



Journal of Law & Social Politics

Volume 4, Issue 4, 1001-1017

e_ISSN: 2807-6311

<https://jolastic.id/index.php/jlsp/index>

DOI: doi.org/10.59261/jlsp.v4i4.276

Cyberpolitics and Constitutional Governance in Indonesia's Digital Democracy

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Article Info:

Article history:

Received: August 12, 2026

Revised: September 15, 2026

Accepted: September 17, 2026

Available Online: October 5, 2026

Keywords:

Cyberpolitics;
Political Communication;
Digital Media;
Virtual Campaign Box;
Political Branding;
Surakarta Regional Election



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Abstract

Background: The COVID-19 pandemic transformed political communication patterns and encouraged candidates to adopt campaign strategies based on digital technologies.

Objective: This study analyzes *cyberpolitics* in the political communication of the Gibran Rakabuming Raka–Teguh Prakosa ticket in the 2020 Surakarta mayoral election, focusing on campaign planning, message design, media strategy, voter segmentation, and digital political communication.

Methods: This study employs a qualitative descriptive-exploratory case study within a constructivist paradigm. Data are analyzed interpretively to examine communication strategies, symbolic interactions, image formation, and political meanings constructed through digital spaces.

Results: The findings show that *cyberpolitics* served as an adaptive strategy for overcoming restrictions on face-to-face campaigning during the pandemic. It was implemented through social media, *Virtual Campaign Boxes*, social activities, and digital content portraying the candidates as young, modern, responsive, technologically adaptive, and close to the community. The *Virtual Campaign Box* emerged as an important innovation by integrating digital communication with direct community interaction and reaching voters with limited social media access. Digital media also strengthened *political branding*, legitimacy, candidate visibility, and the reach of political messages. The integration of technology, political symbols, voter segmentation, interaction, and political networks contributed to the electoral success of the Gibran–Teguh ticket.

Conclusion: *Cyberpolitics* has evolved beyond an alternative campaign strategy into an integral component of contemporary political communication.

To cite this article: Nugroho, D. C. S., Yuwanto, Sardini, N. H., & Alfirdaus, L. K. (2026). Cyberpolitics and constitutional governance in Indonesia's digital democracy. *Journal of Law & Social Politics*, 4(4), 1001-1017. <https://doi.org/10.59261/jlsp.v4i4.276>

INTRODUCTION

The 2020 Surakarta Mayor Election differed significantly in campaign modality and communication context from several previous election periods, particularly those following the implementation of direct regional head elections in 2005, 2010, and 2015. In 2005, the election was won by Joko Widodo and F.X. Hadi Rudyatmo, who were re-elected for the following term. Furthermore, in 2015–2016, the leadership of Surakarta City was continued by F.X. Hadi Rudyatmo and Achmad Purnomo. This pattern indicates relatively stable continuity in local political leadership, with campaign practices still dominated by conventional approaches based on direct interaction with voters. The comparison concerns the shift from predominantly face-to-

face campaigning in earlier local-election cycles toward pandemic-era digital communication; the manuscript does not infer statistically significant differences in turnout, candidate profiles, or political configurations across election years.

However, the 2020 Surakarta Mayor Election presented different dynamics, both in terms of political configuration and the social context surrounding it. In the election, the candidate pair of Gibran Rakabuming Raka and Teguh Prakosa won a significant victory, receiving 86.5% of the total valid votes, while the opposing pair received 13.5%. This substantial vote share constitutes an interesting phenomenon for academic study, particularly when considered in relation to the highly unfavorable external conditions created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The election was also part of the 2020 Simultaneous Regional Head Elections, which were held in 9 provinces, 37 cities, and 224 regencies in Indonesia. In contrast to the implementation of regional elections in previous periods, the 2020 regional elections took place amid a global crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which had multidimensional impacts on people's lives. The pandemic affected not only the health sector but also the economic, social, and cultural sectors, as well as democratic and electoral political practices.

From the perspective of democratic implementation, the COVID-19 pandemic posed a serious challenge that had the potential to erode the political and sociological legitimacy of elections. The high rate of virus transmission and the associated health risks could inhibit voter participation because people tended to avoid activities involving crowds, including attendance at polling stations (*Tempat Pemungutan Suara* or TPS). This condition raised concerns about a decline in public political participation, which could ultimately affect the quality of local democracy.

In line with this, various government policies aimed at controlling the pandemic, such as the implementation of Large-Scale Social Restrictions (PSBB) through Government Regulation Number 21 of 2020, as well as further arrangements through Regulation of the Minister of Health Number 9 of 2020, directly limited people's social activities. These policies included restrictions on activities in workplaces, educational institutions, and religious settings, as well as restrictions on gatherings in public spaces. The implications of these policies included a reduction in opportunities for social interaction, including political campaign practices that traditionally relied on mass mobilization and face-to-face meetings.

On the other hand, Indonesia's regional head election system still relies on direct voting at polling stations, which inherently involves physical interaction among voters and election personnel (Ilham et al., 2023; Karolan, 2020; Nasir & Asis, 2026). This created a paradox between the need to maintain the continuity of electoral democracy and the obligation to protect public health. In this context, election organizers, particularly the General Elections Commission (KPU), faced a complex policy dilemma. Although the election stages were postponed, the 2020 Simultaneous Regional Elections were ultimately held with adjustments through regulations governing the implementation of elections under non-natural-disaster conditions.

This condition affected not only the administration of elections but also the political strategies of candidates. Under normal circumstances, political campaigns are conducted through various methods that emphasize direct interaction, such as rallies, blusukan, and community meetings. Indeed, various studies have shown that direct political communication can be effective in building emotional proximity and voter trust in candidates. Hikmat's research (2018) demonstrated that the most effective campaign among the forms of campaigning available to regional head candidates was the blusukan campaign, which involved meeting voters directly. Regional head candidates campaign by meeting residents directly in crowded places, such as markets, terminals, malls, hospitals, and other public venues.

