

POLITICAL POLARIZATION AND MARKETING STRATEGIES OF *PESANTREN ALUMNI* IN THE 2024 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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Abstract: This study investigates the political dynamics of *pesantren alumni* from three influential *pesantrens* in East Java's region: *Pesantren Nurul Jadid Probolinggo*, *Pesantren Sidogiri Pasuruan*, and *Pesantren Salafiyah Syafi'iyah Situbondo*, with fieldwork conducted in Bondowoso and Jember. Focusing on the 2024 presidential election, this research explores two key issues: the emergence of polarization among alumni groups and their adoption of political marketing strategies. Using a qualitative approach, the study finds that polarization intensified in line with divergent political preferences among the founding families of the parent *pesantren*. This division occurred not only across alumni networks of different *pesantren* origins but also within alumni of the same alma mater. The findings also show that each alumni group employed political marketing principles, combining push and pull strategies, to mobilize support and strengthen voter engagement for their preferred presidential candidate.

Keywords: *Pesantren alumni*; Polarization; Political Marketing; Presidential Election; Indonesia.

Introduction

Alumni of Islamic boarding schools (*pondok pesantren* or simply *pesantren*) constitute one of the networks that possess strong and organic ties. The strength of this alumni network operates not only within the domain of, for example, the transmission of knowledge

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through the establishment of new *pesantren* institutions that are genealogically connected to the original *pesantren*. In practice, alumni who establish new *pesantren* are also involved in mobilizing political support, whether aligned with or divergent from the political direction of the original *pesantren*.¹

This study investigates the involvement of *pesantren* graduates who have established new *pesantren* (referred to here as ‘*pesantren alumni*’) in the political dynamics of the 2024 Presidential Election (Pilpres 2024). Specifically, the analysis focuses on alumni-led *pesantren* located in the Pandalungan cultural region (Jember, Situbondo, and Bondowoso), whose leaders maintain *sanad* ties to three major *pesantrens* in East Java, namely *Pesantren Nurul Jadid Paiton Probolinggo*, *Pesantren Salafiyah Syafi’iyah Sukorejo*, and *Pesantren Sigodiri Pasuruan*.

Academically, research on the graduates of *pesantren* networks has been extensive.² Among these studies, some highlight the role of *pesantren* graduate in empowering the initiatives in both economy³ and educational domains.⁴ The involvement of *pesantren* graduates in political activities has also received scholarly attention.⁵ It is no se-

¹ Yon Machmudi, “Preserving Kyai Authority in Modern Society; A Case Study of Pesantren Cidahu, Pandeglang, Banten,” *Wacana, Journal of the Humanities of Indonesia* 15, no. 2 (2014): 336-350.

² See Munir, “The Continuity and Change of Pesantren Tradition: Study Network Main Pesantren and Alumni Pesantren in Kabupaten OKU Timur, South Sumatra,” *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 5, no. 2 (2016): 347-364; Nurul Azizah et al., “The Octopus-like Power of Pesantren Dynasty in the Dynamics of Local Politics,” *Cogent Social Sciences* 7, no. 1 (2021); M Faishal Aminuddin, “Santri’s Community in Political Change: Historical Interpretive,” *Islamic Insights Journal* 1, no. 2 (2019): 1-19; Achmad Juhaeni et al., “Strategic Management of Quality Improvement of Madrasah Aliyah Graduates in Modern Islamic Boarding Schools,” *Tarbawi: Jurnal Keilmuan Manajemen Pendidikan* 7, no. 1, (2021): 33-46; Abdul Jalil, “Alumni Networks and Economic Reinforcement in Pesantren Ummussabri,” *Shirkah: Journal of Economics and Business* 4, no. 2 (2019).

³ Jalil, “Alumni Networks and Economic Reinforcement in Pesantren Ummussabri.”

⁴ Munir, “The Continuity and Change of Pesantren Tradition.”

⁵ Azizah et al., “The Octopus-like Power of Pesantren Dynasty in the Dynamics of Local Politics”; Aminuddin, “Santri’s Community in Political Change”; Machmudi, “Preserving Kyai Authority in Modern Society”; C.Y. Madani & K. Marijan, “Pengaruh Kiai Terhadap Perilaku Memilih Alumni Santri Pondok Pesantren Mbi Amanatul Ummah Pacet Angkatan 2017 pada Pemilu Presiden dan Wakil Presiden Tahun 2019,” *Jurnal Politik Indonesia* 7, no. 1 (2021): 10-22; Masdar Hilmy, “Towards a “Wider Mandate” of Pesantren: In Search for a New Nomen-

cret that the strength of *pesantren* graduate often becomes a highly targeted segment for politicians, especially because of its considerable electoral influence.

