

# The Role of Opinion Leaders in Political Decision-making in the Community of Sumber Pinang, Mlandingan District, Situbondo Regency

## ABSTRACT

In the delivery of information regarding decision-making in the Sumber Pinang village community, Mlandingan District, Situbondo Regency, an intermediary is needed, which is a person trusted by the village community. A trusted person is an opinion leader in Sumber Pinang Village. Sumber Village has three opinion leader figures trusted by the community, namely the Village Head, the Hamlet Head, and the Religious Leader. The opinion leader figure in political decision-making in Sumber Pinang Village is played by the religious leader. The role of the mass media in conveying information about political decisions utilizes the influence of opinion leaders in conveying information. Therefore, researchers are interested in describing the role of opinion leaders in political decision-making in the Sumber Pinang Village community, Mlandingan District, Situbondo Regency. To support this research, the researcher uses a descriptive research type using the phenomenology method. The data collection techniques used are observation, interviews and documentation as well as being associated with the two-step flow theory. The result of this research is the role of opinion leaders in political decision-making in the Sumber Pinang Village community, Mlandingan District, Situbondo Regency, by urging the community to use their voting rights so that the elected political members can side with the community in their policies. Although this information has been widely conveyed by the mass media, for things that have not been understood by the community, they ask for an explanation from the opinion leader.

Keywords: Opinion Leader, Political Decision, *Two-Step Flow of Communication Concept*

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## ABSTRAK

Dalam penyampaian informasi mengenai pengambilan keputusan pada masyarakat Desa Sumber Pinang, Kecamatan Mlandingan, Kabupaten Situbondo membutuhkan perantara yaitu seseorang yang dipercaya oleh masyarakat desa. Seseorang yang dipercaya merupakan pemimpin pendapat (*opinion leader*) di Desa Sumber Pinang, Desa Sumber mempunyai tiga sosok *opinion leader* yang dipercaya oleh masyarakat yaitu Kepala Desa, Kepala Dusun, dan Tokoh Agama. Sosok *opinion leader* dalam pengambilan keputusan politik di Desa Sumber Pinang diperankan oleh tokoh agama. Peran media massa untuk menyampaikan informasi mengenai keputusan politik memanfaatkan pengaruh *opinion leader* dalam menyampaikan informasi. Oleh karena itu, peneliti tertarik untuk mendeskripsikan peran *opinion leader* dalam pengambilan keputusan politik pada masyarakat Desa Sumber Pinang, Kecamatan Mlandingan, Kabupaten Situbondo. Untuk mendukung penelitian ini, peneliti menggunakan jenis penelitian deskriptif dengan menggunakan metode fenomenologi. Teknik pengumpulan data yang digunakan adalah observasi, wawancara dan dokumentasi serta dikaitkan dengan teori *two step flow*. Hasil penelitian ini adalah peran *opinion leader* dalam pengambilan keputusan politik pada masyarakat Desa Sumber Pinang, Kecamatan Mlandingan, Kabupaten Situbondo dengan cara menghimbau masyarakat untuk menggunakan hak suaranya agar kelak anggota politik yang dipilih bisa berpihak kepada masyarakat dalam kebijakannya. Meskipun informasi ini sudah banyak disampaikan oleh media massa tetapi untuk hal yang belum dipahami oleh masyarakat, mereka meminta penjelasan kepada *opinion leader*.

Kata kunci : Opinion Leader, Keputusan Politik, *Two-Step Flow of Communication Concept*

## Introduction

Politics is a relationship related to government regarding power and decision-making in a country, city or village. Politics has a very significant influence on the behavior of society. Political policies will greatly affect the daily life and values of each individual in the community (Mas & Indrawan, 2017).

As a form of the state having implemented a democratic system, one of which is holding general elections. Political participation is the participation of the community in all political processes, starting from policy formulation, decision evaluation, and having the opportunity to participate in the implementation of these decisions. Political participation is an attitude of legitimacy in the conduct of politics by the community. According to Miriam, 1998, every citizen who participates in the political process in elections is driven by the belief that through this joint participation, the desires of the community will be realized and can be channeled and receive attention, community participation will have an effect called political efficacy (In Sukma, 2023).

