

The empty ballot phenomenon in regional head elections from the perspective of the theory of communicative action

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of single-candidate pairs and the presence of empty boxes in Regional Head Elections (Pilkada) pose political communication challenges for election organizers in building public understanding. The 2024 Gresik Regency Election, which was contested by only one candidate pair and resulted in 40.28% of the votes going to blank ballots, serves as the empirical context for this research. This research aims to analyze the political communication strategies of the Gresik District General Election Commission (KPU) in socializing the blank ballot using Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action. The research uses a qualitative approach with an instrumental case study design, employing interviews, observations, and documentation. The research findings indicate that the KPU's communication strategy tends to be dominated by instrumental rationality oriented toward procedural and regulatory compliance. The information has been factually presented, claims of truth and neutrality have been maintained, and claims of accuracy have been made. However, the limitations of public dialog have resulted in claims of honesty and comprehensibility not being optimally fulfilled. As a result, empty boxes are more often interpreted as an expression of political protest. The novelty of this research lies in the analysis of the General Election Commission (KPU) as a communicative actor that reveals the dominance of instrumental rationality in the socialization of blank ballots in single-candidate regional elections.

Keywords:

pilkada; single candidate; strategy; socialization; communication

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INTRODUCTION

General elections, or Pemilu, constitute a democratic process through which state leaders are legitimately elected. Elections also serve as a mechanism for the transfer of power based on popular sovereignty and are recognized as a fundamental pillar of

democracy (Harahap et al., 2021; Zulfirman, 2022). The phenomenon of single-candidate contests in Regional Head Elections (*Pemilihan Kepala Daerah/Pilkada*) represents a dynamic that has increasingly emerged in Indonesia's electoral democratic practices. The provision of an empty ballot (*kotak kosong*) in single-candidate elections is intended to preserve democratic legitimacy by continuing to offer voters an alternative choice. In practice, however, this phenomenon not only raises administrative issues but also presents challenges related to political communication between election organizers and the public (Pakaya et al., 2022).

The 2024 Gresik Regency Regional Head Election serves as an important example of the empty ballot phenomenon. The election featured only one candidate pair, Fandi Akhmad Yani and Asluchul Alif, who were supported by a large coalition of political parties, resulting in the absence of alternative candidate pairs. This situation placed voters in a legally valid binary choice: voting for the single candidate pair or selecting the empty ballot. The high proportion of votes cast for the empty ballot in the 2024 Gresik election indicates tension between democratic procedures and public perceptions of the quality of political competition. The dominance of a large political party coalition backing a single candidate pair left voters with only two options: choosing the sole candidate pair or the empty ballot (Lestari et al., 2019). This condition created an abnormal political situation that required the public to understand the meaning, function, and consequences of such political choices (Dewi et al., 2022).

In this context, the General Election Commission (*Komisi Pemilihan Umum/KPU*) plays a strategic role as an actor in political communication (Amisan et al., 2024). The KPU functions not only as a technical organizer of elections but also as an institution that constructs and conveys political meaning to the public through socialization activities. Through its political communication practices, the KPU determines how society understands the phenomenon of single candidates and the empty ballot as legitimate options in regional elections (Moonti, 2019).

The high proportion of empty ballot votes in the 2024 Gresik Regency Election, which reached 40.28%, indicates serious problems in the political communication process during election implementation. This figure should not merely be interpreted as a voter preference but rather as an indication of a mismatch between the messages conveyed by the KPU and public understanding of the concepts of single-candidate elections and the empty ballot. This situation was further reinforced by a legal challenge filed by a civil society group, GENPABUMI, which argued that the socialization of the empty ballot option had not been conducted optimally (Husni & Harmanto, 2021). In light of this phenomenon, the Gresik Regency KPU must implement appropriate political communication strategies and introduce innovations in its socialization efforts to enhance public understanding of the empty ballot and single-candidate elections in future electoral processes.

