



POLITICAL BEHAVIOR OF THE CHINESE ETHNIC COMMUNITY IN THE 2024 LEGISLATIVE ELECTION IN LHOKSEUMAWE CITY

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Abstract

This study examines the political behavior of the Chinese ethnic community in Lhokseumawe, Aceh, during the 2024 Legislative Election. The research explores how this minority group participates in politics and what factors shape its voting decisions within a post-conflict environment. A qualitative descriptive approach was applied, using in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis conducted between April and May 2025. Ten informants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling, representing community leaders, business actors, first-time voters, and a local academic. The findings show that participation among the Chinese community is active in the formal sense but limited in scope. Voting is treated as a civic responsibility, while involvement in party or campaign activities is minimal. Economic considerations are the strongest influence on political choice, as respondents associate stable governance with the continuity of their businesses. Family and community networks play a guiding role in decision-making, and national parties are preferred for their perceived neutrality and inclusiveness. These orientations produce a pattern of political behavior that values stability and social harmony over ideological alignment or power competition. Interpreted through the lens of rational choice and social identity theories, the findings suggest that political participation among this minority group reflects a pragmatic adaptation to local conditions. Engagement in electoral processes serves as both an affirmation of citizenship and a strategy to maintain coexistence within a socially sensitive environment. The study provides insight into how small ethnic minorities in post-conflict areas negotiate democratic participation through cautious and context-aware practices.

Keywords: *Political Behavior; Chinese Ethnic; Community; Election 2024; Lhokseumawe; Aceh*

A. Introduction

Political behavior is an essential element of democratic life, particularly in the context of elections where citizens express their preferences and participate in public decision-making (Nissen, 2021). Each social group develops distinctive ways of forming political choices, including the Chinese ethnic minority whose social and economic background differs from that of the majority. According to Huntington and Nelson (1994), political behavior refers to the actions of individuals as citizens who seek to

influence government decisions. This behavior is shaped by internal factors such as political awareness, education, and historical experience, as well as by external influences that include public policy, economic conditions, and relations with other social groups.

In Indonesia, ethnic diversity has long influenced the development of political participation. The Chinese community represents one of the most visible minority groups. Although it has made strong contributions to the national and regional economy, its political involvement has remained limited. Historical experiences of exclusion and social pressure have shaped a cautious and pragmatic pattern of participation (Dhaneswara, 2023). The post–New Order period opened wider opportunities for representation, yet traces of past discrimination continue to influence political trust and engagement (Wasino et al., 2019; Putri et al., 2022).

The 2024 Legislative Election in Lhokseumawe offers a relevant setting to examine these dynamics. Lhokseumawe is a city in Aceh where the Acehnese Muslim majority holds strong cultural and political influence. Within this environment, the Chinese community forms a small but economically active group. Recent studies conducted in the same context show that local political engagement takes diverse forms. Fadillah et al. (2024) found that Generation Z voters in Lhokseumawe display low levels of political literacy and rely heavily on family and social media for political information, indicating limited critical engagement. Meanwhile, Marcella et al. (2024) highlighted how female candidates in the 2024 election navigated patriarchal structures by combining persuasive social strategies with practical economic outreach. These findings illustrate the broader characteristics of political participation in Lhokseumawe, where pragmatic adaptation and relational networks often determine how different social groups engage in electoral politics.

Their approach to political participation reflects an effort to maintain stability and social harmony in a region still shaped by memories of conflict. A comparable situation was identified by Akmal et al. (2022) in their study of the 2019 legislative election in Rias Village, where local political dynamics and social perceptions strongly shaped electoral outcomes despite high voter participation. This suggests that the interplay between community structure and social expectations can significantly affect patterns of political engagement, particularly in small or close-knit societies.

The post-conflict setting of Aceh also shapes how communities view political participation, where maintaining peace and social cohesion remains a major consideration (Zulfan et al., 2023; Ikramatoun et al., 2023). Studies in other regions, such as Amin et al. (2021) in Rias Village, show that strong communal bonds and local political dynamics can sustain high electoral turnout while constraining broader political engagement. These findings offer a useful comparison for understanding how minority communities like the Chinese in Lhokseumawe navigate participation within socially cohesive but politically sensitive environments. Understanding their political choices can therefore provide insight into how minority groups in Indonesia engage within environments that emphasize local identity and collective stability.

