The Price of Power

Campaign Finance and Vote Buying in Indonesia's 2024 Elections

Ward Berenschot, Mada Sukmajati, Vignesh Rajahmani, Iqra Anugrah

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Executive Summary

Overview

The high costs of election campaigns pose one of the most serious threats to the quality of governance in Indonesia. Politicians who spend enormous sums to win office face powerful incentives to recoup those costs through corruption — extracting fees from bureaucrats, awarding contracts corruptly, or facilitating regulatory evasion. A product of a collaboration between UGM (PolGov) and KITLV Leiden, this report offers the first comprehensive, data-driven overview of how much candidates spend on election campaigns, how they fund those costs, and what can be done to reduce them.

The findings draw on a survey of 478 candidates in the 2024 district head (pilkada) elections across 10 provinces, combined with fieldwork in which 14 researchers shadowed 42 candidates during the campaign period. This methodology — asking candidates to assess each other's spending rather than relying solely on self-reporting — is designed to correct for the systematic under-reporting that has long made Indonesia's official campaign finance records unreliable.

Campaign Costs are Extraordinarily High

Winning candidates in the 2024 district head elections spent an average of 27.4 billion rupiah (approximately USD 1.6 million) on their campaigns. Once payments for party endorsements — the so-called political dowry (*mahar politik*) — are included, total expenditure for winning candidates rises to 36.8 billion rupiah (USD 2.1 million): roughly 7,400 percent of a district head's annual salary, and 468 times the average annual income of an Indonesian citizen. Official filings with the KPU are widely considered untruthful; Indonesia Corruption Watch found that declared spending rarely exceeded 3.5 billion rupiah, a small fraction of actual costs.

Spending is strongly predictive of electoral success: in 78 percent of races, the highest-spending candidate won, and each additional billion rupiah spent over district rivals is associated with a 0.8 percentage point increase in vote share. In international comparison, Indonesia's total per-voter expenditure of USD 10.53 for winning candidates exceeds every other country in our comparison — including Liberia (USD 7.18), Pakistan (USD 0.80), and Kenya (USD 0.74).

Political Dowry is Pervasive and Costly

Despite being explicitly illegal under both the Election Law and the Regional Election Law, payments to political parties in exchange for candidate endorsements are nearly universal: an estimated 87.8 percent of candidates pay political dowry, averaging 6.9 billion rupiah per candidate — approximately 23.5 percent of total campaign costs.

Extrapolated across all 1,557 candidate pairs in the 2024 Pilkada, candidates collectively transferred approximately 9.4 trillion rupiah to political parties through this channel — around 75 times the total annual state subsidy those same parties receive.

Vote Buying Dominates Campaign Spending

Handouts to voters constitute the single largest expenditure category: 41.3 percent of total campaign spending for all candidates, and 47.1 percent for winners. Direct cash and food distribution alone accounts for 28.7 percent of all campaign budgets (averaging 8.3 billion rupiah per candidate), rising to 33.8 percent for winning candidates. On a national scale, aggregate vote-buying expenditures across the

2024 Pilkada are estimated at 12.9 trillion rupiah — equivalent to 7 percent of Indonesia's annual health budget. Fieldwork confirms the practice has become normalised: many voters expect payments from multiple candidates. Enforcement is minimal, as the current evidentiary threshold for prosecution means that distributing cash is effectively legal unless an explicit verbal exchange requesting a vote can be documented.

Campaign Funding is Concentrated in Personal Wealth and Business Donors

Nearly half of all campaign funding (49.2 percent) comes from the candidate's own pocket or family, amounting to approximately 13.7 billion rupiah per candidate. A further 26.4 percent comes from business sponsors. Political parties contribute only 5.4 percent and citizens a negligible 2.2 percent. This structure has severe consequences for governance: candidates who self-finance are under intense pressure to recoup expenses through corruption once in office, while business donors expect access to contracts, permits, and regulatory favours in return. State party subsidies, at Rp 1,000 per vote (around USD 0.06) and Rp 126 billion in total annually, are wholly inadequate — covering an estimated 1.5 percent of actual party financing needs, compared to around 35 percent in Germany and 50 percent in France.

Policy Recommendations

The report's principal recommendation is the establishment of an independent expert commission to develop a comprehensive reform package. The central argument is that high campaign costs are not an inevitable consequence of direct elections but the product of specific, reversible policy choices. Key reform directions include:

1. **Curtailing vote buying:** lowering the evidentiary threshold for prosecution, establishing rapid-response enforcement teams modelled on India's flying squad system, and strengthening Bawaslu's independence through transparent appointment processes and provincial rotation of commissioners.

2. **Reforming campaign funding:** substantially increasing state subsidies to political parties, and introducing citizen-directed subsidy allocation through a democracy voucher mechanism — drawing on the model proposed by economist Julia Cagй — to democratise the distribution of public funds and reduce dependence on oligarchic donors.
3. **Strengthening campaign finance regulation:** setting and enforcing meaningful spending limits calibrated to the data in this report, and requiring publicly searchable disclosure of all campaign donations
4. **Reforming the electoral system:** including consideration of a parliamentary model for regional head elections — in which the leading candidate of the party winning the most seats becomes district head — as a third option beyond either abolishing direct elections or maintaining the status quo.

These proposals are complementary and mutually reinforcing. Effective reform requires addressing simultaneously the demand side (vote buying and political dowry), the supply side (funding structure), and the institutional environment (enforcement capacity and electoral system design). The data in this report provide, for the first time, an empirical foundation on which such reforms can be credibly designed and publicly debated.

The Price of Power
Campaign Finance and Vote Buying in Indonesia's 2024 Elections

1
Introduction

The high costs of election campaigns constitute a major challenge currently facing Indonesia's democracy. The large amounts of money that candidates for district head, governor, or legislative assemblies are spending on their election campaigns, are not just a major driver of corruption. As politicians face the need to recover this money, they face strong incentives to engage in practices that weaken the Indonesian state and lower the quality of services that Indonesian citizens receive.

In a large number of corruption cases against Indonesian politicians — currently the count stands at 171 district heads and 441 parliamentarians convicted between 2004 and 2024 — politicians have been found guilty of selling bureaucratic positions, circumventing licensing procedures, undermining court verdicts, siphoning off budgets intended for improving infrastructure and public services, and auctioning off concessions and permits.[1] While some personal greed might also be involved, such corrupt practices are largely

[1] https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2025/09/17/13312931/data-kpk-setelah-swasta-pejabat-eselon-dan-anggota-dpr-dprd-paling-banyak

motivated by the need to amass and recover campaign budgets. In other words, the high costs of elections are having a negative impact on the quality of state governance and, hence, the quality of life in Indonesia.

Observers are regularly voicing concern about campaign finance.[2] Indonesia's campaign finance regulation has been dubbed 'dysfunctional',[3] while several studies are suggesting that politicians are spending increasing amounts of money on vote buying.[4] Other academics, including one author of this policy brief, published books expressing concern about Indonesia becoming a "democracy for sale".[5] Newspapers are now more frequently reporting about the excessive amounts of money being spent on elections.[6] The topic is also figuring in parliamentary debates, and when the president speaking about democracy being 'tiring',[7] he was also expressing concern about campaign costs. Relatedly, a growing number of observers as well as ordinary Indonesians are complaining about the oligarchic character of Indonesia's democracy, as an oft-noted effect of high-cost election campaigns is that rich people have, compared to ordinary Indonesians, a much greater chance of getting elected to positions of political power.[8] This oligarchization of politics makes Indonesian democracy less inclusive and distorts policymaking processes.

These concerns are fuelling ongoing efforts to redesign the electoral system. Discussions about new laws on parliamentary elections (*UU Pemilu*) as well as on district head and gubernatorial elections (*UU Pilkada*) are currently taking place, and drafts of these laws are likely to be discussed by Indonesia's national parliament within the coming year. An important topic to address in these reforms of the

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[2] See for example Sukmajati and Disyacitta, 2019.
[3] Mietzner, 2015. See also Mietzner, 2007 and 2010.
[4] See Muhtadi, 2019.
[5] Aspinall and Berenschot, 2019; Hadiz, 2010.
[6] See for example, "Biaya Politik Tinggi Pemicu Korupsi", *Kompas.id,* 13 April 2023; "Biaya Politik yang Tinggi dalam Pilkada Jadi Persoalan Serius", *Media Indonesia,* 14 Februari 2026; "Dari Pilkada ke Penjara: Mahalnya Ongkos Politik Lokal", *ANTARA News*, April 2026.
[7] See https://www.thejakartapost.com/indonesia/2024/03/05/democracy-is-tiring-messy-prabowo.html
[8] See for example Damanik et al., 2025; Tambunan, 2023.

electoral issue is the pressing issue of whether and in what ways these high costs of election campaigns could be reduced.

So far, these discussions have been taking place with limited information about the scale and character of the problem. Campaign spending and associated issues like vote buying are secretive, hushed-up topics. Beyond the occasional anecdotes, we lack reliable information about how much money politicians spend, on what they spend this money, and how they finance these costs. This means that the current efforts to draft new laws for the electoral system, are hampered due to having limited insight into the actual about how much money politicians spend on their election campaign, but also about the drivers of high campaign expenditures. This lack of information is hampering discussions about the redesign of the electoral system.

