Do *Santri* Still Obey the *Kiai*? Examining Voting Behaviour in Traditional and Modern *Pesantren* during the 2024 Presidential Election

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Abstract

Amid narratives of Generation Z's heightened political awareness through internet access, this study examines a specific subset: santri in Islamic boarding schools—Muslim groups with limited access to the internet to engage in online political discourse. They are frequently characterised as merely a traditional group, and prior studies have largely attributed their political choices to the authority of the kiai (pesantren leaders). To revisit this assumption, the study was conducted in two contrasting Islamic boarding school traditions: traditional and modern. It investigates five potential influences on santri voting behaviour in Indonesia's 2024 Presidential Election: kiai, teachers (ustaz/ustazah), peer groups, political promises, and evaluations of the Joko Widodo–Ma'ruf Amin government. This study, employing mixed methods, reveals that, contrary to previous studies, kiai exert no significant influence. Instead, teachers shape political preferences through classroom discussions, which also enable students to critically evaluate the Jokowi–Ma'ruf government. These findings enhance the diversity within the field of voting behaviour studies in religion communities with limited internet access while challenging assumptions about Generation Z's short-term political outlook. The findings also extend voting behavior theory in the context of religious communities with restricted internet access.

Keywords: *Santri; voting behaviour; 2024 presidential election*

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Introduction

According to the 2020 population census conducted by Indonesia's Central Statistics Agency (BPS), Generation Z—defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012—constitutes 27.4% of the national population (BPS, 2021). Data from the General Elections Commission (KPU) indicate that Generation Z represents 48.6 million registered voters in the 2024 election, including around 25 million first-time voters (Kemenpppa.go.id, 2023). Supporting this demographic significance, a 2023 study by the Katadata Insight Center found that over half of young people, including Generation Z, express an interest in political issues, largely due to their exposure to political news through social media and online platforms (CSIS, 2022; Katadata Insight Center, 2023).

Research by CSIS (2022) and the Katadata Insight Center (2023) raises an important question: how do students (*santri*)[2] in *pesantren*[3]—particularly those belonging to Generation Z and classified as first-time voters—form their political preferences, given their limited access to the internet and social media? Students in *pesantren* often experience restricted digital

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2   The term *santri* was popularised by Geertz (1960) in his anthropological study of East Java. Geertz defined *santri* as devout Muslims who follow Islamic teachings as a way of life, including performing the five daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, paying zakat, and undertaking the Hajj if able (Geertz, 1960:6). However, this definition is considered too broad for the purposes of this study. Therefore, this research adopts the classification proposed by Dhofier (1985, in Darmaji, 2020:51), which distinguishes between *santri mukim*—students who reside in the *pesantren*—and *santri kalong*, who live outside but study there. Due to research limitations, this study focuses exclusively on *santri mukim*.

3   *Pesantren* have traditionally been characterised as institutions focused solely on Islamic religious education. Over time, however, their curriculum has expanded beyond purely religious instruction.

access due to internal regulations (Darmini, 2021), setting them apart from peers outside these institutions.

The political behavior of *santri* in *pesantren* has garnered considerable scholarly attention. Numerous studies have examined their voting patterns as part of the broader Muslim electorate (e.g Barokah & Kurniawan, 2024; Holilah et al., 2024; Jati, 2023; Masruri et al., 2019; Siswanto & Zuber, 2022; Siswanto & Yulita, 2019; Sufaidi et al., 2023).

Previous research has predominantly situated Islamic boarding schools within traditional educational structures, where the authority of the *kiai*[4] in *pesantren* extends beyond religious instruction to encompass social and political influence (Sarkowi et al., 2025). The relationship between *kiai* and *santri* is often described as authoritarian–paternalistic, resembling a patron–client model that emphasises loyalty and obedience (Pratama et al., 2024). As Ismah (2022) notes, the *kiai* functions as the "king" of the *pesantren* and a central source of spiritual blessing. Consequently, students are expected to demonstrate submission to gain the *kiai*'s approval, as defiance may be seen as risking these blessings (Achmadin et al., 2024).

This hierarchical structure renders *pesantren* attractive to politicians seeking electoral support. The *kiai*'s influence is often perceived as a conduit for mobilising votes, particularly in rural or religious constituencies.

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4 *Kiai* is defined as an Islamic religious leader—usually also used to refer to the head of a pesantren—which is often used in Central and East Java (Turmudi, 2006: 1 & 22). In other discourses, kiai is not only defined as an Islamic religious leader but also as having social and political power in society (Hikmawan et al., 2020; Jati, 2012).

Accordingly, in the lead-up to elections, politicians often visit *pesantren* under the pretext of community engagement or religious outreach (Hertiana et al., 2024)—a practice commonly referred to as *safari politik* or political safari (Darmini, 2024)—to secure symbolic endorsement from respected religious authorities and, by extension, their followers.

This study compares the voting behaviour of first-time voters from traditional and modern Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) in the context of the 2024 Presidential Election. Focusing on students aged 18−21—members of Generation Z and first-time voters—it investigates how *santri* form political preferences despite limited access to online news and social media, which distinguishes them from their peers outside the *pesantren* environment. The study examines whether their electoral choices remain primarily influenced by the *kiai*, as suggested in previous research (Arravi et al., 2021; Jati, 2023; Siswanto & Zuber, 2022), or whether other factors have become more significant.

To offer a more comprehensive understanding, this research incorporates variables rarely addressed in existing literature. These include the influence of teachers (*ustaz/ustazah*) in classroom settings (Bazić et al., 2023); peer groups, which play a key role in the communal life of *pesantren* (Zainurin et al., 2024); political promises made during campaign visits (Born et al., 2018; Naurin, 2014; Darmini, 2024); and retrospective

evaluations of government performance (Fiorina, 1981; Kinder & Kiewiet, 1981).

