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Electoral Populism Narratives in the Free Lunch Program: An Analysis of the Prabowo-Gibran Campaign in the 2024 Presidential Election

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ABSTRACT

The free lunch campaign promise put forward by Prabowo Subianto and Gibran Rakabuming Raka in the 2024 Presidential Election sparked debate between genuine social concern and electoral populism strategy. This study analyzes the narrative construction and meaning of this promise within the context of political competition using a qualitative approach with qualitative content analysis (QCA) of news coverage from Kompas.com and Tempo.co during the campaign period. The findings show that the program was utilized to build an empathetic image, erode the elite perception of the candidates, and create symbolic differentiation from other candidate pairs. Additionally, there was a shift in Prabowo's voter segmentation toward a grassroots base. These findings affirm that populism was practiced pragmatically as an adaptive strategy by the elite, not as a consistent ideology.

Keyword:

Populisme Elektoral,
Kampanye Pilpres 2024, Janji
Makan Siang Gratis,
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INTRODUCTION

General Elections (*Pemilu*) constitute a democratic mechanism that enables citizens to directly choose their representatives and government leaders, thereby realizing governance grounded in the will of the people. In Indonesia, general elections have been an important part of the democratization process since independence and play a strategic role in strengthening democracy — both as a means for the public to make informed and rational choices, and for candidates and political parties to communicate their visions, missions, and work programs. The 2024 General Election attracted widespread attention not only because it determined executive and legislative leaders at various levels, but also because it became an arena for applying diverse political strategies to gain voter trust — including the use of populism in campaigns through pro-people rhetoric and social policy promises aimed at building the image of a leader close to the community.

The campaign stage is an important phase to observe because it is during this stage that candidates seek to build their image and garner support through various political communication strategies, one of which is populism emphasizing closeness with ordinary people and criticism of the political elite. In the 2024 Presidential Election, each candidate pair offered flagship programs reflecting their approach to national development issues. Candidate pair number 01, Anies Baswedan and Muhaimin Iskandar, emphasized job creation to reduce unemployment and increased higher education subsidies to promote social mobility (Rachman, 2024). Candidate pair number 02, Prabowo Subianto and Gibran Rakabuming Raka, championed the free lunch program as a long-term investment to improve human resource quality through improved nutrition and health for children and pregnant mothers (Chaterine & Setiuningsih, 2023). Meanwhile, candidate pair number 03, Ganjar Pranowo and Mahfud MD, offered free internet to expand digital access, particularly in distance education, and free education through the "One Family, One Graduate" program to increase higher education access (Rachman, 2024). These programs reflect differing policy priorities while simultaneously serving as vehicles for forming the political identity of each candidate during the campaign period.

In the 2024 Presidential Election, the free lunch program championed by Prabowo Subianto and Gibran Rakabuming Raka became the flagship promise to provide nutritious food for more than 80 million school children and pregnant mothers, with a budget of approximately \$28 billion or 450 trillion Rupiah (Financial Times, 2025). The program was positioned as an effort to strengthen human resource quality through nutritional and educational intervention, while simultaneously serving as a symbol of the state's commitment to vulnerable groups. However, the massive exposure of this promise sparked public debate over whether the free lunch program constitutes a substantive social policy or a populist strategy to gain electoral sympathy.

Populism, which conceptually positions the interests of "the people" in opposition to "the elite" (Wisnu, 2019), is reflected in this promise as an effort to build the image of a leader who cares about the basic needs of society. This narrative asserts that only a leader who claims closeness with the people is capable of voicing the interests of the lower classes and challenging a political elite deemed unresponsive. In this context, Prabowo and Gibran, though socially and politically part of the elite, sought to frame themselves as populist leaders through promises that are broad and emotional. However, the promise also drew criticism for allegedly lacking mature technocratic planning — whether regarding infrastructure readiness, distribution, or financing (Tempo, 2024).

In the 2024 Presidential Election campaign, candidates' policy promises reflected programmatic preferences as well as ideological positions and symbolic relations between the

leader and the people. The Ganjar Pranowo–Mahfud MD pair championed free internet through a narrative of modernization and connectivity acceleration to strengthen community capacity in the digital economy (Farisa, 2024). However, amid problems of poverty, malnutrition, and stunting, this promise risked being perceived as a technocratic solution far removed from the real needs of the lower class — tending toward elitism. By contrast, the Prabowo Subianto–Gibran Rakabuming Raka pair offered the free lunch program as a form of support for ordinary people and a solution to nutritional problems and stunting. Prabowo asserted that "children must not go hungry" and stated that the free lunch program is more important than free internet (Purba, 2024) — a statement that built his image as a leader who understands people's basic needs beyond the technocratic planning framework.

