

From Electoral Participation Toward Political Awareness: A Critical Analysis of First-Time Voters in the 2024 General Election in Banda Aceh

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the political participation of first-time voters in the 2024 General Election in Banda Aceh, focusing on the conceptual gap between electoral participation and political awareness. The principal research gap lies in the tendency of voter-participation studies to treat turnout at polling stations (TPS) as a singular proxy for democratic quality, while the dimension of political awareness has received insufficient scholarly attention in the Acehnese context. The study adopts a qualitative approach using library research and document analysis. Secondary data were drawn from academic literature, official documents issued by electoral management bodies, statistical data, survey reports, and verified news coverage. The findings indicate that voter participation in Banda Aceh increased from 78.67 percent in the 2019 General Election to approximately 81 to 81.48 percent in the 2024 General Election. However, this procedural increase does not necessarily indicate a corresponding improvement in the political awareness of first-time voters. Their political preferences are formed through a hybrid process involving interactions among social media, family, educational institutions, peers, religious figures, and gampong-based social ecosystems. The novelty of this study lies in its proposed multi-stage analytical model of transformation from electoral participation to political awareness, which incorporates Aceh's local socio-cultural context. The study contributes theoretically to the development of the concept of substantive political participation and, at the practical level, offers recommendations for voter-education reform that is contextual, digitally oriented, and grounded in local social ecosystems.

Keywords: Banda Aceh; political awareness; electoral participation; first-time voters; political socialization

INTRODUCTION

In a democratic state, a general election is not merely a mechanism for the circulation of political power; it also provides an arena in which citizens form political identities and in which the substantive quality of democracy is tested (Norris, 2011; Dahl, 2020). In political science, high voter participation is frequently treated as an indicator of successful electoral democracy. A number of scholars, however, have challenged this assumption, arguing that citizens' presence at polling stations (TPS), the most visible form of electoral participation, cannot automatically be interpreted as evidence of mature political awareness (Almond & Verba, 2016; Theocharis & van Deth, 2017). This argument becomes particularly salient when the analysis focuses on first-time voters entering the formal political arena for the first time.

In the context of Indonesia's 2024 General Election, the study of first-time voters assumes particular urgency. The General Elections Commission of the Republic of Indonesia (KPU RI) recorded that approximately 55 percent of voters in the 2024 election came from younger generations, including Generation Z and millennials (Setiawan & Djafar, 2023). This numerical predominance positions young voters as an important determinant of the trajectory of electoral democracy, while simultaneously raising a critical question: does the large

number of young voters correspond to an equally deep level of political awareness? First-time voters, as a subgroup of young citizens exercising their voting rights for the first time, are especially susceptible to the formation of shallow political preferences under the influence of social media, pressures from their social environment, and limited political experience (Pramesti et al., 2025).

Banda Aceh provides both a representative and distinctive local setting in which to examine this problem. As the capital of Aceh Province, Banda Aceh is a center of government, education, religious activity, and regional political dynamics within a province that enjoys a special constitutional status. The Banda Aceh Independent Election Commission (Komisi Independen Pemilihan, KIP) established a Permanent Voter List (Daftar Pemilih Tetap, DPT) of 169,146 voters for the 2024 General Election, distributed across 618 polling stations in 90 gampong. Empirical data indicate that voter turnout in Banda Aceh in the 2024 General Election reached approximately 81 to 81.48 percent, an increase from 78.67 percent in the 2019 General Election (Nisa et al., 2025). Nevertheless, this figure remained below the Aceh provincial average of 87.01 percent in the 2024 presidential and vice-presidential election, a paradox that raises questions about the relationship among urban status, access to information, and the quality of political participation.

Previous studies provide an important foundation but leave a significant research gap. Setiawan and Djafar (2023) emphasize the strategic significance of young voters in the 2024 General Election while identifying the risk that they may be instrumentalized merely as objects of electoral competition. Pramesti et al. (2025) examine democratic literacy among first-time voters in relation to social-media consumption, whereas Nisa et al. (2025) focus on the communication strategy of the Banda Aceh KIP in educating first-time voters. None of these three studies explicitly asks how electoral participation can be understood as a process of transformation toward political awareness within Aceh's local socio-cultural context. This gap provides the epistemological basis for the present study.

