



DIGITAL POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN LOCAL ELECTIONS: SOCIAL MEDIA'S ROLE IN BANGKA BELITUNG

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Abstract

The rise of social media has transformed political communication by enabling direct interaction between political actors and the public, including in local elections. This study examines strategies for strengthening political representation through social media and identifies factors affecting its effectiveness in building support bases in Bangka Belitung Province. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations of campaign activities, and analysis of candidates' social media content. The findings show that social media is used to build contextual political representation through narratives on local issues, candidate image building based on achievements and personal closeness, and targeted communication strategies for different voter groups. Its effectiveness depends on factors such as campaign team capacity, public digital literacy, responsiveness to public opinion, data-driven evaluation, and integration with offline interactions. Overall, social media serves as a strategic tool in local political communication, but its success requires an integrated and context sensitive approach. This study contributes to digital political communication research by providing local-level evidence and practical insights for developing adaptive campaign strategies in the social media era.

Keywords: Digital Political Communication; Political Representation; Social Media Campaigns.

Abstrak

Perkembangan media sosial telah mengubah komunikasi politik dengan memungkinkan interaksi langsung antara aktor politik dan masyarakat, termasuk dalam konteks pemilihan lokal. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis strategi penguatan representasi politik melalui media sosial serta mengidentifikasi faktor yang memengaruhi efektivitasnya dalam membangun basis dukungan di Provinsi Bangka Belitung. Metode yang digunakan adalah pendekatan kualitatif dengan studi kasus, melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi kegiatan kampanye, dan analisis konten media sosial kandidat. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa media sosial digunakan untuk membangun representasi politik kontekstual melalui narasi isu lokal, pembentukan citra kandidat berbasis prestasi dan kedekatan personal, serta strategi komunikasi yang disesuaikan dengan segmen pemilih. Efektivitasnya dipengaruhi oleh kapasitas tim kampanye, literasi digital masyarakat, respons terhadap opini publik, evaluasi berbasis data, dan integrasi dengan interaksi tatap muka.

Kata Kunci: Komunikasi Politik Digital; Representasi Politik; Kampanye Sosial Media

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INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communication technologies has brought about fundamental transformations in the ways political actors interact with the public. In contemporary political environments, social media has evolved far beyond its initial function as a platform for personal communication and now constitutes a strategic arena for political engagement and contestation. Through social media, political actors are able to communicate directly with citizens, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers and enabling faster, broader, and more personalized dissemination of political messages (Cobis & Cangara, 2023). Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok provide cost-effective channels for politicians to construct public images, mobilize supporters, and shape public discourse in real time (Górka, 2024; Panasenko & Khlivniuk, 2021). This transformation reflects a broader shift in political communication, where digital interaction increasingly defines how political representation is articulated and perceived.

Empirical evidence suggests that social media does not merely complement traditional political communication but actively reshapes it. It expands opportunities for political participation while simultaneously redefining the mechanisms through which political representation is constructed and maintained (Kashaka, 2025). In this context, political actors are no longer passive conveyors of information but active producers of meaning who strategically use digital platforms to influence public perceptions, set agendas, and build legitimacy. The interactive nature of social media further allows for immediate feedback from the public, creating a dynamic and reciprocal relationship between politicians and citizens. This shift has profound implications for democratic processes, particularly in local political contestation where proximity and personal engagement play a critical role.

Beyond expanding opportunities for participation, the growing reliance on social media in political communication has also generated urgent challenges for democratic processes. Digital platforms have facilitated the rapid circulation of misinformation, political polarization, and the manipulation of public narratives, which may undermine public trust and democratic legitimacy. These risks are particularly significant in local electoral contexts, where political competition often depends on interpersonal trust, reputation, and community-based legitimacy. This concern also resonates with broader scholarship on peace-oriented communication, which emphasizes that dialogue, mutual respect, and constructive engagement play an important role in mitigating social conflict and strengthening more democratic forms of interaction (Prasetyo & Poniman, 2025). In such settings, the strategic use of social media is not merely a matter of campaign innovation, but an increasingly urgent issue in understanding how political representation is constructed, contested, and sustained (Sheikh, 2024).

