

**PATRON-CLIENT NETWORKS AND PUBLIC UTILITY FOR INCUMBENT POLITICIANS IN ELECTIONS: A BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS**

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***Abstract***

*This study analyzes the relationship between patron–client networks and the strategic use of public utilities by incumbent politicians in electoral contexts through a bibliometric approach. It explores how patronage-based electoral strategies are conceptualized and debated within academic literature, particularly regarding the mobilization of state resources to secure voter loyalty and sustain political dominance. The primary objective is to identify patterns of knowledge production, influential scholars, dominant themes, and emerging research trajectories related to incumbency advantage and patronage politics. Methodologically, the study employs bibliometric analysis supported by VOSviewer software to visualize co-occurrence networks among keywords, citation relationships, author collaborations, and leading publication sources. This quantitative mapping enables a systematic understanding of the intellectual structure and evolution of the field. The findings reveal three major thematic clusters. First, political patronage and clientelism are strongly associated with the distribution of public utilities as electoral incentives. Second, incumbency advantage emerges as a central concept linked to resource control and institutional access. Third, social capital and local networks function as mediating mechanisms that strengthen patron–client exchanges. The analysis also shows a growing trend of interdisciplinary research combining political science, governance, and public administration perspectives. Overall, the study demonstrates that public utilities often operate not only as service instruments but also as strategic tools for power reproduction and electoral consolidation.*

*Keywords: Incumbent; Election, Politics; Patronage; Clientelism*

***Abstrak***

Penelitian ini menganalisis hubungan antara jaringan patron-klien dan penggunaan strategis fasilitas publik oleh politisi petahana dalam konteks pemilihan umum melalui pendekatan bibliometrik. Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana strategi pemilihan berbasis patronase dikonseptualisasikan dan diperdebatkan dalam literatur akademik, khususnya terkait mobilisasi sumber daya negara untuk memastikan loyalitas pemilih dan

mempertahankan dominasi politik. Tujuan utama adalah mengidentifikasi pola produksi pengetahuan, cendekiawan berpengaruh, tema dominan, dan arah penelitian yang muncul terkait keunggulan petahana dan politik patronase. Secara metodologis, studi ini menggunakan analisis bibliometrik yang didukung oleh perangkat lunak VOSviewer untuk memvisualisasikan jaringan ko-munculan antara kata kunci, hubungan kutipan, kolaborasi penulis, dan sumber publikasi utama. Pemetaan kuantitatif ini memungkinkan pemahaman sistematis tentang struktur intelektual dan evolusi bidang ini. Temuan menunjukkan tiga kluster tematik utama. Pertama, patronase politik dan klientelisme erat terkait dengan distribusi utilitas publik sebagai insentif pemilu. Kedua, keunggulan incumbency muncul sebagai konsep sentral yang terkait dengan pengendalian sumber daya dan akses institusional. Ketiga, modal sosial dan jaringan lokal berfungsi sebagai mekanisme perantara yang memperkuat pertukaran patron-klien. Analisis juga menunjukkan tren meningkatnya penelitian interdisipliner yang menggabungkan perspektif ilmu politik, tata kelola, dan administrasi publik. Secara keseluruhan, studi ini menunjukkan bahwa utilitas publik sering beroperasi tidak hanya sebagai alat pelayanan tetapi juga sebagai alat strategis untuk reproduksi kekuasaan dan konsolidasi elektoral.

Kata kunci: Petahana; Pemilihan Umum, Politik; Patronase; Klientelisme

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## 1. Introduction

In the portrait of electoral democracy in Indonesia, the situation and climate surrounding general elections often illustrate complex patterns of relationships, particularly regarding coalitions. These relationship patterns are mostly between incumbents and constituents, and certainly cannot be separated from patron-client practices and networks (Dharma, 2023; Kadir et al., 2021). This type of relationship represents a political interaction that involves personal and particular interests in a hierarchical structure, where the incumbent is positioned as a patron who generally possesses broad power and access to public resources, enabling them to allocate these resources to specific groups in exchange for votes from those groups (Sobari, 2023). Gonschorek, (2021) argues that this phenomenon will continue to take root and flourish within Indonesian politics as long as low ideological divisions, weak party loyalties, and the high prevalence of money politics in a decentralized state fiscal system persist within a strong parochial culture. The weak institutionalization of political parties, especially regarding their function as ideal spaces for political regeneration and communication for citizens, encourages incumbent preferences to rely on informal and transactional networks as a way to maintain or form new power in electoral contestation (Wiguna & Khoirunurrofik, 2021).

