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# **The Political Participation of The Elderly in Aceh: Potential and Reality**

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## **Abstract**

The participation of the elderly in politics is greatly anticipated since it serves as a barometer of the democratic system's distance from citizens. The elderly have political potential that can be utilized to ensure democracy's long-term viability. However, even though the elderly have the highest place in society's social structure, their political engagement continues to dwindle. On this basis, the elderly's political involvement potential and reality must be revealed to bridge and increase their political participation. The phenomenology method was applied in this study. Using this method allows this study to start from empirical data independently from the field directly and then draw meaning subjectively according to the existing reality. As the primary source of research, informants have physical and psychological specialties because the respondents are elderly people who are more than 60 years old. Purposive sampling and snowball sampling were used to pick respondents. Only 20 people were used as intensive sources of in-depth information during the research. The study's results indicate that the elderly have various potentials that can be used to support their political engagement, including knowledge, skills, wisdom, and ideology. The elderly, on the other hand, confront stereotype obstacles, including the desire of young people to take and dominate political positions and political pragmatism, which makes them reluctant to participate in politics.

## **Keywords**

Political participation, the elderly, potential and reality

## **Introduction**

The elderly are always interesting to talk about, not because of the

growing population but also their physical and mental conditions. The elderly experience many changes in aspects: physical (Smith & Gove, 2012), cognitive (Duff et al., 2010), and psychosocial (Brown & Lowis, 2003). The discussion of the elderly leads to government policies (health, economy, and empowerment) aimed toward this group. The preceding information is consistent with the disengagement theory, activity theory, and continuity theory.

Today, government attention and research on the elderly is mostly health and economic- oriented, intending to improve their quality of life (Alavi et al., 2011). Meanwhile, it is still weak in terms of empowering the elderly, despite the fact that the objective of empowerment is to encourage the elderly's activity and productivity so that they are healthy, meaningful, and happy, as per the *active aging theory* (Reker & Woo, 2011). The participation of the elderly in politics is one of the elements of this empowerment. However, in practice, the government and society still pay little attention to the elderly's political involvement and rights, and their loss of support leads in their becoming increasingly marginalized in political life (Tang, 2008)

The processes stated in the previous paragraph relate to future consequences in many aspects of older people's lives, including cognition and political participation. In developed countries, research on the political participation of the elderly has made progress, for example, by analyzing the factors that predict and influence participation, or by comparing the participation of the elderly with that of the younger generation. Other studies look at parental motivation and barriers to participation in political activities.

For the elderly, political participation is essential for various reasons. First, every elderly wishes to be healthy, and in order to be healthy, the elderly must participate in politics. Second, the elderly possess political knowledge, experience, and political views. Third, the engagement of the elderly in politics makes them feel valued and have meaning in society because the image of the elderly is shaped by interactions between people and their environment (Längle & Probst, 2000; Monks & Knoers, 2014). Furthermore, the participation of the elderly in politics is greatly anticipated since it serves as a barometer of the democratic system's distance from citizens.

In terms of political participation, the older a person becomes, the more engaged and involved they get in politics. Even citizens with high political knowledge are more interested in and involved in government. Furthermore, wisdom grows with age. Furthermore, by 2020, Indonesia's potential elderly population will account for 80% of the country's overall elderly population, which would total 26.82 million individuals. However, the number of senior voters in Aceh Province continues to fall year after year.

The elderly's involvement and participation in religious, cultural, and customary activities are higher than their political participation. This situation raises the issue of why this can happen; do not the elderly in the east have a high social status and are respected by the younger generation?. The elderly in East

Asia, especially in Indonesia, have cultural characteristics as well. Even in several studies that discuss the relationship between the elderly and the family, support and good communication with the family will raise the confidence and motivation of the elderly to face problems. Kinship is one of the saviors of the elderly from vulnerability.

Eastern cultural norms recognize and respect the elderly and establish the elders' role as someone who is "older" and a source of wisdom. Although many elderly people do not have formal education, their life experiences qualify them to serve as role models to continue social and cultural life. Although measuring the productivity of the elderly culture is challenging, the advantages of this productivity can be felt by future generations. Furthermore, the elderly in Aceh are respected and honored, as is suggested by religious teachings and cultural norms to honor the elderly in all domains, including politics. Furthermore, because the Acehnese people's socio-political dimension influences them, the elderly in Aceh have political understanding and experience from the historical turmoil of complicated politics. As a result, this study aimed to examine and explore the potential and actuality of older political engagement in Aceh Province's urban and rural areas.

