

## Santri Community, Charisma, and the Contrast Political Agency: Electoral Victory and Defeat in Jombang and Mojokerto, Indonesia

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This study examines the contrasting electoral outcomes of the 2024 regional elections in Mojokerto and Jombang, two santri-dominated districts in East Java, Indonesia. In Mojokerto, Gus Al-Barra, the son of a prominent kiai, won the election, while in Jombang, Bu Nyai Munjidah, the daughter of a renowned kiai, was defeated. This study employs a comparative approach to investigate how religious authority, patronage networks, and the political agency of santri communities interact to shape electoral trajectories. The analysis reveals that genealogical charisma alone does not guarantee electoral success; its effectiveness depends on its translation into sustained organizational work, credible alliances, and engagement with pesantren public. In Mojokerto, Gus Al-Barra's victory was enabled by converting his father's symbolic legitimacy into effective mobilization through patronage brokerage, pesantren network consolidation, and strategic deployment of charisma. In contrast, Bu Nyai Munjidah's defeat in Jombang was linked to fragmented pesantren support, weakened patronage linkages, and the impact of gender expectations on leadership evaluation. This study contributes to the scholarship on religious politics and clientelism by demonstrating how the political influence of traditional religious elites is reconfigured through hybrid networks that combine moral authority, electoral pragmatism, and patronage-based mobilization. It also highlights the agency of santri voters, who evaluate candidates based on patronage access, leadership credibility, and perceived consistency with campaign promises rather than simply following religious cues. The findings underscore the importance of local democratic arrangements that improve accountability, protect fair competition, and widen substantive representation, especially for women, while strengthening critical participation among Santri communities.

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### Public Interest Statement

This study examines the role of the Islamic boarding school (santri) community in local politics in Mojokerto and Jombang, Indonesia. The candidates, Gus Barra (Deputy Regent of Mojokerto, 2021-2025) and Bu Nyai Munjidah (Regent of Jombang, 2018-2023), come from religious leadership families. While Gus Al-Barra won the 2024 regional election, Bu Nyai Munjidah lost, demonstrating that the Islamic boarding school community is not uniform in its decision-making. The community bases political choices on rational, gender, and patronage factors.



## Introduction

The sons of Islamic scholars (Kiai) possess significant social capital to win regional head elections in Indonesia, although not all of them are guaranteed victory. Gus Barra (Muhammad Al-Barra) won the 2024 regional head election in Mojokerto Regency (Gunaeri and Khusna 2025). This contrasts with the reality in Jombang

Azizah et al. (2021) Regency, where Bu Nyai Munjidah, daughter of KH. A. Wahab Chasbullah was defeated, even though both were the same. They possess reliable religious social capital because they are the sons and daughters of prominent Islamic scholars. This phenomenon marks the heterogeneity of Islamic boarding school students' political behavior within the East Javanese Islamic boarding school communities.

In contrast to the public's perception that the santri community has an advantage in identity, namely a big name behind "santri," the santri community shares similarities in ideology, daily life, and national and state life. This has changed the understanding of the santri community, which was initially homogeneous, having the same phenomenon, to heterogeneity because in the dynamics of the regional head election in Jombang Regency, which is a city of santri, the candidate from the daughter of a charismatic cleric was defeated by a candidate from the village head, who is a government structure under the Regent of Jombang. This differs from the incident in Mojokerto Regency, where the candidate, a son of a Kiai, won the local election.

These dynamics reflect the patronage of the kiai and pesantren networks (Azizah et al., 2021), and the political agency of the santri community (Siswanto et al., 2022), which interact in complex ways to produce contrasting electoral patterns and differing election results. Essentially, the patronage of Islamic boarding schools (kiai) wields significant social power, as kiai hold sway within their communities, especially among their congregations and students. The network of Islamic boarding schools also has its own power, as the relationship between one pesantren and another is often well established through kinship or because new pesantrens are developments of older ones.