In line with this reality, Thomas Meyer (2012), in his book *The Role of Political Parties in a Democratic System: Nine Theses*, states that the orientation of political parties in Indonesia has shifted from their true ideological goal of improving the state of the country. This shift is characterized by party elites engaged in unclear ideological confrontations (an ideological battlefield) and opportunistic power struggles driven by economic motives. In this context, utilities or public goods that are distributed to provide broad benefits are no longer seen as the rights of citizens that must be fulfilled by the government without any

return. Instead, they have become instruments and symbols of the incumbent candidates' winning strategies in elections (Virananda et al., 2021), particularly at the regional level, where there is a high level of economic dependence (Berenschot et al., 2021). Elections in Indonesia are no longer an arena for the exchange of ideas about visionary policies; rather, they have become a means of reproducing power and stabilizing absolutism (established power). The practice of clientelism has blurred the line between society's full right to democracy and oligarchic interests (Komarudin et al., 2025). It is not surprising, then, that Indonesia's socio-political climate has consistently been under the control of rent-seeking (Permadi, 2021).

Patron-client networks have been at the root of every stage of electoral activity and political contestation in Indonesia for a long time. Elekwachi & Ufomba, (2024) state in their research that this is what causes many deviations from the ideal realization of effective governance. Furthermore, they also argue that patron-client networks in Indonesian elections are responsible for the failure to achieve efficient public service delivery, as well as the loss of merit-based recruitment and the undermining of quality- and intelligence-based recruitment of personnel or public officials. One of the reasons why patronage and clientelism are difficult to eliminate in Indonesia's democratic process is the core political strategy of populism. Wawan Sobari conveys that good policy performance does not guarantee incumbent political survival, and conversely, poor policy performance does not necessarily mean losing political power. This suggests that populism, competition, and clarity actually support patronage-driven democracy, at least since the 2005 elections (Sobari, 2023). In line with this, Washida, (2023) states that the distribution of patronage networks, broadly defined as 'material resources distributed for particularistic gain for political purposes,' ranges from the micro level (individual or household), to the meso level (geographical group, association, or sectoral), and up to the macro level (national or regional), with resources tailored for particularistic gain. The mobilization of these networks is determined by the electoral regime in which many incumbent politicians are involved. It is evident that there are systematic efforts by incumbents to violate electoral boundaries in order to perpetuate their power (Jaffrey & Warburton, 2024; Moeis et al., 2020; Rammohan et al., 2020).

Incumbent is a political term often used in elections and local elections, typically referring to politicians in executive positions. Etymologically, an incumbent is a person who is currently occupying an office. However, the term 'incumbent' in laws and regulations can also refer to an election or regional election participant who holds an office and is seeking re-election, either for the same position or for a hierarchically higher one (Rasyadi, 2021). In Indonesia, as a third-wave democracy, incumbents have different characteristics compared to those in developed democracies, where incumbents always have an advantage. This stands in contrast to the conditions in developed countries, where incumbents face vulnerability due to their victory depending on their performance in the previous term of office. Interestingly, this advantage is closely linked to stronger parochialism, which is measured by spending in their area to secure better results at the ballot box (Riono & Schraufnagel, 2020). Additionally, it is supported by persuasion mechanisms using mass media and social media, which enable the transformation of political discourse in relation to oligarchic power struggles, as well as the establishment of political access by political insiders and local figures (Dinarto & Ng, 2021; Rakhmani & Saraswati, 2021). Purwaningsih

& Widodo, (2020) state that the results of their research show that three key issues namely, the increasing power of incumbents, the phenomenon of political dynasties, and corruption at the local level are strongly interconnected from a governance perspective. However, as access to services, a form of public utility, expands more rapidly, voters in Indonesia tend to strongly favor incumbents returning to office (Lewis et al., 2020). Although the morality of incumbents often carries negative connotations and criticism (Kurnia et al., 2022), they are quite skilled at defusing tensions by making small compromises to survive various legitimacy problems, thus weakening the overall transformative potential (Novalia et al., 2021).