Previous studies indicate that the phenomenon of single-candidate elections in regional head elections has largely been analyzed from the perspective of elite political configurations and party coalition dominance (Prilani & Hutomo, 2020). Other studies highlight the impact of the empty ballot phenomenon on public political participation, which is often characterized by low levels of voter understanding regarding the implications of such choices and declining trust in local political processes (Rohis, 2022). Furthermore, research on the role of the General Election Commission (KPU) in the context of regional elections has predominantly positioned the institution as an administrative and normative actor tasked with implementing electoral stages in accordance with regulations, including conducting socialization and disseminating information to the public (Muhazir et al., 2023).

A number of studies have examined the phenomenon of single-candidate elections and the existence of the empty ballot in regional head elections; however, these studies generally focus on political power configurations, voter participation rates, or the normative aspects of election administration. Previous research has not sufficiently explored the political communication strategies of the KPU in single-candidate elections, particularly in cases where the empty ballot receives significant voter support. There remains a lack of studies that position the KPU as a communicative actor whose practices can be critically analyzed, including the tension between demands for neutrality and objectivity and the realities of public socialization efforts.

This research gap is particularly relevant in the context of the 2024 Gresik Regency Regional Head Election. The election involved only one candidate pair, forcing voters to choose between the single candidate pair and the empty ballot. The election results showed that the empty ballot received 40.28% of the votes, a high percentage that reflects issues related to public understanding and acceptance of the single-candidate election mechanism. The substantial share of empty ballot votes indicates problems in political communication between election organizers and the electorate. Furthermore, the high percentage of empty ballot votes can be interpreted as an expression of protest and political dissatisfaction among some voters toward an election that presented only a single candidate pair.

The role of the KPU as the institution responsible for conducting voter socialization therefore becomes crucial. A more in-depth analysis is needed to examine how messages are constructed, delivered, and understood by the public. Accordingly, this study is important for analyzing the KPU's political communication strategies in the context of single-candidate elections using a theoretical approach that views communication as a process of mutual understanding rather than merely one-way information transmission.

Studies analyzing the KPU's communication strategies from the perspective of communicative action theory remain limited, particularly in the context of single-candidate regional elections. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the political communication strategies of the Gresik Regency KPU using Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action. This theory is selected for its focus on achieving mutual understanding regarding the empty ballot and single-candidate elections free from manipulation and domination by various actors (Muttaqien & Ramdan, 2023; Zakiyah et al., 2024). According to Habermas, this theory emphasizes four validity claims: truth, rightness, sincerity, and comprehensibility (Kaida, 2019). These four claims are employed to analyze the political communication practices of the Gresik Regency KPU in socializing the empty ballot during the 2024 Regional Head Election. This approach is used not only to evaluate the administrative effectiveness of socialization efforts but also to assess the extent to which the communication fulfills principles of rationality and succeeds in creating mutual understanding between election organizers and voters (Wahyudi, 2021).

Based on this background, this study seeks to examine how the political communication strategies implemented by the Gresik Regency General Election Commission in socializing the empty ballot during the 2024 Regional Head Election can be understood from the perspective of Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action. Accordingly, the objective of this study is to critically analyze the political communication strategies of the Gresik Regency KPU in socializing the empty ballot using the framework of communicative action theory.

METHOD

The research method employed in this study is a descriptive qualitative approach using an instrumental case study design. Descriptive qualitative research aims to explore central

issues and phenomena, which are then examined in greater depth and detail (Moleong, 2017). The instrumental case study was selected because the case under investigation is not viewed as a unique or isolated phenomenon, but rather as a means to gain a deeper understanding of the political communication strategies employed by the General Election Commission (KPU) in socializing the existence of the empty ballot in regional elections with a single candidate pair.