Against this background, the central scholarly problem addressed in this study is the gap between rising electoral participation in Banda Aceh and the absence of any guarantee that the political awareness of first-time voters has improved. The main research question is: how can the political participation of first-time voters in Banda Aceh's 2024 General Election be understood as a process of transformation from electoral participation toward political awareness? This question is elaborated through four sub-questions: (1) what forms did the electoral participation of first-time voters take in Banda Aceh during the 2024 General Election? (2) what factors shape the political preferences of first-time voters? (3) how do social media, family, formal education, and local social ecosystems contribute to the development of political awareness among first-time voters? and (4) to what extent can increased electoral participation serve as an indicator of the quality of local democracy?

This study aims to critically analyze the political participation of first-time voters in Banda Aceh during the 2024 General Election, identify the factors shaping their political preferences and awareness, and evaluate the challenges of voter education in Aceh's urban social context. The novelty of the study lies in two contributions. First, it proposes a multi-stage analytical model, moving from electoral presence to political understanding, autonomy of choice, and post-election engagement, as a framework for evaluating the quality of local democracy. Second, it integrates political-socialization and democratic-literacy perspectives in analyzing first-time voter participation in Aceh, a region with distinctive socio-political characteristics within Indonesia's constitutional system.

The study of political participation has developed significantly as definitions and forms of citizen engagement have expanded. In the classical tradition, Verba et al. (1996) define political participation as activities undertaken by citizens to influence the selection of public officials and government policy. Theocharis and van Deth (2017) subsequently broaden this definition, demonstrating that in the digital era political participation encompasses a much wider spectrum, ranging from voting in elections and participating in campaigns to online political discussion, digital petitions, and social-media-based activism. This conceptual expansion is important because it creates analytical space for reconsidering the boundary between formal and informal participation.

Within electoral democracy, electoral participation remains the most readily measurable form of engagement and the indicator most frequently used to assess democratic success. Norris (2011) argues that high voter turnout can reflect democratic legitimacy, while cautioning that citizens who vote are not necessarily critical citizens capable of critically evaluating the performance of political institutions. Dahl (2020), through the framework of polyarchy, similarly emphasizes that substantive democracy requires not only free and fair electoral mechanisms but also citizens with the capacity to participate meaningfully. This tension between electoral participation as a procedural indicator and political awareness as a substantive measure constitutes a central debate in the contemporary literature.

Empirical research in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, reveals a similar pattern. In their longitudinal study of voting behavior in Indonesia since democratization, Mujani et al. (2018) find that Indonesian voters' choices are not always determined by rational evaluations of policy but are frequently influenced by party identification, candidate personalities, social networks, and emotional attachments. This finding is reinforced by a recent study in Bandung that identifies five types of electoral decision-making: closed, semi-open, open, mixed, and coattail-effect-based, demonstrating the prominence of decisions based on social heuristics rather than programmatic evaluation (Kartini DS, Adinadya Putra MD and Zainudin A, 2025). This context is relevant to understanding first-time voters, who enter the political arena without prior electoral experience and therefore tend to rely on simpler heuristics when making political choices.

First-time voters constitute a distinctive category in the study of voting behavior. They are at an early stage in the formation of political orientations, a process described in the literature as political socialization-during which political values, attitudes, and preferences begin to take shape but have not yet fully consolidated (Hyman, 1959; Almond & Verba, 2016). In the Indonesian context, Hasyim and Azkia (2023) argue that first-time voters require political education that goes beyond explaining the technical procedures of elections to develop an understanding of political rights, the functions of state institutions, and the role of citizens in a democracy. Meanwhile, Nofriansyah and Aryansah (2026) show that young voters in the regional head elections in Lubuklinggau displayed high numerical participation, although their political orientations had not yet become fully programmatic.

The vulnerability of first-time voters to external influences has been documented across a range of contexts. In their study of youth political participation in Kazakhstan, Baizhumakzy et al. (2025) find that although young people with strong democratic values tend to participate in political processes, they prefer to operate within existing institutional frameworks rather than engage in transformative activism. This finding is relevant to the proposition that first-time voters' electoral participation may reflect conformity with prevailing social norms rather than autonomous political awareness. In Indonesia, Masi et al. (2025) show that the political awareness of first-time student voters can be assessed through four indicators: political knowledge, understanding, attitudes, and behavior. Voters with a high level of awareness not only understand voting procedures but are also capable of evaluating candidates and critically assessing political information.

