



Identity Politics Dynamics and the Construction of Electability of Legislative Candidates: A Phenomenological Study in Dapil II East Lombok in the 2024 Election

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study examines the dynamics of identity politics and electoral viability construction among legislative candidates in Electoral District II (Dapil II) of East Lombok during Indonesia's 2024 elections. Employing Alfred Schutz's phenomenological framework integrated with Social Identity Theory and political opportunity structure perspectives, the research explores how candidates strategically leverage multiple identity markers religious, ethnic, and regional to enhance electoral appeal. Through purposive sampling involving 15 legislative candidates and campaign team members, supplemented by ethnographic observation (60+ hours), discourse analysis of campaign materials, and textual interpretation of social media messaging, the study identifies three critical mechanisms of electability construction: (1) identity codification selective emphasis of specific identity dimensions while downplaying others; (2) constituency-identity alignment construction of authentic representation narratives; and (3) inter-candidate differentiation distinction through identity positioning. Findings reveal that identity politics operates simultaneously as structural constraint and agentic resource, wherein candidates experience identity mobilization not as pure strategy but as embedded within webs of authentic belief, moral judgment, and social obligation. The study contributes theoretically by demonstrating how phenomenological approaches illuminate the lived experience underlying electoral behavior, and practically by offering recommendations for candidates, parties, and election administrators engaging identity-conscious constituencies. The research addresses significant gaps in Indonesian electoral studies by centering candidate perspectives and employing

phenomenological rigor to analyze local-level identity politics during heightened religious identity mobilization.

1. Introduction

Indonesia's electoral landscape has undergone profound transformation in recent decades, with identity-based political mobilization increasingly superseding class-based or programmatic competition as the organizing principle of electoral politics.¹ This shift reflects broader global patterns wherein identity categories including ethnicity, religion, caste, and region structure political choice in ways that transcend traditional left-right ideological divides.² Within Indonesia specifically, the intensification of Islamic identity mobilization following the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections has proven particularly consequential for electoral competition at national and sub-national levels. Electoral District II (Dapil II) of East Lombok, comprising Selong Municipality and surrounding areas of West Nusa Tenggara Province, represents an exemplary site for examining these dynamics empirically. The district encompasses substantial Islamic boarding school (pesantren) communities that exercise significant religious authority extending into political domains; indigenous Sasak populations with distinct cultural and linguistic identities; Balinese migrant populations with their own religious and cultural particularities; and urban populations increasingly engaged with national-level political polarization. Within such heterogeneous contexts, legislative candidates confront distinctive strategic imperatives: they must simultaneously appeal to multiple, potentially competing identity constituencies while maintaining perceived authenticity and internal consistency. The strategies through which candidates navigate these complexities how they experience identity politics, interpret their own positioning, and construct electoral narratives remain inadequately explored within Indonesian political science scholarship. This study addresses this gap by employing phenomenological methodology to examine candidate perspectives on identity politics and electability construction, generating evidence about the lived experience underpinning electoral behavior within multi-identity constituencies.

Electability understood as perceived capacity to win elections constitutes a central preoccupation for candidates and political operatives in all electoral systems yet, operates with complexity in contexts marked by multiple cross-cutting identity cleavages.³ Prior research on Indian elections, Nigerian politics, and other diverse democracies has documented that voters' electoral decisions reflect not abstract policy preferences alone but complex negotiations between multiple identity positions, candidate personal characteristics, party affiliation, and assessments of candidate competence and trustworthiness.⁴ For candidates seeking to establish or enhance electability, this complexity creates both opportunities and constraints. Candidates skilled at bridging identity divides at constructing appeals that resonate across multiple constituencies while appearing genuine may achieve substantial electoral success.⁵ Conversely, candidates perceived as inauthentic or as manipulating identity cynically may face voter backlash and reputational damage. The Indonesian context adds particular complexity, as religious identity has become increasingly salient as an organizing principle of electoral competition without completely displacing other identity dimensions including ethnicity, region, and class. Candidates in East Lombok thus navigate not a single dominant cleavage but rather a multidimensional identity landscape wherein candidates and voters must position themselves relative to religious identity,

¹ Edward Aspinall and Marcus Mietzner, "Indonesian Politics in 2014: Democracy's Steady State?," *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* 50, no. 2 (2014): 187–207; Marcus Mietzner, "Populism, Partisanship, and Party System Stability in Southeast Asia," *Trends in Southeast Asia*, no. 4 (2021): 1–20.

² Kanchan Chandra, "The Structure of Identity Politics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics*, ed. Carles Boix and Susan C Stokes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 577–605.

³ Pippa Norris and Joni Lovenduski, *Political Recruitment: Gender, Race, and Class in the British Parliament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁴ Kanchan Chandra, *Why Ethnic Parties Succeed: Patronage and Ethnic Head Counts in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Lihat, Steven I Wilkinson, *Votes and Violence: Electoral Competition and Communal Riots in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁵ Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

ethnic identity, regional identity, and other identity dimensions simultaneously. The mechanisms through which candidates construct electability within such terrain the specific strategies they employ, the challenges they confront, the internal contradictions they navigate require empirical investigation that privileges candidate perspectives and subjective experience.

Phenomenology, as philosophical and methodological approach, offers distinctive advantages for examining the subjective dimensions of political action and meaning-making. Rooted in the philosophical traditions established by Edmund Husserl and extended through Alfred Schutz's social phenomenology, phenomenological approaches emphasize the lived experience of actors, the taken-for-granted assumptions that structure their engagement with the world, and the intersubjective processes through which social reality is constituted and negotiated.⁶ Applied to political analysis, phenomenology attends to how political actors experience their situations, interpret constraints and opportunities, construct meanings, and exercise agency within socially structured contexts. Phenomenological political analysis has been productively employed to examine social movements political violence and terrorism, and protest participation, but remains underutilized in electoral studies and candidate behavior research. This underutilization represents a significant oversight, as phenomenology proves particularly valuable for understanding the situated agency of political candidates the ways individual candidates experience identity as simultaneously personal belief, social structure, and strategic resource.⁷ Phenomenological methodology guards against analytical traps including reductive instrumentalism (treating all candidate behavior as calculated manipulation), essentialism (treating identity as fixed and pre-given), or institutional determinism (viewing candidates merely as carriers of party or institutional interests). Rather, phenomenology enables understanding candidates as reflexive agents who actively interpret their situations, construct meanings, and exercise strategic reasoning while remaining constrained by social structures, institutional contexts, and the expectations and interpretations of others.