Several previous studies have revealed that the power of Islamic boarding school dynasties plays a dominant role in local politics (Azizah et al., 2021). Meanwhile, the role of the kiai in shaping students' choices is paternalistic, though not monopolistic (Siswanto et al., 2022). There has also been a shift in public perception towards Islamic-based parties in East Java (M NASTAIN et al., 2024), as well as discourse on the authority of the kiai in the context of modern education (Nadhif Muhammad Mumtaz et al., 2024). Previous research has examined various dimensions of the politics of santri and kiai: the pragmatic orientation of NU kiai (Yani et al., 2022), hegemony of kiai in Islamic boarding schools, the role of ulama as patron-umara, egalitarian relations between kiai and santri, the role of Islamic boarding schools in electoral economics (Lestari et al., 2024; Gunaeri, et al., 2025), dominance of Islamic boarding school dynasties (Azizah et al., 2021), the influence of kiai on PKB (Mutillah, 2024), and the ideology of guarding against abstention by Salafiyah Islamic boarding schools. However, these studies remain fragmented and have not yet been compared across the two santri regions reviewed in this paper, with different outcomes: Mojokerto (Gus Barra's victory) and Jombang (Bu Nyai Munjidah's defeat). No study has yet investigated how the genealogical charisma of kiai—taking gender factors into account—interacts with local patronage and the political agency of santri communities in the context of regional election contestations with varying outcomes. (Arifinsyah et al., 2019; Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2018). This study fills this gap with a comparative approach across districts, combining perspectives on charisma, patronage, and agency to understand the contextual variations in political support from santri communities. The results of this study contribute to the science of local Islamic democracy and the sociology of religious politics in Southeast Asia, and in the future, it will be necessary to present research in other parts of the world.

This study uses a micro-comparative design to examine two neighboring santri districts in East Java—Mojokerto and Jombang—where pesantren-linked families entered regional election contests but produced contrasting outcomes. This study aims to explain how pesantren-based religious legitimacy and genealogical authority are converted into electoral support through everyday political work at the village—pesantren level. By comparing the Mojokerto victory of Gus Al-Barra and the Jombang defeat of Bu Nyai Munjidah, the study focuses on the mechanisms through which support is built, maintained, or eroded over time, including the organization of patronage and brokerage, the consolidation or fragmentation of pesantren elites, the credibility of campaign commitments, and the way voters evaluate leadership in practice.

In doing so, this study contributes to the scholarship on clientelism and local electoral politics by bringing pesantren authority and santri voter judgement into the same explanatory frame. While work on Indonesian client networks often centers on intermediary structures and brokerage chains (Aspinall et al., 2017), this study shows how religious authority becomes politically effective only when embedded in sustained organizational coordination and credible engagement with pesantren publics. It also speaks to debates on democratic competition in Muslim-majority societies

by treating santri communities as politically active constituencies whose choices reflect practical considerations, alongside moral and religious recognition.

The study's analytical framework combines Weberian insights on charismatic authority with political-economy accounts of patronage and clientelism, while taking voter agency seriously in explaining why similar symbolic resources can yield different electoral effects across cases (Berenschot, 2018; van Klinken, 2009; Weber, 1978). Gender is treated as part of leadership evaluation within pesantren publics, shaping how candidates are assessed when organizational channels fragment or when religious forums are perceived as politically counterproductive (Brenner, 2011; White et al., 2024a). Rather than proposing a new theory, this study offers an integrated explanation of how charisma, patronage relations, and santri political agency operate together in local contests.

## **Materials and Methods**

This study employs a qualitative comparative approach to examine how pesantren-linked political actors operated in the 2024 regional elections in Mojokerto and Jombang. Both regions are characterized by strong santri communities and pesantren traditions, yet they produced different electoral outcomes. Therefore, the analysis compares the two cases to understand how religious authority, organizational practices, and everyday political interactions shaped electoral trajectories in each setting.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with political actors, pesantren figures, santri and local voters. These interviews were complemented by an examination of official electoral documents, publicly available monitoring records, media reports, and campaign-related materials. In addition, limited observations of religious gatherings and campaign-linked activities were conducted to capture patterns of interaction between kiai, santri, and candidate teams as they unfolded in everyday contexts.

