

ORIGINAL

The Effect of Candidate Branding and Election Socio-Economics on Voter Loyalty in Regional Elections in Palangka Raya City With Candidate Image as an Intervening Variable

El efecto del branding del candidato y la socioeconomía electoral en la lealtad del votante en las elecciones regionales de la ciudad de Palangka Raya, con la imagen del candidato como variable interviniente

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: this study aims to analyse and explain the influence of candidate branding and voters' socio-economic conditions on voter loyalty in the regional head elections (Pemilukada) in Palangka Raya City, with candidate image serving as an intervening variable.

Method: using a quantitative approach, this research employed a survey method involving 400 respondents proportionally selected from various sub-districts in Palangka Raya. Data were gathered through structured questionnaires and analysed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to assess both direct and indirect relationships among variables.

Results: the results show that candidate branding has a positive and significant effect on candidate image, and that candidate image significantly mediates the influence of branding on voter loyalty. Additionally, voters' socio-economic conditions also impact candidate image, with their influence on voter loyalty becoming stronger when mediated by candidate image.

Conclusions: these findings suggest that efforts to foster voter loyalty should prioritize building an authentic, credible, and community-relevant candidate image, taking into account the local socio-economic context. Theoretically, this study supports approaches in political communication and voter perception theory. Practically, it offers strategic guidance for candidate success teams in designing effective branding and campaign communication strategies based on socio-economic voter segmentation.

Keywords: Candidate Branding; Voter Socio-Economics; Candidate Image; Voter Loyalty.

RESUMEN

Introducción: este estudio tiene como objetivo analizar y explicar la influencia del branding del candidato y las condiciones socioeconómicas de los votantes sobre la lealtad electoral en las elecciones regionales (Pemilukada) en la ciudad de Palangka Raya, con la imagen del candidato como variable interviniente.

Método: utilizando un enfoque cuantitativo, esta investigación empleó un método de encuesta con la participación de 400 encuestados seleccionados proporcionalmente de varios subdistritos de Palangka Raya. Los datos se recopilaban mediante cuestionarios estructurados y se analizaron utilizando el Modelo de Ecuaciones Estructurales (SEM, por sus siglas en inglés) para evaluar tanto las relaciones directas como indirectas entre las variables.

Resultados: los resultados muestran que el branding del candidato tiene un efecto positivo y significativo sobre la imagen del candidato, y que esta imagen media significativamente la influencia del branding en la lealtad del votante. Además, las condiciones socioeconómicas de los votantes también influyen en la imagen del candidato, y su efecto sobre la lealtad electoral se fortalece cuando es mediado por dicha imagen.

Conclusiones: estos hallazgos sugieren que los esfuerzos para fomentar la lealtad del votante deben priorizar la construcción de una imagen de candidato auténtica, creíble y relevante para la comunidad, teniendo en cuenta el contexto socioeconómico local. Teóricamente, este estudio respalda los enfoques de la comunicación política y la teoría de la percepción del votante.

Palabras clave: Marca del Candidato; Socioeconomía del Votante; Imagen del Candidato; Lealtad del Votante.

INTRODUCTION

In local political contests such as regional elections, voter loyalty is a crucial element that can determine a candidate's victory.⁽¹⁾ However, this loyalty does not emerge suddenly; it is the result of a complex political communication process involving perception, identification, and interaction between candidates and voters. In the context of Palangka Raya City, which is characterized by diverse social, economic, and cultural dynamics, understanding the factors that influence voter loyalty is not only crucial for candidates, but also essential for strengthening a more participatory and rational local democracy.⁽²⁾

One of the strategic factors in building closeness with voters is political branding.⁽³⁾ Candidate branding represents a systematic effort to shape public perception of who the candidate is, the values they uphold, and how they distinguish themselves from their competitors. Branding is not merely about symbols and slogans—it is a political narrative that resonates with both the emotions and reasoning of voters. When communicated consistently and effectively, strong branding can create a lasting candidate image that stays in the minds of the electorate.⁽⁴⁾

On the other hand, the socio-economic conditions of voters play an important role in determining how voters process political information.⁽⁵⁾ Education level, income, and type of employment can influence the extent to which voters receive, comprehend, and respond to political messages conveyed through branding strategies. Voters from lower-middle economic groups, for instance, tend to prioritize pragmatic considerations in their decision-making, while highly educated groups are more likely to focus on a candidate's integrity, vision, and track record. Therefore, socio-economic factors must not be overlooked when examining the formation of political loyalty.⁽⁶⁾