Defining Traditional and Modern *Pesantren*

Historically, the Islamic boarding school tradition in Indonesia has been categorised into two main types: *pesantren* and *madrasah* (Azra et al., 2010; Brooks et al., 2020; Porter, 2002; Turmudi, 2006; Woodward, 2015). Traditional Islamic groups rely not only on the Qur'an and Hadith, as do modern groups, but also on classical Islamic texts known as *kitab kuning* or "yellow books" (Rosidin et al., 2022; Turmudi, 2012). These texts are a key component of traditional

Figure 1. Focus of this study

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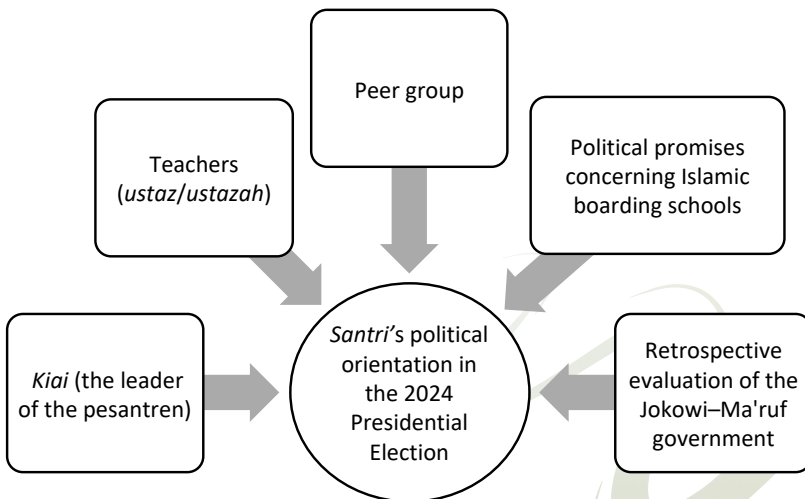
pesantren curricula, offering moral and intellectual guidance for Muslim life in the modern world.

Pesantren have typically been associated with Islamic instruction and linked to Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), while *madrasah* combine religious and general education, often aligned with Muhammadiyah (Bruinessen, 2019). However, such distinctions have become less relevant, as many *pesantren* now incorporate general education (Brooks et al., 2020; Rohman, 2023; Woodward, 2015).

Traditionally, the *kiai* serves as both spiritual and institutional leader, often compared to a monarch (Fauzi, 2012; Ismah, 2022). In modern *pesantren*, the *kiai* plays more of a managerial role (Noor et al., 2023; Pramitha, 2020; Silfiana, 2020). This difference is evident in *santri's* interactions: in traditional settings, students attend weekly *bandongan* sessions with the *kiai* (Rosidin et al., 2022), whereas in modern *pesantren*, students primarily engage with *ustaz*, and the principle of *sami'na wa atha'na* ("we hear and we obey"), a dogma upheld in traditional *pesantren,* is generally rejected (Hafidh et al., 2019).

Theoritical framework

This study uses the framework of voting behaviour theory to understand how *santri* in both traditional and modern *pesantren* determine their political choices in the 2024 Presidential Election. In its simplest form, voting

behaviour theory seeks to address questions such as: why do individuals decide to participate in elections? Do voters choose a political party or a candidate? Which party or candidate do they select? (Mujani et al., 2008).

Sociological approach

The sociological approach suggests that factors such as age, gender, religion, level of piety, social class, racial or religious identity, place of residence (urban or rural), income, and education significantly influence an individual's political preferences (Hutchings & Jefferson, 2018; Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Mujani et al., 2018). These characteristics shape formal and informal social groupings (Asfar, 2020). Formal groupings include religious and professional organisations, while informal ones encompass family, friendship, and neighbourhood networks. Political choices are thus often influenced by everyday interactions within these groups (Nickerson, 2008), especially among first-time voters, whose political attitudes are still forming (Franklin, 1995).

Social groups function as platforms for political socialisation, shaping perceptions, attitudes, and orientations that guide voting behaviour. Political socialisation involves the transmission of norms and ideologies upheld by the group. Since each group holds particular interests, political parties aim to represent them (Denver & Robert, 2022). In many contexts, religion and religious organisations strongly influence political

preferences. In the United States, for example, religion shapes voter attitudes on issues like abortion and same-sex marriage (Evans & Ball-Northmore, 2018), often reflecting underlying moral values (Aldrich & Jenke, 2018).

In Indonesia, religion similarly plays a key role in shaping electoral behaviour, especially among *santri* communities (Turmudi, 2006). Within the socio-political tradition of the *pesantren*, *santri* are closely associated with the *kiai*, whose authority extends into political matters. In practice, *kiai* can mobilise their *santri* to support specific candidates who reflect the values, norms, and collective interests of the *santri* community (Sefina et al., 2025; Sinarsari & Adnan, 2025).

Prospective voting

A central aspect of the rational choice approach is the impact of political promises on voting behaviour (Asfar, 2020). Political promises are a key factor in voters' decision-making processes, as voters generally adopt a future-oriented perspective when choosing candidates or parties (Born et al., 2018; Naurin, 2014; Downs, 1957). Individuals aim to select a government expected to deliver favourable outcomes over time, comparing and predicting the likely performance of competitors based on campaign promises. These promises serve as a basis for evaluating the potential benefits of electing a particular candidate or party (Lockerbie, 1991).

This behaviour, known as prospective voting, involves making electoral decisions

grounded in expectations about future government performance (Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2009). Political promises typically include statements, policy positions, and proposals on key public issues, which voters use to assess candidates' credibility and commitment (Bonilla, 2022). During campaigns, candidates compete by presenting promises—often tied to budgetary allocations—designed to attract voter support. Voters generally favour those whose proposals they believe will deliver the greatest advantage. In the context of this study on *pesantren*, political promises refer specifically to commitments relevant to Islamic boarding schools, as *santri* engage with these pledges within their distinct socio-religious setting.

Retrospective voting

The fundamental assumption of this model is that citizens will cast their vote (reward) for incumbent candidates if they perceive the government's performance as satisfactory; conversely, voters will refrain from voting for the incumbent if their performance is deemed unsatisfactory (Fiorina, 1981; Mujani et al., 2018; Plescia & Kritzinger, 2017; Stiers, 2021; Budi, 2024). The evaluation of government performance encompasses a broad array of issues, such as: national economic conditions, the economic circumstances of individual households, human rights, corruption scandals, public transportation concerns, unemployment, the state of democracy, and the outcomes of government policies, among others (Fiorina, 1981;

Jurado & Fernández-Vázquez, 2022; Kinder & Kiewiet, 1981; Markwat, 2021; Mujani et al., 2018; Norris, 2004; Schwenk, 2023; Shin, 2018).

