

Smoke-filled Room and Secret Garden of Politics: How Do Candidate Selection as Rational Choice in Local Head of Government Election?

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Abstract: This study aims to analyze the candidate selection model in political parties, especially in the current electoral politics in Indonesia, which has not been adequately explained by previous studies. Candidate selection, distinct from political recruitment, is the process of selecting from a competitive group of candidates and frequently takes place behind closed doors, analogous to a “smoke-filled room” or a “secret garden of politics”. This practice raises issues of transparency, accountability and the dominance of party elites, who can overlook grassroots aspirations and candidate quality. This research uses a literature review method, exploring previous research and official documents to understand the concepts, practices and challenges of candidate selection. The findings show that the candidate selection mechanism often becomes an arena for internal party power struggles, far from democratic principles. This article also discusses democratic selection models based on the supply and demand perspectives of candidates and analyzes them through the lenses of new institutionalism and rational choice institutionalism. The rational choice institutionalism approach is considered relevant in explaining how individual and group interests influence the selection process. The study concludes that understanding these dynamics is important to promote a more democratic and accountable candidate selection system.

INTRODUCTION

The candidate selection process for the office of the head of government is a critical stage within political parties, including in local head of government elections. During this crucial process, political parties determine which figures are qualified to be endorsed as candidates for the election ballot. Candidate selection is one of the strategic functions of a political party in a democracy (Hazan & Rahat 2006). The candidate selection of local head of government in political parties is one of the basic functions of the party as a pillar of democracy and an agent of political recruitment. Political parties have the responsibility to identify, assess, and nominate individuals who are considered the most qualified and in alignment with the values and platforms of the political party to lead the local government. As a political party, the selection process should not only ensure the sustainability of the political parties' ideology at the local level, but also the delivery of the citizens' voice and aspirations through political representation. Local election regulations provide a formal framework for parties to conduct selection, determine candidate requirements and nomination procedures, hence creating political legitimacy in their process.

Internal party democracy played a crucial factor in determining the selection process. Diverse mechanisms within every political party, influenced by organizational structure, political culture, and the power of prominent elites, will determine how candidates are identified and nominated. The political party's strategic considerations to win the elections, including the popularity of the candidate, electability, and financial resources, are often decisive factors in the final decision. The study of internal party democratization, especially in the context of the selection of local head candidates, is increasingly relevant in enhancing the quality of democracy at the local level. However, it illustrates how strategic decisions regarding nominations are frequently taken in a closed door situation, far from the participation of party affiliates at large.

Non-elite considerations such as voters' aspirations and expectations remain important considerations, although frequently distorted by internal party elite interests.

Political parties that are responsive to voters' needs and expectations tend to nominate candidates who are highly relevant to the local context in terms of vision, integrity and capacity. Competition between political parties makes candidate selection even increasingly critical as a strategy to win elections. Political parties seek to identify and endorse candidates who have the highest potential to beat candidates from other political parties (Prianto, 2024). This process involves an in-depth evaluation of the candidate's track record, survey performance, and financial resources.

There are numerous studies regarding candidate selection systems, procedures, and methods by political parties (Norris, 2006; Rahat & Hazan, 2010; Detterbeck, 2016; Vincentini, 2018; Budi, 2020). Nevertheless, it is still considered inadequate to explain how the candidate selection model within political parties, especially in the practice of electoral politics in Indonesia. Candidate selection was a strategic step in political recruitment, in determining the quality of prospective leaders.

Political recruitment and candidate selection are entirely different matters. Political recruitment is a way of seeking to attract potential candidates for political office, while candidate selection is the process whereby candidates are selected from among a competitive group of candidates (Siavelis & Morgenstern, 2008). The importance of the candidate selection stage is well known, leading to it being referred to as the "shadow route" (Bjarnegard & Kenny, 2015) or the "twin sister" of elections contested by political parties (Rahat, 2013; Prianto, et al., 2022).