The data collection technique applied in this study is purposive sampling, utilizing three data collection methods, with each involving selected informants. First, in-depth interviews were conducted to obtain comprehensive and detailed information from key actors involved in the 2024 Gresik Regency Regional Head Election. These informants include the Chairperson of the Gresik Regency KPU, the Coordinator of the Legal, Data, and Information Division of the Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) as an election organizer, the chairperson, secretary, and public relations officers of political parties supporting the single candidate pair to understand the dynamics of political communication during the election, as well as members of the public as voters in the 2024 election.

Second, observation was conducted to examine the political communication processes implemented by the Gresik Regency KPU through direct observation, recording, and analysis of relevant activities related to the research problem.

Third, documentation was used to obtain supporting data for analysis and interpretation. The collected data include photographs, official documents, and interview transcripts (Anufia & Alhamid, 2019). Data collection was carried out from the initial socialization activities conducted by the KPU through to the vote-counting stage. The study focuses on the Gresik Regency KPU as the primary actor in the formulation and implementation of political communication strategies.

This study employs the Miles and Huberman interactive model for data analysis. This analytical technique consists of three stages. The first is data reduction, which involves selecting, focusing, simplifying, and transforming data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation to ensure relevance and significance to the research focus, particularly aspects related to the KPU's political communication strategies in socializing the empty ballot to the public. The second stage is data display, which involves organizing the data to reveal patterns of communication implemented by the KPU, the effectiveness of the strategies applied, and public responses to the socialization of the empty ballot. This stage also facilitates the identification of emerging issues and the planning of subsequent analytical steps. The final stage is conclusion drawing and verification, which synthesizes the analyzed data by considering relevant aspects, components, factors, and dimensions (Zulfirman, 2022).

In this study, Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action is employed as the analytical framework to understand the KPU's political communication strategies in socializing the empty ballot. Key concepts of the theory, particularly the validity claims, are used as analytical tools. The truth claim focuses on consensus regarding the objective and natural world and is used to assess whether the political communication conducted by the KPU aligns with voters' realities in accessing information related to the existence and meaning of the empty ballot. The normative rightness claim relates to the application of prevailing norms within the social world and is used to analyze the extent to which the KPU's political communication strategies align with social norms, democratic values, and applicable regulatory frameworks. The sincerity or authenticity claim focuses on the congruence between the internal intentions of the actor and their communicative expressions and is used to evaluate the honesty, transparency, and genuineness of the KPU in socializing the empty ballot in the Gresik Regency Regional Head Election. Meanwhile, the

comprehensibility claim is used to assess the clarity and intelligibility of the communicated messages, enabling the construction of mutual understanding between the KPU and the public without ambiguity or misunderstanding in the political communication process (Sufyanto, 2015).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis in this study employs Communicative Action Theory by examining four validity claims, namely the claim of truth, the claim of rightness, the claim of authenticity or sincerity, and the claim of comprehensibility. The claim of truth within communicative action theory constitutes a crucial element that reflects the extent to which communication represents objective reality, particularly in the context of public information dissemination. This claim also illustrates the institutional reality of the General Elections Commission (KPU) as the election organizer. The implementation of local elections (Pilkada) is realized through the delivery of information to voters. This claim not only provides informative communication but is also empirically validated through observable realities in practice (Rizqian, 2023). Truth is therefore one of the essential aspects of communicative action, as it serves to verify that the information conveyed is consistent with existing realities.

Based on the interview results with the Chairperson of the Gresik Regency General Elections Commission (KPU), Ahmad Taufik, the socialization activities conducted by the KPU during the 2024 Gresik local election (Pilkada) had been implemented. These activities were carried out through two main approaches, namely face-to-face interactions and direct outreach. This strategy was adopted to ensure that information regarding the empty box option and the single-candidate election could be effectively received by all segments of society in Gresik Regency.

The socialization was conducted in the form of face-to-face meetings with community organizations, university students, and journalists, as well as through capacity-building sessions for Polling Station Committees (PPS) and Voting Organizing Groups (KPPS) at the sub-district and village levels. In addition, the KPU utilized social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, X, and YouTube, as well as the official website of the Gresik Regency KPU, as channels for information dissemination. These findings indicate that, in factual terms, the KPU has fulfilled its role in delivering public information in accordance with its institutional mandate as an election management body.