Furthermore, the candidate's image acts as a bridge between branding and voter loyalty. A positive image can strengthen the branding effect while also being an indicator of the quality of political communication received by voters.⁽⁷⁾ By positioning the candidate's image as an intervening variable, this study seeks to provide a more comprehensive explanation of how branding and voters' socio-economic conditions jointly shape voter loyalty in the Palangka Raya City Election. This research offers not only theoretical contributions to the fields of political communication and voter behavior but also practical implications for local political actors in crafting adaptive, data-driven strategies for electoral success.⁽⁸⁾

The phenomenon in the field shows that in every regional election in Palangka Raya City, many voters do not only choose based on the candidate's work program or track record, but more because of emotional closeness and personal perception of the candidate's figure.⁽⁹⁾ In some cases, candidates with superior programs and clear development visions have actually lost to opponents who successfully built a simple, populist, and community-oriented image. This suggests that strong and targeted political branding can shape positive voter perceptions, even outweighing the appeal of formal policy programs. The image constructed through social media, local cultural symbols, and direct communication styles appears to be more effective in fostering political loyalty than purely rational or policy-driven strategies.⁽¹⁰⁾

On the other hand, the socio-economic reality of the Palangka Raya City Community which is quite heterogeneous shows a diverse pattern of voter behavior.⁽¹¹⁾ Community groups with lower levels of education and limited income tend to be more easily influenced by visual and emotionally driven campaigns, whereas the middle to upper-income voter segment tends to be more critical and analytical of the information presented by candidates.⁽¹²⁾ In this context, the application of candidate images becomes increasingly important as a filter or lens that influences how voters from different socio-economic backgrounds interpret the political messages they receive. This phenomenon reinforces the urgency to examine more deeply how branding and socio-economic conditions interact through perceptions of candidate images in shaping voter loyalty.⁽¹³⁾

Previous research results show that candidate branding has a significant influence on voter loyalty.⁽¹⁴⁾ In the context of political marketing, it is affirmed that a strong personal brand can create deep emotional and cognitive connections between candidates and voters. At the local level, previous studies have shown that

voters tend to be more loyal to candidates who present a consistent, authentic, and locally relevant image. This finding highlights the importance of building a political brand that goes beyond mere appearances—one that aims to establish a trusted political identity within the community. This aligns with the political dynamics in the city of Palangka Raya, where strong candidate branding often proves more influential than the rational appeal of policy programs.⁽¹⁵⁾

Meanwhile, other studies have shown that voters' socio-economic background indirectly influences political loyalty, especially when mediated by perceptions of candidate quality.⁽¹⁶⁾ This reinforces the notion that a candidate's image functions as a perceptual filter through which voters from different social classes subjectively evaluate a candidate's worthiness. In other words, even if two voters come from different socio-economic backgrounds, they can exhibit the same level of loyalty if they hold a positive perception of the candidate's image. This study introduces a new dimension to understanding voter behavior in regions like Palangka Raya, which are characterized by significant socio-economic diversity. Therefore, an approach that integrates branding, socio-economic factors, and candidate image is both relevant and essential for further in-depth research.⁽¹⁷⁾

Based on the background and the phenomena previously described, the formulation of the problem in this study is as follows: (1) how does candidate branding influence voter loyalty, (2) how do voters' socio-economic conditions influence voter loyalty, (3) how does candidate branding influence candidate image, (4) how do voters' socio-economic conditions influence candidate image, (5) how does candidate image influence voter loyalty, (6) how does candidate branding influence voter loyalty through candidate image, and (7) how do voters' socio-economic conditions influence voter loyalty through candidate image.

This study offers scientific novelty by integrating three key dimensions—candidate branding, voters' socio-economic characteristics, and candidate image—into a single comprehensive analytical model to explain voter loyalty in the context of regional elections in developing urban areas such as Palangka Raya City. The originality of this research lies in the use of candidate image as an intervening variable, which has not been widely explored empirically in examining the relationship between candidate-related factors and voters' demographic characteristics in shaping political loyalty.

