

Reception of academics toward the film *Dirty Vote* in the context of the 2024 general election

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Received 10 October 2025
Revised 11 November 2025
Accepted 04 December 2025

ABSTRACT

This study examines the academic reception of the documentary film *Dirty Vote*. The film exposes the misuse and partiality of political power during the 2024 general election contestation. Using a qualitative research approach, this study uses Stuart Hall's theory of audience reception, especially the ideas of encoding and decoding. Seven academics from various universities, each with expertise in political communication and media studies, were interviewed for data collection. The results show various interpretations by the informants. Four informants chose a dominant-hegemonic position, interpreting *Dirty Vote* as a form of political literacy and a critique of government abuse. Two informants took a negotiated position, viewing the movie as both a medium for political literacy and a potential for political propaganda in the lead-up to the 2024 presidential general election. Meanwhile, one informant represented an oppositional position, perceiving the movie as biased and politically motivated. In conclusion, *Dirty Vote* Movie functions as a space for interactive discussion between the media, government, and academic universities, affirming that media products can simultaneously foster awareness and provoke ideological debate within a democratic society.

Keywords: *Dirty Vote*; Audience Reception; Academics; Political Communication

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1. INTRODUCTION

Film is a medium for sharing stories, ideas, or specific messages with an audience. Its purpose is to entertain, educate, or influence how people think based on the filmmaker's intent (Asri, 2020). As a form of mass communication, films play a key role in shaping public responses. McQuail (2011) identified two main factors in the development of film. First, films are often used as propaganda tools to influence political goals. Second, it serves as a critique of society, reflecting on various social realities. Film has a dual power; it can both support authority and serve as a means of resistance to social and political inequalities.

Films as a medium of mass communication possess symbolic power in the delivery of messages, cultural values, and criticisms. The visual strength and narrative structure of films connect communications between filmmakers and audiences as members of civil society. Such a process allows films to build public opinion while educating the medium that awakens critical consciousness in citizens, especially with the political dynamics a country undergoes before a general election (Agustina, 2024).

Audiences perceive media messages and give meaning to them in ways that might vary from one another, cultivating civic awareness regarding emerging social and political issues (Panuju, 2021, p. 42). Therefore, film should not only be considered an entertainment medium but also a reflective and

the meaning of a message would change according to how it was perceived and considering their different social positions (Vera, 2024, p. 13). According to Bungin (2017, p. 128), mass media act as an agent of hegemony, consolidating dominance among groups but simultaneously may also act as a site of resistance against social inequities within society (Halim, 2025). This view explicitly explains the dialectical nature of film: it might be used both as an instrument of power and as a means of critique against the government. In democratic systems, films are often instrumental in political expression, through which manipulation, deviation, and injustice in the democratic process are brought to light (Nurul Hidayat, 2025).

As a film genre, documentaries are highly vital in presenting reality while simultaneously blurring fact and fiction. In documentaries, the narrative and aesthetic methods used are reflective of constructed realities, creating an authentic and engaging but often confrontational viewing experience (Hill et al., 2019). In this regard, reception theory becomes relevant for studying how different groups of audiences with different education, culture, social, and life experiences interpret a film differently (Astu 2024).

The most engaging documentary film analyzed is *Dirty Vote* by Watchdoc Documentary, directed by Dandhy Dwi Laksono. Not only does this documentary carry critical messages about the misconduct and partiality of power in political contests, but it was also released in the lead-up to Indonesia's 2024 presidential election.

From an academic standpoint, this film provides significant subject matter for scholarly examination, particularly from the perspective of academic reception. There are at least three reasons why the reception or interpretation by academics is important. First, academics have the analytical and ethical competence to review socio-political representations within electoral contexts, enabling them to provide objective insights into the criticisms raised by dirty voting. Second, *Dirty Vote* created a pro-and-cons controversy among viewers, especially among those who support each presidential candidate in the 2024 election, thus provoking an ethical debate in political communication regarding the boundary between constructive criticism and politically motivated propaganda. Third, the academics' reception has played an important mediating role in connecting the critical position of the film to the future of Indonesian democracy by providing a theoretical underpinning and normative reflection on the meaning of the film within the public sphere (Hidayat, 2025).