The factual dissemination of this information is also reflected in the experiences of some community members as message recipients. One community informant stated that they were already aware of the existence of the empty box option prior to the local election and obtained this information through interpersonal conversations among residents. This awareness was primarily related to the situation in which only a single candidate pair was running, as other potential candidates failed to meet the nomination requirements. These findings indicate that information regarding the existence of the empty box option had factually circulated and was known among voters, even though the channels through which the information was received did not always originate directly from the KPU's official communication platforms.

The information dissemination carried out by the KPU indicates that various strategies have been employed to convey information to the public regarding the local election involving a single-candidate contest and the empty box option. The approach was not limited to face-to-face interactions but also incorporated social media as a means of broader information dissemination. This approach is consistent with the findings of Ambarwati et al. (2023), which suggest that social media is effective in reaching segments of society that are not adequately covered by conventional socialization methods.

Based on the data obtained, 40.28% of voters chose the empty box option in the 2024 Gresik Regency local election, indicating that messages concerning the empty box had not been fully comprehended by the public. This lack of understanding reflects a gap between the dissemination of information framing the empty box as a legitimate voting option and public perceptions that conflate it with the single-candidate ballot column. In addition, low levels of political literacy among the community also constitute a significant barrier to effective information delivery. Some voters perceived the empty box merely as an expression of disappointment or even equated it with abstention (*golput*), rather than recognizing it as a constitutional option with specific political consequences. These findings suggest that while information may have been delivered in its entirety, the communicative truth of the message has not been fully internalized as an objective reality within voters' understanding.

Furthermore, data collected from all sub-districts indicate that the average voter turnout among registered voters was 66.85%. This figure suggests a decline in public interest in exercising voting rights. Voters who lacked an understanding of the significance of the empty box option tended to perceive it as meaningless, which in turn contributed to lower levels of participation in the local election.

Within Habermas's framework, the claim of truth is not assessed merely by the presence of information, but by its success in representing the objective world in a manner that is both intelligible and mutually accepted. In this context, the KPU's socialization efforts have fulfilled the truth aspect of information delivery; however, they have not fully bridged the gap between the KPU's institutional reality and the cognitive reality of the public as message recipients. Accordingly, the claim of truth in the political communication strategy of the Gresik Regency KPU has been implemented procedurally, yet it continues to face limitations in fostering a shared understanding of the political reality of the empty box as a legitimate and meaningful option in a single-candidate local election.

The claim of rightness in communicative action theory refers to the extent to which communicative actions are normatively acceptable within a social community. In this context, the claim of rightness serves as an important instrument for assessing whether the communication strategies employed by the KPU reflect prevailing societal norms (Bhakti, 2020). Political communication strategies should therefore be evaluated not only from a technical perspective but also in terms of their relevance to the characteristics and social context of the community.

In the context of the Gresik Regency local election involving a single-candidate pair, the claim of rightness in the KPU's political communication was predominantly constructed through references to statutory regulations. This is reflected in statements from the Gresik Regency Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu), which emphasized that its oversight efforts were focused on ensuring the fulfillment of all electoral stages in accordance with prevailing legal regulations. Bawaslu stated that the primary duty of election supervisors is to ensure that "the KPU has implemented all stages in compliance with statutory provisions," while simultaneously acknowledging that the empty box is "legitimate and may be chosen by the public." This statement indicates the presence of heightened oversight by Bawaslu to ensure that formal legal legitimacy is balanced by substantive normative considerations.

The interview findings indicate that the KPU has sought to maintain neutrality throughout its political communication strategies. This is evident in the segmentation approach employed, which included socialization activities targeting university students (Universitas Muhammadiyah Gresik), first-time voters (SMAN 1 Menganti), the Gresik journalists' community, and Christian women voters. However, despite these segmentation efforts, the KPU has not yet reached all segments of society. Notably, the KPU did not

sufficiently leverage community environments characterized by strong religious values, nor did it involve the full range of religious communities in its socialization activities.