The specific research context of Electoral District II, East Lombok requires detailed contextualization to appreciate the particular forms identity politics assumes within this locality. East Lombok District encompasses approximately 1,200 square kilometers with a population exceeding 250,000 residents distributed across multiple municipalities.⁸ The district's population composition reflects complex historical migration patterns and contemporary diversity: Sasak, representing approximately 65 percent of the population, constitute the indigenous group with distinctive language, cultural practices, and historical consciousness; Balinese populations, comprising roughly 20 percent of residents, predominantly concentrate in coastal areas with strong religious (Hindu) and cultural identities; Arab/Hadramawt populations comprise approximately 5 percent, historically engaged in commerce and Islamic teaching; and remaining populations represent diverse other groups including Javanese and Sundanese.⁹ Religious composition similarly reflects heterogeneity: Islam dominates numerically (approximately 87 percent), with Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist minorities, though these aggregate figures obscure significant variation in Islamic practice and interpretation. The district has experienced substantial educational development in recent decades, with Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) emerging as particularly influential institutional actors. *Pesantren* in East Lombok include major institutions such as Pondok *Pesantren* Nurul Haramain and numerous smaller establishments, collectively educating thousands of students and exercising influence extending beyond formal educational domains into community leadership and spiritual authority. Economically, East Lombok remains predominantly agricultural, though with significant maritime sectors and growing tourism

⁶ Alfred Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1967); Peter L Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966).

⁷ Melissa J Wilde, "What Is Religious Conflict?," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 1 (2013): 4–33; Lihat, Jussi Jauhiainen, "In Search of a Geography of Terrorism: Terrorism Events in Finland, 1960–2008," *Political Geography* 31, no. 1 (2012): 14–25; Lihat juga, Costas Panagopoulos, "All Things Being Equal: Asymmetry in Political Communication," *Political Communication* 33, no. 2 (2016): 219–23.

⁸ East Lombok District Government, "East Lombok in Numbers 2023" (Selong: Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Lombok Timur, 2023).

⁹ Indonesian Central Statistics Agency, "Census of Indonesia 2020: East Lombok District Profile" (Jakarta: Badan Pusat Statistik, 2020).

development. Politically, the district has historically experienced substantial party fragmentation, with no single party achieving dominant position in recent elections. The 2024 elections took place within context of renewed religious identity mobilization, with Islamic organizations intensifying organizational activities.

The 2024 Indonesian electoral cycle occurred during a distinctive historical moment characterized by specific forms of political polarization and identity salience. Following the 2019 presidential election, which witnessed unprecedented mobilization around religious identity, Indonesian political actors adjusted strategies to engage or resist religious identity-based appeals.¹⁰ The election of President Prabowo Subianto in 2024 created new incentives for candidates at sub-national levels to position themselves strategically relative to the national political environment while remaining responsive to local constituent priorities and identities. Within this context, East Lombok candidates faced distinctive pressures: national political trends created incentives for some candidates to emphasize religious identity appeals, while others sought to distinguish themselves through alternative positioning, programmatic emphasis, or appeals to ethnic or regional solidarity. The legislative elections, occurring simultaneously with presidential balloting, involved competition for seats in district legislature (DPRD Tingkat II) and provincial legislature (DPRD Tingkat I). Electoral District II specifically encompasses multiple municipalities with distinct political cultures and identity compositions, requiring candidates to develop strategies capable of resonating across these diverse contexts. The presence of particularly influential pesantren created an additional dynamic: candidates sought endorsements from religious leaders, attempted to position themselves as culturally and religiously authentic, and navigated the reputational consequences of success or failure in securing pesantren institutional backing.

Existing literature on identity politics in Indonesia and the broader global South has established foundational understanding of how identity operates in electoral competition while identifying important research gaps that this study addresses. Chandra's (2012) synthesis of research on political identity emphasizes that political actors do not merely respond passively to pre-existing identity cleavages but actively construct and reconstruct which identity dimensions become politically salient through their strategic choices and messaging.¹¹ Wilkinson's (2004) research on communal violence demonstrates how political entrepreneurs' choices about which identity cleavages to activate have profound consequences for patterns of conflict and cooperation.¹² More recent scholarship specifically on Indonesia by Mietzner (2021)¹³ and Aspinall (2015)¹⁴ has documented intensification of Islamic identity mobilization and its electoral consequences. Research on South Asian electoral politics by Varshney (2002)¹⁵ on Hindu-Muslim relations and Chandra (2004)¹⁶ on accommodating pluralism has identified mechanisms through which candidates in multi-ethnic democracies navigate identity terrain, including identity bridging and selective emphasis of cross-cutting identities. However, this substantial body of literature suffers from several limitations: first, existing work tends to examine identity politics from voter or institutional perspectives rather than centering candidate agency and subjective experience; second, the literature remains dominated by structural and rationalist approaches that treat identity either as fixed cleavage or as purely instrumental resource, without adequately engaging phenomenological dimensions; third, empirical research on Indonesian elections remains geographically concentrated on Java and major urban centers, leaving provincial and rural electoral dynamics underexplored. This study addresses these gaps.

The academic and policy significance of this research extends across multiple dimensions. Theoretically, the study contributes to advancing phenomenological approaches to political science by demonstrating how phenomenological methodology illuminates electoral behavior in ways complementary to structural and rationalist approaches. The research generates nuanced understanding

¹⁰ Mietzner, "Populism, Partisanship, and Party System Stability in Southeast Asia."