Theoretical Review

The influence of candidate branding on voter loyalty

Candidate branding has a significant effect on voter loyalty.⁽¹⁸⁾ Previous research explains that branding elements such as slogans, communication styles, visual appearances and personal narratives of candidates contribute to shaping public perceptions which then trigger external loyalty.⁽¹⁹⁾ The next finding explains that consistent and authentic branding can create an emotional connection between voters and candidates, which ultimately encourages voters to remain loyal to choosing the candidate in every election.⁽²⁰⁾

Other studies strengthen the relevance of the influence of candidate branding in forming loyalty.⁽²¹⁾ In their research on young voters in regional elections, they found that branding strategies that portray candidates as leaders who are close, visionary, and representative of the appreciation of the young community significantly increase voter loyalty.⁽²²⁾ Branding that successfully creates an emotional image and shared identity values has proven to be a more influential factor than rational work programs. These findings indicate that in the era of digital democracy, political branding has become a key instrument in shaping public perception, which directly impacts voter commitment and loyalty. Therefore, it is crucial for candidates to design branding strategies that are not only informative, but also engaging and capable of resonating with the psychological aspects of voters.⁽²³⁾

H1: there is a significant influence of candidate branding on voter loyalty.

The socio-economic influence of voters on voter loyalty

The socio-economic influence is significant on voter loyalty, this shows that social characteristics such as education, income, and employment status have an important role in shaping political behavior, although the influence is not always direct.⁽²⁴⁾ Previous studies have explained that socio-economic background greatly influences how individuals access political information, respond to campaign issues, and determine attitudes towards candidates. Voters from higher economic classes tend to have better access to information and higher analytical skills, so their loyalty is usually formed from rational processes and value considerations.⁽²⁵⁾

Meanwhile, lower-middle socioeconomic groups tend to be more influenced by emotional and symbolic approaches used during campaigns. Other studies have confirmed that, in the modern context, political loyalty is shaped not only by ideology or party affiliation, but also by voters' social and economic experiences. For instance, voters with lower income levels are more likely to express loyalty to candidates or parties they perceive as supportive of their economic interests. However, this loyalty can shift if their expectations are not fulfilled.⁽²⁶⁾

H2: there is a significant influence of socio-economic status of voters on voter loyalty.

The influence of candidate branding on candidate image

Research on the influence of candidate branding on candidate image is widely explored in political marketing literature, as a candidate's public image is not formed organically, but is shaped through structured communication and branding strategies. One study highlights that in modern politics, candidates must be positioned like a brand—with clear values, a distinct identity, and strong differentiation. Branding efforts carried out through mass media, social media, slogans, clothing styles, and personal narratives directly influence the public's perception of the candidate's image.⁽²⁷⁾

A positive image will be created if the branding elements are consistent and able to answer the hopes and emotions of voters. This is in line with the theory of political branding, where perceptions of a candidate's integrity, leadership and empathy are mostly formed through branding symbols that are displayed strategically.⁽²⁸⁾

Other studies have confirmed that a candidate's brand personality—such as warmth, honesty, or competence—plays a significant role in shaping public perception. These studies found that voters are more likely to remember candidates whose public image aligns with the brand they consistently projected during the campaign. For instance, if a candidate consistently portrays themselves as a defender of the common people through visual symbols and campaign rhetoric, that image tends to remain strongly embedded in the public's mind.⁽²⁹⁾

H3: there is a significant influence of candidate branding on candidate image.

The socio-economic influence of voters on candidate image

The socio-economic status of voters influences their perception of a candidate's image. Voters from the upper economic class tend to form a more rational image of candidates, focusing on their capabilities, vision, and track record. In contrast, voters from the lower-middle class often assess a candidate's image through emotional and symbolic lenses—such as communication style, perceived closeness to the people, or social background. This highlights that perceptions of political candidates are highly contextual and shaped by how voters interpret the candidate's identity and the political messages they convey.⁽³⁰⁾

Other studies have shown that voters from low-income groups tend to value candidates who appear close to the people and are responsive to social issues such as unemployment or direct aid programs. In contrast, voters with higher levels of education and economic status are more likely to prioritize technocratic qualities, such as a clear development vision and personal integrity. This indicates that a candidate's image is multidimensional and shaped by the value systems and socio-economic experiences of the voters.⁽³¹⁾

H4: there is a significant influence of voters' socio-economic status on candidate image.

The influence of candidate image on voter loyalty

Candidate image has a significant impact on voter loyalty. This is also supported by previous research, which suggests that public perceptions of a candidate's personality, integrity, and competence play a crucial role in determining whether voters remain loyal or shift their support. Another study emphasizes that candidate image is a key factor in political decision-making—often more influential than the actual content of the campaign program. Voters tend to stay loyal to candidates they perceive as authentic, trustworthy, and aligned with their personal values. This implies that when a candidate succeeds in building an image that resonates with the psychological and emotional dimensions of voters, loyalty is not only established, but can also endure beyond a single election cycle.⁽³²⁾

Another relevant study explains that voters who have a positive perception of a candidate's image—particularly in terms of personality, connection with the community, and public communication—tend to exhibit strong loyalty and are not easily swayed by negative issues. Even when a candidate shows weaknesses in policy matters, voters often remain loyal as long as the candidate's personal image remains positive. This study highlights the idea that image serves as an emotional bridge between candidates and voters, and that voter loyalty reflects the depth of positive perceptions toward the candidate.⁽³³⁾

H5: there is a significant influence of candidate image on voter loyalty.