The analysis was conducted through a qualitative reading of the narrative data drawn from interviews, documents, and observations. Themes were identified from recurring explanations offered by actors regarding electoral mobilization, leadership evaluation and voter decision-making. Each case was first analyzed on its own terms, following the sequence of events and interactions described by the participants. A comparative analysis was then developed by placing Mojokerto and Jombang side by side to identify convergences and divergences in how political support was built and maintained over time.

This approach allows the study to explain electoral outcomes through the accumulation of social relationships, organizational practices, and voter judgements within santri communities. This analysis focuses on how authority, trust, and credibility were negotiated during the electoral process.

## **Discussion**

The conceptual framework of this study was devised to examine how the santri community, as a cultural and religious foundation, navigates political decisions in local electoral contexts. This analysis is grounded in empirical evidence, including several prior studies and the researchers' own findings. It is presented to caution the santri community against prematurely asserting a dominant majority in the electoral process. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that electoral realities may sometimes diverge from the knowledge and understanding of the santri elite.

There are three main, interrelated pillars. First, the religious charisma of the descendants of Kiai is often considered a form of symbolic capital and a source of political legitimacy. This charisma is not always compelling, depending on the social context and the structure of political opportunities (Rismawan & Barona, 2025). Second, political patronage and clientelism networks play a significant role in local contestation, especially in rural Java, through the distribution of resources and the role of political brokers (Mietzner, 2013; Amrillah & Maliha, 2025). Third, the political agency of the santri community cannot be reduced to mere elite mobilization. Santri are capable of political calculations that consider issues of identity, gender, and practical interests, as seen in the variation in support between Mojokerto and Jombang (Siswanto et al., 2022; White et al., 2024).

The gender dimension adds a layer of complexity to this discussion; female candidates descended from kiai often face patriarchal challenges that limit the effectiveness of their religious capital (Gunaeri and Khusna, 2025). They personally possess the qualities of leaders, but this sometimes clashes with their students' understanding of religious texts. The literature shows that socio-political changes among Indonesian Muslims have led to increasingly diverse political orientations among students (Afisa et al., 2024; Anjeli et al., 2025; Yani et al., 2022). This was done after reading and comparing the results of various previous studies.

This conceptual framework links religious charisma, political patronage, the agency of the santri community, and gender factors as key determinants in interpreting election implementation. This serves to develop a sense of

homogeneity in the santri community in social and political life. This research contributes by demonstrating how the combination of these four dimensions explains the Mojokerto-Jombang electoral contrast, while also broadening the discourse on the dynamics of santri politics in the implementation of democracy in Indonesia in 2024.

***Mojokerto–Jombang Electoral Contrast***

The 2024 regional elections in Mojokerto and Jombang revealed a clear electoral contrast. Both districts are often associated with strong santri constituencies and pesantren-based social influence, yet their outcomes diverged sharply. In Mojokerto Regency, Muhammad Al Barra (Gus Barra), the son of KH. Asep won the election. In Jombang Regency, Nyai Hj. Mundjidah Wahab (Bu Nyai Munjidah), the daughter of the late KH. Wahab Chasbullah failed to retain the regency leadership (Lestari et al., 2024b). The contrast matters because it shows that genealogical legitimacy and religious charisma, while politically meaningful, do not translate into votes uniformly; their electoral value depends on how they are supported—or constrained—by coalition architecture, local brokerage, and governance dynamics.

In Mojokerto, the contest was competitive rather than decisive in nature. The winning pair, Al Barra–Rizal, secured 53.38% (372,537 votes), while the incumbent pair Ikfina–Sa’dulloh obtained 46.62% (325,396 votes), producing a margin of approximately 6.76% (Table 2) (Komisi Pemilihan Umum Kabupaten Mojokerto, 2024). This relatively narrow gap suggests that victory emerged through effective mobilization and coalition work rather than through religious lineage alone. The incumbent coalition was anchored by major parties (PKB, PDI-P, Golkar, PKS), whereas the challenger assembled a broader multiparty alignment. The Mojokerto case is best read as a contest in which religious symbolism interacted with organizational capacity and political machinery at the local level.