Two primary perspectives underpin this evaluative framework: the pocketbook-retrospective model and the sociotropic-retrospective model. The former suggests that individual voting behaviour is shaped by personal economic experiences (Fiorina, 1981), while the latter emphasises broader perceptions of national economic performance, prioritising collective well-being over personal financial circumstances (Kinder & Kiewiet, 1981; Budi, 2024; Mujani et al., 2018). This study adopts a sociotropic-retrospective perspective, focusing on general evaluations of national economic conditions (Mujani & Liddle, 2010), particularly concerning their influence on the political choices of *santri*. Furthermore, the evaluation of government performance is confined to policy output, specifically within the education sector (Jurado & Fernández-Vázquez, 2022; Markwat, 2021).

Data and methods

This study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews and field observations. While the quantitative method identifies statistical relationships, it cannot fully explain contextual influences (Jati, 2024). Research was conducted in East Java's Jombang and Malang regencies, representing traditional (Tebuireng) and modern (Ar-Rohmah) *pesantren*. One

school unit per institution was sampled, involving 200 respondents—100 from each, equally divided by gender. Non-probability quota sampling ensured proportional representation (Morgan, 2008), though generalisability is limited (Eichhorn, 2022). Informants were selected randomly, and informal interviews were used to encourage openness. All participant names have been anonymised.

Variables and measures

The dependent variable in this study is the political preference of *santri* (Islamic boarding school students) voting for the first time in the 2024 Presidential Election. Respondents indicated support for one of three candidate pairs: Anies Baswedan–Muhaimin Iskandar (01), Prabowo Subianto–Gibran Rakabuming Raka (02), or Ganjar Pranowo–Mahfud MD (03), coded ordinally as 1, 2, and 3, respectively. Five independent variables were assessed: the influence of the *kiai*, teachers (*ustaz/ustazah*), peer groups, political promises targeting Islamic boarding schools, and retrospective evaluations of the Jokowi–Ma'ruf government. As the dependent variable is ordinal and non-normally distributed, ordinal logistic regression was applied (Martin, 2022). Three models were tested: (1) combined data from all *pesantren*, (2) traditional *pesantren*, and (3) modern *pesantren*. Binary responses were coded as "yes" or "no", while Likert-scale items ranged from "very dissatisfied" (0) to "very satisfied" (4).

An overview of Tebuireng and Ar-Rohmah Islamic Boarding School

1. *Pesantren* Tebuireng

Tebuireng Islamic Boarding School, founded in 1899 by KH[5] Hasyim Asy'ari in Jombang, East Java, is one of Indonesia's most influential *pesantren* (Fijriah & Ellisa, 2022). After studying in Mecca, Hasyim Asy'ari established Tebuireng and later co-founded Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Indonesia's largest Islamic organisation, which famously issued a fatwa for jihad against colonialism (Misbah & Rozi, 2022; Juma, 2022). Tebuireng is often called a "factory and warehouse" of *kiai* for its historical role in producing

Islamic scholars (Alkaf et al., 2022). Notable alumni include KH Wahid Hasyim, founder of the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Syahriman & Mulyana, 2019); KH Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), Indonesia's fourth president; KH Salahuddin Wahid, 2004 vice-presidential candidate; and KH Ma'ruf Amin, former vice president.

Ahead of the 2024 Presidential Election, several candidates visited Tebuireng, including Anies Baswedan (Anggrainy, 2023), Prabowo Subianto (Antaranews.com, 2023), Ganjar Pranowo (Tempo.co, 2024), and Mahfud MD (Tebuireng.online, 2023). While some reports claim Tebuireng supports the Prabowo–Gibran ticket (Republika.co.id, 2024), others note that figures like Yenny Wahid back Ganjar–Mahfud. According to Gus

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5   KH stands for *Kiai Haji*. This title is commonly bestowed upon *kiai* who have completed the Hajj pilgrimage and is frequently used to denote *kiai* who also serve as leaders of *pesantren*.

Kikin, such political activity reflects personal views rather than an official stance of the *pesantren* (Halim & Faishal, 2024).

2. Ar-Rohmah Islamic Boarding School

This research was conducted at Ar-Rohmah Putra and Ar-Rohmah Putri Islamic Boarding Schools, both affiliated with the Hidayatullah organisation. Founded in 1973 as a monotheism-purification movement (Afifuddin, 2016), Hidayatullah became a mass-based organisation in 2000, introducing the *Systematic Nuzulnya Wahyu* (SNW) method (Hidayat et al., 2022). SNW frames monotheism not only theologically but also as the foundation for moral development and social harmony (Rusli, 2020). Unlike Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), which became a political party during the Guided Democracy period (Mahmud et al., 2023), Hidayatullah has never become one. While focusing on social, educational, and economic spheres, it has occasionally supported electoral politics (Rusli, 2020).

During the 2024 election cycle, only one major political visit occurred: a seminar by Gamal Albinsaid of PKS (Arrohmah.co.id, 2023). Leadership in traditional *pesantren* like Tebuireng is typically held by *kiai*, who command spiritual reverence and influence (Ismah, 2022). In contrast, modern *pesantren* leaders like those at Ar-Rohmah are usually *ustaz*, holding administrative rather than spiritual authority (Noor et al., 2023; Pramitha, 2020; Silfiana, 2020). Unlike traditional

pesantren where students meet *kiai* through *bandongan*, modern students typically interact with leaders only during formal events.

Islamic boarding school politics in tradition: declining *kiai* influence in the 2024 election

This study analysed data collected from traditional, modern, and combined Islamic boarding schools. A relationship between independent and dependent variables is considered statistically significant when $p < 0.05$ (Di Leo & Sardanelli, 2020). In this study, the results show $p > 0.05$ (see Tables 1–3 in the Appendix), indicating no significant relationship between the variables. These findings contrast sharply with previous research highlighting the influential role of *kiai* in shaping *santri*'s political orientations, particularly in traditional *pesantren* contexts (e.g., Arravi et al., 2021; Siswanto & Zuber, 2022).