In addition to the mobilization of the electoral regime and the distribution of benefits, like a 'pork barrel' in a parochial political culture, the incumbent's strength in controlling political maneuvers in elections lies in a large governing coalition and a dominant presidency, coupled with weak parties that have few program differences (Pepinsky, 2024). This is certainly a reflection of proportionality with a high district size, which has implications for electoral politics, particularly in the dimension of socio-economic diversity. Fealy (2024) demonstrates the relationship between the two by portraying the figure of Joko Widodo in 2019. As he prepares to enter his final year in office, Jokowi has become the most powerful and influential figure in Indonesian politics, with more public support than any president since the 1998 Reformasi. He is widely credited with successfully handling the COVID-19 pandemic, maintaining a healthy economy through numerous national strategic projects, and overseeing equitable physical infrastructure development. Under his leadership, Indonesia has achieved its highest international profile in the history of its global engagement, while maintaining a largely peaceful and stable country. Because legitimacy is strongly established, it is seen by most parties as a supporting factor for the election of Gibran Rakabuming, the son of Joko Widodo, as Vice President in the 2024 election (Rusnaedy et al., 2021). In addition to party institutionalization, weak regulations also provide incumbents with a free space not only to arrange the distribution of public goods as campaign tools, but also to involve their families in extending their period of power (Rannie et al., 2023; Safa'at, 2022). However, what is highlighted this time is the possibility of allocating public funds, packaged in the form of programs and policies, not oriented towards fulfilling citizens' rights to receive utility benefits, but rather oriented toward maintaining power or forming new sources of power. At the regional level, this pattern of political relations can be analyzed through the election of the Governor of East Kalimantan in the 2024 Pilkada, where the candidate offered a scholarship program for students as a campaign promise if elected, with the program likely to be funded by public funds (Maulana, 2025).

The phenomenon of diversification and distribution of utilities as instruments to build the legitimacy and electability of incumbents is a central part of electoral political strategies in Indonesia, which tend to be pragmatic, opportunistic, and transactional (Virananda et al., 2021). Public utilities, which are sourced from the community and represent the basic rights of citizens that must be provided in accordance with the law, are often mobilized as hidden campaign tools and facilities by incumbent politicians to shape their image, create perceptions of success, escalate electability, and strengthen voter loyalty (Wang, 2023). Physical infrastructure development, such as roads, schools, hospitals, markets, or fiscal assistance, such as money, social aid for basic necessities, and a package of populist

programs, are selectively and temporarily distributed to vulnerable demographic groups to create positive perceptions of the incumbent (Anele, 2022). In many cases, the distribution of these goods and services is not entirely based on the objective needs of the people, but is targeted toward electorally strategic areas or loyalist groups (Amri, 2022; Pathak, 2024; Suswanta & Saday, 2024). This condition illustrates how sources of state wealth are controlled unilaterally and used as tools to shape the legitimacy of power, not only through ideal and substantive government leadership performance, but also through patronage mechanisms that make political relations full of exchange values and calculations (Prianto et al., 2023). The position of the electoral regime becomes increasingly strong in patron-client networks amid weak public accountability and institutional control (Siregar, 2025), further blurring the boundaries between the constitutional mandate and the practical politics of certain groups seeking to maintain or expand power, ultimately undermining the idealism of democratic values (Gammon, 2022; Mauk, 2022).