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Within the framework of political communication studies, political representation is understood as a communicative and relational process through which political actors convey their values, identities, and policy positions to the public in order to gain legitimacy and support (Kaloka et al., 2025). Representation in the digital era is inherently dynamic, as it involves continuous interaction, negotiation, and adaptation between political actors and their audiences. Social media facilitates this process by providing a space for symbolic exchange, where narratives, images, and messages are strategically crafted to resonate with specific groups of voters. This aligns with the agenda setting theory, which posits that political actors can influence the salience of issues by emphasizing particular topics, thereby shaping what the public perceives as important (Gilardi et al., 2021). At the same time, framing theory highlights how political messages are structured to influence interpretation, allowing politicians to present issues in ways that align with their strategic objectives (Salam-Salmaoui & Salam, 2023).

The integration of agenda-setting and framing perspectives provides a strong conceptual foundation for understanding how political representation is constructed in digital spaces. Social media enhances the capacity of political actors to control narratives, define political identities, and reinforce their legitimacy through continuous engagement with the public. In this sense, political representation is no longer limited to formal institutional processes but extends into everyday digital interactions that shape public understanding of political realities.

Beyond agenda-setting and framing perspectives, this study is also informed by Public Sphere Theory developed by Jürgen Habermas, which conceptualizes public communication as a deliberative process through which legitimacy is formed through discourse and interaction. In digital environments, social media can function as an expanded public sphere where political actors and citizens negotiate meanings, contest narratives, and construct legitimacy through communicative exchanges. This perspective complements agenda setting and framing by emphasizing not only how issues are made salient or interpreted, but also how representation is relationally produced through public interaction. Integrating these perspectives provides a stronger theoretical basis for examining digital political representation in local electoral settings (Correia, 2026)

A growing body of empirical research highlights the central role of social media in contemporary political practice. Studies indicate that political actors increasingly rely on digital platforms not only to disseminate messages but also to construct political narratives and sustain visibility between election cycles. For instance, local politicians have been found to use social media as an agenda setting tool to define issues and reinforce political identities (Steinveg & Bjørnå, 2023). Moreover, the circulation of political content such as memes, images, and short videos can shape public perceptions by translating complex political

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issues into accessible and persuasive forms (Halversen & Weeks, 2023). These findings suggest that social media functions not merely as a channel of communication, but as a strategic space where political representation is actively produced and negotiated.

In addition to shaping political narratives, social media also contributes to the formation and consolidation of support bases. Research suggests that online political engagement can stimulate broader political involvement, including campaign participation, political discussion, and voter mobilization (Theocharis et al., 2022). This indicates that digital communication extends beyond symbolic representation by connecting online interaction with tangible political support. The participatory character of social media also allows citizens to engage with, respond to, and sometimes co-produce political narratives, creating more interactive relationships between political actors and audiences. This reinforces the relevance of examining how support building processes are linked to strategies of digital political representation.

Despite these advancements, significant gaps remain in existing scholarship. First, current studies largely examine social media as a driver of political participation, with a strong emphasis on engagement, mobilization, and behavioral outcomes, while offering limited theoretical attention to how political representation is communicatively produced through digital interaction (López-López et al., 2023; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2018). Second, a methodological gap persists, as much of the literature focuses on macro-level patterns such as agenda setting, polarization, and large-scale behavioral trends while providing limited insight into the micro-level practices through which political actors strategically construct support bases (López-López et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2017). Third, a contextual gap exists because local electoral settings where informal relations, cultural norms, and interpersonal legitimacy play a central role remain comparatively underexplored in digital political communication research (Santos, de Lima & Ceron, 2023; Steinbach et al., 2020). These gaps indicate the need for a more nuanced analysis of digital political representation as a communicative and strategic process.

These gaps are especially relevant in regions characterized by strong interpersonal political relationships, such as Bangka Belitung. In such contexts, political communication is often shaped by close social ties, cultural norms, and localized issues, which require tailored strategies of engagement. This condition aligns with studies emphasizing that local wisdom and culturally embedded leadership practices play an important role in shaping trust formation, legitimacy, and relational engagement within community-based environments, thereby influencing how actors establish credibility and maintain public support (Astuti et al., 2025). Social media offers new opportunities for political actors to navigate these dynamics by combining digital outreach with personal interaction. However, the effectiveness of these strategies depends on various factors, including the capacity of campaign teams, the level of public digital literacy,

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and the ability to integrate online and offline communication. Understanding these factors is essential for analyzing how political representation is constructed and sustained in local electoral contestation.

