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The Noken System and Distorted Political Participation in Lanny Jaya's 2024 Regional Election

Antonita Asriani Lensru[1*)], Armin Arsyad[2], Gustiana Kambo[3] , Ratna Istianah[4]
[1]Department of Political Science, Universitas Hasanuddin, Indonesia
[2]Department of Political Science, Universitas Hasanuddin, Indonesia
[3]Department of Political Science, Universitas Hasanuddin, Indonesia
[4]Department of Public Administration, Universitas Muhammadiyah Sukabumi, Indonesia
*)Corresponding author: anjoevaantonitalensru@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT - This study analyzes the implementation of the Noken System in the 2024 Lanny Jaya Regency Head and Deputy Regency Head Elections and its impact on the political participation of indigenous Papuans. The Noken System, as a collective voting practice based on local wisdom, has gained constitutional legitimacy through Constitutional Court Decision Number 47-81/PHPU.A-VII/2009. However, its implementation creates a paradox between the principle of electoral democracy, which emphasizes individual voting rights, and the tradition of communal deliberation among indigenous peoples. This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study method, collecting data through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis. The results show that the Noken System in Lanny Jaya Regency has undergone a transformation from a traditional deliberation mechanism to a political mobilization tool that is vulnerable to politicization and elite intervention. The role of the Big Man as the determinant of collective choice has shifted from traditional legitimacy to a transactional patronage-client relationship. This study found three patterns of political participation, such as authentic communal participation based on customary consensus, participation guided by elites, and transactional participation involving material exchanges. This study contributes to the theory of legal pluralism and deliberative democracy by revealing the complexity of negotiations between state law and customary law in the context of Indonesian electoral democracy.

Keywords: *Noken System, Political Participation, Local Democracy, Costumary Law*

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Introduction

Post-1998 Reform Indonesia's democracy was built on a normative foundation that affirmed that sovereignty rests with the people and is realized through a general election mechanism based on the principles of Direct, General, Free, Secret, Honest, and Fair (Mietzner, 2015; Rüland, 2017). These principles are affirmed in Article 22E of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, which places electoral participation as an individual right that cannot be transferred and must be protected from all forms of intimidation or intervention (Nadziri & Mashari, 2024; Oktarina & Agustian, 2025). Thus, the design of Indonesian elections not only emphasizes democratic proceduralism but also builds political legitimacy by ensuring that every vote carries equal weight and is cast consciously and without coercion (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019; Noor & Marlina, 2023).

However, in the rugged mountainous region of Papua, especially in Lanny Jaya Regency of Papua Highlands Province, a fundamentally different and institutionalized electoral practice continues through the Noken system (Efriandi et al., 2021; Faiz et al., 2023a). This system, deeply rooted in the traditions of communal deliberation among indigenous communities, replaces individual voting mechanisms with collective agreements, whose decisions are often delegated to a tribal chief or respected figure, known as the Big Man (Faiz et al., 2023b; Nugraha, 2021). In the context of Papuan highland communities, the traditional political authority and social legitimacy of the Big Man make this system of collective representation not only accepted but also viewed as an authentic form of local democratic practice that reflects the social structure and cultural values of the community (Hernawan, 2015).

Recognition of the Noken System was affirmed in Decisions Number 47–48/PHPU.A-VI/2009 and Number 06–32/PHPU-DPD/XII/2014, which positioned the Noken System as a casuistic and limited voting mechanism. This judicial recognition was then translated into technical regulations through General Election Commission Decision Number 810/2019 and updated in General Election Commission Decision Number 66 of 2024, which limited the application of the Noken System to only certain areas in Papua in the 2024 Regional Elections. This shows that the Noken System was institutionalized as a form of administrative legal pluralism and was not fully integrated into the national election legal system.

This phenomenon gives rise to a central paradox in Indonesia's constitutional architecture. On the one hand, the state seeks to promote the unification of electoral law as an instrument to guarantee equal political rights for every citizen. However, on the other hand, the same constitution , through Article 18B paragraph (2) of the 1945 Constitution, explicitly recognizes and respects the existence of customary law communities and their traditional rights. This constitutional dilemma creates a condition of "institutionalized legal pluralism," in which the state simultaneously imposes two philosophically contradictory electoral legal regimes: one based on individual rights and confidentiality, and one based on communal rights and openness.