Research on first-time voters in Indonesia must also take account of their specific generational context. First-time voters in the 2024 General Election are part of Generation Z, a cohort that has grown up within an intensive, visual, and interactive digital ecosystem. Kamil and Indah (2022) emphasize the importance of political communication in voter education that is adaptive to the characteristics of this generation. Wulandari and Kurniawan (2024) argue that education for first-time voters should be situated within a broader framework than election socialization alone; it should be understood as an effort toward sustained political empowerment.

The role of social media in political participation and the formation of voter preferences has become one of the most productive themes in contemporary political science. In their seminal study of social media and fake news in the 2016 United States election, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) show that exposure to false content on social media can affect voter perceptions and choices. Although the context differs, the finding is relevant to understanding comparable risks in Indonesian elections, where voter digital literacy, particularly among first-time voters, remains a challenge. Padoma and Rahmawati (2024) specifically examine social-media use and political participation among first-time voters in Indonesia's 2024 General Election, finding that digital platforms function effectively as channels of political participation in terms of access to information but do not necessarily promote deeper understanding.

Pramesti et al. (2025) offer a more critical elaboration by showing that democratic literacy among first-time voters in the 2024 General Election cannot be separated from their patterns of social-media consumption. First-time voters who are active on Instagram, X (Twitter), and TikTok have extensive access to political information, but the quality of their understanding depends on critical-literacy skills that do not automatically develop through digital-content consumption. Suryawijaya et al. (2025) reinforce this argument by showing that social media can intensify polarization and the formation of echo chambers among younger generations.

A study of voting behavior in Indonesia's 2024 election conducted in Bandung found that 62 percent of Generation Z voters relied on TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube as their principal sources of political information, confirming the intensity of digital mediation in the formation of young voters' preferences (Kartini DS, Adinadya Putra MD and Zainudin A, 2025). The same study, however, also identifies algorithmic filter bubbles that tend to reinforce pre-existing preferences rather than broaden voters' political perspectives, thereby potentially weakening the critical-analytical capacities of first-time voters.

Political-socialization scholarship provides an important framework for understanding how political orientations are formed over the course of individual development. Political socialization theory (Hyman, 1959; Almond & Verba, 2016) identifies family, schools, peer groups, and the media as principal agents of socialization that shape an individual's political values and attitudes. For first-time voters, these agents operate simultaneously and sometimes in contradictory ways in shaping political preferences and awareness.

Baizhumakzy et al. (2025) demonstrate that political culture has a significant influence on youth political participation, with civic responsibility strengthening the relationship between political culture and democratic engagement. This finding is relevant to Aceh, where gampong-based community political culture and the influence of religious figures continue to play important roles in the political socialization of first-time voters. In their study of the Banda Aceh KIP's communication strategy, Nisa et al. (2025) find that voter education for first-time voters remains at the level of single-loop learning and continues to draw substantially on the 2019 election paradigm. This indicates an adaptation gap between voter-education strategies and the needs of first-time voters in the 2024 General Election.

Conceptually, the literature distinguishes voter education in its technical-procedural sense (voter information) from political education in its substantive sense. Hasyim and Azkia (2023) argue that effective political education must move beyond procedural matters to foster citizens' critical awareness. In post-democratization Indonesia, Mujani et al. (2018) emphasize that democratic quality depends not only on institutional design but also on citizens' capacity to function as critical democrats. This proposition constitutes a central argument of the present study.

The preceding literature review reveals three interrelated research gaps that provide a strong rationale for this study. First, although scholarship on young voter participation in Indonesia has expanded, no study has explicitly analyzed the relationship between electoral participation and political awareness in Aceh's local context while incorporating the distinctive social structure of gampong-based communities and local political parties. Second, existing studies tend to focus on a single factor, such as social media, the communication strategies of electoral management bodies, or generational characteristics, without developing an analytical model that integrates these factors into a systematic framework. Third, the transformation from electoral participation to political awareness as a multi-stage process has not been adequately developed in the Indonesian academic literature. This study seeks to address these three gaps through a more comprehensive and locally contextualized critical analysis.

This study employs political socialization theory as its principal theoretical framework. Initially developed by Hyman (1959) and subsequently elaborated by Almond and Verba (2016), the theory explains how individuals develop political orientations, values, attitudes, and behavior through interaction with multiple agents of socialization throughout their lives. It is particularly relevant to first-time voters because they are situated at an early stage of political-orientation formation, a critical period that can shape long-term patterns of political participation.



