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The role of Ulama and Malay customary institutions in shaping voters' political preferences in the 2024 regional elections in Riau

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This study aims to analyze the influence of religious scholars and Malay traditional institutions on the political preferences of the community. In this context, religious scholars are defined as religious figures who have a significant influence in shaping the views and attitudes of the community toward political issues, while Malay customary institutions refer to social structures that regulate norms and values in Malay society. This study uses a quantitative approach with multiple linear regression analysis, which is a statistical method that allows researchers to understand the relationship between several independent variables and one dependent variable. This study uses a quantitative approach with multiple linear regression analysis, which is a statistical method that allows researchers to understand the relationship between several independent variables and one dependent variable. The results indicate that the role of ulama has a significant influence on political preferences ($p = 0.003$), while the role of customary institutions does not have a considerable impact ($p = 0.416$). This study highlights a shift in socio-political authority from customary institutions to ulama in shaping political preferences in Riau Province. These findings confirm a shift in social-political authority from traditional institutions to religious figures in society. The greater the influence of religious scholars in society, the greater the likelihood that the community will choose political candidates or parties that align with the teachings and views of religious scholars. It is recommended that the cultural role of traditional institutions be strengthened and that other factors influencing the formation of political preferences be explored.

KEYWORDS

political preferences, religious scholars, Malay customary institutions, social authority, local election

1 Introduction

In many Muslim-majority countries, such as Indonesia, religious scholars serve not only as spiritual leaders but also as figures who influence people's political decisions. Previous research has shown that religious scholars have a strong influence on political choices, often more significant than rational or ideological considerations (Fossati, 2019; Kustiawan et al., 2021). The authority of religious leaders and elders extends beyond spiritual guidance; they serve as trusted advisors whose opinions influence political

preferences and voting patterns. This phenomenon underscores the deep integration of religious and cultural identities in the political landscape of these regions (Azeh et al., 2023). Voters tend to prioritize support for and teachings of respected religious figures, believing that aligning with a particular candidate or party reflects their beliefs and social values. As a result, electoral decisions are often driven by religious and customary influences, which can sometimes obscure pragmatic or policy-based considerations (Deluhula et al., 2024; He et al., 2025). This dynamic highlights the importance of customary institutions and religious authorities in shaping the political order of Muslim-majority regions such as Riau.

Riau Province, with a population of 6,708,143, exhibits a clear majority of Muslim residents. Islam, with 5,726,306 followers, is by far the largest religion in the region, reflecting a broader national trend in Indonesia, where Islam is the dominant faith. Christianity ranks second, with 638,119 adherents, indicating some level of religious diversity in the province, though on a smaller scale. Other religions, including Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, are represented by much smaller numbers: Catholicism has 69,867 followers, Hinduism has 767, Buddhism has 136,542, and Confucianism has 2,204.

Figure 1 these data further illustrate the significant religious plurality in Riau, despite substantial numerical disparities between Islam and other religions. These figures demonstrate the homogeneity of religious identity at the regional level, with Islam accounting for nearly 90% of the religious demographic, followed by Christianity in second place. This proportion underscores Islam's significant influence on the province's socio-cultural dynamics, while also highlighting the presence of other relatively small but essential religious communities in shaping the region's multifaceted cultural identity. These demographic patterns are crucial for understanding religious cohesion and diversity in Riau, which can have implications for policymaking, interfaith dialogue, and community relations.

Based on voter data from the Riau Provincial General Election Commission, which recorded a total of 4,827,022 registered voters with 2,882,476 individuals exercising their voting rights, there are notable regional variations in political participation. Kampar Regency (371,964 votes) and Pekanbaru City (364,819 votes) recorded the highest voter turnout, while the Meranti Islands (91,222 votes) showed the lowest level of participation.

Figure 2 although interest in understanding the factors that shape voter preferences is growing, there remains a significant gap in quantitative research on the specific influence of Malay ulama and traditional institutions in Riau. Most existing studies are descriptive, offering general observations without delving into measurable data that could support claims about their impact (Argenti et al., 2022). This lack of empirical analysis limits our understanding of how these entities function as active political agents, particularly in mobilizing communities and shaping electoral behavior (Muhammad et al., 2025). The role of religious scholars and Malay traditional institutions in shaping political preferences in Indonesia, particularly in Malay regions like Riau, has increasingly become an important topic in the study of identity politics. Indonesians, who are predominantly Muslim,

often place religion and cultural traditions central to their political decisions. In many regions, including Riau, religious scholars serve not only as spiritual leaders but also as influential figures in people's political decisions. Previous research has shown that religious scholars have a strong influence on political choices, often surpassing rational or ideological considerations (Hartono et al., 2020).