Table 2. Electoral results and party coalitions in the 2024 Mojokerto Regency Election.

Candidate Pair (Number)	Supporting Parties	Combined Seat Share in DPRD	Vote Percentage	Vote Count (KPU)
1. Ikfina Fahmawati – Sa’dulloh Syarofi	PKB, PDI-P, Golkar, PKS	Approximately (PKB + PDI-P + Golkar + PKS) seats	46.62%	325,396 votes
2. Muhammad Al Barra – Rizal Octavian	Gerindra, NasDem, PAN, PPP, Perindo, PBB, Garuda, PKN, Hanura, PSI, Gelora, Ummat, Demokrat	Estimated ~36 seats	53.38%	372,537 votes

By contrast, the Jombang election produced a landslide. Warsubi–KH. Salmanudin Yazid (Gus Salman) won 74.88% (515,880 votes), while Mundjidah–Sumrambah received 25.12% (173,098 votes) (Table 3) (Komisi Pemilihan Umum Kabupaten Jombang, 2024). The size of this gap points to a consolidated electoral bloc rather than a fragmented one. In this setting, genealogical legitimacy did not confer a protective advantage to the incumbent. Defeat is also linked in the manuscript to pressures operating through village governance structures, including claims that village heads experienced institutional pressure (Bulya & Izzati, 2024; Siswanto et al., 2022). In this light, the Jombang outcome is less about the presence of religious heritage and more about the strength of local control, coalition consolidation, and the capacity to discipline or coordinate political support at the grassroots level.

Table 3. Electoral results and party coalitions in the 2024 Jombang Regency Election.

Candidate Pair (Number)	Supporting Parties (Coalition)	Combined Seat Share in DPRD	Vote Percentage	Vote Count (KPU)
1. Nyai Hj Mundjidah Wahab – Sumrambah (MuRah)	PDIP, Demokrat, PPP	Approximately (PDIP 10 + Demokrat 6 + PPP 4) = 20 seats	25.12 %	173,098 votes
2. Warsubi – KH. Salmanudin Yazid (Gus Salman) (WarSa)	Gerindra, PKB, PKS, Golkar, NasDem, PAN, Gelora, PSI (8 parties)	Approximately (PKB 12 + Gerindra 8 + Golkar 5 + NasDem 2 + PKS 3) = 30 seats	74.88 %	515,880 votes

Placing the two districts side by side highlights the differences that cannot be reduced to national party alignments. Coalition formation appears to be locally contingent, shaped by district-level opportunity structures and tactical calculations. The Mojokerto result reflects competition between coalitions with relatively close voter support, whereas the Jombang result reflects a decisive consolidation behind the challenger. These differences align with the broader observation that political actors may form pragmatic, tactical coalitions that diverge from the patterns observed in national presidential contests.