Several factors may explain this shift in traditional *pesantren*. First, no direct political instruction was observed from the *kiai* or *pesantren* leader at *Pesantren* Tebuireng. Although subtle cues—such as articulating criteria for an ideal leader—were occasionally given, there was no explicit endorsement of any presidential candidate. Institutionally, *Pesantren* Tebuireng maintains political neutrality. However, some members of the *dzuriyah* (family lineage), including Yenny Wahid, who joined the Ganjar–Mahfud campaign team, and Gus Irfan Yusuf, Gus Billy Wahid, and Gus Ivan Fahmi, who

expressed support for Prabowo–Gibran following a visit from then–Minister of State-Owned Enterprises Erick Thohir, publicly declared their preferences.

Second, many *santri* today appear less reliant on the authority of the *kiai* or the *dzuriyah*. This suggests a generational shift in which *santri* increasingly demonstrate independent political agency, diverging from earlier studies that emphasised obedience and loyalty to *kiai* authority in electoral behaviour (Hafidh et al., 2019; Arravi et al., 2021; Siswanto & Zuber, 2022).

Figure 2. Political directives issued by the *kiai* endorsing a particular candidates[6]
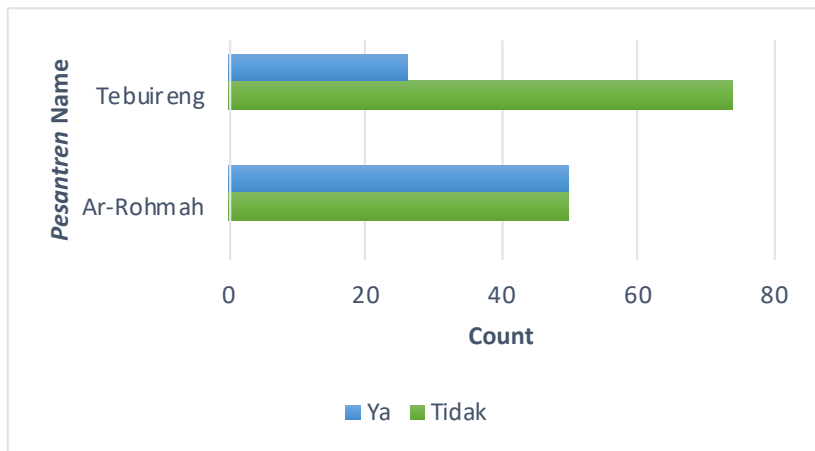
Source: processed by the author

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6   "ya" means "yes" and "tidak" means "no'.

At the Ar-Rohmah Islamic Boarding School for boys, indications of political mobilisation emerged in the period preceding the 2024 Presidential Election. Questionnaire data suggest that 50% of respondents who answered *"tidak"* (no) were female, whereas those who answered *"ya"* (yes) were male. This mobilisation appears to have taken the form of a seminar-like event held during the quiet period before election day, attended by students from junior to senior high school. Although initially presented as a discussion on leadership criteria—such as rejecting candidates with human rights violations, upholding constitutional values, and favouring those with Islamic backgrounds—the session seemingly evolved into one promoting a specific political orientation. As the discussion progressed, the speaker reportedly encouraged *santri* to support candidate pair number 01, Anies Baswedan and Muhaimin Iskandar.

This orientation appears to reflect the ideological position of the Hidayatullah organisation, which manages Ar-Rohmah. In contrast to mass Islamic organisations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, which advance Islam *Nusantara* and Progressive Islam respectively (Nasikhin & Raharjo, 2022), Hidayatullah emphasises monotheism (*tauhid*) as the moral and spiritual foundation of life (Rusli, 2020). While Hidayatullah did not formally endorse any candidate, its representatives were documented visiting the Central Leadership Council (Dewan Pimpinan Pusat,

DPP) of the Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS) alongside other Islamic organisations. This engagement appears to align with PKS's political support for the Anies–Muhaimin (01) ticket, reflecting broader ideological affinities among Hidayatullah, PKS, and Anies Baswedan. Anies's participation in Hidayatullah's 50th anniversary event in Balikpapan further illustrates this connection (Kumparan. com, 2023). Their shared modernist Islamic roots, influenced by the *Ikhwanul Muslimin* tradition (Basyir, 2014), may underpin this ideological proximity.

The involvement of religious leaders in politics is not unique to the *pesantren* context but is also evident in the United States (Campbell et al., 2018; Margolis, 2018; Smith & Walker, 2013), Brazil (Smith, 2014), and several Middle Eastern countries (Williamson et al., 2023). In the United States, close alignment between Christian leaders and political factions has been shown to strengthen religion's social influence (Djupe & Gilbert, 2009). In Brazil, Evangelical and Pentecostal pastors frequently endorse or participate in political campaigns, a practice largely accepted across faith groups (Smith, 2014). Conversely, in Middle Eastern contexts, Muslim leaders visibly engaged in politics tend to experience diminished religious authority (Williamson et al., 2023).

The weakening influence of *kiai* in shaping *santri*'s political attitudes reflects broader processes of modernisation and

technological change. Norris and Inglehart (2011) describe this as the secularising effect of modernity, whereby exposure to education and information erodes traditional religious authority. Consequently, *santri* no longer regard the *kiai* as the sole moral or political guide. Although their internet use is limited compared with other members of Generation Z, *santri* still access digital media during designated days off or family visits. Through such exposure—to social media, mass media, and classroom discussions—they acquire opportunities for independent reflection and critical engagement with political issues. Hence, while *kiai* remain respected religious figures, their authority in political matters has become increasingly symbolic. The findings suggest that *santri* now act as autonomous agents capable of evaluating candidates and forming independent political preferences.

Beyond the classroom: teachers' roles in education and political awareness

The statistical analysis of the logistic regression model, based on the combined data from both traditional and modern *pesantren*, yielded significant results. The significance values were 0.001 (< 0.05) for variable X2_2 and 0.019 (< 0.05) for variable X2_3 (see Table 1 in the appendix). These findings indicate that variable X2 has a statistically significant influence on the voting behaviour

of novice *santri* voters across both traditional and modern *pesantren*. This suggests that the factors represented by teachers (*ustaz/ustazah)* play an important role in shaping the political preferences of first-time voters within these educational contexts.

