

THE GATEKEEPERS OF RURAL DEMOCRACY: RELIGIOUS AND TRADITIONAL LEADERS AS POLITICAL OPINION MAKERS

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the role of religious and traditional leaders as opinion leaders in the dynamics of rural political communication, using a case study in Sirnaresmi Village, Cisolok District, Sukabumi Regency, West Java Province (Kasepuhan Ciptagelar). This qualitative case study employed a purposive sampling technique to identify key informants, including traditional elders, religious scholars, village officials, and the local community. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation studies, which were then analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model. The results indicate that the flow of political communication in this village consistently applies the Two-Step Flow Theory mechanism, in which external political information is first filtered by opinion leaders before being disseminated to the community. The dualistic authority structure in this village does not give rise to conflict, but rather produces a convergence of complementary communication; religious leaders mobilize the masses based on moral-theological persuasion through the religious study group (Majelis Taklim), while traditional leaders use communal-cultural persuasion through traditional institutions to maintain village stability. This integrative-collective opinion leadership model has proven effective in reducing electoral polarization, countering digital disinformation, and significantly increasing voter participation. This study concludes that the effectiveness of political communication in rural areas depends heavily on the level of sociological trust in local actors, whose position remains unchallenged by the massive development of modern media.

Keywords: *Opinion Leader, Rural Political Communication, Dualistic Authority Structure, Two-Step Flow Theory, Kasepuhan.*

A. INTRODUCTION

Political dynamics at the rural level consistently exhibit unique characteristics that differentiate them from urban areas. In this era of modernization, the availability of information does not necessarily change the political behavior of rural communities instantly (Rohmawati, 2013). Rural communities tend to maintain the communal and patronage values that are deeply rooted in their daily lives. Consequently, the penetration of political messages is not always linear, but must pass through various social filters within the environment. This phenomenon confirms that political communication in rural areas has a unique and independent message exchange mechanism (Zainal, 2018).

Regulatory-wise, the strengthening of the position of villages has been guaranteed through Law Number 6 of 2014 concerning Villages. This policy grants villages broad autonomy to manage government and development affairs independently (Rauf & Maulidiah, 2015). The fiscal and political freedoms enshrined in this regulation directly increase the tension of local political contestation, both in the Village Head Election (Pilkades) and the simultaneous General Election (Pemilu). Consequently, villages are no longer merely objects of vote mobilization by political elites at the central level. They have now transformed into active, dynamic arenas for the struggle for political interests, requiring a persuasive communication approach (Situmorang, 2016).

Despite the rapid growth of digital media and social networks, the flow of political information in rural areas still faces structural and cultural barriers. These barriers include limited digital infrastructure, political literacy gaps, and a strong oral culture among villagers. People do not simply accept political information they receive from television or social media (Alfayn et al., 2022). They require a space for confirmation to validate the truth and alignment of the information they receive. This reality on the ground demonstrates a fundamental need for mediators capable of bridging global political messages into local languages (Mayasari et al., 2022).

In the rural sociological context, these mediators are strongly held by religious and traditional leaders. These two figures possess strong social, cultural, and spiritual legitimacy, positioning them as opinion leaders within the community (Ibrahim, 2022). Through an interpersonal communication approach, the advice and political views of these figures are often considered primary references by villagers. This strategic role aligns with the assumptions of the Two-Step Flow Theory. This theory states that mass media messages flow through community leaders before reaching and influencing the wider audience (Oktarina & Abdullah, 2017).

However, contemporary realities demonstrate shifts and new challenges in the role of religious and traditional leaders as opinion leaders. The commodification of religion and the politicization of tradition during electoral periods often trigger polarization at the grassroots level (Sugiana et al., 2019). Religious leaders are sometimes caught up in practical political interests that obscure their moral role. Conversely, traditional leaders often face the dilemma of maintaining traditional neutrality or leveraging their proximity to power for village development. This clash of interests has the potential to undermine public trust in their traditional authorities (Ulla, 2019).