### **Research Methodology**

The approach utilized in this study is phenomenology because it allows the researcher to collect empirical data directly from the field and then interpret it subjectively based on the existing reality. The phenomena of elderly participation and political rights, such as general elections, are publicly interpreted according to the meaning of individuals involved in the phenomenon, rather than theoretical controls conducted prior to going into the field. This study was started with the goal of experience research, which is to find meaning and insight. As a result, the researcher attempted to access the conceptual world of the elderly in order to comprehend the reality and role of their participation in politics.

The rationale for choosing a qualitative method in this study is based on several reasons. First, this research deals with a highly complex phenomenon. Since the subject of the study is a person's experience and understanding of political engagement, the researcher assumed that quantitative research would be unable to reveal these complexities comprehensively and transparently. Thus, the researcher used a qualitative approach to pay attention to the emphasis of the study in order to grasp one's inner events and experiences by putting the participant's point of view in addressing this research question.

Second, political participation and rights are phenomena that encompass the subjective dimensions of individuals and objective choices. Participants' beliefs and choices about political participation and rights are not entirely the consequence of rational (objective) choices that a qualitative method might reveal. Instruments that can adapt and be flexible to capture the intellectual and emotional components of choosing, believing in choices, etc., are required.

Third, the researcher's involvement as the primary instrument is essential and reliable in doing this research. Only humans as instruments can understand the meaning of human-to-human interaction, read facial expressions, and explore the feelings and values contained in the respondent's words and actions.

Respondents have a significant impact on this study since they are the primary source of research that has a specialty, either physically or mentally, mainly because they are above 60-year-olds. This research focused on the meaning of the elderly in politics and their rights in politics, which is a novel and unique phenomenon that the researcher intended to reveal. The elderly's political rights have been deemed insufficient to meet their attributes in recent years. The elderly have so far only been seen as a complement to the political process rather than a significant component whose full potential must be realized. Hence, the researcher considered that phenomenology could be a method to reveal the problems faced by the elderly.

The sources of data for this study included individuals, objects, and events, in accordance with the types of data to be collected in this study. Humans are data sources in qualitative research, with the status of informants relating phenomena or problems depending on the research topic. As a result, gathering clear and competent informants is critical in determining the approach to be employed in solving the problems in this study. According to Alwasilah Caedar (2003), qualitative research employs *probability sampling*, which entails picking samples with the idea that they represent the entire population. As a result, the researcher used *snowball sampling* and *purposive sampling*.

The researcher would employ the two strategies outlined in the preceding paragraph to identify and obtain suitable informants as the research's primary source. The elderly who were directly active in elections and campaigns, the elderly who had experience, and other people who had experience with the participation and political rights of the elderly, were chosen as research informants based on their qualities. This attempt was made to draw a comparison between the two statements. Furthermore, by putting in these efforts, the researcher may be able to gather information from additional informants who can supplement and strengthen the data.

Following the respondent screening process, 80 respondents were identified as potential informants for this study. However, only 20 of the 80 sources of information were intensive providers of in-depth information during the research process. The majority of them had been personally involved in politics, including general elections, campaigns, and membership in political parties. The remaining groups were outsiders who had no direct involvement in political participation but had witnessed or learned about the process of political participation and the political rights of the elderly. Finally, 24 important informants were identified. These informants were chosen based on observations, and initial interviews, where the information

presented had roughly similar features in terms of the elderly's political participation and rights.

Table 3.1 Research Subjects

No.	Participant Criteria	Total	Research Setting
1.	The elderly living with adults.	4	Banda Aceh City and Bener Meriah Regency
2.	The elderly living in the nursing home.	4	Banda Aceh City and Bener Meriah Regency
3.	The elderly who are actively involved as administrators of political parties.	2	Banda Aceh City and Bener Meriah Regency
4.	The elderly who are not involved as administrators of political parties.	2	Banda Aceh City and Bener Meriah Regency
5.	The elderly living in urban.	4	Banda Aceh City
6.	The elderly living in the countryside (rural areas).	4	Bener Meriah Regency

The total number of subjects taken as participants in this study by researchers was 20. The participants came from Banda Aceh City and Bener Meriah Regency. These participants are considered to be able to represent urban and rural areas in Aceh Province.