In terms of political engagement, teachers in traditional *pesantren* generally refrain from discussing political matters in the period leading up to the 2024 Presidential Election. This contrasts with teachers in modern *pesantren*, who tend to be more proactive in addressing political issues within the classroom. Teachers in traditional *pesantren*, particularly those who do not personally support the Prabowo–Gibran (02) ticket, often remain reticent, making it difficult for them to engage in discussions relating to the pair or the leadership of Joko Widodo (2019–2024). In response to the perceived irregularities surrounding the election, teachers in traditional *pesantren* typically align their political stance with that of the *dzuriyah* (founder's descendants). Conversely, teachers who support the Prabowo–Gibran (02) ticket use classroom discussions to highlight the achievements of Joko Widodo's government, including the nickel downstreaming programme and extensive toll road infrastructure development.

Although no explicit instruction is given to vote for a particular candidate, these discussions often function as an indirect means of fostering a favourable evaluation of Joko Widodo's administration. When such evaluations are positive,

students (*santri*) are implicitly encouraged to support a candidate who is perceived as capable of continuing his policies—namely, Prabowo–Gibran (02). In response to the inquiry regarding whether their teachers introduced political topics for classroom discussion, the following responses were collected (see Figure 3).

Teachers at Pesantren Ar-Rohmah engage more actively in classroom political discussions than those at Tebuireng (see Figure 3). Issues frequently raised ahead of the presidential election include the abuse of power and constitutional matnipulation, national economic conditions, education, corruption, and the Supreme Court's proposal to lower the age limit for

Figure 3. The role of *ustaz* and u*stazah* in addressing political topics in the classroom[7]
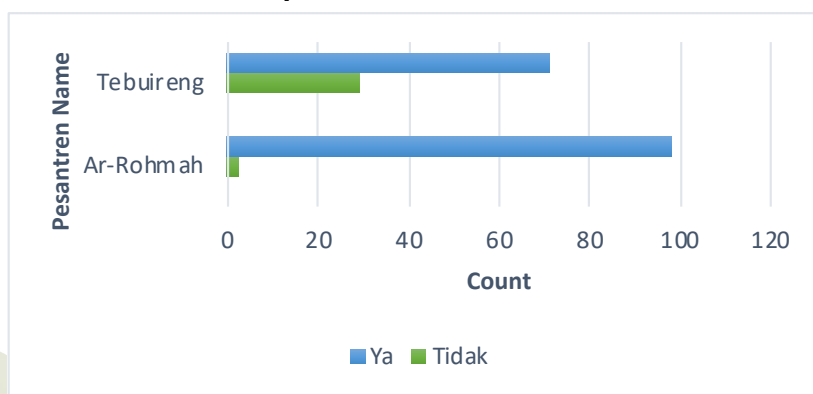
Source: processed by the author

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[7] "Ya" means yes, indicates that respondents affirmed their teachers did introduce political issues for discussion in class, whereas "Tidak" means no, signifies that respondents denied the presence of such discussions.

regional head candidates. Studying and debating such public issues—particularly political topics during the election period—is regarded as a way to foster students' political participation and encourage their engagement in civil society movements.

Teachers play a key role in stimulating and guiding these discussions (Hess, 2009). Within the *pesantren* context, teachers (*ustaz/ustazah*) act as alternative authorities who provide political literacy alongside the *kiai*. Students also interact with teachers far more frequently than with the *kiai*, allowing these exchanges to become central to their political learning. When students discuss, debate, or analyse current political issues, they strengthen their political interest and critical thinking (Levy et al., 2016). Such discussions help cultivate awareness that citizens, through participation in political processes, can influence the wider society.

Peers did not influence political decision-making

The results of the statistical test indicate p-value > 0,05 which suggests that there is no significant relationship between the peer group variable and the voting behaviour of the *santri*. In making their political decisions, the *santri* do not base their choices on the influence of their peers. However, political discussions among fellow *santri* remain prevalent, with one of the most widely discussed issues before the election being the contentious ruling of the Constitutional Court (MK) which facilitated a smoother path for Gibran Rakabuming Raka,

the son of the incumbent president Joko Widodo, to run as a vice-presidential candidate in 2024. This decision did not escape media attention and became a widely debated topic.

This attitude may partly stem from the fact that *santri* in traditional *pesantren* generally hold favourable views of Prabowo Subianto. Consequently, the nomination of Gibran Rakabuming as his vice-presidential running mate

Figure 4. *Santri*'s political choice on the 2024 Presidential Election

Source: processed by the author

Do Santri Still Obey the Kiai?
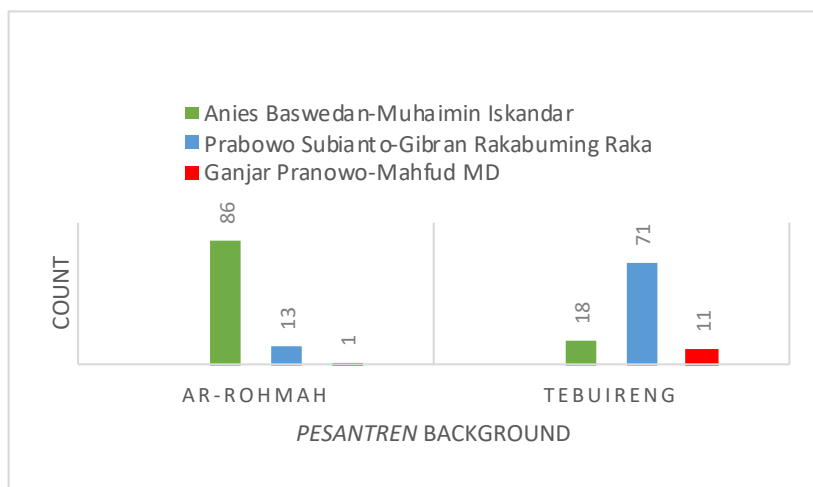
is not regarded as particularly problematic. Rather than questioning the decision, *santri* often align themselves with prevailing group norms and collectively adopt political attitudes that mirror the shared beliefs of their community (Zainurin et al., 2024). In this context, *santri* in traditional *pesantren* tend to display greater tolerance towards such issues, largely because this sentiment is reinforced by the majority within their peer group. Conversely, *santri* in modern *pesantren* are more inclined to reject candidates associated with controversy or perceived breaches of constitutional law, reflecting a broader peer consensus characterised by critical and reform-oriented perspectives.