Although previous studies have examined the political involvement of *pesantren* graduates, none have specifically focused on alumni who later establish their own *pesantren*, so-called “*pesantren alumni*,” whose political orientations remain closely tied to those of their parent institutions. This strong alignment is shaped by enduring *kesantrian* bonds,⁶ in which loyalty to the *keiai* (head of *pesantren*) and the continuity of *sanad keilmuan* transcend space and time, making alumni far less likely to diverge from the *pesantren*’s position even after they become *keiai* themselves. In some *pesantrens*, such as *Pesantren Walisongo* and *Pesantren Sumber Bunga* in Situbondo, alumni are not even referred to as graduates but as *santri bermasyarakat*, reflecting a relational identity that persists across occupations and generations. These dynamics extend into political behavior, where alumni often embody and transmit the implicit political orientations of their parent *pesantren*, despite the *pesantren*’s formal neutrality. Addressing the lack of scholarship on this specific group, the present study examines how *pesantren alumni* navigate polarization and deploy political marketing strategies in the 2024 presidential election.

This study has a distinctive contribution compared to earlier research in two respects. First, studies that examine the involvement of alumni networks within *pesantren* have rarely, if not never, explicitly focused their analysis on the political engagement of *pesantren alumni*. In the political context, it is necessary to consider how *pesantren alumni* serve as intermediaries between the political orientation of the parent *pesantren* and the broader public. The strong *sanad* tradition within the *pesantren* milieu enables the formation of deep and extensive bonds between *pesantren alumni* and the parent *pesantren*. The influence of the parent *pesantren* may initially be limited to a particular locality; however, because of the presence of *pesantren alumni* in that place, endowed with recognized religious authority,

clature of Political Role of *Pesantren* in an Era of Democracy,” *Millab: Journal of Religious Studies* 11, no. 1 (2011): 51-73.

⁶ Dodik Harnadi, Hotman Siahaan, and Masdar Hilmy, “*Pesantren* and the Preservation of Traditional Religious Authority in the Digital Age,” *Masyarakat, Kebudayaan dan Politik* 34, no. 3 (2021): 272-280.

the attachment to the parent *pesantren* will gradually develop, strengthen, and expand.

Second, this study differs from most previous political studies because it focuses on two main aspects. First, the polarization that emerges among *pesantren alumni* due to differing political orientations of their respective parent *pesantren*. Second, the political marketing strategies employed by each *pesantren alumni* to advance their political agendas. These political marketing strategies are important to trace because each *pesantren alumni* has its own distinct space and form of political expression in supporting its political objectives.

Differences in the political positions of *kiai* in the parent *pesantren* have the potential to generate polarization among their alumni, as the *sanad* ties linking them to their scholarly origins also influence their political orientations. As a result, alumni with divergent alignments may promote different political interests and develop distinct strategies to advance the candidates they support—often reflecting the political stance of their parent *pesantren*. Given these layered social dynamics and the need to understand how alumni interpret, negotiate, and enact such political orientations, an interpretive methodological approach becomes necessary.

This study therefore adopts a qualitative research design to uncover the actions, meanings, and subjective interpretations underlying human political behavior, in line with Weber's view that socio-cultural phenomena require methods capable of grasping actors' motives.⁷ A qualitative approach is particularly suitable for examining beliefs, perceptions, awareness, and outward actions, as these elements reside within individuals and must be understood from their own perspectives. To articulate these dynamics more clearly, the study employs a qualitative–descriptive method, which allows for an in-depth depiction of community perceptions and is especially relevant for answering “how” and “who” questions, as noted by Lawrence Neuman. Within this framework, the research is grounded in an interpretive social science (ISS) approach rooted in the ideas of Weber and Dilthey, emphasizing the distinction between *erklarung* and *verstehen* as foundations for understanding social reality.

⁷ Irving M. Zeitlin, *Memahami Kembali Sosiologi: Kritik terhadap Teori Sosiologi Kontemporer*, trans. Anshori and Juhada (Yogyakarta: Gadjah Mada University Press, 1996), 254.

