



Research Artikel

## Voter Turnout Among First-Time Voters in the Gorontalo City Mayoral Election in Buladu Subdistrict, Gorontalo City

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**Abstract:** Awareness of the importance of participating in elections can begin with first-time voters aged 17 to 21. The purpose of this study is to determine the motivations behind the voting decisions of first-time voters in the Gorontalo City Mayoral Election in Buladu Village, Kota Barat District. This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach. The data collected were not numerical but were obtained from various sources, such as interview results, field notes, personal documents, and other official documents. The data collection techniques used included observation, interviews, and documentation. Meanwhile, the selection of informants was conducted according to the research needs. The data analysis process was carried out through the stages of data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. The research results indicate that first-time voters in Buladu Village are influenced by several factors in deciding which candidate to choose, including parental influence, employment, dawn raids or vote-buying practices, and their level of awareness regarding the local elections. This suggests that the rationality of first-time voters remains at the level of bounded rationality, consistent with James S. Coleman's theory of rational choice, which posits that individuals make decisions based on a cost-benefit analysis. A synthesis of the main findings of this study indicates that the political decisions of first-time voters are influenced not only by personal rational considerations but also by social, economic, and environmental factors that shape their patterns of political participation. These conditions suggest that first-time voters are still in the process of developing independent and critical political awareness when making their choices in local elections. In conclusion, first-time voters in Buladu Village are still in a transitional phase, moving from passive and normative participation toward more active participation; however, their choices in the 2024 Gorontalo City Mayoral Election are not yet fully rational and independent, as they remain influenced by parental factors, the environment, the practice of vote-buying, and a lack of political education.

**Keywords:** First-Time Voters; Local Elections; Political Participation; Rational Choice; Vote-Buying.

### 1. Introduction

Regional Head Elections are one of the instruments of democracy that provide an opportunity for the public to directly elect local leaders. In modern democratic systems, public political participation serves as a key indicator in assessing the quality of a country's democracy. Public engagement in elections not only reflects the exercise of citizens' political rights but also demonstrates the level of public political awareness regarding the governance process (Novianty & Octavia, 2018). One group of citizens that holds a strategic position in local political contests is first-time voters. This group consists of citizens exercising their right to vote for the first time, typically aged 17–21 (Abdi Muhammad et al., 2020). In the

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context of local democracy, first-time voters are a significant group because their numbers are substantial and they have the potential to influence the outcomes of local elections.

This study focuses on the participation of first-time voters in casting their ballots in the 2024 Gorontalo City Mayoral Election in Buladu Village, Kota Barat Subdistrict, Gorontalo City. Based on data from the Permanent Voter List, the number of first-time voters in Buladu Village reached 403, distributed across six Polling Stations. This number indicates that first-time voters constitute a group with significant political potential in determining the direction of a candidate's victory in the election. Furthermore, first-time voters are in a transitional phase toward social and political maturity, so their political behavior remains influenced by various factors, such as family, social environment, political education, social media, and even the practice of vote-buying.

Previous studies have examined the participation of first-time voters in regional elections and general elections. The study by Saiful Ahmad, Aswir Faruk Badjodah, and Mahmud Husen (2021) on ethnic politicization and first-time voter participation in the North Maluku regional election employed a nonparametric descriptive quantitative approach. This study has the advantage of statistically describing voter behavior trends, but it lacks depth in exploring the social motivations and subjective experiences of first-time voters. Meanwhile, M. Samsudin's (2020) study on first-time voter participation in the Mataram City Regional Election employed a phenomenological approach capable of depicting first-time voters' political experiences in greater depth; however, the study focused primarily on participation rates and did not specifically analyze the rational factors influencing voters' political choices. Thus, research on first-time voters still requires further development, particularly in understanding the motivations and rational considerations of first-time voters in making their choices in local elections.

Based on these various phenomena, the research question of this study focuses on what motivates first-time voters in making their choices in the 2024 Gorontalo City Mayoral Election in Buladu Village, Kota Barat Subdistrict. This issue is important to examine because first-time voters are often viewed as a group that is still unstable, susceptible to environmental influences, and lacks mature political experience. Furthermore, low political literacy, the influence of social media, the practice of vote-buying, and the strong influence of family and social environment are factors that can affect their political behavior.

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the factors influencing the political participation and decision-making of first-time voters. This approach was chosen because it is capable of comprehensively depicting social reality through observation, interviews, and documentation (Pattipeilohy et al., 2018). In analyzing this phenomenon, this study employs James S. Coleman's rational choice theory, which posits that individuals act based on cost-benefit considerations when making social and political choices (Syafira & Harianto, 2020). Through this theory, the behavior of first-time voters is understood as the result of a rational calculation process influenced by personal interests, the social environment, and available resources.