Almond and Verba (2016) identify three types of political culture: parochial, subject, and participant, each reflecting different levels of citizen awareness and engagement. A parochial orientation is characterized by minimal awareness of the political system; a subject orientation by awareness without active involvement; and a participant orientation by fuller awareness and active participation. In this study, Almond and Verba's typology is used to locate first-time voters in Banda Aceh along a spectrum of political culture: whether they are moving from a subject toward a participant orientation, or remain confined to procedural participation that does not reflect substantive awareness.

In addition, the study integrates the political-socialization perspective with the concept of substantive participation. Verba et al. (1996) distinguish mobilized participation, defined as participation encouraged by external actors such as political parties, public figures, or electoral management bodies, from voluntary participation arising from citizens' own initiative and awareness. This distinction is essential for critically interpreting the increase in Banda Aceh's turnout: does the increase reflect greater political awareness, or is it primarily the outcome of electoral mobilization?

In this study, electoral participation is defined as citizens' formal involvement in electoral mechanisms, particularly the exercise of the right to vote (Budiardjo, 2008). Electoral participation is procedural in the sense that it can be quantitatively measured through voter-turnout figures and does not inherently capture dimensions of quality. By contrast, substantive political participation refers to engagement grounded in adequate political knowledge, the capacity to assess information critically, autonomy in making electoral choices, and awareness of the consequences of political decisions (Dahl, 2020; Norris, 2011).

The distinction between procedural and substantive participation forms the central analytical axis of this study. Voters who participate procedurally attend polling stations and cast their ballots but may do so without an adequate understanding of the candidates, the institutions being elected, or the relevance of elections to public life. By contrast, substantively participating voters not only cast a ballot but also understand the reasons for their choices, are able to evaluate political programs, and are willing to remain engaged in monitoring political processes after the election.

Political awareness (or political consciousness) is a multidimensional concept comprising at least four components: (a) political knowledge: an understanding of political systems and institutions; (b) democratic understanding: the internalization of democratic values and citizenship rights; (c) critical attitudes: the ability to evaluate information, recognize disinformation, and think analytically about public issues; and (d) autonomy of choice: the capacity to determine political preferences on the basis of reasoned judgment rather than social pressure or external mobilization alone (Habermas et al., 1989; Masi et al., 2025).

Within this analytical framework, political awareness functions as an evaluative variable for assessing the quality of first-time voters' electoral participation. Drawing on Pramesti et al. (2025), democratic literacy, as an operational manifestation of political awareness, encourages first-time voters not merely to consume political information passively but also to analyze issues, verify campaign messages, scrutinize policies, and participate actively in the public sphere.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative approach using a library-research design and document analysis. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research does not seek to measure the magnitude of statistical effects; rather, it aims to develop an interpretive-critical understanding of how the political participation of first-time voters in Banda Aceh's 2024 General Election can be conceptualized as a process of transformation toward political awareness (Miles et al., 2014; Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Library research and document analysis were selected because they are consistent with the study's analytical-conceptual objective: to develop theoretical arguments from available secondary data, connect empirical evidence with the conceptual framework, and interpret the meaning underlying voter-turnout figures. This

design is acknowledged to have limitations in relation to the validity associated with primary data; nevertheless, it remains appropriate as a scholarly contribution because it can generate an analytical framework that may serve as a foundation for subsequent field research (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

The research setting is Banda Aceh, Aceh Province. The location was selected on four grounds. First, Banda Aceh has distinctive socio-political characteristics as Aceh's center of government, education, and religious activity. Second, comparable data are available for the 2019 and 2024 General Elections, enabling analysis of changes in participation. Third, the existence of local political parties and Aceh's special status creates a political context distinct from that of other Indonesian provinces. Fourth, sufficient previous research on Banda Aceh exists to permit the formulation of a specific research gap. The study focuses on the political participation of first-time voters in the 2024 General Election, particularly the relationship between electoral participation and political awareness within Aceh's local socio-cultural context.

The study draws on two principal categories of data sources. First, official documentary sources include: (a) Permanent Voter List (DPT) data and voter-turnout figures for the 2019 and 2024 General Elections from the Banda Aceh KIP; (b) election-administration reports issued by KPU RI, the Aceh KIP, and the Banda Aceh KIP; (c) demographic and social statistics for Banda Aceh; and (d) reports and survey findings concerning young voters in Indonesia. Second, academic sources comprise scholarly journal articles indexed or discoverable through Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and Semantic Scholar on political participation, first-time voters, political awareness, democratic literacy, social media, and voter education. In addition, reports from credible news media containing data on voter participation in Banda Aceh in the 2019 and 2024 elections are used as supporting empirical sources.