The community of Sumber Pinang Village, Mlandingan District, Situbondo Regency is a rural community that has a relatively low level of education. Many parents only send their children to Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) up to the high school level. The trust of the Sumber Pinang Village community, Mlandingan District, Situbondo Regency, in sending their children to Islamic boarding schools is because they believe that with the capital of religion, their children will not violate Islamic law and will not do things that violate morality.

The researcher observes the phenomenon where the community of Sumber Pinang Village, Mlandingan District, Situbondo Regency, trusts opinion leaders. This can be seen from the background of the village community, which has a low level of education. According to population data in Sumber Pinang Village, there are 2,861 residents, where 677 residents have only completed elementary school, 51 have completed junior high school, 395 have completed high school, and 21 residents have bachelor's degrees (desakami.com, n.d.). With an inadequate educational background and only religious knowledge as their capital, the people of Sumber Pinang Village trust religious leaders as role models in the context of political decision-making in Sumber Pinang Village. Therefore, the village community really needs opinion leaders in all decisions related to common interests. The trust of the village community in the opinion leaders is visible because the opinion leaders have high education and have been respected since the past (Abrori, 2020).

The role of opinion leaders in Sumber Pinang Village involves three key types: the village head, religious leaders and community leaders. During the recent political campaign period, the people of Sumber Pinang Village received information about which legislative representatives to choose through a religious study session organised by the village head. This session briefly discussed politics, specifically focusing on identifying good, honest and trustworthy leaders. During the study session, the religious leader made a statement: "I do not know who is a good leader for Indonesia because I do not have the knowledge, but I have my teacher and role model who understands better and possesses that knowledge." From this

statement, the community could already infer who his teacher is and whom he would choose.

Through the case mentioned above, researchers observed a phenomenon where the people of Sumber Pinang Village trusted opinion leaders. This can be attributed to the generally low educational background of the village people. Therefore, rural communities urgently need opinion leaders for all decisions related to common interests. The trust of the village community in opinion leaders stems from the leaders' high education level and long-standing respect within the community

The urgency of the religious figure H. TH in political decision-making in Sumber Pinang Village, Mlandingan District, Situbondo Regency is as a cultural figure and a bastion of morality, where this synergy will create a civil society, which is the desired and dreamed-of condition for all human beings, where the community hangs its choices on religious figures who follow the ulama (Islamic scholars) in Situbondo. The people of Situbondo are known as a paternalistic society, characterized by high obedience to ulama, as evidenced by the slogan 'mate odi' noro' kyiai' (life and death follow the kyai/Islamic scholar) which is often uttered during electoral contestation. Therefore, their socio-political preferences are based on the figure of the kyai who is platforms himself as a religious figure in Situbondo (Abrori, 2020).

The role of the Opinion Leader as a communication actor in all policies and decisions for the development of Sumber Pinang Village, Mlandingan District, Situbondo Regency, has a significant vision and mission for the good of the village. The Sumber Pinang village community is part of a social system with diverse backgrounds. With this diversity of backgrounds, the presence of community leaders who can become role models and whose opinions can directly influence the actions of individuals and groups is necessary. Through a journal titled "The Role of Opinion Leaders in the Covid-19 Resilient Village in Wage Village, Sidoarjo", it is explained that the opinion leader, from the perspective of Paul Lazarefeld, that communication media and communication do not come into direct contact, but there is someone who brings the message that will be conveyed to a wider audience. Opinion Leaders have characteristics that will be grouped into Active Opinion Leaders and Passive Opinion Leaders, where followers allow their followers to be more active in seeking information that will be conveyed to their opinion leaders (Efendi, 2022)

Another study titled "The Role of Public Opinion Leaders in Delivering Messages about Village Development in Lantung Village, Wori District, North Minahasa Regency" highlights the importance of opinion leaders in conveying messages about village development. This involves interaction with the community, and opinion leaders play a crucial role in meeting the community's information needs regarding village development (Rondonuwu, 2018). Therefore, the researcher will conduct a study to determine "The Role of Opinion Leaders in Political Decision-Making in the Community of Sumber Pinang Village, Mlandingan District, Situbondo Regency".