The Chinese population in Lhokseumawe is concentrated in Gampong Kota Lhokseumawe, Pusong Lama, and Pusong Baro. Field data from 2025 recorded 813 residents, down from 1,076 in 2019. This decline is associated with migration and the tendency of younger generations to move to other cities after completing their education. The demographic shift not only affects the community's economic activities but may also influence its level of political participation and representation.

This study applies political behavior theory as the main analytical framework. The theory helps explain how individuals and groups make political decisions that reflect social, economic, and psychological motivations. In the Indonesian context, identity politics is also relevant to understanding voting preferences. Abadi et al. (2023) note that political identity often serves as a strategy to mobilize group support and build influence. For minority groups, identity politics may instead encourage a cautious form of engagement that seeks balance with the majority.

Social Identity Theory by Tajfel and Turner (1986) provides another useful perspective. It explains that individuals define themselves through their group membership and tend to support political figures who reflect that shared identity. For the Chinese minority in Aceh, this sense of belonging often encourages restrained and low-profile participation. A similar dynamic has been observed among first-time voters in Aceh, where family identity and inherited political affiliations strongly shape early political orientations (Faisal, et al., 2025). As noted by Suryani and Azmy (2020), the Chinese community in many Indonesian regions likewise tends to focus on maintaining coexistence and stability rather than pursuing political competition.

Based on these perspectives, the study develops a conceptual understanding of political behavior among the Chinese community in Lhokseumawe. The analysis focuses on how the social environment, party preference, and participation patterns are connected. Family and community influence may shape a preference for national parties that are seen as neutral and inclusive. This orientation often leads to consistent participation in elections but limited involvement in broader political activities. The pattern reflects a practical concern for security and economic continuity, consistent with the view that political decisions are guided more by everyday considerations than by ideological alignment. This study therefore aims to describe the political behavior of the Chinese ethnic community in the 2024 Legislative Election in Lhokseumawe and to identify the factors that influence their voting decisions. By examining the interaction between social identity, political choice, and economic orientation, the research contributes to a broader understanding of minority participation in Indonesia's democratic processes.

B. Methods

This study used a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the political behavior of the Chinese ethnic community in Lhokseumawe during the 2024 Legislative Election. The method was chosen to capture the meanings, motivations, and experiences underlying their participation in politics, which cannot be measured solely through quantitative indicators. The research was carried out in Lhokseumawe City, Aceh,

between April and May 2025, focusing on three gampongs with the largest Chinese populations: Kota Lhokseumawe, Pusong Lama, and Pusong Baro. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling, involving ten informants representing community leaders, business actors, first-time voters, and a local academic. The selection emphasized variation in gender, age, and occupation to ensure diverse perspectives.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Interviews were guided by semi-structured questions related to political participation, perceptions of political parties, and social experiences in the post-conflict context of Aceh. Observations were conducted during community events to understand social interactions and informal discussions about politics, while documents such as demographic data and community archives were reviewed to support and verify field information. All interviews were conducted in a language preferred by the participants, recorded with consent, and transcribed for analysis. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke (2006), involving coding, categorizing, and identifying patterns that reflected participation behavior, family influence, and economic orientation. Triangulation between interviews, observations, and documents was applied to strengthen the validity of findings.

C. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study, which explore how the Chinese ethnic community in Lhokseumawe participated in the 2024 Legislative Election and what factors shaped their political choices. The presentation follows a thematic structure based on field data collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis. Each theme is discussed together with interpretation and theoretical reflection to provide a contextual understanding of the community's political behavior. The analysis also refers to the conceptual framework outlined earlier, which connects social environment, economic orientation, and political participation patterns.

1. The Political Behavior of the Chinese Ethnic Community in the 2024 Legislative Election

Field observations indicate that members of the Chinese community in Lhokseumawe participated in the election mainly through voting, while keeping their distance from campaign activities or party organizations. They regarded voting as an obligation of citizenship rather than a channel to seek influence. Many preferred to remain neutral and avoid political disputes. As one local trader explained:

“Most of us just vote quietly, we don't like to get involved in political debates. For me, what matters is that the region stays peaceful and business goes smoothly. Politics should not disturb our work or daily income.” (Interview with a Chinese business owner, May 2025)

This response captures the pragmatic attitude that characterizes the community's participation. For most respondents, politics is acceptable as long as it does not disrupt stability or trade. The pattern reflects a practical understanding of democracy in which

participation is limited to voting. This attitude is consistent with the logic of rational choice theory, which views political behavior as a means to maintain personal stability and avoid unnecessary risk (Downs, 1957).