However, while numerous studies acknowledge the importance of religious scholars' influence, few studies have used a quantitative approach to systematically evaluate the extent to which religious scholars and Malay traditional institutions influence political preferences. This study fills this gap by using a quantitative approach through multiple linear regression analysis to measure the relationship between social proximity to religious scholars and customary institutions and community political preferences in Riau during the 2024 Regional Head Elections (*Pilkada*). These findings are significant because they provide in-depth empirical insights into the shift in socio-political authority in Riau's Malay community, which has historically been dominated by customary institutions, but now sees a significant shift toward religious scholars.

Therefore, more systematic and data-driven studies are needed to bridge this gap and explain how religious and customary institutions shape the electoral process in Riau. This study adopts a quantitative survey methodology to explore the significant role of Malay religious scholars and customary institutions in shaping voter preferences during regional elections in Riau. Using structured questionnaires and statistical analysis, this study aims to collect empirical data that reveals how socio-religious beliefs and cultural traditions influence electoral decision-making processes in the specific context of Indonesia (Suryanagara et al., 2025). This gap prompted this study to systematically examine the role of ulama and customary institutions through a quantitative survey approach with multiple linear regression analysis. Thus, this study contributes to explaining the shift in social authority from customary institutions to religious authority and enriches our understanding of the interaction between religion, tradition, and politics in the contemporary Indonesian local democratic landscape. Previous research has demonstrated that religious scholars and traditional institutions have a substantial impact on people's political preferences. However, this influence can shift in response to social and political dynamics in specific contexts. The theoretical framework of this study is based on the integration of Social Identity Theory, the Civic Voluntarism Model, and the Theory of Planned Behavior. Social Identity Theory explains how individuals tend to identify with certain social groups, such as religious scholars and traditional institutions (Tabassum et al., 2023; Baber, 2020), which influences their political preferences (Overton and Cunningham, 2025). The Civic Voluntarism Model emphasizes the importance of resources, political efficacy, and social networks in motivating political participation (Goetting and Becker, 2025), while the Theory of Planned Behavior states that attitudes (Cleveland, 2025), social norms, and perceived behavioral control play a role in individuals' intentions to participate in politics (Shepherd et al., 2020; Sestito, 2025). In this study, a multiple linear regression model was employed to examine the relationship

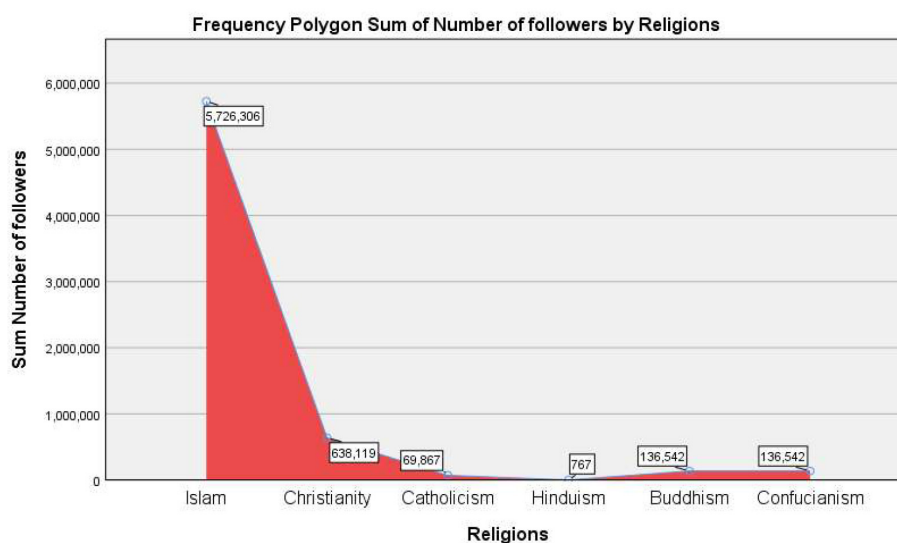


FIGURE 1

Statistics of the religious population in Riau Province. Source: Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia, 2024.

