

RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘We campaign just by gathering 20 people’: suboptimal campaigning as a gendered campaign style in Medan, Indonesia

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How do we understand the gendered campaign styles of women candidates contesting elections in which they are structurally constrained with a low probability of success? We introduce the term ‘suboptimal campaigning’ as a gendered campaign style to emphasise the accommodations women make due to broader gender orders that put them at an electoral disadvantage. Research with 24 female candidates in the 2024 local legislative elections in Medan, Indonesia, revealed their campaigns to be self-limiting in terms of where they campaign (spatial restrictions), who they target (predominantly women voters), when they campaign (temporal constraints) and what campaign practices they employ (limited financial investment and restricted activities). Rationalising female candidates’ decisions as strategically ‘running as a woman’ obscures how Indonesia’s masculinised political institutions necessitate that women run suboptimal campaigns. The concept of ‘suboptimal campaigning’ hence exposes how women are included in electoral democracy as candidates while only minimally disrupting women’s political under-representation.

Keywords gender campaign styles • suboptimal campaigning • women’s political under-representation • Indonesia

Key messages

- Suboptimal campaigning is a gendered campaign style that captures how women candidates self-limit their campaigns to accommodate the constraints of broader gender orders.
- In city-level elections in Medan, Indonesia, suboptimal campaigning was a rational response to highly constraining conditions for women candidates, which consequently put them at an electoral disadvantage.
- Including women as candidates without transforming the conditions that make women's suboptimal campaigning a necessary response is a factor perpetuating male political dominance.

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Introduction

Men and women do not face an even playing field in electoral campaigns. Campaigns are gendered institutions in which gender is embedded in the practices, norms and perspectives of voters, candidates and other campaign actors (Dittmar, 2015). Campaigns are 'defined by masculinity' (Irving, 2018: 65), creating gendered disadvantages for women. Within this context, women candidates and their teams make strategic choices to either overcome or take advantage of these conditions (Dittmar, 2020; Tolley and Paquet, 2021). Gendered campaign styles arise due to differences in men's and women's campaigns regarding messaging, practices, self-presentation and policy focus, among others (Enns-Jedenastik et al, 2017; Dewi, 2018; Kusche, 2021; Coffé et al, 2023; Ono and Miwa, 2023). Strategic choices partly stem from women's socialisation (Borges Martins da Silva and Grotto, 2021) and their responses to actual and perceived voter biases.

Indonesian politics is particularly rooted in masculinity, with women facing significant electoral disadvantages. Leadership is coded masculine, with 'political patriarchy' common among voters (White et al, 2024). A congested party system with open party lists has created extreme intra- and inter-party competition, requiring candidates to aggressively sell their personal brand (Aspinall and Berenschot, 2019). The distribution of cash and club goods has become a shortcut to electoral success, with expensive campaigns further disadvantaging women (Prihatini, 2019; Perdana and Hillman, 2020; Harahap et al, 2022). To compete, women candidates strategically 'run as women' (Dittmar, 2015): targeting women voters, reaching out through women's networks, prioritising women's issues and conforming to stereotypes of a good (often pious Muslim) woman (Dewi, 2015; Mahsun et al, 2021; Ni'mah, 2021). Gendered campaign styles thereby tend to reinforce the gendered institutions of election campaigns (Dittmar, 2015) while offering only a slim pathway to victory.

'Gendered campaign styles' provides a valuable lens to examine how gender influences 'campaign strategy and behavior' and, in turn, how candidates produce anew 'the gendered nature of campaign institutions' (Dittmar, 2015: 2). This framework

has mainly been advanced in the Global North (Arriola et al, 2021a) to examine how women manoeuvre and operate strategically within gendered campaign institutions for electoral success. Studies on women’s campaigning from the ‘majority world’ (a term we use to emphasise that most of the world’s population lives in the so-called ‘Global South’ [see Lawrence, 2025]) reveal, however, that gendered campaign styles are often characterised by what is feasible rather than effective (Arrioli et al, 2021b; Gichohi, 2021), conditioned by what is affectively and materially possible within gender orders (Lorber, 2000; Robinson, 2008) mediated by cultural constructions of ethnicity, caste and so on (Gichohi, 2021). Bringing the gendered body into analysis shows how a female candidate’s ability to bear the psychic and emotional costs of transgressing gender norms is a large determinant of gendered campaign styles. We seek to extend the analytical lens of gendered campaign styles to better understand female candidates’ choices and their consequences in elections that are highly disadvantageous for women.

We introduce ‘suboptimal campaigning’ as a gendered campaign style to capture the limited scale of women’s campaigns in Indonesia – and beyond. ‘Suboptimal’ does not suggest that women have substandard electoral knowledge or a lack of ambition or political acumen but, rather, indicates the accommodations women make due to broader gender orders that put them at an electoral disadvantage. By describing these campaign styles as ‘suboptimal’ rather than ‘accommodative’, we emphasise the agency of women in directing their own campaigns, though in ways that are (often subconsciously) self-limiting. Recognising the suboptimal styles of women draws attention to constraints that present not as explicit barriers but as factors channelling choices. Rather than emphasise women’s weakness as political actors, it seeks to highlight how suboptimal campaigning can be a rational response to these conditions; in other words, women do not lose because they run poor campaigns but, rather, because these are necessarily suboptimal.

Indonesia presents an ideal case of ‘suboptimal campaign styles’ due to the highly masculine and competitive electoral terrain, alongside a high volume of female candidates. The heuristic of suboptimal campaign styles may, however, be useful in other contexts in which gendered, racial, ableist and classist social orders overly constrain some candidates, such that the scale (and possibility of success) of their campaign is limited. Analytically, it points to how the response is not always to overcome these constraints but to campaign within imposed limits and, in doing so, to obscure gendered barriers. Suboptimal campaigning is an under-recognised response to electoral disadvantage while also reproducing the social orders that produce inequitable electoral terrains. Normatively, the lens counters the perception that increasing the number of marginalised or minoritised candidates is sufficient for democratic legitimacy. It demands attention to the gendered conditions of electoral democracy and the need to create a level playing field for electoral success.

The following section reviews the literature before considering the Indonesian case and outlining our methodological approach. Two ethnographic vignettes point to the scale required for electoral success in Medan compared to the scale of most women’s campaigns. We then detail how and why women’s campaigns are suboptimal in four respects: spatially (where), outreach (who), temporarily (when) and practices (what). We end by considering how suboptimal campaigning can be a useful analytical tool in the field of gender and politics.