Several recent studies have shown that the debate over the Noken System is no longer limited to legality issues following the Constitutional Court Decision, but has shifted to implementation issues in the context of modern electoral competition, particularly when noken interacts with patronage practices and political support transactions. Recent research maps the dynamics of the Noken System historically through to the 2024 General Election and Regional Election period, highlighting the ongoing tension between recognizing the local wisdom of indigenous communities and the application of democratic electoral principles that emphasize

individual voting rights, equal voting, and electoral accountability (Muksin et al., 2022; Yahya et al., 2023; Yuwono et al., 2025)

This study aims to analyze in depth the implementation of the Noken System in the 2024 Regent and Deputy Regent Election of Lanny Jaya Regency and its impact on the quality of political participation of indigenous peoples. The focus of the research includes: (1) the mechanism of collective decision-making and the role of the Big Man in the noken system; (2) the transformation of noken practices from a deliberative tradition to a formal political contestation arena; (3) the pattern of patronage-client relations in voter mobilization; and (4) the implications of the noken system on the political representation of women and marginalized groups. This study is important considering that Lanny Jaya Regency is one of twelve regencies in Papua that officially implemented the Noken System in the 2024 election, and experienced complex local political dynamics with a voter participation rate reaching 85.29%.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with an instrumental case study design to examine in depth the implementation of the Noken system in the 2024 election of the Regent and Deputy Regent of Lanny Jaya Regency. The selection of Lanny Jaya Regency as the research locus is based on both theoretical and empirical considerations. First, Lanny Jaya is one of the twelve regencies in Papua that officially implemented the noken system in the 2024 election. Second, its high voter participation rate of 85.29 percent provides rich empirical material for analysis. Third, the regency presents complex local political dynamics involving a wide range of actors, including traditional leaders, candidates, political parties, and election administrators.

Data were collected through three main techniques. First, in-depth interviews were conducted with purposively selected key informants, including traditional leaders and Big Men from various villages implementing the noken system (15 individuals), regent candidates and campaign team members (8 individuals), election officials from the Gerenal Election Commison of Lanny Jaya Regency and Election Supervisory Agency (6 individuals), voters from diverse backgrounds, including women and youth (25 individuals), and academics as well as NGO activists concerned with local democracy issues (5 individuals). In total, 59 informants participated in this study. Second, participant observation was carried out during the campaign period and on election day in five villages implementing the noken system. Through this process, the researcher directly observed village deliberations, collective decision-making mechanisms, the role of the Big Man, the dynamics of interaction between candidates and traditional leaders, and the technical implementation of voting through the noken system. Third, document analysis was undertaken using both official and unofficial materials, including election regulations issued by the General Election Commission and Election Supervisory Agency, election results and vote recapitulation data at the polling-station level, village deliberation documents, news and media reports on the conduct of the election, and academic documents and previous research on the noken system.

The data were analyzed using the thematic analysis approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis proceeded through six stages: familiarization with the data through transcription and repeated reading, initial coding to identify significant features of the data, searching for themes by grouping codes into potential themes, reviewing the themes to ensure internal coherence and clear distinctions among them, defining and naming the final themes, and producing the report through narrative analysis supported by relevant quotations from the data.

The validity of the research was maintained through source triangulation by comparing information from different informants, method triangulation by combining interviews, observations, and document analysis, and member checking by confirming the researcher's interpretations with key informants. Research ethics were upheld by obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring the confidentiality of sensitive identities, and respecting local cultural norms throughout the research process.

Result and Discussion

Implementation Mechanism of the Noken System in the 2024 Lanny Jaya Regional Election

Noken etymologically derives from the Mee (Ekari/Ekagi) language and refers to a traditional tote bag made from woven bark or natural plant fibers that are processed and knitted by indigenous Papuan communities (Irnawati et al., 2023; Saiba et al., 2023). In the context of elections, noken no longer simply refers to a physical container, but has transformed into a symbol of a collective decision-making system rooted in the deliberative traditions of indigenous Papuans. This system reflects the values of communalism, group solidarity, and respect for traditional authority that have been practiced for centuries in various aspects of social life in the Papuan highlands.

Warami (2014) explains that the noken in Papuan tradition functions not only as a material container, but also as a "mirror" of social values that prioritize togetherness, honesty, and collective responsibility. In electoral practice, the noken system operationalizes these principles through a deliberation mechanism at the village or clan level , where all community members gather to discuss and reach a collective agreement regarding their political choices. The resulting decision is then represented by a trusted figure. usually the tribal chief or Big Man , to vote or put the ballot papers collectively into one noken.