Candidate selection practices in many places demonstrate closed and confidential practices. The experience of political parties in the United States, describes the candidate selection arena with the metaphor "smoke filled room". This political aphorism actually originated from empirical experienced in a room at Chicago's Blackstone Hotel in 1920. It was where the nomination of Senator Warren G. Harding to represent the Republican Party in the United States Presidential Election as a candidate was decided. The decision-makers were described as a group of "well-connected men of conscience" with party power, in the nomination of a "dark horse" candidate who differed from the will of the ruling group (Bagby, 1955; Prianto, et al., 2022).

The popular standout slogan 'secret garden of politics' (Gallagher and Marsh, 1988) is another term used to describe the secret and mysterious nature of candidate selection procedures. No one really knows what activities a minority of party elites are doing inside. The analogy of the "secret garden" of political parties in describing the candidate selection situation has been very powerful in further studies of political recruitment.

Since direct elections have been adopted, the contribution of parties is increasingly required in selecting qualified candidates. Transparent and accountable selection processes not only produce qualified candidates but also increase the legitimacy of political parties in the public and contribute to the quality of leadership and governance at the local level. There is no space for citizens and party members to access the selection arena and activities. Sarcastically, this is called a state full of muddy waters, to illustrate how dirty the determination of political party elites on the arena and activities of candidate selection.

Obviously, there are several critical issues that often characterize the selection process of regional head candidates by political parties. First, transparency and accountability in the selection mechanism are often in the spotlight. While each party has internal rules on how to select local head candidates, not all parties consistently carry out their own rules (Prianto, et al., 2021; Syahendry, et al., 2023). In candidate selection practices, unclear assessment criteria, lack of engagement of party members at the grassroots level, and suspected political payoffs may undermine the integrity of the selection process. The ultimate decision is frequently controlled by a limited number of party elites, which delegitimizes the true representativeness of aspirations and provides an opportunity for internal party conflicts. Second, underlying priorities and interests in political parties' decision-making is problematic. Political parties usually prioritize short-term electoral interests, the financial resources of candidates, or even transactional

considerations over the quality, capacity, and integrity of candidates to serve the citizens. Limited ability to recruit qualified candidates due to less effective kaderization or the political parties' lack of acceptance by high potential candidates also reduces the options. As a result, the voters are often faced with a less-than-ideal choice of candidates, which ultimately undermines the local development. When decision-making mechanisms within the party are dominated by a limited number of elites without engaging the support of grassroots participation, the candidate selection process becomes vulnerable to non-transparent and unaccountable practices. A state of affairs that reinforces the weakness of intra-party democracy in the selection of local head government candidates.

The longer the journey of electoral democracy, the symptom of stagnation and regression occurred (Power & Evewerburton, 2020). The political context in Indonesia shows that the phenomenon of local government head selection in political parties, especially in the Golkar Party and PDI-Perjuangan, is increasingly centralized and far from democratic procedures (Budi, 2020; Prianto and Yusraini, 2024). What an anomaly to generate local leaders who are required to govern in a decentralized system. This turns the candidate selection arena into a “*black market of politics*”, where political support can be bought and sold based on the law of “*supply and demand*” (Norris, 2006).

RESEARCH METHODS

The research method based on literature review is a systematic approach to identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing knowledge relevant to the research topic from various publication sources. In a previous research framework, this approach involves a comprehensive search of published scientific journal and other research reports.

The preliminary stages of the literature review-based research method involve identifying keywords that are relevant to the research topic. These keywords are then used to conduct systematic searches on various databases of scientific publications to collect previous research, as well as on official sources of relevant governments, institutions or organizations to obtain relevant documents. This was followed by reading and recording key information from each source, focusing on the theory, methodology, findings and conclusions from previous research, as well as the context, data and policies from official documents. The subsequent stage is to analyze and synthesize the information that has been collected. In previous research, the researcher will identify patterns, trends, contradictions and gaps in the existing literature. A critical analysis of the methodologies used in previous studies is also important to understand their strengths and limitations. The synthesis process then links findings from previous research with information from official documents, looking for common ground, differences or complementarities. The final stage is to formulate conclusions based on the analysis and synthesis that has been carried out, which will form the basis for the argumentation or theoretical framework in the current research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The candidate selection process, as part of political recruitment, is a strategic battleground for internal party power. Historically and comparatively, the candidate selection mechanism is identical to the closed, secret and mysterious arena of political parties. Both political catchphrases compare the role of selection committees to “smoke-filled rooms” and the nomination process within parties to “secret gardens”. Less research has been done attempting to open these “smoke-filled rooms” and “secret garden gates”. Formal rules exist and are identified in writing in the form of documents, but there is always a difference between *de jure* and *de facto* (Norris, 2006).