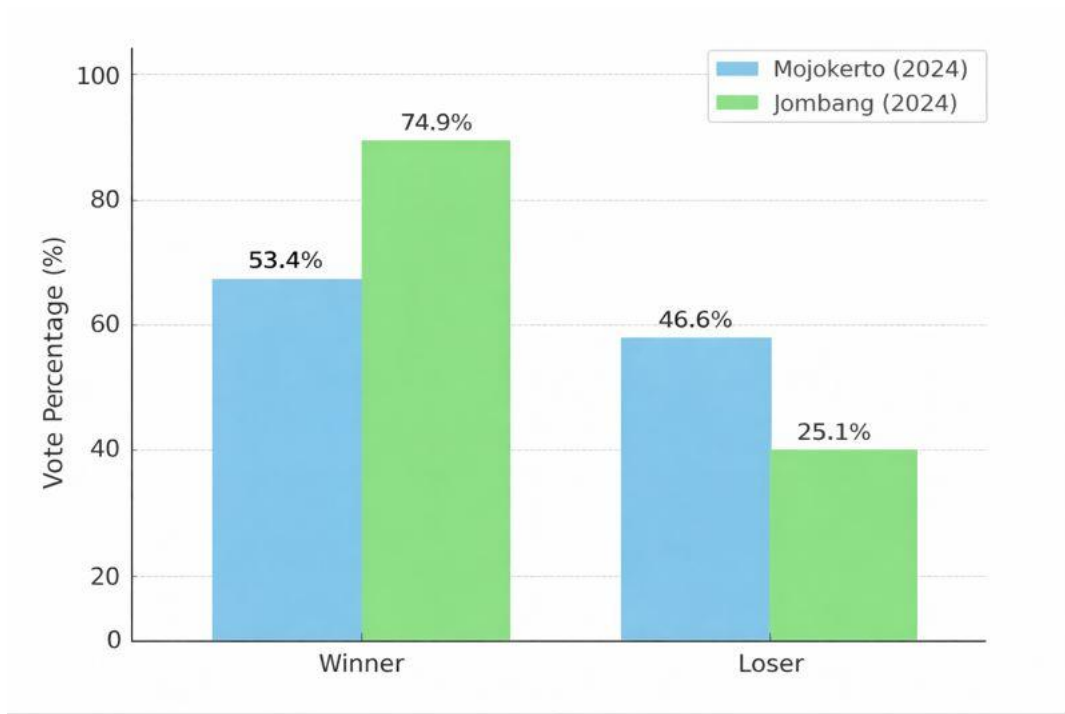


Figure 1. Comparison of Electoral Outcomes

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the contrast by illustrating the varying degrees of separation between the candidate pairs in the two districts. Mojokerto was depicted as a closely contested race, whereas Jombang was characterized by a distinctly polarized outcome. This visual comparison is valuable as it underscores the primary observation evident in the vote shares: the designation of a "santri region" does not ensure uniform electoral trajectories across different districts.

To synthesize the explanatory factors behind the divergence, Table 4 compares four dimensions: genealogy, main support base, symbolism, and patronage of the two shrines. In Mojokerto, victory is associated with consolidated pesantren networks and stronger political machinery, alongside patronage distribution, which appears more effective in sustaining alliances. In Jombang, the incumbent's position is described as facing fragmented pesantren support and weaker patronage linkages, with symbolic framing that places the candidate as the female heir of a major NU figure. This combination helps clarify why similar religious sociologies can still yield sharply different electoral results: what matters is not the presence of religious capital alone, but the way it is converted into political coordination, coalition discipline, and local governance support.

Table 4. Differences in the Dimensions of the Election for Santri Community

Dimension	Mojokerto (Gus Barra)	Jombang (Ning Munjidah)
Genealogy	Son of KH. Asep	Daughter of KH. A. Wahab Chasbullah
Main Support	Consolidated pesantren network, political machines	Fragmented pesantren support
Symbolism	Young male santri leader	Female heir of NU figure
Patronage	Strong local patronage distribution	Weak patronage alliances
Electoral Result	Victory	Defeat

### *Mojokerto Case: Gus Barra and Kiai Asep*

The role of Kiai Asep in the Mojokerto regional head election illustrates how religious authority can operate as political capital that complements material resources in Indonesia's patronage democracy (Berenschot, 2018; van Klinken et al., 2009). In the 2024 Mojokerto contest, KH Asep Saifuddin Chalim's backing was repeatedly framed in local reporting as a major electoral asset, indicating how religious charisma and pesantren-based networks may translate into mobilization capacity and broader coalition-building (Budianto, 2024a, 2024b).

The consolidation of support among village heads in Mojokerto further reveals the fragmentation of rural political organizations. Conflicts among village head associations emerged as a result of elite political affiliations, particularly when competing camps aligned themselves with different candidate pairs, thereby politicizing previously administrative or professional networks (Aliandu, 2025). These dynamics were exacerbated by contestation over

village governance rules and the struggle to control mass-based support structures, as confirmed through field interviews conducted in May 2025 (the results of the interviews are from May 2025).

He formed the Barisan RT (BARET) as a long-term grassroots network under the Relawan Bekasi structure during the Ikfina–Barra (IKBAR) campaign. BARET functioned as a localized political volunteer organization that mobilized neighborhood-level supporters and coordinated field logistics. Members adopted standardized symbols, such as berets and uniforms, to project discipline, cohesion, and group identity, signaling organizational strength and loyalty to the candidate (Aris, 2020; Infopol.co.id, 2020). This organizational form corresponds to broader patterns of political volunteerism in Indonesian elections, in which candidate-centered volunteer groups operate alongside—and sometimes independently of—formal party machinery as instruments of patronage-based mobilization (Supriatma, 2025).