To guide this interpretive analysis, the study employs three interconnected theoretical lenses: political marketing, marketing strategies, and political polarization, which together illuminate how *pesantren alumni* construct, communicate, and negotiate their political preferences. Political marketing positions political engagement as an exchange process in which actors present ideological and programmatic offerings to constituents, much like transactions in a competitive market.⁸ This framework is operationalized through the push–pull–pass model, which explains shifts in political support as outcomes of forces that drive individuals away from certain options or attract them toward others, while also acknowledging the role of third-party endorsers.⁹ Together, these perspectives enable a systematic examination of how *pesantren alumni* persuade, mobilize, and consolidate political support within their genealogical and religious networks.

Complementing this marketing perspective, the study also draws on political polarization theory to understand how divisions within alumni networks emerge and intensify during electoral contestation. Polarization occurs when social differences harden into antagonistic in-group/out-group distinctions, whether through emotional distancing, as in affective polarization, or through more stable ideological commitments, as in preference polarization.¹⁰ In

⁸ Firmanzah, *Marketing Politik* (Jakarta: Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia, 2012), 137; N. Fligstein, “Markets as Politics: A Political-Cultural Approach to Market Institutions,” *American Sociological Review* 61, no. 4 (1996): 656–673; Bruce I Newman et al., “Political Marketing,” in *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Interest Groups, Lobbying and Public Affairs*, eds. Phil Harris, Alberto Bitonti, C.S. Fleisher, and A.S. Binderkrantz (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022): 1022–1034.

⁹ Hsi-Peng Lu and Yu-Shan Wung, “Applying Transaction Cost Theory and Push-Pull-Mooring Model to Investigate Mobile Payment Switching Behaviors with Well-Established Traditional Financial Infrastructure,” *Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research* 16, no. 2 (2021): 1–21; H.S. Bansal, “Migrating to New Service Providers: Toward a Unifying Framework of Consumers’ Switching Behaviors,” *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 33, 1 (2005): 96–115; A. Nursal, *Political Marketing: Strategi Memenangkan Pemilu, Sebuah Pendekatan Baru Kampanye Pemilihan DPR, DPRD, Presiden* (Jakarta: Gramedia, 2004)

¹⁰ Thomas Carothers & Andrew O’Donohue, *Political Polarization in South and Southeast Asia* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2021); Murat Somer and Jennifer McCoy, “Déjà vu? Polarization and Endangered Democracies in the 21st Century,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 62, 1 (2018): 3–15; Andreas Schedler, “Rethinking Political Polarization,” *Political Science Quarterly* 138, no. 3 (2023): 335–359; Elizabeth R. Nugent, *After Repression How Polarization Derails*

the context of Indonesian electoral politics—marked notably by the affective polarization of the 2019 presidential contest¹¹—these concepts provide a robust interpretive lens for analyzing how political loyalties, religious authority, and alumni identities shape the dynamics of alignment and contestation within *pesantren*-based communities.

Several actors from *pesantren alumni* were examined in this study. All of them are located in the cultural region of Pandalungan, particularly in Jember, Situbondo, and Bondowoso. It is well-known that these *pesantrens* are genealogically (in terms of *sanad*) connected to one of three major *pesantrens* in East Java that serve as the sources of their scholarly lineage: *Pesantren Nurul Jadid* Paiton Probolinggo, *Pesantren Salafiyah Syafi'iyah* Sukorejo, and *Pesantren Sidogiri Pasuruan*. In the context of Bondowoso, Situbondo and Jember, many Islamic educational institutions (*pesantren*) were founded by *kiai* whose *sanad* remains connected to one of these three *pesantrens*.

In Bondowoso, several alumni-led *pesantren* demonstrate strong genealogical ties to major East Javanese *pesantren*. *Pesantren Darul Falah* Cerme is led by KH. Abdul Qadir Syam, an alumnus of *Pesantren Sidogiri Pasuruan* who also serves as Chairman of the NU Branch Leadership in Bondowoso. *Pesantren Nurul Ulum* Tapen is headed by KH. Junaidi Mu'ti, whose *sanad* connects to *Pesantren Nurul Jadid* Probolinggo, while *Pesantren Manbaul Ulum* Wonosari is led by KH. Salwa Arifin, an alumnus of *Pesantren Salafiyah Syafi'iyah* Sukorejo. Although the political role of these *kiais* is not always explicitly expressed, their orientations remain closely shaped by the political positions of their parent *pesantren*.