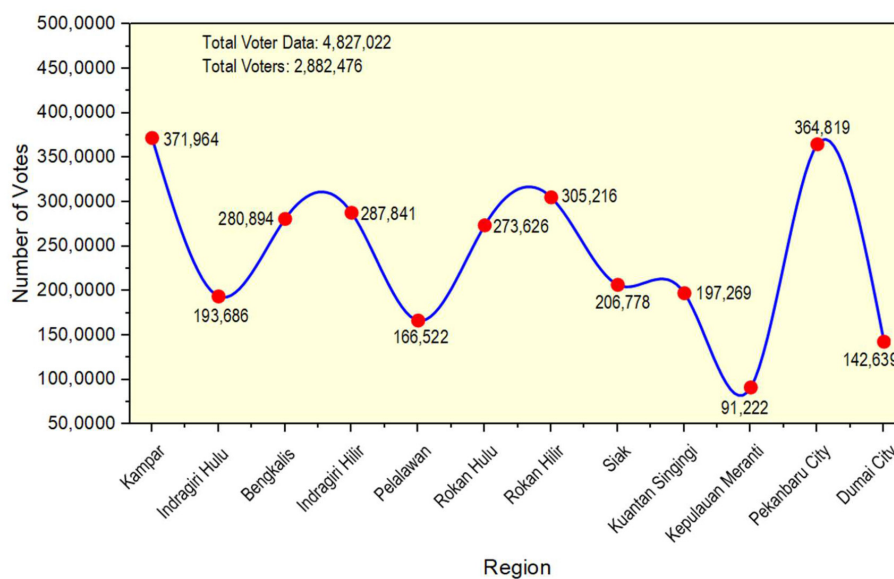


FIGURE 2

Riau Province voter data for the 2024 regional head elections. Source: Riau Provincial General Election Commission, 2024.

between independent variables (the roles of ulama and traditional institutions) and dependent variables (political preferences), while also considering other factors that may influence individual political decisions.

Similarly, Malay customary institutions, which embody the traditional social structure and cultural norms of the region, are expected to significantly influence electoral behavior by reinforcing community loyalty and customary values (Wicaksono et al., 2025). The survey targets a diverse sample of voters from various demographic groups to gain comprehensive insights into their perceptions and motivations. Through statistical analysis, this

study seeks to identify patterns and correlations that illustrate the extent to which these socio-religious and cultural factors shape electoral preferences. These findings are expected to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex interactions between religion, tradition, and politics in traditional Indonesian society and provide valuable implications for policymakers, political candidates, and academics interested in the socio-political dynamics in Riau. Ultimately, this study seeks to provide insights into how religion and local customs influence the democratic process, highlighting the importance of cultural context in electoral studies within Indonesia's diverse society.

2 Methods

This study uses a quantitative survey methodology to investigate the influence of voters' closeness to Malay religious scholars and traditional institutions on their political preferences during the Riau Provincial Head Elections (*Pilkada*). The survey approach was deliberately chosen because it allows for systematic measurement of the relationship between social variables across a large population sample, thereby facilitating the generalization of findings (Klein, 2022). Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire to capture respondents' perceptions, attitudes, and the strength of their relationships with religious leaders and traditional institutions. The questionnaire included Likert scale items, multiple-choice questions, and demographic information to ensure comprehensive data collection. In addition to primary data, secondary sources such as official election results, previous survey reports, and institutional documentation were included to provide contextual and collaborative information (Creswell, 2024). The focus was on collecting quantitative numerical data that reflected respondents' perceptions and the intensity of their relationships with religious and traditional leaders. This approach enables researchers to analyze patterns and correlations between social proximity to important figures and voter behavior, offering valuable insights into how cultural and religious affiliations influence political decision-making in the unique socio-political landscape of Riau Province.