Several previous studies have discussed political practices in-depth, especially during the electoral momentum in Indonesia. However, there is still a gap in systematically mapping this topic, particularly regarding the connection between patron-client networks and the distribution of public utilities by incumbents as part of their electoral strategy. The majority of earlier studies have focused on issues such as changes in the electoral system and religious overtones in party ideology (Nurjaman, 2023), the implications of the relationship between social identity and religion on community cohesion and political freedom (Putra et al., 2021), the demarcation between bureaucracy and politics (Nadjib et al., 2022), authoritarian practices in contemporary democracies (Curato & Fossati, 2020), and the relationship between land lease business practices and the success of political candidates in several Indonesian villages (Kurosaki et al., 2024). However, there has been limited literature that employs bibliometric analysis to create a comprehensive visualization of trends, patterns, and tendencies in research themes related to this study. Therefore, this study aims to explain how patron-client networks and public utilities are utilized by incumbents in elections using a bibliometric analysis approach. This approach is expected to contribute academically by providing outputs in the form of literature mapping, identification of research trends and study topics, and analysis of relevant scientific networks. Consequently, the results of this research are anticipated to further enrich theoretical and methodological understanding of the diversification of electoral political practices, particularly concerning patron-client networks in Indonesia.

### **3. Method**

In this research, the method applied is a literature review with a bibliometric approach. A literature review or analysis must be structured, systematic, explicit, and reproducible (Varsha et al., 2024), and can be considered a method of mapping thought that emphasizes the boundaries of cognition (Azarian et al., 2023). Bibliometric analysis is an approach aimed at examining the change or evolution of a research domain, which includes topics, authors, intellectuals, social structures, and conceptual disciplines (Donthu et al., 2021). In general, bibliometric analysis is used as a discipline that focuses on quantitative studies derived from papers, journals, books, or other types of secondary data (İri & Ünal, 2024).

The bibliometric analysis method used in this research consists of five steps. First, defining the keywords 'Incumbent' and 'Indonesia' in the initial search stage (Defining Search Keywords). Second, performing the initial search using these keywords (Initial Search Result). Third, refining the search results to focus on articles with relevant topics (Refinement of the Search Results). Fourth, compiling statistics on the initial data (Compiling Statistics on the Initial Data). Finally, conducting data analysis with the help of VOSviewer software to perform co-occurrence analysis, which examines how often two or more keywords appear together in a document.

#### 4. Results and Discussions

##### *Defining Search Keywords*

The literature search was conducted in June 2025 using the keywords 'Incumbent' AND 'Indonesia.' The author utilized the Scopus database for literature searching and data collection. The search steps were as follows: TLE-ABS-KEY ('Incumbent' AND 'Indonesia') AND PUBYEAR > 2020 AND PUBYEAR < 2024 (LIMIT-TO (SOCIAL SCIENCES)). Additionally, the author specified the 'journal' type and set the publication timeframe to 2020–2024, limiting the research theme to 'Social Sciences.' Magazines, reports, newspapers, books, book reviews, and any materials not classified as scientific articles were excluded. As a result, the author obtained a total of 204 articles from the Scopus database, of which 177 were selected as published articles from 2020 to 2024.

##### *Initial Search Results*

The list of the top ten articles identified by Scopus (Unrefined Search) is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Top 10 Articles Identified by Scopus (Unrefined Search)

No	Author	Title	Year	Citation
1	Curato, N., Fossati, D.	Authoritarian innovations	2020	58
2	Mietzner, M. &, Muhtadi, B.	The myth of pluralism: Nahdlatul Ulama and the politics of religious tolerance in Indonesia	2020	33
3	Lewis, B.D., Nguyen, H.T.M., & Hendrawan, A.	Political accountability and public service delivery in decentralized Indonesia: Incumbency advantage and the performance of second term mayors	2020	29
4.	Gonschorek, G.J.	Subnational favoritism in development grant allocations: Empirical evidence from	2021	23

		decentralized Indonesia		
5.	Lewis, B.D.	How do mayors get elected? The causal effects of pre-electoral coalitions on mayoral election outcomes in Indonesia	2020	21
6.	Wardani, S.B.E., & Subekti, V.S.	Political Dynasties and Women Candidates in Indonesia's 2019 Election	2021	20
7.	Kohardinata, C., Soewarno, N., & Tjahjadi, B.	Indonesian peer to peer lending (P2P) at entrant's disruptive trajectory	2020	20
8.	Anwar, D.F.	Indonesia's hedging plus policy in the face of China's rise and the US-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific region	2023	15
9.	Rüland, J.	Democratic backsliding, regional governance and foreign policymaking in Southeast Asia: ASEAN, Indonesia and the Philippines	2021	15
10.	Novalia, W., Rogers, B.C., & Bos, J.J.	Incumbency and political compromises: Opportunity or threat to sustainability transitions?	2021	14