The contributions of this study are as follows: (1) to provide an empirical overview of the political behavior of first-time voters in local elections, particularly in the Buladu subdistrict of Gorontalo City; (2) to enrich the field of political sociology regarding the political participation of the younger generation; (3) to provide an understanding of the factors influencing the political decisions of first-time voters; and (4) to serve as a reference for the government, election organizers, and educational institutions in developing more effective political education strategies for the younger generation.

The next section of this study consists of several parts. The second part discusses the theoretical review, which covers James S. Coleman's theory of rational choice, the concept of regional elections, the concept of first-time voters, and previous research. The third section explains the research methods used, including the research approach, research location, data collection techniques, informant selection techniques, and data analysis techniques. The fourth section presents the research results and a discussion regarding first-time voters' participation in making their choices in the 2024 Gorontalo City Mayoral Election in Buladu Village. Finally, the fifth section contains the conclusions and research recommendations.

## 2. Literature Review

Numerous studies have previously examined the participation of first-time voters in regional elections, yet each study reveals distinct characteristics and findings that reflect the specific social conditions of the communities in their respective research locations. A study conducted by Fina Novianty and Eka Octavia highlights that the General Election Commission plays a crucial role in boosting the political participation of first-time voters through political education and election outreach. That study placed greater emphasis on the role of election management bodies in fostering political awareness among the younger generation. Meanwhile, this study focuses more on the motivations and political behavior of first-time voters in making their choices during the Gorontalo City Mayoral Election in the Buladu neighborhood. Thus, this study not only examines participation rates but also analyzes the social factors influencing the political decisions of first-time voters.

In addition, research conducted by Sitti Alhadar and her colleagues on strengthening democracy among first-time voters shows that political education through social media and outreach activities can improve the younger generation's understanding of democracy. The study emphasizes the importance of strengthening political literacy so that first-time voters can participate actively and critically in elections. Unlike previous studies, this research found that although first-time voters have broad access to political information through social media, most are still influenced by family, social environment, and the practice of vote-buying when making their political choices. This indicates a gap between increased access to political information and first-time voters' ability to make rational political decisions.

Another study conducted by A. Pattipeilohy explains that political education has an impact on increasing political participation among first-time voters. The study confirms that the better the political education received, the higher the political awareness of the younger generation in exercising their right to vote. However, the results of the study in Buladu Village show that a relatively high level of formal education does not fully guarantee the development of rational political behavior. Some first-time voters still make their choices based on family influence, candidate popularity, and pragmatic considerations such as vote-buying. This discrepancy in results indicates that formal education alone is insufficient to foster mature political awareness without being supported by ongoing political education.

When analyzed using James S. Coleman's Rational Choice Theory, the behavior of first-time voters in this study indicates that individuals act based on their perceived costs and benefits. Some informants voted because they perceived certain benefits, whether in the form of civic satisfaction, family influence, or material gains through the practice of vote-buying. In Coleman's theory, individuals are viewed as rational actors who make decisions based on personal interests deemed most advantageous. However, in the context of first-time voters in Buladu Village, this rationality remains limited (bounded rationality), as the political decisions made are not yet fully grounded in a critical evaluation of the candidates' vision, mission, and campaign platforms. From a political sociology perspective, the results of this study also indicate that the political behavior of first-time voters cannot be separated from the influence of the surrounding social structure. The family serves as the most dominant primary agent of political socialization in shaping the political orientation of first-time voters. In addition to the family, social circles and social media also contribute to shaping the political preferences of the younger generation. This situation indicates that the political participation of first-time voters in Buladu Village is still in a transitional phase, moving from normative participation toward more rational and independent political participation. Therefore, there is a need for the continuous strengthening of political education, digital literacy, and the promotion of democracy so that first-time voters can become a critical and responsible segment of society in making their political choices.

## 3. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to gain an in-depth understanding of first-time voters' participation in the Gorontalo City mayoral election in Buladu Village, Kota Barat District. The qualitative approach was chosen because this study aims to comprehensively describe social phenomena based on the experiences, perspectives, and behaviors of first-time voters in the local political process. Through this method, the researcher can gain a deeper understanding of the factors influencing first-time voters'

political decisions. The research was conducted in Buladu Village, Kota Barat Subdistrict, Gorontalo City. The location was selected based on the significant number of first-time voters and the presence of socio-political dynamics that are of interest for study in the 2024 Gorontalo City Mayoral Election. The research subjects consisted of first-time voters aged 17–21 who were registered on the Permanent Voter List, including students, college students, and young adults who were already employed.