2.1 Sample and data collection

In this study, data were collected through a carefully designed questionnaire distributed to registered voters in Kampar, Pekanbaru, and Siak Regencies, Riau. Sampling was conducted purposively to ensure respondents met specific criteria relevant to the research objectives (Younas et al., 2023). The target sample for this study consisted of 400 Malay voters in Riau, proportionally representing the main demographic groups in the region. The sample in this study consisted of individuals who adhered to Islam, considering that the Muslim population in Riau Province is 85.36% (<https://satudata.kemenag.go.id/statistik>). Participation was limited to respondents who identified their religion as Islam, which was verified through a direct survey. Participation criteria based on religion were applied to ensure homogeneity within the sample group and to focus on the Islamic perspective in the context of this study. The determination of the sample size, comprising 400 respondents from a total population of six million, was based on theoretical considerations in statistical inference that emphasize the principles of representativeness and efficiency. This sample size generally meets the criteria for statistical reliability with a 95% confidence level and a margin of error of $\pm 5\%$, as derived from the sample size determination formula $n = \frac{Z^2 \times p \times (1-p)}{e^2}$. Using a Z value of 1.96 and $p = 0.5$ to maximize variance, a minimum requirement of approximately 384 respondents was obtained, which was then rounded to 400 to ensure the stability of the estimate. Theoretically, this number is sufficient because, based on the Central Limit Theorem and

the Law of Large Numbers (Peng, 2019; Qu et al., 2022), the distribution of sample means with sizes above 30 will approximate the normal distribution of the population. Therefore, increasing the sample size above 400 only results in an insignificant decrease in error. Therefore, a sample size of 400 is considered efficient and representative for scientifically describing the characteristics of a large population.

This approach aims to ensure accurate insights into voter preferences and regional political dynamics. Participants responded using a Likert scale, which allowed for in-depth measurement of their attitudes and opinions regarding the topics studied (Nwabuko, 2024). This approach helped obtain reliable and in-depth data for analysis. This survey was tested for reliability using Cronbach's alpha, which produced a value of X , indicating high internal consistency.

2.2 Data analysis

The data analysis used was multiple linear regression analysis to test the influence of independent variables (proximity to religious scholars and traditional institutions) on the dependent variable (political preference). In addition, Pearson's correlation test was used to see the strength of the relationship between variables, while ANOVA was used to see differences in influence based on demographic characteristics. Data processing and analysis were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics version 26, ensuring rigorous statistical procedures. Before analysis, relevant assumptions, including data normality, multicollinearity among predictors, and heteroscedasticity, were thoroughly examined to validate the robustness of the results (Li and Ren, 2025). This quantitative approach is designed to uncover potential causal relationships between sociocultural influences and political behavior, providing a clearer understanding of how traditional affiliations and religion shape political orientation in the studied population.

2.3 Operationalization of variables

This study examines two primary variables: the role of religious scholars (ulama) and the role of customary institutions in shaping the community's political preferences in Riau Province. To ensure that these variables are measured systematically, measurement tools based on a Likert scale were used, which allows for the numerical assessment of the influence exerted by ulama and customary institutions on the respondents' political choices.

1. Role of ulama

The role of ulama is measured using a five-point Likert scale designed to assess the influence of ulama on the respondents' political preferences. This scale consists of five items that measure the level of agreement respondents have with the following statements:

- religious scholars have a significant influence on my political choices.

- I am more likely to choose candidates supported by religious scholars.
- The opinions of religious scholars greatly influence my political views.
- I consider religious scholars to have moral authority in choosing political candidates.
- I follow the teachings of religious scholars in making political decisions.

Respondents are asked to rate their agreement with each statement on a scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). This scale aims to measure the extent of the ulama's influence in the respondents' political decision-making process.

1. Role of customary institutions

The role of customary institutions is measured using a five-point Likert scale similar to the one used for the role of ulama. Still, it focuses on the influence of customary leaders or institutions on the respondents' political preferences. This scale consists of five items:

- customary leaders have a significant influence in determining my political choice.
- I feel bound by the political decisions made by customary institutions.
- I am more likely to follow the advice of customary leaders in choosing political candidates.
- Customary institutions have authority in influencing my political views.
- The teachings or policies of customary institutions often influence my political decisions.

As with the scale for ulama, respondents are asked to rate their agreement with each statement on a scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). This scale is designed to measure the extent to which customary institutions influence the respondents' political choices.

2.4 Validity and reliability of the measurement tools

To ensure the validity and reliability of these measurement tools, validity and reliability tests were conducted on the Likert scale items through Cronbach's Alpha. The results of the reliability test indicated an acceptable Cronbach's Alpha value, showing that the measurement tools are consistent and reliable for measuring the intended variables. Additionally, to ensure content validity, the questionnaire items were developed based on relevant literature. They underwent discussions with experts in the fields of religion and customary law to ensure their appropriateness.