The difference in campaign promises between the Ganjar–Mahfud and Prabowo–Gibran pairs reflects a symbolic contrast in defining "the people's interest" in the 2024 Presidential Election. Ganjar Pranowo emphasized a free internet program to support education, SME development, and digital transformation as a long-term poverty alleviation solution (Farisa, 2024), reflecting a technocratic, future-oriented approach — particularly for the urban middle class. By contrast, Prabowo Subianto asserted that the free lunch program is more important than free internet, stating that "children must not go hungry" and ridiculing critics of the program as having "slow brains" (Hutabarat, 2024; Farisa, 2024). This statement demonstrates the Prabowo–Gibran pair's effort to build emotional closeness with ordinary people through promises targeting basic biological needs such as food and nutrition — symbolically closer to the daily lives of the majority of voters, particularly the working class and vulnerable groups (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Thus, this contestation is not merely a difference in policy vision, but a narrative battle between the people's material-literal interests and a digital modernization approach that tends toward elitism.

However, Prabowo's position as a figure with an elite military background and as chairman of a major party creates ambiguity in this populist narrative. Although claiming to stand with the lower class, he openly described himself as an elite who had "repented" from the exploitative liberal economic system (Hakim & Galih, 2018). This inconsistency shows that the populism of Candidate Pair 02 is not grounded in ideological antagonism toward the elite, but is rather pragmatic in nature as an electoral winning strategy. Thus, Prabowo–Gibran can be categorized as elite populists who exploit pro-people discourse to broaden their political appeal (Triwibowo & Martha, 2021).

In Indonesian electoral politics, populist narratives such as the free lunch program championed by Prabowo–Gibran reflect a strategy that is more pragmatic than ideological. Populism is used not as structural resistance to the elite, but flexibly to build a representative image and expand the electoral base. Although campaign rhetoric emphasizes closeness with ordinary people and criticism of an unresponsive elite, Prabowo remains part of the military and political elite with a strong power network. The mismatch between populist rhetoric and elite coalition practices indicates that populism functions primarily as an electoral mobilization tool, not as an ideological project for structural change (Triwibowo & Martha, 2021). Based on this explanation, this study formulates the following main research question: How is the narrative of populism constructed in the free lunch promise by the Prabowo–Gibran pair in the 2024 Presidential Election?

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with the qualitative content analysis (QCA) method to analyze the construction of electoral populism narratives in the free lunch promise

of the Prabowo Subianto–Gibran Rakabuming Raka pair in the 2024 Presidential Election. The QCA method was chosen because it is capable of revealing explicit and latent meanings in texts and allows subjective interpretation of media discourse. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), QCA rests on systematic classification through coding and theme identification to interpret textual content. The analysis was conducted through stages of identifying meaning units, condensation, coding, category grouping, and main theme development to reveal symbolic and rhetorical patterns of electoral populism. The analysis procedure follows the QCA stages outlined by Zhang and Wildemuth (2005), including data collection, identification of initial quotations, condensation, coding, categorization, theme formulation, interpretation, and reporting of results.

Research data were obtained from online media coverage from Kompas.com and Tempo.co during the active campaign period of November 2023–February 2024. Searching Kompas.com with the keyword "makan siang gratis Prabowo–Gibran" (*free lunch Prabowo–Gibran*) yielded 6,061 articles, with 540 relevant news items, and 26 selected as the sample, while Tempo.co yielded 140 articles with 83 relevant news items and 8 used as the sample. News items were selected purposively with the criteria: (a) explicitly containing campaign narratives and the free lunch program, (b) featuring statements from candidates or campaign team spokespersons, and (c) relevant to indicators of electoral populism. Each news item was analyzed systematically through the identification of meaning units, condensation, initial coding (Table 1), and grouping of categories and formulation of main themes (Table 2). Kompas.com and Tempo.co were selected for their credibility as major national mainstream media outlets with broad news coverage and consistency in covering candidates' political activities.