This policy-brief aims to strengthen the policy-making and public debates about Indonesia's electoral system by providing a first-ever comprehensive overview of the nature of campaign funding and spending in Indonesia, and by using these insights to identify concrete, actionable ways to reduce campaign costs in Indonesia. The policy brief addresses address four main questions: (1) how much did candidates in the 2024 district head elections (*pilkada*) spend on their election campaigns, (2) to what extent do these amounts vary across Indonesia, (3) what aspects of election campaigns are contributing most to these campaign costs, and (4) how are politicians funding these campaign expenses?

We address these questions on the basis of unique, never-before collected data on the actual character of campaign finance in Indonesia. Over the last year, Lembaga Survei Indikator conducted a survey among 478 politicians — 178 winning and 300 losing candidates — participating in the 2024 district head elections. We asked these politicians not only about how much they spend on their own election campaign, but also about how and how much their competitors spend, and how they funded their election campaign. We complemented this survey material with fieldwork involving the shadowing of election campaigns of 14 candidates for district elections, and 28 candidates for district-level legislative assemblies. In the month prior to these elections — which took place in November (district head elections) and February (legislative elections) 2024, 14 researchers followed candidates on the campaign trail to document the character of their campaign spending. For more information about our methodology and the design and execution of the candidate survey used for this report, see the appendix. With this innovative methodology and never-before collected data, the report offers an unprecedentedly detailed insight into the character of campaign finance in Indonesia.

The second part of this report builds on this analysis to develop concrete proposals for reducing campaign costs. Drawing on the analysis of cost drivers and fieldwork on the nature of election campaigns, we discuss several ways to reduce campaign costs without sacrificing democratic accountability. The report shows that addressing high campaign costs does not require abolishing direct elections. Rather, the proposals demonstrate that high campaign costs are not an inevitable side-effect of elections, but the result of policy choices. By adopting policies such as those proposed in this report, campaign costs could be reduced without limiting democratic accountability.

We focus in this report on district head elections (*pilkada*) instead of legislative elections. This choice has both practical and substantial reasons. Practically, we focus on these elections because the more limited number of candidates in these elections (mostly between two and six) enables us to implement our methodology of asking candidates to assess each other's campaign finance — something which is not possible for the legislative assembly elections with its many candidates. Substantially, our reason for focusing on these elections is that district heads have considerable influence on the functioning of local governments, the use of government budgets and, hence, the quality of government. Their campaign expenditures are most directly influencing the character of governance in Indonesia. These district head elections involve contests between candidate pairs, i.e. a candidate for *bupati* or *walikota* runs alongside a candidate for vice-*bupati* or vice-*walikota*. For reasons of brevity, in the following we tend to write 'candidate' when actually referring to the candidate-pair.

This report is a product of an ongoing research collaboration between Universitas Gadjah Mada, KITLV Leiden and UPIASI New

Delhi, funded by the Dutch Research Council NWO. This research project involves collaborative research with researchers across Indonesia and India. Its aim is to study to what extent and why the costs of election campaigns vary across India and Indonesia. For more information about the project, please visit the project website. For calculating Rupiah into US Dollar, we took the exchange rate of 17.600 IDR/Dollar.

2
Campaign Finance Regulation in Indonesia: An Overview

Before discussing actual campaign finance practices, a very brief overview of applicable rules and regulations is useful — particularly to understand in what ways and to what extent actual practices violate these regulations. Indonesia's campaign finance framework is governed primarily by Law No. 7 of 2017 on General Elections (*Undang-Undang Pemilu*) and Law No. 10 of 2016 on Regional Head Elections (*Undang-Undang Pilkada*), supplemented by implementing regulations issued by the General Elections Commission (KPU), most recently KPU Regulation No. 18/2023 for national elections and KPU Regulation No. 14/2024 for the 2024 regional elections (*pilkada*).

According to these regulations, campaign funds may come from three sources: candidates themselves, political parties, and third-party donations (individuals, private companies, and non-party organizations). For the 2024 *Pilkada*, individual donations were capped at Rp 75 million during the campaign period, while donations from private legal entities and political parties were capped at Rp 750 million.[9] These donations are illegal if they come from state-owned enterprises, foreign entities, and state budgets. The regulations also forbid donations from unidentified (i.e. not publicly declared) donors

[9] https://www.kompas.id/artikel/en-kpu-terbitkan-pedoman-pembatasan-dana-kampanye-pilkada-2024-transparansi-pasangan-calon-jadi-sorotan

— a type of donation that, as well shall see, is very common (TI, 2025: 9).

The regulations are explicit about forbidding two types of expenditures that, as we will report, in practice constitute the bulk of the costs of election costs: 'political dowry' and vote buying (TI, 2025). Both the election law and the regional election law forbid parties from receiving financial rewards from individuals seeking party support for their candidacy. These laws prescribe various sanctions for providing and receiving such political dowry — including fines, imprisonment and cancellation of the candidacy.[10] The election laws also specifically forbid the provision of money to voters for the purpose soliciting their vote ('vote buying'). Article 187A of the regional election law prescribes jail sentences between three and six years and fines of up to 48 million rupiah for perpetrators of vote buying.

One of the most striking features of Indonesian campaign finance law is the near-absence of effective spending limits. While most countries attempt to curtail campaign expenditures by imposing spending ceilings,[11] Indonesia has no such limits for legislative and presidential elections. For district head elections and *pilkada*, the KPU does set spending ceilings that vary by region based on local cost standards, geographic coverage, and the scale of the contest. As our overview in *Appendix 3* shows, these spending limits are generally set so high that they do not impose any meaningful deterrent on campaign spending. For example, for *kabupaten* Pandeglang in Banten the spending limit is a fanciful 200 billion rupiah (12.4 million US dollar),[12] for *kota* Padang it is 88 billion rupiah, and for Semarang it is 89 billion rupiah.[13] With a few exceptions (for Bandung the limit is relatively low at 13 billion rupiah) these spending limits are unreachable for even the most well-endowed politician. This means that, in practice, Indonesia does pose meaningful spending limits on politicians.

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[10] Political dowry is discussed in articles 228 and 242 of the Election Law, and article 47 of the regional election law, and articles 187B and 187C of this law stipulate sanctions. See TI, 2025: 11.

[11] For a useful overview of campaign spending regulation in different countries, see the International IDEA Political Finance Database, available at https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/political-finance-database

Politicians do have to submit reports on their campaign spending. Candidates and parties are required to open dedicated campaign bank accounts (*RKDK*) and submit multiple sequential financial reports: an initial declaration (*LADK*), a donations receipt report (*LPSDK*), and a final income-and-expenditure report (*LPPDK*). Candidates for regional heads must submit reports of campaign fund donations and expenditures within one day before the campaign period begins and one day after it ends (see TI, 2025). The KPU's SIKADEKA information system is used to collect and publish these reports, though with limited public-facing detail. The Election Commission KPU, the General Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) are tasked with supervising and monitoring and scrutinizing these campaign finance reports, with the Financial Intelligence Unit (*PPATK*) tasked with receiving and analyzing suspicious transaction reports. In practice, however, these campaign finance reports are widely considered to be untruthful. A range of studies and media reports find that the reports tend to be incomplete[14] and provide campaign spending figures that are unreliably low.[15] As candidates prefer not to disclose their campaign funders, they try to submit campaign expenditure amounts that match the amounts of legal, disclosable campaign funding sources. Articles 496 and 497 of the Election Law impose sanctions on election participants who report campaign funds incorrectly — yet it seems that candidates regularly do see without getting sanctioned.[16]

Another aspect of campaign finance regulation that regularly sparks debate, concerns state subsidies for political parties. Following Government Regulation 2018 on Political Party Assistance, the Indonesian state provides political parties with a yearly subsidy of Rp 1.000 per vote received during the national legislative elections. Based on the 2024 election results, PDI-P will receive Rp 25.3 billion

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[12] https://news.detik.com/pilkada/d-7583231/dana-kampanye-pilbup-pandeglang-maksimal-rp-200-m-ini-rinciannya

[13] https://www.detik.com/jateng/pilkada/d-7569323/dana-kampanye-pilwalkot-semarang-maksimal-rp-89-4-miliar-ini-rinciannya

[14] https://asiatimes.com/2019/03/indonesia-needs-transparency-in-campaign-funding/

[15] https://kemitraan.or.id/en/press-release/buruknya-akuntabilitas-laporan-dana-kampanye-problem-serius-pengaturan-penegakan-aturan-dan-komitmen-para-capres-cawapres/

[16] For an important analysis of Indonesia's campaign finance regulation, see Mietzner, 2015.

annually, followed by Golkar at Rp23.3 billion and Gerindra. In total, after the 2019 election this state subsidy to parties amounted to Rp126 billion (around USD 8 million) per year.[17] This amount is relatively low; according to the Ministry of Home Affairs, state aid can only meet about 1.5 percent of political parties' actual financing needs. By comparison, state funding covers around 35 percent of party needs in Germany and 50 percent in France.[18] Debates are ongoing whether higher subsidies could reduce the dependency of candidates on business actors ('oligarchs') or personal wealth[19] — an issue we will further discuss in the section on policy recommendations.

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[17] https://www.kompas.id/artikel/en-bantuan-keuangan-parpol-untuk-siapa

[18] *Idem*.