Agustine (2019) categorizes the noken system as an "unwritten law" that has been integrated into Indonesia's national legal system through a mechanism recognizing the rights of indigenous peoples. This legal legitimacy is reinforced by the Constitutional Court's ruling, which positions noken as part of local wisdom protected by the constitution, as long as its implementation complies with the values and procedures agreed upon by the local indigenous community and does not conflict with the fundamental principles of a democratic state based on the rule of law.

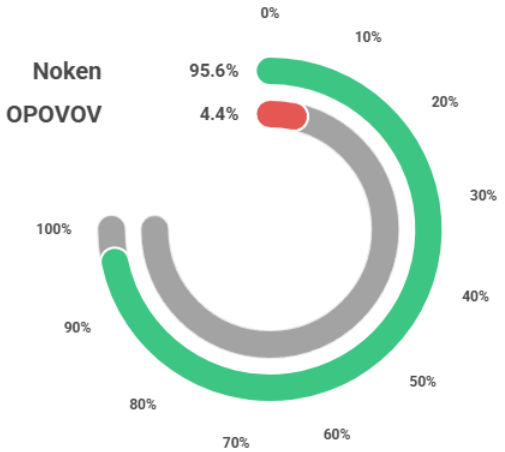


Figure 1. Composition of polling station in Lanny Jaya Regency
Source: General Election Commission of Lanny Jaya Regency, 2025

Figure 1 shows that the use of the noken system in the 2024 Lanny Jaya regional election reached 95.6%, while the one-person, one-vote, one-value mechanism only utilized 4.4%. This dominance demonstrates that citizens' procedural political participation occurs more through collective mechanisms than through direct individual expression of choice. This finding provides an important basis for analyzing the potential for distortions in political participation, particularly when electoral decisions are mediated more by local social structures than by individual voters.

The research results show that the implementation of the Noken System in the 2024 Lanny Jaya regional elections was not homogeneous, but rather displayed significant procedural variation across villages. Generally, the process begins with a village deliberation held several days before election day. In this deliberation, all community members, both men and women, though with varying levels of participation, gather to discuss their political choices. The discussion is led by a traditional leader or village head, with the Big Man (village head) being a central figure in the opinion-gathering process.

Observational data from five villages revealed three distinct patterns of deliberation. First, relatively inclusive deliberative deliberation, where diverse opinions are heard and discussed before reaching a consensus. This model was found in two villages with relatively egalitarian social structures and a Big Man with strong traditional legitimacy. Second, elite-dominated deliberation, where actual decisions are predetermined by a small group of key figures, and the deliberation serves more as a ritual of ratification than a forum for substantive deliberation. This pattern was found in two villages with more hierarchical power structures. Third, polarized deliberation, where sharp differences of opinion exist between clans or groups within the village, and agreement is reached through political negotiations involving mutual concessions. This pattern was found in one multi-clan village with a history of internal tensions.

Once an agreement is reached, the voting process differs from conventional methods . Instead of each voter individually casting their ballots in a voting booth, the collective decision is made by a "Big Man" or designated figure who marks or inserts all the village ballots into a single "noken" (traditional ballot paper). In some cases, the ballots are not even opened at all, but are instead inserted directly into the noken, with the agreement that all votes will be awarded to a specific candidate. This practice, while technically a violation of the principle of vote secrecy, is considered legal by the Lanny Jaya Regency Election Commission because it is based on a legitimate customary community agreement.

The Transformation of the Big Man's Role: From Traditional Authority to Political Broker

A significant finding of this research is a fundamental transformation in the role and legitimacy of the Big Man in the context of electoral politics. While in traditional systems, the Big Man's authority stemmed from his personal ability to accumulate and distribute wealth (usually through the ritual of pig feasts), his conflict mediation skills, and his charisma reflecting community values, in the context of modern elections, this legitimacy has undergone a significant shift. Contemporary Big Men are no longer judged solely by their traditional capacities, but also, and in many cases primarily, by their ability to access modern political resources and mediate between the community and candidates or political parties (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Stokes et al., 2013)

Interviews with 15 Big Men from various villages revealed that they received various forms of incentives from candidates or campaign teams , ranging from cash, promises of infrastructure projects for the village, to positions in government structures if the candidate is elected. One Big Man informant (YM, 52 years old) stated: "We decided to support candidate X because he promised to build a road to our village and provide assistance for schools. He also gave money for village meetings amounting to 50 million rupiah. We think he is a good candidate for our village." This statement shows that political decisions are no longer solely based on ideological or programmatic considerations, but rather on instrumental calculations about the material benefits that can be obtained by the community.