To facilitate the analysis process, this study uses the QCA coding format developed by Zhang and Wildemuth (2005), with the following structure:

Table 1. Qualitative Content Analysis Model

| No. | Date | Quotation (Meaning Unit) | Condensation | Initial Code |
|-----|-------------------|---|--|---|
| 1 | Date of statement | Excerpt from news containing campaign narrative | Summary of the core meaning of the quotation | Initial category reflecting the form of populism in the narrative |

Source: Table compiled by the Researcher, 2025

The following table is an example of an analytical structure using the qualitative content analysis (QCA) approach. Quotations are taken from statements in news items, then summarized through condensation, and analyzed in the form of initial codes representing indicators of electoral populism.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis results show that the Prabowo–Gibran free lunch promise contains various dimensions of electoral populism constructed through welfare narratives, redistribution, moral rhetoric, and a symbolic pro-people image. These findings are summarized in several main themes obtained through qualitative content analysis. Each

meaning unit in the news items was analyzed through condensation and initial coding. The following table presents examples of initial coding results:

Table 2. Sample Analysis Units and Initial Codes

| No. | Date | Quotation (Meaning Unit) | Condensation | Initial Code | Source |
|-----|-----------|--|---|--|------------|
| 1 | 07 Nov 23 | "I believe this program can be implemented, we are a rich nation." | Belief that the state can finance it | The state can meet the needs of society | Kompas.com |
| 2 | 06 Dec 23 | "The Prabowo-Gibran work program is ready to help young people find employment." | Promise of job creation | Political Promise Rhetoric | Tempo.co |
| 3 | 09 Dec 23 | "The free lunch program aims to make all Indonesian children healthier and free of stunting." | Stunting prevention and child health improvement | Child health and anti-stunting | Kompas.com |
| 4 | 25 Dec 23 | "Food ingredients and milk will be purchased from local stalls and SMEs to support the local economy." | Distribution of food ingredients through local SMEs | Communitarian economy | Kompas.com |
| 5 | 28 Dec 23 | "Ganjar questioned the free lunch program. The program using a budget of IDR 400 trillion is considered too grand a promise." | Doubt about the program being realized | Electoral Program Competition | Tempo.co |
| 6 | 31 Dec 23 | "Mahfud said the free lunch program championed by Prabowo-Gibran is good but questioned the program's prospects." | Competition between presidential programs, Mahfud MD favors his own program | Electoral Program Competition | Tempo.co |
| 7 | 05 Jan 24 | "Free lunch and milk is the flagship program to reduce stunting and prosper local farmers." | Nutrition for human resources and rural farmer welfare | Nutrition and rural welfare | Kompas.com |
| 8 | 20 Jan 24 | "Prabowo affirmed that children and pregnant mothers must be given free nutritious food... People who say the people don't ask for | Populist rhetoric with direct attacks on the elite | Rhetorical Confrontation against the Elite | Kompas.com |

| No. | Date | Quotation (Meaning Unit) | Condensation | Initial Code | Source |
|-----|-----------|---|--|---------------------------------------|------------|
| | | food have somewhat slow brains." | | | |
| 9 | 07 Feb 24 | "The free lunch program is more important than free internet, because children must not go hungry and must grow up healthy, strong, and intelligent." | Prioritizing child nutrition and health over digitalization | Rhetorical contrast: digital vs. food | Kompas.com |
| 10 | 11 Feb 24 | "Final Grand Rally of Prabowo-Gibran, Prabowo Reaffirms the Free Lunch Program for Children" | Will implement the promise of free lunch and milk if elected president | Candidate campaign rhetoric | Tempo.co |

Source: Table compiled by the Researcher, 2025

After identification and initial coding, data were grouped based on similarities in meaning or recurring thematic issues, yielding categories and main themes as the basis for discussion in the following subsections. To maintain focus and readability, quotations in Table 3 represent only a portion of the coded analysis units, while the complete coding data for all news items is presented in the appendix.

Table 3. Categories and Themes of Electoral Populism Narratives

| No. | Initial Code | Category | Main Theme | Example Quotation |
|-----|--|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| 1 | The state can meet the needs of society | Rhetorical economic nationalism | Economy | "I believe this can be implemented, we are a rich nation." |
| 2 | Candidate campaign rhetoric | Candidate campaign promise | Campaign promise | "Prabowo affirmed that if elected president alongside Gibran, they will implement the free lunch and milk program without hesitation." |
| 3 | Electoral Program Competition | Electoral competition | Competition between candidates | "Mahfud said the free lunch program by Prabowo-Gibran is good but questioned its prospects." |
| 4 | Rhetorical contrast: digital vs. food | Prioritize Nutrition | Child Populist Rhetoric | "The free lunch program is more important than free internet..." |
| 5 | Rhetorical Confrontation against the Elite | Electoral confrontational rhetoric | Competition between candidates | "TKN: this program will involve villages, fishermen, farmers, and various ministries." |

Source: Table compiled by the Researcher, 2025

From the groupings above, the researcher identifies three major themes reflecting the construction of electoral populism narratives in the Prabowo–Gibran campaign: candidate campaign rhetoric, electoral program competition, and rhetorical confrontation against the elite. These three themes will be elaborated in depth in the following discussion subsections.