[19] See for example https://www.kompas.id/artikel/en-dilema-kenaikan-bantuan-keuangan-dan-tuntutan-kemandirian-partai-politik

3
The Cost of Democracy: Campaign Spending Across Indonesia

Having discussed the regulations, we now turn to actual practices. How much do candidates for district head elections spend on their election campaigns, and to what extent do these campaign costs vary across Indonesia? In our survey we asked candidates both about the expenditures for the election campaign (defined as all expenditures made for winning a seat during the last year before the elections), and the expenditures for gaining party support for one's candidate — sometimes referred to as *mahar politik* or political dowry. We will discuss both types of expenditures in turn, after which we provide an overview of total costs.

3.1 *Campaign expenditures*

To assess campaign expenditures, we employ a unique feature of our candidate survey. We asked not only candidates about the spending of their competitors, but also about their own expenditures. As candidates might be expected to provide underestimates of their own expenditures, while inflating the costs of their competitors (particularly of the winners),[20] our approach allowed us to arrive at spending assessments that neutralized these biases to a certain

[20] This indeed turned out to be the case, but to a limited extent: the ratio of self-assessments vs competitor assessments is 0.80

Table 1
Campaign Spending District Heads: All Candidates vs Winning Candidates

Region	*All Candidates*			*Winning Candidates*		
	No. Candidates	Mean (Billion Rp)	Mean/ Voter	No. Candidates	Mean (Billion Rp)	Mean/ Voter
Sumatra	68	29,4	189.133	27	33,8	211.390
Java	127	24,3	51.461	45	31,5	71.106
Kalimantan	9	15,2	87.223	4	22,6	132.571
NTT	54	7,4	69.301	14	12,1	108.638
Sulawesi	76	14,1	105.240	29	23,1	165.020
TOTAL	**334**	**20,1**	**95.575 (5,43 USD)**	**119**	**27,4**	**132.303 (7.51 USD)**

extent — thus boosting the reliability of these estimates. We arrived at the campaign expenditure of candidates by combining these self-assessments and the average of the competitor assessments.[21] We excluded candidates for which we had no self-assessments and those for whom the given assessments were so varied that we considered them unreliable. We ended up with assessments of campaign expenditures of 334 candidates for district head elections.[22]

Table 1 provides a first broad overview of our findings. We find that winning candidates — i.e. the elected district heads — spend on average 27.4 billion rupiah on their election campaign. The average for all surveyed candidates — involving 119 winning and 215 losing candidates — is 20.1 billion rupiah. As one might expect, winning candidates spend much more on election campaigns — on average 27.4 billion rupiah. This higher expenditure might be partially due to the fact that candidates with little chance of winning likely avoid spending a lot of money. But it might also be that candidates

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[21] As the number of competitor assessments varied (as districts vary in the number of candidates and those surveyed), we first calculated the average of these competitor assessments. We then took the average of the self-assessment and the thusly combined competitor assessment to arrive at the spending figures provided in this report. See the annexure for a more elaborate explanation.

[22] As further discussed in the annexure, we assessed this reliability by looking at the coefficient of variation (CV). We excluded candidates for whom the CV was higher than 1, meaning that the standard deviation of the assessments was higher than their average.

Table 2

Campaign Spending in 10 Provinces, Ranked by Spending per Voter

Rank	*Province*	*Region*	*N Cands*	*N Districts*	*Mean Spending (B Rp)*	*Mean Spend/ Voter (Rp)*	*Avg Constit-uency Size*
1	SUMATERA SELATAN	Sumatra	16	7	39,4	207.522	293.847
2	SUMATERA UTARA	Sumatra	52	24	26,3	183.475	174.621
3	SULAWESI UTARA	Sulawesi	18	11	14,3	145.350	104.154
4	SULAWESI SELATAN	Sulawesi	29	20	22,6	130.935	215.512
5	KALIMANTAN SELATAN	Kalimantan	9	4	15,2	87.223	191.070
6	NUSA TENGGARA TIMUR	NTT	54	20	7,4	69.301	119.973
7	JAWA TENGAH	Java	51	28	29,9	67.699	544.594
8	SULAWESI TENGAH	Sulawesi	29	12	5,6	54.649	124.358
9	JAWA BARAT	Java	62	25	22,4	41.661	712.490
10	DI YOGYAKARTA	Java	14	5	12,5	35.707	392.400

spending a lot of money have a higher chance of winning elections — a topic we will further explore in later publications. These candidate assessments provide proof that election campaigns are very expensive, and that these expenses are much higher than the candidate's official campaign finance report suggests. A study done by Indonesia Corruption Watch found that the total spending as reported to the KPU in the *LPPDK* filings of candidates does not exceed 7.4 billion rupiah, with most reports containing expenditure amounts below 3.5 billion rupiah (see ICW, 2025: 14). Our study thus provides further proof that the reports that candidates submit to KPU are untruthful.

This difference in spending between winning and non-winning candidates is also reflected in the success rate of big spenders. We find that in 78.4 percent of the elections (i.e. in 80 out of the 102 districts for which we could examine this), the biggest spending candidate ended up winning the elections. Comparing candidates within the same district, we find that there is a strong and statistically significant relationship between the campaign spending and variation in the vote share of candidates (Within-district RI = 0.44, which means that campaign spending explains 44 percent of the variation in candidate vote shares). To put this finding in other words, per 1 billion rupiah that a candidate outspends his district rivals, he/she receives a 0.8 percentage higher vote share,[23] holding the district context constant. While not being proof that elections can be bought, this finding does show that a capacity to spend money boosts a candidate's chance of winning elections campaigns.

As Table 2 shows, there is considerable variation in campaign spending across Indonesia. Candidates spend the most money in Sumatra, closely followed by Java. Election campaigns are less expensive in Kalimantan and Sulawesi, and relatively cheap in East Nusa Tenggara. This variation, however, acquires some nuance if we consider the number of voters for each district. As shown in the column 'mean/voter', candidates in densely populated Java are spending less money per voter compared to, particularly, Sumatra.

We will engage in a fuller analysis of the pattern of variation in campaign expenditure at a later occasion. But for the purpose of this policy report, a few preliminary observations are in order. *First*, it is important to point out that we did not find much differences in spending between rural and urban areas. Bupati and Walikota races are nearly identical in absolute spending (Rp 20.4B vs 19.1B), but walikota races cost 31 percent more per voter (Rp 117K vs 89K) because urban constituencies are smaller. *Second*, we did not see a significant correlation between per-capita incomes and campaign spending, and *third*, the commonly expressed hypothesis that politicians spend more in tight electoral contests, is also not supported by our data. There is no significant correlation between the margin of victory and campaign expenditure ($r = -0.01$, $p = 0.90$), suggesting that high spending is not due to the intensity of competition. Instead we find some preliminary evidence that variation in the levels of campaign spending is related to the character of local economies, with preliminary and hence tentative analysis suggesting a statistically

[23] With a 95 percent confidence interval, *0.C3–0.S3 pp.*

Table 3
Political Dowry — Total Expenditure on Party Endorsement

Region	*All Candidates*			*Winning Candidates*			*% cand. paying dowry*
	N	Mean (B Rp)	Dowry as % of Total	N	Mean (B Rp)	Dowry as % of Total	
Sumatra	57	6,4	14,3	25	6,8	13,1	94,0
Java	109	8,2	22,2	49	9,0	17,1	85,4
Kalimantan	7	12,6	43,9	3	17,2	41,9	83,3
NTT	48	3,5	28,6	18	4,7	25,0	82,9
Sulawesi	54	6,8	31,4	29	8,2	35,1	90,3
TOTAL	**275**	**6,9**	**23,5**	**124**	**7,9**	**20,1**	**87,8**

significant correlation between local tax revenue (*pendapatan asli daerah*, PAD) and campaign spending. Such a finding is suggestive of the possibility that politicians are more willing to spend money in regions where the local government controls more resources — a relationship we will explore more fully in later publications.

3.2 *Expenditures on political dowry*

Next to the campaign expenditures outlined above, candidate (–pairs) running for district head elections also pay considerable amounts of money to political parties to convince them to support their candidacy. This 'political dowry' is the result of a quirk of Indonesia's electoral system: at the time of the 2024 district head elections,[24] candidates required support from parties or a party coalition with 25 percent of the popular vote or 20 percent of seats in the local legislature (DPRD).[25] As political parties generally do not meet this threshold on their own, this has meant that candidates need to acquire the support of a coalition of political parties. Prior to our research, there

[24] In decision number 60/PUU-XXII/2024, the Constitutional Court changed the nomination threshold. It annulled the previous seat-based requirement and declared that political parties that don't even hold seats in the DPRD can now nominate candidates. The new threshold is based solely on valid votes received in the relevant region, ranging from 6.5 percent to 10 percent depending on the size of the electorate.

[25] Candidates can also run for independents, if they manage to collect the signatures and photocopies of identity cards of between 6.5 and 10 percent of the registered voters in their region. As this is a tall order, most candidates run with party support.

have been indications and anecdotal evidence that political parties demand considerable sums of money in exchange for that support — generally citing the need to meet 'operational costs' as reason for requesting this money.[26] Yet there had been no evidence of the regularity and costs of this practice of demanding political dowry. As this practice is also secretive, such numbers are rarely reported in newspapers, and it had previously not been possible to systematically assess these costs.

With our survey we can now provide, for the first time, a general overview of the money that candidates spend on acquiring support from political parties. As the practice is illegal, we did not ask candidates about themselves, rather we asked the candidates to provide estimates of how much money competing candidates paid to political parties, both in total and per seat. In this way we obtained estimates about 275 candidates, of which 124 candidates won the elections. With the caution that these numbers thus represent estimates of candidates about each other's costs,[27] Table 3 first provides the general overview.