Data were collected purposively through library research and document analysis. Sources were selected according to four criteria: (a) relevance to the study's themes: political participation, first-time voters, political awareness, and voter education; (b) relevance to the 2024 General Election or to the dynamics of young voters in Indonesia; (c) for local data, relevance to Banda Aceh or Aceh Province; and (d) source credibility, including publication in reputable scholarly journals, academic books, official documents, or accountable survey reports.

Data analysis proceeded through three stages based on the qualitative analytical model of Miles et al. (2014). The first stage was data reduction, involving the filtering and selection of information relevant to the research focus from all collected sources. The second stage was data display, in which the selected evidence was organized thematically around six principal themes: (1) electoral participation among Banda Aceh voters; (2) the characteristics of first-time voters in electoral democracy; (3) political awareness as a measure of participation quality; (4) social media and the formation of political preferences; (5) family, education, and local social ecosystems; and (6) voter education in Banda Aceh. The third stage involved interpretive-critical conclusion drawing, in which the relationship between electoral participation and political awareness was analyzed in relation to the theoretical framework developed in the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Empirical data indicate that voter turnout in Banda Aceh in the 2024 General Election ranged from approximately 81 to 81.48 percent, up from 78.67 percent in the 2019 General Election. In absolute terms, this represents approximately 137,000 voters participating in the 2024 General Election from a Permanent Voter List (DPT) of 169,146 people (Nisa et al., 2025). The increase of 2.81 percentage points constitutes an important procedural achievement because it indicates a strengthening of formal electoral engagement among Banda Aceh's electorate.

When these figures are interpreted comparatively, however, they raise significant critical questions. First, Banda Aceh's voter turnout in the 2024 General Election remained below the Aceh provincial average of 87.01 percent for the presidential and vice-presidential election. Although the provincial capital is a center of information access, education, and government, its turnout did not exceed the provincial average. This

condition challenges the assumption that access to information and urban status are positively and causally related to the level and quality of political participation.

Second, an increase in turnout does not in itself answer the question of the quality of political understanding underlying the act of voting. As Norris (2011) emphasizes, voter-turnout figures tell us that citizens exercise their right to vote, but they do not explain why citizens vote or the depth of political understanding accompanying that act. Setiawan and Djafar (2023) reinforce this argument by warning that increased participation among young voters may simply reflect successful electoral mobilization rather than an improvement in the substantive quality of democracy.

Analytically, the increase in electoral participation in Banda Aceh should therefore be interpreted through two complementary dimensions: a procedural dimension, reflecting the technical and administrative success of election administration, and a substantive dimension, asking whether this procedural achievement has been accompanied by stronger political awareness among voters, particularly first-time voters. This study argues that the second dimension should become the primary concern when evaluating the quality of local democracy in Banda Aceh.

Within the framework of electoral democracy, the participation of first-time voters in Banda Aceh remains predominantly procedural. First-time voters attend polling stations and exercise their right to vote, a form of engagement that formally meets the criteria of democratic participation. Yet attendance at a polling station does not inherently demonstrate adequate political understanding, autonomy of choice, or the capacity to evaluate candidates and their political programs (Norris, 2011; Dahl, 2020).

The critique of this reduction of participation to its procedural dimension can be developed through at least four points. First, measuring electoral success solely through turnout risks reducing voter education to an agenda of mass mobilization rather than the political empowerment of citizens. When success is equated with attendance at polling stations, first-time voters risk being positioned as political objects rather than democratic subjects who require the capacity for critical thought (Setiawan & Djafar, 2023). Second, a substantial gap exists between current voter-education strategies and the specific characteristics of first-time voters in the 2024 General Election. Nisa et al. (2025) show that the educational strategy of the Banda Aceh KIP continues to rely on the paradigm of the 2019 election and has not demonstrated sufficient innovation to address first-time voters living within an intensive digital ecosystem.