Source: Scopus

### *Refinement Of The Search Results*

Article selection was conducted to obtain articles that met the screening criteria. After reviewing the titles and abstracts, 27 articles were excluded for various reasons. First, 12 articles focused on irrelevant topics, specifically the relationship between digital and information technology and democracy. Second, seven articles discussed democracy from an economic perspective. Additionally, six articles examined democracy in the context of energy, minerals, and natural resources. Two non-journal sources were also identified. Finally, 177 articles with topics relevant to incumbents and elections in Indonesia were selected for analysis using VOSviewer software. The details can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Title of Table (9 pt)

No.	Search Screening	Number of Articles
1	Irrelevant (Digital and Information Technology Topics)	12

2	Irrelevant (Economic Topics)	7
3	Irrelevant (Energy and Mineral Topics)	6
4	Non-Journal Sources	2
5	Topics on Incumbents and Elections in Indonesia	177
6	Total	204

Source: Author analysis from Scopus Database

### Compiling Statistics On The Initial Data

Once corrected, the search results are downloaded and saved to the Mendeley application in the form of exported files in RIS format. This allows all information about the journal article to be included, such as the title, author names, abstract, keywords, and journal details (publisher, year of publication, volume, issue, and pages).

### Discussion

#### Data Analysis

This article provides a description and explanation of the bibliometric analysis of the keywords 'Incumbent' AND 'Indonesia,' with search criteria further specified to focus on election and democracy studies in Indonesia, sourced from the Scopus database. The bibliometric analysis presented in this article is based on data processed using VOSviewer software, which maps topic clusters, publication trends, and the density of study topics. This section discusses the identification of Scopus-indexed journal articles on the topics 'Incumbent' AND 'Indonesia.' Visual data sourced from Scopus and analyzed through VOSviewer offer comprehensive insights into the linkages between research topics and emerging trends. The results of the VOSviewer analysis include: (1) Clusters/Collections of network links between related topics, (2) Topic trends, and (3) Density, which illustrates the volume of research on each topic. The color intensity in the data reflects the amount of research conducted on each topic. The following figure shows the results of the VOSviewer Cluster analysis.

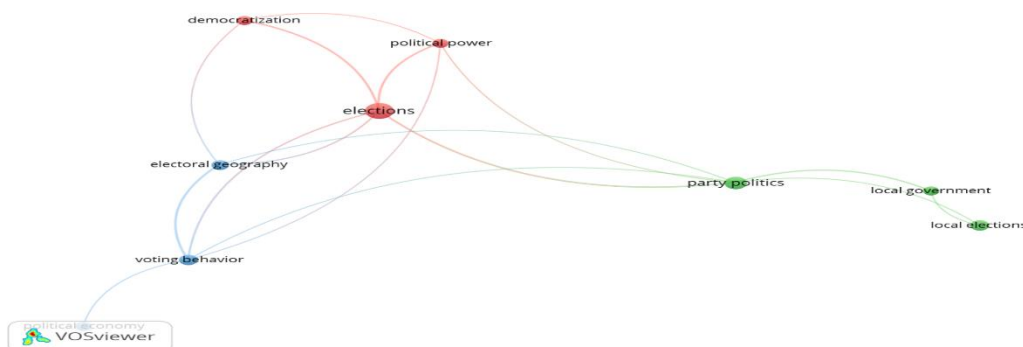
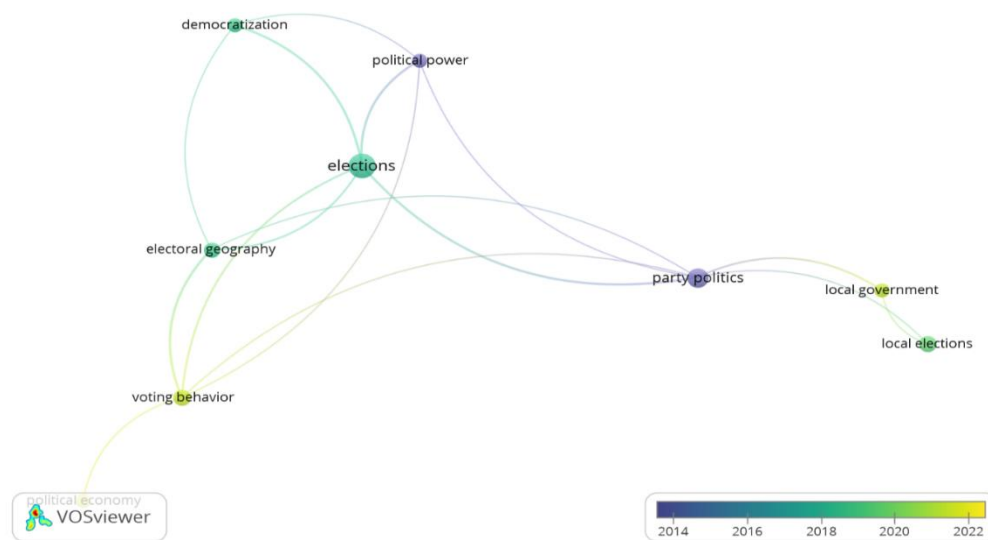