Based on the interview results with the Gerindra Party, it appears that the KPU has not yet implemented an adequately appropriate communication strategy for the people of Gresik Regency. The communication constructed by the KPU has also been insufficient in providing an equitable and comprehensive communicative engagement. Furthermore, the KPU has not sufficiently created social spaces that align with the community's strong religious values, which has contributed to the limited effectiveness of its communication strategy.

From the perspective of the public as message recipients, the claim of rightness in single-candidate local election communication is also understood within the normative framework of democracy. One community informant stated that the public can continue to participate in democratic processes even when only a single candidate is available, and that choosing the empty box is perceived as a form of response to dissatisfaction with the existing candidate. This statement indicates that, normatively, the mechanism of a single-candidate local election and the presence of the empty box can be accepted as part of democratic practice. In other words, the public does not question the formal legitimacy of this mechanism but rather interprets it as a legitimate space for political expression.

From a Habermasian perspective, a claim of rightness that is reduced to procedural compliance risks losing its communicative dimension. Norms are treated merely as rules to be obeyed, rather than as outcomes of a process of discursive justification involving the public. In the case of the Gresik local election, the KPU's caution in explaining the position of the empty box can be understood as an effort to maintain neutrality and avoid legal violations. At the same time, this stance limits the space for normative discourse regarding the meaning of the empty box as a form of citizens' political expression within electoral democracy.

This assessment is further reinforced by the interview findings with Ainul, which indicate that the KPU has not yet implemented a communication strategy that is appropriately aligned with the characteristics of the Gresik Regency community, particularly its strong religious values. The KPU has not sufficiently focused on creating social spaces grounded in religious values, nor has it actively engaged religious leaders, resulting in an uneven distribution of information among the public. Accordingly, the claim of rightness in the political communication of the Gresik Regency KPU may be considered formally strong, as it is supported by regulatory compliance and recognition from supervisory institutions and political parties. However, this normative legitimacy operates more within the logic of the legal system than within communicative rationality, as articulated by Habermas. The rightness of action is assessed through procedural conformity rather than through the formation of normative mutual understanding between election organizers and the public. This constitutes the primary limitation of the claim of rightness in the KPU's communication within the context of a single-candidate local election.

Accordingly, the claim of rightness in the political communication of the Gresik Regency KPU can be considered legally and formally strong, as it is supported by compliance with regulations and recognition from supervisory institutions as well as political parties. However, this normative legitimacy operates more within the logic of the legal system than within communicative rationality, as conceptualized by Habermas. The rightness of action is measured through procedural conformity rather than through the formation of normative mutual understanding between election organizers and the public. This constitutes the primary limitation of the claim of rightness in the KPU's communication within the context of a single-candidate local election.

The claim of sincerity in Jürgen Habermas's communicative action theory refers to a form of validity that focuses on shared agreement regarding the relationship between an individual's inner world and the expressions conveyed to the public. In the context of the 2024 Gresik Regency local election, the claim of sincerity is employed to examine the KPU's political communication strategies in socializing the empty box option to voters (Meyliana & Erowati, 2020).

In the context of the 2024 Gresik Regency local election, the claim of sincerity is employed to assess the extent to which the KPU's statements regarding openness, dialogue, and public participation are reflected in the implementation of political communication strategies related to the socialization of the empty box and the single-candidate contest. Based on interviews with the Chairperson of the Gresik Regency KPU, the institution expressed its commitment to creating spaces for dialogue with various segments of society and demonstrated an open attitude toward public invitations and feedback.