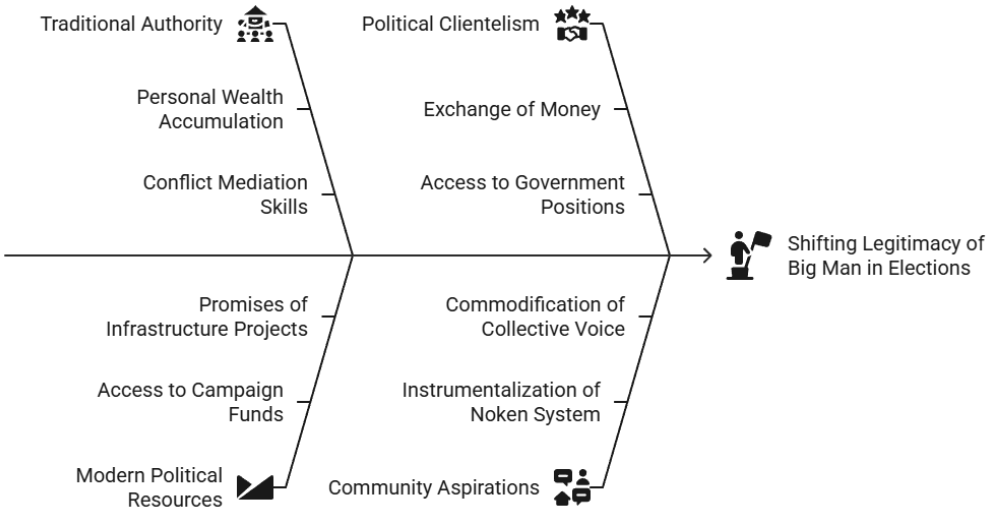


Figure 2. Transformation of Big Man's Role in Electoral Politics
Source: Processed by Author, 2025

The findings of this study align with field studies in Jayawijaya Regency, which show that elections based on the Noken system open up space for political clientelism practices through the exchange of money, access to office, and traditional approaches mediated by indigenous elites to secure electoral support. In this context, the relationship between candidates and the Big Man operates as a relatively efficient network of political brokers in consolidating collective voting blocks within indigenous communities, thus reinforcing the patronage-clientage pattern in regional election contests in the Papuan Highlands region (Muksin et al., 2022). Pamungkas's research (2017) also shows that in contemporary electoral practices, the legitimacy of the Big Man no longer comes solely from traditional authority, but also from the ability to access and distribute modern political resources such as campaign funds, promises of development projects, and connections with candidates or political parties. This shift opens up space for the instrumentalization of the noken system for political mobilization purposes that are not always in line with the authentic aspirations of the community.

This transformation has dual implications for the noken system. On the one hand, integrating traditional mechanisms with modern incentives can be seen as a pragmatic adaptation that allows indigenous communities to maximize the benefits of their political participation. The Big Man acts as a "political entrepreneur" who negotiates community interests with external political actors. On the other hand, this shift also opens up space for the commodification of collective voice, where political decisions no longer reflect authentic deliberations about collective preferences but instead become objects of transactions between local elites and candidates. Several

informants from among young voters expressed dissatisfaction with this practice, feeling that their voices were not truly taken into account in the decision-making process dominated by the Big Man.

Patronage-Client Relationship Patterns and Political Clientelism

Aspinall & Berenschot, (2019) in their comprehensive study of Indonesian electoral democracy, show that clientelism has become a structural feature of Indonesian politics, operating through various mechanisms ranging from direct money politics to more covert forms of exchange such as club goods (goods or services provided to specific groups) and targeted programmatic promises. The noken system, in this context, has the potential to reinforce patterns of clientelism because it concentrates control over significant voting blocs in the hands of local political brokers (Big Men), who can then negotiate with candidates or parties.

This research identifies three layers of patronage-client relationships operating within the noken system. The first layer is the relationship between the regent candidate and the Big Man. In this relationship, the candidate acts as a patron, providing material resources (money, project promises, political positions), while the Big Man acts as a client, providing political support in the form of mobilizing community votes. This relationship is transactional and relatively explicit, with negotiations involving bargaining over the value of aid or projects to be provided to the village.

