

Empathy, Homophilia, and Rapport Talk in Grassroots Political Communication: A Case Study of the Citizen Greeting Program in the 2024 Depok City Legislative Election

Saeful Imam

Universitas Paramadina, Indonesia

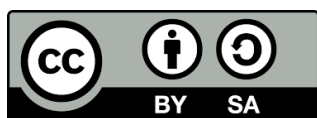
Email: saefulimam2012@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Grassroots political campaigns depend not only on programs and party organization but also on candidates' ability to establish relationships with voters. This study examined how empathy, homophily, and rapport talk operated in Hj. Ela Dahlia's Citizen Greeting Program during the 2024 Depok City legislative election. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the candidate and four citizens from diverse social backgrounds, supported by observation, documentation, media reports, and literature review. The data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model through data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing, while research validity was strengthened through source and technique triangulation. The findings showed that similarities in social status, geographical background, values, language, and everyday experiences reduced social distance and facilitated the development of initial trust. Rapport talk, expressed through active listening, familiar language, familial framing, modest appearance, and egalitarian interaction, enabled citizens to feel respected and included. Empathy further transformed initial acceptance into relational trust by acknowledging citizens' concerns and providing appropriate responses. Together, these mechanisms strengthened the candidate's political credibility and may have contributed to electoral support; however, they could not be considered the sole determinants of electoral outcomes. The study concluded that consistent, empathetic, and relationship-oriented communication could strengthen grassroots political representation during electoral processes.



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INTRODUCTION

Legislative elections at the local level demonstrate that electoral competition occurs not only through the contestation of party programs and organizational strength but also through candidates' ability to establish social relationships with voters. In an increasingly candidate-oriented electoral system, candidates are required to present personal identities, credibility, and communication styles that are accepted by local communities (Cangara, 2016). This condition becomes particularly important when candidates do not possess substantial economic resources, do not originate from established political elites, and must navigate long-standing social structures (McNair, 2011).

The case of Hj. Ela Dahlia in the 2024 Depok City Legislative Election illustrates this dynamic. She contested the election as a candidate from the Prosperous Justice Party (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, PKS) in Electoral District (Daerah Pemilihan, Dapil) 6 of Depok City, which includes Sawangan, Bojongsari, and Cipayung. Based on the thesis serving as the

primary source of this article, Hj. Ela obtained 6,802 votes and was elected as a member of the Depok City Regional House of Representatives (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah, DPRD). Among the 13 PKS candidates elected to the Depok City DPRD, only three were women. This fact is noteworthy because the candidate was described as not having a professional political background and not relying primarily on dominant economic resources, but instead developing a local social network through religious community activities and her role as Chairperson of the Communication Forum of the Majelis Taklim (Forum Komunikasi Majelis Taklim, FKMT) of Sawangan District (Rakhmat, 2018).

The context of women's representation further strengthens the relevance of this case. Women's representation in Indonesian legislative institutions remains below the 30% affirmative action threshold. At the same time, local politics continues to be influenced by gender stereotypes that associate public and political spaces more closely with men, while women are often associated with domestic roles (Dalton, 2013). From the perspective of hegemony, continuously reproduced values may be accepted as social norms and create boundaries that do not always appear coercive (Lull, 1995). Therefore, the success of female candidates emerging from local community networks is important to analyze not only as an electoral phenomenon but also as a communication practice that interacts with social structures and gender perceptions (Rogers & Storey, 1987).

The Sapa Warga program represents the primary communication strategy examined in this research. The program involved direct house-to-house visits conducted by the candidate and her team to greet residents, engage in dialogue, introduce themselves, listen to concerns, and collect aspirations. These interactions occurred informally within residents' everyday environments. The characteristics of the program demonstrate that face-to-face communication functions not only as a channel for delivering campaign messages but also as a space for negotiating meaning, shaping impressions, and developing interpersonal closeness (Sugiyono, 2013).

Theoretically, face-to-face campaigns have different characteristics from mass communication and digital campaigns. (Nimmo, 2001) positioned interpersonal communication as an important channel in political communication, while (Norris, 2000) distinguished ground wars, which rely on direct meetings and field organizations, from air wars, which rely more heavily on media communication (Yin, 2018). Green and Gerber (2019) demonstrated that direct contact can increase political participation because it creates stronger interpersonal experiences. However, the effectiveness of direct contact does not occur solely because candidates are physically present. The quality of interaction, perceptions of similarity, listening ability, and the way candidates position themselves before citizens determine whether such encounters generate acceptance or reinforce social distance.