H6: there is a significant influence of candidate branding on voter loyalty through candidate image.

H7: there is a significant influence of socio-economic status of voters on voter loyalty through candidate image.

METHOD

Research approach

This study uses a quantitative approach with an explanatory method. The aim is to test the influence of candidate branding and voter socio-economics on voter loyalty both directly and through mediating variables, namely candidate image. This study was conducted by survey using a structured questionnaire and analysed using inferential statistical techniques.

Population and sample

The population in this study was all Palangka Raya City residents who had the right to vote and participated

in the last Regional Election. This population was chosen because it represents subjects who have direct experience in making political decisions, especially in choosing regional head candidate pairs. Based on data from the Palangka Raya City General Election Commission, the number of permanent voters lists in the last Regional Election was recorded at 160 000 voters spread across three main sub-districts: Pahandut, Jekan Raya, and Sabangau. The sampling technique was carried out using stratified random sampling, namely random sampling based on regional stratification and socio-economic groups. The determination of the sample used the Slovin formula, so that the number of samples obtained in this study was 400 respondents.

Data analysis techniques

The data obtained will be analysed using a structural equation modelling approach using SmartPLS software. The analysis is carried out in several stages, namely: construct validity and reliability testing, structural model testing, direct and indirect hypothesis testing.

| Table 1. instrument validity | | | | |
|------------------------------|--------------------|---------------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| | Candidate branding | Voter loyalty | Candidate image | Election socio-economics |
| FL1-1 | 0,724 | | | |
| FL1-2 | 0,848 | | | |
| FL1-3 | 0,798 | | | |
| FL1-4 | 0,785 | | | |
| FL1-5 | 0,836 | | | |
| FL2-1 | 0,800 | | | |
| FL2-2 | 0,778 | | | |
| FL2-3 | 0,765 | | | |
| FL2-4 | 0,822 | | | |
| FL2-5 | 0,811 | | | |
| FL3-1 | 0,840 | | | |
| FL3-2 | 0,812 | | | |
| FL3-3 | 0,805 | | | |
| FL3-4 | 0,767 | | | |
| FL3-5 | 0,810 | | | |
| FL4-1 | 0,801 | | | |
| FL4-2 | 0,811 | | | |
| FL4-3 | 0,873 | | | |
| FL4-4 | 0,832 | | | |
| FL4-5 | 0,838 | | | |
| FP1 | | | | 0,857 |
| FP2 | | | | 0,907 |
| FP3 | | | | 0,915 |
| FP4 | | | | 0,879 |
| FP5 | | | | 0,839 |
| S1-1 | | 0,859 | | |
| S1-2 | | 0,851 | | |
| S1-3 | | 0,863 | | |
| S1-4 | | 0,897 | | |
| S1-5 | | 0,804 | | |
| S1-6 | | 0,871 | | |
| S2-1 | | 0,842 | | |
| S2-2 | | 0,783 | | |
| S2-3 | | 0,844 | | |
| S2-4 | | 0,839 | | |
| S2-5 | | 0,808 | | |

| | |
|--|-------|
| S2-6 | 0,778 |
| TA1-1 | 0,810 |
| TA1-2 | 0,818 |
| TA1-3 | 0,829 |
| TA1-4 | 0,798 |
| TA1-5 | 0,840 |
| TA2-1 | 0,873 |
| TA2-2 | 0,718 |
| TA2-3 | 0,875 |
| TA2-4 | 0,873 |
| TA2-5 | 0,800 |
| TA3-1 | 0,860 |
| TA3-2 | 0,806 |
| TA3-3 | 0,885 |
| TA3-4 | 0,865 |
| TA3-5 | 0,839 |
| TA4-1 | 0,883 |
| TA4-2 | 0,866 |
| TA4-3 | 0,871 |
| TA4-4 | 0,854 |
| TA4-5 | 0,853 |
| TA5-1 | 0,871 |
| TA5-2 | 0,825 |
| TA5-3 | 0,843 |
| TA5-4 | 0,812 |
| TA5-5 | 0,808 |
| Sources: data analysis SEM-Pls 2025 | |