Figure 1. Cluster Study

The results of the data analysis show (Figure 1) that the topics 'Incumbent' AND 'Indonesia' are related to three clusters: (1) elections, political power, and democratization; (2) party politics, local government, and regional elections; and (3) electoral geography, voting behavior, and political economy. Cluster 1 illustrates that patron-client issues and the use of public utilities by incumbent politicians are frequently employed during elections and influence democratization. This strategy is used to maintain power in subsequent elections (Mietzner, 2024; Mietzner & Honna, 2023). Cluster 2 indicates that patron-client discussions are often linked to political parties and local governments (Rammohan et al., 2020). Meanwhile, Cluster 3 reveals that patron-client topics are commonly associated with political economy, voting behavior, and the location of elections (Aji & Dartanto, 2018;



Moeis et al., 2020; Yustisia et al., 2023). An analysis using VOSviewer was also conducted to examine research trends on 'Incumbent' AND 'Indonesia,' as follows.

Figure 2. Research Trends

Figure 2 shows the trend of research topics in Indonesia from 2014 to 2022. Since 2014, discussions on the role of political parties in patron-politics and clientelism have been a consistent and in-depth theme in scholarly studies. Between 2016 and 2020, the research focus began to expand to include critical aspects such as elections, local elections, and the spatial dimensions of politics, including electoral geography and democratization processes. More recently, since 2022, there has been a significant shift towards the scholarly study of voting behavior and political economy, making these two topics the main focus of recent research. This trend reflects a shift from structural analysis of patron-client relationships towards a more holistic approach—combining political-electoral dynamics, economic redistribution, local identities, and voter motivations—in response to the complexities of democratic development and elections in Indonesia.

In addition, the VOSviewer density analysis results illustrate trends that are currently

being researched in Indonesia. This visual data (Figure 3) was used to provide a snapshot of key areas in the bibliometric network. The development and density gave the author direction on relevant topics to be raised in this study. So that the results obtained from all review articles on “Incumbent” AND “Indonesia” will provide more complete and comprehensive literature in the next research reference material. Look at figure 3 about VOSviewer Density analysis.