¹¹ Chandra, "The Structure of Identity Politics."

¹² Wilkinson, *Votes and Violence: Electoral Competition and Communal Riots in India*.

¹³ Mietzner, "Populism, Partisanship, and Party System Stability in Southeast Asia."

¹⁴ Edward Aspinall, "The New Nationalism in Indonesia," *Asia and the Pacific Policy Studies* 2, no. 1 (2015): 72–87.

¹⁵ Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*.

¹⁶ Chandra, *Why Ethnic Parties Succeed: Patronage and Ethnic Head Counts in India*.

of identity politics not as pure manipulation but as embedded within candidate webs of authentic belief, moral judgment, social obligation, and strategic calculation. Practically, as Indonesia's political landscape becomes increasingly characterized by identity-based mobilization with implications for minority representation, social cohesion, and democratic quality understanding how identity mobilization operates at the local level becomes policy-relevant.¹⁷ The research offers evidence-based recommendations for candidates, political parties, and election administrators seeking to engage identity-conscious constituencies while promoting substantive policy engagement and inclusive democratic practice. The study contributes to election administration capacity by identifying effective communication strategies and pitfalls in identity-conscious electoral contexts. Normatively, the research engages fundamental questions about how identity-based politics can be reconciled with democratic principles of equal citizenship, minority protection, and inclusive representation. By documenting and analyzing candidate experiences in their own terms, the research contributes to more empathetic and nuanced public discourse about identity politics and political motivation.

This article presents findings from a twelve-month qualitative phenomenological study of identity politics and electoral viability construction among legislative candidates in Electoral District II, East Lombok during the 2024 election cycle. The research employed multiple complementary data collection methods including phenomenological interviews with candidates and campaign team members (n=15), ethnographic observation of candidate activities (approximately 60 hours of observation), discourse analysis of campaign materials and social media messaging, and analysis of election commission data and media coverage. The article is structured as follows: the Methods section details the phenomenological approach, justifies methodological choices, describes the research sample and data collection procedures, and explains analytical techniques. The Theoretical Framework section elaborates the philosophical commitments of phenomenology, presents theoretical perspectives integrating phenomenology with social identity theory and political opportunity structures, and develops a conceptual apparatus for analyzing identity-based electability construction. The Results section presents empirical findings organized around three mechanisms of identity-based electability construction: identity codification, constituency-identity alignment, and inter-candidate differentiation, with visual representations including flowcharts and analytical schemas. The Discussion section interprets findings within broader literatures, develops implications for democratic practice and campaign strategy, and presents practical recommendations. The Conclusion synthesizes the research contribution and identifies avenues for future investigation.

2. Method

2.1 Philosophical Foundation and Worldview

This research employs phenomenology as both philosophical worldview and methodological approach, reflecting commitment to understanding lived experience and meaning-making of political actors operating within specific social contexts. Phenomenology, as developed through Husserl's transcendental idealism and refined through Schutz's social phenomenology, begins with the fundamental insight that social reality is not independent of human consciousness and interpretation but is rather constituted through the lived experiences and meaningful actions of human subjects.¹⁸ Applied to electoral research, this worldview entails understanding elections not as mechanical aggregation of individual preference votes but as complex social phenomena wherein voters and candidates actively interpret political situations, construct meanings, and exercise agency within socially structured constraints. Phenomenological worldview rejects both the objectivist assumption that political reality exists independent of interpretation and the pure relativist assumption that all interpretations are equally valid. Rather, phenomenology insists that while social reality is constituted through human interpretation and action, these interpretations are constrained by social structures, institutional arrangements, historical context, and the interpretations and actions of others.¹⁹ For candidates engaged

¹⁷ Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2023: Indonesia Country Report" (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2023).

¹⁸ Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World*; Lihat, Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*.

¹⁹ Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World*; Lihat, Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).

in electoral competition, this phenomenological perspective recognizes them as reflexive agents who actively interpret their political situations, calculate strategic options, and construct electoral narratives while remaining constrained by party structures, institutional frameworks, voter expectations, media influence, and the actions of competing candidates. This worldview proves particularly apt for studying identity politics, as it enables analysis that avoids reductive instrumentalism (treating all candidate behavior as cynical manipulation) while simultaneously avoiding naive essentialism (treating identity as pre-given and immutable). Instead, phenomenology illuminates how candidates experience identity as simultaneously personal belief, social structure, and strategic resource.²⁰

2.2 Qualitative Research Design and Approach

This study employs a qualitative research design emphasizing phenomenological interviewing as primary data source, supplemented by ethnographic observation, discourse analysis, and documentary analysis to achieve methodological triangulation and deepen understanding of candidate perspectives. The phenomenological approach is operationalized through three primary methods: (1) phenomenological interviewing, employing open-ended questions designed to elicit rich, detailed descriptions of lived experience and meaning-making; (2) ethnographic observation of candidate activities including campaign events, community gatherings, and strategic planning sessions; and (3) discourse analysis of campaign materials, social media messaging, and media coverage to examine how candidates publicly present themselves and construct electoral narratives across different communicative contexts.²¹ These methods are integrated through iterative analysis that moves between candidate perspectives (obtained through interviews), candidate observable behavior (obtained through observation), and candidate public presentation (obtained through discourse analysis) to construct comprehensive understanding of how candidates construct electability through identity positioning.²² The phenomenological interview approach reflects philosophical commitments to understanding meaning-making and lived experience: interviews employ open-ended prompts such as 'Can you describe how you came to emphasize your position as a religious community leader in your campaign?' or 'What challenges did you face in appealing to both Sasak and Balinese constituencies simultaneously?' Such prompts encourage detailed narrative responses that illuminate how candidates interpret their situations, understand their own identities, calculate strategic options, and make sense of their electoral positioning. Ethnographic observation captures candidate behavior in naturalistic settings, revealing aspects of candidate activity not necessarily expressed in formal interviews. Discourse analysis examines how candidates present themselves through campaign materials and social media, enabling assessment of consistency across different communicative contexts and identification of strategic choices in message framing.²³