This study developed an analysis based on three interconnected concepts. First, homophily refers to the tendency for interactions to become easier when communicating parties perceive similarities in social background, values, language, culture, or experiences (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954; Arifin, 2011 (Arifin, 2011; Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954).

Previous studies provide an important foundation while leaving opportunities for further analysis. (Muna et al., 2019) demonstrated that empathy and homophily can support political acceptance within faith-based communities. (Huda et al., 2022) showed how language, simplicity, and cultural symbols are used to construct political closeness. Studies on women in

politics, including those by Sa'diyah El Adawiyah and other scholars, have highlighted the roles of networks, message construction, media, and structural barriers. Meanwhile, research on personal campaigning emphasizes the importance of candidate characteristics and direct relationships with voters (Karlsen & Skogerbo, 2015). This article adopts a micro-level perspective by examining how identity similarities, active listening, relational communication styles, and empathy operate within a series of door-to-door interactions involving a female candidate in local politics (Scammell, 2014) .

The analytical novelty of this research lies in integrating empathy, homophily, and rapport talk to explain the mechanisms underlying political trust formation. Homophily is positioned as an entry point for initial acceptance, rapport talk as a mechanism for maintaining and deepening relationships, and empathy as a process for validating citizens' experiences and strengthening credibility. This integration is important because grassroots political communication does not always develop through programmatic arguments alone. In communities characterized by strong social relationships, voters may also evaluate whether candidates are perceived as members of their community, willing to listen, capable of understanding problems, and able to communicate without creating excessive power distance.

Based on this background, this study addressed two research questions. First, how did Hj. Ela Dahlia's political communication strategy through the Sapa Warga Program build social closeness and support electability in Electoral District 6 of the Depok City Legislative Election? Second, how could Hj. Ela Dahlia's credibility as a political communicator be explained through empathy and homophily theories while considering the feminine communication style of rapport talk? The study aimed to describe the interpersonal communication mechanisms formed, identify dominant dimensions of homophily and empathy, and explain how relational communication styles contributed to voter trust.

Academically, this research contributes to political communication studies by positioning interpersonal experiences as an important analytical unit in local electoral campaigns. Practically, the findings may serve as a reference for candidates and political organizations seeking to develop campaigns based on presence, dialogue, and relationship building with citizens. However, this article does not claim that communication strategies are the sole determinants of electoral outcomes. Electability results from interactions among multiple factors, including party organization, social networks, constituency characteristics, campaign resources (Venus, 2019) , local issues, and voter preferences. This research focuses on explaining the observable contribution of communication mechanisms within the Sapa Warga case.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using a descriptive case study method. The qualitative approach was selected because the research focused on understanding the meaning, experiences, and communication practices within a real-life context rather than statistically testing causal relationships. A case study approach was appropriate because it enabled an in-depth examination of a phenomenon within its social context using multiple sources of evidence (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 1995). The case examined in this study was the political communication practice of Hj. Ela Dahlia through the

Sapa Warga Program during the 2024 Legislative Election in Electoral District 6 of Depok City.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews and observations. Interviews were conducted to explore informants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of their interactions with the candidate. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to follow a consistent interview guide while developing additional questions based on informants' responses. Observations were conducted to examine interaction patterns, communication styles, and the social context of the program. Secondary data were obtained from activity documentation, media reports, political communication literature, and relevant supporting documents.

The main subjects of this study were Hj. Ela Dahlia as a candidate and political communicator, along with residents who participated in the Sapa Warga Program. Four citizen informants were selected to represent diverse social positions and age groups, including housewives actively involved in social activities, community leaders, women's empowerment activists, and students or young voters. The diversity of informants was intended to capture how candidate communication patterns were perceived by groups with different experiences and social backgrounds.

Data validity was strengthened through source and technique triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from the candidate with the experiences of residents from different backgrounds. Technique triangulation was conducted by comparing interview findings with observation results and documentation. These procedures were applied to reduce reliance on a single narrative and evaluate the consistency of emerging patterns. This study did not aim for statistical generalization to all voters in Electoral District 6; instead, validity was based on the depth of description and consistency of interpretation within the case boundaries.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Interview transcripts and field notes were categorized according to theoretical concepts and emerging themes. Initial codes included social similarity, geographical similarity, value similarity, shared experiences, active listening, openness, equality, empathic responses, informal language, familial framing, and credibility indicators. These codes were subsequently organized into broader analytical categories, including homophily, rapport talk, empathy, interpersonal communication effectiveness, and political credibility.