A similar pattern appears in Situbondo and Jember. In Situbondo, *Pesantren Sumber Bunga* Seletreng, founded by the late KH. Ahmad Sufyan Miftah, is now led by KH. Syainuri Sufyan, an alumnus of *Pesantren Sidogiri Pasuruan*. In Jember, *Pesantren Darun Najah* Al-Irfani is overseen by KH. Irfan Mu'tashim Billah, who maintains *sanad* ties to both *Pesantren Sidogiri Pasuruan* and *Pesantren Nurul*

Democratic Transition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020); Wasisto Raharjo Jati, "Polarization of Indonesian Society during 2014-2020: Causes and Its Impacts toward Democracy," *Jurnal Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik* 26, no. 2 (2022): 152-167.

¹¹ Afrimadona, "Revisiting Political Polarisation in Indonesia: A Case Study of Jakarta's Electorate," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 40, no. 2 (2021): 315-339.

Jadid Probolinggo. These cases illustrate how alumni-led *pesantren* continue to reflect the genealogical and political imprint of their parent institutions.

Polarization Among *Pesantren Alumni*

Based on the data obtained in this study, each *pesantren alumni* has a different type of connection with its parent *pesantren*, particularly in terms of the linearity of their political choices in the 2024 presidential election. These differences arise because not all parent *pesantren* provided clear and unified political direction in the 2024 election.

Among the three parent *pesantrens* of the *pesantren alumni* examined in this study (*Pesantren Nurul Jadid*, *Pesantren Sukorejo*, and *Pesantren Sidogiri*) each demonstrated different political support in the previous presidential election 2024. This, in turn, contributed to the diverse political positions taken by their *pesantren alumni* in supporting their respective presidential candidates; 01 Anies Baswedan-Muhaimin Iskandar, 02 Prabowo Subianto-Gibran Rakabuming Raka, and 03 Ganjar Pranowo-Mahfud MD.

Referring to Somer & McCoy, polarization occurs when differences become increasingly sharp and shape a relational dynamic of “us versus them.”¹² Primarily, this is due to the differing political views held by each group. In the context of the *pesantren alumni*, the polarization that emerges appears with varying degrees of intensity. These differences sharpen further when they involve the relationship with the *kiai*.

In the context of the 2024 presidential election, polarization manifested more clearly in the form of differing political affiliations, yet these divisions became fluid when aligned with the same basis of reference from the parent *pesantren*. In this respect, polarization did not fully materialize into a completely oppositional form. Nevertheless, mutual claims among the groups of *pesantren alumni* continued to arise as a means of justifying their respective choices.

There are two models of polarization among *pesantren alumni* in the 2024 presidential election. First, polarization formed between alumni *pesantren* originating from different parent *pesantren*. For example, some graduate *kiai* originating from *Pesantren Nurul Jadid*,

¹² Somer and McCoy, “Déjà vu?”

Pesantren Sidogiri, and *Pesantren* Sukorejo had different political affiliations in the previous election. While differences between one *pesantren alumni* and another already existed—some even forming polarization due to local dynamics—these distinctions intensified alongside their contrasting choices in the election.

Each claimed to occupy the most appropriate position and to best represent the will of the *kiai*. However, this first type of polarization does not entirely reflect the reality within each *pesantren alumni*. The perspective of the respective leaders (*pengasub*) in interpreting differences becomes a crucial factor. For example, *pesantren alumni* that view politics as a domain in which alumni are free to exercise their own *ijtihad* tend to be more open to differences. The *kiai* of one *pesantren* in Jember said, “I think the absence of a single directive shows that, in the political sphere, alumni are given the freedom to choose.”¹³ This group does not position political choice as a direct expression of obedience to the *kiai*. What matters most is that the moral and ethical principles of the parent *pesantren* are upheld regardless of the political choice taken. Thus, obedience to the *kiai* and the parent *pesantren* is placed within a framework of principled and moral commitment.