Presidential figures attract considerable interest among *santri* in both traditional and modern *pesantren*. Political discussions often centre on the candidates' personal appeal rather than policy agendas, track records, or party strategies. The most frequently mentioned names are Anies Baswedan and Prabowo Subianto—Prabowo being more prominent in traditional *pesantren*, and Anies in modern *pesantren*.

Illusory political promises and voter distrust

Each presidential candidate presented promises specifically addressing issues related to *pesantren* (see the vision, mission, and policy programmes of each candidate). These promises were part of broader efforts to engage with the *pesantren* community, offering policy proposals aimed at addressing

challenges faced by *santri* and *pesantren*, particularly in the domain of education. However, statistical analysis reveals that the variable concerning political promises related to *pesantren* does not yield a significance p > 0.05 (see Tables 1, 2, and 3 in the appendix). This indicates that such promises did not significantly influence the political choices of *santri* in either traditional or modern *pesantren* during the 2024 Presidential Election.

This can be understood in light of a broader tendency among the public to remain sceptical of political promises made during election campaigns by politicians and political parties (Naurin et al., 2019). Scepticism is often rooted in voter disappointment stemming from the poor fulfilment of pledges made by candidates or parties in previous electoral cycles. Many voters perceive that there is little assurance these promises will be realised if the candidates are elected, except in particular cases where political contracts are formalised with specific groups.

Retrospective voting and electoral decision-making: *santri* evaluations of the Jokowi–Ma'ruf era

The statistical results demonstrate a significant correlation between the evaluation of the Jokowi–Ma'ruf's government and the voting behaviour of first-time *santri voters in modern pesantren*. Specifically, for variable X5 = 2, the p-value is 0.044 (< 0.05), indicating statistical significance; and for X5 = 4, the p-value is 0.035 (<0.05), also indicating significance (see Table 3, Sections X5 = 2 and X5 = 4 in

the appendix). Statistically, it can be concluded that there is a significant correlation between the performance evaluation of the Jokowi–Ma'ruf government and the voting decisions of *santri* in modern *pesantren* during the 2024 Presidential Election.

In this analysis, respondents were asked two questions: (1) How do you assess the Jokowi–Ma'ruf administration's education policies? (2) How do you evaluate national economic conditions under the same administration? Most *santri* in traditional *pesantren* expressed satisfaction with both, while those in modern *pesantren* were largely dissatisfied (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Review of the educational policies implemented during the Jokowi–Ma'ruf government[8]
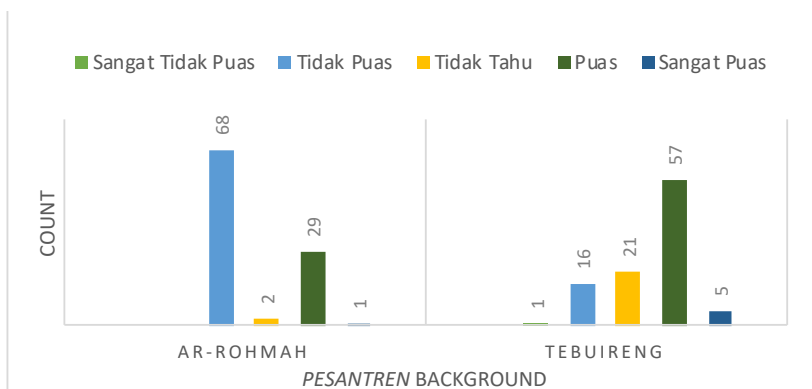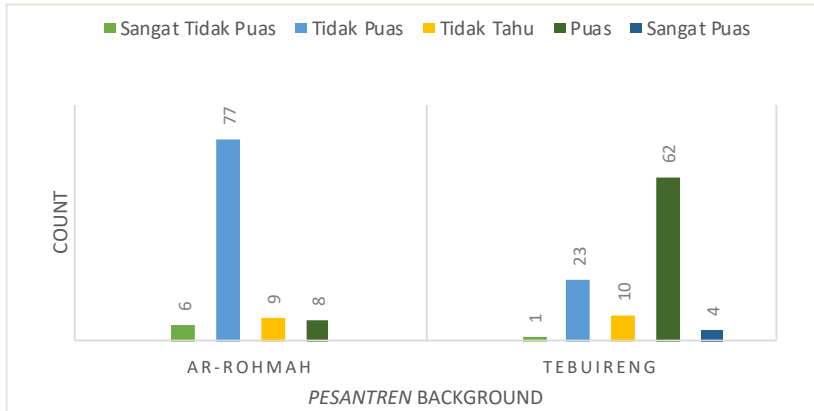

Source: processed by the author

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8   "Sangat tidak puas" means very dissatisfied, "tidak puas" means not satisfied", "tidak tahu" means not sure, "puas" means satisfied", "sangat puas" means very satisfied.

The satisfaction observed among *santri* in both traditional and modern *pesantren* regarding the outcomes of educational policies during the Jokowi–Ma'ruf government can largely be attributed to the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka. This reform, introduced by the former Minister of Education, Nadiem Anwar Makarim, within the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, during the second term of Joko Widodo's presidency (Kemendikbud. go.id, 2022), sought to offer students more agency in their educational journeys. Specifically, the Kurikulum Merdeka provided *santri* with the opportunity to select subjects aligned with their interests, thereby challenging the conventional dichotomy between Natural Sciences (IPA) and Social Sciences (IPS). This shift reflects a broader trend towards more personalised and flexible education, which has been widely discussed as essential for fostering critical thinking and catering to diverse academic and vocational aspirations.