Gendered political styles and campaigns

The insight that campaigns are gendered institutions has proven productive in the politics and gender literature. Grounded in feminist institutionalism, scholars of politics and gender have revealed how campaign rules ‘uphold masculine power’ (Dittmar, 2015: 11), advantaging men and disadvantaging women in election campaigns. ‘Campaigns are not gender neutral and are defined by masculinity’ (Irving, 2018: 65), with practices reproducing male political dominance. Women candidates have no option but to navigate this gendered institution, either reproducing or challenging institutional norms in the process.

Stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity that make men more suitable for political leadership in the eyes of voters shape electoral strategy. Women overcome disadvantages by adopting ‘a campaign strategy that downplays their gender or deploys it strategically’ (Tolley and Paquet, 2021: 46). Women can ‘run as a man’, meeting voter expectations by displaying masculine traits and emphasising competency on ‘stereotypically male issues’ (Dittmar, 2020: 302) while downplaying characteristics that might be considered feminine and therefore unsuited to leadership. ‘Running as a woman’, on the other hand, aims to emphasise strengths associated with stereotypical femininity or to capitalise on voter sentiment for change (Dittmar, 2020). A third approach entails ‘challenging long-held ideas of gender and/or candidacy instead of adapting to them’ (Dittmar, 2020: 296), or to ‘degender a campaign’, that is, to ‘challenge, rethink and reconceptualize gender codes’ such that gender does not matter to voters’ choice or, in its more ambitious strain, that this ‘results in the abolition of gender as an organizational category’ (Tolley and Paquet, 2021: 46; see also Lorber, 2000).

Numerous studies examine the strategic choices of men and women candidates and their different campaign styles in relation to the gendered institutional context (Windett, 2014; Carpinella and Bauer, 2021; Tolley and Paquet, 2021). Studies examine differences in self-presentation between men and women: how they talk about and highlight issues, character traits, political experience and their families and disclose details of their lives (Dewi, 2018; Kusche, 2021; Bauer and Santia, 2023). The extent to which women appeal to women or, alternatively, downplay their gender is analysed through campaign manifestos, speeches and media appearances (Aronson et al, 2020; Ono and Miwa, 2023). Other studies examine communication styles and use of social media (Chen and Chang, 2018; Evans and Clark, 2015; Hrbková and Macková, 2021; Meeks, 2016), as well as how voters respond to gendered or gender-neutral messages (Kam et al, 2017; Mendoza and DiMaria, 2019). Gendered differences in negative campaigning (Krupnikov and Bauer, 2014; Enns-Jedenastik et al, 2017; Coffé et al, 2023) and the disproportional punishment women receive at the ballot box for immoral campaign practices (Goetz, 2007; Borges Martins da Silva and Grotto, 2021) or for not conforming to gender stereotypes (Everitt et al, 2016) are also central themes.

Empirically, much of this literature is grounded in an analysis of campaign material, media, speeches or experiments that capture the ‘end product’ of campaign decisions. Methodologies unable to pick up on ambivalence and equivocations in decision making often fall back on assumptions of a ‘rational, calculating subject’ (Windett, 2014; Enns-Jedenastik et al, 2017). Other studies position campaign strategies within broader gender orders through mixed-methods case studies (Tolley and Paquet, 2021).

Dittmar’s (2015) influential study of elections in the US deployed surveys and interviews to allow consideration of how gender ‘influences [both] the *psyche and strategic* considerations of those involved’ (Dittmar, 2015: 4, emphasis added). Dittmar’s careful analysis excavates how women must confront their gender when they enter politics and the way embedded masculinity within the election is ever present, even if not always consciously attuned to. While doing much to advance theory on gender campaign styles, methodologically, through the focus on campaign managers and practitioners, and situationally, as being particular to the US, the study is, however, set up to foreground electoral strategy.

Research on women’s campaigning outside Euro-America is less likely to position their studies within the literature on ‘gendered campaign styles’ yet adds richness to our understanding of how the gendered institutions of the election shape women’s experiences and strategic choices (Rai and Spary, 2019; Arriola et al, 2021a; Coffie and Medie, 2021; Ofosu et al, 2026). For example, Bedi (2016), Riley (2019) and Franceschet et al (2016) reveal how women deploy cultural narratives of femininity to garner electoral support in India, Senegal and Latin America, respectively. Other studies reveal how gendered barriers disadvantage women (Piscopo et al, 2022; Singh, 2023) and/or how they manoeuvre within these constraints (Mahsun et al, 2021; Goyal, 2025). Importantly, women’s campaign decisions within highly disadvantageous gendered electoral conditions are often made on account of what is available to them as women, ‘not because they are the most effective strategies’ (Arriola et al, 2021a: 20). As Gichohi (2021) shows, ‘running as a woman’ may be a candidate’s only option and, hence, is the ‘strategic’ campaign style even if unlikely to lead to success. These are, in our words, ‘suboptimal’ campaign styles, which in their extreme, make candidates non-viable (Wiley et al, 2019; Hasanah et al, 2024).

It is in appreciation of the analytical utility of ‘gendered campaign styles’ and the richness of studies from the majority world of women’s campaigning that we seek to contribute to both. Electoral contexts like Indonesia are particularly fecund sites for theorising due to the highly masculinised nature of electoral campaigns, which reveals new types of gendered campaign styles. We ask not (only) how women navigate gender stereotypes to win but (also) how they sustain the coherence of their gendered selves despite participating as candidates in a male-dominated domain. The ‘afterlife’ of the election and the very real possibility of loss bear as heavily, if not more, on women’s decision making than does electoral strategy (Hasanah et al, 2024). We next turn to why the possibility of loss, even more than success, drives women candidates in Indonesia.

Gendered campaigns in Indonesia

Since the ‘reformation’ of democracy that saw an end to three decades of authoritarian rule under President Suharto, politics has been male dominated in Indonesia. In recognition of the need for greater participation of women in politics, the government of Indonesia introduced gender candidate quotas. Article 55(2) in 2008 stipulated that every third prospective candidate on a party list should be a woman, with an increase of female representation in the national-level Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat (People’s Representative Council [DPR]) from 11.8 per cent in 2004 to 17.9 per cent in 2009. Since then, there has been only incremental progress. The slight increase to

only 21.9 per cent in the most recent election in 2024 from 20.9 per cent in 2019 has raised concerns that the rate of progress in gender political equality is too slow and at risk of going backwards.