Table 1 instrument validity the outer loading analysis of the SEM model indicates that all indicators within the constructs of candidate branding, voter socio-economics, candidate image, and voter loyalty have values exceeding the convergent validity threshold of > 0,70. This demonstrates that all indicators strongly contribute to representing their respective constructs.

| Tabel 2. AVE analysis | |
|--|-------|
| Average Variance Extracted (AVE) | |
| Candidate branding | 0,654 |
| Voter loyalty | 0,701 |
| Candidate image | 0,705 |
| Election socio-economics | 0,774 |
| Sources: data analysis SEM-Pls 2025 | |

| Table 3. Reliability analysis | |
|--|-------|
| Composite Reliability | |
| Candidate branding | 0,974 |
| Voter loyalty | 0,966 |
| Candidate image | 0,984 |
| Election socio-economics | 0,945 |
| Sources: data analysis SEM-Pls 2025 | |

Table 2 explains that the four AVE values are above the validity threshold, which is $> 0,50$, so that all constructs in this model are theoretically and empirically valid. This in-depth interpretation also confirms that the constructs studied have conceptual integrity, and the relationship between variables can be interpreted with a high level of confidence in the context of the influence of candidate branding and voter socio-economics on voter loyalty through candidate image.

Table 3 explains that the four composite reliability values indicate that the measurement instruments in the model are very reliable, meaning that the indicators used consistently and accurately measure the constructs being studied. This strengthens validity and ensures that empirical data reflects conceptual reality very well.