According to Rogers, an opinion leader is an individual who can influence others

through attitudes or behaviours that appear and are felt according to a certain frequency. Rogers and Carlo also describe an opinion leader as someone who provides a valuable example for their followers (Efendi, 2020). Indirectly, opinion leaders serve as intermediaries for various information received and passed on to the local community. The role of the opinion leader is often played by someone who is respected by the community and equipped with sufficient knowledge. The characteristics of opinion leaders can be divided as follows: (1) *The Controlling Style*, opinion leaders who exercise control; (2) *The Equalitarian Style*, which prioritises the similarity of the way of thinking between opinion leaders and their community; (3) *The Structuring Style*, with more use of oral and written messages to establish instructions that must be followed by all members of the community; (4) *The Relinquishing Style*, better known as the aggressive communication style, which involves sending messages or communicators knowing that their environment is action-oriented; (5) *The Dynamic Style*, which reflects a willingness to accept the suggestions, opinions or ideas of others. The opinion leader with this style does not give orders, even though they have the right to give orders and control others; and (6) *The Withdrawal Style*, an independent or stand-alone style that avoids communication. It tends to hinder fruitful and productive interactions.

This study also uses the two-step flow theory for its analysis. This theory assumes that information from the media moves in two different stages. Firstly, individuals (opinion leaders) who pay attention to the mass media receive the information. Secondly, these opinion leaders communicate their interpretations to the public along with the actual media content. The term “personal influence” was coined to refer to the process of intervention between a direct media message and a society’s initial reaction to that message. Opinion leaders have sufficient influence to change people’s attitudes and behaviour and often share similarities with those they influence. The two-step flow theory has enhanced our understanding of how mass media influences decisions.

### **Methodology**

In this study, a qualitative approach was employed to explore the dynamics of political decision-making within the community of Sumber Pinang Village, Mlandingan District, Situbondo Regency. Qualitative research, defined by Moleong (2017), is a methodological approach aimed at comprehending the phenomena experienced by research subjects. It involves various aspects, such as actions, behaviours, perceptions and motivations, providing a nuanced understanding of the subject matter. This method involves meticulous word processing and the descriptive deconstruction of ideologies and meanings, primarily based on the observed behaviours of the subjects or objects under investigation.

The primary data collection technique utilised in this study was in-depth interviews, a well-established method for gathering rich and detailed information directly from participants. Researchers engaged with informants through a series of structured questions and open-ended discussions to gain insights into their perspectives, experiences and attitudes regarding political decision-making in the community. The selection criteria for informants were meticulously defined to ensure a diverse and representative sample. Specifically, informants were chosen based on two key criteria: age range (20–70 years) and marital

status, reflecting a broad spectrum of perspectives within the community.

These in-depth interviews provided researchers with a comprehensive understanding of the nuanced factors influencing political decisions within the community, allowing for the exploration of various themes and patterns emerging from the data. The qualitative nature of this approach facilitated the exploration of complex social phenomena, enabling researchers to capture the depth and richness of participants' experiences and perceptions. Through meticulous analysis and interpretation of the data gathered, researchers were able to draw insightful conclusions and contribute to the existing body of knowledge on political decision-making processes within rural communities.

### **Findings**

Opinion leaders are individuals capable of generating innovative ideas and sharing them with the people with whom they communicate. The role of opinion leaders in Sumber Pinang Village, Mlandingan District, Situbondo Regency, extends beyond religious aspects to encompass broader issues. Thus, opinion leaders in Sumber Pinang Village serve as role models for the village community. These figures are highly regarded by the community, as evidenced by interviews conducted by researchers with village heads, heads of krajan hamlets, religious leaders and several community members. Before interviewing various villagers, researchers first interviewed village heads, Krajan hamlet heads, and religious leaders to understand the personal behaviour of these key figures in Sumber Pinang Village. The first interview conducted by the researchers was with the Head of Sumber Pinang Village, Mlandingan District, Situbondo Regency, as a village leader.