A young voter described a similar approach, linking her decision to family influence:

“I don’t really understand politics. Usually, I ask my family which party is good to choose. I just follow their advice because they know better. For me, as long as we can vote peacefully and continue our work, that’s enough.” (Interview with a first-time voter, May 11, 2025)

The statement shows that political decisions are often made collectively within families, reflecting social norms that emphasize harmony over individual preference. Political behavior in this context becomes an extension of family consensus and communal belonging, illustrating the dynamics described in social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

A community leader expressed this preference for calm participation:

“We always take part in the election, but we don’t want to argue or get too involved. As long as everyone votes and respects each other, that’s already good. Keeping calm keeps everyone comfortable.” (Interview with the Chinese Buddhist Community Leader, May 22, 2025)

The leader’s statement underlines a low-profile orientation that values peace and respect more than political competition. The community’s involvement functions as a sign of civic responsibility while maintaining social distance from partisan politics. This pattern is also evident in research on post-conflict participation among Chinese minorities, where maintaining stability becomes the key to coexistence (Suryani & Azmy, 2020).

Another elder confirmed the atmosphere of mutual respect surrounding the election:

“We have never had problems with security during elections. Everything runs peacefully. The local people respect us, and we also respect them. That’s why we keep things as they are, without any tension.” (Interview with the Head of the Chinese Buddhist Community, May 5, 2025)

This view highlights how peace and mutual understanding shape the experience of political participation in Lhokseumawe. The election becomes an affirmation of belonging rather than a contest of interests. Through such engagement, the Chinese community strengthens its relationship with the broader society while safeguarding the stability that supports its economic and social life.

2. Factors Influencing Political Decision-Making among the Chinese Community

Interviews and observations reveal that the political decisions of the Chinese community in Lhokseumawe are shaped by several interrelated factors. Three main influences can be identified from the data: economic orientation and livelihood stability, family and community relations, and party preference shaped by perceptions of neutrality

and safety. These aspects illustrate how the community seeks to participate in politics while preserving its social and economic security.

Economic motivation consistently emerges as the strongest consideration behind political choice. Most respondents link their political preferences to business continuity and financial stability. As one participant explained:

“We just want a government that keeps the economy stable. As long as we can continue our business and there are no problems with safety, that is enough. I do not care much about parties or ideologies, because what matters is a stable situation.” (Interview with a Chinese business owner, May 2025)

This statement shows that political support is not driven by ideology but by the perceived capacity of political actors to maintain order and stability. Politics is viewed through the lens of economic survival. Such reasoning demonstrates a rational and instrumental logic, consistent with rational choice theory, which suggests that individuals participate politically to protect their interests and reduce uncertainty.

Family and community relations also have a significant role in shaping political preferences. For many respondents, voting decisions are made collectively rather than individually. A first-time voter described her experience as follows:

“I usually discuss with my parents before voting. They have more experience and know which party is better. I follow what the family decides. It is safer that way, and everyone feels the same.” (Interview with a first-time voter, May 11, 2025)

The statement indicates that political behavior is rooted in collective decision-making that values harmony over individual preference. Family discussions provide guidance and emotional security, which help minimize tension in a socially sensitive environment. Similar observations were made by Faisal et al. (2025), who found that in Aceh, the transmission of political identity within families—particularly from paternal figures—shapes how first-time voters understand and engage with politics. This pattern illustrates the process described by social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), where individuals align their actions with group norms to maintain social belonging.

Perceptions of political parties form another major influence. Many respondents expressed a consistent preference for national parties, which they perceive as neutral and less likely to emphasize local or religious issues. A community elder described this view clearly:

“National parties are more neutral. They do not bring up local or religious issues. Local parties sometimes speak too much about regional history, and we do not really understand or feel part of that. So we choose the ones that are more general.” (Interview with a community leader, May 5, 2025)

This perspective reflects a selective approach to political participation. National parties are regarded as safer and more inclusive, while local parties are viewed as closely tied to sensitive identity narratives. This reasoning aligns with identity politics theory, which explains how groups choose alliances that minimize symbolic or cultural conflict (Abadi et al., 2023).