However, in a pandemic situation, such methods became less feasible and potentially high-risk, forcing candidates to adapt their political communication strategies. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these crowded public spaces were effectively "lost" as campaign venues because they were subject to government restrictions intended to prevent the spread of the virus. Regional head candidates were prohibited from gathering citizens in certain places, such as fields, meeting halls, and other venues. The COVID-19 pandemic therefore limited regional head candidates' ability to campaign face-to-face with voters. Regional head candidates could not conduct political

communication with voters as directly as they had previously. Indeed, six of the seven forms of political communication require the direct presence of the candidate (Hikmat, 2019). According to Graber in *Mass Communication and American Politics*, political communication is a communication activity, both verbal and nonverbal, that has political content (Galvano et al., 2023).

Political communication is the study of how individuals, groups, and organizations use messages to shape, change, and reinforce political opinions and behaviors (Chaffee & Kanihan, 1997). In regional head elections, regional head candidates fall within the category of political communicators, which Nimmo (1977) describes in terms of infrastructural communicators and which, in L.W. Dob's conceptualization, are categorized as part of the political sphere (Harun & Sumarno, 2006). In the Indonesian context, however, those who run as regional head candidates are not necessarily career politicians; some come from professional or academic backgrounds. Nevertheless, some candidates become politicians in order to be nominated by political parties, while others choose to participate through independent channels as individual candidates.

In fact, six forms of political communication, including political rhetoric, public relations politics, political lobbying, political campaigns, political agitation, and political propaganda, may be more effective when regional head candidates meet directly with voters. As McQuail (2020), argues, political communication encompasses processes of conveying information, including facts, opinions, beliefs, and so forth, as well as the exchange and pursuit of such information by participants in the context of political activities.

The political communication process may be more effective when it is conducted directly. The results of Rahmat study (2023) indicate that direct communication can be more effective than indirect communication because communicators can receive direct responses, facilitate interaction between the two parties, identify the characteristics of their interlocutors directly, and minimize the risk of misunderstanding. Especially in regional head elections, it is beneficial for a prospective regional leader to be known directly by the people as prospective voters, thereby avoiding a situation analogous to the Indonesian expression "choosing a cat in a sack," which refers to making a choice without knowing what is actually being chosen.

Restrictions on physical interaction due to the COVID-19 pandemic led to a transformation in political communication practices, from predominantly face-to-face communication to media-based communication. In this context, mass media, particularly digital media and new media, became important instruments for conveying political messages to the public. The rapid development of information technology, together with increasing internet penetration in Indonesia during the pandemic, accelerated the digitalization of political communication.

The use of social media as a means of political communication increased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp functioned not only as media for disseminating information but also as spaces for political interaction that enabled two-way communication between candidates and voters. Therefore, social media was no longer merely a campaign tool but had become an important arena for political contestation.

Campaigns through mass media have a relatively high level of safety and reach because they do not rely on large-scale face-to-face interaction, thereby reducing the potential for social conflict and disease transmission associated with mass gatherings. In addition, mass media have broad reach and high accessibility, allowing political messages to be delivered to the public more widely. Since the Reform Era began in 1998, mass media have played an increasingly significant role in the democratic process, particularly through political socialization, the organization of public debates, political campaigns, and the dissemination of electoral information.

In the context of the 2020 Simultaneous Regional Head Elections, which took place amid the COVID-19 pandemic, mass media, including digital media, became important instruments for compensating for limitations on direct interaction imposed by health protocols. The increase in media use by the public during the pandemic indicated a shift in information-consumption patterns from direct social interaction toward media-based interaction. Widely implemented social restrictions encouraged people to rely more heavily on mass media as a primary source of information, including political information.

Political campaigns through mass media are essentially an integral part of modern political communication practices. This development contributed to the emergence of a new approach in the study of political communication, namely political marketing. According to Baines (2011), political marketing developed rapidly in the United States and subsequently spread to various other countries as the complexity of political contestation increased. Political marketing can be understood as a series of strategic activities undertaken by political parties and candidates to formulate political issues, construct persuasive messages, and communicate policy programs and solutions to the public.

Furthermore, political marketing serves not only as a communication tool but also as a mechanism for building political images, strengthening candidate positioning, and managing relationships with voters on an ongoing basis. In this perspective, as stated by Firmanzah (2007), political marketing includes the formulation of political agendas, the communication of ideologies, and the function of social control over powerful political actors. Thus, the integration of mass media and political marketing strategies is an important element of contemporary political communication practices, particularly in the transformation toward digital-based campaigns (digital campaigns) and cyberpolitics.

Cyberpolitics refers to political practices that take place in cyberspace through the use of digital technologies as primary media for communication, mobilization, and the formation of public opinion. Cyberpolitics represents a paradigm shift in political communication, from a predominantly hierarchical conventional model toward a more participatory, interactive, and decentralized model. In this context, political actors are required not only to convey messages but also to manage digital interactions strategically.

Research by Novianti et al. (2023) shows that the number of internet users in Indonesia during the COVID-19 pandemic, as of June 2020, had increased significantly, reaching 196.7 million users, or the equivalent of 73.7% of the total population. Meanwhile, based on a report by We Are Social and Hootsuite, in January 2019 the number of social media users in Indonesia was recorded at 150 million, with approximately 130 million users accessing social media through mobile devices (mobile devices or gadgets), representing approximately 48% of the total population. These data indicate broader penetration of digital media and increased accessibility to communication technologies within Indonesian society.

Significant growth also occurred across various social media platforms, particularly video-based platforms such as YouTube, which showed consistent growth trends from year to year. Data released by Websindo.com indicated that the number of YouTube users in Indonesia reached approximately 160 million. The high level of platform use is inseparable from its multifunctional role, including meeting information needs, facilitating social interaction, supporting economic activities, and providing learning opportunities. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, restrictions on social mobility encouraged people to shift various activities to the digital space, making social media, particularly YouTube, an important medium for conducting daily activities online.