Conversely, *pesantren alumni* that consider choosing a particular party as an expression of obedience to the parent *kiai* tend to believe that only their choice can bring about goodness. This is because such a choice is seen as embodying the essence of obedience to the *kiai* or the parent *pesantren*. This second group tends to view political differences not merely as profane matters, but as something sacred due to their connection to the relationship with their teacher, for which responsibility is ultimately borne before God. Even their identity as *santri* is questioned if they do not vote according to the teacher’s preference. “In the end, if there are alumni who do not vote for this candidate, they are no longer considered *santri*. This is actually what they fear.”¹⁴

The second model of polarization takes shape in the context of differences occurring among *pesantren alumni* from the same parent *pesantren*. This, in fact, becomes the primary focus of this study. Such

¹³ Interview with *Kiai* Arfan, the leader of one *pesantren alumni* in Jember, in Jember, 20 July 2024.

¹⁴ Interview with *Kiai* Kholdun, the leader of one *pesantren alumni* in Bondowoso, in Bondowoso, 29 June 2024.

polarization, for example, occurs among alumni of *Pesantren Nurul Jadid*, *Pesantren Sidogiri*, and *Pesantren Sukorejo*.

Data from this research indicates that polarization among *pesantren alumni* emerged due to internal political differences within the families of the parent *pesantren*. For instance, divisions within the family of Nurul Jadid, which expressed support for all three presidential candidates, allowed alumni seeking political reference from the parent *pesantren* to find justification.

“We try as much as possible to follow the teacher, even if it is done reluctantly or half-heartedly. But now, thankfully, whoever they choose, there are all references in Nurul Jadid who support them.”¹⁵ Consequently, alumni chose candidates 01, 02, and 03—each grounded in a legitimate basis from the parent *pesantren*. However, among the alumni of *Pesantren Nurul Jadid*, polarization was more fluid due to several factors.

First, the climate of freedom long cultivated among Nurul Jadid students, especially given the historical precedent that the family of the *pesantren* has never issued unified or explicit political directives. “As we all know, Nurul Jadid has always allowed its students to choose based on their own *ijtihad*.”¹⁶

As a result, differences among the alumni of Nurul Jadid are common and expected in any political moment. Second, the position of the *pesantren* leader as a symbol of mediation and unity—by refraining from publicly expressing political preferences—allows differences to dissolve when oriented toward his role as the meeting point among diverse *pesantren* constituencies.

Meanwhile, in *Pesantren Sukorejo*, similar polarization also occurred in the 2024 presidential election, taking shape primarily between support for candidates 01 and 03, each backed by members of the *pesantren's* family. However, compared to Nurul Jadid, polarization in Sukorejo became more pronounced when associated with claims over who most legitimately represented the *pesantren* and its leader. “Some are making competing claims about who best represents *Kiai Azaim*.”¹⁷ *Kiai Azaim* is the central leader of *Pesantren Sukorejo*.

¹⁵ Interview with *Kiai Bakar*, the leader of one *pesantren alumni* in Bondowoso, in Bondowoso, 28 June 2024.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Interview with *Kiai Kholdun*, the leader of one *pesantren alumni* in Bondowoso, in Bondowoso, 29 June 2024.

This intensified further when connected with partisan identities, which some graduate equate with expressions of loyalty to the *pesantren* leadership. For many alumni of *Pesantren* Sukorejo, loyalty to the *kiai* and the *pesantren* is demonstrated through consistency in supporting the political party believed to be the legacy of the late KH. Ahmad Fawaid As'ad, namely the United Development Party (PPP).

Those positioned within PPP are considered to best represent the aspirations of the *Kiai* and the *pesantren*, while anyone taking a different position has their commitment to the *pesantren* questioned. "Usually, to convince the alumni about their choice, we start from the party. This is *Kiai* Fawaid's party."¹⁸ *Kiai* Fawaid refers to KH. Achmad Fawaid As'ad, the son of KH. As'ad Syamsul Arifin (national hero), and the previous leader of *Pesantren* Sukorejo. His role in strengthening the PPP was significant. Nevertheless, the leader's decision to remain passive served as a moderating force when tensions arose. Although similar to the stance of the Nurul Jadid leadership, its implications differ due to Sukorejo's distinct historical context.

In Nurul Jadid, a climate of openness and freedom regarding differences has existed for a long time. This contrasts with Sukorejo, where historically, especially under the previous leader, a one-command structure was more evident. *Kiai* Fawaid was more expressive in stating his political positions, accompanied by direct guidance or even instructions to his student. The idea that loyalty to the *kiai* and the *pesantren* must be manifested through alignment with a specific political party (PPP) is often attributed to his teachings.