### **Results and Discussion**

The elderly's political participation cannot be dismissed because they have the potential to contribute to a nation's or country's democratic development. According to the results of the interview, elderly people in rural areas have exceptional physical ability and strength to fulfill their political rights as citizens. As a result, informants realized what was going on and began eagerly collecting information for researchers. In general, the elderly in rural areas are still capable or strong enough to participate in politics, as evidenced by the following excerpts from interviews with several elderly informants.

I was still able to walk to the polling location since I was healthy and could run (laughing), but I had no idea who I was voting for because the ballots were large and there were too many people. So, I only saw faces that I recognized. If I know, I voted for him/her (x). I was still strong when I went to the polls, but sometimes I got confused when I got there. That is why I chose who I like and know, because there were so many people. Sometimes there were people whom I knew, sometimes I did not. It is better for us to vote for our relatives than anyone else (y).

The researcher attempted to dig deeper into the culture of rural

communities in relation to their political role and participation. In rural areas, the elderly feel that the culture that places them in a noble or wise position gives them the opportunity and motivation to seek and gain political knowledge. Political participation, for them, is one way to get the chance (meaningful) to do more for the community.

Skill is one of the keys to citizens' meaningful involvement and political rights, particularly the elderly. Each person's skills are unquestionably unique due to their experience and knowledge. In terms of talents, the elderly have a wide range of skills and can serve as a model for maximizing their political participation and rights. According to the findings of field interviews, the elderly has skills that encourage political participation, such as influencing the masses or the community in their neighborhood. The elderly in rural areas can influence others in elections since they are seen to have experience and political knowledge, allowing them to combine those experiences and knowledge to participate in politics. The excerpts below are from interviews with some of the elderly.

The elderly are thought to be people who know everything and are wise enough to be able to influence others (...). We were often asked who to vote for during the election period (...).

It must be realized that the ability to influence or mobilize the masses is not a skill; nonetheless, due to their limited political knowledge, not all the elderly possess this ability. As a result, finding or identifying the appropriate preferences when discussing politics is challenging. Because there is a culture of glorifying the elderly in rural areas, expertise is usually not an absolute need for being able to influence people. Whatever the elderly say is seen as a contemplation of thinking based on their combined knowledge and political experience.

The abovementioned statement is illustrated by the results of interviews with several informants who stated that:

The elderly is a place to ask questions, about all problems. Although they do not have a lot of knowledge but they have a lot of wisdom (). The elderly must be respected because they always associate problems with religion, and religion is the best way to solve problems (...).

It must be noted that the elderly in rural areas are well aware of their critical role in society. As a result, they must enhance their political abilities and knowledge so that they may contribute to their village's progress. People's attitudes about the elderly in urban areas are similar to those in rural settings; however, they are not identical or centralized. This issue is undoubtedly attributable to the fact that the elderly's significance in urban regions is much diminished because there are so many people with advanced knowledge in metropolitan areas that the elderly's existence is sometimes marginalized.

### **A. Potentials for the Elderly Political Participation**

In general, the elderly showed a fairly good level of political

understanding. Their experiences as youths and adults have shaped their current condition. Experience is crucial since it has an impact on long-term commitment and motivation. The learning process that a person has gone through then influences their cognition. If someone listens a lot, reads a lot, and is directly involved, the activities mentioned above have a big impact on their degree of knowledge. According to Jean Piaget, as quoted by Leni Marinda, other factors that influence a person's knowledge are genetic, family, and community environmental factors (2020).

Furthermore, the elderly's knowledge is graded as a good, medium, or low based on their cultural background. The elderly in urban areas, in particular, have a higher level of political understanding than those in rural areas. The elderly in urban areas read more frequently while they are young than the old in rural areas, where reading activities are still limited. Education controls political participation in elderly age. The elderly in urban regions have a far higher level of education than the elderly in rural areas, where the average level of education is now junior high school. In contrast, the average level of education for the elderly in urban areas is a diploma.