These findings are reinforced by Junawan and Laugu's research (2020) which shows that during the COVID-19 pandemic, YouTube was the most widely used social media platform among Indonesians, with an access rate of 88%. Furthermore, other platforms, such as WhatsApp, reached 84%, Instagram 79%, and Facebook 79%. The high level of social media use indicates that social media has become an important communication infrastructure in people's lives. Social media users in Indonesia are also heterogeneous, covering a productive-age range of 16 to 64 years, which reflects the broad accessibility of digital technology.

In addition, the intensity of digital media use during the pandemic also increased significantly. This is reflected in the average duration of internet access among Indonesians, which reached 7 hours and 59 minutes per day. The high duration of internet use indicates a change in communication behavior, from patterns of direct interaction toward patterns of interaction mediated by digital media. Social media functions not only as a means of communication but also as a new social space, or digital public sphere, that facilitates various social, economic, and political activities.

This reality demonstrates that digital transformation has become an integral part of the

lives of Indonesian people. Therefore, it is not surprising that the government has made digitalization a national strategic agenda covering various sectors, including the political and democratic sectors. In this context, electoral democracy in Indonesia, both at the national level—including the election of the President and Vice President, members of the House of Representatives of the Republic of Indonesia (DPR RI), members of the Regional Representative Council (DPD), and members of provincial and regency/city Regional People's Representative Councils (DPRD)—and at the local level through the direct election of regional heads, has been adapting to a digital ecosystem.

This transformation marks a paradigm shift in democratic practices, from a model originally based primarily on physical interaction toward a model increasingly integrated with digital technology. Thus, the development of digital media and increasing public participation in cyberspace are important factors affecting the dynamics of contemporary political communication, especially in the context of political campaigns and the formation of public opinion in the era of cyberpolitics.

The 2020 Surakarta Mayor Election provides a relevant case for examining this phenomenon. Under conditions of limited direct interaction, the Gibran Rakabuming Raka–Teguh Prakosa ticket used digital media as an important means of political communication. The campaign demonstrated a shift from ground campaigning to digital campaigning, accompanied by intensive use of social media. This illustrates a strategic adaptation to changes in the political communication environment influenced by the pandemic.

Interestingly, despite concerns about low voter participation, voter turnout in the 2020 Surakarta Mayor Election remained relatively high. This indicates that digital-based political communication strategies operated alongside other electoral mechanisms during a period when direct interaction was constrained. However, the available evidence does not by itself establish that digital political communication caused higher voter participation or directly determined voter behavior.

However, academic studies that comprehensively discuss the practice of cyberpolitics in the context of regional elections in Indonesia, particularly under pandemic conditions, remain relatively limited. Most previous research has focused on the use of social media in political campaigns generally, without examining in depth how crisis conditions altered the structure and dynamics of political communication. Therefore, there is a need to examine more systematically how cyberpolitics was implemented in this context.

Therefore, this research has academic and practical relevance, particularly in addressing the research gap concerning the transformation of political communication under crisis conditions. The novelty of this research lies in its integrative analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic as a disruptive contextual factor, the transformation of candidates' political communication strategies, and the use of digital media within the framework of cyberpolitics at the regional-election level. In addition, this study offers an empirical perspective through a case study of the 2020 Surakarta Mayor Election, examining how digital political communication strategies were employed during the electoral contest.

Based on this description, this research focuses on the study of cyberpolitics in the 2020 Surakarta Mayor Election, with an emphasis on the political communication strategies of the Gibran Rakabuming Raka–Teguh Prakosa ticket during the electoral contest amid the limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The 2020 Surakarta Mayor Election brought together the candidate pair of Gibran Rakabuming Raka and Teguh Prakosa with the pair of Bagyo Wahyono and Suparjo Fransiskus Xaverius in a local political contest that formed part of the 2020 Simultaneous Regional Head Elections (Pilkada). In the election, the Gibran–Teguh pair obtained a significant victory, receiving 86.5% of the votes, compared with 13.5% for the opposing pair. These results led to the election of Gibran Rakabuming Raka and Teguh Prakosa as Mayor and Deputy Mayor of Surakarta for the 2021–2026 term.

In addition to the electoral result, voter participation in the 2020 Surakarta Mayor Election remained relatively stable, at approximately 70% of the total Permanent Voter List (DPT), which comprised 420,021 voters. This figure did not decrease substantially compared with the

participation rates in previous elections, which were 72% in 2005, 71% in 2010, and 70% in 2015. The stability of participation is noteworthy because the election was held amid the COVID-19 pandemic, which had the potential to reduce voter attendance at polling stations (Tempat Pemungutan Suara or TPS).

The 2020 Simultaneous Regional Head Elections took place under extraordinary circumstances due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted various aspects of life, including political activities and the practice of electoral democracy. At the initial stages, the General Elections Commission (KPU) postponed the election stages in response to the public health emergency. However, through decisions involving the government and the House of Representatives of the Republic of Indonesia (DPR RI), the implementation of the Simultaneous Regional Head Elections proceeded and was ultimately held on December 9, 2020, with various regulatory adjustments and health protocols.

The pandemic posed multidimensional challenges for all stakeholders in the regional elections, including election organizers (KPU and Bawaslu), election participants (candidates), and the public as voters. Social-restriction policies, such as restrictions on gatherings and the implementation of physical distancing, directly limited the opportunities for social interaction that had traditionally served as the foundation of conventional political campaigns. This situation raised concerns about declining public political participation and the potential weakening of the legitimacy of electoral democracy.

In this context, regional head candidates faced significant limitations in conducting face-to-face political communication, which had traditionally been regarded as an effective method for building emotional proximity and influencing voter behavior. These restrictions encouraged adaptations in political communication strategies, shifting from conventional campaign models toward media-based campaigns, particularly through digital media.