RESULTS

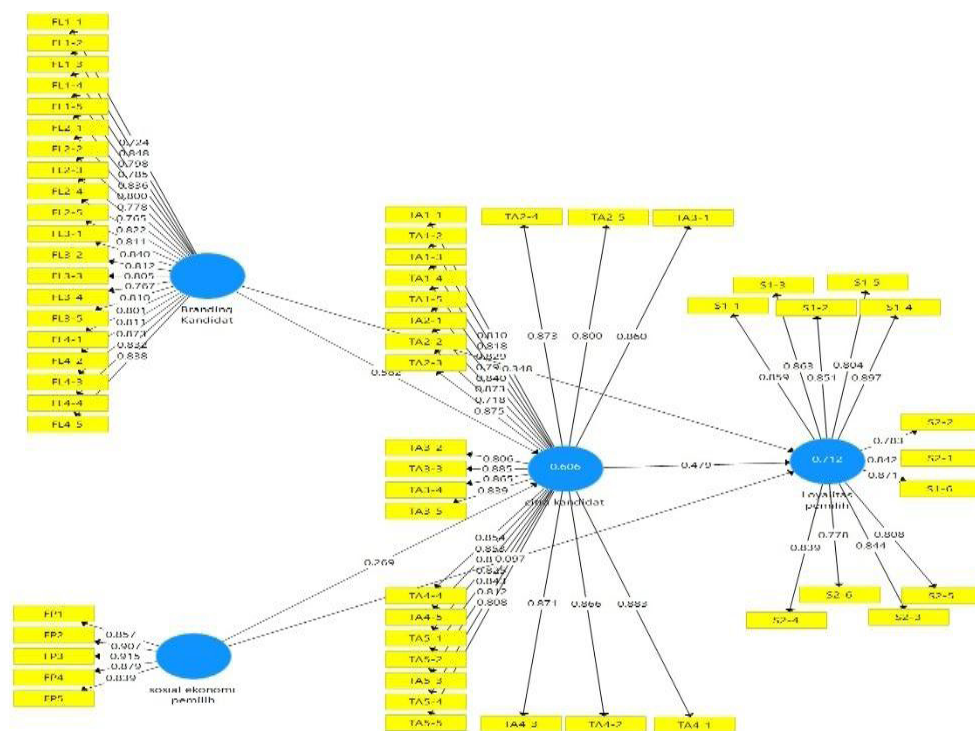


Figure 1. Outer model analysis

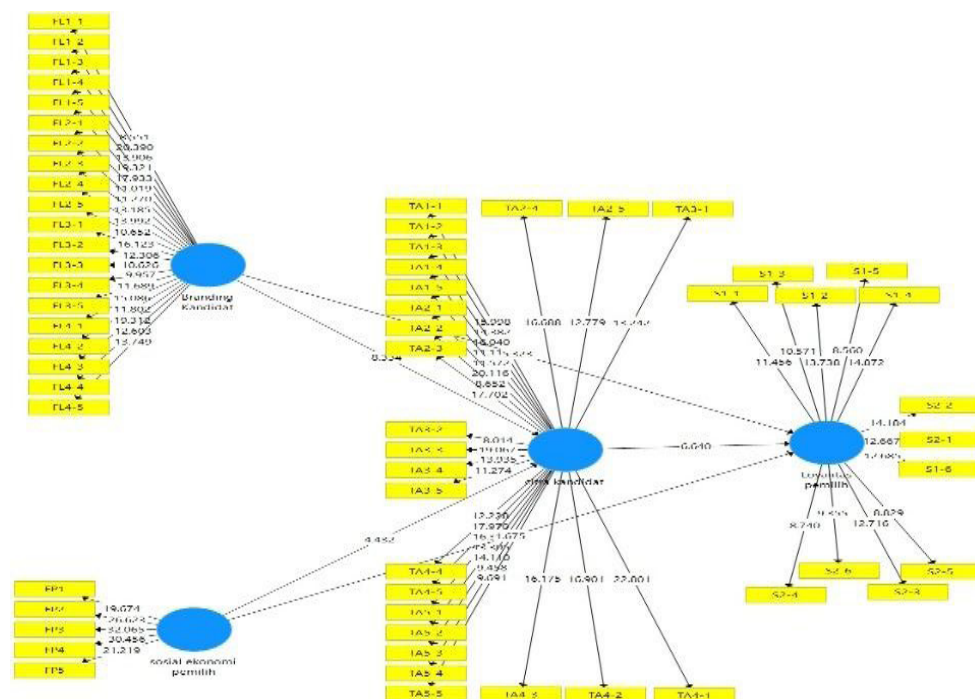


Figure 2. Inner model analysis

Table 4. Hypothesis test

| | Original Sample (O) | Sample Mean (M) | Standard Deviation (STDEV) | T Statistics (O/STDEV) | P Values |
|--|------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------|
| H1: candidate branding -> voter loyalty | 0,348 | 0,338 | 0,065 | 5,323 | 0,000 |
| H2: election socio-economics -> voter loyalty | 0,097 | 0,090 | 0,058 | 1,675 | 0,095 |
| H3: candidate branding -> candidate image | 0,582 | 0,568 | 0,070 | 8,334 | 0,000 |
| H4: election socio-economics -> candidate image | 0,269 | 0,256 | 0,061 | 4,432 | 0,000 |
| H5: candidate image -> voter loyalty | 0,479 | 0,472 | 0,072 | 6,640 | 0,000 |
| H6: candidate branding -> candidate image -> voter loyalty | 0,279 | 0,270 | 0,060 | 4,637 | 0,000 |
| H7: election socio-economics -> candidate image -> voter loyalty | 0,129 | 0,121 | 0,034 | 3,841 | 0,000 |
| Sources: data analysis SEM-PLs 2025 | | | | | |

Table 4 hypothesis testing the findings presented in Table 4 reveal the dynamics of how voter perceptions are shaped in the context of the Regional Election in Palangka Raya City. The most striking result is the direct effect of candidate branding on voter loyalty. With an original sample value of 0,348, a t-statistic of 5,232, and a p-value of 0,000, this indicates that a well-crafted branding strategy can directly generate political loyalty—without necessarily being filtered through the rational evaluation of work programs. In other words, the symbolic appeal and public image projected by the candidate become decisive factors in winning voters' hearts. This supports the argument that modern politics has increasingly shifted toward being communicative and emotionally driven.

Interestingly, the socio-economic background of voters was found to have no statistically significant effect on loyalty—an outcome that contrasts with many previous studies which often assume that socio-economic status has a direct impact on political attitudes. In Palangka Raya's context, voter loyalty appears to be less about economic conditions and more about the symbolic interpretation of the candidate's persona.

This is further supported by the strong correlation between candidate branding and candidate image. The results show a very high level of statistical significance—branding has been proven to effectively shape a strong candidate image in the minds of voters. This image, in turn, plays a crucial role as an intervening variable. The analysis shows that the influence of candidate image on voter loyalty is highly significant. Therefore, the power of branding does not operate in a linear fashion but works through the construction of voter perceptions and emotional connections to the candidate.

Notably, the mediation model tested in this study offers important scientific novelty. Candidate branding, when mediated by candidate image, has an indirect but significant effect on loyalty. This confirms that candidate image is the central linking factor in building voter loyalty—both from the perspective of campaign strategy (branding) and voter characteristics (socio-economic factors). The novelty of this finding lies in its demonstration that, in a local political context such as Palangka Raya, candidate image acts as a strategic mediator that activates the influence of other variables on voter loyalty.