3 Results

This study involved respondents from three different districts and cities and sought to explore various factors influencing

political preferences in these communities. The findings reveal interesting insights into the relative impact of local customs and religious leaders on individual political choices. In particular, the influence of religious scholars demonstrates a positive and significant relationship with political preferences, indicating that their role plays a substantial part in shaping individuals' political orientations. In contrast, the influence of traditional institutions is not statistically significant, suggesting that their role in this context is relatively limited. Overall, the research model exhibits a satisfactory level of significance, although its explanatory power remains modest. Nonetheless, the findings contribute empirically to a deeper understanding of socio-religious factors in shaping political behavior within society. This suggests that cultural traditions and community practices play an important role in shaping political opinions and decisions among the population.

Furthermore, the study highlights an important age-related trend: older individuals, particularly those aged 50 and above, tend to be significantly more influenced by religious leaders in shaping their political preferences. This may reflect a greater reliance on religious authority and traditional values among older segments of the population. Conversely, younger respondents show a more balanced or diverse influence from local customs and religious leaders. Overall, respondents demonstrate moderate political preferences, indicating neither strong nor weak tendencies toward specific political ideologies or candidates. In addition, the age distribution of participants was fairly even, covering various age groups. These findings underscore the complex interaction between cultural, religious, and generational factors in shaping the political landscape in this region.

The results of this study show that the role of ulama has a significant influence on the political preferences of the community in Riau, as evidenced by the p -value of 0.003 and a beta coefficient of 0.171. In contrast, the role of customary institutions does not show a significant influence on political preferences, with a p -value of 0.416. These findings reflect a shift in socio-political authority in Riau, where traditionally, customary institutions played a dominant role, but now, ulama have become increasingly influential in shaping the political decisions of the community (Table 1).

However, the coefficient of determination (R^2) obtained was 0.031, meaning that only 3.1% of the variation in political preferences can be explained by the two independent variables in the model, namely the Role of Religious Leaders and the Role of Malay Customary Institutions. The remaining 96.9% is explained by other factors outside this model. Thus, although the regression model explains only 3.1% of the variation in political preferences,

TABLE 1 Results for multiple linear regression: influence of religious scholars and Malay customary institutions on political preferences.

Model		Coefficients beta	p -value	R^2
1	The influence of Ulama	0.171	0.003	0.031
	The role of Malay customary institutions	0.147	0.416	

TABLE 2 Regression coefficients for the influence of religious scholars and Malay customary institutions on political preferences.

Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	11.988	0.929		12.903	0.000
	The influence of Ulama	0.114	0.039	0.171	2.970	0.003
	The role of Malay customary institutions	0.049	0.060	0.047	0.814	.416

^aIndependent Variable: Political preference.

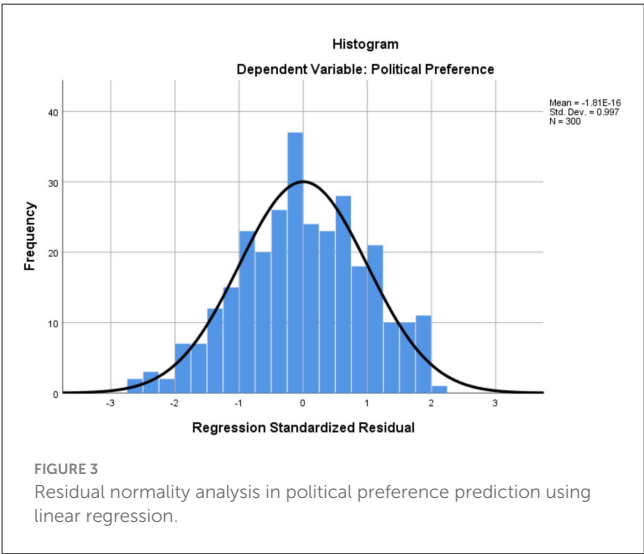


FIGURE 3
Residual normality analysis in political preference prediction using linear regression.

it indicates that other factors not captured in this model also play a significant role in determining people’s political choices. Partially, the *t*-test results indicate that the Ulama Role variable has a positive and significant influence on Political Preferences. This is evidenced by the regression coefficient value of 0.114 and the significance value of 0.003 ($p < 0.05$). This means that the greater the role played by ulama, the more likely political preferences among the community will increase in the direction of that influence (Table 2).