Several previous studies have extensively examined the effectiveness of opinion leaders in increasing public political participation (Hamid et al., 2023; Lestario & Hendro, 2020). However, much of this previous literature tends to dichotomize the roles of these two actors, or focuses solely on one figure. Comprehensive studies mapping how religious and traditional leaders collaborate or compete for political influence in the same rural space are rare. This research gap needs to be filled to understand the convergence between spiritual and cultural authority in guiding citizens' political behavior.

The urgency of this research lies in the importance of remapping the structure of rural political communication amidst the onslaught of information transparency. Understanding how religious and traditional leaders operate as opinion leaders will provide a new perspective on how political consensus is built at the local level. Furthermore, this study is crucial for assessing the extent to which local values can filter the negative impacts of smear campaigns and political disinformation. The results are expected to serve as a scientific reference for academics and political practitioners in formulating communication strategies based on local wisdom.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze in-depth the role of religious and traditional leaders as opinion leaders in rural political communication. The primary focus of the research is on the information filtering mechanisms, the persuasive strategies used, and the impact of these leaders' involvement on community political preferences. Through this analysis, it is hoped that adaptive political communication patterns and models for rural communities can be revealed without disrupting the existing social order.

B. METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study method to explore in depth the role of religious and traditional figures as opinion leaders. The research location was determined purposively in Sirnaresmi Village, Cisolok District, Sukabumi Regency, West Java Province, which includes the Kasepuhan Ciptagelar customary unit area. This location was

chosen because the community is known to be very strong in maintaining the dualism of local leadership, namely high adherence to religious law as well as full loyalty to the customary order (kasepuhan) in community life and political decision-making. The selection of research informants was carried out using a purposive sampling technique, which targets key actors such as traditional elders (Abah), the Rorokan (traditional assistants), local clerics, youth leaders, and the village community as recipients of political messages. Primary data collection was carried out through participatory observation techniques on cultural activities and structured in-depth interviews to explore the patterns of filtering, interpretation, and dissemination of political information by the figures. Secondary data was obtained through documentation studies, including village administrative archives, historical records of traditional institutions, and relevant academic literature. Validity The data was tested using source triangulation and method triangulation techniques to ensure the objectivity of the findings. Furthermore, the collected data was analyzed using Miles et al.'s (2014) interactive analysis model, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification to map the rural political communication model mediated by these opinion leaders.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Dualistic Authority Structures and Two-Step Flow Mechanisms in Rural Areas

The existence of rural communities in their social conformity is inseparable from the presence of informal leaders who serve as the epicenter of citizen obedience (Silalah, 2023). In Sirnaresmi Village, the social structure is controlled by two intertwined main axes of power: religious authority and the Kasepuhan customary authority. The first axis is represented by the local kiai, ustaz, and ajengan (religious leaders), who hold sway over moral doctrine and the daily spiritual guidance of the residents. The second axis is occupied by the Abah and the Rorokan structure, which holds the mandate to safeguard ancestral heritage, customary law, and manage the agrarian system. The presence of these two forms of informal leadership creates a unique social landscape, where the wheels of society are simultaneously governed by Islamic sharia law and Sundanese customary law.

This dualistic condition directly influences the architecture and patterns of political communication that develop in this rural area. Political information originating from the superstructure, such as state institutions, political parties, and the mass media, is never directly absorbed by the grassroots community. The region's culturally isolated geography and strong oral culture have forced villagers to limit themselves to the massive penetration of outside information. Consequently, a natural selection of incoming political messages occurs, requiring intermediaries to verify the veracity of such information. This is where the strategic role of religious and traditional leaders emerges, not merely as ordinary citizens but as village gatekeepers of information (Bokau, 2002).