Informant quotations were presented selectively to illustrate identified patterns rather than replace analytical interpretation. Since this study focused on communication mechanisms, the relationship between communication strategies and electoral outcomes was interpreted as a contributing factor rather than a single determinant (Firmanzah, 2008). Vote acquisition was considered as contextual information regarding political outcomes, while qualitative data were used to explain how citizens experienced and evaluated the communication process. This approach prevented the conclusion that a single campaign program alone determined electoral victory (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Table 1. Citizen Informant Profile

Informants	Categories	Education	Domicile	Analytical Relevance
Lidia Arifin	Housewives/social workers	High School	São Paulo, Depok	Assess empathy, caring, and personal closeness
Dudi Iskandar	Public Figures	S1	Cipayung, Depok	Assess real actions, integrity, and leadership
Dini Ardiani	Social activist & women's empowerment	D3	Cipayung, Depok	Assess local social, educational, and cultural contributions
Radja Fatra Hilal	Students/young voters	Students	Bojongsari, Depok	Assess listening, nurturing, and language style

Source: processed from research data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Homophilia as an Entrance to Citizen Acceptance

The first findings suggest that homophilia works as a mechanism that reduces the psychological distance between candidates and citizens. Similarities do not emerge in one form, but through appearance, perceived social status, geographical origins, the value of politeness, experiences as ordinary citizens, and the cultural codes used in conversations. In a *door-to-door* context, citizens must first feel safe to open up a conversation before political messages can be accepted. Therefore, homophilia serves as an opening condition for deeper communication.

In the status and visual dimensions, the candidate's simple appearance reduces the symbol of luxury that is commonly associated with officials. One of the informants stated, "If you talk to an official who looks luxurious, usually residents are a bit afraid to talk. But like Mrs. Haji, the residents dare to tell stories." The candidate also explained his choice to use "ordinary clothes, everyday robes". These findings show that clothes are not just personal attributes, but become a nonverbal message about the social position they want to display. Visual simplicity forms the perception that the candidate is not asserting the hierarchy, so that citizens are more free to speak.

Distance reduction is also aided by the presence of RT/RW or known local figures. They function as a bridge of trust. Residents' statement that the presence of RT/RW makes residents "not hesitate to talk" shows that homophilia can be strengthened through local social structures. The credibility of a candidate in the early stages is not entirely built on its own; it rests on the trust network that already exists in the community. In terms of social capital (Putnam et al., 1993) trust networks and norms provide a relational infrastructure that allows communication to take place more effectively.

The most prominent dimension is geographical homophilia. The candidate's identity as the daughter of the Sawangan Baru region creates an in-group perception. Residents feel that the candidate understands regional issues because they live in the same context. One of the informants described his differences with candidates from outside the region: "If you look at it

from outside, you usually only look at it at a glance... Mrs. Haji seems to know first." The candidate herself consciously displays her family history and attachment to the region: "Because I am an indigenous person here. A regional princess. People know my parents, my grandfather." Geographical similarity thus has two layers: it accelerates recognition and strengthens the belief that the candidate has local knowledge.

Homophilic values are seen mainly in interactions with older citizens. For this group, manners and communication rhythms are indicators of character. Elderly informants assessed that candidates came "slowly, politely, not in a hurry" and said goodbye well. The similarity in the value of politeness allows citizens to project political relations into more intimate social relations. The phrase "I feel like I have a caring child" shows that the candidate-voter relationship is not perceived solely as an instrumental relationship ahead of the election, but is understood through a family scheme.

In young voters, homophilia emerges as *relatability* and commonality of cultural codes. Young informants call candidates "relate" because they were previously also ordinary citizens and can joke in a way that is considered "in" for young people. These findings add an important dimension: political homophilia not only works through traditional identities such as ethnicity or region of origin, but also through the ability to adapt language styles and humor. This adaptability expands the range of acceptance without eliminating the candidate's local identity.

Conceptually, these results are in line with Lazarsfeld and Merton (1954) and the homophilic research tradition that sees similarities as reducing uncertainty in interactions. However, this case shows that homophilia should not be understood as a fixed attribute. Candidates actively produce and display similarities through their choice of clothing, language style, origin story, local intermediaries, and way of positioning. Thus, homophilia is a combination of objective similarity and impression management that makes these similarities relevant to citizens.