The KPU is still considered to be limited in its engagement with the community, as the scarcity of forums facilitated by the institution has contributed to public misunderstanding regarding information about the empty box and the single-candidate contest. The data above indicate that while the KPU formally opens spaces for dialogue with the public, such openness is largely reactive, as the KPU tends to engage only when invited by community members to conduct socialization activities related to the empty box. These limitations have resulted in insufficient direct engagement between the KPU and the public, which in turn has hindered the development of a deeper public understanding of the importance of the empty box as a legitimate voting option. This situation reflects a discrepancy between the planned communication strategy and on-the-ground realities. The KPU has not evenly disseminated information regarding the empty box and the single-candidate contest, particularly in areas that remain unreached. The claim of sincerity cannot be measured solely through verbal expressions of openness, but must also be evidenced through concrete actions that support the formation of comprehensive two-way communication. In this regard, the KPU's political communication strategy in socializing the empty box has not yet fully fulfilled the claim of sincerity.

From a Habermasian perspective, the claim of sincerity is fulfilled when communication not only reflects an explicit stance of openness but is also realized through actions that strengthen public trust and participation. In this context, the political communication strategy of the Gresik Regency KPU reveals a gap between its normative commitment to openness and the communicative practices observed in the field. This gap indicates that the claim of sincerity has not been fully satisfied, as the communication remains largely reactive and has yet to actively foster public dialogue that is inclusive, egalitarian, and sustainable.

The claim of comprehensibility in Jürgen Habermas's communicative action theory constitutes the final validity claim, emphasizing that political communication messages must be conveyed in a manner that is clearly understandable to message recipients. In the context of this study, this claim is employed to analyze the extent to which the messages delivered by the Gresik Regency KPU regarding the empty box option can be clearly understood by the people of Gresik Regency as active voters in the 2024 local election (Nurfathiyah, 2021).

Communication can be considered successful when the message conveyed is clearly understood by recipients without generating ambiguity. Based on interviews with the Chairperson of the KPU, it can be explained that the KPU has disseminated information through various media, including social media, community forums, and training sessions for PPS and KPPS officials. However, the use of social media as a primary channel for

socialization has not fully reached segments of the population who are less familiar with digital platforms, particularly residents in peripheral areas and older age groups.

Interviews with the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) indicate that segments of the public who were dissatisfied with the single candidate tended to channel their disappointment by voting for the empty box. This finding suggests that the political communication constructed by the KPU has not yet been fully understood by the public. Many members of the community have not received clear and adequate information, resulting in an information imbalance between the empty box option and the single-candidate alternative. This observation is further reinforced by a statement from the Vice Chair of the Golkar Party, Khamim.

The interview findings with the Golkar Party indicate that although the party's internal structure has disseminated information across all levels—from upper to grassroots levels—the reality in the field shows that many members of the public still do not fully understand elections involving the empty box and a single candidate. The Golkar Party has conveyed information through digital media such as Instagram, as well as through pamphlets and print media; however, public reception and understanding of the empty box option and the single-candidate contest remain uneven.

These limitations in comprehensibility are directly reflected in the experiences of community members as message recipients. One community informant stated that they had never participated in any socialization activities conducted by the KPU and were unaware of the existence of dialogue spaces or communication forums organized within their residential area. This statement indicates that although information has been disseminated through various media, not all members of the public have experienced direct communicative processes that allow for clarification and the development of deeper understanding.

This lack of understanding indicates that the primary issue within the claim of comprehensibility lies not in the absence of information, but in the limitations of dialogical communication processes that enable the public to grasp the political consequences of each available option. Some segments of the community continue to interpret the empty box as a form of abstention (*golput*) or merely as an expression of disappointment, rather than as a constitutional option with specific political implications. The limited public knowledge regarding the procedures of the empty box and the single-candidate election serves as further evidence that the communication conducted by the KPU has not yet been fully effective. Many citizens perceive abstention (*golput*) as equivalent to supporting the empty box, leading to misunderstandings within the democratic process. According to [Septiani et al. \(2025\)](#), the empty box phenomenon is often viewed as a form of public protest against the quality of candidates put forward by political parties, thereby contributing to less-than-ideal socio-political conditions.