The second layer is the relationship between the Big Man and his community members. In this relationship, the Big Man acts as a patron, distributing a portion of the resources obtained from candidates to community members, as well as providing leadership and representation of community interests. Community members act as clients, providing loyalty and compliance with collective decisions led by the Big Man . This relationship is more complex because it contains traditional elements (customary legitimacy, moral obligations) mixed with modern elements (material distribution, promises of improved welfare).

The third, most problematic layer, is the relationship between candidates and individual voters, which bypasses or ignores the role of the Big Man as a mediator. In some cases, candidate campaign teams approach voters directly by providing individual political money, especially to young voters or women who are considered less bound to the authority of the Big Man . This practice creates internal tension within the community because it undermines the cohesion that should be maintained through collective deliberation mechanisms. A female informant (RL, 28 years old) stated: "The campaign team came to my house at night and gave me 500,000 rupiah, asking me to influence my husband and family not to participate in village decisions. I was confused because on the one hand I needed the money, but on the other hand I was afraid of being ostracized by the community if I violated the noken agreement."

An analysis of these patronage patterns indicates that the noken system is not insulated from the clientelistic dynamics that have long characterized Indonesian electoral politics. On the contrary, the collective structure of the noken system may, in certain contexts, enhance the efficiency of clientelism by enabling candidates to secure the support of large voting blocs through negotiation with a limited number of influential intermediaries, particularly the Big Men, rather than engaging in individualized vote-buying with each voter. In this sense, the noken system can reduce the transactional costs of electoral mobilization while simultaneously increasing the political significance of customary leaders as brokers of collective support. The authority of the Big Men thus becomes strategically valuable not only because of their traditional legitimacy within the

community, but also because of their capacity to convert communal consensus into electoral advantage for particular candidates. This finding supports Aspinall and Berenschot's (2019) argument that local social structures can function as an infrastructure for clientelism. However, in the Papuan context, this process takes on a distinctive form because clientelistic exchange is mediated not merely through informal neighborhood networks or local strongmen, but through customary institutions that possess cultural legitimacy and social obligation. As a result, political transactions are often embedded in collective norms, traditional authority, and communal decision-making processes, making clientelism less visible as an individual transaction but potentially more powerful in shaping electoral outcomes. This condition suggests that the noken system can operate as both a culturally grounded mechanism of political participation and a structural channel through which collective voting may be appropriated for elite negotiation and patronage distribution.

Implications for the Quality of Political Participation

The noken system produces a paradoxical form of political participation: quantitatively high (participation rates reaching 85.29 %), yet qualitatively problematic when measured by deliberative democracy standards. This study identifies three typologies of political participation in the noken system: First, authentic communal participation occurs when the deliberation process is truly inclusive and deliberative, decisions reflect genuine community consensus, and the Big Man serves as a neutral facilitator in the decision-making process (Moore, 2018). This pattern is found in villages with relatively egalitarian social structures, a Big Man with strong traditional legitimacy, and the absence of significant material intervention from candidates. In this context, the noken system can be viewed as a legitimate form of communitarian democracy, reflecting the values of solidarity and togetherness held dear by indigenous Papuans.

Second, guided participation occurs when decisions are dominated by village elites, deliberation is more ritualistic than substantive, and ordinary voters have limited say in the decision-making process. This pattern is found in villages with strong hierarchical structures and Big Men who wield consolidated power. Although formally following the procedures of the noken system, participation in this category is more passive than active, with voters acting more as objects of mobilization than autonomous political subjects.(Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Dalton, 2017). Third, transactional participation occurs when political decisions are made based on calculations of material benefits to the community, with the Big Man acting as a broker in transactional negotiations with candidates. This pattern was most dominant in the 2024 Lanny Jaya regional elections, reflecting the penetration of clientelism logic into traditional structures. Participation in this category, although involving high levels of collective mobilization, cannot be considered an authentic expression of deliberative political preferences, as it rather reflects an instrumental response to material incentives.

An important implication of these findings is that the legitimacy of the noken system cannot be assessed monolithically. This system produces highly variable outcomes depending on the local socio-political context, the quality of the Big Man's leadership , and the degree of external intervention in the deliberation process. Therefore, the recognition and protection of the noken system as local wisdom needs to be accompanied by safeguards mechanisms to ensure that its practices continue to reflect deliberative values and do not become instruments for the consolidation of elite power or the commodification of voters' voices.