The first question that the researcher asked the informant was about the role of opinion leaders in political decision-making in the community of Sumber Pinang Village, Mlandingan District. This question received an answer from the first informant, Anik Prihatin, the acting head (Plh) of Sumber Pinang Village, Mlandingan District, Situbondo Regency; she said:

The role of the Village Head in making political decisions in the Sumber Pinang community, as examined by Mbak Ifon [one of the researchers], is very important. The Village Head provided information about the election system to the community, explained voting procedures, provided information on voting dates, and directed residents to vote according to their conscience on 14 February 2024. The residents, especially the elderly, prefer brief, clear and understandable information, as some cannot read. During the election, guidance was provided to ensure everyone understood the process. The influence of the Village Head is well-recognised by the community, especially through his associations with religious leaders and hamlet heads who supported him during his election as Village Head. (Anik Prihatin, Acting Village Head, in-depth interview, 17 April 2024)

This first piece of information has shown the role of the village head in making political decisions for the people in Sumber Pinang Village, Mlandingan District, particularly in providing systematic information to the community regarding the election day in 2024.

Meanwhile, the role of the head of the hamlet in making political decisions in Sumber Pinang Village is not very prominent. His role is primarily to help with security and coordinate assistance that will be distributed to the community. This was revealed in an interview where he said:

My role is to maintain harmony between neighbours and the community. When there is a family problem or young people causing trouble, I intervene by mediating and finding solutions so that these issues do not reach the village head. The village head has many other responsibilities, so I act as the right hand of the village head. This way, minor issues do not reach him, allowing him to focus on more significant matters. Regarding political decisions, I leave that to those who know better and understand political issues, such as the more authoritative religious figures. Besides, my activities include maintaining security in my hamlet with Babinsa [Village Guidance Non-Commissioned Officer], providing information to the village head about those in need of government assistance, and ensuring that aid from the government reaches those who genuinely need it. I also supervise the distribution of aid to ensure fairness. (Abdul Rasyid, Head of Hamlet, in-depth interview, 18 April 2024)

On the other hand, researchers interviewed religious leaders in Sumber Pinang Village to understand their roles and considerations in making political decisions. One of them, Haji Tupa Hatin, emphasised the importance of applying the knowledge gained from religious education to benefit the community. He mentioned involving young people in productive activities and maintaining harmony among neighbours. Additionally, he highlighted his reliance on the guidance of his Kiai for political decisions, emphasising trust in the Kiai's judgment and cautioning against political choices that could cause community divisions. In Indonesia, a Kiai is a respected religious figure, often a teacher in an Islamic boarding school, who is considered a successor to the Prophet's teachings and a moral and spiritual guide for the community. The high influence of the Kiai was shown on his statement as follows:

I follow my Kiai. A Kiai is considered a successor of the Messenger of Allah's da'wah, so I never question his reasons for choosing or supporting someone. I trust his judgment because he understands better which leaders are good for this nation and trustworthy. As an alumnus of the boarding school, I know very well why many political candidates come to him for prayers and support. I also appeal to the community not to let our political choices create distance between us, as this can easily happen when different choices lead to neighbours not speaking to each other. (Haji Tupa Hatin, religious leader, in-depth interview, 21 April 2024)

From the statements of religious figures in interviews conducted by researchers, it is evident that the former in Sumber Pinang Village are simple, firm and knowledgeable. This aligns with the framework established by the researchers. The role of opinion leaders in political decision-making in Sumber Pinang Village, Mlandingan District, Situbondo Regency, is embodied by religious figures. Additionally, these religious figures exhibit the characteristics of opinion leaders, specifically the Controlling and Equalitarian Style.