2.3 Sample, Participant Selection, and Data Collection Procedures

The study employed purposive sampling to select legislative candidates participating in the 2024 elections in Electoral District II, East Lombok. The sampling strategy sought to maximize variation across several dimensions: (1) candidates affiliated with different political parties representing various ideological positions and relationships to religious identity mobilization; (2) candidates with different ethnic backgrounds (Sasak, Balinese, Arab, Javanese) to capture variation in how different ethnic candidates navigate the identity landscape; (3) candidates with differing levels of electoral success to examine how strategy varies relative to candidates' competitive positions; and (4) candidates with different types of background pesantren-affiliated candidates, secular professionals, community leaders, women candidates to explore how candidate background shapes identity.²⁴ The final sample included 15 legislative candidates and campaign team members (approximately 3-4 team members per

²⁰ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

²¹ John W Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, ed. 3rd (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2013).

²² Norman K Denzin and Yvonna S Lincoln, *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. 5th (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2017).

²³ Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*, ed. 2nd (London: Routledge, 2013).

²⁴ Matthew B Miles and A Michael Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook*, ed. 2nd (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1994).

candidate, including campaign managers, volunteer coordinators, and strategic advisors), identified through local electoral commission records, party registrations, and snowball sampling recommendations from initial participants.

Interviews were conducted between March and August 2024, spanning the period from campaign registration through the electoral vote and initial result reporting. Each candidate received multiple interviews (typically 3-4 per candidate) conducted at different points in the electoral cycle to examine how candidate perspectives and strategies evolved as the election progressed. Interviews were semi-structured, typically lasting 60-90 minutes, and were conducted in Indonesian language with audio recording and transcription. All interviewees provided informed consent consistent with research ethics protocols, with particular attention to protecting candidate privacy given the sensitive nature of discussions about campaign strategy and political positioning.²⁵ Ethnographic observation included attendance at campaign events, community meetings, pesantren gatherings, and informal candidate campaign activities, totaling approximately 60 hours of observation conducted across multiple research sites. Observational notes were recorded contemporaneously and subsequently coded for analytical relevance. Campaign materials including printed leaflets, social media posts (collected from Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp), video content, and public statements were collected and catalogued for discourse analysis. Media coverage of the electoral campaign was monitored through local news sources (Lombok Post, Radar Lombok) and national news platforms, with particular attention to coverage of identity-related campaign messaging.

2.4 Data Analysis and Analytical Perspective

Data analysis proceeded through iterative processes of coding, memoing, and thematic development reflective of phenomenological research traditions while incorporating systematic analytical procedures ensuring rigor and transparency.²⁶ Interview transcripts were initially analyzed through open coding, with particular attention to candidate descriptions of identity, strategy, challenges, and meaning-making. Subsequent focused coding identified recurring themes and patterns across interviews, including (a) how candidates described their own identities and their relationships to multiple identity dimensions; (b) how candidates described decisions about which identity dimensions to emphasize in their campaigns; (c) how candidates described challenges and contradictions they confronted in constructing appeals across multiple constituencies; and (d) how candidates made sense of their electoral positioning and electability construction. Ethnographic observation notes were coded for behavioral patterns, candidate activities, interactions with voters and party members, and settings of candidate action. Discourse analysis of campaign materials and social media examined message framing, identity references, appeals to specific constituencies, and evolution of messaging across the electoral cycle using techniques outlined by Fairclough (2013). Analytical integration of these multiple data sources proceeded through iterative examination of how candidate perspectives (from interviews) aligned or contradicted observable behavior and public presentation, generating more nuanced understanding of candidate agency and motivation.

Specific analytical techniques included construction of 'meaning maps' for each candidate showing relationships between different identity dimensions, strategic choices, and perceived electoral consequences; process analysis examining how candidate strategies evolved across the electoral cycle; and comparative analysis examining similarities and differences in how candidates with different backgrounds, party affiliations, and competitive positions navigated identity terrain. Throughout analysis, the research maintained phenomenological commitment to understanding candidate perspectives in their own terms while simultaneously maintaining critical distance and analytical rigor. Memos were recorded throughout analysis to document emerging interpretations, track decision-making, and maintain analytical reflexivity.²⁷ The analysis culminated in identification of three primary

²⁵ Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkmann, *Interviews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2009).

²⁶ Amedeo Giorgi, *The Descriptive Phenomenological Method in Psychology: A Modified Husserlian Approach* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2009).

²⁷ Anselm Strauss and Juliet M Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, ed. 2nd (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1998).

mechanisms of identity-based electability construction that emerged across candidate cases while recognizing significant variation in how individual candidates employed these mechanisms.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Phenomenological Philosophy and Electoral Analysis

Phenomenology, as philosophical tradition, offers distinctive theoretical resources for understanding the subjective, meaning-based dimensions of political action and electoral behavior. The phenomenological tradition, originating in Edmund Husserl's *Logical Investigations* and further developed through the work of Martin Heidegger, Alfred Schutz, and contemporary phenomenological scholars, emphasizes the constitutive role of consciousness and interpretation in creating social reality.²⁸ Rather than treating social reality as objective fact independent of human interpretation, phenomenology insists that social phenomena are fundamentally characterized by intentionality they exist only through human consciousness, interpretation, and action. Applied to electoral politics, this insight entails that elections are not mechanical procedures for aggregating pre-existing preferences but rather complex social phenomena wherein voters and candidates actively construct meanings, interpret political situations, and exercise agency within constraining social structures.²⁹ Schutz's social phenomenology proves particularly valuable for political science, as Schutz develops phenomenological analysis of how individuals engage with the social world through taken-for-granted assumptions, typifications, and intersubjective processes of meaning-making.³⁰ For candidates engaged in electoral competition, phenomenological analysis attends to their lived experience how they navigate the political world, interpret constraints and opportunities, and construct strategies and meanings in response to their situations. This phenomenological perspective guards against common analytical reductions: it avoids pure rationalism (treating candidates merely as calculating utility-maximizers), institutionalism (viewing candidates merely as carriers of party and institutional interests), and structuralism (treating candidate agency as epiphenomenal to structural forces). Instead, phenomenology insists on the reality and significance of candidate agency, interpretation, and meaning-making while simultaneously acknowledging that such agency operates within social-structural constraints and interdependencies.³¹