Bangka Belitung provides a critical case for examining these dynamics because local political competition in the region is strongly shaped by interpersonal networks, localized political issues, and evolving digital campaign practices. The growing penetration of social media into local political communication creates a unique setting in which traditional relationship based politics intersects with digitally mediated representation. This study offers novelty by conceptualizing political representation not merely as electoral visibility or campaign messaging, but as a digitally mediated communicative process through which support bases are constructed and legitimacy is negotiated.

In response to these gaps, this study aims to examine how strategies of political representation are implemented through social media to build support bases in local political contestation, with a specific focus on Bangka Belitung. The research seeks to identify the communicative practices employed by political actors, analyze how digital narratives are constructed and disseminated, and explore how interactions on social media contribute to the formation of public support. By adopting a qualitative case study approach, this research provides an in depth understanding of the relationships between political representation, communication strategies, and support building processes in a localized context.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to both theoretical and empirical scholarship. Theoretically, it advances the understanding of political representation as a communicative practice in the digital era by integrating perspectives from agenda setting and framing theories. Empirically, it provides context-specific insights into how social media is utilized in local political environments, which remain relatively underexplored in existing literature. Furthermore, the study offers practical implications for political actors, policymakers, and communication practitioners by highlighting effective strategies for engaging with voters and building support through social media.

Synthesis of literature presented in this section underscores the importance of social media as a strategic instrument in contemporary political communication. It highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of how digital platforms are used to construct political representation and mobilize support, particularly in local contexts. By addressing these issues, this study contributes to the broader discourse on digital democracy and provides a foundation for future research on political communication in the evolving media landscape.

METHOD

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This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study strategy to examine in depth how political actors strengthen political representation through social media in local political contestation in the Province of Bangka Belitung. The study adopts a case study design because it enables the analysis of digital political communication phenomena within their real-life contexts, while accounting for the social, cultural, and local political dynamics that shape candidates' representational practices. Rather than measuring quantitative variables, this research focuses on processes, meanings, and strategies enacted by political actors in digital spaces. This approach allows the study to investigate symbolic interactions, political narratives, and candidate constituent relations as communicative practices embedded in specific contexts. Epistemologically, the design aligns with the qualitative research tradition that emphasizes contextual and interpretive understanding of political communication practices in natural settings (Creswell, 2021).

The study draws on both primary and secondary data and determines data sources through purposive sampling based on their relevance to the research focus and their capacity to provide rich and contextually grounded information. The research selects informants according to their roles, involvement, and knowledge of local political contestation and social media-based political communication. These informants include regional head candidates who actively use social media in campaign communication, campaign team members who manage digital engagement, voters who interact with or are exposed to candidates' online communication, and supporting informants such as representatives of community organizations and local political observers who contribute contextual insight into local political dynamics. The research continues data collection until it reaches sufficient informational depth and no substantially new themes emerge. In addition to interviews, the study conducts observations of candidates' social media activities by applying criteria such as relevance of content to campaign communication, frequency of posting, interaction intensity, and evidence of audience engagement, including comments, shares, and responses. The study also uses digital documentation, including social media posts, online campaign materials, and supporting documents, to complement and verify findings generated from interviews and observations.

The study applies inclusion criteria to select informants directly involved in local political contestation in Bangka Belitung, publicly accessible candidates' social media content published during the campaign period, and documents relevant to digital political communication strategies. The study excludes data that do not relate directly to political representation, remain private in nature, or cannot be verified for authenticity. The analysis focuses on three units of analysis: political actors as candidates, campaign teams as managers of digital communication, and social media content as narrative representations of political messaging. The study analyzes data through thematic analysis using an interactive model that involves data

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reduction, data display, and iterative conclusion drawing throughout the research process. To ensure validity, the study applies methodological and source triangulation to verify consistency across interviews, observations, and documentation. This analytical approach enables the identification of patterns of meaning and discursive strategies in digital political communication practices (Creswell & Clark, 2017; Yin, 2019).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Research Finding