Therefore, this study analyzes the academic reception of the documentary *Dirty Vote* in the context of the 2024 General Election. With the maneuvering of complex political dynamics for influence and triumph in this election, this research attempts to establish how film works in academic circles as a medium of social critique and for promoting democratic literacy. By engaging in this exploration, this study will be able to explain the relationship that exists among film, media criticism, and the encouragement of democratic awareness among academics.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Stuart Hall's Reception Analysis

The term reception comes from the Latin word *recipere* and the English word *reception*, which means to receive or welcome. In a broader sense, reception is defined as a way through which audiences give meaning to or process media texts, especially how they respond to television or cinematic messages (Ghassani & Nugroho, 2018). The essential assumption of reception analysis is that audiences are active participants in interpreting media messages rather than being passive consumers (Widyastuti, 2023).

The theory and methodology of reception analysis boil down to how audiences perceive and internalize media messages. Its prime focus lies with the audience (Vera, 2024). The crux of this kind of analysis is the investigation of the relationship between audience meaning-making and media meaning-making. Media messages are open and polysemic in nature; they contain multiple sets of meanings. Audiences, conceptualized as interpretive communities, are conceived as active constructors of meaning from media texts rather than passive absorbers of the meanings intended by the producers (McQuail, 2005).

Hall (1980, p. 128) asserts that audiences decode media messages through three distinct positions: dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional.

First, the dominant hegemonic position. In this position, "the media produce the message; the masses consume it. The audience reading coincides with the preferred reading." Audiences accept the encoded meaning of a media message that corresponds to the dominant cultural or ideological code in society.

Second, Negotiated Position. The negotiated position occurs when audiences generally accept the dominant ideology but resist or reinterpret it in specific contexts. Here, audiences acknowledge the overarching framework of the dominant ideology but apply exceptions or modifications according to their cultural norms or situational contexts.

Third, Oppositional Position. The oppositional role arises when critical audiences reject the preferred meaning encoded by the media and produce an alternative interpretation. That is, the audience decodes the message in a way that is in direct opposition to the media's intention; they replace the intended meaning with their own ideological framework or worldview.

3. METHOD

This qualitative approach is used to understand the phenomena experienced by research subjects in their context (Meleong, 2017). In the context of documentary film reception, a qualitative approach was used to understand the academic reception of the film *DirtyVote* in the context of the 2024 election. A qualitative approach is chosen since it allows the in-depth exploration of meanings, perceptions, and interpretations of research subjects related to social reality and media. Therefore, this research not only explores the film's message but also aims to objectively understand academic reception as an audience with analytical and ethical competencies.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews with seven academics from diverse backgrounds in political communication and media studies. The informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, with the requirement that they had seen the film *DirtyVote* and were academic staff. The interviews were conducted by the researcher between November and October 2025.

After data collection, it was analyzed using audience reception theory, referring to the encoding/decoding model (Stuart Hall). The analysis was used to determine the academic reception of the film *DirtyVote* as dominant-hegemonic, negotiating, or oppositional.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Result

4.1.1 Dominant (Hegemonic) Position

A dominant position occurs when the audience fully accepts the message conveyed by the media in accordance with the filmmaker's intentions. In the film *Dirty Vote*, informants in this position responded that the film's content depicted political realities on the ground, particularly regarding the abuse of power in the lead-up to elections to win the contest. They believed the film successfully explained previously hidden truths and saw it as a form of moral courage in criticizing the non-transparent implementation of the election and democracy system and the government's bias toward certain candidates. As mentioned by informants 1 and 2:

The film *Dirty Vote* opened the eyes of many members of the public to the fact that law-making can be controlled by dominant power. This is a negative pretence for democracy. Of course, this is not political propaganda, but rather a necessary step in political literacy (Interview with informant 1).

And when viewed from the perspective of data sources, objectivity, and methodology, the film's production is also very clear and can be scientifically proven (Interview with informant 2).

According to interviews with Informants 1 and 2, the message conveyed in the film "*Dirty Vote*" represents the political realities occurring in Indonesia, particularly the influence of power on the legal and democratic processes. They believe that the film successfully reveals the dominant realities of power within the Indonesian political system and plays a role in raising public awareness of these conditions. They reject the notion that the documentary "*Dirty Vote*" is political propaganda, instead viewing it as a means of enlightenment and critical reflection on the current democratic situation.

Regarding data sources, they also stated that the film can be scientifically proven and justified; therefore, the opinions expressed in the film are not speculative but rather based on social and empirical realities. Furthermore, informants interpreted "*Dirty Vote*" as a form of citizen political literacy that needs to be developed amidst low public awareness of political ethics and practices in Indonesia. According to them, the film fulfills an educational function by providing the audience with explanations and an understanding of the importance of transparency, justice, and the independence of legal institutions in maintaining the quality of democracy. The following are the results of the interview with Informant 5.