The key finding that emerges here, is the staggering costs involved in political dowry. Candidates running for district head are estimated to spend on average 6.9 billion rupiah, or 23.5 percent of the total campaign costs, on acquiring party endorsements. Almost all candidates — 87,8 percent on average — pay such political dowry. Winning candidates spend somewhat more on political dowry (7.9 billion rupiah), which is likely due a tendency of strong candidates to 'buy' large party coalitions as a strategy to prevent other politicians from acquiring enough party support, in combination with the fact that weaker candidates tend to have less money to spend. These estimates from candidates suggests that political dowries are considerably more expensive in Kalimantan, and form a higher share of the campaign costs in the regions where campaign expenditures are lower (i.e. NTT and Sulawesi) — but particularly the numbers from Kalimantan need to be taken with a grain of salt due to the low number of assessed candidates.

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[26] See Hendrawan et al., 2021; Aspinall and Berenschot, 2019.

[27] These numbers thus represent the averages of the assessments given by their competing candidates in their district.

Table 4
Average Cost per DPRD Seat by Party

Party	*N obs*	*Mean (M Rp)*
GERINDRA	20	842
PPP	13	800
HANURA	11	632
GOLKAR	21	616
NASDEM	13	599
PKB	26	574
PERINDO	12	542
PKS	23	539
PSI	12	492
DEMOKRAT	22	455
PAN	22	443
PDIP	18	401
ALL PARTIES	**213**	**571**

We find that this tendency to demand political dowry is equally common among all political parties. There is some variation, however, in the amounts of money that parties receive from candidates, if we look at the amount of money per seat that this party holds in local parliament (DPRD). Table 4 provides an overview for the 213 candidates for whom the surveyed competing candidates could give estimates. While we urge some caution as these numbers reflect competitor estimates and involve a lower number of candidates, the pattern described in this table is nonetheless very interesting as it largely reflects the current national political constellation. The parties that, apparently, could ask the highest amount of money per seat, are the party of president Prabowo (Gerindra, receiving 842 million rupiah per seat) and those parties forming part of his party coalition — a coalition referred to as 'KIM plus' and involving all major political parties minus PDI-P. The lack of a link with the national ruling coalition might make PDI-P a less attractive partner, leading to lower 'price' for their support at 'only' 401 million rupiah per seat. Yet the relatively cheap political dowry of the PDI-P might also simply be because they are often the largest party in local parliaments, thus still amassing large sums of money while asking for lower amounts per seat. This variation in the money that parties obtain from candidates is again a topic that deserves to be explored further, while falling outside the scope of this policy brief.

As our sample is fairly representative, we can extrapolate these findings to the whole of Indonesia: as in total 1.557 candidate pairs participated in the 2024 district head elections,[28] if 87.8 percent of these pairs each paid on average 6.9 billion rupiah to parties, this means that in the run up to the 2024 district head elections candidates paid political parties the astounding amount of 9.4 *trillion* rupiah. This amount dwarfs the, in comparison, puny amount of state subsidies that political parties receive — amounting to only 126 billion rupiah in 2023.[29] The conclusion here is that district head elections are big business for political parties, as they are extracting large sums of money from their candidates — about 75 times as much as they are getting in yearly state subsidies. If we keep in mind that winning candidates generally try to recover this money once in office, then these findings underline that the practice of political parties to demand political dowry is a major driver of corruption and, consequently, state financial losses.

3.3 *Total campaign costs*

Having outlined the sums of money that politicians spend on the actual election campaigns, and on political dowries, we can now combine these two expenditures to arrive at the total costs of campaign costs in Indonesia. Table 5 provided the general overview. These numbers are slightly different from those presented above, as these average totals are calculated only for those 275 candidates for whom we have both the campaign costs *and* the costs of political dowry — i.e. slightly less than the 334 candidates we analysed above. This sample is, while smaller, still draws from a broad range of provinces and hence broadly representative of the full 1,557 candidate-pairs participating in the 2024 elections.

[28] See https://en.antaranews.com/news/336117

[29] https://databoks.katadata.co.id/keuangan/statistik/a1a416f9225d912/pemerintah-kucurkan-dana-bantuan-parpol-rp126-m-terbanyak-untuk-pdip

Table 5
Total Operational Expenditures of District Head

Region	*All Candidates*					*Winning Candidates*				
	N	*Campaign Spending*	*Political Dowry*	*Total (Spending + Dowry)*	*Total Cost / Voter (rp)*	*N*	*Campaign Spending*	*Political Dowry*	*Total (Spending + Dowry)*	*Total Cost / Voter (rp)*
Sumatra	57	31.8	6.4	38.2	248,378	22	36.4	7.0	43.4	282,356
Java	109	24.9	8.2	33.1	74,456	41	32.2	9.8	42.0	100,81
Kalimantan	7	17.1	12.6	29.7	162,088	3	24.9	17.2	42.2	237,415
NTT	48	7.9	3.5	11.4	108,889	14	12.1	5.5	17.6	165,962
Sulawesi	54	14.1	6.8	20.9	165,851	21	22.5	9.2	31.7	254,559
TOTAL	275	21.1	6.9	27.9	136,693 (7.77US$)	101	28.1	8.7	36.8	185,411 (10.53US$)

We find that, when counting both campaign costs and political dowry, the average candidate (—pair) spends 27.9 billion rupiah on an election campaign, while winning candidates spend on average 36.8 billion rupiah. To put these numbers into perspective, winning candidates are spending 75 times more than the average annual salary of district head including allowances (estimated to amount to 41.1 million per month).[30] With the annual income of an average Indonesian being 78.6 million per year,[31] this means that elected district heads spend 468 times as much on their election campaigns than the average Indonesian earns in one year. If, as this data suggests, the 1,557 candidate pairs contesting the 2024 pilkada spend on average 27.9 billion rupiah, this means that jointly these candidates spend 43.4 trillion rupiah. This amounts to 0.20 percent of Indonesia's GDP, or 6.5 percent of the yearly educational budget.[32]

While these figures sound high, one might still wonder how these expenditures compare to those of politicians participating in elections elsewhere. A recent research project undertaken by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, provides us with an

[30] See https://seknasfitra.org/pressrelease/naikan-gaji-kepala-daerah-presiden-bangkrutkan-daerah-2/
[31] See BPS.go.id
[32] https://databoks.katadata.co.id/en/economics-macro/statistics/1507d9c612d0a05/indonesias-2024-education-budget-reaches-rp665-trillion-a-new-record-high

opportunity for such a comparison. On the basis of (a more limited) number of expert assessments provided by politicians in a range of countries, these studies provide rough assessments of the costs of running for parliamentary seats in a range of countries. The comparison is thus imperfect, as our elections concern district head elections, not parliamentary elections, and the estimates are based on a smaller number of interviews. Still, the calculation of a per-vote expenditure for these elections in different countries, provides us at least a rough indication of how Indonesia's campaign costs compare to other countries. This international comparison underlines how worrying the situation in Indonesia is: in terms of per-voter expenditure, the expenditures for the district head elections are higher than those for all the studied elections in other countries. With a per voter expenditure of 10.85 dollar for winners and 7.77 dollar for all candidates, Indonesia even beats Liberia (7.18 dollar for winning candidates), while these expenditures generally more than five times higher than those in Pakistan (0.80 USD), Ghana (1.24), Kenya (0.74) and Mali (1.23). In summary, these admittedly imperfect international comparisons suggest that Indonesia's campaign spending is also very high by international standards.

4
How do Politicians Spend Their Campaign Funds?

Given these large amounts of campaign budgets of politicians, our subsequent question acquires urgency: on what do the candidates (—pairs) for district head spend this money? In other words, how much money do politicians spend on different types of campaign expenditures? Once again we asked our set of 471 candidates to provide assessments of how much money their competitors spend on eight main budget items. These were categories of campaign expenses that, through our fieldwork on election campaigns, we identified as the most important ones. As not all surveyed candidates provided estimates, in the end we acquired estimates of the patterns of campaign expenditures of 279 candidates (including 124 winners), In Table 6 below we provide a general overview of the results, which we will subsequently contextualize using the insights we obtained from our fieldwork on election campaigns.