Table 2. Homophilic Dimension in the Citizen Greeting Program

Dimensions	Empirical Indicators	Meaning for Citizens	Communication Implications
Status/visual	Everyday clothes, sitting equally, lack of elite symbols	Candidates are perceived as "ordinary people"	Lowering your shyness and opening up conversations
Geography	Regional princesses, local family history, community networks	Candidates are considered to understand the region	Accelerate initial trust and acceptance
Value	Manners, manners, calmness of interaction	Similarity of norms and sense of family	Deepens emotional bonds
Experience/culture	Ordinary citizen background, humor, casual language	Relatability and shared cultural code	Increase the connectedness of young voters

Source: results of research data analysis

Rapport Talk: Listening, Equality, and Family Framing

The second finding shows the dominance of communication patterns that can be read as rapport talk. Candidates do not place visits as a space to monopolize conversations, but as an opportunity to build connections. This orientation can be seen in the way candidates frame

relationships as family relationships, give space for residents to tell problems at length, and resist the urge to immediately cut off or offer uncertain solutions.

The framing of family relationships is strongest seen in elderly voters. The candidate admits that many elderly residents consider him or her as their own child. The experience of the residents confirms this through the expression "like meeting your own child". In (Tannen, 1990, 1994) perspective, such closeness is the result of communication that prioritizes rapport—a feeling of connection—not just a report or exchange of information. Politically, this framing shifts candidates from the position of 'people who come to vote' to 'community members who come to visit'.

Listening skills are the most consistent element that emerges. A male informant assessed that candidates "listen first, not immediately offend" and added that while help may not necessarily be provided right away, citizens feel heard. This statement is important because it shows that political satisfaction does not always come from instant solutions. In many interactions between citizens and institutions, complaints often fail to gain space. When candidates take the time to listen, they become a valuable communication experience.

Rapport talk is also characterized by an orientation to the process. The candidate does not end the communication on self-introduction, but places the aspirations of the citizens as material to be remembered and acted upon. In this context, the listening process is not a cosmetic strategy to build a friendly image, but rather part of a mechanism for obtaining political information. Informal conversations generate local knowledge about infrastructure, uninhabitable houses, floods, green open spaces, irrigation, education, health, and other social needs. The quality of interpersonal communication therefore has substantive implications: candidates obtain richer social data from citizens' experiences.

In addition to verbal, *rapport* is formed through intonation, body position, and interaction settings. Simple clothing and the willingness to sit with citizens communicate *equality*. This principle is in line with (DeVito, 2019), who places equality as one of the qualities of effective interpersonal communication. Equality does not mean eliminating differences in political roles, but avoiding the use of those differences to dominate the conversation. Citizens are treated as subjects whose knowledge of the environment is considered valuable.

From a gender perspective, the communication pattern can be read as a nurturing style that emphasizes care, attention, and the maintenance of relationships (Gilligan, 1982). However, this article does not consider these qualities to belong exclusively to women. Its analytical value lies precisely in the fact that female candidates can transform the communication character that is often seen as domestic—listening, nurturing relationships, building a safe atmosphere—into political capital in the public sphere. Thus, the feminine communication style is not only a personal identity, but also a strategy that challenges the assumption that political leadership must always appear through dominant rhetoric, formality, and symbols of power.

Rapport talk also has an openness dimension. In the findings of the study, candidates are considered not to always promise immediate solutions, but rather convey the limits of ability or authority. This kind of openness strengthens trustworthiness because citizens are not faced with excessive promises. In credibility theory, trustworthiness is the result of an evaluation of the sincerity (Patton, 2015), consistency, and responsibility of communicators. An attitude of

'not knowing' or 'not being able to' conveyed honestly can be more credible than false certainty that only works for a moment during a campaign.

Manifestations of Empathy in Political Interactions

If homophilia creates a sense of 'likeness' and *rapport talk* creates a space for conversation, empathy gives depth to the relationship. The data show that citizens judge empathy not only by verbal expressions such as caring speech, but by the way the candidate understands perspective, validates it, and demonstrates effort. Empathy is thus cognitive, affective, and behavioral.