Women have struggled to assert political credibility due to stereotypes and voter expectations. The Suharto-era state ideology of 'State Ibuism' ('Ibu' means mother) designated the home as the place for women, while Bapakism ('Bapak' means father) designated the public sphere for masculine paternalism (Suryakusuma, 2011). 'State Ibuism' reinforced motherhood as 'the basis of women's political status and their incorporation into the political order' (Robinson, 2008: 73), with their status as 'procreators of the nation, as mothers and educators of children, as housekeepers, and as members of Indonesian society – in that order' (Suryakusuma, 2011: 101). State influence over gender norms has waned in recent years as Islamic-inspired ideologies of *Keluarga Sakinah* or 'Happy Family' (Wieringa, 2015) have gained traction. These continue to place a value on women's prioritisation of the domestic sphere. A survey of 1,210 voting-age adults across all 34 provinces shows the majority hold views of 'political patriarchy': 'attitudes holding that politics should be a male domain and that women are less suited to, and capable of, holding political office than men' (White et al, 2024: 392). Gender orders are dynamic (Robinson, 2008, 2018) but, to date, have tended to reinscribe male political dominance.

Ichsan Kabullah and Fajri (2021) show how these gendered ideologies influence women's political campaigning. They coined the term 'neo-Ibuism' to show how women in West Sumatra conformed to the role of 'wife' (and appendage) to prominent male politicians while also challenging the discourse of women as simply housewives. Two women candidates grew their support base through institutions established during the era of 'State Ibuism'. They kept to scripts of gendered acceptability while also implicitly challenging the norm that there was no place for women in public life. Their research speaks to the ways that gender orders result in feminised campaign styles that accommodate and challenge gender norms and stereotypes. Both women were, however, prominent candidates, with a credible chance of success on account of their husbands' political backgrounds. Both men and, particularly, women from political families are more likely to be successful candidates, with 43 per cent of women elected in 2019 from dynastic families (Wardani and Subekti, 2021). The conditions for the majority of female candidates without a prominent political family member are distinctly different.

Most female candidates have fewer resources to contest Indonesia's highly competitive and expensive elections compared to men. The open party list system, which provides voters with the 'freedom to choose their representatives ... and assert control over them' (CCRI, 2023), has turned elections into a 'Hunger Games' of excessive competition (Hosen, 2023). The effect of intra-party competition has 'enhanced the role of vote-buying, informal campaign teams, and efforts to promote the personal profile of individual candidates' (Aspinall et al, 2021: 8). While some women candidates have the resources and personalities to compete in such a terrain (Kramer, 2022), women in general are disadvantaged by lower financial resources and personal profiles (Hillman, 2018; Prihatini, 2019; Harahap et al, 2022). Indonesia's electoral system shares similarities with those of other countries, such as Brazil, where an open party list system has similarly increased campaign costs (Araújo, 2010), and the Philippines, where patronage politics and vote buying are common (Aspinall et al, 2022;

see also [Murray et al, 2023](#)). Campaigns have become so expensive in Indonesia that they are arguably the biggest factor in women’s lack of electoral success.

The strategic response of many female candidates has been to ‘run as a woman’. Case studies of female politicians show that appealing to women, leveraging women’s networks and emphasising feminine traits are common approaches ([Dewi, 2017, 2018](#); [Aspinall et al, 2021](#); [Mahsun et al, 2021](#); [Savirani et al, 2021](#); [Kramer, 2022](#)). Women build successful campaigns by deploying the social resources of national Islamic organisations, which female candidates leverage to recruit volunteers and reach women voters ([Dewi, 2017](#); [Prihatini, 2020](#); [Mahsun et al, 2021](#)). Feminine acts of religious piety and self-presentation, for example, the wearing of certain styles of Islamic head covering, are also important strategic decisions for electoral success ([Dewi, 2018](#); [Ni’mah, 2021](#)). The ‘amoral’ electoral culture of money politics can also allow women to present their feminine qualities as offering something different to cynical voters ([Harahap et al, 2022](#)). In Indonesia, success seems to come more from conforming to and leveraging feminine stereotypes rather than adopting masculine traits or trying to neutralise gender.

‘Running as women’ is exacerbated by the centrality of patronage politics to Indonesian elections. [Aspinall et al’s \(2022\)](#) study of patronage politics is important for its breadth across Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia, finding two generalisable patterns: the assiduous targeting of women and using bifurcated, gender-segregated spaces for outreach. Both men and women use homosocial networks to distribute patronage, with ‘gendered campaign appeals and mobilization efforts that target women, particularly, though not only, by female candidates’ ([Aspinall et al, 2022: 192](#)). [Aspinall et al \(2022: 192\)](#) observed that it is common to find female legislative candidates ‘who say they devote 70 or 80 percent of their campaign effort and resources to attracting female voters’, with some getting close to only targeting women. Men also tend to recruit men as *tim sukses* (‘success team’) members, while women recruit among women. [Aspinall et al \(2022: 192\)](#) suggest that ‘this strategy reflects the use of open-list PR: a candidate can win a seat by accumulating a relatively small proportion of the personal votes on offer’.

Reading women’s gendered campaign styles as primarily an accommodation to conditions rather than a foregrounding strategy, however, shows that decisions are often involuntary, even when presented as tactical. This constrained agency is evident in [Kramer’s \(2022\)](#) excellent in-depth study of Ayu, a female candidate from East Java. Halfway through her campaign, Ayu adopted the deliberate strategy of concentrating on women, for two reasons: ‘First ... she sometimes found men condescending and uninterested in entertaining the possibility of a female representative. Second, she felt she could potentially draw support from women, playing on their sense of exclusion from politics’ ([Kramer, 2022: 107](#)). The barriers that women face, including the affective discomfort of trying to engage uninterested and condescending men, force a choice to target women that is then justified in terms of electoral strategy. Similarly, the decision to rely on homosocial networks to recruit team members and target voters of the same gender identity limits women’s outreach and the effectiveness of brokers. Indeed, [Aspinall et al \(2022\)](#) concur with [Bjarnegård \(2013\)](#) that reliance on homosocial capital within patronage politics advantages men and disadvantages women.

These studies on women’s campaign styles in Indonesia, as well as their comparison in other contexts, demonstrate the multiple disadvantages women face within

gendered institutions of electoral politics. Yet, the tendency is to read campaigns through a lens of electoral strategy, asking how women manoeuvre within constrained conditions to try to achieve electoral success. This maximising imperative (where winning is foremost) can misread the forces behind campaign decisions, thereby obscuring how these are suboptimal. Suboptimality is, we suggest, a response to the highly constraining environment, in which gender orders prescribe what women can do in a highly competitive and masculine contest with limited chances of success. We next outline how our research showed the extent to which women candidates limit the scale of their campaigns while still holding hope of electoral success.