The first observation about these findings is that the three 'traditional' categories of campaign spending, publicity, campaign events and campaign organisation, form only a minor share of the total campaign expenditure. Candidates spend on average 11.9 percent of their budget (i.e. about 2 billion rupiah per campaign) on publicity and advertising, which involves spending on posters, banners, as well as on advertising on traditional and social media. They spend on average 17.2 percent (about 3 billion rupiah per campaign) on

Table 6
Campaign Expenditure Breakdown by Category and Region
(*Figures show share of campaign spending* [%]. *Winning candidates in brackets*)

Expenditure Category	*Sumatra (N=58)*	*Java (N=108)*	*Kalimantan (N=7)*	*NTT (N=46)*	*Sulawesi (N=60)*	*National (N=279)*
Handouts	44,9 (45,8)	46,4 (54,9)	19,2 (24,9)	25,6 (33)	43,4 (45,9)	**41,3 (47,1)**
Cash & food distribution to voters	*31.2 (32)*	*33.4 (41)*	*5.6 (8)*	*17.5 (22.7)*	*29.4 (32.5)*	***28.7 (33.8)***
Community facilities	*7.2 (6.3)*	*6.9 (7.7)*	*11.5 (13.3)*	*2.3 (3.6)*	*7.3 (7.6)*	***6.4 (7)***
Gifts to local leaders	*6.5 (7.5)*	*6.1 (6.2)*	*2.1 (3.6)*	*5.8 (6.7)*	*6.7 (5.8)*	***6.2 (6.3)***
Mass rallies & face-to-face events	19 (17.3)	11.4 (9.9)	31.6 (35)	26.6 (22.6)	16.8 (17.2)	**17.2 (15.5)**
Publicity & advertising	9.6 (11.1)	12.8 (10.1)	13.5 (5.7)	13.2 (7.4)	11.5 (12.5)	**11.9 (10.5)**
Campaign team	11.1 (8.5)	11.1 (10.6)	4 (17.1)	8.9 (10.9)	11.8 (10.1)	**10.7 (10.2)**
Campaign organisation	8.2 (8.3)	8.3 (8.1)	21.6 (13.7)	12.9 (13.9)	9.7 (8.9)	**9.7 (9.2)**
Polling-station monitors	7.2 (8.9)	10 (6.5)	10.2 (3.5)	12.8 (12.2)	6.9 (5.4)	**9.2 (7.4)**
TOTAL	**100 (100)**	**100 (100)**	**100 (100)**	**100 (100)**	**100 (100)**	**100 (100)**

organising rallies and other such campaign events, and they spend 9.7 percent (or 1.6 billion rupiah per campaign) on organisational costs, which involves costs for renting offices, transportation, catering, as well as opinion polling.

We asked candidates to provide separate assessments for the spending on campaign staff — including local campaigners, consultants and the central campaign team. We did so because these assessments illustrate a peculiar feature of election campaigns in Indonesia. As political parties have limited mobilizational capacity, and as candidates organise the election campaigns themselves (rather than political parties), they need to build their own campaign team (see Aspinall and Berenschot, 2019). This provides us with the first reason why campaign expenditures are relatively high in Indonesia. In many countries candidates can rely on political parties and party volunteers who do not need to be paid for their campaign work. In contrast, this survey confirms that politicians in Indonesia need to spend considerable money on getting people to campaign on their behalf: on average an estimated 10.7 percent of campaign costs (i.e. almost 2 billion rupiah per candidate) is spent on the campaign team.

The limited involvement of party cadres makes election campaigns expensive in yet another way, by forcing candidates to spend considerable money polling-station monitors — *saksi tps.* As candidates feel that KPU staff cannot be trusted to count their votes fairly, they tend to send campaign staff to polling booths to monitor both the actual voting and the vote counting taking place afterwards. This lack of trust in the voting process is costing them dearly. These witnesses tend to get a daily allowance (of 200-300 thousand rupiah per person) as well as food, and they are trained before the elections. We found that candidates spend on average 9.2 percent of their budget (or 1.2 billion rupiah per candidate) on booth witnesses. Either the availability of committed volunteering party cadres, or a more trustworthy voting process, would have enabled candidates to avoid these costs.

The main campaign expense, however, involves the handouts that candidates provide to voters and local leaders. We found that, in the assessments of candidates, 41.3 percent of campaign budgets (i.e. about 11 billion on average per candidate) is spent on handouts, with higher percentages and amounts (47,1 percent amounting to about 17 billion rupiah) for winning candidates. These handouts fall in three categories. A first type of handout involves the money that candidates spend providing facilities for communities, such as money for building roads, repairing irrigation, renovating places of worship, compensation for the deceased, ambulances, agricultural equipment, etc. These gifts are sometimes referred to as 'club goods' as they are provided to whole communities rather than individuals. Politicians spend on average 6.4 percent (or 1.5 billion rupiah) on community gifts. In addition, they spend a similar amount (6.2 percent or 1.3

billion rupiah) on giving money and gifts to influential neighborhood leaders such as RT heads, village heads or customary leaders to enlist their support during election campaigns.

The most important type of handouts, and the most important spending category overall, is the money that candidates distribute to voters in the run up to election day. This money distribution is sometimes (inadequately) referred to as 'vote buying' or, in Indonesian, *serangan fajar*. Winning candidates spend about a third of their campaign budget (33.8 percent or 12.4 billion rupiah) on such money distribution, with these numbers slightly lower for all candidates (28.7 percent or 8.3 billion rupiah). During our fieldwork following candidates on the campaign trail, we saw how relatively normal, accepting this practice of handing out money to voters has become, with many voters expecting to receive some money from, often, several candidates. As various qualitative studies also illustrate (*refs*) candidates can hardly avoid handing out money as they feel they will not be taken seriously if they refuse to do so. So while research tends to show that splurging on handouts does not guarantee an electoral victory,[33] our finding suggests that politicians remain convinced that such handouts are an essential element of electoral success. We find that the spending on these expenditure categories does not vary significantly across Indonesia. However it is noticeable, unsurprisingly, that for the most expensive election campaigns, the share of vote buying is also higher. This suggests that when candidates have higher campaign budgets, they tend to prefer to spend this excess money on handing out money to voters.

Over the years, this distribution of money has become increasingly sophisticated, with candidates carefully targeting the groups and amounts of voters receiving money, and deploying monitoring teams and even apps to ensure that the money is distributed reliably. For the purpose of policymaking a particularly important observation is that election monitors (from Bawaslu) lack the resources and mandate to stop this practice. As a result there are indications that levels of 'vote buying' in Indonesia are among the highest in the world.[34]

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[33] See Muhtadi, 2019.

[34] *Idem*.

To provide an idea of the massive scale of this money distribution, it is worth calculating the total amount of money that candidates distributed during the 2024 district head elections. With 1.557 candidate pairs contesting, and assuming that our sample is representative and that, therefore, each candidate pair spent on average 8.3 billion rupiah on vote buying, this means that in total 12.9 trillion rupiah was distributed to voters across Indonesia. To put this amount into perspective, as in 2025 the Indonesia's national health budget amounts to 187.1 trillion, the vote buying during the 2024 district election costs the equivalent of 7 percent of Indonesia's entire health budget,[35] or 18 percent of the entire yearly budget for the free school meal program (MBG).[36]

This assessment of how politicians spend their campaign budgets, yielded three more drivers of Indonesia's high campaign expenditure — next to political dowries discussed in the previous section. A *first* key driver is the unavailability for candidates of a committed party cadre. As candidates cannot rely on party volunteers and need to build their own campaign team, the resulting cost of campaign staffing is relatively high, amounting to about 10.7 percent to the total cost. The *second* driver is the perceived unreliability of the electoral process, and the resulting tendency of candidates to hire booth witnesses, adding a further 9.2 percent to campaign costs. *Third*, the most important reason for these high campaign costs is the permissibility of Indonesia's electoral system towards the distribution of money to voters. This practice of 'vote buying' amounts to nearly one-third of the campaign budgets, and has become a nearly normalised, accepted aspect of election campaigns. As we will discuss in the last part of this report, the current permissiveness towards vote buying, and the lack of effective efforts to counter this practice, suggests that campaign costs might be substantially reduced if more effective countermeasures were implemented.

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[35] https://finance.detik.com/berita-ekonomi-bisnis/d-6951966/anggaran-kesehatan-ri-di-2024-rp-187-5-triliun-ini-alokasinya.

[36] https://katadata.co.id/finansial/makro/66bf0cb0ae60a/anggaran-makan-bergizi-gratis-capai-rp-71-t-pada-2025-siapa-saja-sasarannya.

5
How do Politicians Fund Their Election Campaigns?

Given these considerable amounts of money politicians spend on election campaigns, how do they finance these costs? This question is important for understanding the functioning of district heads once they are in office. Campaign donations from companies, for example, tend to come with the expectations that, once in office, the elected district head will return the favour by facilitating access to permits, concessions or government contracts (e.g. Anugrah, 2023; Aspinall and Berenschot, 2019: 202-223). If, on the other hand, candidates finance most of their campaign themselves, they face strong incentives to use their control over state resources to recoup these expenses. As recurring corruption cases suggest, in such cases politicians engage in various forms of rent-seeking, such as demanding a percentage of awarded contracts, or a bribe from bureaucrats seeking a promotion.[37] In other words, the extent to which politicians rely on business actors or personal wealth to finance their election campaign, matters for understanding the character of corruption that is generated by high campaign costs.

To assess the character of campaign funding, we again rely on the combination of our candidate survey, and our fieldwork on election campaigns. We asked the interviewed candidates to assess

[37] See for example Berenschot, 2018b.