Compared to the elderly in rural areas, those in urban areas are more likely to participate in practical political activities. The social and political activity must be accepted to bring people together or link them. Indeed, in theory, knowledge is the outcome of human interaction and response to anything, or all human activities aimed at understanding an object it encounters, or the product of a human effort to understand a specific object. Furthermore, political phenomena in urban areas differ from political phenomena in rural areas; therefore, this aspect contributes to the condition of the elderly's political awareness in these two areas. People use the environment as a laboratory to photograph phenomena, symptoms, and facts, including political facts. Elderly individuals in rural areas enjoy and follow political phenomena in their communities, although these phenomena and facts are not as sophisticated as those in urban areas. The environment has an impact on knowledge in this case.

Work will also have an indirect impact on one's political knowledge because work is closely linked to social interaction aspects resulting from the exchange of information, which can influence a person's political knowledge. People will reach a particular degree of participation if they have sufficient political knowledge. In politics, a person must gain not only knowledge but also attitudes and skills. According to Fyfe (2007), combining these characteristics is known as "political literacy."

The elderly in the urban and those in the village have quite different levels of political literacy. The political literacy of urban residents is far higher than that of the village elderly. The source of information is another aspect that determines the political literacy of the elderly. In cities, sources of political information are numerous and easy to access, while in villages, sources of information are very limited and readily accessible. Dennis classifies political knowledge into three

categories: knowledge of the government, knowledge of the political game's rules, and knowledge of the environment and society. The foundation of one's political behavior is political knowledge.

On the other hand, high political knowledge is not always directly related to citizen participation in politics; this case also applies to the elderly. According to Rahman (2009), political activities included in the concept of political participation have various forms. Even the elderly with good political knowledge will not necessarily participate in politics. Their rationale is that politics is cruel. Meanwhile, the elderly in rural areas have a low level of political education but a high level of participation. However, the forms of participation are somewhat limited.

When compared to the political skills of the elderly in the city, the elderly in the village has lower political skills. Education and the environment are the two most important influencing factors. Because education in urban is far superior to education in rural areas, the elderly in rural areas are regarded as lacking skills. According to Blickle et al. (2010), political skills are defined as effectively understanding others and utilizing that knowledge to influence others to act. As a result, it can help achieve personal and organizational objectives. The elderly in urban areas have higher levels of self-confidence than those in rural settings. Those with strong political abilities, despite their self-assurance, are unselfish since their attention is on others. This reality enables people with political skills to keep the appropriate balance and perspective while simultaneously being accountable to others .

In contrast to the elderly in rural areas, the elderly in urban areas know when to move and voice their political views. This state is known as skills. Prieto (2010) argue that people with good political skills know when and what to do in various social settings in the workplace and how to do it correctly. In contrast to the elderly in urban areas, the elderly in rural areas are less likely to be able to contribute to politics. Although, in terms of numbers, not many elderly in urban areas participate actively. However, in urban areas, the elderly have a greater power to affect the more vital and urgent sectors. In the city, the elderly are generally followers, while in the village, they are leaders. The leaders here are not formal but relatively informal. Meanwhile, the elderly who become leaders in the city function as members of official organizations, such as political parties and other non-governmental community organizations.

This study reveals that the elderly have a strong political ideology compared to young individuals and even adults. Young people's ideologies are frequently unstable and pragmatic; this is something that even adults have experienced. The elderly, on the other hand, are exempt from this condition. The findings also show that there is no significant difference between elderly political ideology in urban regions and elderly political ideology in rural areas; the difference is just in ideological manifestations. In terms of the political ideology of the elderly in rural areas, the study's findings show that the elderly in rural areas



have a strong political ideology, but their level of knowledge is low. The political ideology of the elderly in urban areas, on the other hand, is weak and flat. This situation is due to the perception that the elderly in urban areas have a pragmatic ideology, whereas the elderly in rural areas have a basic ideology of identity idealism.

The movement of political parties in Indonesia can be divided into two categories based on diverse theories about ideology and politics: nationalist and religious (Islamic). As a result, mapping the grouping or coalition of political parties in Indonesia can be said to be nonlinear in terms of ideological reference as a criterion for coalition formation. Although ideology does not always become the single and dominant factor in a political party's policy arena, its presence in any political institution is critical and is the primary prerequisite for a political party's survival. According to De la Villarmois et al. (2008), political ideology can be employed by a political institution to justify its existence.