On the cognitive dimension, candidates try to understand the problem from the perspective of citizens. Complaints about damaged roads, floods, uninhabitable houses, green open spaces, and irrigation are not only recorded as a list of issues, but discussed in the context of their impact on daily life. *Perspective taking* allows candidates to connect public issues with citizens' personal experiences. This is important because citizens often do not convey problems in policy language. They tell stories through experiences, disappointments, and expectations. Empathetic communicators must translate the narrative without losing its emotional meaning (Goleman, 1997).

In the affective dimension, citizens feel validation when candidates do not rush to change the topic or turn stories into oration opportunities. Research has found experiences especially in the elderly who feel that their presence is appreciated. This emotional resonance strengthens the impression of sincerity. (Davis, 1983) helps explain that affective empathy is not just knowing what others are experiencing, but the ability to respond appropriately to emotional states. In the context of a campaign, an appropriate response can be in the form of patience, expressions of concern, or recognition of citizens' difficulties.

Empathy is also interpreted through action. One of the male informants assessed the candidate's physical work when visiting homes as evidence of concern. *Door-to-door* activities require time and energy, so attendance becomes a symbol of commitment. For citizens, these actions distinguish abstract campaign messages from concrete experiences of interacting with candidates. This is where empathy meets credibility: goodwill is considered more convincing when accompanied by observable behavior.

It is important to note that empathy does not always lead to the fulfillment of demands. It is precisely political limitations that are part of the empathy test. Candidates who understand the issue but lack direct authority need to openly explain the process, priorities, or possible follow-up. This strategy prevents empathy from turning into populism of promise. In this article, empathy is seen as credible when it includes four steps: listening, understanding, validating, and responding proportionately.

These findings broaden the understanding of persuasive political communication. Persuasion does not only take place through argumentation, framing, or repetition of messages (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Persuasion also occurs when communicators feel that they are treated with dignity. In the context of Sapa Warga, citizens become more open because they feel similarity and concern. This is in line with the social function of interpersonal communication that builds relationships and facilitates decision-making. Voters not only evaluate the content of the message, but also the experience of communicating with the messenger.

The Effectiveness of Interpersonal Communication in a DeVito Perspective

Further analysis showed that the interaction pattern of Sapa Warga can be mapped to DeVito's five qualities of interpersonal communication: *openness*, *empathy*, *supportiveness*, *positivity*, and *equality*. These five qualities help explain why homophilia and *rapport talk* do not stop at the impression of friendliness, but produce a relatively intact communication experience.

Openness is seen when candidates provide space for citizens to express their grievances while communicating the boundaries of authority honestly. Empathy is seen in the willingness to understand citizens' experiences and adjust responses. Supportive attitudes are reflected in non-judgmental and non-defensive communication. Positive attitudes emerge through friendliness, humor, and reinforcement towards citizens. Equality is built through the reduction of status symbols and the recognition that citizens have important knowledge about their environment.

These five dimensions support each other. Equality facilitates openness; openness provides information to empathize; empathy encourages supportive attitudes; positive attitudes maintain conversations; and the whole process reinforces a sense of security. This structure explains why one seemingly simple action—for example, sitting down and listening—has broader communicative consequences than just the image of simplicity.

The effectiveness of interpersonal communication also depends on segment adaptation. Candidates do not use exactly the same style to all citizens. In the elderly, politeness and rhythm of conversation become dominant; in community leaders, there is a stronger emphasis on integrity, effort, and environmental issues; in young voters, casual language and humor reinforce connection. This adaptation does not change the core message, but adapts the form of delivery to the communicator's relational needs. The practice demonstrates the important contextual communication competence in grassroots politics.

Table 3. Integration of Rapport Talk, Empathy, and Interpersonal Quality

Elements	Key Practices	Citizen Experience	Political Consequences
Report talk	Hearing, familiar language, family relations	Feeling close and not being "lectured"	Relationships become more relational
Empathy	Perspective taking, emotional validation, proportional response	Feel understood and valued	Increase trustworthiness
Openness	Receive complaints and explain the limits of authority	Get realistic talking space and information	Reduce the impression of over-promising
Equality	Modest clothing, equal seating, minimal symbols of power	Less reluctance	Opening a two-way dialogue
Supportiveness/positivity	Friendly tone, humor, non-judgmental response	Comfortable and continuous conversations	Strengthen personal acceptance

Source: results of research data analysis using the framework of Tannen (1990, 1994) and DeVito (2011)

Political Credibility: From Initial Trust to Relational Trust

The main findings of the study can be formulated as a two-stage credibility formation process. In the first stage, homophilia generates initial trust. Citizens are more receptive to candidates because they feel the similarity of status, origin, values, and experiences. These similarities reduce uncertainty and reduce prejudice against politicians who are considered to be distant. In the second stage, initial trust is tested through the quality of interaction. *Rapport talk* and empathy determine whether initial acceptance develops into *a more stable* relational trust.