The standardized beta coefficient (Beta) of 0.171 also indicates that the role of religious scholars contributes relatively more strongly than other variables in the model. Conversely, the role of Malay customary institutions does not show a significant influence on political preferences, with a significance value of 0.416 ($p > 0.05$). The small regression coefficient value (0.049) and low beta value (0.047) indicate that the role of traditional institutions in this context does not significantly influence the political choices or tendencies of respondents in this study sample (Figure 3).

Based on Figure 3, the residual distribution is close to a symmetrical bell shape. Most of the residual values are around zero and decrease gradually to the left and right. There are no extreme deviations (e.g., distribution spikes on one side or very skewed). The mean residual = $2.82\text{E}-16$ (≈ 0) and standard deviation = 0.997, indicating that the residuals are well distributed and close to a normal distribution. Therefore, it can be concluded that this histogram indicates that the assumption of residual normality

is met, which is one of the important prerequisites in classical linear regression analysis (OLS). With this assumption met, the previously interpreted regression results (*F*-test, *t*-test, R^2) can be considered statistically valid. This figure illustrates the residual distribution of the regression model used to predict political preferences. The distribution resembles a symmetrical bell-shaped curve, with residual values primarily centered around zero and gradually tapering off on both sides. There are no significant deviations, which indicates that the assumption of normality for the residuals has been satisfied. This finding supports the validity of the regression analysis results.

The results of the study indicate that, within the socio-cultural context of the research site, religious scholars still hold a strategic and influential position in shaping the political preferences of the community, while traditional institutions tend to play a less significant role in this regard, at least within the configuration of this model. These findings can serve as an important foundation for developing more adaptive political strategies based on religious values that are better aligned with the sociological realities of the community. These findings align with various literatures that position religious scholars as social actors with moral legitimacy and symbolic authority within society. In many cases, religious scholars are not only role models in religious matters but also serve as references in social-political decision-making, particularly in religious and communal societies (Pomerance and Zifla, 2025).

Figure 4 illustrates a positive relationship between the role of religious scholars and political preferences, meaning that the role of religious scholars contributes to shaping or influencing the political choices of the community. However, this relationship is not very strong visually, so the regression results (coefficient values and R^2) are crucial for strengthening the interpretation. The scatterplot reveals a discernible linear pattern between the residuals and predicted values, suggesting that the regression model demonstrates a satisfactory fit. This relationship indicates that the model is effective in predicting political preferences, with minimal systematic deviations and consistent residual behavior across the range of predictions.

The normality assumption test was conducted using a Normal Probability–Probability (P–P) Plot of standardized residuals. This graph shows the relationship between the observed cumulative probability and the expected cumulative probability if the residuals follow a normal distribution. The visualization results show that most of the residual points follow the diagonal line representing the theoretical normal distribution. There are no significant pattern deviations, such as curvature or extreme deviations from the

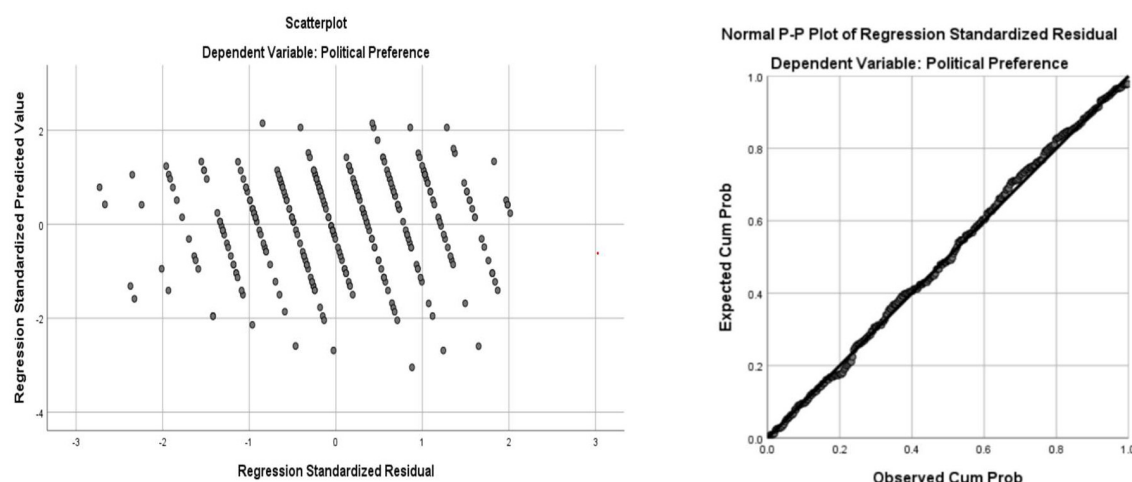


FIGURE 4

Scatterplot of standardized residuals against predicted values: diagnostic of political preference regression models and testing the normality assumption of residuals using normal P-P plots in political preference models.