A local academic provided an analytical observation about this cautious orientation:

“They are involved in elections, but not because they want power. Their main concern is that politics should not disturb their business. Their participation is motivated by economic and social stability rather than ideology.” (Interview with Dr. M. Rizwan, May 22, 2025)

The comment confirms that political decisions among the Chinese community are guided by pragmatic motives rather than ideological commitments. Their engagement in the electoral process reflects an attempt to balance civic duty with the preservation of economic and social harmony in the post-conflict setting of Aceh. The combination of economic reasoning, collective influence, and preference for neutrality forms a consistent pattern of participation that emphasizes stability, mutual respect, and social adaptation.

3. Patterns of Pragmatic Participation in Post-Conflict Lhokseumawe

The findings from the field show that the political engagement of the Chinese ethnic community in Lhokseumawe follows a pattern that can be described as pragmatic and stability-oriented. Community members participate actively in elections, yet their involvement remains limited to the formal aspects of the process. Political activity is approached with caution, reflecting their position as a small economic minority within a region that carries a strong post-conflict memory.

The data indicate that political participation is shaped less by ideology and more by the need for continuity and social balance. Respondents repeatedly emphasized the importance of maintaining peace, security, and business stability. This orientation explains why many prefer national political parties that are perceived as inclusive and neutral. Their decisions are made collectively within families and community circles, reinforcing the role of social belonging in shaping political choices. The combination of economic reasoning and group-based decision-making produces a form of political participation that is consistent but not confrontational.

This pattern corresponds with broader tendencies observed among minority and peripheral communities in post-conflict areas, where participation often functions as a sign of social integration rather than competition (Amin, et al., 2020). Similar to the dynamics identified in Rias Village, participation in Lhokseumawe demonstrates how communities prioritize harmony, familiarity, and collective stability over political contestation or competition for power. In the case of Lhokseumawe, the Chinese community views political involvement as a way to affirm citizenship and social acceptance while avoiding situations that might disturb established harmony. The findings suggest a deliberate adjustment to the local political environment, where maintaining coexistence and everyday stability is valued more than political visibility. Similar patterns of context-driven pragmatism are evident in other electoral groups within Lhokseumawe. Studies on Generation Z voters show that limited political literacy and dependence on familial and online cues shape how young people interpret politics (Fadillah et al., 2024). Research on female legislative candidates also emphasizes the

importance of relational engagement and social trust over ideological competition (Marcella et al., 2024). Together, these perspectives confirm that political participation in Lhokseumawe is characterized less by confrontation and more by adaptation to social and cultural realities.

The behavior observed in this study aligns with theoretical perspectives that describe participation as a rational and socially embedded action. From a rational choice viewpoint, voting and limited engagement are means to preserve economic and social security (Downs, 1957). From a social identity perspective, the collective and cautious approach reflects the influence of community norms and intergroup relations in determining political expression (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The convergence of these factors illustrates how pragmatic participation allows minority communities to remain engaged in democratic life without compromising their sense of security in a plural and historically sensitive setting.

D. Conclusion

The study shows that the Chinese ethnic community in Lhokseumawe participates in political life in a careful and measured way. Their involvement is expressed mainly through voting, with limited engagement in party or campaign activities. This pattern reflects an understanding of politics as a civic duty rather than a pursuit of influence. The community's participation remains quiet but consistent, shaped by efforts to maintain peaceful coexistence in a context where local identity and historical memory continue to influence social relations. Political choices are guided by everyday considerations. Economic stability and business continuity form the core of decision-making, supported by family and community discussions that provide guidance and reassurance. The preference for national parties arises from perceptions of neutrality and safety compared to local parties with stronger identity orientations. These tendencies indicate a mode of participation that values predictability and security, allowing the community to meet civic obligations without becoming entangled in political tension.

The observed behavior reflects the interaction between practical reasoning and social belonging. Economic concerns correspond with rational choice explanations of self-interest, while family and communal consensus align with the dynamics described in social identity theory. Within the post-conflict context of Aceh, these mechanisms operate together to shape a cautious yet consistent form of engagement. Political participation thus functions less as an ideological expression and more as a social practice adapted to local realities. Although the study focuses on a single urban community, its findings contribute to understanding how small minority groups engage in democratic processes within socially sensitive contexts. The patterns observed here suggest that participation can take modest and adaptive forms that still carry civic meaning. Further research might compare this experience with other regions or examine how younger generations interpret participation in increasingly digital political spaces. The case of Lhokseumawe ultimately portrays a mode of engagement defined by pragmatism, restraint, and the pursuit of everyday stability rather than competition for power.

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