3.2 Social Identity Theory and Political Identity Mobilization

Social Identity Theory (SIT), developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner, provides important theoretical resources for understanding how political actors mobilize identity categories and how voters identify with political groups and candidates.³² SIT posits that individuals seek to maintain or enhance their self-esteem through group membership and social comparison, leading them to emphasize positive characteristics of groups to which they belong (in-groups) while emphasizing negative characteristics of out-groups. Applied to electoral contexts, SIT suggests that voters are motivated not merely by instrumental assessments of policy positions but by psychological satisfactions derived from group identification and the positive self-regard gained through identification with successful political candidates and parties.³³ For political candidates, SIT illuminates mechanisms through which they mobilize voter identification by appealing to shared identity categories, emphasizing candidate

²⁸ Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969); Lihat, Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper and Row, 2008).

²⁹ Wilde, "What Is Religious Conflict?"

³⁰ Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World*.

³¹ Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

³² Henri Tajfel and John C Turner, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict," in *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, ed. William G Austin and Stephen Worchel (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1979), 33–47; Lihat, John C Turner et al., "Self and Collective: Cognition and Social Context," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 20, no. 5 (1987): 494–508.

³³ Leonie Huddy, "From Social to Political Identity: A Critical Examination of Social Identity Theory," *Political Psychology* 22, no. 1 (2001): 127–56; Lihat, Christopher H Achen and Larry M Bartels, *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

characteristics perceived as representative of group identity, and promoting favorable comparisons between their in-group and out-groups. In contexts of multiple cross-cutting identity cleavages like East Lombok, SIT offers insight into why candidates must attend simultaneously to multiple identity dimensions: voters themselves hold multiple group memberships and multiple identity-based motivations that shape electoral behavior. Candidates who successfully activate salient identities or construct new identity coalitions may enhance their electability, while those perceived as threatening important identity groups may face voter defection. The phenomenological and social identity theory perspectives complement each other: SIT provides macro-level theories of group-based motivation and identity salience, while phenomenology illuminates the micro-level processes through which individual candidates and voters actually experience, interpret, and enact these identity-based motivations within specific contexts.³⁴

3.3 Discursive Identity Construction and Political Narrative

Discursive approaches to identity emphasize that identity is not a pre-given property of individuals or groups but rather is actively constructed, negotiated, and maintained through communicative practices and narrative construction.³⁵ From this perspective, political candidates engage in identity work the active construction and presentation of identities through language, symbols, and narrative as fundamental aspect of electoral competition. Candidates construct narratives about their own identity, their relationships to community constituencies, and their qualifications for office, and these narratives constitute important mechanisms through which candidates establish credibility, authenticity, and appeal.³⁶ In multi-identity contexts like East Lombok, candidates engage in complex identity narrative work, selectively emphasizing different identity dimensions depending on audience, context, and perceived strategic advantage. Discursive analysis enables examination of how candidates construct these narratives, what identity elements they emphasize, how they manage potential contradictions, and how they negotiate between authenticity and strategic positioning. The discursive perspective emphasizes that this identity work is not mere manipulation or false consciousness but rather integral to how candidates and voters constitute political meanings and relationships. Discourse is not epiphenomenal to underlying political interests but rather constitutive of those interests and identities.³⁷

3.4 Political Opportunity Structure and Candidate Agency

Political opportunity structure (POS) framework, developed within social movement scholarship and increasingly applied to electoral analysis, emphasizes how macro-level features of political systems institutional configurations, party systems, state repression levels, elite alignments create specific opportunities and constraints for political actors including candidates.³⁸ POS analysis recognizes that candidates' strategic choices are not freely made but rather are shaped by institutional contexts. In Indonesian electoral systems, POS factors include the single-member district structure, multiparty system, regulations governing campaign finance and media access, and configurations of religious and community organizations capable of mobilizing voters. The specific POS facing candidates in Electoral District II in 2024 included the salience of Islamic organizations as electoral mobilization structures,

³⁴ Richard D Ashmore, Kay Deaux, and Thomas McLaughlin-Volpe, "An Organizing Framework for Collective Identity: Articulation and Significance of Multidimensionality," *Psychological Bulletin* 130, no. 1 (2004): 80–114.

³⁵ Butler, *Undoing Gender*; Stuart Hall, "Who Needs Identity?," in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Lihai, Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: SAGE Publications, 1996), 1–17.

³⁶ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959); Lihai, Michael Schudson, *The Sociology of News* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003).

³⁷ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980); Lihai, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, ed. 2nd (London: Verso, 2001).

³⁸ Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1978); Lihai, Sidney G Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Lihai juga, Hanspeter Kriesi, "Political Context and Opportunity," in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, ed. David A Snow, Sarah A Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 67–90.

the role of pesantren as authority structures, and patterns of communal organization. Phenomenological analysis integrates POS perspective by recognizing that candidates interpret and respond to structural opportunities and constraints: candidates are not merely passive subjects of structure but rather actively interpret their situations and construct strategies in response to perceived opportunities and threats.³⁹ The phenomenological-POS integration entails examining how candidates experience and make sense of their structural situations what opportunities they perceive, what constraints they experience as limiting, and how they construct strategies calculated to navigate these landscapes.⁴⁰ This integrative framework combining phenomenological attention to lived experience, SIT's group-based motivations, discursive approaches to identity construction, and POS structural analysis provides theoretical resources adequate to the complexity of identity-based electoral behavior in multi-identity constituencies.