Table 7
Campaign Funding Sources by Region
(*Figures show share of campaign funds, as estimated by competitors, in percentages. Winning candidates in brackets*)

Funding Source	*Sumatra (N=68)*	*Java (N=127)*	*Kalimantan (N=G)*	*NTT (N=54)*	*Sulawesi (N=77)*	*National (N=335)*
Personal wealth / family	63.2 (60.6)	47.3 (44.3)	31 (28.1)	41.7 (40.1)	47.3 (45.6)	49.2 (47.3)
All business sponsors (combined)	22 (23.6)	26.2 (30)	33.9 (32.5)	31.1 (32.4)	26.5 (33.7)	26.4 (29.8)
Local business sponsors	*13.6 (14.7)*	*17.2 (19.4)*	*23.9 (23.1)*	*18.6 (20.1)*	*14.1 (17.6)*	*16.1 (18.1)*
Non-local business sponsors	*8.5 (4)*	*9 (11.6)*	*10 (3.8)*	*12.5 (12.8)*	*12.4 (9.9)*	5.4 (6)
Political parties	3.1 (4)	6.7 (6.8)	17.3 (22.5)	4.8 (5.8)	4.4 (4.5)	*10.3 (9.4)*
Other politicians	4.2 (4.2)	5.4 (5.3)	7.8 (11.9)	4.6 (3.4)	4.3 (3.6)	4.8 (4.7)
Individual citizens	3.5 (2.6)	1.5 (1.4)	1.7 (1.2)	3.1 (3.8)	1.4 (1.6)	2.2 (2)
Civil society organisations	0.9 (0.8)	0.7 (0.5)	1.1 (0)	1.4 (1.6)	1.7 (1.2)	1.1 (0.9)
Other sources	3 (9)	12.2 (10.6)	7.2 (9.4)	13.2 (12.3)	14.5 (16.1)	10.9 (11.7)
TOTAL	**100 (100)**	**100 (100)**	**100 (100)**	**100 (100)**	**100 (100)**	**100 (100)**

the sources of campaign funding of their competitors, providing them with potential funding sources identified during our fieldwork. Table 7 provides an overview of the results.

The headline finding here is that candidates shoulder a remarkably large share of the campaign costs — almost 50 percent on average — by themselves. Particularly in Sumatra candidates (and their families) tend to provide their own campaign funding. If candidate pairs fund an estimated 49.2 percent of the assessed average of 27.9 billion rupiah themselves, this means that on average a candidate for district head and/or the vice-candidate and families contribute a stunning 13.7 billion rupiah (about 790 thousand US dollars) themselves — and winning candidate (–pairs) on average 18.1 billion rupiah. Next to personal wealth, the main source of funding are business sponsors. On average 29.8 percent of campaign funding is estimated to come from business actors, with a larger role for local businesses (18.1 percent) compared to those having their headquarters outside of the district (9.4 percent).

An important reason why these personal and business contributions are so high, is that the contributions from more common sources of funding — political parties and citizens — are relatively low. In studies on political finance,[38] political parties are generally described as the most important sources of campaign funding. Citizen donations also play an important role, either in the form of direct donations to candidates (particularly in the US), or as membership fees paid to political parties. In European countries the membership fees that citizens pay to political parties, in combination with state subsidies, allows these parties to amass sizable campaign budgets. Consequently in most of these countries (excepting the UK) individual candidates rarely contribute to campaign funds out of their own pocket.[39]

In comparison with such international studies, we find that in Indonesia these 'traditional' sources of campaign funding play a much smaller role. Perhaps it is not surprising that citizens (and civil society organisations) contribute so little (at an estimated 2 and 0.9 percent respectively), as citizens have, as mentioned above, become accustomed to receiving from, rather than giving to, politicians. Yet the small role of political parties in campaign funding is somewhat remarkable, given that candidates already pay these above-mentioned sizable amounts of political dowry to parties — one might expect that some of this money would then be used for the election campaign.

There have been considerable debates in Indonesia about providing more state subsidies for political parties,[40] and it highlights a relevant finding of our study that the current (very limited) subsidies are hardly being used to fund election campaigns of

[38] E.g. Norris and van Es, 2016; Casas Zamora, 2024.
[39] See Cagé, 2020; Biezen and Kopecky, 2007.
[40] See for example Mietzner, 2015.

district heads. It seems that parties (and other politicians) expect candidates to fend for themselves — even though the small estimate (5.4 percent for political parties, and 4.8 percent for contributions from other politicians) might be discounting the costs of large rallies involving candidates from several districts that the bigger parties (and gubernatorial candidates) sometimes organise. Yet in general this finding underscores the general observation made earlier that political parties pay a small role in election campaigns. For the purpose of policymaking, we underline that this limited funding from parties is at least partially an effect of the electoral system: as the current system forces most candidates seek support from a coalition of parties (rather than representing one party), parties lack incentives to invest in candidates that are not fully 'theirs'.

It is important to emphasize the negative implications for governance of this consequently heavy reliance of politicians on personal wealth and business donations. While party and citizen contributions do not need to be repaid (at least not with money), personal and business contributions tend to be *investments* that need to be recovered. Business actors that fund campaigns tend to do so with the expectation that, once elected, politicians will repay this favour by providing them with government contracts, by helping them to navigate (or circumvent) government regulations, by arranging permits or concessions, etcetera. Such under-the-table deals between politicians and business actors limit the capacity of the Indonesian state to uphold rules and regulations, and thus contribute to environmental degradation, labour rights violations, tax evasion and general lawlessness.

The reliance on personal wealth also has considerable negative effects. Politicians that contributed large amounts of their own money to their election campaign, tend to engage in extensive effort to *balik modal*, i.e. the recoup these costs by abusing their control over state resources. As the regular stream of corruption cases show, politicians are recovering money in various ways, ranging from extracting fees from bureaucrats for promotions, demanding fees from companies for awarding government contracts, extracting bribes from business actors for facilitating regulatory evasion, or simply by skimming state budgets intended for providing public services. The big role of personal wealth in campaign finance is, in other words, a big driver of corruption, and consequently has a very negative impact on the quality of governance and, hence, the quality of life in Indonesia.

In short, the main conclusion of this overview of the character of campaign funding, is that efforts to curtail the damage that the costs of elections are doing to governance, should not only focus on reducing campaign costs. The oft-observed corruption of politicians and their under-the-table deals with business actors can also be addressed by finding ways to reduce the dependency of politicians on personal wealth and business donations. In the next section on policy recommendations, we will discuss a number of ideas of how this reliance on such less healthy sources of campaign funding might be reduced.

6
Policy Recommendations to Reduce Campaign Costs

These assessments of candidates of the 2024 regional head elections provided a unique insight into the actual character of campaign finance in Indonesia. The responses from surveyed politicians provided proof that, with an average of 36.8 billion rupiah for winning candidates, the campaign expenditure is unsustainably high, also in comparison to other countries. The problem, we found, is compounded by the dependence of politicians on their personal wealth and business actors for meeting these costs — being the source of about 75 percent of campaign funding. This finding is worrying because these funders are more likely (compared to funding from state subsidies or political parties) to require repayment — and hence generate corruption and weaken governance.

These assessments of politicians, however, also provided useful insights into the reasons why election campaigns are so expensive in Indonesia. Very briefly summarizing the key findings, the preceding analysis of the character of campaign expenditures showed that there are four key drivers that make campaign costs in Indonesia particularly high. We highlighted, *first*, the impact of political dowry. According to the surveyed district head candidates, political parties are demanding and receiving very high amounts (on average 6.9 billion rupiah) in exchange for supporting their candidacies — despite such payments being illegal. *Second*, candidates estimate that they are expanding about 28.7 percent of their election campaign budget or 8.3 billion rupiah on vote buying — an amount that rises to 12.4 billion for winning candidates. These large expenditures are, again, illegal. A *third* cause of high campaign costs concerns the need that candidates feel to spend money on booth witnesses. Their lack of trust in voting and vote-count procedures is costing them on average 1.2 billion rupiah per candidate. *Fourth*, the lack of committed party cadres force politicians to spend considerable amounts of money on building and maintaining campaign teams.

These findings hold implications for the current ongoing discussions about changing Indonesia's electoral laws. In this final section of this report, we build on these findings as well as our previous studies on elections in Indonesia,[41] to articulate the ways in which our findings are relevant for these policy debates about how to reduce campaign costs.

Our main recommendation, however, is **that the Indonesian government form a commission of experts to provide parliamentarians working on electoral reform with a comprehensive, evidence-based set of proposals to reduce campaign spending**. This commission should involve jurists and political scientists with extensive experience with, and knowledge of, both Indonesia's politics as well as electoral reform. Our arguments for proposing such a commission of experts are twofold. *First*, given the complexity of the topic, a commission of experts is needed to carefully weigh the pros, cons, and unintended consequences of reform measures. They can bring in experiences and lessons learned from other countries to arrive at well-considered, evidence-based proposals. *Second*, the involvement of such a commission would also address public concerns that politicians would adopt reform measures that only serve their own personal interests. Such a commission would do well to make sure of, and evaluate, the various reform proposals that have already been put forward in recent years, such as the ones we develop here.

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[41] See for example Aspinall and Sukmajati, 2016; Aspinall and Berenschot, 2019; Berenschot, 2018.

In the remainder of this report, we build on the findings of this survey as well as our experience in studying elections over the last twenty years, to develop several concrete proposals that might serve to reduce campaign costs and address the problems stemming from campaign finance. These proposals should be read as attempts to enrich the debate and with the aim of convincing the reader that these high campaign costs are not beyond human control, as policy interventions can really serve to do something about this serious threat to governance and, hence, the quality of life in Indonesia. We see these proposals as complimentary to, and largely overlapping with, proposals recently proposed by civil society organisations (see for example TI, 2025).