Santri at *Pesantren* Tebuireng Jombang express greater satisfaction with the national economic conditions during the Joko Widodo - Ma'ruf Amin government compared to *Pesantren* Ar-Rohmah Malang (see Figure 6). When analysed in relation to their political preferences (see Figure 6 and 7 below), this finding aligns with the prospective voting model, which posits that voters are likely to support the incumbent if they are satisfied with the government's performance, but will turn to alternative candidates if they are dissatisfied (Mujani et al., 2018).

**Figure 6. An evaluation of
the current national economic condition[9]**

Source: processed by the author

**Figure 7. Perceptions of national economic conditions and
their influence on political preferences among**

santri of *Pesantren* Tebuireng[10]
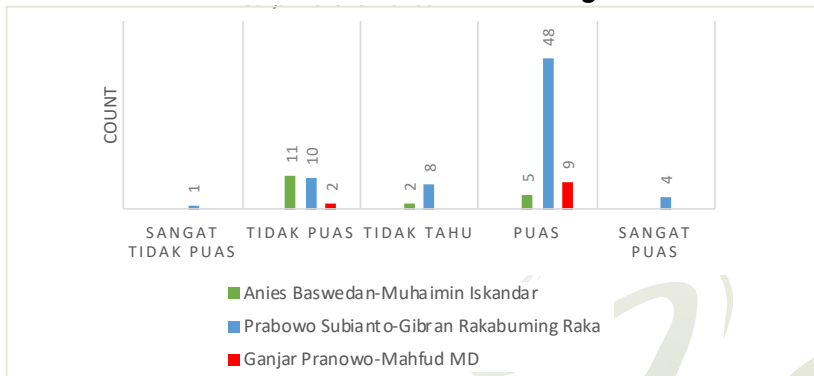
Source: processed by the author

9   "Sangat tidak puas" means very dissatisfied, "tidak puas" means not satisfied", "tidak tahu"
     means not sure, "puas" means satisfied", "sangat puas" means very satisfied.
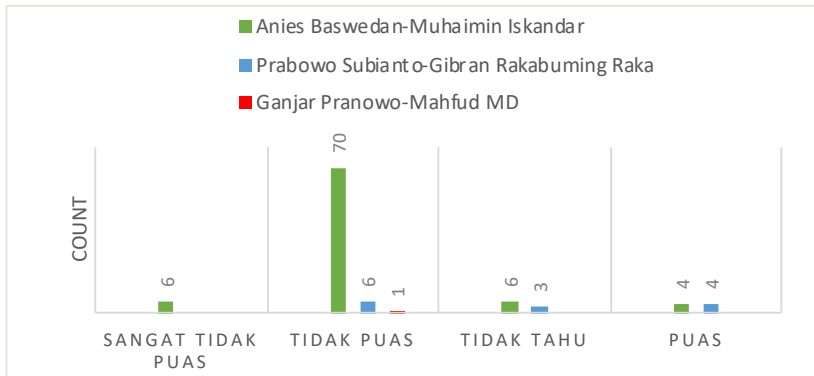
10   "Sangat tidak puas" means very dissatisfied, "tidak puas" means not satisfied", "tidak tahu"
     means not sure, "puas" means satisfied", "sangat puas" means very satisfied.

Figure 8. Perceptions of national economic conditions and their influence on political preferences among *santri* of *Pesantren* Ar-Rohmah[11]

Source: processed by the author

Santri who express satisfaction with national economic conditions tend to support the Prabowo Subianto–Gibran Rakabuming Raka (02) ticket. This preference is largely shaped by the continuity narrative endorsed by Joko Widodo, which positions Prabowo–Gibran as the successors to his policy legacy. Voters appear concerned that a change in leadership could disrupt ongoing government programmes initiated during Jokowi's presidency. Consequently, they are more inclined to support candidates who explicitly commit to maintaining these initiatives.

Conversely, *santri* dissatisfied with national economic conditions are

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11 "Sangat tidak puas" means very dissatisfied, "tidak puas" means not satisfied", "tidak tahu" means not sure, "puas" means satisfied", "sangat puas" means very satisfied.

Do Santri Still Obey the Kiai?

more likely to favour the Anies Baswedan–Muhaimin Iskandar (01) pair (see Figure 7). However, a noteworthy variation emerges between *pesantren*. At Pesantren Tebuireng, even *santri* who report strong or moderate dissatisfaction—or remain uncertain—tend to continue supporting Prabowo–Gibran (02). By contrast, at Pesantren Ar-Rohmah, santri who express dissatisfaction or uncertainty are more likely to reject candidates affiliated with Joko Widodo or the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP), which has dominated political power for the past decade. Although a small number of Ar-Rohmah *santri* still support Prabowo–Gibran (02) despite their discontent, their proportion is notably lower than that observed among Tebuireng students.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal distinct political preferences between *santri* in traditional and modern *pesantren* during the 2024 Presidential Election. *Santri* in traditional *pesantren* tended to support candidate pair number 02, Prabowo–Gibran, whereas those in modern *pesantren* were more inclined towards candidate pair number 01, Anies–Muhaimin. This research contributes to the existing literature on voting behaviour in Indonesia by offering an alternative perspective on the political engagement of *santri*. It demonstrates that the political preferences of *santri* can no longer be automatically equated with those of the *kiai,* whether in traditional or modern *pesantren.* Contemporary *santri* now have broader

access to diverse sources of information beyond the *pesantren* environment—particularly through teachers *(ustaz/ustazah)*. Furthermore, this study challenges the argument proposed by Assidiq et al. (2023), which portrays young voters as irrational actors driven by short-term interests.

The findings indicate that teachers (*ustaz/ustazah*) play a crucial role in shaping *santri*'s political orientations across both types of *pesantren*. Through classroom discussions, they encourage political awareness and critical thinking, which in turn influence voting behaviour. While *kiai* continue to hold considerable religious authority, such authority does not necessarily translate into political alignment.

Santri exhibit autonomy in determining their political choices, drawing on interactions with teachers to conduct retrospective evaluations of past government performance. Finally, this study questions the electoral strategies of political parties that instrumentalise *pesantren* communities and their leaders as tools for vote mobilisation. Although *kiai* still shape aspects of *santri* political perception, students demonstrate independent agency. Political actors should therefore move beyond transactional approaches and instead promote political literacy, encourage deliberation on substantive policy issues, and support greater civic participation among Muslim communities.