Al-Barra first won executive office in the 2020 regional election when he ran as deputy regent and later consolidated his political position in the 2024 electoral cycle. The same period also saw Gus Habiburrochman, Kiai Asep's son, being elected as a member of the Indonesian House of Representatives. These electoral successes were achieved through sustained organizational mobilization and long-term patronage-based engagement across multiple electoral contests (Jatimpos.co, 2023; Times Surabaya, 2024).

Kiyai Asep's struggle as a newcomer has a unique identity. He was a native of Cirebon who came to Mojokerto to promote the development of religion and education. The community accepts his presence in the village. Kiyai Asep has charisma, but KH Husein Ilyas, the leader of the Al-Misbah Islamic boarding school, is more charismatic because he is more senior in religious development in Mojokerto (Budianto, 2024a). Although Gus Barra was relatively new to the Mojokerto political arena, his candidacy benefited significantly from Kiai Asep's religious recognition and his local moral authority. This association helped him gain acceptance among conservative constituencies that might otherwise resist newcomers lacking deep roots in established religious networks (Budianto, 2024a).

### *Jombang Case: Nyai Mundjidah and Warsubi*

In contrast, the Jombang case demonstrates how incumbency and gender intersect with patronage politics in ways that undermine electoral legitimacy. One of the most controversial issues during Wahab's administration was the cancellation of the free school uniform fabric assistance program. As reported by local media, "The cancellation of free uniform fabric assistance became a public controversy because the program had been widely perceived as one of the campaigns promises made during the previous election" (KabarJombang.com, 2022, August 25, 2021; October 11, 2022). This decision weakened her moral standing among rural voters, who associated welfare distribution with political accountability.

An academic evaluation of her development policies further substantiates this perception of her leadership. A policy review by (Ilmiyah 2024) observed that "development initiatives during the Mundjidah Wahab–Sumrambah administration were not implemented uniformly across the region, resulting in unequal outcomes between urban centers and peripheral villages." Such assessments reinforce public narratives that question the effectiveness of her leadership.

Warsubi's candidacy capitalized on rural governance networks, particularly through his leadership of the Paguyuban Kepala Desa Bersatu (Village-Head Association) in Jombang. On January 16, 2023, as the chair of the association, he coordinated the departure of 251 village heads to Jakarta to join a peaceful demonstration at the Senayan complex, demanding that village-head tenure be extended from six to nine years. The report also noted that six buses were prepared for the trip (Chusna, 2023). Beyond electoral mobilization, Warsubi and the AFCO Group (Agung Family Corporation)—described in local coverage as a frozen-food company in Jombang working with the families of H.M. Agung Wicaksono and H. Warsubi has sustained visible social assistance activities. During Ramadan 1446 H, AFCO's "sedekah Ramadhan" distributions were reported as taking place across villages, and in a separate charity event, beneficiaries explicitly described receiving food plus "paket frozen food" along with cash support (Rahma, 2025a, 2025b). In the 2024 election context, public sentiment also pointed to a demand for leadership change: an LSI Denny JA survey reported that 67.2% of Jombang respondents hoped for a new leader, alongside higher favorability and electability for the Warsubi–Salmanudin pair compared to the incumbent pair (Sumantri, 2024).

The comparison between Mojokerto and Jombang highlights the enduring significance of patronage democracy in Indonesian local politics. In Mojokerto, Gus Barra's victory was facilitated by a combination of religious endorsement and material redistribution that aligned closely with established patron–client patterns, confirming the broader findings on the political economy of clientelism in Indonesia (Berenschot, 2018).