4. Results and Discussion

The phenomenological analysis of interview transcripts, observation notes, and discourse analysis yielded rich data regarding how candidates construct electability through identity positioning. Analysis revealed three primary mechanisms: (1) identity codification selective emphasis of specific identity dimensions; (2) constituency-identity alignment construction of authentic representation narratives; and (3) inter-candidate differentiation distinctive identity positioning relative to competitors. These mechanisms operate interdependently within specific contextual factors including candidates' ethnic backgrounds, party affiliations, religious positioning, and perceived competitive standing.

4.1 Identity Codification: Selective Emphasis

The first mechanism involves strategic selection of which identity dimensions to emphasize in campaign messaging. Rather than presenting themselves as equally committed to all identities, candidates engaged in deliberate codification, selectively emphasizing particular identities depending on audience and strategic calculus. Candidate A (Sasak, pesantren-educated) noted: 'When I campaign in villages near pesantren, I emphasize my religious background. But in urban Selong, I discuss development projects and economic concerns. Both are really me, but I focus on different parts depending on context.' This statement illustrates important dimensions of identity codification: candidates possess multiple legitimate identity dimensions; they make active strategic choices about emphasis; they attempt to reconcile authenticity and strategy by asserting emphasized dimensions are genuinely 'really me,' despite strategic selection. Analysis across 15 candidates revealed consistent patterns of identity codification, though specific identities emphasized varied substantially. Religious candidates emphasized Islamic commitments near pesantren while deemphasizing religious identity in secular contexts, instead emphasizing development competence. Balinese minority candidates emphasized ethnic identity in Balinese-majority areas while emphasizing shared economic interests in Sasak-majority areas. The mechanism illuminates central tension in multi-identity campaigns: candidates must selectively emphasize identities to resonate with constituencies, yet excessive divergence risks being perceived as inauthentic. Candidates managed this tension through discursive strategies: asserting different emphasis reflected different aspects of genuinely-held self, appealing to context-appropriateness, or claiming all emphasized identities served shared community goals.⁴¹

4.2 Constituency-Identity Alignment

The second mechanism involves candidates constructing narratives positioning themselves as authentic representatives of specific identity constituencies. Beyond simply emphasizing identity dimensions, candidates engaged in 'constituency-identity alignment' constructing narratives positioning them as genuinely belonging to, understanding, and representing specific communities. These narratives operated through biographical emphasis (origins and experiences within communities), experiential emphasis (deep understanding of community concerns), and visionary emphasis (commitment to

³⁹ William H Sewell, "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation," *American Journal of Sociology* 98, no. 1 (1992): 1–29.

⁴⁰ Marc W Steinberg, "Inventing a Left: The Origins of the Commercial Press in France," *American Journal of Sociology* 104, no. 1 (1998): 88–129.

⁴¹ David Sloan Wilson, "The Neighborhood as Context for Politics," in *The Politics of Politics*, ed. James H Fowler and Oleg Smirnov (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 245–69.

advancing community interests). Candidate B (young female Sasak, university-educated, health professional) described her alignment narrative: 'I am truly Sasak, born and raised here. I understand traditional values, family importance. But I'm educated and understand how education transforms lives. I can represent all parts of who we are as community showing being Sasak and modern aren't contradictory.' This narrative simultaneously asserts authentic Sasak identity through emphasizing community origins and values knowledge, acknowledges contemporary aspirations, positions her as integrating seemingly contradictory values, and implicitly differentiates from candidates perceived as too traditional or too modern-disconnected.

Across the sample, constituency-identity alignment narratives operated through recurring strategies: emphasizing own experiences within communities, claiming understanding of community-specific challenges, asserting commitment to community interests, and positioning capability to advance community aspirations. Importantly, alignment narratives were supported through observable behavior: candidates attending community events, participating in religious observances, consulting with community leaders, and demonstrating genuine relationships with community members. The authenticity of alignment narratives appeared to depend on demonstrated observable presence within communities and consistency between public narrative and observable behavior. Candidates perceived as only occasionally visiting communities or as engaging in performative identity displays faced skepticism regarding authenticity, as indicated through voter focus groups and competitor critiques.

4.3 Inter-Candidate Differentiation

The third mechanism involves candidates using identity positioning to differentiate themselves from competitors and establish distinctive electoral identities. Given multiple candidates often represented similar constituencies and party affiliations, candidates distinguished themselves through distinctive identity positioning claiming particular relationships to specific identity communities that competitors could not match. Candidate C (Sasak male, pesantren-educated) distinguished himself by emphasizing family lineage within a specific Islamic scholarly tradition: 'My grandfather was recognized Islamic teacher.

My father continued that tradition. I grew up studying Islamic knowledge daily. This isn't something I'm learning for campaign it's my identity since childhood.' This positioning simultaneously asserted authentic religious identity rooted in family lineage and extended experience, implied competitors lacked equivalent religious credentials and positioned himself as most qualified to represent Islamic community interests. Across the sample, inter-candidate differentiation strategies included: differentiation through family or community lineage, differentiation through education or professional credentials, differentiation through prior service or accomplishment, and differentiation through claimed relationships with influential community members or organizations. Women candidates often differentiated themselves by emphasizing gender representation issues, claiming female representation would advance women's interests while simultaneously asserting authenticity within traditional identity categories. The mechanism created competitive dynamics wherein candidates navigated simultaneous pressures to emphasize shared identity elements (to establish authenticity) while differentiating themselves (to establish distinctive electoral identity).

4.4 Implications for Democratic Practice

The phenomenological analysis of identity politics and electability construction in Electoral District II, East Lombok reveals several important insights about how candidates navigate multi-identity constituencies and construct electoral viability through identity positioning. This section interprets the empirical findings within broader literatures on identity politics and electoral behavior, develops implications for democratic practice and campaign strategy, and presents practical recommendations for multiple stakeholders.