diagonal line. This indicates that the residuals are symmetrically distributed and close to a normal distribution. Thus, based on the P-P Plot, it can be concluded that the assumption of residual normality is fulfilled in this regression model. The fulfillment of this assumption strengthens the validity of the model in explaining the relationship between the independent and dependent variables.

4 Discussion

The results of this study provide in-depth insights into the shift in socio-political authority in Riau's Malay community, which has historically been characterized by the dominance of customary institutions as social regulators. However, the findings indicate that, in the context of the 2024 regional head elections (*Pilkada*) in Riau, the role of religious scholars (*ulama*) is more significant in shaping community political preferences than Malay customary institutions. This shift reflects a broader phenomenon in many Islamic regions, where religious scholars increasingly dominate political decision-making. Ulama, who previously served as spiritual leaders, now play a broader role in shaping community political attitudes. Aligns with previous literature, highlighting the central role of religion and religious figures in politics. These figures are viewed not only as sources of morality but also as leaders in the political arena.

This study revealed that the role of religious scholars (*ulama*) has a significant influence on community political preferences. At the same time, customary institutions showed no considerable effect after being controlled for in the analysis. Although customary institutions in Riau have a rich history and significant role in the social and cultural context, these findings indicate that religious scholars are more dominant in shaping community political decisions, particularly in the 2024 Regional Head Elections. This influence is reflected in the regression analysis results, which show a very low significance value for customary institutions ($p = 0.416$), indicating that the impact of customary institutions on political

preferences in this context is relatively small compared to that of religious scholars.

Furthermore, the regression results indicate that the role of religious scholars has a positive and significant influence on community political preferences, with a p -value of 0.003. These suggest that the greater the impact of religious scholars in the community, the more likely the community is to vote for candidates or political parties that align with the teachings and views of these scholars. These findings illustrate a shift in socio-political authority in Riau, with religious scholars increasingly playing a central role in determining the direction of community politics, replacing the traditional institutions that were previously dominant in this context.

Meanwhile, the weak influence of the role of Malay customary institutions on political preferences may be due to several factors. First, the weakening of customary authority amid modernization and state centralization. Second, the role of customary institutions in political preferences is weaker in this study, suggesting that their influence may have become more symbolic in contemporary political contexts. However, this finding should be interpreted with caution, as the decline in influence may vary across different regions or contexts, and further research is needed to explore the evolving role of customary institutions in political decision-making. Third, the tendency of the community to refer more to religious leaders than customary leaders in determining their political attitudes. This condition indicates a shift in social authority in society from the traditional (customary) order to the religious or even political-bureaucratic order (Tiganis et al., 2025). This is an important signal for policymakers and political actors in understanding the basis of social influence in shaping public political preferences (Petersen et al., 2024).

On the other hand, customary institutions tend not to play as significant a role in politics (Waluyo, 2020). Although customary institutions have power in preserving traditions and culture, in this configuration model, they seem less able to influence political

dynamics (Zhao et al., 2024). This shows that although customary institutions have legitimacy in a cultural context, they do not always have the same appeal in the political sphere, especially when compared to the influence of religious scholars.

These findings can be an important basis for developing a religious values-based political approach that is more adaptive to the sociological reality of society. In formulating such strategies, it is important to consider how religious values can be used as tools to build political awareness. For example, in political campaigns, candidates can adopt an approach that integrates moral messages conveyed by religious scholars, thereby creating a stronger resonance with the community (Juniyanti and Situmorang, 2023). Thus, religious value-based political strategies will not only be more accepted, but also more effective in reaching the hearts and minds of the people (Purnomo et al., 2024).