However, in Jombang, age and gender played a decisive role in shaping voter perceptions. Nyai Mundjidah’s position as an older female incumbent intersected with conservative gender norms, reducing her acceptability among segments of the electorate that favor male leadership figures who are perceived as more authoritative and decisive (Hadiz, 2016). These dynamics were further intensified by political patriarchy, which structurally disadvantages female candidates by framing leadership legitimacy in masculine terms (Brenner, 2011).

Taken together, these findings reinforce the argument that the political influence of traditional religious elites has not disappeared but has been reconfigured. Rather than acting as autonomous power brokers, figures such as kiai and ulama now operate within hybrid networks that combine moral authority, electoral pragmatism, and patronage-based mobilization, reflecting broader transformations in Indonesia’s religious and political landscape (Fealy and Bush, 2014).

## Discussion

The contradictory phenomenon between Gus Barra's victory in Mojokerto and Ning Munjidah's defeat in Jombang confirms that charismatic religious legitimacy does not always guarantee electoral victory. Gus Barra succeeded because the charisma of the kiai was supported by strong political patronage and the effectiveness of the pesantren network in line with findings that kiai patronage remains dominant in local democracy. On the other hand, Ning Munjidah faced challenges from the fragmentation of the pesantren network and patriarchal patterns that limited the mobilization of female voters, phenomena that align with findings on gender dynamics and the mobilization of santri (Islamic boarding school) (Mahmud A, & Agustin D, 2025; Mahali, 2019). Furthermore, recent studies suggest that changes in the santri community from total obedience to political rationality have led santri to become critical voters, no longer fully submissive to the authority of the kiai. This is related to the conditions of the implementation of democratic contestation during normal times or during the Covid-19 pandemic (Megananta & Fauzi, 2022), the main momentum being the 2024 regional general elections.

In this context, religious charisma can be understood as an initial form of symbolic capital: it becomes socially effective when a community recognizes it as a legitimate authority and responds to it in practice (Weber, 1978). In the Mojokerto–Jombang comparison, the data associated this charisma with KH Asep Saifuddin in Mojokerto and the late KH Wahab Hasbullah in Jombang. Both are described as possessing religious authority within their respective socio-religious communities, where guidance and recommendations are broadly respected in santri networks.

Table 5. Comparative dimensions of religious charisma and mobilization networks in Mojokerto and Jombang (KH Asep Saifuddin vs. KH Wahab Hasbullah)

Dimensions	KH Asep Saifuddin (Mojokerto)	KH Wahab Hasbullah (Jombang)
Interaction Model	Direct engagement: direct meetings, cash assistance, grand recitations.	Lineage politics: relying on lineage ( <i>dzurriyyah</i> ) and historical authority.
Attraction	Economic well-being and access to immediate educational support.	Traditional loyalty and NU historical identity.
Volunteer Power	Reinforced through candidate-linked volunteer structures (e.g., BARET/Barisan RT as reported in local coverage).	Driven by pesantren-based structural loyalty, especially Tambakberas networks.

Source: processed from Primary Data and Results of the informant interview, June 2025

As shown in Table 5, charisma is only the entry point. What turns charisma into votes is the way it is converted into organized support through the mechanisms of patronage and brokerage. In Weber’s terms, charisma becomes politically effective when it is socially recognized and stabilized through repeated practices and networks (Weber, 1978). In local Indonesia, this stabilization commonly occurs inside what scholars describe as patronage democracy, where resources, access, and protection are exchanged through intermediaries and local organizations rather than through programmatic party competition (Berenschot, 2018; van Klinken, 2009).

This logic helps explain why two settings that both involve strong religious authority can produce different electoral outcomes. In Mojokerto, the pattern described in Table 5—direct engagement, welfare-related attraction, and volunteer reinforcement—fits a model where charisma is continuously “worked” through ongoing outreach and neighborhood-level organizations. This resembles the broader Indonesian pattern, where volunteer groups and grassroots brokers become key instruments for translating recognition into turnout and loyalty, sometimes operating alongside and sometimes beyond party machinery (Supriatma, 2025). In Jombang, the table points to a different mechanism: lineage-based authority and historical NU identity can generate durable respect, but the conversion into electoral support relies more on long-standing institutional loyalty structures (e.g., pesantren networks). In other

words, a famous name and historical legitimacy can remain powerful, but they do not automatically guarantee mobilization when the organizational vehicle and persuasive outreach are weaker or disrupted by the state.