In our view, the goal of reducing campaign costs involves four separate challenges:

1. *Curtail vote buying*

As this report has shown, the practice of handing out money to voters is both very widespread and very costly, thus deserving urgent attention. The following three measures are examples of how current attempts to curtail this practice through advertisements and voter education, might be complemented:

a. **Lowering the evidentiary threshold for vote buying prosecutions.** A key reform would be to reduce the evidential requirements for arresting and prosecuting perpetrators of vote buying and for seizing cash during election campaigns. Currently, the number of arrests is very low, owing to the high evidentiary bar set by existing election regulations. Under current rules, witnessing a perpetrator handing out money is insufficient evidence on its own — prosecutors must also demonstrate that the perpetrator explicitly solicited a vote in return. In practice, this means that distributing cash while saying "here is a gift from my candidate" falls outside the legal definition of vote buying and cannot be prosecuted. This threshold should be lowered. It should be made illegal to distribute money to multiple individuals during an election campaign, regardless of whether a verbal exchange takes place. Equally, carrying large amounts of cash during campaign periods should be treated as a prosecutable offence.

b. **Increase the monitoring capacity of Bawaslu by introducing rapid-response election monitoring squads modelled on India's flying squad system.** A promising reform would be to establish dedicated rapid-response monitoring teams — deployed at the constituency level during campaign periods — empowered to make arrests when encountering vote buying, and to intercept and seize unaccounted cash without requiring proof of explicit electoral intent. India's Election Commission has operated such "flying squads" since the 1990s under the Model Code of Conduct, and their design offers direct lessons for Indonesia. Each squad combines a magistrate-level officer, police personnel, and a video team, enabling on-the-spot evidence recording that substantially lowers the evidentiary burden for prosecution. Public reach is further extended through a dedicated mobile reporting app (C-Vigil in India), allowing citizens to submit geo-tagged complaints that trigger a mandatory response within 100 minutes. Evaluations of the Indian system confirm that large-scale seizures of unaccounted cash have increased significantly, and that the visible presence of squads deters open cash distribution. Adapting this model to Indonesia would require equipping Bawaslu with inter-agency enforcement teams — combining Bawaslu monitors, police, and prosecutors — at the district level, with clear legal authority to make arrests and seize cash.[42]

c. **Strengthening the political independence of Bawaslu through appointment reform and rotation.** A key reason for Indonesia's electoral system's relative permissiveness towards vote buying is that the officials tasked with curtailing it face strong incentives to maintain good relations with regional political elites. Under the current system, the career prospects of Bawaslu commissioners are often perceived — if not in practice determined — to be in the hands of the very political leaders they are mandated to monitor. This creates a structural conflict of interest: taking enforcement action against a powerful candidate or their campaign workers is widely seen as professionally damaging, making inaction the path of least resistance.

This lack of institutional independence could be addressed through two complementary reforms. *First*, Bawaslu commissioners should be appointed through a transparent, merit-based process insulated from regional political influence — for instance, by vesting

[42] On these flying squads in India, see for example https://scroll.in/article/918948/meet-the-flying-squads-that-are-enforcing-ecs-model-code-of-conduct-on-the-ground.

appointment authority in a national independent body rather than local legislatures or executives. *Second*, commissioners should serve fixed, non-renewable terms of sufficient length to reduce short-term career calculations, and should be systematically rotated across provinces. Rotation in particular would sever the personal and professional ties that accumulate between local monitors and the elites they oversee, making it harder for political relationships to compromise enforcement decisions.

Together, these measures would reduce commissioners' structural dependence on regional political elites and thereby strengthen the credibility and effectiveness of electoral supervision.

2. *Reduce dependence on personal wealth and business donations as sources for campaign funding*

This report has also highlighted how, in comparison to other countries, Indonesian politicians tend to rely more heavily on business contributions and their personal wealth to fund their election campaigns. We have also emphasized the considerable damage that such campaign funding does to the quality of governance, as these funding sources force politicians to recover or repay this money. To address this problem, healthier forms of campaign finance — in the form of either state subsidies or citizen donations — should be stimulated. Here are examples of initiatives elsewhere that might be fruitfully applied in Indonesia:

d. **Allocate state subsidies through citizen-directed vouchers**. A fiscally grounded and administratively feasible reform for Indonesia would be to allow citizens to allocate state subsidies to parties and/or candidates through their tax filings. This approach to allocating state subsidies draws on the democracy voucher model proposed by economist Julia Cage, who argues that public funding of political parties should be democratised by giving every citizen — not just wealthy donors — an equal and direct say in how public money is distributed across the political landscape (Cage, *The Price of Democracy*, 2020). Rather than allocating public funds to parties through a formula based on past electoral performance — which entrenches incumbents and rewards existing concentrations of political power — Cage's model empowers individual citizens to actively direct a standard notional amount to a party of their choice. The right to direct allocations would be extended to registered direct taxpayers at the point of annual tax filing. Each eligible filer would assign a standard notional amount from the public pool to a registered party of their choice — not contributing private funds, but directing a share of already earmarked public money. This makes the reform administratively realistic at the outset, and it adds a form of democratic accountability to state subsidies as citizens would be able to express their preference yearly. The model also allows for regional allocation, as it would be feasible to allocate subsidies to regional branches based on their share of citizens 'democracy vouchers' in their region.

To prevent the system from reproducing the very patronage dynamics it is designed to dismantle, the allocation process must be strictly double-blinded. Political parties should receive only aggregate disbursements and should have no visibility over which individuals directed funds to them. Citizens, in turn, should make their allocations through a secure system that involves no direct relationship with recipient parties. Eligibility for receiving funds should be conditional on audited accounts, disclosure compliance, and adherence to campaign finance rules.

The number of citizens with such 'democracy vouchers' could be progressively expanded beyond direct taxpayers through other authenticated citizen channels such as the INA digital platform. Over time, this trajectory moves Indonesia closer to the democratic ideal at the heart of Cage's proposal: a system in which political finance reflects the preferences of citizens rather than the resources of elites.

e. **Increase state subsidies for political parties.** As various commentators regularly remark, at 1000 rupiah per voter (0.06 US Dollar) and 126 billion rupiah (8 million US dollar) in total, the subsidies that the Indonesian state provides to political parties is relatively low (e.g. Mietzner, 2015).[43] Germany, for example, provides about 1 dollar per voter and around 230 million US dollars in total subsidies.[44] The Netherlands provides 2.80 US dollars per voter,[45] while Japan provides 2 dollars per voter and around 200 million dollars in total.[46] So far attempts to increase

[43] See also https://www.kompas.id/artikel/en-bantuan-dana-partai-politik-dari-negara-semakin-urgen

[44] See https://www.bmi.bund.de/EN/topics/constitution/law-political-parties/funding-pol-parties/funding-pol-parties-node.html

[45] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Party_funding_in_the_Netherlands

[46] https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2024/10/30/japan/politics/ldp-subsidy-cut

these subsidies have failed due to concerns that parties would misuse these funds. The allocation model proposed above could allay such concerns, and help generate public support for increased subsidies. If allocated carefully, and involving transparent accounting by political parties, such increased state subsidies could be an important means to reduce the reliance on candidate wealth and business donors.

3. *Better regulate campaign finance*

At present, Indonesia does not have — again in contrast to most other countries — effective spending limits. It has no limits for legislative elections, and while there are spending limits for district head elections, they are generally set so high (see Appendix 3) that they do not limit campaign spending. Indonesia does have limits for individual and company campaign donations, which has proven difficult to monitor. There are good arguments to strengthen campaign finance regulations, for example in the following ways:

f. **Set and enforce campaign spending limits.** The data provided in this report could be used to set more spending limits that reflect actual campaign costs — minus vote buying costs. Initially such limits might be difficult to monitor as candidates might continue to submit untruthful campaign finance reports — while here also lessons could be learned from efforts undertaken in other countries, such as the above-mentioned flying squads in India. Yet even if this monitoring is initially difficult, the value in setting such limits is that it also sets a moral standard, conveying to both politicians and voters that high campaign spending is undesirable and should be avoided.

g. **Increase transparency about campaign donations.** Information about companies and individuals donating money to parties or candidates should not only be provided to KPU, it should also be provided to voters. Again there are lessons to be learned from similar efforts in other countries. In many countries election commissions are providing voters a 'campaign finance database' with such fully searchable information about campaign donations.[47] In some countries NGOs collaborate with election commissions to make information campaign funding and spending publicly available.[48] Taking inspiration from these examples,

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[47] For the UK, see www.electoralcommission.org.uk; for the US, see FEC.gov; for Germany, see www.bundestag.de/parlament/partei-finanzierung

[48] Examples of such websites are opensecrets.org or https://donation.watch/en.

the KPU could similarly compile campaign finance reports and make the campaign donations publicly available on its website. Support from the state financial intelligence unit PPATK could serve to boost the capacity to monitor the truthfulness of these reports. Here again, even if monitoring is difficult, the value in demanding such transparency from politicians is that it sets a moral standard about the importance of transparency.

4. *Reforming the electoral system in ways that curtail spending* and *maintain democratic accountability*

As part of recurring tweaks and regulatory changes, in recent years there have been discussions about whether and how aspects of the design of Indonesia's electoral system could serve to curtail campaign spending. These discussions have mainly revolved focussed on two aspects: (a) whether or not to revert back to closed party lists for legislative elections as the current open lists incentive vote buying (see Muhtadi, 2019) and (b) whether or not to abolish direct elections (*pilkada*) and revert to the previous system of having the district legislative assemblees (DPRD) select the district head. As these reforms have considerable drawbacks, opponents have proposed leaving the electoral system as it is.