The Free Lunch Promise and Prabowo-Gibran's Effort to Deconstruct Elite Status

In electoral political contestation, campaign promises are often used as a medium for building symbolic closeness between the political elite and society. One prominent form in the 2024 Presidential Election is the free lunch promise championed by the Prabowo-Gibran pair. Through the narrative that "Indonesian children must not go hungry" and that "this country is rich and capable of providing lunch" (Nugraheny & Prabowo, 2023), Prabowo presented himself as a figure who understands the most basic difficulty experienced by the people — access to nutritious food. This narrative sought to build empathy as well as moral legitimacy, asserting that a leader who understands basic needs is a leader worthy of being chosen.

However, this construction must be read more deeply as part of an elite status deconstruction strategy. Prabowo is a figure long embedded in the power structure — both as a former general and as part of the political elite circle since the New Order era. Gibran, as the son of President Joko Widodo, also does not come from a marginalized group. Within this framework, the free lunch promise does not stand as a purely social policy, but rather functions as a device to break down the symbolic distance between the elite and the people. This is consistent with findings from the Kompas.com media data processing, where key quotations such as "this program targets school students" or "lunch distribution will be conducted simultaneously" show how this campaign was directed toward representing closeness with ordinary people, particularly children and groups marginalized in basic education.

This strategy reflects a form of populism that is pragmatic and articulative in nature, whereby the political elite exploits symbols of the people to build emotional closeness without bringing a concrete transformational agenda. Prabowo–Gibran used the free lunch promise not merely as a social policy, but as a means of forming an empathetic image that presented them as though they understood the suffering of the lower class. In this context, the Prabowo–Gibran approach aligns with the thinking of Ernesto Laclau (2005), who views populism as a logic of political articulation. Through articulation points such as the free lunch, various fragmented social demands (such as issues of poverty, nutritional access, and inequality) are united into a single political narrative that is moral and touching.

Furthermore, populism in this case can also be understood through the perspective of Kurt Weyland (2001), who views populism as a political strategy emphasizing message simplification and leadership personalization. The free lunch promise was pursued not as a systematically designed technocratic policy, but as a medium of populist communication that foregrounds the leader as a figure who responds directly to the needs of the people. Prabowo–Gibran shaped the image that they are caring leaders who "understand the feeling of hunger," even though socially and historically they do not come from the group of society that has experienced hunger itself.

Within this framework, the empathy built through campaign narratives is more accurately read as a form of strategic political communication than authentic connection. The free lunch promise becomes a symbol of pseudo-connection that functions to obscure the actual power structure they occupy. Thus, the populism practiced by Prabowo–Gibran is not a movement from below, but a strategy from above to build representational closeness with the people through simplified and emotionally charged narratives.

Electoral Populism as a Pragmatic Strategy: The Free Lunch Promise for Attracting Public Support

Policy promises often function as more than mere solutions to public problems; they also serve as political communication instruments designed to shape image and broaden electoral reach. This is reflected in the free lunch promise championed by the Prabowo-Gibran pair in the 2024 Presidential Election. Through narratives such as "children must not go hungry" and "free lunch is more important than free internet" (Purba, 2024), the promise was constructed as a form of empathy toward the basic needs of the people. This narrative was strategically positioned to touch the emotions of grassroots voters, combining moral messages, symbols of the people, and welfare distribution promises.

The contrast between the pragmatic populism strategy of Prabowo–Gibran and the technocratic approach of Ganjar–Mahfud is clearly visible in the free internet program promise. The free internet promise championed by Ganjar Pranowo placed greater emphasis on modernization and digital infrastructure provision, with targets that tended to be abstract and futuristic. Although the program addressed important needs in the digital era, its emotional resonance with everyday societal problems was weaker compared to free lunch. In public debates, Prabowo even ridiculed the program by stating that "it is more important for children to be able to eat than for them to be able to use the internet" (Purba, 2024) — a statement that constructed an opposition between basic needs (food) and supplementary needs (connectivity). This reinforced the representation that free lunch constitutes a more grounded and populist form of populism, even though it is not necessarily more realistic in terms of implementation.

This approach reflects the practice of populism as described by Weyland (2001): a strategy relying on direct communication, leadership personalization, and simplification of political messages. The free lunch program was not designed as a technocratic policy with a measurable implementation framework, but rather as a means of building symbolic emotional closeness. Pro-people rhetoric was used to assert caring, not to design structural change.