Finally, Table 5 also clarifies why voter behavior cannot be reduced to “santri always obey.” Patronage democracy does not imply that voters are irrational; rather, it suggests that choices are influenced by how networks deliver credibility, benefits, and practical access (Berenschot, 2018; van Klinken, 2009). This is also where gender can appear as a political constraint, rather than a simple identity label. In Indonesian Muslim public debates, moral authority and leadership legitimacy are often negotiated through gendered expectations and moral narratives, which can affect how candidates are received, especially when religious spaces are perceived as being drawn into practical politics (Brenner, 2011).

Mojokerto–Jombang comparison is best explained through the interaction of religious charisma, patronage brokerage, gendered expectations of leadership, and voter agency, rather than a single “religious factor.” In Mojokerto, symbolic legitimacy and pesantren-linked networks were effectively translated into coalition building and mobilization. In Jombang, incumbency proved vulnerable when coalition consolidation, organizational discipline, and grassroots coordination shifted away from the incumbent. The question of neutrality among local apparatuses should be presented strictly as an oversight-documented controversy—described and cited, not asserted as an established fact—unless the manuscript can provide stronger evidence beyond monitoring records and reported allegations (Badan Pengawas Pemilihan Umum, 2024; Budiando, 2024b).

These cases also show that santri voters are not a fixed bloc of support. The same symbolic resource—being a kiai descendant—produces different electoral effects depending on whether it is supported by sustained organizational work, credible alliances, and consistent engagement with pesantren communities. When incumbency is associated with limited perceived benefits, weak network maintenance, or contested policy consistency, symbolic authority becomes less decisive, and electoral support may shift even in religiously dense environments.

In practical terms, patronage brokerage, gendered norms, and the strength of community mobilization shape how democratic competition operates in santri regions. The Jombang case, in particular, suggests that women’s leadership may face sharper scrutiny when organizational channels are fragmented or when constituents perceive religious forums as politically counterproductive. This underscores the importance of local democratic arrangements that improve accountability in patronage practices, protect fair competition, and widen substantive representation—especially for women—while strengthening critical participation among pesantren communities.

Overall, the Mojokerto and Jombang cases point to an integrated explanation in which religious charisma, patronage relations, and santri political agency operate simultaneously in the political arena. In Mojokerto, lineage-based legitimacy gained electoral force because it was embedded in organizational coordination and credible local mobilization. In Jombang, genealogical credentials did not provide automatic protection: voters evaluated leadership performance, continuity of campaign commitments, and maintenance of networks with pesantren actors. When these elements were perceived as weak or discontinuous, religious identity ceased to function as a decisive advantage.

## Conclusion

This study examines how pesantren-based authority is mobilized in regional head elections and what this reveals about religious politics in local Indonesian democracy. The findings show that genealogical religious legitimacy—being a kiai descendant—does not automatically translate into electoral victory, especially when rival candidates draw on comparable pesantren symbols and compete for the same moral constituency. In Mojokerto, Gus Al-Barra’s victory was enabled by the conversion of symbolic legitimacy into organized mobilization: sustained patronage brokerage, pesantren network consolidation, and the strategic deployment of younger-generation charisma. In Jombang, Bu Nyai Munjidah’s defeat illustrates the limits of genealogical authority when elite cohesion within pesantren circles fragments and incumbency narratives are weakened by perceived inconsistency in the political promises that previously underpinned support.

These cases indicate that santri communities should not be treated as passive blocs. Electoral choices reflect political agency: voters weigh patronage access, leadership credibility, gendered expectations, and practical calculations in their everyday lives. Charisma, therefore, remains relevant, but its political impact depends on whether it is translated into durable organizational work, credible alliances, and continuous engagement with pesantren publics. Rather than proposing a “new theory” as a label, the analysis is more productively framed as an integrated explanation that combines Weberian charisma, clientelistic patronage dynamics, and voter agency to account for variations in electoral outcomes among pesantren-linked political families.

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