Candidate Selection as “*Smoke Filled Room*”.

The term “smoke-filled room” in politics refers to a secret and private meeting where a small group of powerful individuals, often party elites or “bosses”, make important decisions, such as selecting political candidates or formulating strategy, away from public oversight. The phrase

originated from a 1920 event where Republican Party leaders allegedly held a meeting in a smoke-filled hotel room to decide on their presidential candidate, Warren G. Harding. The term has acquired negative connotations, denoting undemocratic and non-transparent decision-making that prioritizes insider influence over wider participation or achievement.

The standout term *smoke filled room* is an analogy for a powerful and connected secret meeting, a gathering of cigar-smoking men meeting privately to determine the running of an uncontested candidate against the mainstream of the political party's aspirations. The term comes from the empirical experience of presidential nominations at the 1920 Republican national convention. A room at the Blackstone Hotel in Chicago in 1920 was the historic setting for Senator Warren G. Harding to run in the United States Presidential Election, who was later elected as the 29th President of the United States, really surprised many people. On that occasion, Harding, who has a background in journalism and media investors, was still a young senator from Ohio. Warren G. Harding's election cannot be separated from the role of Republican political brokers. These political brokers, described as "*a group of men with a cigar*", controlled the strategic decisions of the political parties, from a "*smoke-filled room*" (Bagby, 1955).

Prior to the presidential election system in the United States recognized the system of primaries and open conventions, US presidential candidates were determined by political party leaders. The determination by the political parties was through a well-known clichéd procedure known as a *smoke-filled room*, by a group of men in dark suits with large cigars. There is a sense that this process is undemocratic, non-transparent, and ultimately disadvantageous to voters (Motz, 2019). The considerable power of party elites may lead to them prioritizing their personal and group preferences in candidates

The political catchphrase smoke filled room evolved for the context of economic and political contexts at large. Kelsall (2002) describes the *smoke-filled room*, as a contradictory effect of political transformation in Tanzania, from "*veranda politics*" to "*air conditioner politics*". Veranda politics refers to the traditional model of governance by traditional authorities, while air-conditioner politics is a modernized is a style of governance modernization, as part of political reform activities driven by donor agencies. According to there is still a "*third room*", the *smoke-filled room*, which offers a contradiction to the governance reforms being undertaken.

Even the usage of the term smoke filled room has reached business activities. The Sherman Act provisions for companies not to determine prices in a closed meeting. Competition law indicates the potential for collusion from closed meeting processes (McCutcheon, 1997). The overall use of the term *smoke-filled room* describes disorganization, deviation from organizational laws and non-transparent activities.

The term "*smoke-filled room*" in the context of candidate selection in political parties describes an exclusive, closed, and usually non-transparent decision-making process. Instead, such strategic decisions tend to result from discussions and agreements among a limited number of party elites, far from engaging with all parties. Otherwise, these strategic decisions tend to be the result of discussions and agreements among a select few party elites, away from the attention of the public and without clear accountability to party members or the broader society.

This "smoke-filled room" practices have created various problems in the sense of internal party democracy and the qualified candidates produced. The lack of transparency provides an opportunity for transactional practices, nepotism, or favoritism, where subjective considerations and personal interests of the party elite may defeat meritocracy and grassroots aspirations. As a result, the candidates elected may not be the most qualified or best suitable for the needs of the people, but rather those who have close relations with the party elite or are able to make a specific "contribution".