These findings are in line with various literature that positions religious scholars as social actors who have moral legitimacy and symbolic authority in society. In many studies, religious scholars are identified as figures trusted by the community to provide guidance in various aspects of life, including politics. This is reinforced by the fact that many people consider religious scholars as a source of truth, especially in matters related to social justice and morality (Smith et al., 2024). Thus, when religious scholars speak about political issues, their voices are not only considered personal opinions, but as representations of the greater values embraced by the community (Wahyudi et al., 2025).

These findings can also be explained by referring to Social Identity Theory and the Civic Volunteerism Model. According to Social Identity Theory, individuals tend to identify with certain social groups, such as religious scholars or traditional institutions, which influences their political preferences. In this context, religious scholars serve as a significant source of social identity; therefore, their influence on political preferences is more pronounced. On the other hand, the Civic Volunteerism Model emphasizes the importance of social networks and political engagement in motivating political participation. The low involvement of traditional institutions can be understood from this perspective, where limited resources and lack of mobilization capacity hinder traditional institutions from substantially influencing political decisions. Furthermore, in a religious and communal society, religious scholars are not only role models in religious matters, but also references in social and political decision-making. For example, in situations where people face difficult choices in elections, many will refer to the opinions of religious scholars to determine their choice. This demonstrates that religious scholars play a crucial role in shaping public opinion and attitudes toward political issues, which in turn can influence election outcomes and public policy.

In implications for practice and policy, these findings have important implications for political communication strategies. Political communication involving religious authorities, such as religious scholars, has the potential to be more effective in influencing public political preferences, given their social power. Therefore, politicians and political parties can design more in-depth campaigns by involving religious scholars as the main channel for conveying political messages that align with spiritual values. Meanwhile, the revitalization of the role of customary law must be carried out substantively, not merely symbolically, so that

customary institutions can again play a more significant role in the political process in the future.

5 Conclusion

Based on the analysis, it is evident that there has been a significant shift in the political landscape of Riau, where religious scholars, or ulama, have progressively asserted their influence and overshadowed traditional Malay customary institutions. This emerging dominance reflects broader socio-political transformations that underscore the growing importance of religious authority in local governance and community decision-making processes. As a result, traditional Malay institutions, which have historically played an important role in mediating community interests and preserving culture, face marginalization in the contemporary political context. To address this imbalance and ensure the preservation of Malay cultural heritage, it is essential to revitalize and adapt these customary institutions. Such efforts must involve strategic collaboration between traditional leaders and religious figures, who foster mutually reinforcing relationships that can effectively shape political preferences. This will enable the creation of a more inclusive and balanced socio-political environment that is capable of responding to the complexities of current dynamics while preserving indigenous cultural identities.

Local governments and political actors can establish more strategic communication with religious scholars in efforts to educate the public based on ethical and spiritual values. The revitalization of traditional institutions needs to be carried out structurally and substantially, so that they do not merely become symbolic entities, but also play a role in culture-based political development. Further research is recommended to add other variables such as education level, social media, ideological orientation, or political party affiliation to obtain a more comprehensive model. Qualitative studies can explore in greater depth the mechanisms of the influence of religious scholars and the causes of the delegitimization of traditional institutions in politics. Comparative research between traditional and non-traditional regions can enrich perspectives on the role of social structures in local politics.

These findings provide a theoretical contribution by strengthening the literature on identity politics and symbolic authority, demonstrating that religious authority now functions as a heuristic shortcut in electoral behavior, while customary institutions experience relative delegitimization. Practically, the results underscore the importance of political communication strategies that collaborate with ulama while simultaneously revitalizing the role of customary institutions so that they do not remain merely symbolic. Further research is recommended to explore additional variables, such as education, social media use, ideological orientation, or political party affiliation, that could better explain political preferences in this region. Qualitative research can also delve deeper into the mechanisms of ulama influence and the reasons behind the delegitimization of customary institutions in politics, as well as compare regions with different social structures to provide a more complete picture of the role of social institutions in local politics.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this study can be found in online repositories. The names of the repository/repositories and accession number(s) can be found in this article/supplementary material.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the study involving humans in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent to participate in this study was not required from the participants or the participants' legal guardians/next of kin in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

Author contributions

DW: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. MW: Visualization, Formal analysis, Resources, Software, Writing – review & editing. SJ: Writing – review & editing, Project administration. DH: Visualization, Data curation, Project administration, Writing – review & editing.

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