The findings of this report do suggest that an evaluation and, subsequently, reform of the electoral system is indeed needed. In various ways the character of the current system is a cause of high campaign costs — as for example the high expenditures on 'mahar politik' is driven by the particular requirement that candidates need to obtain support from a party or a coalition of parties, and indeed the open party lists drive vote buying. We emphasize, however, that current debates on electoral reform do not reflect the full range of possible electoral reform. Furthermore, as electoral reform is a complex matter that — as the adoption of the open party lists in 2009 illustrated — can have many unintended consequences, a careful and holistic review of the system is preferable over tinkering with one or two features. In that light we propose the following considerations:

h. **Assign a committee of experts the task of proposing and evaluating various electoral reform options**. Given the complexity and importance of this task, it would be imperative to give a number of experts knowledgeable both about Indonesian politics and electoral system reform. As mentioned, the added benefit of such a committee is that, compared to politicians, such outside experts do not have a vested interest in particular reform options. Consequently they could engage in a holistic and objective evaluation of potential pro's and con's of different reform options. Their proposals could subsequently form the basis for both public and parliamentary debate about electoral reform, thereby potentially also enlarging public support for reforms.

i. **Consider alternatives to abolishing district head elections, such as reverting a parliamentary system for local elections.** The considerable disadvantage of the proposal to simply abolish direct elections for district heads and governors is that it would lead to money politics inside district and provincial legislative assemblees (DPRD). This would simply shift campaign costs from money spent on vote buying of voters, to vote buying of legislators. Furthermore, the selection of regional heads by district legislatures would undermine their legitimacy and democratic accountability. If they are accountable to legislators rather than voters, their efforts and, generally speaking, their quality, would likely diminish. Yet, given the high campaign costs documented by this report, maintaining the current system is also not advisable. Hence it is important to **consider third options**, i.e. options beyond abolishing or maintaining the current direct elections for regional heads. One such third option is reverting to the parliamentary system for local elections. This would involve *fusing legislative and district head elections by stipulating that the numbers one and two on the list of the party with the largest number of votes, would become district head* (governor) and vice-district head. This option has several advantages: (1) it substantially reduces campaign costs by reducing the number of elections, while maintaining democratic accountability for district heads; (2) it will reduce the costs of political dowry, as this systems incentivizes parties to select popular candidates rather than well-paying ones — because selecting popular candidates will boost a party's seat-share, while selling the top position to an unpopular candidate could lead to party losing its parliamentary seats;(3) it strengthens intra-party collaboration and, hence, party strength as it incentivizes candidates to collaborate (compared to the current system, which does not really incentivize collaboration) and (4) democratic accountability is maintained, as voters can still vote for (or against) sitting regional heads. The potential drawback of this system — that elected district head is supported by a party having a minority of the seats in parliament — could be overcome by having parties form coalitions either before or after elections, like in parliamentary systems elsewhere.

We offer these proposals in the spirit of promoting lively public debate about this important topic, and with the disclaimer that this report does not offer us the space to fully develop or evaluate these proposals — a task that we hope one day the proposed commission of experts will take up.

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Appendix A
Methodology of Candidate Survey Pilkada 2024

In 2024–2025, Lembaga Survei Indikator conducted face-to-face interviews with 471 candidates and campaign officials involved in the November 2024 district head elections (Pilkada), covering 178 regencies and cities across 10 provinces in five island regions (Sumatra, Java, Kalimantan, NTT, and Sulawesi). For each candidate pair in a given district, multiple respondents, typically including rival candidates themselves, provided estimates of campaign spending, the breakdown of expenditure across categories, sources of campaign funding, and the cost of securing party endorsements.

The core innovation of this survey is its competitor-based approach. Rather than relying solely on candidates' self-reported spending, which, as our data confirms, tends to be understated, we collected estimates from informed rivals who have strong incentives to observe their competitors' campaign activities. For each candidate, the final spending estimate is computed as the simple average of their self-assessment and the mean of their competitors' assessments, balancing the likely downward bias of self-reports against potential noise in competitor estimates. In our data, 60.5 percent of candidates reported lower spending than their competitors estimated, with a median self-to-competitor ratio of 0.80, confirming the value of this approach.

From the full pool of surveyed candidates, we restrict our analysis to 335 candidates for whom the coefficient of variation (CV) across all available estimates, self-assessment and competitor assessments combined, falls below 1. This reliability filter excludes candidates with wildly inconsistent assessments (i.e., cases where the standard deviation exceeds the mean). All 335 selected candidates have both a self-assessment and at least two competitor assessments. The selected sample covers 156 districts, with 119 identified election winners and 215 non-winners.

Annexure B
An international comparison of Indonesia’s campaign expenditures

Source for other countries: costofpolitics.net (Westminster Foundation for Democracy). All costs in USD. Cost/voter = avg. cost to contest ÷ avg. registered voters per seat.

Country	Office contested	Study year	Avg. cost to contest (USD)	Cost as % of annual politician’s salary	Avg. voters per seat	Cost per voter (USD)
Asia G the Pacific						
Indonesia	*District Head elections (Pilkada)*	*2024*	*2.030.000 (winning) / 1.585.000 (all)*	*~7400%*	*332734*	*10,53 (winning) / 7,77 (all)*
India	Lok Sabha — lower house (single-member constituencies)	2025	~60,000–120,000	430–860%	1,784,346	~0.05
Pakistan	National Assembly (single-member constituencies)	2025	~250,000–360,000 (midpoint ~305,000)	~1,100–1,600%	382,738	~0.80
West Africa						
Ghana	Parliament (single-member constituencies)	2020	68,215	167%	54,909	1.24
Mali	National Assembly (multi-member constituencies)	2019	66,956	252%	54,422	1.23
Sierra Leone	Parliament (district block system)	2017 & 2024	~20,000	~153%	25,53	~0.78
Liberia	House of Representatives (single-member districts)	2024	243,125 (winners) / 118,000 (losers)	n/a	33,836	7.18 (winners) / 3.49 (losers)
East G Southern Africa						
Kenya	National Assembly (single-member constituencies)	2020 & 2021	182	245%	76,207	2.39
Kenya	Senate	2020 & 2021	350	n/a	470,213	0.74
Uganda	Parliament (single-member constituencies)	2016 & 2020	136,084	132%	33,27	4.09
Malawi	National Assembly (single-member constituencies)	2019	37	142%	35,544	1.04
Zambia	National Assembly (single-member constituencies)	2021	31,300 (all) / 54,500 (>20% vote)	69% / 120%	45	0.70 (all) / 1.21 (>20% vote)

Notes:
Senegal, Nigeria, and Malaysia do not report a single average cost figure; findings are qualitative.
Indonesia’s USD 315,000 is based on a small qualitative sample (n=7); wide variation reported (USD 13,000–USD 10.7 million). India’s Rs 5–10 crore ≈ USD 60,000–120,000 at 2024 rates (~83 INR/USD); some candidates reach Rs 100 crore (~USD 1.2 million). Pakistan’s PKR 70–100 million ≈ USD 250,000–360,000 at 2024 rates (~280 PKR/USD).
Cost/voter = avg. cost to contest ÷ avg. registered voters per seat (midpoint used where range reported).
All costs reflect total spending across the full election cycle as reported by candidates — not official declared figures.

Appendix C
KPU Campaign Expenditure Ceilings per Candidate Pair — Kabupaten & Kota, 2024 Indonesian Pilkada

All figures are the maximum total campaign expenditure per candidate pair (pasangan calon), set by the respective local KPU under PKPU No. 14/2024. USD conversion at approx. Rp 16,200/$.

Region	Province	Type	Ceiling (Rp)	Approx. USD	Formal decision	Source
Kab. Pandeglang	Banten	Kab.	200,000,000,000	~$12.4m	KPU Pandeglang No. 1870/2024	detik.com, 11 Oct 2024
Kota Semarang	Jawa Tengah	Kota	89,417,000,000	~$5.5m	KPT No. 1170	detik.com, 2 Oct 2024
Kota Padang	Sumatera Barat	Kota	88,743,680,020	~$5.5m	—	kompas.com, 9 Oct 2024
Kota Bogor	Jawa Barat	Kota	72,000,000,000	~$4.4m	—	tempo.co, 1 Oct 2024
Kota Palembang	Sumatera Selatan	Kota	64,000,000,000	~$3.9m	KPU Palembang No. 687/2024	infoindonesia.id, 16 Oct 2024
Kab. Kulon Progo	DI Yogyakarta	Kab.	67,000,000,000	~$4.1m	—	kompas.com, 27 Sep 2024
Kab. Pasuruan	Jawa Timur	Kab.	48,635,491,000	~$3.0m	KPU No. 1751/2024	kompas.com, 3 Oct 2024
Kota Solo	Jawa Tengah	Kota	39,000,000,000	~$2.4m	—	kompas.com, 1 Oct 2024
Kab. Probolinggo	Jawa Timur	Kab.	37,000,000,000	~$2.3m	—	kompas.com, 3 Oct 2024 *(referenced in Aceh article)*
Kab. Pasaman Barat	Sumatera Barat	Kab.	~29,334,170,000*	~$1.8m	—	antaranews.com, 8 Oct 2024
Kota Bandung	Jawa Barat	Kota	13,013,701,060	~$0.8m	KPU Bandung No. 754/2024	detik.com, 3 Oct 2024
Kota Blitar	Jawa Timur	Kota	16,200,000,000	~$1.0m	SK KPU Blitar No. 419/2024	blitarkota.go.id, Oct 2024
Kota Kupang	NTT	Kota	26,700,000,000	~$1.6m	—	detik.com, 30 Sep 2024
Kota Kendari	Sulawesi Tenggara	Kota	26,648,000,000	~$1.6m	—	sultra.bpk.go.id, Nov 2024

**Pasaman Barat total derived from itemised figures in the ANTARA article; no explicit round total was stated.*

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