In addition, the smoke-filled room phenomenon also represents the lack of intra-party democracy. When decision-making power is concentrated in the hands of a limited number of people, the participation and representation of party members at large is obstructed. Unsurprisingly, this undermines the principles of democracy in party organizations and has the potential to trigger internal conflicts and reduce the legitimacy of the party in the public perception. The public is finally faced with a choice of candidates determined exclusively by the

party elite, without adequate space to provide feedback or evaluate the quality of their candidate transparently.

Candidate Selection as the “*Secret Garden of Politics*”

Candidate selection has been described as the secret garden of politics, an obscure process, usually invisible from the public view, that is mostly organized by internal party rules, informal practices and power relations (Gallagher and Marsh 1988). Another finding on candidate selection in a comparative perspective. The study explored the determinant variables (legal provisions, government organization, electoral system, political culture and the nature of the political party) and the effects of candidate selection on nine countries were studied.

One of the findings is the strong relationship between federalism and decentralized candidate selection. Political parties require different strategies in different party systems. Decentralization of power makes the competition for party power competitive. Conversely, in a non-multiparty system with good stability of support, there is no need for political parties at the national level to accommodate the aspirational interests of regional branches of the party (Gallagher and Marsh, 1988).

Several studies have even attempted to complement the concept of the secret garden of politics. Such as studies on efforts to revealing (Bjarnegard & Kenny, 2015) and digging (Deiss-Helbig, 2016) the “secret garden” of politics. The study revealing the secret garden of politics identifies the existence of formal and informal regulation of the selection process (Bjarnegard & Kelly, 2015). The use of informal mechanisms is more utilized. The use of formal regulations is strongly influenced by the institutional arrangement of political parties. While studying digging the secret garden of politics, which tries to explore the formal and informal processes of selection mechanisms, especially in the representation of ethnic minorities in the German political system (Deiss-Helbig, 2016)

Another study conducted by Alexandre-Collier (2106) on “open garden of politics” in considering the primary election procedure as a mechanism that reveals the primary election procedure is a mechanism that unlocks the candidate selection process. Even though this preliminary election procedure is not adequate as an effort to democratize internal party candidate selection. Are candidate selection rules in political parties flexible? The question becomes important in looking at formal regulations inside political parties. Although there are formal regulations, informal aspects also always dominate candidate selection activities. These formal and informal aspects of selection are researched by several scholars (Gallagher and Marsh, 1988; Norris, 2006).

Kind of the “*smoke-filled room*,” the idea of a “*secret garden of politics*” describes the candidate selection process in political parties as a hidden space, only known and controlled by a very limited group of elites. This metaphor implies that the mechanisms and criteria used to select candidates are not available to the public and indeed are frequently not even well understood by most of the members of the party itself. Key decisions are planted and nurtured in secret, where informal power dynamics and strategic alliances between elites play a bigger role than formal rules or member aspirations.

The existence of this “*secret garden*” nurtures unfavorable practices in democracy. The lack of transparency creates an ideal environment for transactional and patronage. Party elites can use their power to cherry-pick candidates based on personal loyalty, financial gain, or other short-term considerations, in the absence of mechanisms for effective accountability or oversight. The result is that potential leaders of high quality and integrity may be marginalized because they simply do not have the right access or connections within the “*secret garden*”.

Furthermore, this “*secret garden of politics*” deepens the gap between the party elite and grassroots members, as well as between the party and the society in general. The closed and non-participatory selection process undermines party membership and their trust in the organization. The citizens also feel that they lack a role in determining who will lead their local government. Ultimately, it can contribute to political apathy and an erosion of the democratic quality in general, as elected officials might be more responsible to the “*keepers of the secret garden*” than to the people they are supposed to be serving.

Candidate Selection & the Challenge of Intra-Party Democracy

Recent media coverage frequently shows signs of democratic stagnation and regression. Voices of public disappointment with democratic practices are getting louder. There are strong indications of pessimism about the future of democracy. The state practices democracy in an ever decreasingly undemocratic manner (Power & Ewewarburton, 2020). Meanwhile, the challenges of the state are increasingly complex: from food disasters to conflict, from climate change to terrorism and organized crime, and from populism to corruption.