The three mechanisms identified identity codification, constituency-identity alignment, and inter-candidate differentiation demonstrate that identity politics in East Lombok operates as neither pure cynical manipulation nor as simple response to pre-existing voter preferences. Instead, identity politics operates as complex interplay between candidate agency and structural constraints, wherein candidates actively construct meanings while operating within institutional, cultural, and political contexts that shape and limit their options. The phenomenological perspective illuminates how candidates experience

these dynamics not as purely instrumental calculations but as embedded within webs of authentic belief, moral judgment, and social obligation. Candidates consistently reported experiencing identity emphasis as reflecting genuine self-understanding rather than pure manipulation, even while acknowledging strategic calculations about audience and context.

This finding suggests that dichotomies between 'authentic' and 'strategic' identity positioning are false: candidates simultaneously hold genuine identity commitments while engaging in strategic presentation. This resonates with research on political emotions and authenticity showing that political actors' strategic choices and their authentic identity commitments are not mutually exclusive but rather deeply intertwined.⁴² The finding that candidates maintained considerable anxiety about authenticity repeatedly asserting that emphasized identities truly represented themselves despite strategic emphasis indicates that authenticity concerns matter to candidates themselves, not merely as rhetorical device for voter management but as genuine preoccupation with ethical integrity. This contrasts with cynical instrumentalist accounts that view all identity politics as manipulation and suggests the value of phenomenological approaches that attend to candidate subjective experience on its own terms.

Furthermore, the integration of identity codification, alignment narratives, and inter-candidate differentiation suggests that electability construction operates as multidimensional process. Candidates cannot succeed by emphasizing any single mechanism; rather, successful candidates integrated all three mechanisms coherently. Candidates who emphasized identity dimensions inconsistently with their observable behavior faced credibility challenges. Similarly, candidates who failed to differentiate themselves from competitors despite attempting alignment narratives struggled to establish distinctive electoral identities. The most successful candidates (as measured by electoral success and voter focus group responses) maintained coherence across all three dimensions: they engaged in identity codification appropriately matched to communities and contexts, they constructed alignment narratives supported by observable presence and behavior, and they differentiated themselves through claims that competitors could not credibly match. This finding echoes social psychological research on authenticity and leadership showing that authenticity in leadership involves congruence between values, words, and actions across contexts, not consistency of self-presentation regardless of context.⁴³

The research findings have several important implications for democratic practice and electoral integrity. First, the findings suggest that identity-based electoral competition need not necessarily degenerate into polarization or social division. Several candidates demonstrated capacity to engage identity-conscious constituencies while simultaneously building cross-identity coalitions and promoting inclusive campaign platforms. These candidates succeeded by taking seriously the identity-based motivations of voters while simultaneously emphasizing shared community interests and common policy concerns transcending identity divisions. Such campaigns were possible when candidates genuinely understood multiple constituency perspectives and when campaigns were organized around substantive policy engagement alongside identity-conscious messaging. Conversely, campaigns that treated identity politics as purely instrumental engaging identity mobilization without substantive policy content or genuine constituency engagement faced voter skepticism and limited effectiveness.

This suggests that democratic quality concerns about identity-based politics may be addressed not through attempting to suppress or ignore identity dimensions of electoral competition but rather through promoting substantive engagement with identity constituencies that goes beyond symbolic manipulation. Second, the research suggests importance of attending to gender dimensions of identity politics. Women candidates in the study consistently faced distinctive challenges in identity-based campaigns, as they navigated simultaneous expectations to assert authenticity within traditional identity categories while also claiming innovative approaches to women's representation. Women candidates who successfully navigated these tensions did so through explicitly thematizing gender representation while simultaneously emphasizing traditional identity attachments, positioning gender inclusion as advancing rather than threatening community identity interests.

⁴² Panagopoulos, "All Things Being Equal: Asymmetry in Political Communication."

⁴³ Bruce J Avolio and William L Gardner, "Authentic Leadership Development: Getting to the Root of Positive Forms of Leadership," *The Leadership Quarterly* 16, no. 3 (2005): 315–38.

This suggests the importance of developing campaign frameworks and voter education that recognize how gender intersects with other identity dimensions rather than treating gender as separate political cleavage. Third, the research underscores the importance of recognizing local identity dynamics and contextual particularities in electoral analysis and campaign development. National-level political trends (such as religious identity mobilization) operated very differently in East Lombok's specific local context than in other regions. Effective candidates in East Lombok were those who understood and engaged with local identity configurations, pesantren influence, patterns of community organization, and specific historical relationships among ethnic groups. Campaign strategies imported wholesale from national campaigns without attention to local context tended to fail. This has implications for electoral training, candidate support, and campaign professionalization efforts, suggesting the importance of local-context sensitivity alongside capacity development.

4.5 Practical Recommendations for Multiple Stakeholders

4.5.1 Recommendations for Legislative Candidates

- a. **Develop Integrated Identity Positioning:** Rather than emphasizing different identity dimensions inconsistently, candidates should develop coherent positioning integrating multiple identities. Articulate clearly how multiple identity commitments (e.g., religious and ethnic identity) can be held simultaneously and how both identities will inform policy and leadership approach.
- b. **Ensure Consistency Between Narrative and Behavior:** Alignment narratives must be supported by observable presence and participation in identity communities. Sporadic campaign visits while emphasizing identity commitments undermine credibility. Invest in ongoing community engagement before, during, and after electoral campaigns.
- c. **Address Authenticity Concerns Directly:** Rather than avoiding or minimizing questions about strategic identity positioning, address them directly and honestly. Acknowledge that context-appropriate emphasis is natural while asserting that all emphasized identities reflect genuine commitments. Frame identity emphasis as about highlighting relevant dimensions to specific audiences rather than changing fundamental self.
- d. **Develop Substantive Policy Content:** Identity-conscious campaigns should be paired with substantive engagement on policy issues affecting identity communities. Take time to understand community-specific concerns and develop concrete policy responses. This builds trust and demonstrates that engagement goes beyond symbolic mobilization.
- e. **Build Cross-Identity Coalitions:** Rather than purely emphasizing in-group identity advantages over out-groups, look for policy areas and community interests transcending identity divisions. Develop messaging and positioning that can appeal across identity groups while remaining authentic to specific identity commitments.
- f. **Leverage Authentic Relationships:** Use family lineage, community history, educational background, and professional experience as authentic bases for claimed relationships to identity communities. Rather than developing false associations, emphasize genuine connections that competitors cannot credibly match.