This two-stage model helps explain why local identity alone is not enough. Candidates may have the same regional origin as residents but lose trust if communication is perceived as arrogant, inconsistent, or simply transactional. In contrast, candidates from not entirely the same background can build trust through cultural adaptation and empathy. In Hj. Ela's case, geographic homophilia provides an initial advantage, while relational communication reinforces those advantages into a perception of credibility.

Credibility is formed organically through direct experience, not just through media imagery. Citizens judge the competence and integrity of things that are close to their experience: whether the candidate is present, listening, explaining, sticking to what can be done, and maintaining relationships. This expands the concept *of expertise*. In local politics, *expertise* is not only read from titles, positions, or mastery of issues, but also from contextual knowledge of the region and the ability to navigate community networks.

Trustworthiness also acquires a very interpersonal meaning. Candidates are considered trustworthy when verbal and nonverbal behavior are consistent (Mujani et al., 2012). Simple appearances will lose meaning if they are not accompanied by an equal attitude. Listening will be considered manipulative if there is no follow-up or honesty. Therefore, credibility is not the result of one symbol, but coherence between identity, way of interacting, and actions perceived by citizens.

In the perspective of social capital, this process can be understood as the transformation of proximity into political capital. Community networks provide access; homophilia generates acceptance; interpersonal communication generates trust; and trust increases the likelihood of support. This transformation is in line with Putnam (1993), who places networks, norms, and trust as components of social capital. However, this study adds that social capital does not automatically become electoral support. It needs to be activated through communication practices that make networking have a positive experience with candidates.

Relationship-based credibility also has post-election implications. If trust is built through relationships, citizens will expect the relationship to continue after the candidate is elected. The advantage of interpersonal campaigns is also the obligation of representation: candidates need to maintain channels of dialogue, show follow-up, and maintain equality. Failure to maintain relationships can turn initial trust and relational trust into stronger disappointment because citizens' expectations have been built personally.

Women's Political Communication and Patriarchal Hegemony Negotiation

This case also has significance in the study of gender and politics. Female candidates enter a political space that is still strongly associated with male leadership, elite networks, and material capital. The research did not find that Hj. Ela explicitly campaigned with an agenda challenging patriarchy. However, her communication practices showed a more subtle form of

negotiation: characters culturally associated with the domestic realm—caring, listening, relationship-building, and caring for networks—articulated as political competence.

In the framework of Lull (1995), hegemony works when dominant meanings are accepted as something natural. When politics is perceived as an arena that demands a hard, formal, and distanced style of communication, female candidates can face pressure to emulate the model. The case of Sapa Warga shows an alternative: relational style is used as a strategic differentiator. Candidates do not seek to erase communicative femininity, but convert it into a political force that is relevant to citizens' needs to be heard.

These findings need to be read carefully so as not to reinforce the stereotype that women are 'naturally' more empathetic. *Rapport talk* and nurturing are communication practices that anyone can learn and practice. Its relevance in this case lies in how a female candidate uses the style in a social context that gives special meaning to the roles of mother, child, neighbor, and community mover. Gender identity interacts with local identities and social networks, rather than working alone.

In terms of representation, communication models such as Sapa Warga can expand the understanding of substantive representation. Women's representation is not only related to the number of seats, but also to the way political representatives relate to citizens and bring social experiences to the policy space. The practice of listening to aspirations directly has the potential to bridge experiences that are often absent in formal political communication. However, these benefits only become substantive representation if aspirations can be translated into agendas, oversight, and policies after elections.

Implications for Electability and Explanatory Limits

Hj. Ela obtained 6,802 votes and was successfully elected as a member of the Depok City DPRD. The research data also showed that strong support came from Sawangan Baru, an area with high geographical and social proximity to the candidates. The qualitative findings provide a plausible reason why the Sapa Warga Program can contribute to these results: the program improves candidate recognition, builds interpersonal experiences, expands networks, and turns common identity into trust (Moleong, 2017).