Mass media, and especially social media as a component of digital media, became important instruments in political communication during the pandemic. The increase in internet penetration and the intensity of social media use in Indonesia strengthened the position of digital media as a new public sphere in the political communication process. In this context, political campaigns were conducted not only through one-way message delivery but also through more participatory and decentralized digital interactions.

This phenomenon contributed to the development of cyberpolitics, referring to political communication activities that utilize cyberspace as an important medium for conveying messages, mobilizing support, and forming public opinion. In the 2020 Surakarta Mayor Election, the Gibran–Teguh pair demonstrated a strong tendency to use social media as an important component of its political campaign, in line with KPU regulations that provided for online campaign activities.

Based on the complexity of this context, this research is limited to examining digital-media-based political communication within the framework of cyberpolitics conducted by the Gibran Rakabuming Raka–Teguh Prakosa ticket during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research focuses on the digital political communication strategies used during the campaign, the forms of political interaction that occurred in cyberspace, and their relationship to the electoral outcome of the 2020 Surakarta Mayor Election.

This study does not discuss all aspects of the implementation of the regional elections in general but specifically focuses on the dimension of digital political communication from the perspective of cyberpolitics as the principal analytical framework in the context of the pandemic crisis.

Based on the background and limitations of the problems described above, this study focuses on the analysis of digital-media-based political communication practices within the framework of cyberpolitics in the 2020 Surakarta Mayor Election amid the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, the study examines how digital political communication strategies were implemented by the Gibran Rakabuming Raka–Teguh Prakosa ticket during the local political contest.

Therefore, the research questions are formulated as follows: How was digital political communication planned within the framework of cyberpolitics by the Gibran Rakabuming Raka–

Teguh Prakosa ticket in the 2020 Surakarta Mayor Election, including the design of political communication, message strategy, media strategy, audience segmentation, and target-audience determination? Why did Gibran Rakabuming Raka and Teguh Prakosa adopt cyberpolitics-based political communication in their campaign for the 2020 Surakarta Mayor Election, and what role did social media play as a strategic instrument in shaping public opinion and influencing voter behavior? How was the implementation (actuating) of digital political communication in the form of cyberpolitics campaigns carried out by the Gibran Rakabuming Raka–Teguh Prakosa ticket, particularly with regard to the use of social media, patterns of digital interaction, and forms of political communication that developed in cyberspace during the campaign?

The research aims to comprehensively analyze the practice of digital-media-based political communication within the framework of cyberpolitics in the context of regional elections during a crisis. In particular, the objectives of this research are as follows: to analyze the planning of digital political communication within the framework of cyberpolitics conducted by the Gibran Rakabuming Raka–Teguh Prakosa ticket in the 2020 Surakarta Mayor Election, including political communication design, message strategy, media strategy, audience segmentation, and target-audience determination. This research is expected to make a significant contribution, both theoretically and practically, to the development of political communication studies, particularly in the context of digital transformation and cyberpolitics practices.

METHOD

This research used a qualitative approach with a descriptive-exploratory case study design and a constructivist paradigm. The qualitative approach was chosen to gain a deep, contextual, and interpretive understanding of the phenomenon of cyberpolitics as a form of political communication conducted by the Gibran Rakabuming Raka–Teguh Prakosa ticket during the 2020 Surakarta (Solo) Mayor Election. This approach enabled the researchers to understand the processes of meaning-making, symbolic interaction, communication strategy, and the dynamics of political communication in the digital space. A case study design was employed because the research focused on a specific case, namely the practice of cyberpolitics by the Gibran–Teguh ticket during the 2020 Surakarta Mayor Election. The case was bounded by the election period and campaign activities, with data collection covering the processes of planning, implementing, and evaluating political communication. The case study was both descriptive and exploratory because the research not only described the practice of cyberpolitics but also explored the strategies, communication patterns, and meanings constructed through digital media.

The constructivist paradigm was adopted because the research viewed social reality as the result of individual and collective construction and interpretation. This paradigm helped the researchers understand the experiences and meanings attributed by actors involved in political communication through cyberpolitics, including the candidate pair and campaign team, election organizers, and members of the public. The research was conducted in the context of the 2020 Surakarta (Solo) Mayor Election, with a focus on the political communication activities of the Gibran Rakabuming Raka–Teguh Prakosa ticket through digital media during the campaign period and the implementation of the regional election amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The research focused on political communication through cyberpolitics, particularly the processes of planning, designing, delivering, and evaluating political messages through digital media. These processes included the use of verbal and nonverbal messages, symbols, narratives, political-image formation strategies, and interactions with the public as voters.

The research data consisted of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through observations of cyberpolitics activities and in-depth interviews with informants who were involved in or knowledgeable about the political communication activities of the Gibran–Teguh ticket. Secondary data were obtained from various documents, books, journals, reports, news articles, photographs, videos, and digital content related to the 2020 Surakarta Mayor Election. The research instruments included observation guidelines, interview guidelines, smartphones for audio recording and photography, and other documentation equipment. Data were collected through document analysis, in-depth interviews, and unstructured observations.

Document analysis was conducted by examining various documents and digital content from the social media accounts and websites of the Gibran–Teguh ticket, the Surakarta City General Elections Commission (KPU), and the Surakarta City General Elections Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu), including Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and websites. In-depth interviews were conducted openly but with sufficient direction to obtain information about the planning, implementation, strategies, and evaluation of cyberpolitics. Observations focused on digital political communication activities, social media content, interactions with the public, the use of symbols and narratives, visual representations, and political-image formation strategies. Interviews were recorded using the study's smartphone recording equipment when permitted and were subsequently organized for thematic analysis. The source records identified informant categories but did not provide a verified fixed total; therefore, informant recruitment was reported as purposive and continued until thematic saturation was reached, rather than assigning an unsupported number of informants.