I agree with the message conveyed in *Dirty Vote*, because what is shown in the film is not fiction, but rather real events carried out by the authorities in a structured manner (Interview with informant 5)

This interpretation illustrates that the informant positioned himself in a dominant-hegemonic position, fully accepting the film's message in accordance with the creator's intentions. This reception emphasized that documentary films can be a strategic instrument for building citizen political awareness and strengthening social control against abuses of power.

The movie drew wider attention to the unhealthy patterns of power in the pre-election period, with state instruments seemingly serving specific parties' interests. This was stated in an interview with Informant 3.

The data from the informant above reveal that "*Dirty Vote*" is a medium for social criticism of government practices that have deviated from democratic processes. In this case, the informant evaluated that the film successfully brought into public awareness the inappropriate intervention of power in the process leading up to the election, in which the state was no longer neutral but had become a part of the political interests of the people in power: This perspective explains that the documentary provides a way

of collectively assessing and stocktaking the degree to which the concepts of justice and integrity are adhered to in the democratic system, especially during general elections.

This informant's comment also indicates a concern over the deterioration of the quality of democracy because the elites abuse political interests. The state does not behave as a neutral facilitator; it takes sides, leading to a situation in which the public has lost confidence in democracy.

Thus, a movie like "Dirty Vote" is a mode of entertainment and also a medium to raise public consciousness and become more critical of power dynamics and the state's role in ensuring honest and free elections.

4.1.2 Negotiation Position

The negotiation position is where the audience or informant accepts the dominant ideological practices and the various messages presented in *Dirty Vote*, but rejects their application in certain cases. This indicates that the informants do not entirely reject the film's message, but rather recognize that there are relevant criticisms as a form of concern about unhealthy political practices. This position emphasizes the active reception process of the audience; the meaning of the film is not received passively, taking it at face value, but rather negotiated according to the background knowledge and individual values of each informant.

Each narrator conveys their communication goals well, but unfortunately, they lack a counterbalance, namely, from the perspective of the criticized. Data from sources obtained need to be presented in a balanced manner and should emerge after the contestation, not before the election, (Informant 2).

The data in the *Dirty Vote* message is indeed accountable, but a closer look at the three actors in the documentary clearly reveals their positions in Indonesian politics leading up to the general election. Their comments, invariably, position them as critics of the government. This clearly highlights the imbalance in this documentary (Interview with informant 7).

According to interviews with informants 2 and 7, the data sources obtained need to be presented in a balanced manner so that the documentary not only represents a particular perspective that also has political interests in the election, but also serves as a political communication product with a balanced and accountable messaging strategy. Therefore, proportional data presentation allows for more objective analysis and can be understood as a media text containing ideological interests and simultaneously as a means of political literacy to raise public awareness of healthy political practices.

This informant certainly does not deny the existence of political interests driven by those in power to support certain candidates, emphasizing that the implementation of such elections should be of public concern so that democracy does not lose its substance. The informant assessed that raising public critical awareness regarding the use of government power must be fostered through media and political literacy controlled by elite interests. Thus, although the informant stated that political interests of power exist, he also emphasized the role of the audience in safeguarding democracy through critical, analytical, and active participation.

4.1.3 Oppositional Position

The oppositional position is the final method in audience reception theory for decoding the message of the documentary "Dirty Vote" through opposition, which involves criticizing and rejecting the message constructed by the film, which is considered non-neutral and imbued with political interests.

This final position clearly illustrates that the informant positions himself as an active and critical audience member of the media texts presented in this documentary. Thus, the informant does not accept the message of the film; he also says that the narrative is not balanced and is biased according to a certain

political agenda. The film is not considered to reflect the socio-political reality as presented but as constructed in such a way as to reflect the perspective of its creator.

This oppositional role demonstrates the power dynamic within the reception of media messages. The audience not only accepts them at face value, but they also engage in shaping and re-negotiating the film's message based on experience, knowledge, and levels of trust with the media and institutions of power.

Substantively and persuasively, "Dirty Vote" is a tool of political propaganda communication. The opposition study of the film also frequently points to a number of potential biases and selective use of data and facts in support of their desired narrative, namely the dissection of the practices and conditions of the political perspectives of one of the presidential candidates in the 2024 election. (Interview with informant 6)

According to this informant's source, the substance of the film Dirty Vote is not only understood as an informative documentary but also intended to influence public perception. The informant emphasized the indications behind this, namely, that it serves as a political propaganda tool under the guise of political education. This underlines active reception by the audience in reading the film-not passively accepting the message of the film but rather a critical reading of it, perceived as having political interests ahead of the 2024 general election. Thus, Dirty Vote serves in influencing public perception through strategic planning.