Furthermore, the researchers also observed how community leaders serve as role models and their views can directly influence community actions. This is further corroborated by interviews with several villagers, indicating that the role of religious leaders in political decision-making can also directly impact community actions. This was evidenced from one of the stories shared by the villagers, in which their election decision was affected by Haji Tupa Hatin's presence and his shared educational background with their son at the boarding

school. Realising that Haji Tupa Hatin's mentor was also their son's teacher, they recognise him as another influential figure in the village. They highlighted Haji Tupa Hatin's role as a religious figure and his active involvement in addressing community issues, such as handling intoxicated youths, suggesting his significance as an opinion leader. Similar sentiments toward Haji Tupa Hatin were also seen from the other villagers:

"In my opinion, he is a religious figure here and respected by the people of this village." (Abdul Aziz, villager, in-depth interview, 17 April 2024)

"Because he is the oldest religious figure that can be believed in today." (Asmani, villager, in-depth interview, 17 April 2024)

"Actually, regarding this political decision figure, there are two options: Mas Umam and Haji Tupa. However, I am more inclined to choose the candidate that Haji Tupa supports, considering his seniority and how he is perceived by the community." (Miyani, villager, in-depth interview, 17 April 2024)

"I see his contribution in forming a Remas (mosque teenagers), which indirectly involves the youth in this village to engage more in religious activities." (Triana, villager, in-depth interview, 17 April 2024)

"Because Haji Tupa is a native of this place and already understands the intricacies of this village and the character of its people. It is not surprising that many political candidates seek his support." (Riski Fitri, villager, in-depth interview, 18 April 2024)

"To be honest, I'm not sure exactly why, but it seems to stem from the fact that the community sees him as a virtuous individual. Many people heed his advice, so I believe Haji Tupa, as a religious figure, can be trusted." (Endang Rudiana, villager, in-depth interview, 18 April 2024)

The results of interviews conducted by researchers with the residents of Sumber Pinang Village, Mlandingan District, Situbondo Regency, revealed that the latter mostly rely on religious figures. Trust in religious figures in villages stems from their religious knowledge and exemplary behaviour. Due to the lack of formal education, people indirectly defer their political choices to individuals they trust, such as religious figures, who are perceived as capable advisors to the community.

Opinion leaders in the community, including village heads, hamlet heads and religious leaders, play significant roles and can directly influence community actions. While religious leaders are highly esteemed, village heads still hold authority, and decisions are not finalised without their approval. Among the eight villagers interviewed by the researcher, one disagreed that political decisions were solely dictated by religious leaders. This villager expressed respect for religious figures but emphasised that political choices are personal rights, made according to conscience. "I truly respect the religious figure here, and I could say I know him quite well because his children are also my friends. However, when it comes to making choices, I decide based on my own judgment" (Bambang Irawan Budisantoso, villager, in-depth interview, 18 April 2024).

All in all, this study has found the role of opinion leaders in political choices primarily refers to religious figures. Apart from their religious knowledge, they possess other prominent qualities, such as being mosque caretakers, esteemed individuals, alumni of Islamic boarding schools, having performed the Hajj pilgrimage and being well-acquainted with the dynamics of Sumber Pinang Village.

## Conclusion

In the research conducted by the researchers, a significant conclusion emerges regarding the role of opinion leaders in political decision-making in the community of Sumber Pinang Village, Mlandingan District, Situbondo Regency, with a particular emphasis on religious figures. The latter serve as opinion leaders due to their profound religious knowledge, involvement as mosque caretakers and deep understanding of the dynamics within the village. While religious leaders hold substantial respect within the community, it is noteworthy that the village head and hamlet head also command significant influence as opinion leaders in specific contexts.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. Firstly, the research was confined to a single village, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other communities with different socio-cultural contexts. Additionally, the study primarily focused on the perspectives of villagers, without considering the viewpoints of other stakeholders, such as local government officials or non-governmental organisations.

It is recommended that future studies broaden the scope by including multiple villages or communities to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role of opinion leaders in political decision-making. Moreover, incorporating diverse perspectives from various stakeholders could offer a more nuanced analysis of the dynamics influencing political choices within rural communities. Additionally, conducting longitudinal studies to observe changes in opinion leadership dynamics over time could provide valuable insights into the evolving nature of political decision-making processes.

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