Study site and methods

Our research took place between January and April 2024 to coincide with elections on 14 February. Voters cast their ballot in five contests for local, provincial, national and presidential races in ‘simultaneous’ elections. We focused on local legislative bodies at the regency or municipal level, the Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah (DPRD), in Kota Medan, the capital of North Sumatera and the fourth-largest city in Indonesia. Culturally diverse, Muslims comprise 69 per cent of inhabitants against an Indonesia-wide average of 87.2 per cent, with significant numbers of people with Christian, Buddhist, Confucian and Hindu faiths. Kota-Medan DPRD is comprised of 50 legislative members, representing five electoral districts. In 2024, 830 candidates contested, 289 of which were women (34.8 per cent). Female representation increased in 2024 to 16 per cent (eight women), up from only five women in 2019, but far below gender parity.

We interviewed 24 women candidates and 20 twice, once before and once after the election. We aimed for a mix of political parties, religion, age and ballot position, but recruitment was challenging. Candidates’ contact details were not available on electoral registries and rarely advertised on banners or social media. The most effective strategy was to visit party offices and ask them to supply these details. This strategy worked to recruit candidates from nine parties: the remaining nine parties either did not have a publicly available address in Medan or were shut on the multiple occasions we visited. Party officials tended to give the contact details of women they felt were ‘genuinely contesting’, acknowledging that many were simply *tempel* candidates, that is, women on the ballot paper in name only to fulfil the quota. We contacted women independently to avoid any coercion, reaching out to all women for whom we had details.

These efforts yielded a convenience sample of female candidates that reflected some of the diversity within the broader population. Of the 24 interviewees, 18 were Muslim, five were Christian and one was Buddhist. Ballot positioning is critical to candidate success (Prihatini, 2019): five women were positioned at number 1 on the ballot paper and four at number 3, with the remaining 15 positioned at number 4 or below. Two of the women we interviewed prior to the election won, with an additional successful incumbent interviewed after the election. We did not, however, succeed in convincing any *tempel* candidates to talk with us and, hence, cannot comment on their experiences or offer an estimation of what percentage of women candidates genuinely contest. While this omission is a limitation of our study, it is important to note that *tempel* candidates do not fit within the frame of ‘suboptimal

campaigns’, as they do not engage in campaigning at all. They are on the ballot in name only, akin to ‘phantom candidates’ (Wiley et al, 2019). The Indonesian term ‘*niat*’, which means intention, plan or aim, helps to clarify this distinction. In our sample, not all candidates expected to win, but most expressed optimism, and all campaigned with commitment, that is, with *niat*, an intention to genuinely contest. In contrast, *tempel* candidates had no *niat* and took no action beyond being nominated. Interviews were semi-structured, recorded with permission, transcribed and analysed in Bahasa Indonesian. We also observed campaign activities, both those of our respondents and events by other candidates. We reflected on the event immediately after the observation, wrote individual fieldnotes and then circulated them to check interpretations and deepen analysis.

These methods enabled both in-depth understandings and an ability to speak to larger themes. The ethnographic approach excavated underlying compulsions that are unavailable to methods that take decisions at face value (through surveys or single-point interviews) or that analyse the outcomes of those decisions (for example, candidate videos and election manifestos). Unlike ethnographies of a small number of candidates, which are ideally placed to see how individual candidates deal with dilemmas in real time (Dewi, 2015; Kramer, 2022), we achieved a degree of breadth by interviewing a larger number of candidates. At the same time, our sample is not sufficient for statistical generalisations within the city, let alone across Indonesia. A further limitation is that we did not follow male candidates. Many of the conditions that constrain women and make them uncompetitive are also true for men, including expensive campaigns, large numbers of candidates, low success rates (7.76 per cent for men, 2.77 per cent for women in Kota Medan DPRD) and gender-segregated spaces. We note where conditions are gendered and those that are equally applicable to men and women. Our intent was to develop insights and heuristics from in-depth qualitative research that could be tested on a wider scale through other methods in Indonesia – and beyond. Suboptimal campaigning is one such heuristic that we expect is particularly prevalent as a gendered campaign style for women.

Campaigning in Medan

Two ethnographic vignettes of typical events give a sense of different scales of election campaigns in Medan. The first is a ‘socialisation’ event by Nova, a female candidate. Borrowed from state development discourses, ‘*sosialisasi*’ is a common term in political campaigns, meaning to teach or persuade another group (Gibbins, 2017). The event was in a house rented for the campaign period with a covered outdoor area perfect for large gatherings. When we arrived in the late afternoon, the ‘success team’ were preparing by folding mock ballot papers, organising souvenirs and snacks, arranging chairs, and setting up the public address (PA) system. Most were paid for their time rather than being volunteers. Nova shared these and other expenses with her husband, who was a DPRD candidate in the neighbouring electoral district, a so-called ‘tandem arrangement’ strengthened by familial ties.

Women and children came first, with more men arriving as the sun sank lower and they returned from work. The chairs soon filled, and more were brought out to accommodate a crowd of between 250 and 300 people. Attendees showed their *Kartu Tanda Penduduk* (identity card [KTP]) to one of the success team coordinators

as proof of their presence, with details duly noted. The attendees told us that they would listen to the socialisation and go home empty-handed, as electoral laws prohibit the candidates from distributing gifts of more than 60,000 Rupiah (USD3.65) at campaign events. In a couple of days, the campaign team would deliver food items, such as rice and oil, and souvenirs, such as T-shirts, pens or headscarves. Voters were told to hang on to Nova's business card to show team members when they came to their homes.

Nova addressed the crowd first. She reminded the attendees how to vote in each of the five ballots, making the people shout out the number of the party and ballot position. Alluding to the distribution of gifts, she said, 'We are not rich, we cannot give lots of money and *sembako* [groceries]. But you will not go away empty-handed.' Her husband then took the microphone, emphasising his personal background and the challenges he had faced, without delving into any policy or party programmatic details. Light on details, he nonetheless managed to talk long enough for the campaign team to distribute snacks and cordial. This programme was one of several socialisation events that Nova and her husband held each week in the lead-up to the election.