4.2 Discussion

The dynamics of the 2024 presidential election are further heightened with the release of the documentary "Dirty Vote." Watchdoc Documentary presents the film in cooperation with Director Dandhy Dwi Leksono, a production house noted for its critical work on government policies. The film brings into the open the non-neutrality, irregularities, and abuses committed against the democratic system by the government. In the form of a narrative presented by three academics, Zainal Arifin Mochtar, Feri Amsari, and Bivitri Susanti, the film reveals how state instruments are not neutral and tend to favor a particular presidential candidate.

"Dirty Vote" not only relays data and facts but also political messages, framing, and constructed ideologies. The movie can thus be read with the theory of audience reception, encoding, and decoding pioneered by Stuart Hall. Hall insists that audiences are never passive carriers of any messages or information from media; instead, they actively interpret meaning according to their personal experience and knowledge. This decoding process gives rise to three important positions within the audience reception theory: the dominant/hegemonic position, the negotiating position, and the oppositional position.

Codes can be read in a very different way from the intended connotation of the filmmaker. Some informants did stress that "Dirty Vote" is political education for the larger public, but others again said it creates a critical stance in order to ensure proportionality. A number even said that "Dirty Vote" was political propaganda.

The dynamics in the responses of these informants signal an active audience reception, which also denotes active engagement with the film. Some audiences, from within an ideological context, did interpret it as a manipulative play of power.

Based on the results of the reception with academics, the three audience receptions emerged as follows in Table 1:

Table 1. Categorization of Academic Reception

Reception Position	Informant Categorization	Meaning or Interpretation that is formed
Dominant Position	Informants 1, 3, 4 and 5	The Dirty Vote film is a political literacy media based on data and facts (objective) to increase critical public awareness.
Negotiating Position	Informants 2 and 7	The film Dirty Vote is considered a political literacy tool which also has political propaganda interests, the message is interpreted selectively and contextually.
Opposition Position	Informant 6	The film Dirty Vote is not just a documentary, but a political product that aims to influence public perception for the benefit of the 2024 presidential election.

Processed by researchers

With the data above, the academic reception of the film "Dirty Vote" placed a dominant position whereby the majority of the informants interpreted the film to be data-based and objective as a political literacy medium. This academic perspective confirms the acceptance of the filmmaker's message, namely providing political literacy to the audience regarding the abuse of power and the lack of neutrality in the 2024 presidential election. Thus, most informants of academic background tended to see "Dirty Vote" as a means for public enlightenment.

The outcomes of this movie illustrate that audience reception forms a dynamic spectrum of meanings. This also reinforces Stuart Hall's encoding and decoding, which explains that media meaning is not fixed but negotiable in the process of audience interpretation. The film also acts as an arena for ideology, power, and critical awareness in the struggle for meaning (Halim, 2024).

The audience treated it as a kind of counter-discourse against political power. This film was considered to have successfully exposed the abuse of power and threatened Indonesian democracy. On the other hand, from a more reflective and academic point of view, the legitimacy of a message would be based not only on ideological conformity but also on epistemic considerations such as validity of data, transparency of methodology, and objectivity of narration. This interpretation shows scientific rationality in audience reception, which grants value to a film, and audience reception, which judges it with verifiable standards.

This analysis depicts scientific rationality in audience reception and assigns value to a film by way of verifiable standards of knowledge. This also highlights the fact that the acceptance of documentary films does not rely exclusively on political preferences, but rather on political literacy and intellectual orientation of the audience.

In the negotiation position, the informants highlighted an ambivalent attitude: they accepted some messages of the film but at the same time criticized those messages the film got across. The most important criticism was about communication ethics, namely about the timing of broadcasting, which coincided with the 2024 presidential election. This position in Hall's theory explains how meanings are negotiated based on the personal values and public ethical norms. Audiences in this position definitely did not reject the main message of the film, but they regarded the fairness of representation and neutrality of the time of broadcasting as important elements of accountable political communication.