Furthermore, within Laclau's (2005) framework, populism is understood as a process of political articulation that unites fragmented social demands into a chain of collective identity called "the people." In this context, the free lunch promise becomes an articulation point that allows various aspirations — from child hunger to welfare inequality — to be connected through a single powerful symbolic narrative. Prabowo–Gibran did not claim to carry a grand ideology, but packaged basic needs as the primary marker of their closeness to the public. Thus, the populism pursued is pragmatic and communicative, not ideological — functioning to strengthen electoral legitimacy through simplicity of message and the power of symbol.

From the Middle Class to the Grassroots: The Shift in Prabowo's Voter Segmentation

Prabowo Subianto's political journey through three presidential elections demonstrates a significant change in the voter segments he targeted. In the 2014 and 2019 Presidential Elections, Prabowo carried a narrative of strong opposition to the government of Joko Widodo, with emphasis on economic nationalism, national self-reliance, and criticism of the ruling elite. This strategy was quite successful in capturing votes from the urban middle class, particularly conservative religious and critical nationalist groups (Mietzner, 2015). However, his support base still failed to reach the grassroots community broadly — a base that in both periods was dominated by Jokowi.

The strategic shift is clearly visible in the 2024 Presidential Election, when Prabowo ran alongside Gibran Rakabuming Raka, President Jokowi's son. Having previously appeared as opposition, Prabowo now took on the role of continuator of the administration. This transformation was accompanied by a shift in campaign strategy toward a more populist approach, including through the free lunch promise targeting voters from the lower classes — especially school children, housewives, and residents in peripheral areas. Media coverage described the program as covering all students from early childhood education through high school throughout Indonesia, with phased distribution (Zain & Dzulfaroh, 2023). Data processed from Kompas.com shows that this rhetoric was used intensively to build the impression of closeness with ordinary people.

Within Kurt Weyland's (2001) framework, this strategy reflects populism as a political approach relying on leadership personalization and simplification of public messages — whereby a figure is constructed as a leader who responds directly to the needs of the people. The free lunch promise was not built on technocratic calculation, but was packaged in simple yet emotionally powerful moral rhetoric, with the goal of broadening political appeal to untapped voter segments. Prabowo–Gibran did not position themselves as structural reformers, but as a symbolic representation of a leader who cares about the basic needs of society.

Furthermore, populism in this context can also be understood through Ernesto Laclau (2005), who views populism as a logic of political articulation, not as a complete ideology. In this case, the free lunch promise becomes an articulation point that unites various demands and social frustrations — such as poverty, inequality, and hunger — into a single collective narrative simplified in the figure of a leader. Prabowo sought to consolidate the political identity of "the people" through a populist narrative, without truly dismantling the elite structure that shelters him.

Thus, the strategic shift from middle-class to grassroots voters reflects the use of populism as an adaptive electoral instrument. The free lunch promise was not born from grassroots pressure, but is a top-down strategy pursued by the elite to broaden political reach in an increasingly competitive electoral competition. Populism in this context is pragmatic and representational — used not to oppose power, but to reconstruct the image of the ruler as the representation of the people. CONCLUSION

This study analyzes the construction of electoral populism in the free lunch promise championed by Prabowo Subianto and Gibran Rakabuming Raka in the 2024 Presidential Election. The findings show that the program was not merely offered as a social policy, but

was packaged as a political narrative to build a pro-people image and broaden electoral support, particularly from the lower classes of society. Through rhetoric emphasizing basic needs such as "children must not go hungry," this pair sought to build the perception that they understand the suffering of ordinary people — even though structurally they originate from the elite power circle.

Populism in this context was not pursued as an ideological movement or transformational project, but as a pragmatic electoral strategy. The free lunch program (*MBG*) was used to simplify political messages and shape a collective identity of the people through symbols of emotional connection. This approach aligns with Weyland's (2001) thinking on populism as a strategy relying on leadership personalization and direct rhetoric to the masses, as well as Laclau's (2005) idea of populism as a logic of articulation that unites various social demands into a single narrative that is easily recognized and broadly supported. This study also notes a shift in Prabowo's voter segmentation from the urban middle class in previous elections to a grassroots base in the 2024 Presidential Election. This change shows that Prabowo–Gibran's electoral populism is adaptive — used to reposition campaign strategy in an increasingly competitive political landscape. The free lunch narrative became a representational tool to obscure the elite position and expand electoral legitimacy through symbolic closeness with the people.

Thus, it can be concluded that the free lunch promise represents a form of pragmatic populism pursued by the political elite as a top-down representational strategy. The program illustrates how pro-people narratives are formed and mobilized — not by pressure from below, but through political calculation to broaden support in the arena of electoral competition.

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