### **B. The Reality of the Elderly Political Participation**

According to several studies, voters rise as they get older, then stabilize as they get older. A similar tendency can be seen in one's political participation. Even recent research on aging and political cognition has demonstrated that while making political decisions, elderly people consider less information for longer periods than younger participants. However, in reality, the level of political participation of the elderly is not directly proportional to aging; in fact, participation in politics among the elderly continues to fall, with one reason being the community's stereotype.

According to Havighurst (1953), as a person grows older, he or she gradually begins to withdraw from social life, a phenomenon called "Disengagement Theory." The elderly's disengagement affects their participation in political activities and issues at some point. However, in the political literature, citizens fail to participate in politics because they cannot, do not want to, or because no one asks. Meanwhile, in Aceh, the elderly's reluctance to join in political activities is more prevalent due to their dissatisfaction with society's stereotyped views.

Although the elderly in Aceh have their own socio-cultural specialties, they are highly respected due to their status as custom symbols. However, the people of Aceh fail to notice the elderly's potential since they only regard them as traditional symbols. People in Aceh, particularly young people, are currently suffering from a condition in which they believe that it is their responsibility to conduct politics. Due to the elderly's slower processing of information than young people, this condition is produced by young people realizing that the elderly's political style has been abandoned and is no longer representative of the larger population.

As time passes, this state impacts increasing human activities, leading to a desire for quick and practical things. This type of behavior can sometimes be seen

in political relationships. Although many elderly still participate in political activities, it is only to raise awareness of their political rights and obligations to the nation or country. The elderly are involved in politics to maintain a sense of control over their lives.

It turns out that the elderly participate in politics not only because they have political rights but also as a sort of struggle and responsibility for the elderly's goal of a better life. This condition is consistent with Barnes et al. (1988), who found that because of their sensitivity to their needs and interests, the elderly can participate actively in age-specific organizations. Political participation by the elderly has been misinterpreted in the past as an attempt by the elderly to force themselves into political positions through participating in politics. In fact, the elderly's expected political participation is how they can actively advocate their rights and interests in various areas, including welfare, health, etc. Thus, the elderly's political participation can be regarded as an activity aimed at influencing the government's policymaking and as a channel for the state's and society's hopes to be realized.

Furthermore, the elderly's participation and political rights serve as a way to pass on their knowledge and experience to the younger generation and support a nation's or country's advancement. In general, policymakers in Indonesia do not provide moral or material support to the elderly in rural and urban areas. Despite their physical and mental limitations, the paucity of facilities and services available to the elderly exemplifies this predicament. According to Jirovec et al. (1989) the elderly's increasing political knowledge and participation were primarily due to services and support. As a result, the elderly require assistance in participating in political activities, particularly from family members. Up to this point, it has been challenging for some older people to obtain this assistance since their families have prohibited them from participating in political activities.

The younger generation has created a situation and a standard in which the elderly are only required to worship and care for their grandkids, with some even being obliged to support their financing needs. This condition leads to inequity and injustice in political rights between the elderly and young people, with the elderly having no negotiating power in politics. Even if the elderly are a source of wisdom in society, this predicament is generated by restrictions on age, physical condition, and health for occupying certain political positions.

The elderly are individuals who have had setbacks in many aspects of their lives and want the ease of being able to participate in politics. Many elderly individuals have been employed as political subjects rather than political objects by certain groups vying for votes during elections without our consent. The elderly, on the other hand, is a nation's asset since they have experience and political wisdom. Indeed, they have generally experienced a decline in various body functions. However, the speed of the decline could be slowed if political elites have already grasped the concept of sustainability and are investing in human resources.

According to this logic, many elderly have a more robust political party

identification due to their long-term socialization and attachment to a particular political party or candidate. Others have stated that older people participate in politics to maintain a sense of control over their lives

### Conclusions

This study reveals that the elderly's political potential characteristics in rural and urban areas are different. However, the elderly in urban and rural areas have various assets that can be exploited to motivate them to participate in politics: knowledge, skills, wisdom, and ideology. However, stereotypes, the desire of young people to take and dominate political positions, and political pragmatism make it difficult for the elderly to participate in politics. Because the elderly are a source of wisdom, and we all will get older, the government and society must pay special attention to their political engagement to bring life hope, meaning, and knowledge transfer to the younger generation.

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