

# Ad Hominem in Indonesian Political Debate: A Dilemma in Democracy?

Sukarsono

Universitas Islam Negeri Sayyid Ali Rahmatullah Tulungagung, Indonesia

E-mail: Sukarsono@uinsatu.ac.id

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## Abstract

To maintain his face during political debate sessions, a political leader often avoids focusing his argument on the issue being discussed. Instead, he often verbally attacks his opponent's personality with different motivations. This study investigates how presidential candidates in Indonesia committed an ad hominem fallacy during the 2024 presidential debates. The data were collected from YouTube videos and the debate transcripts were downloaded from the internet. The data were qualitatively analyzed to identify the types and functions of ad hominem appearing on the debates. The researcher found ad hominem of *abusive*, *circumstantial*, *tu quoque*, *guilt by association* types colouring the debate sessions. Meanwhile, the used ad hominem functions as *criticising*, *cornering*, and even *belittling* the credibility or capacity of the debate opponent. The findings also indicate that there is a symmetrical trending pattern between the frequency of ad hominem use in debates and the candidates' vote gaining, implying its use as (i) a rhetorical tool in political debate to achieve electoral success; (ii) an indicator of political education failure in a democratic society.

**Keywords:** ad hominem, fallacy types, functions, political debate

## 1. Introduction

The fallacies of reasoning committed by a debater are a common phenomenon during a debate session due to suspiciously inadequate knowledge on the issue being addressed. A common fallacy appearing in debate is what is called *ad hominem*, a type of logical fallacy used by a debater to personally attack the opponent instead of focusing on the issue being debated. It commonly occurs in a debate in any forum, even in daily social interactions or academic discussions. As *Ad Hominem* occurs, a discussion becomes less enlightening, losing focus on the core issue being addressed. Political debates, including those of presidential candidates, are interesting to analyze from perspectives of either formal logic or practical politics. The former views that arguments should be constructed according to logical rules and common sense. On the other hand, practical politics is concerned with how to win people's votes, commonly involving strategies to persuade and manipulate public opinion.

Hess-Luttich (2007) emphasizes that political debates are a “double game,” meaning they present rational arguments while also making tactics to sway the audience. As a debater distracts the audience from the focused issue under discussion, it may lead to the use of fallacious arguments, such as *ad hominem*, which attacks the opponent's personal character rather than their proposed policies. In fact, research has shown that *ad hominem* arguments are commonly used in political debates to discredit opponents and gain an advantage (e.g., Jazeri et al., 2019). If this is the case, the objective of debate, i.e. providing political education and electoral discourse to the voters, might be in vain.

The quality of democracy in Indonesia has been declining due to increasing authoritarianism and decreasing electoral quality (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019). The use of *ad hominem* in political debate may worsen the democratic atmosphere in Indonesia, considering that Indonesian politics is also coloured by high levels of intensity and polarization of voters. And most apprehensively, Indonesian politics is coloured by political dynasties. Darwis and Amalia (2025) underscored that Indonesian democracy has been undermined by political dynasties, in which power is passed down among family members and thus hindering opportunities for non-political elite circles to participate in a fairly treated electoral contest. Hence, such a political condition creates inequality and unfairness among young Indonesian potential leaders. The practice seems legitimate in the eyes of political parties and in accordance with electoral rule although it obviously weakens Indonesia's democracy in the long run. Democracy in a country can only thrive if the state institutions and procedures conducive support participation and fairness in the electoral process.

The aforementioned phenomena negatively indicating the declining Indonesian politics have triggered the researcher to conduct this study, aiming to look into the quality of presidential debate in 2024, especially concerning the presence of *ad hominem* acts committed by the presidential candidates. In democratic societies, political debates play a significant role in educating people positively about well-qualified democracy since the prospective leaders can articulate their visions and policies. Hence, an ideal political debate should be idea-rich, free from *ad hominem* so that voters consume healthier, broader, and more meaningful political discourse. And thus they may have a valuable chance in considering the most potential

candidate to elect. Through evaluating the contestants' stances and arguments on crucial public issues in their country, they may come to the right leader, whose capacity and integrity are reliable to overcome the state's problems.