Research informants were selected purposively based on their involvement, knowledge, and relevance to the research focus. The informants consisted of key informants and additional informants. Key informants included Teguh Prakosa, members of the Gibran–Teguh campaign team, and representatives of the Surakarta City KPU and Bawaslu who were involved in the implementation and supervision of the 2020 regional election. Additional informants included academics or political observers, community leaders, and younger-generation voters in Surakarta City. The number of informants was determined based on data saturation, which was reached when the information obtained became repetitive and no longer generated significant new findings. The role-based composition comprised key informants from Teguh Prakosa, the Gibran–Teguh campaign team, the Surakarta City KPU, and the Surakarta City Bawaslu, together with additional informants from academia and political observation, community leadership, and younger voters. This role-based composition was used to interpret interview quotations and triangulate campaign, regulatory, and voter perspectives.

Data analysis using the Miles and Huberman (1992) interactive model was conducted throughout the data-collection process and continued until the research was completed. The analysis consisted of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction was carried out by selecting, categorizing, and simplifying data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation according to the research focus. The reduced data were then presented in the form of descriptive narratives, tables, figures, and other forms of presentation to facilitate interpretation. The final stage involved drawing conclusions by identifying patterns, relationships, and meanings that emerged from the data in order to answer the research questions.

Data validity was established through triangulation, peer discussion, and increased research diligence. Triangulation was conducted by comparing data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation, as well as by cross-checking information from different sources and collected at different times. Peer discussions were conducted to examine the researchers' perceptions and interpretations of the findings, while increased research diligence involved careful and continuous observation and repeated examination of relevant references and research materials. Through the application of these methods, the research sought to produce an in-depth, holistic, and interpretive account of the practice of cyberpolitics as a form of political communication conducted by the Gibran Rakabuming Raka–Teguh Prakosa ticket during the 2020 Surakarta Mayor Election.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Formulation of Political Communication Design (Planning)

The results of the study show that the planning of Gibran–Teguh's political communication in the 2020 Surakarta Mayoral Election began with the identification of Surakarta City's socio-political context as affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Restrictions on face-to-face activities, changes in patterns of public interaction, and increased use of digital media prompted campaign teams to shift from conventional campaign practices toward digital-based communication. The

planning also considered the characteristics of Surakarta's population, voter composition, levels of digital literacy, local political dynamics, health concerns, and community needs during the pandemic.

The campaign team then involved consultants and creative personnel with information technology competencies to formulate digital campaign strategies. Mapping the opportunities and challenges of the digital space provided the basis for determining the media, messages, and communication mechanisms to be used. Digital media was viewed as capable of expanding reach, accelerating message dissemination, and facilitating two-way communication, while also presenting challenges in the form of disinformation, audience fragmentation, information overload, unequal digital literacy, algorithmic dependence, and echo chamber risks.

Gibran–Teguh's cyberpolitics planning was conceptually directed toward three main goals, namely electoral goals, image building, and political branding. Electoral goals were directed toward increasing electability, expanding support, and mobilizing voters. Image building was used to construct an image of Gibran–Teguh as a young, adaptive, professional, and responsive pair of candidates. Meanwhile, political branding was developed through consistency of identity, visual elements, narratives, and the use of social media to differentiate the pair from other candidates.

The planning was subsequently realized through the integration of various digital media and the Virtual Campaign Box innovation. Thus, digital communication was not positioned merely as a complement to conventional campaigning, but as a central campaign strategy that enabled the candidates to maintain political communication under pandemic conditions. Contemporary reporting and subsequent studies identify the Virtual Campaign Box as a campaign innovation through which Gibran could communicate with residents remotely while reducing the need for large physical gatherings.

Gibran–Teguh Cyberpolitics Message Design

The design of Gibran–Teguh's cyberpolitics messages was strategic, persuasive, interactive, and adaptive to the characteristics of digital media. The campaign messages were directed toward constructing an image of closeness to the public, modernity, governmental openness, and the candidates' ability to respond to public concerns.

The main finding concerning message design was the use of Virtual Campaign Boxes as a form of digital blusukan. The device enabled candidates to communicate directly with residents through video calls without requiring large-scale physical meetings. Residents could convey their aspirations and receive direct responses, allowing technology to function not only as a medium for information dissemination but also as a means of two-way political interaction. Operationally, the Virtual Campaign Box was a campaign communication device positioned in community settings and connected residents with the candidate through facilitated video calls. It reproduced elements of the two-way interaction associated with blusukan encounters while reducing physical crowding during the pandemic. Contemporary reporting describes the device as a mobile campaign box equipped with a monitor, camera, microphone, and connectivity that enabled residents to communicate with Gibran remotely.

In addition to the Virtual Campaign Box, the campaign team made extensive use of Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and other digital platforms. Visual content, videos, informal narratives, candidate activities, work programs, and interactions with the public were used to build personal branding and increase voter engagement, particularly among millennials and Generation Z.

From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, these digital messages served not only as political information but also as symbols through which meanings of leadership were constructed. The visualization of activities, communication styles, direct interactions, and use of technology contributed to perceptions of Gibran–Teguh as a close, simple, responsive, modern, and open pair of candidates.

Target Audience and Voter Segmentation

The main target of the Gibran–Teguh campaign was Surakarta residents who had the right

to vote. Based on data from the 2020 Surakarta Mayoral Election, there were 418,283 registered voters. The distribution of voters across districts was therefore relevant to the management and allocation of campaign resources.

Segmentation by age identified a group of young voters aged 17–29 years, productive-age adults aged 30–49 years, and older voters aged 50 years and above. Digital campaigns were initially more strongly directed toward younger voters, particularly millennials and Generation Z, who had high levels of social media use. However, the use of Virtual Campaign Boxes expanded the campaign's potential reach to adult voters, older voters, and members of the public who lacked access to or did not actively use social media. These age categories are treated as campaign-segmentation categories derived from observed campaign content and informant accounts rather than as a formal statistical classification of the electorate. The characterization of millennials and Generation Z as important digital audiences is consistent with the campaign's intensive use of Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and visual-content formats described in the findings.

Thus, the Virtual Campaign Box served as a strategy for bridging the digital divide. Digital media was not used solely to reach people who were active on the internet; digital communication technology was also physically brought into neighborhood and community settings so that people who were less connected to digital technology could still interact with the candidates.