The results of the qualitative data analysis derived from interviews, observations, and documentation of social media content indicate that the use of social media by politicians in the Province of Bangka Belitung centers on constructing political representation that is contextually grounded and locally relevant. Informants emphasized that published content was designed to reflect issue proximity to local concerns that resonate with the public, ensuring that political messages were not conveyed in abstract terms but were instead packaged in simple and accessible narratives for constituents (Theocharis et al., 2022). This finding aligns with contemporary patterns of political communication that highlight the importance of emotional and narrative proximity in digital political representation (Enli, 2025). Social media content management was handled internally by structured campaign teams, including cyber teams and IT managers, to maintain message consistency with the candidate's vision (Kreiss & McGregor, 2023). Dominant themes in campaign social media posts included narratives of positive transformation, tangible achievements, and personalized representations of the candidates.

Further findings demonstrate that social media functions as an instrument for segment-based mobilization of public support. Posts targeting younger voters, for instance through visual and interactive content, generated higher engagement among individuals under the age of 35, whereas older groups tended to respond more strongly to face-to-face communication (Theocharis et al., 2022). This segmentation was reflected in strategies that differentiated between digital and offline approaches based on audience demographic characteristics. Social media was also used to disseminate documentation of offline campaign activities, such as field visits and social initiatives, illustrating the integration of digital communication with direct interpersonal interaction (Sahana, 2023). This strategy produced a pattern of political representation that extended beyond the distribution of digital messages to the reinforcement of social ties between candidates and voters.

Findings related to the effectiveness of social media in fostering political participation and communication with constituents reveal several structural and contextual factors influencing platform performance. First, the availability of competent internal human resources for social media management was

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a key determinant of digital communication consistency, with internal teams responsible for content evaluation and audience response (Jungherr, 2024). Second, levels of digital literacy varied across the population, making digital messages more effective among groups accustomed to using social platforms than among those with limited digital literacy (Ip, 2024). Third, responses to public aspirations on social media were managed selectively by campaign teams, balancing the avoidance of direct confrontation with critics and the provision of counter-content when necessary, reflecting a controlled strategy of public opinion management (Wang et al., 2023). Fourth, the combination of social media with offline political activities, such as face-to-face interaction, remained essential for fostering participation, as social media did not fully replace the role of interpersonal communication in local contexts (Theocharis et al., 2022).

Thematic analysis also indicates that the effectiveness of social media as a channel of political communication is closely linked to data-driven evaluation mechanisms, such as internal surveys assessing the contribution of social media to candidates' electoral prospects. These data were used to adjust campaign strategies in real time (Jungherr, 2024). The findings further show that social media expands opportunities for political participation among younger and digitally savvy groups, while still demonstrating limitations in reaching older or less technologically familiar populations. Consequently, digital political communication strategies must be complemented by offline approaches to ensure broad engagement across diverse segments of society (Theocharis et al., 2022).

Overall, these findings present a detailed empirical mapping of the configuration of social media utilization and the factors influencing its effectiveness in the context of local political contestation in Bangka Belitung. The results indicate that social media serves as a strategic tool for constructing contextual political representation, segment-based mobilization of support, and the integration of digital and offline communication. However, its effectiveness is highly dependent on organizational capacity, audience characteristics, and strategies for managing public opinion. These patterns reveal a complex relationship between digital communication practices and the dynamics of local political participation, without extending to evaluative judgments regarding their overall effects.

Discussion

The findings confirm that social media functions not merely as a campaign instrument but as a strategic communicative space through which political actors construct representation, negotiate legitimacy, and strengthen support bases in local electoral contestation. This finding directly addresses the first research question by demonstrating that digital political representation operates through the strategic construction of locally grounded narratives, audience segmentation, and the integration of online and offline communication practices. Rather than relying solely on message dissemination, political actors use social media to produce

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political meaning through symbols, issue framing, and interactive engagement aligned with constituents' lived experiences. These findings indicate that support formation in local elections depends not only on digital visibility, but also on the ability of political actors to align communication strategies with local social dynamics and voter expectations.

Interpreted through the lens of Agenda Setting Theory and Jürgen Habermas, these findings suggest that social media enables political actors not only to shape issue salience but also to construct legitimacy through communicative interaction in digital public spaces. Agenda-setting functions through the strategic prioritization of issues relevant to local concerns, while digital interactions create spaces where political meanings are negotiated between candidates and constituents. From a public sphere perspective, the findings indicate that social media extends representation beyond institutional processes into relational and discursive engagement, where legitimacy emerges through interaction, responsiveness, and symbolic proximity. These findings also support the argument that digital political representation is not simply informational but fundamentally communicative and relational.