Third, available election data remain dominated by quantitative indicators: the size of the DPT, the number of polling stations, and turnout percentages, without evaluative instruments capable of measuring the quality of voters' political understanding. The absence of such instruments constitutes a structural obstacle to systematic efforts to improve the quality of local democracy. Fourth, existing voter education has not sufficiently connected elections with concrete issues relevant to the lives of first-time voters in Banda Aceh. Cross-contextual research indicates that meaningful political engagement emerges when citizens can perceive a direct relationship between electoral choices and policy issues affecting their lives (Mujani et al., 2018; Kartini DS, Adinadya Putra MD and Zainudin A, 2025).

Drawing on the typology of electoral decision-making identified in a study of Indonesian voting behavior in 2024 (Kartini DS, Adinadya Putra MD and Zainudin A, 2025), there are strong indications that many first-time voters, particularly those casting a ballot for the first time, tend to adopt a closed decision-making pattern that relies on social heuristics such as family loyalty, popular figures, or environmental influence rather than analytical programmatic evaluation. This pattern is consistent with the proposition that first-time voters are still at an early stage in the formation of political orientations (Almond & Verba, 2016).

One of the substantive findings of this study is that the political preferences of first-time voters in Banda Aceh are not shaped by a single factor. Rather, they emerge from dynamic interactions among three overlapping ecosystems: the digital ecosystem, the institutional ecosystem, and the local socio-cultural ecosystem.

Social media, particularly TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, X, and WhatsApp, have become the principal channels through which first-time voters access political information (Pramesti et al., 2025). These platforms



offer advantages in terms of the speed of information dissemination, accessibility, and their capacity to create emotional connections between voters and candidates. However, as identified by Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) and confirmed in the Indonesian context by Padoma and Rahmawati (2024), social media also generate significant risks: the reduction of politics to images and emotional narratives, the dissemination of disinformation, the formation of echo chambers that weaken critical evaluation, and the development of shallow preferences based on popularity rather than the programmatic quality of candidates.

In Banda Aceh specifically, the role of social media does not operate in isolation but interacts with other agents of socialization. Political information received by first-time voters through social media is validated, reinforced, or contested through family conversations, peer discussions, sermons or guidance from religious figures, and the dynamics of gampong communities. Political preference formation is therefore hybrid in character, emerging from an ongoing dialogue between digital spaces and traditional social spaces (Nisa et al., 2025).

Family is the primary agent of political socialization in political-socialization theory (Hyman, 1959; Almond & Verba, 2016). For first-time voters, the family is not only a source of initial political values and orientations but can also directly shape electoral choice, either explicitly through discussion and advice or implicitly through the political climate of the household transmitted to younger family members. Setiawan and Djafar (2023) note that social factors such as family and community remain integral to the formation of young voters' political orientations even in a digital era that appears to dominate political-information consumption.

Educational institutions, particularly schools and universities, have considerable potential as spaces for cultivating critical and substantive political awareness. As Aceh's educational center, with a number of universities and secondary schools, Banda Aceh possesses significant institutional resources for this function. Yet this potential has not been fully realized because existing civic education tends to be normative and does not sufficiently encourage critical reflection on public issues or the relevance of elections (Nisa et al., 2025). Kamil and Indah (2022) emphasize that political-communication education for first-time voters should be specifically designed to develop analytical capabilities rather than merely transmit information.

The most distinctive aspect of the Banda Aceh context is the strength of the gampong-based social ecosystem as a foundational social unit in Acehnese society. A gampong is not merely an administrative entity; it is a social space in which residents interact, build trust, discuss public issues, and obtain perspectives from locally authoritative figures. In electoral contexts, religious and community leaders can exert significant influence over the political preferences of first-time voters, partly because of the social capital and community trust they command. Aceh is also distinctive because it has local political parties that do not exist in other Indonesian provinces. Consequently, the dynamics of first-time voters' political choices in Aceh possess a locally specific dimension that requires analysis different from that applied to the national context (Nisa et al., 2025).

Peer groups also play an important role, particularly for first-time voters who are still in secondary education or are university students. Peer influence on political preferences can operate through informal discussion, the sharing of social-media content, and conformity with group opinion. Cross-contextual findings suggest that peer influence can weaken autonomy of choice when it is not accompanied by adequate critical-thinking capacity (Baizhumakzy et al., 2025).

According to the multi-stage transformation model proposed in this study, political awareness is the qualitative measure that determines whether electoral participation possesses democratic depth. In the case of first-time voters in Banda Aceh, there are indications that many remain at Stage 1 (electoral presence) and are only beginning to enter Stage 2 (political understanding), while Stage 3 (autonomy of choice) and Stage 4 (post-election engagement) remain aspirations that have not been realized evenly across the first-time voter population.