Gibran–Teguh Cyberpolitics Activities

The results of the study show that Gibran–Teguh's cyberpolitics activities were supported by digital planning and infrastructure, including creative teams, information technology personnel, communication devices, and social media accounts. These activities developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which restricted face-to-face campaigning while making the digital space an important arena for political communication.

Social media, particularly Instagram, was a major instrument for displaying candidate activities, constructing an image of young leadership, and establishing a political presence in the digital space. Photo and video content was used consistently to produce and reproduce the candidates' political identities.

Virtual Campaign Box Activities

The Virtual Campaign Box was one of the principal findings of the study. This innovation enabled candidates to engage in dialogue with residents through video connections brought into various community settings. The practice reconstructed the concept of *blusukan* by shifting some elements of physical interaction into mediated interaction while retaining the emphasis on personal and direct communication. Contemporary accounts specifically describe Gibran's use of the Virtual Campaign Box to conduct remote dialogue with residents in neighborhood settings during the 2020 campaign.

From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, the Virtual Campaign Box functioned as a symbol of the candidates' proximity, concern, and presence. Gestures, informal language, direct responses, and dialogue with residents produced interactional experiences through which members of the public could interpret the candidates as accessible and responsive political figures.

Thus, the Virtual Campaign Box was not merely a technological device but also an arena for the production of political meaning, a means of constructing social proximity, and a medium through which candidates' political identities were negotiated. The technology contributed to the representation of Gibran–Teguh as young and adaptive candidates who could communicate with the community under crisis conditions.

Online Social Activities

Social activities, including the distribution of basic necessities, masks, hand sanitizer, and medical equipment to people affected by the pandemic, were also an important component of Gibran–Teguh's cyberpolitics. These activities were positioned not only as forms of social assistance but also as symbols of the candidates' empathy, concern, and social responsibility.

Documentation of social activities through digital media expanded the meaning of these

activities from local interactions into political messages that could reach a broader public. The visualization of assistance and accompanying narratives contributed to perceptions of the candidates' proximity to community problems and their ability to respond to crises through concrete actions.

Thus, social activities functioned as a form of action-based political communication that contributed to the construction of moral legitimacy and public trust. The activities also formed part of a counter-narrative to discussions of dynastic politics by presenting the candidates through concrete actions, social concerns, and responses to community needs.

Social Media Activity

Social media was the principal space for the production and distribution of Gibran–Teguh's political messages. Instagram was used as a primary visual channel, while YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok were used to expand communication reach among voter groups with different digital characteristics. The content disseminated included candidate activities, work programs, interactions with the community, and narratives concerning young and modern leadership.

The findings show that social media served as a space for the production of leadership symbols. Symbols of simplicity, proximity, concern, and competence were constructed through visuals, narratives, captions, comments, likes, and shares. However, public interactivity remained relatively limited because primary control over the campaign narrative remained with the campaign team. This demonstrates that although new media is technologically open, political communication within it may remain strongly curated by campaign actors.

From a cyberpolitics perspective, social media constituted an arena for the contestation of political discourse and legitimacy. The issue of dynastic politics was not eliminated but was accompanied by narratives emphasizing competence, concern, modernity, and young leadership. Thus, digital communication contributed to a shift in the themes through which the candidates were publicly represented, from their political origins toward their performance, activities, and public image.

Gibran–Teguh Cyberpolitics and the Electoral Outcome

The results of the study show that the Gibran–Teguh pair received approximately 86.5% of the valid votes in the 2020 Surakarta Mayoral Election. Official election results report 225,419 votes for Gibran–Teguh and 35,113 votes for the opposing ticket, corresponding to 86.5% and 13.5% of the valid votes, respectively. The electoral outcome occurred in a context shaped by party support, political networks, social capital, Gibran's symbolic capital as President Joko Widodo's son, and Teguh's political experience and local networks. The electoral result should therefore be presented descriptively rather than attributed to cyberpolitics alone.

Social media was an important instrument for building visibility, image, and symbolic proximity with voters. Content displaying integrity, competence, professionalism, work activities, proximity to the community, and young leadership contributed to a consistent political presence in the digital space. In the context of the pandemic, social media also provided an important channel for maintaining communication when opportunities for face-to-face campaigning were restricted.

The Virtual Campaign Box complemented this strategy by combining digital communication with direct interaction with members of the public. The innovation was adapted to pandemic conditions, enabled mediated interpersonal interaction, required comparatively limited physical logistics, could be integrated with social media, and contributed to the representation of the candidates as innovative and modern political figures.

In addition, social activities involving basic food assistance and medical equipment contributed to the construction of moral legitimacy and emotional proximity between the candidates and the community. These activities became symbols of concern and responses to the crisis, which were subsequently reinforced through digital documentation and dissemination. Thus, social activities and digital communication operated together in constructing representations of trust and positive candidate perceptions.

Overall, the research indicates that cyberpolitics was one of several strategic factors associated with the Gibran–Teguh electoral campaign and its electoral outcome. This process involved the integration of symbolic management, digital technology, personal branding, voter segmentation, the Virtual Campaign Box, social media, and social activities. Cyberpolitics therefore functioned not merely as a complement to conventional campaigning but as part of the communication infrastructure through which political visibility, proximity, legitimacy, and electoral mobilization were pursued in the digital space.

Discussion

Cyberpolitics as a Transformation of Political Communication during the Pandemic

The results of the study show that cyberpolitics in the 2020 Surakarta Mayoral Election constituted a transformation of political communication that was strongly influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Restrictions on face-to-face campaigning, limitations on public gatherings, and changes in patterns of public interaction encouraged the Gibran Rakabuming Raka–Teguh Prakosa ticket to optimize the digital space as an arena for political communication. In this context, digital media was no longer positioned merely as a supporting medium but became an important component of campaign strategy, encompassing message planning, image formation, voter segmentation, interaction with the public, and political-content distribution.