This phenomenon of political message filtering in Sirnaresmi Village is highly relevant to the basic assumption of Paul Lazarsfeld's Two-Step Flow Theory. This theory states that messages from the mass media or political communicators do not directly influence the wider audience but instead move through two measurable stages of transmission. The first stage occurs when macro-scale political information is adopted, understood, and selected by local opinion leaders with greater access to and interest in political issues. The second stage is marked by the process of transmitting these modified messages from opinion leaders to the wider community through interpersonal interactions (Kawengian et al., 2017). Through this mechanism, political information, initially abstract and complex, is transformed into a local narrative that is more easily understood by villagers.

In the first stage, religious and traditional leaders in Sirnaresmi Village position themselves as active observers of national and regional political dynamics. Through mobile devices, television, or partnership networks outside the village, these two groups of leaders

absorb various political discourses, from the visions and missions of regional head candidates to agricultural regulations. These leaders' active involvement in consuming political information is driven by an awareness of their moral responsibility to protect their communities from the negative impacts of external political decisions. They analyze the track records of political parties and election contestants through the lens of village interests. The cognitive processes undertaken by these opinion leaders in this first stage form a crucial foundation before political messages are domesticated and channeled to the next stage (Heryanto, 2018).

Entering the second stage, the process of transmitting information to the grassroots community is carried out through informal and cultural interpersonal communication channels. Religious leaders utilize sacred spaces such as mosque terraces after congregational prayers, Islamic boarding school guest rooms, and even during breaks in tahlilan (religious study) or monthly religious study groups. In these spaces, political conversation flows fluidly, without any sense of stiff campaign formality. Political content is discussed in a familial manner, with local *ajengan* offering moral interpretations of current issues. Through these intensive face-to-face interactions, villagers gain a clearer perspective on the prevailing political winds from figures they trust.

In parallel, traditional leaders mobilize traditional *Kasepuhan* communication channels to disseminate their political interpretations to villagers. These channels move through the traditional chain of command centered at the *Imah Gede*, then to the *Rorokan* level, ultimately reaching the community through meetings in the fields (*huma*) or during traditional rituals. Political communication fostered by traditional institutions does not prioritize complex ideological debates, but rather emphasizes obedience and togetherness. Political messages are packaged in the form of advice from elders that are emotionally and sociologically binding for all members of the traditional community. This culturally based delivery method makes political messages from traditional leaders highly penetrating and minimally rejected.

The primary strength of this two-stage mechanism in *Sirnaresmi Village* lies in the high level of trust residents have in these local opinion leaders. Rural communities tend to be suspicious of the sweet promises of outside politicians, who only visit once every five years during election season. In contrast, religious and traditional leaders are present daily in their lives, helping resolve community conflicts and leading important life rituals. This sociological closeness is what makes political interpretations from religious scholars and traditional elders considered far more valid and objective than campaign billboards or television advertisements. This social capital, in the form of absolute trust, is the primary driver of effective political communication at the grassroots level.

In addition to filtering information, the dualistic authority structure in this village also serves to balance political messages, ensuring they align with local norms. When a potentially divisive political issue enters the village, religious and traditional leaders quickly de-escalate tensions through their sermons and advice. They act as social shock absorbers, neutralizing provocative narratives from outside. If a political message is deemed contrary to the principles of village peace or violates Islamic law, these two leaders will agree to isolate the information so it does not spread to the community. This information control function ensures that electoral political contestation does not damage the bonds of friendship among villagers.

However, this dynamic does not mean turning a blind eye to the potential for differences of opinion that may arise between the religious and traditional axes. Differences in perception often arise when an external political program is deemed beneficial from a material welfare perspective (from a traditional perspective) but questionable from a moral perspective (from a religious perspective). Informal discussion spaces between leaders serve as crucial negotiation platforms for aligning perceptions before disseminating information to the wider public. The sociological maturity of leaders in *Sirnaresmi Village* means that these differing views rarely

surface as open conflict. They consistently prioritize deliberation to reach consensus (mupakat) to maintain the authority of dualistic leadership among villagers.