However, the relationship should not be interpreted as a single causality. The study did not use experimental design, representative surveys, or systematic comparisons with other candidates. Therefore, it cannot be concluded what percentage of votes were generated directly by Sapa Warga, empathy, homophilia, or rapport talk. Party factors, team structure, FKMT network, voter character, position of the serial number, other resources, local issues, and competition dynamics may also have an effect.

These limitations actually clarify the contribution of the research. Qualitative case studies serve to answer the question of 'how' and 'why' a mechanism can work in a given context. Research finds that when face-to-face contact is designed as an equal and empathic interaction, citizens can experience the campaign as a social connection, rather than just persuasion. It is this mechanism that is theoretically relevant to be further tested through comparative or quantitative research.

The practical implication for political campaigns is that *door-to-door* should not be reduced to the activity of chasing the number of homes visited. Its effectiveness is determined by the quality of the interaction. Short visits can remain meaningful if the candidate comes

with context preparation, recognizes local networks, provides a speaking space, notes aspirations, and realistically explains follow-ups. In contrast, large visits do not guarantee trust if communication is one-way and insensitive to citizens' situations.

For female candidates, the findings show an opportunity to develop an authentic strategy for community experiences without having to imitate the dominant campaign style. Relational power can become political capital when managed consistently and linked to the capacity of representation. However, authenticity requires continuity. If the empathic style only appears during the campaign period, citizens can judge the relationship as instrumental. Therefore, the sustainability of the Warga Greeting after the election is an important test of the credibility that has been built.

Table 4. Integrative Model for Building Credibility in Greeting Citizens

Stages	Mechanism	Relational Results	Potential Electoral Contribution
1. Access	Homophilic identity/status/geography	Feel familiar and secure	Increase early acceptance
2. Interaction	Rapport talk and equality	Two-way talk and proximity	Improves recognition and affection
3. Validation	Cognitive-affective empathy	Feel understood and valued	Strengthening trustworthiness
4. Consolidation	Consistency, openness, follow-up	Relational trust and credibility	Supporting loyalty/support alongside other factors

Source: analytical construction based on research results.

CONCLUSION

The research concludes that the Sapa Warga Program represents a grassroots political communication strategy that operates through the integration of identity proximity, relational communication styles, and empathy. Homophily serves as an entry point for citizen acceptance through the perception of similarities in social status, geographical origin, values, culture, and experiences. These similarities reduce psychological distance and establish initial trust, particularly when reinforced by local social networks that already possess community-based trust

Rapport talk deepens acceptance through a communication pattern that prioritizes relationships rather than information dominance. Active listening, familiar language, familial framing, visual simplicity, and willingness to engage in equal interactions enable citizens to feel respected and have space to express their concerns. From DeVito's perspective, these patterns reflect openness, empathy, supportiveness, positivity, and equality. These elements transform door-to-door visits from one-way campaign activities into participatory social interactions.

Empathy functions as a mechanism that transforms initial trust into relational trust. Candidates not only identify citizens' concerns cognitively but also acknowledge their emotional experiences and demonstrate appropriate responses. Political credibility is therefore constructed through consistency between perceived identity proximity, communication behavior, and observable actions. The combination of homophily and empathy explains why

citizens may perceive candidates as members of their community and as communicators worthy of trust.

In the context of women's political participation, this study suggests that relational communication practices, such as listening, maintaining relationships, and creating a sense of security, can be transformed into political resources within public spaces. The findings do not imply that women are inherently more empathetic; rather, they indicate that relational communication practices can become effective leadership strategies when aligned with the social context of the community. Therefore, this case provides an alternative perspective to campaign models that emphasize power symbols, one-way rhetoric, or transactional political interactions.

Methodologically, this research has limitations as a qualitative case study involving a limited number of informants and without comparison groups. Therefore, the findings cannot be statistically generalized and do not demonstrate that the Sapa Warga Program was the sole factor determining electoral outcomes. Future research may examine the integrative model of homophily–rapport talk–empathy through voter surveys, comparative studies among candidates, cross-constituency analysis, or mixed-method approaches. Additional factors, including social media use, party organizational strength, political networks, economic resources, and local issue dynamics, should also be considered to provide a more comprehensive explanation of electoral support.

Practically, the Sapa Warga Program has potential to be developed as a post-election representative communication mechanism. Consistent presence, aspiration documentation, follow-up processes, and feedback channels should be institutionalized so that relationships established during the campaign continue after the candidate assumes office. The primary value of this strategy lies not only in electoral effectiveness but also in its potential to foster more dialogical, inclusive, and citizen-oriented political relationships.

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