Political Exclusion: Representation of Women and Marginalized Groups

One of the most serious criticisms of the noken system is its potential to reinforce political exclusion, particularly against women and other marginalized groups. This study found that in most of the observed deliberations, women's participation was severely limited, both in terms of physical presence and voice in the discussions. Of the five villages observed, in only two were women allowed to attend deliberations, and even in those villages, women sat separately from men and rarely spoke or expressed opinions. Interviews with 12 female informants revealed diverse experiences. Some women, particularly older women and wives of Big Men or traditional leaders, stated that they did not have a problem with the noken system and felt that decisions made by their husbands or heads of households represented the interests of the entire family. However, some other women, particularly younger and more educated women, expressed dissatisfaction with their limited space in the political process. One female informant (MW, 35, education graduate) stated: "I want to choose for myself. I have my own opinion about who is suitable to be a leader. But in the noken system, my opinion doesn't count. Everything is decided by the men in a deliberation. This is unfair to women."

This finding aligns with Marit, (2018) research on the relationship between the noken system and Papuan women's political positions. Marrit argues that the noken system, rooted in the patriarchal structure of indigenous Papuan society, tends to reinforce women's political subordination by eliminating space for the expression of individual political preferences. This system assumes homogeneity of interests within communities and families, ignoring the possibility of differences in preferences based on gender, generation, or social position.

Exclusion also affects other marginalized groups, such as young voters, immigrants, and individuals with differing opinions from the majority community. Several young voter informants stated that they felt pressured to follow decisions made by older generations, even though they personally held different preferences. The noken system, by emphasizing consensus and community unity, tends to marginalize dissident or minority voices, creating what called the "tyranny of the majority" in a form packaged as tradition.

Conclusion

This study reveals the complexity of the Noken System's implementation in the 2024 Regent and Vice Regent Elections of Lanny Jaya Regency and its implications for the quality of political participation among indigenous Papuans. The Noken System, formally legitimized as a form of local wisdom reflecting the values of deliberation and communal solidarity, has undergone significant transformations in practice, creating tension between normative ideals and empirical reality. The main findings of this study can be summarized in several key points.

First, the implementation of the noken system in Lanny Jaya Regency exhibits significant procedural variation across villages, resulting in three patterns of deliberation: deliberative-inclusive, guided-elitist, and polarized-negotiative. This variation demonstrates that the noken system is not a homogeneous practice but rather depends heavily on the local socio-political context and the leadership qualities of traditional leaders. Second, the role of the Big Man has undergone a fundamental transformation, from that of a traditional legitimator to a political broker who mediates patronage-client relationships between candidates and communities. This transformation creates ambiguity in the Big Man's function: on the one hand, he serves as a preserver of tradition and a representative of community interests, and on the other, as a political

entrepreneur who negotiates collective support for material benefits. This shift opens up space for the infiltration of clientelistic logic into traditional structures, potentially transforming the noken system from an authentic deliberation mechanism into an instrument of transactional mobilization.

Third, this study identifies three typologies of political participation within the noken system: authentic communal participation, guided participation, and transactional participation. The dominance of transactional participation patterns in the 2024 Lanny Jaya regional elections indicates that the noken system has become integrated into a broader clientelistic political economy, threatening the system's ideals as a form of deliberative democracy based on local wisdom. Fourth, the noken system raises serious issues of political exclusion, particularly for women, young voters, and other marginalized groups. The patriarchal structures inherent in traditional practices, combined with the emphasis on communal consensus, tend to silence minority voices and reinforce elite dominance in the decision-making process.

Based on these findings, this study proposes several policy recommendations. First, stronger verification mechanisms and institutional safeguards are necessary to ensure that the noken system continues to reflect deliberative values and does not become an instrument of elite mobilization or political transactions. Research on participatory governance emphasizes that democratic institutions require transparency, oversight, and accountability mechanisms to prevent elite capture and maintain legitimacy (Fox, 2015; Iversen et al., 2019). Second, targeted empowerment initiatives are necessary to ensure the substantive participation of women and marginalized groups in deliberative processes, as participatory mechanisms often reproduce existing power inequalities if inclusion is not actively promoted (Cornwall, 2016). Third, strengthening transparency and accountability in the relationship between candidates, traditional leaders, and local communities is essential to reduce the risks of clientelistic exchanges and political manipulation (Kosec & Wantchekon, 2020). Finally, continuous dialogue between the state, indigenous communities, and academic institutions is necessary to periodically evaluate and refine the implementation of traditional governance mechanisms so that they remain legitimate and responsive to changing socio-political contexts (Lightfoot, 2016).

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