The existence of the Two-Step Flow in this region confirms that the modernization of information technology does not necessarily undermine traditional leadership structures in rural areas. Although some village youth now have direct access to social media platforms like TikTok or WhatsApp, they still do not ignore the role of opinion leaders (Adeni et al., 2023). Information obtained digitally is often perceived by village youth as biased, confusing, and full of falsehoods. They still need real-life figures to validate the digital narratives they receive online. Thus, digital media does not replace the role of traditional and religious leaders, but rather serves as an additional instrument that enriches the analytical material for these opinion leaders.

This dualistic authority structure ultimately gave birth to an independent cultural and political defense system for the people of Sirnaresmi Village. The village does not become a manifest object easily swayed by the short-term electoral interests of the city's political elite. Through the multi-layered filters provided by religious and traditional leaders, the village community is able to formulate its own political bargaining position with dignity. This two-stage communication flow in the village has successfully transformed the community from a mere crowd of passive voters into a selective political community based on local wisdom. This system demonstrates the extraordinary resilience of local institutions in the face of the tide of post-reform political liberalization.

Furthermore, this two-stage flow model mediated by dualistic authority provides a new theoretical contribution to the study of contemporary political communication. This model demonstrates that in the post-truth era, traditional social institutions emerge as anchors of rationality and morality for society. Charismatic and traditional authorities are able to adapt to the modern political system without losing their cultural identity. The success of this communication flow is largely determined by the leaders' consistency in maintaining their personal integrity in the eyes of their traditional constituents. As long as this integrity is maintained, the two-stage communication mechanism will remain a key pillar of political stability in rural areas.

The flow of political communication in Sirnaresmi Village is harmonious, driven by religious and traditional leaders. Both share roles in receiving, processing, and distributing political messages using existing cultural-spiritual instruments. The dualistic authority structure does not fragment the voices of the citizens but rather unites them into a strong collective consciousness. The Two-Step Flow mechanism that is running in this village proves that the effectiveness of a political message is not determined by the sophistication of the media that conveys it, but rather by the legitimacy and level of trust in the actor who conveys it at the local level.

2. Patterns of Persuasion and Convergence of Opinion Leadership

The patterns of political persuasion employed by religious leaders in Sirnaresmi Village are characterized by a strong reliance on moral doctrine and transcendental values. Local religious leaders (ulama) or ajengan (leaders) use religious platforms such as weekly religious study groups, religious study groups (masjid taklim), and sermons as their primary and effective communication channels. Political messages are not delivered through practical propaganda, but rather through theological analogies about the importance of choosing a trustworthy and just leader. This approach taps into the emotional and spiritual aspects of the villagers, so that the messages are no longer viewed as secular political instructions but as part of a religious moral obligation. Through polite rhetoric based on religious texts, religious leaders successfully construct a definition of the ideal leader in the minds of the community.

Tactically, religious leaders leverage the emotional closeness fostered through teacher-student relationships within the Islamic boarding school system or local councils to strengthen their influence. This interpersonal closeness allows for intense two-way dialogue outside of formal religious forums. When villagers face confusion amidst the onslaught of political advertising, they voluntarily visit the homes of religious leaders to seek guidance. This process provides space for religious leaders to filter information, correct misinformation, and provide implicit and explicit political recommendations. The spiritual legitimacy inherent in ulama (Islamic scholars) makes these recommendations psychologically binding, with non-compliance often equated with a violation of the moral values they teach.

Conversely, traditional leaders, or Kasepuhan leaders in Sirnaresmi Village, employ a persuasive approach based on communal obedience and the preservation of noble Sundanese traditions. Traditional leaders, particularly Abah, the supreme leader, use their charismatic authority, passed down through generations, to maintain community solidarity. Messages relating to the community's political stance are conveyed through symbolic language and traditional proverbs (*paribasa*) steeped in local philosophical meaning. Traditional leaders rarely explicitly direct residents to vote for a particular figure or party in the public sphere. Persuasion is carried out by emphasizing the importance of maintaining harmony and village peace, as well as the preservation of customary rights to their customary territories from the threat of detrimental external policies.