The findings suggest that crises can act as catalysts for changes in political communication practices. Limitations on conventional communication encouraged the emergence of campaign innovations that combined digital technology with local political practices. The Gibran–Teguh strategy demonstrates how adaptation to changes in the communication environment can become an important component of electoral campaigning. Cyberpolitics, therefore, is not limited to the use of social media but encompasses broader processes through which technology is used to construct and maintain political relationships between candidates and the public.

From the perspective of New Media Theory, the characteristics of digital media—including interactivity, rapid distribution, personalization of messages, and reduced spatial and temporal constraints—provide opportunities for candidates to develop more flexible forms of communication. The findings show that these characteristics were utilized through Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and the Virtual Campaign Box innovation. The use of multiple platforms indicates an effort to adapt communication channels to the characteristics and digital habits of different voter groups.

Construction of Political Meaning through Symbolic Interaction

The findings of the study also show that the political communication associated with Gibran–Teguh's cyberpolitics was not determined solely by the frequency of digital-media use but also by the construction of political meaning through symbols. From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, political actions acquire meaning through processes of interaction and interpretation. Candidate activities displayed in digital media are interpreted by audiences and can thereby contribute to the construction of meanings associated with Gibran–Teguh.

The dominant symbols identified in the digital campaign include simplicity, proximity, concern, competence, modernity, and responsiveness. These symbols were constructed through the visualization of candidate activities, the use of informal language, interactions with the community, social activities, and the representation of the candidates as young political figures. Thus, a political image is not solely transmitted by candidates but is constructed through interactions between the messages produced by candidates and the interpretations of audiences.

Social media then becomes a space for the production and reproduction of political meaning. Photos, videos, captions, comments, likes, and shares allow political symbols to circulate continuously and acquire new interpretations. Although the level of two-way interaction may remain limited, the consistent repetition of symbols can contribute to the construction of a strong political presence. This suggests that the communicative power of digital media does not depend exclusively on intensive dialogue but can also derive from the ability of campaign actors to maintain narrative consistency and political visibility.

Virtual Campaign Box as an Innovation in Political Communication

One of the important findings of the study is the use of Virtual Campaign Boxes as a campaign innovation during the pandemic. This strategy represented an adaptation to restrictions on physical campaigning while retaining an element of personal interaction through technology. Members of the public could communicate with candidates, convey aspirations, and receive direct responses without creating large gatherings. Contemporary reporting similarly describes the Virtual Campaign Box as a mechanism through which residents could communicate with Gibran through a screen while remaining in their neighborhood settings.

From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, the Virtual Campaign Box carried meanings beyond those of a technological device. It functioned as a symbol of the candidates' presence, openness, proximity, and adaptability. The concept of *blusukan*, previously associated primarily with physical presence in communities, was transformed into a mediated form of digital *blusukan*. This transformation demonstrates that technology does not necessarily eliminate local political practices but can alter the form and medium through which they are implemented.

The Virtual Campaign Box also had the potential to bridge the digital divide. Digital campaigns generally benefit people who have internet access and actively use social media. Through the Virtual Campaign Box, however, digital communication technology was physically brought into community settings so that groups less active in the digital space could still participate in mediated interactions with candidates. Thus, the innovation combined digital communication with a community-based political approach.

Social Media and the Formation of Political Branding

The results of the study show that social media occupied a strategic position in the formation of Gibran–Teguh's political branding. Instagram was one of the principal platforms for constructing the candidates' visual image through documentation of activities, interactions with the public, social activities, and representations of political life. Other platforms, including YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok, were used to extend communication to voter groups with different characteristics.

The political branding constructed through these activities emphasized not only the candidates' political identities but also their personal characteristics. Gibran was represented as young, modern, simple, and close to the community, while Teguh contributed a dimension of political experience and local legitimacy. The combination of the two figures produced a leadership representation that brought together symbols of novelty and experience.

In this context, social media enabled candidates to conduct personalized political communication. Candidates could deliver messages directly to the public without relying entirely on conventional mass media. This condition provided greater control over message production and image construction. However, the research findings also show that narrative control remained largely with the campaign team through processes of content selection, curation, and framing. Therefore, the technological openness of digital media does not automatically produce completely egalitarian political relations.

Social Campaigns as a Symbol of Political Concern

The distribution of basic necessities, masks, hand sanitizer, and medical equipment constituted an important component of Gibran–Teguh's political communication. These activities had both material and symbolic dimensions. At the material level, they provided assistance to people experiencing the effects of the pandemic. At the symbolic level, they contributed to representations of the candidates as figures who were concerned, present, and responsive to community problems.

When these social activities were documented and disseminated through digital media, their social meaning was expanded. Interactions that initially occurred at the local level could be viewed by broader audiences through photographs, videos, and digital narratives. Thus, social media functioned as a mechanism of symbolic amplification, extending the meaning of local social actions into political messages with a broader communicative reach.

Social campaigns can also be understood as a form of counter-narrative. Amid discussions

of dynastic politics associated with Gibran's political background, representations of social concern, concrete activities, and proximity to the community were used to construct an alternative narrative concerning the candidates' competence and concern for the public. This demonstrates that cyberpolitics is used not only to communicate political programs but also to manage perceptions and construct political legitimacy.

Voter Segmentation and Digital Communication Strategy

The findings of the study show that Gibran–Teguh's cyberpolitics strategy took into account voter demographics and media-use behavior. Young voters, particularly millennials and Generation Z, were an important audience because of their high levels of social media use. Therefore, the use of Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and visual-content formats was relevant to reaching these groups.

However, the communication strategy was not limited to young voters. The use of Virtual Campaign Boxes enabled the campaign to reach a broader range of people, including adult voters, older voters, and people who were not active users of social media. The strategy therefore indicates that cyberpolitics in the Gibran–Teguh case did not completely replace conventional communication but instead integrated digital technology with a community-based approach.