The global trend of the decline of democracy has been projected as post-democracy (Crouch, 2019). First, the lack of public participation in politics and policy making. Elites and their allies dominate, protecting their own interests; Second, political parties are no longer a channel for the aspirations and interests of the people, political party decisions are determined by elite groups; Third, tendencies to capitalize on artificial moves and populist issues in electoral politics; Fourth, the lack of people enthusiastic about participating and meaning-making in political life; Fifth, and most hazardous, is the loss of respect for the institutions, processes, and values of democracy.

Research on intra-party democracy has largely addressed nomination processes that are decentralized and democratized, both in developed countries and emerging democracies (Hazan & Rahat, 2010; Norris, 2006; Siavelis & Morgenstern, 2008). Intra-party democracy (IPD) is defined as the characteristics of the distribution of power in decision-making, among members and leaders within a political party - with two main dimensions, namely inclusiveness and decentralization. Intra-party democracy (IPD) describes party procedures relating to the regulation of internal party affairs, in the following terms: candidate selection, party policy setting, and procedures for forming coalitions (Croissant & Chambers, 2010).

The importance of democratization in candidate selection can be understood from two perspectives (Hazan & Rahat, 2009); the first perspective, a positive perception of democracy, is democracy as a system that allows all citizens to participate in the selection of competitive candidates and groups that claim to represent them. Based on this perspective, a more democratic system would balance the four basic elements of democracy: participation, competition, representation and responsiveness; the second perspective views democracy as essentially a controlled regime, where power is deliberately distributed among several actors. This 'negative' notion of democracy assumes that power is inherently abused, whether by popular power or oligarchy. This perspective emphasizes the control of power rather than the use of democratic mechanisms. The power to select candidates is dispersed, indicating a more democratic system is constructed.

Despite considering candidate selection based on internal political party democracy as an ideal model, various parties consider that it can deviate from the purpose and threaten the stability of democracy itself. Several studies have also shown the weaknesses of intra-party democracy (Croissant & Chambers, 2010; Seeberg, Wahman, & Skaaning, 2018). Internal democracy is considered vulnerable to dissent and conflict. Therefore, one of the formulas to address the weaknesses of internal democracy is a stable party leadership that is based on strong leadership. Even though in the end, the strong leader as the guardian of this stability personalizes the party institution.

The study results of Seeberg, Wahman, & Skaaning (2018) show that in most African countries, the problem of internal party competition is more dominant than inter-party (external) competition. Internal competition creates electoral violence in the nomination process. The nomination round is a part of the electoral process based on the discretionary of weak party institutionalization. This process is free from the involvement of the electoral commission and the electoral supervisory. Ultimately, weak internal party democracy can increase internal competition, resulting in political violence during nomination or election rounds.

Reaching more democratic candidate selection systems; a proposal for change.

Based on the research findings of Norris (2006) comparatively conducted on several parties in several countries, a pattern of democratic candidate selection was found. A systematic

recruitment guide, while explaining the stages of democratic candidate selection. In the context of encouraging internal democratization political parties in the selection of candidates, the stages and prerequisites are offered, as in the following scheme:

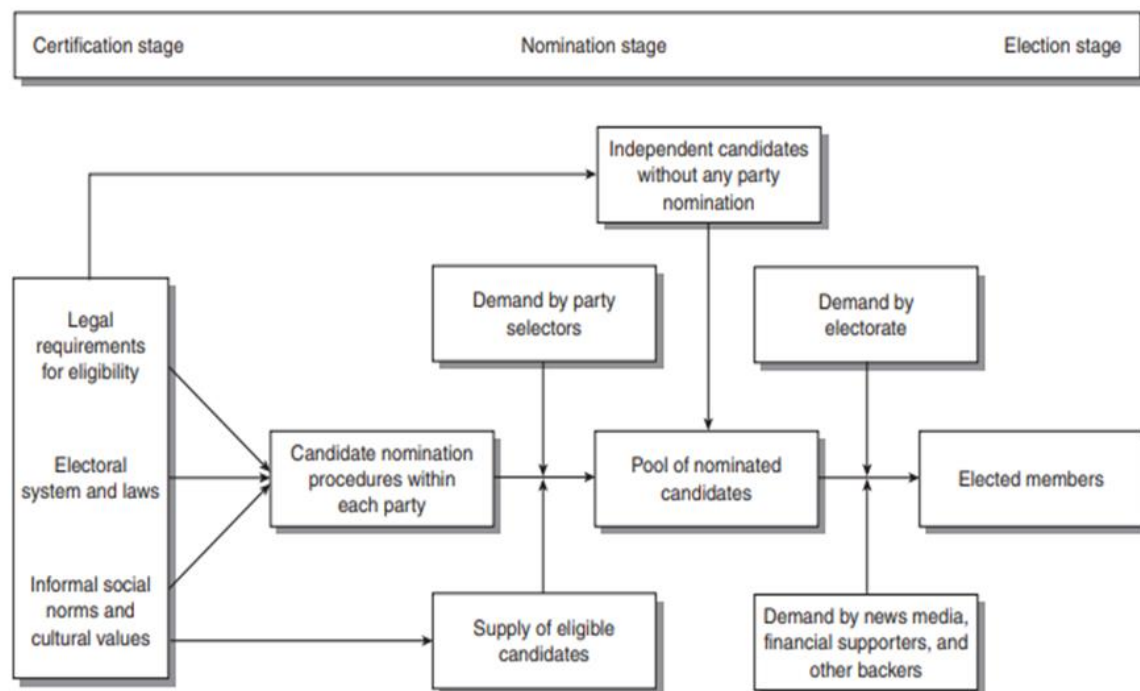


Figure 1.

Overview of the democratic candidate selection process based on supply and demand

Source; Norris, 2006

The democratic candidate selection model is internalized from discussing: (1) “who is eligible?”, (2) “who is nominating?”, and (3) “who is being nominated?”. The supply perspective means the procedures built by political parties in selecting candidates that are eligible. This eligibility takes into consideration the electoral law, political party regulations, and social informal norms or values that are believed by the local community. Meanwhile, in terms of demand, it pays attention to the preferences of party elites, whether they are self-interested, family, kin, or their friends. The chance of winning will be a pragmatic factor to encourage the chosen candidate, which usually means that the political party elites pay less attention to the qualified candidates (Norris, 2006).

The supply-side model is built on two key factors, which include (1). Resources, money, and experience, (2). Motivation, ambition and interest in politics. These are basic resources for potential candidates to race for political office. The potential candidates will apply to follow the internal procedures of the elite and the selectorate based on their level of eligibility. Political parties open wide access for those who meet the qualifications. On the demand-side of the election, the elite and the select committee will evaluate the candidates based on qualifications and experience. However, the selectors will make judgments based on elite preferences and interests as well as on the candidate’s “merit” background. Parties also provide “shortcuts” of information on certain candidates. Selectors will make positive or negative judgments, based on the characteristics of their relationship with the candidates (Krokk, 2010). In this position of selection procedures, the normative rules of the party to enforce internal democratization will

always be opposed to institutional procedures and the interests of political party strategic elites, thereby limiting access and fair competition.

The democratic procedure built with four stages of political recruitment which consist of: (1) a considerable number of citizens who are eligible to run for political office to (2) a smaller group of citizens running for political office in order to (3) a small group of citizens who are nominated to run for political office to (4) the smallest group of citizens elected for political office (Krook, 2010). Although these democratic procedures have been established, distortions of internal practices within political parties continue to occur. Ultimately, the democratic procedures that are established will be subject to the qualifications of candidates, based on experience, political connections, kinship, party service, financial resources, family 'name', and organizational skills (Rahat and Hazan 2001).

Model of supply and demand, framing the candidate selection mechanism within the framework of internal democratization of political parties (Norris, 2006). The focus is on systemic activity analysis of political parties internally, which work based on organizational regulations. In the development of political science, the old institutionalism approach supposes that the establishment of institutions and all the system tools that follow, basically to direct the order of actors in a particular setting. Political actors within a framework of political order are systemic, only following the normative guidelines that have been outlined. That is definitely true, but it is not complete enough to explain the behavior of political actors and institutions, which are characterized by dynamics and complexity of interactions.