Furthermore, voter dissatisfaction with the single-candidate pair has led some voters to channel their discontent by choosing the empty box. From a Habermasian perspective, the claim of comprehensibility is not solely concerned with the availability of information, but also with the capacity of communicative actors to adapt language and communication media so that messages can be understood on an equal basis. In this context, the KPU's political communication strategy continues to exhibit limitations in constructing messages that are easily comprehensible to all segments of society. As a result, the communication process has not yet fully satisfied the claim of comprehensibility, as some voters still lack an adequate understanding of the position and meaning of the empty box within a single-candidate local election.

Based on the overall findings and discussion, the political communication strategy of the Gresik Regency KPU in socializing the existence of the empty box in the 2024 local

election demonstrates a tendency toward the dominance of instrumental rationality over communicative rationality. Instrumental rationality is reflected in the KPU's orientation toward fulfilling procedural obligations, complying with regulations, and achieving technical targets of socialization through audience segmentation and information distribution. This approach positions communication primarily as a formal means of message transmission rather than as a dialogical process aimed at building shared understanding.

As a result, although information was factually delivered (claim of truth) and the KPU demonstrated normative commitment to neutrality (claim of rightness), the communication process did not fully realize consistent dialogical openness (claim of sincerity) nor ensure equal levels of understanding among voters (claim of comprehensibility). From the perspective of Habermas's communicative action theory, this condition indicates that the political communication constructed remains largely one-directional and strategic, thereby failing to cultivate a public sphere that enables the achievement of rational consensus among actors. Accordingly, the limited fulfillment of the validity claims is not merely attributable to technical constraints in socialization practices, but rather to a communication orientation that prioritizes instrumental effectiveness over communicative rationality—where dialogue, participation, and mutual understanding are positioned as the primary objectives.

CONCLUSION

Based on an analysis grounded in Jürgen Habermas's communicative action theory, this study demonstrates that the political communication strategy of the Gresik Regency KPU in socializing the empty box option in the 2024 local election has fulfilled procedural aspects of information dissemination and regulatory compliance, but has not yet fully achieved dialogical and substantive communicative effectiveness. Factually, the KPU has carried out its public communication function through various formal channels, thereby relatively satisfying the claims of truth and rightness at the institutional level.

However, this fulfillment has not been accompanied by the strengthening of the claim of sincerity and the claim of comprehensibility, both of which require dialogical openness, equality of communicative positions, and the internalization of political meaning by the public as voters. As a result, information regarding the empty box tends to be understood partially, ambiguously, or reduced to a form of abstention (golput) or an expression of dissatisfaction, rather than being recognized as a constitutional option with specific political implications.

Based on the overall findings and discussion, the political communication strategy of the Gresik Regency General Elections Commission (KPU) in socializing the empty box option in the 2024 local election demonstrates a tendency toward the dominance of instrumental rationality over communicative rationality. Instrumental rationality is reflected in the KPU's orientation toward fulfilling procedural obligations, complying with regulatory frameworks, and achieving technical targets of socialization through audience segmentation and information distribution. This approach positions communication primarily as a formal means of message transmission rather than as a dialogical process aimed at constructing shared understanding.

As a result, although information was factually delivered (truth claim), and normative neutrality was institutionally maintained (rightness claim), the communication process did not consistently facilitate dialogical openness (sincerity claim) nor ensure equality of understanding among voters (comprehensibility claim). From the perspective of Habermas's communicative action theory, this condition indicates that the political communication practiced remains largely one-directional and strategic, thereby failing to create a public sphere that enables the achievement of rational mutual understanding among actors.

Consequently, the limited fulfillment of validity claims is not merely a result of technical constraints in socialization, but rather stems from a communicative orientation that prioritizes instrumental effectiveness over communicative rationality, which places dialogue, participation, and shared understanding at the core of democratic communication.

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