Reaching up to 300 in one event is necessary to achieve scale. Medan's 1,853,458 registered voters are split into five electoral districts of around 370,000 voters each. An electoral district has four or five sub-districts, with approximately 120,000 to 150,000 households. With eight to 12 legislators for each district, candidates at a minimum need 10,000 votes, reaching between 2,000 and 4,000 households. Candidates and their teams must therefore work full-time in the three months of the official election period between November 2023 and election day in February 2024. Each socialisation event is costly: PA system hire, house rental, incentives for *tim sukses*, food and drink, and gifts of appreciation. Such expenditure is the bare minimum. Many candidates doubt the ability to win without distributing envelopes of cash on election eve, so-called *serangan fajar* ('dawn attack'), which rapidly escalates campaign costs.

Aminah's socialisation programme was of a different scale. It took place in the front room of a modest home. When we arrived, 23 women were sitting cross-legged on the floor, many with small children on their laps. There were plates filled with cake and fried snacks on the floor, and each person had a plastic cup of water. The women listened attentively as Aminah spoke through a small PA system. Wearing a jilbab, the Islamic headscarf, she emphasised her experience that made her qualified to be elected and spoke about her husband, his occupation and his support for her candidacy. She positioned herself as a *putri*, or daughter of the area, and as someone who was willing to go to the people, or be one with them. Aminah said that women were her priority, and she outlined several policies, including nutrition, school scholarships and helping women receive government assistance. She ended by reminding the women how to vote for her, as her small team handed out mock ballot papers.

This smaller-scale socialisation activity was the second of three that Aminah did that afternoon. As her campaign manager took the microphone to speak on her behalf, Aminah sat, her face down, massaging her forehead and wiping away sweat. A woman moved three cups of water towards her that she immediately drank. She looked depleted at this late stage of the campaign. However, Aminah had to keep pushing to reach as many people as possible. Her three socialisation activities a day only reached 75 to 90 women, some or all of whom could be persuaded to put their vote elsewhere with the right financial inducement. After a short period of sitting, she quickly pulled herself away from the women to go to the next campaign event.

Nova won the election; Aminah got fewer than 500 votes. Scholars examining gendered campaign styles will point to the nature of Aminah’s message, the targeting of women, her clothing and her presentation of self within a gendered familial role: ‘running as a woman’. However, what matters for success is the different scale. Nova reached significant numbers of voters a day, with follow-up two days later by team members, while Aminah’s was of a scale that it is difficult to see the pathway to victory despite her intense efforts. Aminah was limited in terms of where she campaigned (socialisation in homes), who she campaigned to (only women), when she campaigned (to not interfere with domestic responsibilities) and what she did (limited gift giving). In this respect, her campaign was suboptimal: not of a scale that could win a highly competitive election. The majority (19) of the campaigns we followed were similarly constrained in terms of where, who, when and what. We delve deeper into each of these constraints.

Where: spatial limits

Women’s political campaigns operate within a complex matrix of spatial limitations that are physical, legislative and affective, fundamentally circumscribing both where women can campaign and how effectively they can mobilise electoral support. The scarcity of public space in Medan presents challenges for all political candidates. During election periods, competition for venues intensifies dramatically, with temporary structures (awnings and plastic chair arrangements) colonising streets for campaign events. The concentrated electoral calendar, with a single campaign period for five elections, exacerbates this spatial premium, driving up costs for tent and chair rentals. Moreover, venues like shopping malls typically prohibit election events, while electoral legislation restricts campaigning in religious spaces.

More significantly, spatial access is profoundly gendered, reflecting deeply embedded social hierarchies that naturalise different mobility patterns. While men navigate public spaces with relative freedom, women’s access is predominantly confined to domestic and quasi-domestic spheres. Zulfa had not even considered campaigning in a coffee shop: ‘It is heavy for me to do that, and its night-time. Men will come around the end of Isya prayer [around 8 pm]. I haven’t tried it.’ Like Aminah, she does most of her socialisation in the homes of supporters. Spatial affective regimes render certain spaces psychologically inaccessible to women regardless of formal prohibitions. Candidates described being uncomfortable in male-coded spaces. Furthermore, women’s presence is often unwelcome; one coffeehouse owner refused to display a female candidate’s banner, citing concerns about alienating regular male patrons who were also candidates. Such incidents demonstrate how the masculine coding of public spaces systematically constrains women’s campaign visibility and access.

The majority of women candidates in the study campaigned in sex-segregated religious gatherings, particularly *wirid* and *pengajian* (Islamic study groups). These venues offer candidates access to female constituents, as most Muslim women participate regularly in such activities. Christian women candidates similarly leveraged religious services and ethnic-based social organisations to reach female voters. However, this religious campaigning reveals asymmetrical gendered dynamics. Some women candidates said that it was easier for an unaccompanied man to attend a women’s *pengajian* than vice versa. Male religious authorities (*Imams*) access women’s religious spaces through their teaching roles, but women candidates face substantial barriers

when attempting to reach male voters in religious contexts. As Annisa explained, 'I approached men in, for example, the *wirid* but accompanied by my husband. In community groups, my husband accompanies me. When a woman approaches men, then they are a bit hesitant.' The requirement for male accompaniment limits the space in which women can campaign and reinforces women's dependent status within the political sphere.

Spatial limits on campaigning are also temporal, in that some spaces are out of bounds at certain times. Laila explained the disadvantages faced by women candidates:

Men are absolutely able to move around more freely. Women cannot go out alone at night; they must be accompanied. So, the time that women can go about is already limited. Women can only go about from very early morning until, at best, after the Maghrib prayer [around 7 pm]. If it is a man, maybe he can sit in a coffee shop freely. Isn't that right? It's more comfortable to chat. But women cannot sit in this way. At most, they can organise *senam* [a form of aerobics] with the community. They are not as free as men.

Limits on when women can access certain spaces significantly reduce women's opportunities for voter outreach. Moreover, the campaign activities available to women differ qualitatively from those accessible to men. Male candidates will engage in leisurely political conversations within coffeehouses, while women are more likely to organise *senam* (community exercise sessions). Although *senam* create convivial atmospheres, these activities provide limited opportunities for women to demonstrate their political credibility.

These spatial limitations channel women into suboptimal campaign styles that prioritise intensive relationship building over extensive voter mobilisation. Women candidates without campaign teams resort primarily to door-to-door canvassing, as Wahyuni described:

Every day, I might also go round the area, as I have limited time to gather the people, at least I go door to door, visiting houses, visiting residents, but not many.... [We go] from the time my husband comes home from work at 5 pm until night-time. I go with my husband because I do not have a *tim sukses* [campaign team].