This study utilized two types of data sources: primary data and secondary data. Primary data was collected directly through in-depth interviews with first-time voters, field observations, and documentation gathered during the course of the study. Meanwhile, secondary data was obtained from official KPU documents, academic journals, books, and various other sources relevant to political participation and the behavior of first-time voters. The data collection process was conducted in several stages. The first stage was observation, specifically direct observation of the social conditions of the community and the political activities of first-time voters in Buladu Village. The second stage consists of in-depth interviews with several informants to gather information regarding their motivations, views, and experiences in making political choices during the local elections. The third stage involves documentation, specifically the collection of supporting data such as voter registration lists, photos of activities, archives, and other documents relevant to the research.

Data analysis in this study was conducted in stages using an interactive analysis model, specifically through the processes of data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. These stages were carried out continuously throughout the study so that the data obtained could be analyzed systematically and in depth. The research methodology can be outlined as follows: problem identification; selection of research sites and informants; data collection (observation, interviews, documentation); data reduction; data presentation; data analysis and interpretation; and drawing conclusions. This research method was used to obtain a clear picture of the nature of first-time voters' participation and the factors influencing their political decisions in the Gorontalo City mayoral election in the Buladu neighborhood. Using a qualitative approach, this study is expected to yield in-depth data that accurately reflects the social conditions on the ground.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### Results

According to the research findings, there were 403 first-time voters in the 2024 Gorontalo City Mayoral Election in Buladu Village, distributed across six polling stations. The first-time voters consisted of 219 men and 184 women. The majority of first-time voters were students, college students, and young working adults. Additionally, first-time voters in Buladu Village have diverse educational backgrounds and are quite active in using social media as a source of political information. The results of the interview with informant AD indicate that his participation in the regional elections was largely influenced by his parents' guidance. The informant revealed that he still voted even though he felt the elections disrupted his work and he had doubts about the candidates' political promises. The informant stated:

“I didn't vote just because my parents told me to since I'm currently working, and in my opinion, the local elections interfere with my work hours. Looking at some of the issues that have arisen, there are quite a few local leaders who, despite being elected, have failed to fulfill their promises to the community. However, I still voted because my parents advised me to; this candidate has held office before and has a good leadership style, so I decided to cast my vote.”

Furthermore, the results of the interview with informant AFB indicate that the decision to choose was entirely driven by family pressure. The informant stated:

“It was all the parents' encouragement that made me decide to vote.”

Informant FI expressed a similar view. However, in addition to parental influence, the informant also acknowledged the influence of vote-buying in determining his political choice. The informant said:

“My parents also directed me to vote because they said it was mandatory, but as for my own choice, there was vote-buying I wanted to get some money from it.”

Meanwhile, the interview with informant MM revealed a skeptical attitude toward the political process. The informant assessed that a change in leadership does not always bring tangible

changes for the community. Nevertheless, they still exercised their right to vote due to family guidance. The informant stated:

“In my opinion, whether I vote or not doesn’t change anything because I see that the methods used in campaigning are the same as in previous campaigns making promises but after being elected, they don’t fulfill those promises. But I still vote because of my parents’ instructions.”

In contrast to some of the previous informants, the interview with informant NAD revealed a greater sense of political awareness. The informant views voting as a civic duty and a form of concern for the region’s future. The informant said:

“Since voting is mandatory, we must go to the polling station and cast our vote. This is our responsibility as citizens, especially for first-time voters who will determine Gorontalo’s future.”

Based on the results of these interviews, it is evident that most first-time voters in Buladu Village are still influenced by their family environment when making political choices. In addition, pragmatic influences such as vote-buying and skepticism toward the political elite were also identified. However, some first-time voters are also beginning to demonstrate political awareness and understand the importance of participating in the democratic process.

### **Discussion**

The research findings indicate that the participation of first-time voters in the Gorontalo City mayoral election in Buladu Village is still in a transitional phase toward more rational and independent political participation. First-time voters have not yet fully based their choices on candidates’ campaign platforms or visions and missions; rather, they are still influenced by their social environment, particularly their families. From a political sociology perspective, the family serves as the primary agent of political socialization that shapes an individual’s political orientation. This is evident from interview results indicating that most informants participated in the election due to parental encouragement. This suggests that first-time voters’ political behavior remains normative and not yet fully independent.