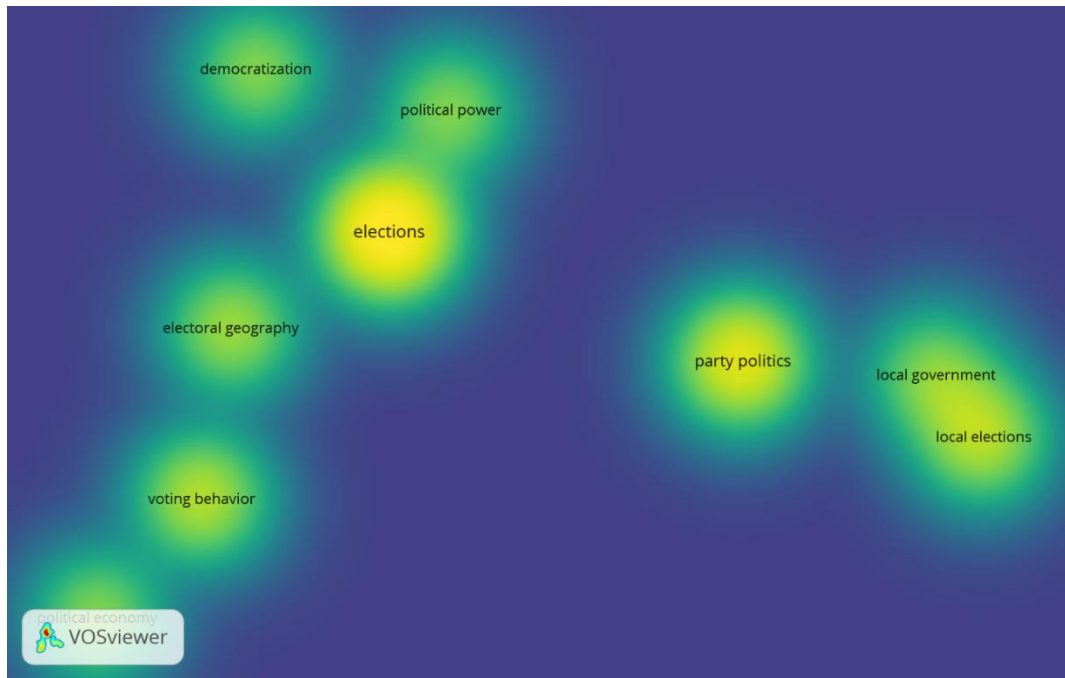


Figure 3. Density Study

The results of the VOSviewer density analysis show that the brighter the color of a topic, the more it is being discussed. Conversely, if the color of a topic is fainter, it indicates that the topic is being discussed less. Based on the results of this analysis, the topics of elections and party politics were found to be heavily discussed this is understandable, considering that Indonesia has recently gone through a series of 2024 elections. These include the legislative elections held on February 14, 2024, followed by the presidential election with public participation reaching 82%, as well as the 2024/2025 regional elections, where the coalition supporting President Prabowo Subianto dominated in many regions (Arifianto, 2023; Komarudin et al., 2025; Kuipers et al., 2024). This emphasizes that the topic raised in this research remains relevant and offers room for further discussion in future studies. While the topics of voting behavior and political economy have started to emerge since 2022, their scope is still relatively limited, presenting significant opportunities for further exploration. Experimental studies in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, show that voter behavior continues to be heavily influenced by patronage mechanisms and candidate personalization, indicating that there is ample space for further study in political economy dynamics and voter strategies. Therefore, the VOSviewer trends support the conclusion that this research is not only relevant to current issues but also reveals significant gaps for exploring topics that are still under explored.

## 5. Conclusions

This study has mapped the development, patterns, and trends of research on patron-client networks and public utilities used by incumbent politicians in elections using a bibliometric approach. The analysis found that the topics 'Incumbent' AND 'Indonesia' are related to elections, political power, democratization, party politics, local government, local elections, electoral geography, voting behavior, and political economy. This provides insights into the pattern of incumbent power distribution in Indonesian elections. Additionally, while topics such as elections and party politics are being actively researched in Indonesia, issues like voting behavior and political economy are still relatively underexplored.

A bibliometric analysis of the topics of patron-client networks and public utilities in the context of incumbent politicians in elections confirms that the phenomenon of patronage and clientelism has been a long-standing construct in Indonesia's political landscape. The asymmetrical relationship between patron and client-involving the exchange of public goods, services, and money-is a strategy that incumbents continue to maintain to maintain their electoral base. This practice is most often seen in local elections, where local politicians provide guarantees to clients or oligarchs to manage natural resources. It is noted that this bibliometric study is relevant, but still has large analytical gaps in the political economy and institutional mechanisms dimensions.

Due to the limited scope of this research, which relies solely on articles from the Scopus database and the use of the VOSviewer application for analyzing scientific articles, the research findings cannot comprehensively describe the power distribution patterns of incumbent politicians in Indonesia. Therefore, the researcher suggests the need to incorporate other scholarly articles sourced from reputable international databases, such as Web of Science and Dimensions Scholars, in order to enhance the clarity of further research and obtain more comprehensive findings.

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