In the alumni of Sidogiri, polarization also emerged due to differing political directions within the *pesantren* family, especially between candidates 01 and 02. Polarization among Sidogiri alumni resembles that of Nurul Jadid, as the tradition of one political command has long been absent. Political differences among the leadership and family have been longstanding, which is understood as a way for alumni with differing preferences to maintain legitimate genealogical ties (*sanad*) with the *pesantren* family. "When A, for example, supports Jokowi, that is considered right because *Kiai* Nawawi Jalil supports Jokowi. It turns out B supports Prabowo, and that is

¹⁸ Ibid.

also considered right because *Kiai* Syaukat supports Prabowo. So, there is no problem.”¹⁹

Several alumni perceive that, despite mutual claims, such differences are actually a strategy used by the *kiai* and *pesantren* leadership to provide space for alumni with varying political preferences. “Why does Sidogiri maintain that? Because people are not the same, and its alumni come from many different backgrounds.”²⁰ Alumni live in diverse environments with distinct characteristics; therefore, each must retain a basis of reference to legitimize their political choices in order to avoid deeper conflict arising from disagreements.

In the context of the 2024 presidential election, this strategy proved effective in preventing further escalation of polarization among alumni, including *pesantren alumni*. Yet, personal disposition and social environment also shaped each alumni’s openness to differences. Those with open attitudes viewed political differences as unproblematic, given that all maintained a legitimate political *sanad* to the *pesantren*. However, those personally resistant to difference tended to express negative views toward other alumni with differing political aspirations, despite the fact that the *pesantren* had already provided legitimacy for all positions.

The findings of this study indicate that the variations in political alignment among *pesantren alumni* produced a form of polarization best understood as affective polarization. This type of polarization is not rooted in long-standing ideological divisions but instead emerges from situational dynamics surrounding electoral cycles. The polarization observed among *pesantren alumni* is temporary in the sense that it intensifies only during moments of political contestation, especially presidential elections, and gradually subsides as alumni return to their everyday social and religious interactions. Once the electoral moment has passed, the relational bonds grounded in shared *pesantren* lineage and moral commitments reassert themselves, allowing tensions to dissipate naturally.

Furthermore, this affective polarization is non-ideological, as alumni do not differ based on competing political doctrines or policy orientations. Their political choices are shaped primarily by relational considerations, such as loyalty to certain members of the *pe-*

¹⁹ Interview with *Kiai* Kaab, the family member of one *pesantren alumni* in Bondowoso, in Bondowoso, 17 June 2024.

²⁰ Ibid.

santren family, personal admiration for particular *kiai*, and localized social pressures. These dynamics do not reflect coherent ideological preferences characteristic of preference or partisan polarization. Instead, the political differences among alumni remain surface-level, relational, and situational, reflecting an emotional rather than doctrinal form of division.

Lastly, the polarization documented in this study is largely driven by seasonal political alignments, especially the shifting political directions among members of the parent *pesantren* families. Alumni seek legitimacy for their political positions by grounding them in the orientations of figures within their genealogical network. When multiple members of a *pesantren* family support different candidates, alumni use these alignments as moral and symbolic justifications for their choices. As these alignments shift from one election cycle to the next, so too do alumni preferences, reinforcing the seasonal nature of polarization. By articulating these characteristics explicitly, this study demonstrates how affective polarization, rather than ideological polarization, operates within *pesantren*-based networks, highlighting the relational logic underpinning political behavior among *pesantren alumni*.

***Pesantren Alumni* and Political Marketing Strategies**

Pesantren alumni place the political choices of the *kiai* in their *pesantren* of origin as a basic consideration for determining their political position, although with varying degrees. Some place it as the primary consideration, while others still prioritize personal judgment but reinforce it by referring to the political direction of their *pesantren* of origin.

Several *Pesantren* alumni are not only concerned with affirming their own political preferences based on various considerations, but also with convincing those around them to choose and advocate for their political options, including the choice associated with the *pesantren* of origin. At this point, *pesantren alumni* are essentially practicing what can be referred to as marketing activities, particularly political marketing.