This reliance on familial support, particularly male accompaniment for evening mobility, exemplifies women's constrained campaign styles. While door-to-door campaigning potentially builds stronger interpersonal connections, its time-intensive nature severely limits reach.

Relegated to domestic and quasi-domestic spaces, women's campaign activities appear less serious and politically consequential, reinforcing perceptions of their marginal political status. Male candidates' access to public spaces (coffeehouses and evening gatherings) enables them to engage in recognisably political acts that reinforce their authority, while women's activities in domestic spheres are more easily dismissed as social rather than political endeavours. Women prefer these spaces, as they are where they feel more comfortable and welcome within broader gender orders. Women access these spaces during the day, a time and place largely out of bounds for unaccompanied male candidates. These gendered spatial norms constrain

men and women differently, but arguably, women's consequent campaign styles are at a relative disadvantage. Women candidates' reliance on small gatherings and door-to-door canvassing rather than large-scale socialisation events reflects not a strategic choice as much as affective and material possibilities.

Who: limited outreach

In a similar way, targeting women voters is presented as a strategic choice, though one heavily structured by affective and structural limitations. The overwhelming majority of women candidates we talked to restricted their campaigns exclusively to female voters, a pattern that reflected both social comfort and network constraints. First-time candidates extended existing social activities into campaign endeavours, following familiar relationship pathways. As Junita articulated, 'The first thing I thought about was, "I'm a beginner. Who is my close family?"... It must automatically be family. From one family, later we meet more family. From family, then friends. From friends, then the school community.' This progression reveals how women's feminised social circles naturally channelled campaign outreach towards other women, creating what appeared to be strategic targeting but was fundamentally an extension of pre-existing social patterns.

This gendered approach to voter engagement was subsequently rationalised through claims of superior access to women's concerns and greater effectiveness in addressing female constituents' needs. Laila described how her campaign methodology revealed the centrality of women's issues: 'This is my first campaign, my first time going to the grass roots, and the first people I met were women. It turns out that there are indeed many problems faced by women.... When we face them, they are more open because women are more comfortable speaking with women.' This narrative positions women candidates as uniquely qualified to understand and represent female voters' interests, legitimising their restricted outreach through claims of a deeper understanding and empathy.

For many women candidates, campaigning became reconceptualised as community service rather than electoral competition: three intensive months devoted to understanding women's problems and providing assistance when possible. This framing aligned campaign activities with normative expectations of feminine behaviour, emphasising caring, selflessness, devotion to others and a service orientation. Such engagement felt 'natural' to candidates and remained commensurate with their established gendered roles within the community. This approach was dictated more by social norms and comfort zones than by what was optimal to win, though candidates anticipated that it would nonetheless yield electoral success. Women candidates felt confident that women voters would reject the 'money politics' of the past and vote for someone who was genuine and honest.

Regardless of any apprehensions they may have felt about the effectiveness of this approach, many women claimed that their decision to focus on women was, in part, strategic, drawing on assumptions about women's household influence. Yulia explained her focus on millennial women: 'Women are reliable; women and young people are more self-assured.... Later on, I would say, "Please influence your family. Mothers are the engine in the family, right?"' This strategy assumed that convincing women voters would secure entire household votes through female influence over family members' electoral decisions. Additionally, Yulia characterised women as more

decisive and honest, as well as less susceptible to last-minute vote-buying tactics. Yet, her focus on women of a similar age to herself suggests that her 'strategy' was equally or more so shaped by what was comfortable. The rationalisation of their campaign choices (to others and themselves) allows for the continuation of hope, that is, to get through the campaign, or, rather, the deferral of disappointment.

The electoral results starkly revealed the miscalculation inherent in women-only campaign strategies. Some candidates expressed anger at women's failure to support them, while others demonstrated greater awareness of their strategic limitations. Wahyuni articulated her pre-election apprehensions: 'Hopefully, I think it's enough. In my heart, I say maybe it's not enough, but never mind, it hurts me too much.' This statement encapsulates the recognition that campaigning exclusively to half the population through small-scale, time-intensive activities could never generate sufficient electoral support. At the same time, Wahyuni also acknowledged the practical and emotional constraints that made alternative strategies seem impossible. These findings raise fundamental questions about the 'strategy' of 'running as a woman'. Does an emphasis on feminine qualities, the prioritisation of women's issues and female-targeted campaign activities represent a strategic choice or reflect gendered constraints? Existing scholarship on gendered campaign styles typically emphasises strategic decision making while rarely interrogating whether such decisions optimise electoral outcomes or merely represent what remains feasible and affectively tolerable within gendered social constraints.

When: temporal limitations

Women candidates possessed an understanding of what it took to be competitive in the elections and yet met temporal constraints that limited how much time they could devote to the campaign. Among the 24 women interviewed, approximately half campaigned intensively, dedicating ten to 12 hours daily to electoral activities. Even these intensive efforts remained inadequate due to the 'short' official campaign period, time-consuming outreach methods and familial demands.

Annisa's campaign exemplified these constraints. Her target of connecting with 2,000 people was, she admitted, impossible:

The official campaign period is too short: only two-and-a-half months.... [My] electoral district has four *kecamatan* [administrative units], each with up to 30 *kelurahan* [smallest urban units]. I can't enter all of them. In one *kelurahan* alone, there are several communities, meaning how many religious study groups? At least two or three. Sometimes, I think I have to devote all my power ... but leading to nothing.

Annisa attributed her limited reach to the insufficient campaign duration of three months rather than recognising the inherently time-intensive nature of her outreach activities. Even her ambitious target of 2,000 direct contacts would require each contacted voter to persuade at least four additional supporters to achieve the minimum 10,000 votes necessary – an unrealistic expectation that Annisa herself admitted.

For other women candidates, campaign intensity remained constrained by gendered expectations of prioritising domestic responsibilities over political activities. As previously noted, candidates like Wahyuni required male accompaniment for evening

campaigning, limiting their schedules to their husbands' availability. More commonly, women carved campaign time from the narrow window between completing morning household duties and preparing evening meals. Rahmi exemplified this pattern, managing only a few hours daily after 2 pm when freed from domestic obligations. These temporal limitations not only reduced overall campaigning hours and voter contact but also reinforced women-only targeting strategies. As Laila explained, 'I am more focused on women, not men, because my schedule is also during the day. [I campaign] from 1:30 pm until the hour before *Asar* prayer [4 pm]. At that time, there are no men.' Women's campaign schedules thus aligned with other women's availability, creating a mutually reinforcing cycle of female-focused outreach driven by temporal rather than strategic considerations.