In their study of political awareness among first-time student voters, Masi et al. (2025) find that substantively aware voters not only know when and how to vote but also understand the importance of voting rights as an instrument of public policy, are able to evaluate candidates critically, and display attitudes that are less

susceptible to manipulative political narratives. These indicators can serve as benchmarks for evaluating the quality of first-time voter participation in Banda Aceh.

Pramesti et al. (2025) specifically emphasize the role of democratic literacy in encouraging first-time voters to participate in an active-critical rather than passive-reactive manner. In this context, democratic literacy includes the capacity to verify political information, analyze policy issues, recognize disinformation practices, and understand the relationship between electoral choices and policy consequences. In an environment where social media dominate first-time voters' access to political information, digital literacy becomes a prerequisite for the development of substantive political awareness (Suryawijaya et al., 2025).

Habermas et al. (1989), through the concept of the public sphere, provide a complementary perspective: political awareness develops through citizens' active participation in rational, critical, and inclusive public discourse. In Banda Aceh, such spaces of public discourse can be found in gampong forums, university discussions, digital conversations on social media, and various civil-society forums. The challenge is to ensure that these spaces genuinely function as arenas of deliberation that deepen political awareness rather than merely as settings in which pre-existing preferences are confirmed.

CONCLUSION

This study yields five principal findings. First, the increase in voter turnout in Banda Aceh from 78.67 percent in the 2019 General Election to approximately 81 to 81.48 percent in the 2024 General Election constitutes a significant procedural achievement, but it cannot be interpreted directly as an improvement in the political awareness of first-time voters. Second, Banda Aceh's position as the provincial capital and educational center does not automatically produce a quality of participation exceeding the provincial average, indicating that access to information and urban status do not have a straightforward causal relationship with the depth of political awareness. Third, the political preferences of first-time voters in Banda Aceh are shaped through hybrid interaction among three ecosystems: the digital ecosystem (social media), the institutional ecosystem (family and educational institutions), and the local socio-cultural ecosystem (gampong, religious figures, peers, and local parties). Fourth, voter education in Banda Aceh faces four strategic gaps: a paradigm gap, an adaptation gap, an ecosystem gap, and an evaluation gap. Fifth, the transformation from electoral participation to political awareness is a gradual process requiring systematic intervention through substantive, contextual, digitally oriented political education grounded in local social ecosystems.

The study's central research question asks how the political participation of first-time voters in Banda Aceh's 2024 General Election can be understood as a process of transformation from electoral participation to political awareness. It can be answered as follows. Such transformation can occur only when voting does not end with attendance at the polling station but develops into political understanding, autonomy of choice, and sustained political engagement after the election. The conditions required to support this transformation include a comprehensive political-education ecosystem that is responsive to the characteristics of digitally connected first-time voters, grounded in local issues, and inclusive of all relevant agents of socialization in Banda Aceh society.

Theoretically, this study makes three contributions. First, it proposes a multi-stage analytical model of transformation from electoral participation to political awareness that can be applied to evaluating the quality of local democracy. Second, it integrates political socialization theory with the concept of substantive participation in a single analytical framework that treats the local socio-cultural context as an important variable. Third, it identifies four strategic gaps in voter education (paradigm, adaptation, ecosystem, and evaluation gaps) that can serve as a diagnostic framework for assessing voter-education programs.

Empirically, the study contributes a critical interpretation of 2024 voter-participation data from Banda Aceh, demonstrating that turnout figures should always be read alongside indicators of the quality of political awareness. This contribution is relevant not only to Banda Aceh but also to the evaluation of local democracy in comparable settings elsewhere in Indonesia.

This study offers several practical recommendations for relevant stakeholders. The Banda Aceh KIP is encouraged to: (a) develop instruments for evaluating participation quality through post-election surveys; (b) update its digital-communication strategy to reflect the characteristics of first-time voters in the 2024 General Election; and (c) establish partnerships with schools, universities, gampong communities, religious figures, and youth organizations to build a political-education ecosystem. Educational institutions should strengthen critical, discourse-based civic education rather than normative-indoctrinative approaches. The Banda Aceh municipal government should make local issues relevant to first-time voters a central component of responsible political communication.

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