Marketing, originally an economic concept, refers to the strategies used to increase the likelihood of successful exchanges between parties by persuading ‘buyers’ through the attractiveness of products, services, or value propositions. When adopted in politics, this

concept assumes that political actors similarly engage in persuasive exchanges, ‘selling’ their track records, personalities, networks, and programs to secure public support. While “transaction” should not be interpreted narrowly as political pragmatism, it captures how politicians, supporters, and even community leaders influence constituents’ choices through structured persuasive efforts. In this sense, *pesantren alumni* also participate in political marketing, consciously or not, when they convince others of the correctness of their political stance or weaken competing positions.

Building on this foundation, the remainder of the subsection analyzes how push and pull strategies specifically operate within *pesantren alumni* practices, demonstrating how alumni mobilize religious authority, interpersonal trust, and candidate attractiveness to shape political support during the 2024 presidential election.

In the context of *pesantren alumni*, these two strategies operate in practice, although to varying degrees. Some *pesantren alumni* tend to be passive, focusing mainly on convincing themselves and those closest to them, such as their families. Others actively make efforts to seek broader support for the political position they have taken.

There are two models of marketing strategies that can be observed in the political practices of *pesantren alumni*. First, to strengthen and attract support from others, the primary strategy used is to emphasize the leadership criteria of the chosen candidate. Almost all *pesantren alumni* highlight rational considerations to strengthen their respective political positions rather than relying on claims of being the most endorsed by the *kiai* of their originating *pesantren*. This is understandable given that each of the presidential candidates in the 2024 election received support from various *kiai* and family members within the *pesantren* of origin.

For example, *pesantren alumni* who supported candidate number 01 argued that this candidate was ideal because he had a vision and mission that supported equality between public and private education. “Then there is candidate 01, represented by Anies Baswedan. For me, he is a genius. His way of thinking is excellent. And one of his interesting visions is that the mandate of the 1945 Constitution is to educate the nation’s children.”²¹ This vision and mission were considered relevant to the role of *pesantren alumni* leaders who are

²¹ Ibid.

currently involved in managing educational institutions, especially private education in *pesantren*.

Others supported candidate 02 on the grounds that such a decision was made based on careful institutional considerations, thus making the outcome more accountable. “I supported Prabowo yesterday because I currently lead Rijalul Ansor, and many of its networks are connected to Prabowo. So, my colleagues asked me how we should channel our support for Prabowo.”²² Rijalul Ansor is one of the wings of the Ansor Youth Movement of Nahdlatul Ulama.

Likewise, those who supported candidate 03 believed that this figure embodied the statesmanship needed to lead the country. “Why did I choose candidate 03? Because Pak Mahfud and Pak Ganjar are statesmen who uphold legal integrity, especially Pak Mahfud.”²³

Nevertheless, the component of claiming endorsement from the *kiai* at the *pesantren* of origin remained an important reinforcement. In other words, even though each group was able to offer rational justifications based on the ideal criteria of the supported candidate, the endorsement of the *kiai* from the *pesantren* of origin served as an additional legitimizing factor combined with the earlier rational considerations. This combination became a *pull effect*—attracting support from others while also strengthening one’s own conviction in the chosen candidate.

Second, although the endorsement of the *kiai* from the *pesantren* of origin was positioned as a reinforcement of the rational considerations emphasized by *pesantren alumni*, in reality it played a major role in driving migration from one candidate to another. This was evident, for example, among *pesantren alumni* of Sidogiri. Initially, when the leader of *Pesantren Sidogiri* had not openly expressed his support for the Prabowo-Gibran ticket, the candidate pair Anies-Muhaimin held the most favorable position among *pesantren alumni*. However, once *Kiai Fuad* publicly declared his support for the Prabowo-Gibran pair, several alumni—including *pesantren alumni*—shifted their support. “Because there was a circular letter from *Kiai Fuad* praying for Prabowo, some of the alumni eventually shifted

²² Interview with *Gus Nisam*, the family member of one *pesantren alumni* and the manager of Rijalul Ansor Bondowoso, in Bondowoso, 25 June 2024.

²³ Interview with *Kiai Arfan*, the leader of one *pesantren alumni* in Jember, in Jember, 20 July 2024.

their support.²⁴ *Kiai* Fuad here refers to KH. Ahmad Fuad Noerhasan, the current leader of *Pesantren* Sidogiri. He initially expressed support for Muhaimin Iskandar to run as a presidential candidate. However, during the 2024 presidential election, he issued a circular letter indicating his support for Prabowo and Gibran.

