. Communities no longer vote solely based on shared clan identity, but also consider ethical values and leadership capacity. Observations in Simangambat support this view: although clan identity remains an important symbol in building social closeness, political orientation is gradually shifting toward more rational and moral considerations.

Based on comparisons with the literature above, this study strengthens the argument that clan identity in Mandailing politics serves a dual function. First, it acts as socio-cultural capital that shapes networks of solidarity and kinship-based political legitimacy; second, it serves as a form of collective identity that is now transforming into a medium of political communication across generations. Thus, clan identity remains a relevant social determinant in regional elections, but its influence is increasingly contextual and dynamic.

Conceptually, this study offers a novel understanding of clan-based politics as a form of cultural adaptation to the modern democratic system. The clan no longer functions solely as a traditional mobilisation tool, but also as an identity symbol that reinforces political morality and social participation. In the context of Simangambat District, the relevance of clan identity is not merely an indicator of genealogical loyalty but also a reflection of how Mandailing society negotiates customary values within contemporary politics.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

This study confirms that clan identity in the Mandailing community in Simangambat District serves as a socio-cultural foundation that continues to shape the dynamics of the 2024 Regional Head Elections, particularly by shaping legitimacy, trust, and emotional closeness between voters and regional head candidates. Clans not only serve as genealogical markers but also as social and cultural capital utilised in local political processes, even though political rationality is increasingly evident among younger generations and educated

voters. The implications of this study indicate that local democracy in customary-based regions needs to be understood through a contextual approach that integrates cultural values and the principles of substantive democracy. However, this study has limitations in terms of the scope of the area and the qualitative approach, which not yet allow for broad generalisations or quantitative measurement of clan influence. Therefore, future research is recommended to expand the study area, employ mixed methods, and examine the role of contemporary political actors in the transformation of identity politics. Practically, this study contributes to raising awareness among the public and stakeholders so that clan identity is understood as an ethical means to strengthen solidarity and inclusive leadership, rather than merely a tool for political mobilisation.

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