Comparison with previous studies reveals both convergence and contextual distinction. Existing research often emphasizes the role of social media in expanding campaign reach and facilitating broad political mobilization (Kashaka, 2025). Consistent with this literature, the findings confirm that social media supports support-building and participation, particularly among younger and digitally engaged groups. However, this study shows that local political actors in Bangka Belitung employ more context-sensitive strategies through audience segmentation, selective interaction management, and hybrid communication approaches that combine digital outreach with interpersonal engagement. This extends previous scholarship by showing that local political contexts require more nuanced representational strategies than models centered primarily on mass dissemination.

The study contributes to scholarship by extending hybrid political communication theory through empirical evidence that support-building in local elections depends not only on online visibility but on the integration of digital narratives, interpersonal legitimacy, and offline political interaction. The findings show that digital political communication does not displace relationship-based politics, but rather complements and reinforces it. This contribution broadens the scope of digital political communication studies, which have often focused on national electoral contexts, by demonstrating how representation is communicatively produced in localized political settings shaped by social ties, cultural norms, and audience differentiation. In this sense, the study advances the understanding of political representation as a digitally mediated communicative process rather than merely an instrument of electoral promotion.

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The implications of these findings are significant for both future research and political communication practice. The findings confirm that the effectiveness of social media in local elections depends on the strategic integration of narrative construction, interactive engagement, and hybrid communication practices that connect digital communication with offline political outreach. From an academic perspective, future studies could explore how specific content genres, such as short-form videos or live broadcasts, influence political participation among different demographic groups or compare digital representation strategies across varying socio-political contexts. For practitioners and policymakers, the findings underscore the urgency of strengthening grassroots digital literacy and developing more systematic hybrid campaign strategies to engage diverse voter segments more effectively.

This study has limitations that should be acknowledged proportionately. First, its focus on a single local region, Bangka Belitung, may limit the transferability of findings to contexts with different socio-cultural characteristics. Future research should therefore expand the geographical scope of investigation through comparative multi-case designs. Second, the qualitative approach relies on interviews and social media content documentation, which may reflect the situated perspectives of particular informants. Future studies could incorporate mixed-methods approaches to strengthen analytical generalizability and assess whether similar patterns of digital political representation emerge across broader political contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that politicians in the Province of Bangka Belitung use social media as a strategic means to construct political representation that is contextual, personal, and oriented toward local issues. Political actors use social media to project proximity to constituents' social experiences, frame political identities through narratives of tangible achievements and positive change, and engage voters through segmented communication strategies aligned with demographic characteristics and communication habits. The findings confirm that the effectiveness of digital political representation depends not only on the use of digital platforms, but also on the organizational capacity of campaign teams, the level of public digital literacy, the strategic management of public opinion, data-driven campaign evaluation, and the integration of online communication with face to face political interaction. These findings show that social media reinforces rather than replaces relationship-based political representation in local electoral contexts.

This study contributes to political communication scholarship by advancing the understanding of digital political representation as a communicative and relational process shaped by local social, cultural, and structural conditions. The findings extend hybrid political communication theory by showing that

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support-building in local elections depends not only on online visibility, but also on the integration of digital narratives, interpersonal legitimacy, and offline political interaction. Beyond its academic contribution, this study contributes to the public interest by showing how digital political communication can support more inclusive participation, strengthen citizens' access to political information, and foster democratic accountability when political actors combine responsible communication practices with stronger digital literacy.

Based on these findings, this study recommends that political actors and campaign teams develop more systematic hybrid communication strategies that combine digital engagement with direct interpersonal outreach, adopt audience segmentation approaches tailored to diverse voter groups, and strengthen the professional capacity of internal digital communication teams. The study also recommends that policymakers and electoral stakeholders promote grassroots digital literacy initiatives to support citizens' critical engagement with political content and reduce vulnerability to misinformation. Future research should expand the geographical scope through comparative multi-case studies or mixed-methods approaches to strengthen analytical generalizability and deepen understanding of how digital political representation shapes democratic participation across broader political contexts.

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