The new institutionalism approach was developed in response to the behavioral and rational approaches, which assume that individual behavior is autonomous and not influenced by external factors (Peters 2004). The new institutionalism approach defines institutions as not the same as organizations. Specifically, institutions are defined as a set of rules, norms, procedures and various conventions that guide and constrain the behavior of individuals in organizations and societies. Institutions are not limited to structural organizational bodies but include aspects of the rules and regulations owned by an organization. The new institutionalism approach can be a perspective in assessing the actions of individuals in organizations, as well as the political benefits of the rules owned and operated by an organization (North 1990; Hall & Taylor, 1996; Peters, 2004; Lowndes & Roberts, 2013).

The formal characteristics of a political system include the laws and rules of political institutions. Its presence may explain why institutional reforms do not always succeed in making major political changes. But its impact recognizes institutional configurations that are not simply universal, but also particular, allowing conflict between the national level and the internal rules of political parties, whether systemic, practical or norm-based (Krook, 2010).

According to new institutionalism, political actors prefer institutionalization rather than fill institutions (Hall and Taylor 1996). The presence of institutions provides incentives for cooperation and exchange. Cooperation and exchange will prevent political actors from the uncertainty of competition and conflict. Cooperation and exchange of information enables coordination that ensures equilibrium and reduces political transactional costs.

While this new institutionalism approach is considered to complement the shortcomings of the old institutional approach, it is not free of criticism. On the relationship between decentralization and democracy in Indonesia, Hadiz (2004) critiques the neo institutionalist perspective that sees decentralization as too eager to promote participation, accountability, and the strengthening of civil society and social capital as policy objectives. Neo-institutionalists consider decentralization as a grand political project, which will succeed if governed in a rational

technocratic manner. The result is that political dynamics will be technocratically controlled. Hadiz suggests that decentralization should be seen as a process, integrated with factors of power, struggle and interest, which are often ignored by neo-institutionalists. The Indonesian experience shows that institutions can be hijacked by various interests, including by those who seek to realize them in a rational-technocratic manner.

Based on the new institutionalism approach, a variation of the model used is rational choice institutionalism (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Peters, 2004). The model is more appropriate in explaining how individual interests are born from rational calculations and actions of other actors. Interactions between rational actors can lead to competition and conflict that can affect the interests of many people. The relationship between political party elites and candidates as principal-agent relationship (Farell, 2018).

Model of Rational Choice Institutionalism in candidate selection of the head of local government election

The process of candidate selection was constructed by Norris (2006), i.e. requirements, registration and selection based on supply and demand, and the whole scheme of internal stages can be democratically reduced to answer the question: who is eligible, who nominates and who is nominated? Attempts to build internal democratization in candidate selection based on supply and demand, do not consider that the selection process is influenced by collective actions and individual and group preferences, which ultimately shape actions with the model of rational choice institutions (North 1990; Ostrom, 1991; Hall and Taylor 1996; Agrawal & Goyal, 2001; Poteete & Ostrom, 2004; Peters 2004; Krook, 2010).

The establishment of collective actions as well as individual and group preferences will create value for the achievement of collective goals. The preferences of individuals and groups will be determined by various types of institutions: systemic, praxis and normative (Krook, 2010). Systemic institutions are formal characteristics of a political system, such as the party system and electoral system. Practical institutions relate to formal and informal criteria as a condition for participation, including the applicable balloting system. Meanwhile, normative institutions emphasize more substantive matters, such as principles of equality and representation that are applicable.