DISCUSSION

The influence of candidate branding on voter loyalty

The results of the study indicate that candidate branding has a positive and significant influence on voter loyalty in the context of regional elections in Palangka Raya City. This confirms that the stronger and more positive the political brand image established by a candidate, the higher the level of voter loyalty toward that candidate. This finding aligns with the evolution of modern political communication strategies, which emphasize the importance of personal image and message consistency in building emotional connections between candidates and the electorate.⁽³⁴⁾

Theoretically, these findings can be explained through the lens of Brand Equity Theory, which posits that a strong brand not only offers functional value but also fosters an emotional connection with consumers. In the political context, voters—as political consumers—are influenced by their perceptions of a candidate's attributes, such as name, symbol, communication style, track record, and the personal narrative constructed during the campaign. When these elements are consistently crafted to build a strong candidate brand personality, they foster a sense of familiarity, trust, and ultimately, loyalty.⁽³⁵⁾

This finding is reinforced by previous research stating that political branding is a very effective strategy in strengthening perceptions and increasing voter engagement.^(36,37) Furthermore, other studies emphasize that

voters are not always rational in making their choices; rather, they are influenced by impressions shaped through media exposure and the candidate's self-image. In the local context, research on the Central Java regional elections (Pilkada) indicates that political branding which highlights values such as community closeness, religious identity, and personal integrity can foster emotional loyalty, not merely rational preference.⁽³⁸⁾

This phenomenon is also evident in the dynamics of the Palangka Raya City Regional Election. Amid the diverse social characteristics of voters, candidate branding serves as a tool for aligning perceptions that can transcend demographic and ideological boundaries. Thus, this study provides empirical confirmation that candidate branding is not merely a superficial element of a political campaign, but a strategic approach that directly influences voter decisions and loyalty.⁽³⁹⁾

The socio-economic influence of voters on voter loyalty

The socio-economic influence of voters on political loyalty is a classic issue in the study of voter behavior, and it has long been a subject of interest in political science and sociology. According to the structural socio-political approach, a person's socio-economic status—including education, income, and type of employment—plays a significant role in shaping political awareness and participatory orientation. This theory posits that individuals from higher social classes tend to have more stable political preferences and are generally more loyal to certain parties or candidates, as they have better access to information and a higher level of political engagement. In contrast, voters with lower socio-economic status are assumed to be more prone to shifting their political support due to limited rationality and lower levels of political literacy.⁽⁴⁰⁾

However, in the context of local contestation such as the Regional Election in Palangka Raya City, research findings show that the socio-economic influence of voters is weak or not directly significant.^(41,42) This strengthens contemporary studies such as those conducted by previous researchers which show that political identity and collective emotions dominate the behavior of modern voters more than socio-economic background. Even in an increasingly digitalized society, access to information and political campaigns is becoming more evenly distributed, making social class differences no longer a dominant factor in determining political loyalty. Thus, loyalty is no longer solely determined by socio-economic status, but by how voters assess candidate figures based on symbolic perceptions and personal connections.⁽⁴³⁾

Other studies in Indonesia also highlight that the relationship between socio-economic factors and voter loyalty tends to be contextual, influenced by campaign narratives, candidates' cultural proximity, and local political dynamics. In regions with diverse community structures—such as Palangka Raya City, which consists of various ethnic and economic groups—voter solidarity often does not align with socio-economic backgrounds. Instead, it is shaped more by interpersonal connections and perceptions of a candidate's personality. Therefore, the findings of this study contribute new insights to the existing literature, suggesting that in the context of personalistic and emotionally driven regional elections, socio-economic variables tend to operate indirectly—primarily through the mediation of candidate image perceptions—rather than serving as direct predictors of voter loyalty.⁽⁴⁴⁾

The influence of candidate branding on candidate image

Based on the results of the H3 hypothesis test, the original sample value was 0,582, with a t-statistic of 8,334 and a p-value of 0,000. These results indicate that candidate branding has a significant effect on the candidate's image. This means that the stronger and more consistent the candidate's branding efforts, the more positive the image formed in the minds of voters. Effective branding encompasses elements such as a clear vision and mission, engaging public communication, and memorable symbolic visualizations. Together, these components shape public perceptions of the candidate's integrity, capability, and appeal.⁽⁴⁵⁾