The double burden experienced by working women further limited the time and energy for sustained campaigning. Elifina, a teacher, articulated these constraints:

I limit myself so that I don't get too tired.... There are legislative candidates who are active until morning, coming home at 2 am. I'm confused: what do they do? Especially because we are women, of course, women are not like men who have flexible time. I also have children; of course, I adjust.

Her comparison highlights the fundamental asymmetry between male and female candidates' temporal flexibility. While men could campaign during optimal periods (morning and evening hours, when most constituents were home), women remained constrained by household responsibilities during these times. The exceptions are candidates like Nova who can afford domestic help and/or have familial support. The majority of women campaigned during suboptimal times and for inadequate durations.

Beyond structural constraints, women candidates faced active familial resistance that further circumscribed campaign activities. Herlina's post-election reflections revealed the emotional toll of these competing demands. Her adult son joined our interview and articulated his resentment: 'My mother is very active, to the point I get angry because she is never home. She doesn't come home until 10 pm. Sometimes, I get emotional.... My mother is so active in the campaign.' Family pressure culminated in a family vacation just weeks before election day, which Herlina reluctantly accepted despite recognising its electoral cost:

Maybe because in the eyes of the children, these ten days should be for them.... Maybe for them, it is only a short period, but usually in that time, I can visit five places a day, five times ten, that is 50 places. But that's okay. We have to share all of that; that's women. Women can divide their time.

Herlina, speaking in front of her son, did so with lightness but also regret that she could not give 100 per cent to the campaign. From the perspective of her son, he had shown his support by coming to Medan to help in Herlina's campaign. Yet, this support was circumscribed. He helped his mother pursue her ambition of contesting an election, though not as a serious endeavour to achieve success. That he considered her campaign a 'hobby' is evidenced by the demand that she take time away during a critical time.

Other women had 'half-hearted' support from their family too. Sainah's family supported her nomination as a candidate but insisted she prioritise the children's

demands on her time. The contradiction reached its apex when her daughter explicitly forbade campaigning: 'Mom, please go ahead and run for legislative office, but you may not campaign. If you campaign, you win.' This prohibition reveals the conditional nature of familial support: acceptable as long as political activities resembled hobbies rather than serious competitive endeavours and posed no risk of actual success. Sainah's and Herlina's experiences are particularly telling, demonstrating how women are expected to run half-hearted campaigns. Some families demand women run suboptimal campaigns not as a strategy to win but in order to guarantee a loss.

What: limited campaign practices

The conditional familial support that circumscribed women's temporal investments extended equally to campaign expenditure. Family members' insistence on fiscal restraint reflected deeper anxieties about women's political seriousness and potential success. Sainah's brother exemplified this dynamic, extracting a promise: 'Don't waste money, Sis', to which she replied, 'No ... I have three children'. Her eldest son's particular concern about depleting family resources required sustained reassurance: 'I kept reassuring him: "I will just do a normal campaign, only the usual socialisation, not like someone who wastes money. I will just go to the *pengajian* ... just in our community and our family."' Then he could begin to accept it.' Such negotiations reveal how women's campaign financing required familial approval and remained subject to ongoing surveillance. In these negotiations, the limited scale of campaign activities is a way to overcome objections.

Limited budget was, however, more likely to be self- rather than externally imposed. Elfina articulated this position:

We want to do the best we can. When I first became a candidate, I made a big commitment to myself. I want to move forward and do something. Second, I want to move forward without wasting a lot of money.... Do not spend our money or make us unhappy by selling assets.

While Elfina expressed determination to achieve something through her candidacy, including advancing her social standing, her commitment to minimal financial investment meant that her campaign was limited in what it could achieve. At the same time, given the risk of indebtedness due to the overly expensive election campaigns, such limits on finances are understandable.

Campaigning in Medan's electoral environment without substantial financial resources proved extremely challenging, however, in large part due to entrenched cultures of material exchange between candidates and voters. Wahyuni explained the fundamental expectation: 'When the candidates come, people will definitely ask, "What do you bring? What can we accept?"'. This culture of expectation meant that even ostensibly low-cost campaign strategies required significant material investment in souvenirs and refreshments for socialisation events. Despite attempts to minimise expenditure, women candidates thus invested heavily relative to their economic circumstances. Campaign expenditures for our respondents ranged from 10 million rupiah (USD630) to 100 million rupiah (USD6,300), representing substantial proportions of household budgets, given that Indonesia's average monthly income is 3.3 million rupiah (USD200). Yet, these investments remained far from sufficient for

competitive campaigning. Junita’s experience illuminated this disparity: after months of outreach, she discovered that competitors were providing household staples. She was deeply dismayed when a candidate told her, ‘If you do not have two billion rupiah, then you should just withdraw.’ She continued to campaign as a matter of principle.

Despite the continuation of patronage politics in 2024, women candidates nonetheless remained optimistic that voters would recognise their honest approach over material inducements. Election day brutally shattered these beliefs. The scale of monetary distribution, particularly the dawn attacks involving cash-filled envelopes distributed on election eve, overwhelmed women’s modest investments. Emmy’s post-election reflection captured this disillusionment: ‘Of course, we are disappointed because our kindness to the community was extraordinary. But the community preferred dawn attacks to kindness.... We see it on the ground.... The dawn attack is what can make you win.’ The resilience of the transactional electoral culture was evidenced by the common abbreviation NPWP (*nomor piro wani piro* [‘How much will you pay me to vote for your number?’]) and voters’ explicit statements to our team that they did not vote because ‘nobody visited us with money’. Given the experiences of past elections, where money politics was rife, the result is not surprising. What is surprising is that women expressed confidence that they could overcome this culture with relatively minimal expenditure.

Most women candidates we followed took the campaign seriously, investing large amounts of time and money relative to their resources. Yet, investment in neither was sufficient; it was suboptimal relative to what was required. Arguably, Indonesia’s competitive ‘Hunger Games’ (Hosen, 2023) elections demand too much of candidates, both men and women. However, women face additional gendered constraints, so much so that most women can only run suboptimal campaigns. These constraints include the gendered expectations to be more *jujur*, or honest, and to limit campaign spending, that is, to treat the election as a hobby rather than a serious endeavour. Women want to win, but they also run suboptimal campaigns in ways that limit that possibility.