Meanwhile, from the opposing perspective, the documentary film Dirty Vote was considered one-sided in its political communication message, having ample possibilities to be transformed into a tool and propaganda message. This interpretation underlines data selectivity, framing, and the timing of broadcasting as an index of partiality towards specific political forces. This position shows the different levels of literacy and critical consciousness of the public; the audiences did not only reject the message; it rejected and deconstructed the ideological mechanisms that lay behind the screen of political literacy. It follows in this context that this is not a pedagogic medium, while it is a tool of persuasion; documentary films have been used to enhance the credibility of the film.

In the opposition's point of view, Dirty Vote is not a representation of political education but an instrument to influence public opinion. It therefore sees the film as less neutral because of its publication momentum, supposedly almost at the heat of the 2024 presidential election, and because it unveiled a one-

sided bias in favor of a particular candidate. In fact, such an analysis shows in them an acute awareness of strategies by media of political communication, very often framed as moral and educational narratives. This opposition reception, therefore, uncovers the ideological dimension of a documentary and how objectivity then becomes a tool of legitimacy for political messages that have a hidden agenda, presented behind the political educational framing (Hidayat et al, 2025).

Comparing these three positions in their entirety, it confirms that the documentary *Dirty Vote* has become a site of debate regarding meaning and ideology by audiences, including academics. In the dominant position, the film is represented as counter-hegemonistic to government power. In the negotiating position, the film is represented as a crucial work that needs a balance of ethics and timing. Meanwhile, in the oppositional position, the film is represented as a politicized media production that was made to influence the people's decisions in the 2024 presidential election. All three construct a spectrum of acceptance that describes the degree of political awareness and belief in alternative media in Indonesia.

Based on an analysis of audience reception of the documentary "*Dirty Vote*," three important aspects can be used as models for analyzing the reception of political documentaries in Indonesia. First, "*Dirty Vote*" serves as a space for ideological struggles. This film is not merely a reflection of reality, but also an arena where ideologies are framed and contested. "*Dirty Vote*" illustrates how media texts can be interpreted dynamically and diversely, according to the audience's social position, education, public beliefs, and political preferences.

Second, the audience acts as an active recipient in the political communication process. The diverse reception demonstrates that viewers of this film possess the critical competency to understand, evaluate, negotiate, and reject its messages. This strengthens the argument that media education should be an integral part of political education for the public. Third, ethics and objectivity are key challenges in the film "*Dirty Vote*." This film presents an ethical dilemma between its political educational function and its potential for political propaganda. Producing political documentaries requires a balance between time, morality, publication, and the variety of sources to avoid potential ideological bias.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and analysis of academic reception of the film *Dirty Vote*, audiences with academic backgrounds positioned themselves as active and critical recipients of the film's message. Academics interpreted the film as an informative documentary presenting political data and facts, but also assessed the film's message construction, which was imbued with political and ideological interests. The resulting reception was not singular, but divided into three positions: dominant-hegemonic, negotiation, and opposition. The majority of academics interpreted the film as a form of political literacy aimed at raising public awareness of political realities, which are in fact used as a means of abuse of power in elections (dominant position). Others interpreted the framing of political literacy as a motive for political propaganda (negotiation). The remaining informant, one informant, rejected the narrative of the film itself as too biased or politically motivated in advance of the 2024 presidential election.

The academic reception, therefore, confirms that the film *Dirty Vote* is one space for political dialectics that take place in the course of messages being received, depending on one's knowledge, ideological background, and political preferences. This confirms that audiences in this digital era are not passive spectators who simply accept information but rather interpret information in light of their prior knowledge, experiences, and democratic framework regarding democratic issues in the 2024 presidential election.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval is not required for this research.

Informed Consent Statement

All participants in this research were informed of the research objectives before data collection. Participation is voluntary, and all informant data is kept confidential for academic purposes.

Authors' Contributions

MR contributed to the conceptualization of the study, development of the research design, and formulation of the theoretical framework using Stuart Hall's audience reception theory. He conducted the majority of the data collection through academic interviews, performed the primary analysis of the encoding–decoding interpretations, and prepared the initial draft of the manuscript. As the corresponding author, he also coordinated the submission and revision process. GMS contributed to the refinement of the methodological approach, validation of the analytical interpretation, and strengthening of the discussion on political communication and media studies. He provided substantial input in revising the manuscript for conceptual clarity and academic rigor. ME assisted in the literature review, data triangulation, and the development of the discussion related to political literacy and media critique. She also contributed to editing the final manuscript and ensuring the coherence of the conclusions.

Disclosure Statement

The Authors declare that they have no conflict of interest

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available upon request from the corresponding author for privacy.

Funding

This study did not receive any external funding.

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