This finding reinforces the theory of brand equity, which asserts that the strength of a brand—including in the political context—is shaped by perceptions, associations, and experiences developed through strategic communication and imaging. In politics, effective candidate branding generates positive perceptions in the minds of voters about a candidate's personality, integrity, and capabilities, thereby creating a strong and credible image.^(46,47) This study is also in line with previous studies which explain that consistent political imaging efforts through visual elements, campaign messages, and candidate communication styles significantly shape and strengthen the candidate's image in the eyes of the public.⁽⁴⁸⁾

The socio-economic influence of voters on candidate image

The hypothesis results indicate that voters' economic conditions have a significant impact on candidates' image. This suggests that voters' socio-economic backgrounds—such as their level of education, income, and employment status—affect how they perceive and form opinions about candidates. This finding aligns with the voting behavior model, which emphasizes that individuals' social characteristics strongly influence their political orientation and their perceptions of public figures. Voters from different socio-economic classes may hold varying standards of evaluation, expectations, and preferences for political information, which in turn shape how they assess a candidate's credibility and competence.⁽⁴⁹⁾

This study also aligns with the notion that individuals with higher socio-economic backgrounds tend to be more critical and rational in evaluating a candidate's image, whereas other groups are more responsive to symbolic and emotional approaches in political communication. Therefore, candidate image-building strategies must take social segmentation into account to create an image that is relevant to and accepted by various segments of society.⁽⁵⁰⁾

The influence of candidate image on voter loyalty

The results of the study show that candidate image has a strong and significant influence on voter loyalty. This indicates that the more positive the image projected by a candidate, the more likely voters are to remain loyal and not easily shift their support. In the dynamic realm of politics, image is not merely about outward appearance, but reflects the candidate's integrity, competence, and core values.^(51,52) Political marketing theory emphasizes that political image is an important instrument in forming emotional attachment to voters.⁽⁵³⁾

This study confirms the findings of previous research which states that voters tend to make decisions based on their perceptions of the character and credibility of the candidate, not solely on the programs offered.

The influence of candidate branding on voter loyalty through candidate image

The results of the study show that candidate branding can shape voter loyalty indirectly through the candidate's image. This indicates that strong branding alone does not necessarily lead to voter loyalty. However, when branding successfully builds a positive image, it fosters voter trust and loyalty. In other words, branding serves as the entry point, while the image becomes the core space where voters feel a sense of comfort and trust.⁽³⁴⁾

The theory of brand resonance and image building in politics suggests that voters are more emotionally attached when they see consistency between what a candidate campaigns for and who the candidate actually is.^(41,54) Previous studies have shown that voters build loyalty not just from promises, but from long-term perceptions of the personality and values displayed by the candidate.^(52,55) So, in this context, image acts as an emotional bridge that transforms initial impressions of branding into real commitments in the form of loyalty.⁽³⁸⁾

The socio-economic influence of voters on voter loyalty through candidate image

The results of the study indicate that the socio-economic influence of voters on voter loyalty occurs indirectly through the candidate's image, signifying a significant relationship. This is noteworthy, as the socio-economic background alone is not strong enough to directly shape loyalty. However, when the candidate's image is perceived positively by voters from diverse social backgrounds, a sense of attachment and loyalty emerges.^(46,56) Simply put, the candidate's image acts as a mirror for voters from various social classes to see the candidate through that mirror, and when what they see reflects their hopes and values, then loyalty grows.⁽³⁹⁾

The two-step flow of communication theory supports this notion—that information or perceptions received by voters do not come directly, but are instead filtered through interpretation. In this context, the candidate's image serves as the primary filter. Previous studies have shown that voters from different economic classes tend to absorb and evaluate political information in different ways. However, a strong and relevant candidate image has the power to unify these varied perceptions.^(57,58) Thus, political strategies that want to reach across social classes must make the candidate's image a bridge that is able to connect voter expectations with the candidate's character, so that loyalty is formed naturally and sustainably.⁽⁴⁰⁾

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the analysis results, the study reveals several key findings. Candidate branding has a significant influence on voter loyalty, indicating that how a candidate presents and positions themselves can directly shape voters' commitment. In contrast, voters' socio-economic conditions do not have a direct significant effect on their loyalty to a candidate. However, candidate branding significantly influences the candidate's image, and voters' socio-economic conditions also have a notable effect on shaping that image. Furthermore, the candidate's image itself has a significant impact on voter loyalty, acting as a crucial mediator in the relationship between both candidate branding and socio-economic factors and voter loyalty. These findings suggest that candidate branding can influence voter loyalty indirectly through the enhancement of the candidate's image. Similarly, the socio-economic conditions of voters can also affect loyalty when mediated by a strong and favourable candidate image.

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