In addition to family factors, social media and social circles also play a significant role in shaping the political preferences of first-time voters. As a generation raised in the digital age, they have broad access to political information. However, limited political literacy and the ability to filter information make first-time voters vulnerable to the influence of public opinion, candidates’ images, and even provocative information. The research findings also reveal the existence of vote-buying practices that influence the political decisions of first-time voters. According to James S. Coleman’s Rational Choice Theory, such actions can be understood as a form of bounded rationality, in which individuals make decisions based on what they perceive to be the most advantageous option given limited information and political experience. Vote-buying is seen as providing direct benefits, thereby influencing the choices of some first-time voters. On the other hand, interview results with NAD informants indicate that some first-time voters already possess a strong political awareness. Political participation is viewed as a form of civic responsibility in shaping the region’s future. This suggests that some first-time voters are beginning to understand the importance of engagement in democracy and are adopting a more active political orientation.

Thus, the participation of first-time voters in Buladu Village reveals a dynamic range of political behaviors. Some still follow a pattern of passive and pragmatic participation, while others are beginning to move toward more conscious and rational political participation. Therefore, strengthening political education and democratic literacy is necessary so that first-time voters can become critical, independent, and responsible voters in making their political choices.

### **5. Comparison**

Previous researchers have conducted numerous studies on first-time voter participation in local elections, each with different focuses and approaches. A comparison with prior research is important to highlight the position and contribution of this study within the field of research on first-time voters’ political participation. This study differs in its research subject, theoretical approach, and findings, which place greater emphasis on the motivations behind the political decisions of first-time voters in Buladu Village, Kota Barat Subdistrict, Gorontalo City.

Research conducted by Titi Darmi and Iqbal Miftakhul Mujtahid on first-time voter participation in the 2020 simultaneous regional elections indicates that first-time voters generally do not yet fully understand the importance of political participation in regional elections. The study focuses primarily on the forms of participation and the factors influencing first-time voters' engagement in elections (kutipan). Meanwhile, this study not only examines forms of political participation but also analyzes the motivations and rationales of first-time voters in making their political choices. The findings indicate that the political decisions of first-time voters in Buladu Village are still influenced by family, social environment, and the practice of vote-buying.

Another study conducted by Muhammad Ilham Wahyudi on the impact of political socialization on first-time voter participation in the Padang municipal elections found that the low turnout among first-time voters was due to a lack of understanding of their political role in the elections (M. Ilham Wahyudi Prasetyo, 2019). That study emphasized the importance of political outreach by the General Elections Commission and related institutions in increasing first-time voter participation. In contrast to that study, this research found that although first-time voters have broad access to information through social media and their immediate surroundings, their political decisions still tend to be influenced by emotional factors, social connections, and pragmatic interests.

In addition, a study conducted by Achmad Mahargya Ridhaning Gusti on the behavior of first-time voters in response to the "Risma Effect" during the 2020 Surabaya mayoral election utilized James S. Coleman's Rational Choice Theory to examine how first-time voters make their choices based on candidate profiles and the influence of social media (Gusti, 2020). The study shows that candidates' images and media coverage have a significant influence on the political preferences of young voters. This study shares similarities with others in its application of rational choice theory, but differs in its findings. In this study, first-time voters are influenced not only by the candidates themselves, but also by parental guidance, family environment, and the practice of vote-buying, which remains quite prevalent in the political decision-making process.

Based on these previous studies, this research contributes to strengthening the study of the political behavior of first-time voters at the local level, particularly in the Gorontalo City mayoral election. This study indicates that the political participation of first-time voters is influenced not only by political education and access to information but also significantly by social structure, family culture, and the socioeconomic conditions of the community. Thus, this study highlights that first-time voters constitute a strategic group in local democracy; however, they still require enhanced political education and democratic literacy to become more critical, independent, and rational voters in making their political choices.

## 6. Conclusion

This study shows that the participation of first-time voters in the 2024 Gorontalo Mayoral Election in Buladu Village was influenced by internal and external factors. Internal factors include political awareness and a sense of responsibility as citizens, while external factors include the influence of family, the social environment, social media, and the practice of vote-buying. The results also indicate that most first-time voters still base their choices on guidance from parents and their immediate surroundings, although some are beginning to demonstrate a more active and independent stance in making their political choices.

This study concludes that first-time voters in Buladu Village are still in the developmental stage of political behavior, moving toward becoming more rational and critical voters. Their political participation is influenced not only by education and access to information but also by the social and cultural conditions of the community. Therefore, political education, digital literacy, and an understanding of democracy need to be continuously improved so that first-time voters can become independent and responsible voters. However, this study has limitations because it was conducted only in Buladu Village with a limited number of informants, so the results cannot yet fully represent the condition of first-time voters in Gorontalo City.

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