Why: legowo and letting go

Running a half-hearted or suboptimal campaign is also a psychological response to poor electoral prospects. Out of the 24 women candidates we spoke to, only three women won. Among the 21 unsuccessful candidates, one received over 1,000 votes, seven between 300 and 600 votes, and eight fewer than 300 votes. Three of the women we spoke to had no intention of winning and campaigned to support the party and have fun, such as Lisa: ‘We don’t have a complicated campaign like other people. We campaign just by gathering 20 people, we teach them how to bake a cake, and because it is more than 20 people, we will end up gossiping.’ Santi, a four-time candidate without electoral success, deliberately campaigns suboptimally as emotional protection: ‘If we really have to win, when we lose, we feel hurt.... When we lose, there must be another lesson from God.’ If winning is not the main aim, campaign decisions are not based on electoral strategy but, rather, on what is practical and enjoyable.

However, the vast majority of women candidates expressed optimism throughout the campaign. Post-election disappointment varied considerably and typically diminished over subsequent weeks, often softened by the retrospective recognition

of the impossibility of success. Herti said that she left her victory to God's will: 'From the beginning, my goal in participating in this election was not necessarily to have the ambition to win. I was indeed optimistic that I could win, but all of that turned around with the will of the universe.' She attributed her defeat to *serangan fajar* ('dawn attack') but was satisfied with her election conduct, which relied on socialisation and introducing herself to people: 'Let God do his work ... my votes did not even reach 1,000.' Herti makes a distinction between ambition and optimism. She campaigned with heart but without the expectation of winning, which both guided her strategy and softened the result.

Cultural and spiritual frameworks provided crucial mechanisms for processing electoral defeat. Candidates described feeling *pasrah* (a calm surrender to fate) or *legowo* (the Javanese concept of finding strength through relinquishing ego after struggle). These responses were facilitated by candidates' limited campaign investment. Farah articulated this dynamic: 'When it comes to feelings, I'm a little disappointed, but not too much because we've tried our best.' Similarly, Yanti initially believed that heartfelt community engagement would secure success but, after receiving fewer than 300 votes, blamed *serangan fajar* while accepting her constrained circumstances: 'So, our path is like *pasrah* ... the important thing is that there is no debt, no burden.' Wahyuni echoed this sentiment, describing results as 'far from expectations' but feeling untroubled because 'I had already tried from my heart to get closer to the people and I didn't spend much money.' These spiritual and cultural frameworks complement an election campaign that women take seriously but only engage in suboptimally.

Conclusion

Indonesia's election campaigns are gendered institutions of masculine advantage. Most women candidates attempt to navigate gendered conditions by conforming to broader gender orders and, where possible, seeking electoral advantage through feminine campaign styles. While the latter approach can be considered strategic, we argue that considering gendered campaign styles only through the lens of 'strategy' understates the way that they are an accommodation to heavily constrained conditions. The decision to limit the spaces in which they campaigned, the people to whom they campaigned and the amount of time and money invested was less about strategy and more about feasibility. Gender orders work through the body of candidates, such that their decisions are based on what can be affectively tolerated, which is then rationalised as an electoral strategy. Research methods must be attentive to the ambivalences and contradictions in women's narratives of their gendered campaign styles. They are not a simple matter of choice; in important respects, they are imposed.

Suboptimal campaigning has emerged as a gendered campaign style in Indonesia that enables women to minimise the emotional, social and material risks of becoming a candidate. While maintaining hope for a positive outcome, suboptimal campaigning is a rational response to the near certainty of electoral defeat and to the desire to participate in an activity that is on the boundary of acceptability for women without disrupting gender institutions outside the campaign. This gendered campaign style thereby further reinforces the masculine advantages of campaigns as gendered institutions. Suboptimal campaigning, which limits women's electoral

possibilities, is, we suggest, a factor in women’s political under-representation, as well as a consequence of their poor chances of success. Our findings are suggestive rather than conclusive. Suboptimality emerged as a strong theme among a sample of female candidates in Medan, requiring further statistical validation. It is also not relevant to all female candidates. Those from elite backgrounds or political dynasties run very different campaigns that maximise the chance of success. At the same time, the number of women candidates is high, and rates of success are low, making it likely that suboptimal campaigning is a significant campaign style.

We propose suboptimal campaigning as a useful heuristic in the broader literature on gendered campaign styles. It highlights how decisions are not simply a strategic response to gendered campaign conditions but an accommodation to constraints. Candidates are not only rational, calculative actors but also gendered beings. ‘Suboptimal campaigning’ acknowledges women’s agency to shape their campaigns in ways that are affectively and materially tolerable but emphasises accommodations over electoral strategy. It is thus a useful lens to excavate the unseen consequences of electoral systems and practices. For example, it may indicate a response to the high cost of elections (Murray et al, 2023; Hasanah et al, 2024), where the impetus is not to withdraw from electoral competition but to limit one’s campaign to avoid excessive losses, thereby reducing the chance of electoral success. Similarly, withdrawal may not be the only response to gendered political violence; a suboptimal campaign, limited spatially, temporally and by who they engage with, allows women to persevere (not let the haters win), though in ways that disadvantage their campaign (Bardall et al, 2019; Arriola et al, 2021b; Gichohi, 2021; Hibbs, 2025).

Suboptimal campaigning thus matters, as it obscures the real costs of elections as gendered institutions. Having a large number of women candidates can reduce pressure to address gender political inequity, allowing the continuation of political dominance while simultaneously silencing demands to dismantle it. The same is true of other groups. People with disabilities, for example, may be encouraged to contest but find that their participation is limited to a suboptimal campaign, with low chances of success (Jakimow, 2025). Suboptimal campaigning thus indicates partial inclusion, which sustains a political system from which women remain (mostly) excluded (Williams, 2023). By understanding the accommodations women must make in their campaigns and exposing the limits of feasibility, more can be done to support women candidates.

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Research ethics statement

This research was approved by the Australian National University Human Research Ethics Committee (2019-934) and the Badan Riset dan Inovasi Nasional (National Research and Innovation Agency [BRIN]) Ethics Committee on Social Studies and Humanities Research (Ref No.: 012/KE.01/SK/01/2024).

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Data availability statement

The authors take responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the analysis. Due to reasons of confidentiality and as a condition of ethics approval, the data are not available publicly. In select circumstances, de-identified data can be shared privately for approved research purposes.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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