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Appendix

Table 1. Results of the partial test on combined data from traditional and modern *pesantren*

Parameter Estimates

		Estimate	Std. Error	Wald	df	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Threshold	[Y = 1]	-1.448	1.373	1.112	1	.292	-4.140	1.243
	[Y = 2]	2.538	1.390	3.337	1	.068	-.185	5.262
Location	[X1=3]	-.777	.511	2.313	1	.128	-1.779	.224
	[X1=4]	-.183	.526	.121	1	.728	-1.213	.847
	[X1=5]	-.530	.958	.306	1	.580	-2.406	1.347
	[X1=6]	0ª	.	.	0	.	.	.
	[X2=2]	1.698	.513	10.975	1	.001	.693	2.703
	[X2=3]	1.060	.452	5.510	1	.019	.175	1.945
	[X2=4]	0ª	.	.	0	.	.	.
	[X3=2]	-.403	.627	.413	1	.520	-1.631	.826
	[X3=3]	-.749	.597	1.575	1	.209	-1.920	.421
	[X3=4]	0ª	.	.	0	.	.	.
	[X4=1]	-.245	.392	.390	1	.532	-1.012	.523
	[X4=2]	0ª	.	.	0	.	.	.
	[X5=1]	-3.164	1.694	3.490	1	.062	-6.483	.155
	[X5=2]	-2.605	1.303	3.999	1	.046	-5.159	-.052
	[X5=3]	-1.615	1.450	1.241	1	.265	-4.456	1.226
	[X5=4]	-2.165	1.304	2.757	1	.097	-4.721	.391
	[X5=5]	.219	1.302	.028	1	.866	-2.332	2.771
	[X5=6]	.309	1.272	.059	1	.808	-2.184	2.802
	[X5=7]	1.178	2.068	.325	1	.569	-2.874	5.231
	[X5=8]	0ª	.	.	0	.	.	.

Link function: Logit.

a. This parameter is set to zero because it is redundant.

Table 2. Results of the partial test on traditional *pesantren*

Parameter Estimates

		Estimate	Std. Error	Wald	df	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
							Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Threshold	[YT = 1]	-1.232	1.522	.656	1	.418	-4.215	1.750
	[YT = 2]	3.163	1.570	4.056	1	.044	.085	6.240
Location	[X1_T=3]	.578	.667	.752	1	.386	-.729	1.884
	[X1_T=4]	.347	.627	.307	1	.579	-.881	1.576
	[X1_T=5]	-.695	1.063	.427	1	.513	-2.778	1.389
	[X1_T=6]	0ª	.	.	0	.	.	.
	[X2_T=2]	.991	.664	2.225	1	.136	-.311	2.293
	[X2_T=3]	.407	.656	.385	1	.535	-.879	1.693
	[X2_T=4]	0ª	.	.	0	.	.	.
	[X3_T=2]	-.804	.780	1.063	1	.303	-2.333	.725
	[X3_T=4]	0ª	.	.	0	.	.	.
	[X4_T=1]	.204	.519	.154	1	.694	-.813	1.221
	[X4_T=2]	0ª	.	.	0	.	.	.
	[X5_T=1]	-.603	2.943	.042	1	.838	-6.373	5.166
	[X5_T=2]	-2.207	1.484	2.213	1	.137	-5.115	.701
	[X5_T=3]	-.053	1.860	.001	1	.977	-3.698	3.592
	[X5_T=4]	-1.111	1.479	.565	1	.452	-4.009	1.787
	[X5_T=5]	.657	1.438	.208	1	.648	-2.162	3.476
	[X5_T=6]	.619	1.404	.194	1	.660	-2.134	3.371
	[X5_T=7]	.761	2.881	.070	1	.792	-4.886	6.408
	[X5_T=8]	0ª	.	.	0	.	.	.

Link function: Logit.

a. This parameter is set to zero because it is redundant.

Do Santri Still Obey the Kiai?

Table 3. Results of the partial test on modern *pesantren*

Parameter Estimates

		Estimate	Std. Error	Wald	df	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
							Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Threshold	[YM = 1]	-2.898	2.556	1.285	1	.257	-7.908	2.112
	[YM = 2]	.513	2.549	.041	1	.840	-4.482	5.509
Location	[X1_M=3]	-.188	.852	.048	1	.826	-1.858	1.483
	[X1_M=4]	0ª	.	.	0	.	.	.
	[X2_M=2]	-19.193	.000	.	1	.	-19.193	-19.193
	[X2_M=3]	.088	1.223	.005	1	.943	-2.308	2.484
	[X2_M=4]	0ª	.	.	0	.	.	.
	[X3_M=2]	.886	1.402	.399	1	.527	-1.861	3.633
	[X3_M=3]	.559	.787	.505	1	.477	-.984	2.102
	[X3_M=4]	0ª	.	.	0	.	.	.
	[X4_M=1]	-1.005	.948	1.125	1	.289	-2.862	.852
	[X4_M=2]	0ª	.	.	0	.	.	.
	[X5_M=1]	-23.278	.000	.	1	.	-23.278	-23.278
	[X5_M=2]	-4.988	2.472	4.072	1	.044	-9.833	-.143
	[X5_M=3]	-4.584	2.690	2.903	1	.088	-9.856	.689
	[X5_M=4]	-5.409	2.559	4.468	1	.035	-10.424	-.394
	[X5_M=5]	-2.700	2.447	1.218	1	.270	-7.496	2.095
	[X5_M=6]	-1.192	2.904	.169	1	.681	-6.883	4.498
	[X5_M=7]	0ª	.	.	0	.	.	.

Link function: Logit.

a. This parameter is set to zero because it is redundant.

Equation: Regression model output for the traditional and modern *pesantren*[12]

$$g_2x = 1{,}698X_{22} + 1{,}060X_{23} - 2{,}605X_{52}$$

Equation: Regression model output for the modern *pesantren*

$$g_2x = -4{,}988X_{52} - 5{,}409X_{54}$$

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12 The regression output is presented only for variables that demonstrate statistically significant results.