This demonstrates the hybrid character of the Gibran–Teguh campaign strategy. Digital communication was used to expand reach, while local interactions continued to be used to construct social proximity. The integration of the two produced a political communication model that adapted to both social conditions and the technological environment. The digital component comprised social-media distribution, visual and video content, and Virtual Campaign Box interactions, while the non-digital component comprised community-based social activities, local networks, and direct interpersonal engagement. The hybrid model refers to the reciprocal use of these channels: digital media expanded reach and continuity, whereas local interaction provided social proximity and contextual legitimacy.

Cyberpolitics and the Construction of the Electoral Outcome

The Gibran–Teguh ticket received 86.5% of the valid vote in the 2020 Surakarta Mayoral Election. Official results record 225,419 votes for Gibran–Teguh and 35,113 votes for the opposing ticket. This electoral outcome cannot be explained by a single factor. Party support, local political networks, Gibran's symbolic capital as Joko Widodo's son, Teguh's political experience, and Surakarta's socio-political conditions were among the factors relevant to the electoral context.

In this context, cyberpolitics functioned as a mechanism through which various political resources could be represented and circulated in the digital communication space. A candidate's symbolic capital could be represented through digital content, social activities could be amplified through social media, and interactions with the public could be documented and recirculated as political messages.

Thus, cyberpolitics is more appropriately understood as one strategic component associated with the electoral campaign rather than as the sole cause of the electoral outcome. Digital media provided infrastructure for constructing visibility, legitimacy, image, proximity, and political trust. Its role was interconnected with social capital, political support, organizational networks, and direct communication strategies involving the community.

Integration of Cyberpolitics, Symbolic Interactionism, and New Media

Theoretically, the results of the study show a strong relationship among cyberpolitics, symbolic interactionism, and New Media Theory. Cyberpolitics describes the spaces and practices of political activity and power that take place through digital networks. New Media Theory describes technological characteristics that enable interactivity, personalization, rapid message distribution, and reduced spatial constraints. Meanwhile, symbolic interactionism explains how political messages and actions acquire meaning through processes of interaction and interpretation.

These three perspectives show that digital political communication is not merely a technological issue. Technology provides spaces and communication mechanisms, but political

actors use these technologies to produce symbols, manage narratives, construct identities, and pursue legitimacy. In the Gibran–Teguh case, digital technology provided an instrument for transforming political and social activities into representations of leadership that could be consumed, interpreted, and reproduced by the public.

The findings also show that digital transformation does not eliminate power relations in political communication. Although the public has opportunities to respond through comments, likes, and shares, the production and curation of messages remain largely controlled by candidates and campaign teams. Thus, the digital space expands opportunities for participation while simultaneously creating new forms of control over narrative, visibility, and the circulation of political information.

Adaptive Cyberpolitics Model in Electoral Contestation

Based on the overall findings, this study identifies an Adaptive Cyberpolitics pattern consisting of three main elements: structural disruption, digitization of political strategies, and integration of political communication goals. The COVID-19 pandemic functioned as a structural disruption that prompted changes in campaign practices. Digitalization then became a central strategy for maintaining communication with voters. Furthermore, various digital activities were directed toward multiple communication objectives, including pursuing electoral support, constructing an image, and strengthening political branding.

The model shows that the effectiveness of cyberpolitics does not lie in the use of technology alone but in the ability to integrate technology with social contexts, voter characteristics, political symbols, and communication needs. The Virtual Campaign Box, social media, and social activities functioned as complementary instruments in constructing Gibran–Teguh's political presence.

Therefore, the case of the 2020 Surakarta Mayoral Election demonstrates a shift from predominantly physical forms of political communication toward a more hybrid and networked communication environment. The digital space became an arena for the production of meaning, image formation, message distribution, interaction with voters, and the construction of legitimacy. Cyberpolitics consequently functioned not merely as an alternative adopted when conventional campaigning was restricted but as an integral component of contemporary political communication practices.

In general, the research discussion emphasizes the integration of technology, symbols, interactions, voter segmentation, and political networks in the Gibran–Teguh campaign strategy. This was associated with a hybrid political communication pattern that combined digital campaigning with direct social interaction. In the context of the 2020 Surakarta Mayoral Election, cyberpolitics functioned as a strategic mechanism for constructing visibility, proximity, legitimacy, and political branding, while also contributing to the campaign's broader electoral strategy.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that cyberpolitics constituted an important component of political communication in the Gibran Rakabuming Raka–Teguh Prakosa campaign during the 2020 Surakarta Mayoral Election, particularly in the context of restrictions on conventional campaigning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The strategy was designed contextually and adaptively using of social media, message personalization, *political branding*, *image building*, the Virtual Campaign Box, and the publication of social activities. Digital media functioned not only as a channel for disseminating information but also as a space for the production and negotiation of political meaning, the formation of political presence, and the construction of proximity and trust with voters.

The Gibran–Teguh ticket received approximately 86.5% of the valid vote, with 225,419 votes out of the 260,532 valid votes recorded in the election. The electoral outcome occurred within a broader context involving cyberpolitics strategies, symbolic construction, social activities, party and political networks, and other forms of political capital. Symbolic interactions carried out through digital and offline channels contributed to representations of leadership as

modern, close to the community, concerned, competent, and responsive to crisis conditions. Thus, cyberpolitics functioned not merely as a campaign instrument but as one component of the broader process through which political legitimacy, electoral mobilization, and local political communication were constructed and negotiated in the digital environment.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors would like to express their gratitude to Universitas Diponegoro for the academic support and research environment provided during the completion of this study. The authors also extend their appreciation to all informants, institutions, and parties who contributed valuable information and assistance throughout the data collection process. Their support and participation greatly contributed to the successful completion of this research.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

All authors contributed to the development and completion of this research. The first author was responsible for conceptualization, research design, data collection, analysis, and manuscript preparation. The second, third, and fourth authors contributed to data interpretation, theoretical discussion, critical review, and refinement of the manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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