The communication channels used by traditional leaders center on traditional institutions such as the *Imah Gede* (large traditional house) and the *Sawala* deliberation forum. In these informal forums, traditional leaders communicate community policy directions horizontally while maintaining vertical respect from all levels of *Rorokan* (traditional assistants) down to ordinary citizens. Indigenous communities' adherence to the political direction of traditional leaders is based on myth, shared history, and a strong sense of belonging to the Kasepuhan entity. When traditional leaders signal their support for a particular political direction, the signal is immediately interpreted as a manifestation of collective interest in protecting village sovereignty. This obedience is not born of structural coercion, but rather from a cultural awareness that customary voices must be unanimous (*saukuran*) to maintain the community's dignity.

The difference in legitimacy between religious leaders, who rely on sacred texts, and traditional leaders, who rely on traditional law, has the potential to create a dichotomy in political stances. However, the reality in Sirnaresmi Village actually demonstrates a harmonious process of communication convergence between these two poles of authority. These two groups of opinion leaders consciously negotiate their space and roles to avoid clashes of interests that could divide the community. This convergence occurs because of a shared macro vision: maintaining social stability and village morality from destructive outside influences. The marriage of Islamic spiritual values with Kasepuhan cultural values creates a robust dual political filter system at the village level.

This convergence process is clearly visible in the mechanisms for making important decisions concerning the future of the village, including determining collective political stances. Before the election, traditional and religious leaders often hold informal face-to-face meetings that do not involve outsiders. During these meetings, they exchange views on the track records of prospective leaders or political parties entering their areas. Religious leaders provide assessments from the perspective of morality and the welfare of the community, while traditional leaders assess the candidate's commitment to preserving traditional customs. The consensus generated in this private space is then transformed into a common village view, disseminated in parallel through their respective communication channels.

The integration of these two communication patterns creates a complementary model of opinion leadership in the eyes of the grassroots community. The residents of Sirnaresmi

Village see no conflict between being devout Muslims and members of the traditional community loyal to ancestral traditions. When traditional leaders issue guidance regarding the direction of communal policy, religious leaders reinforce it with relevant theological arguments, provided it does not conflict with their faith. Conversely, when religious leaders remind residents to avoid money politics, as it is prohibited by religion, traditional leaders support this with social sanctions or moral admonitions based on custom. This synergy makes political education messages highly effective and increases compliance.

A direct impact of this convergence of opinion leadership is the formation of strong group resistance to the penetration of smear campaigns and digital disinformation. In this modern era, rural youth are increasingly exposed to competing political narratives on various social media platforms. However, the potential for polarization among youth can be mitigated because verification mechanisms with traditional and religious leaders remain effective. Youth continue to value the advice of traditional elders and religious scholars as the ultimate source of truth, transcending digital media algorithms. Thus, the convergence of spiritual and cultural authority serves as a social immunity system, safeguarding community harmony from the threat of electoral division.

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authority serves as a social immunity system, safeguarding community harmony from the threat of electoral division.

D. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that religious and traditional leaders in Sirnaresmi Village play a crucial and strategic role as opinion leaders in the dynamics of rural political communication. Amidst the massive penetration of modern information, the flow of political communication in this region does not proceed linearly, but rather follows the Two-Step Flow Theory. These two groups of actors act as gatekeepers of information, proactively absorbing macro-political discourse, filtering it for potential conflict, and then redistributing it to the grassroots through cultural-spiritual interpersonal channels. The harmonious dualistic authority structure between the ulama and the Kasepuhan traditional leaders does not create a division of preferences, but rather gives rise to a convergence of complementary communication. Religious leaders oversee the theological morality of the residents, while traditional leaders maintain communal solidarity and the preservation of local traditions. This integrative-collective synergy has proven effective in building a strong social immunity system for villagers in countering hoaxes, reducing electoral polarization, and significantly increasing political participation in every general election. The absolute obedience of the people to the political directives of this dualism of local leadership confirms that the level of sociological trust (trust) is much more decisive in determining the effectiveness of political messages than the sophistication of modern communication media.

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