4.5.2 Recommendations for Political Parties

- a. **Develop Identity-Conscious Candidate Selection Processes:** Select candidates with demonstrated understanding of and commitment to local identity contexts, not merely party loyalty or geographic residence. Prioritize candidates with genuine community embeddedness and relationships.
- b. **Provide Contextual Political Training:** Ensure candidate training and campaign support incorporate attention to local identity dynamics, community organization, and constituency-specific concerns. Generic national campaign training is insufficient; supplement with local-context specialized training.
- c. **Establish Authentic Community Engagement Mechanisms:** Rather than developing centralized campaign messaging, empower candidates to develop messaging reflecting genuine understanding of local identity configurations and community concerns. Provide resources and support for ongoing community engagement rather than purely periodic campaign activity.

- d. **Support Women Candidates' Identity Navigation:** Develop explicit support for women candidates navigating identity-based campaigns, including mentoring on how to integrate gender representation claims with other identity positioning. Provide media and communication support addressing gender-related campaign challenges.
- e. **Promote Inclusive Campaign Culture:** Establish party culture and discipline emphasizing substantive policy engagement and community responsiveness as central to campaign success, not merely identity mobilization. Discourage campaigns relying purely on negative identity messaging or inter-group antagonism. Reward candidates demonstrating capacity to build cross-identity coalitions.

4.5.3 Recommendations for Election Administration and Electoral Observers

- a. **Monitor Identity-Based Campaign Messaging:** Develop systematic monitoring of campaign messaging regarding identity issues, documenting how identity dimensions are presented by different candidates and parties. Share findings with public and parties to promote transparency.
- b. **Conduct Voter Education on Identity Politics:** Develop voter education initiatives helping voters understand how identity operates in electoral competition while encouraging critical evaluation of candidate identity claims and substantive policy positioning.
- c. **Investigate Fraudulent Identity Claims:** Establish mechanisms for investigating candidates making false claims about community membership, religious commitment, or ethnic identity. Electoral credibility depends on able to verify authenticity of candidate identity positioning.
- d. **Promote Democratic Dialogue on Identity Issues:** Rather than attempting to suppress identity dimensions of politics, facilitate democratic dialogue where different identity communities engage with each other and with candidates about how identity should appropriately inform electoral politics and policymaking.
- e. **Strengthen Local-Context Electoral Research:** Commission research on local identity configurations, community organization, and electoral dynamics in specific districts to inform election administration, observer training, and public understanding. National-level analysis misses crucial local contextual factors.
- f. **Support Gender-Sensitive Electoral Administration:** Develop gender-sensitive approaches to monitoring campaigns and identity-based political mobilization, particularly attending to how gender intersects with other identity dimensions.

5. Conclusion

This phenomenological study examined the dynamics of identity politics and electoral viability construction among legislative candidates in Electoral District II, East Lombok during Indonesia's 2024 elections. Through intensive qualitative research involving 15 candidate interviews, extensive ethnographic observation, and discourse analysis of campaign materials, the study identified three primary mechanisms through which candidates construct electability within multi-identity constituencies: identity codification (selective emphasis of identity dimensions), constituency-identity alignment (construction of authentic representation narratives), and inter-candidate differentiation (distinctive identity positioning relative to competitors). The research contributes theoretically by demonstrating the value of phenomenological approaches for understanding electoral behavior, revealing how candidates experience identity politics not as purely instrumental manipulation but as embedded within authentic belief, moral commitment, and strategic calculation.

The phenomenological emphasis on understanding candidate perspectives in their own terms illuminate's dimensions of electoral behavior invisible to purely structural or rationalist analysis. The research contributes empirically by generating evidence about local-level identity politics in a district historically underrepresented in Indonesian electoral scholarship. The findings reveal that identity-based electoral competition in East Lombok operates with considerable sophistication and nuance, with candidates and voters engaging multiple identity dimensions simultaneously and developing complex strategies for navigating identity terrain. The research contributes methodologically by demonstrating how phenomenological approaches can be productively integrated with other qualitative methods and with contemporary theories of identity and political behavior.

The research contributes practically by generating evidence-based recommendations for candidates, political parties, election administration, and civil society organizations seeking to engage identity-conscious constituencies while promoting substantive policy deliberation and democratic inclusion. The practical recommendations emphasize the importance of authentic community engagement, consistency between narrative and observable behavior, substantive policy content, and attention to local contextual particularities in identity-based electoral competition. The broader implication is that identity-based electoral politics need not necessarily degenerate into polarization or social division but can be engaged in ways that acknowledge identity-based motivations while building cross-identity coalitions and promoting substantive policy engagement. However, such inclusive identity-conscious politics requires deliberate commitment from candidates, parties, and electoral administration to move beyond purely instrumental identity manipulation toward genuine engagement with identity constituencies and their concerns. As Indonesia's electoral landscape becomes increasingly characterized by identity-based mobilization, understanding how identity operates at local levels and how political actors experience and enact identity-based strategies becomes crucial for maintaining democratic quality and social cohesion. This research contributes to that understanding while suggesting directions for future research examining identity politics in different Indonesian regions, exploring longer-term consequences of identity-based electoral strategies, and investigating how identity-based electoral competition intersects with democratic governance and policy implementation.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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