In this example, the determining factor behind migration was no longer the rationality based on the ideal qualities of the candidates, but rather the legitimacy of the *pesantren's sanad*. Here, a *push effect* occurred, prompting some alumni to migrate. The primary determinant of this push effect was the legitimacy of the *kiai's* political choice at the *pesantren* of origin.

The finding of this study indicates that the interplay between political marketing strategies and affective polarization among *pesantren alumni* becomes particularly evident when push strategies are employed. When alumni emphasize shortcomings in rival candidates, often framed through perceived inconsistencies with *pesantren* values or doubts about a candidate's integrity, these narratives do not create deep ideological cleavages but instead intensify emotional distance between alumni groups. Such push strategies work by amplifying feelings of distrust and reinforcing the in-group conviction that their supported candidate best reflects the moral or genealogical authority of the *pesantren*. As a result, affective polarization increases, even though the underlying motivations remain relational rather than ideological.

At the same time, pull strategies can serve to moderate polarization by redirecting alumni attention toward positive candidate attributes rather than toward antagonistic out-group narratives. When *pesantren alumni* highlight qualities such as leadership capability, educational vision, or legal integrity, political debate shifts from emotional rivalry to constructive comparison. These pull strategies encourage alumni to frame their choices around values that cut across *pesantren* networks such as competence, integrity, and public service, thereby reducing the emotional heat of polarization. In this way, political marketing does not merely escalate tensions; it also provides rhetorical tools that can soften boundaries between groups.

Finally, the dynamic combination of push and pull strategies among *pesantren alumni* demonstrates how affective polarization op-

²⁴ Interview with *Kiai* Kaab, the family member of one *pesantren alumni* in Bondowoso, in Bondowoso, 17 June 2024.

erates as a fluid, non-ideological process that is continuously shaped by seasonal political alignments. Alumni may experience temporary distancing from other groups when push narratives dominate, yet this distancing can be quickly redirected when pull narratives re-emphasize shared *pesantren* identity and collective moral commitments. Thus, political marketing not only influences how alumni advocate for candidates but also structures the ebb and flow of polarization itself, sharpening divisions at certain moments while enabling reconciliation at others. This integrated perspective underscores that political marketing is not a separate analytical domain but a mechanism deeply embedded in the formation, transformation, and moderation of affective polarization within *pesantren*-based networks

Conclusion

The differences among *pesantren alumni* in the 2024 presidential election were rooted in the varying political preferences of each group. These differences emerged primarily due to divergent political endorsements given by the *kiai* and families of the originating *pesantren* toward the presidential candidates. In addition, personal considerations regarding the characteristics of the preferred candidate also contributed to these variations. Such differences appeared across all *pesantren alumni* networks from the three major *pesantren*, each of which extended support to more than one presidential candidate.

These variations produced a form of polarization that can be categorized as affective polarization, as it was temporary, non-ideological, and largely driven by seasonal political alignments. The degree of polarization among *pesantren alumni*—whether between alumni of different *pesantren* or among alumni of the same *pesantren*—varied in intensity. In general, polarization was successfully mitigated through a combination of an environment supportive of freedom of choice and the central role of the *pesantren* leaders, who positioned themselves above internal differences.

Furthermore, political marketing practices among *pesantren alumni* manifested in two primary forms. First was the pull effect, in which the political narrative promoted emphasized the ideal leadership qualities of the supported candidate. This narrative served as the initial appeal to strengthen the attractiveness of the chosen candidate. It was then reinforced by the legitimacy of *sanad pesantren*,

highlighting that a particular candidate had received support from the *kiai* or the *kiai's* family at the *pesantren* of origin. This combination of rational criteria and *pesantren* legitimacy constituted the core of the pull-effect strategy widely applied among *pesantren alumni*.

Second was the push effect, a strategy that encouraged the migration of support from one candidate to another. One of the key triggers of this push effect was the legitimacy derived from the political stance of the *kiai* at the originating *pesantren*. While in the pull-effect strategy the endorsement of the *kiai* functioned primarily as reinforcement to rational considerations, in the push-effect strategy such endorsement became the decisive factor. This was evident, for example, in the migration of several alumni to support Prabowo-Gibran after the open endorsement issued by the leader of *Pesantren Sukorejo*.

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