The construction of the candidate selection model based on the literature review; the framework is as follows:

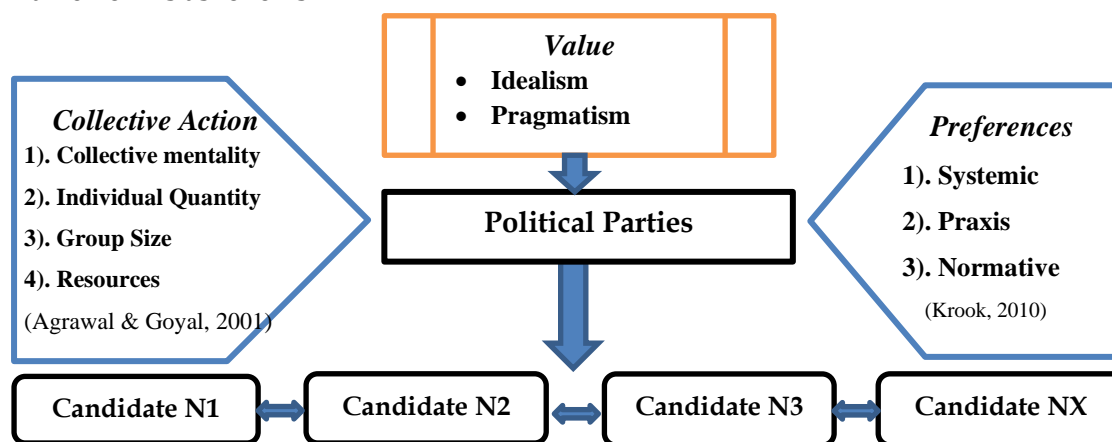


Figure 2.

Framework model of rational choice institutionalization candidate selection for local government heads in political parties

Source: Analyzed by author, 2024

The rational choice action can be explained by the collective action approach which includes: (1) collective mentality, which considers the factor to understand collective action that small groups are also rational and self-interested, but their goals will not be achieved without achieving the collective or larger group interest; (2) individual quantity, explaining that small groups will not be sufficiently needed to achieve collective goals; (3) group size, that group size is also positively related to the spectrum of collective actions and is influenced by production technology, the degree of exclusion, integration, supply, and the degree of heterogeneity within the group; (4) Resources, that the group as a collective resource user, uses costs that adjust to the degree of the institution.

The concept of preference based on a study by Krook (2010) is: (1) systemic choice, which in this principle choice looks at majority or proportional votes based on candidates or lists, based on open party lists or closed party lists, based on single party lists or preferred party lists; (2) practical choice, which in this principle choice looks at composition criteria and methods, namely : formal criteria based on age, citizenship, party membership, term limits, and informal criteria based on quota balance, skills, experience, excellence, party activism, family ties, money, insider or outsider status, and (3) normative choice, which is the choice of this principle looks at two norms, namely the norm of equality based on equal opportunities or equal results (system or party level), and on the norm of representation based on the politics of ideas or the politics of presence (system or party level).

The formation of collective actions and individual and group preferences will be internalized by the political value base. These three variables will be determinant factors for the electoral body or committee (selectorate) in making choices and achieving collective goals. The political value standards that determine the behavior of the electoral body/committee in selecting candidates consist of idealism and pragmatism. Idealistic values are idealistic-normative, indicating the personal qualities of candidates such as aspects of vision-mission, capacity, integrity, reputation for leadership, and membership in political parties. Meanwhile, pragmatic values are based on electoral calculations such as aspects of popularity, acceptability, electability, financial support, family and kinship networks and incumbency factors (Prianto and Yusraini, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This article highlights that the selection process of regional head candidates by political parties, although critical in a democracy, is frequently closed, non-transparent, and dominated by party elites. The practice, which is analogized to “smoke-filled rooms” and “secret gardens of politics”, undermines internal party democracy and produces candidates that might not be entirely representative of the voices of party members or the larger community. Short term party interests, candidates' financial resources, and transactional considerations frequently take priority over the quality and capacity of candidates to serve the public.

Moreover, this article explains that despite the existence of an ideal model of democratic candidate selection based on participation and decentralization, the practice is distorted by elite interests and lack of accountability. This is exacerbated by signs of democratic stagnation and regression, where political parties tend to be increasingly centralized in determining candidates. The article then offers an “rational choice institutionalism” perspective to analyze how individual and group preferences within the framework of formal and informal institutions influence the candidate selection process, which ultimately determines the outcome of the “black market of politics” in determining local government leadership.

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