So far, studies on the use of ad hominem in political debate have been conducted by several researchers. Essentially, they revealed that the use of ad hominem in political debates in Indonesia are driven by, at least, (i) a desire to belittle the opponent's capacity, thereby diminishing their credibility in the public; and (ii) a desire to strengthen the identity and solidarity of their electoral-success team and supporters (Santoso & Hidayat, 2022; Alemina, et al., 2023; Budiman & Herdiansyah, 2023). In addition, a study by Syahputra (2021) suggested that the use of ad hominem in a political debate may potentially undermine democratic discourse and manipulate public opinion. The previous studies mainly contribute to interpretation, shedding light on the intricate relationship between language, politics, and power (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019; Hill & Sen, 2005).

The current study particularly replicates the study of Jazeri et al. (2019) investigating the use of ad hominem in a presidential debate held by Indonesian General Election Commission. While Jazeri's study focused on the forms and motivations of the debaters in using ad hominem based on data corpus of 2019, this study distinctively focused on the fallacy types and pragmatic use of ad hominem acts, utilizing the data corpus of 2024. Specifically, the current study aims to analyze (1) the fallacy types of ad hominem and (2) the functions of ad hominem found in presidential debate 2024. Besides, the study attempts to interpret how ad hominem pragmatically functions to win the electoral competition. By extending the study examination to the fallacy types and functions of ad hominem in data corpus of 2024 presidential candidates, the researcher expected to gain more insightful interpretation and the electoral implications of the use of ad hominem on the electoral success in Indonesian political contests.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

This section discusses the concept of ad hominem and its types, necessary to provide a theoretical framework for data collection and analysis.

### *2.1 Understanding Ad Hominem*

In a discussion or debate, we often hear personal attacks directed at an individual, rather than at the substance of the argument being presented. This type of attack is known as Ad Hominem, which comes from Latin meaning "against man." This term was first used in the context of logic to describe an argument that attacks a person's character or background rather than addressing the claim or topic being discussed.

Ad Hominem is a term derived from Latin that literally means "against man." In the context of logic, the term is used to refer to a type of argument that attacks the character, motives, or attributes of the individual making the argument, rather than addressing the substance of the argument itself. This type of attack is considered a logical fallacy because it is irrelevant to the validity of the argument being discussed.

According to Irving M. Copi (1986), ad hominem is a form of fallacy of relevance that often

occurs in debates, where attention is diverted from the substance of the argument to personal matters. For example, if someone argues that “environmental policies should be tightened to reduce pollution,” this argument cannot be considered wrong simply because the person making it may not practice an environmentally friendly lifestyle. In this case, attacking the individual does not provide a valid basis for refuting their argument.

According to Walton (1998), *ad hominem* is an attack on someone’s character or personality that is irrelevant to the argument being discussed. Walton states that *ad hominem* can be used as a tactic to distract from the main issue and focus on attacking the opposing debater. However, he also emphasizes that *ad hominem* is not always wrong, as in some cases, a person’s character or personality can be relevant to the argument being discussed.

Tindale (2007) adds that *ad hominem* can be used as a tactic to influence public opinion. Tindale states that *ad hominem* can exploit human psychological weaknesses, such as the tendency to believe information that aligns with our beliefs. Therefore, Tindale emphasizes the importance of understanding and identifying *ad hominem* in debates to improve the quality of discussion. *Ad hominem* is also frequently used in discussions to undermine the credibility of the other person. This is seen in many contexts, from informal discussions to political debates. Walton (1998) notes that this tactic is effective in influencing the opinions of audiences untrained in logical analysis, making an argument appear strong even though it is actually logically flawed.

Furthermore, it’s important to understand that *ad hominem* isn’t just a harsh verbal attack; it can also manifest in more subtle forms, such as insinuations or rhetorical questions aimed at discrediting an individual. Hurley (2011) explains that this fallacy often goes unnoticed because it sounds logical on the surface, especially when the audience has an emotional bias against the individual being attacked. By understanding the definition of *ad hominem*, we can more critically evaluate arguments and prevent this logical fallacy from damaging the quality of discussions. This understanding is an important foundation for building healthy and rational communication patterns.

## *2.2 Fallacy Types of Ad Hominem*

Understanding the types of *ad hominem* is crucial for recognizing the attack patterns that frequently arise in discussions or debates. *Ad hominem*, as a logical fallacy, has several different varieties based on how the attack on an individual is carried out. The various types of *ad hominem* can be explained as follows.

### *a. Abusive Ad Hominem*

Abusive *ad hominem* is the most direct form of *ad hominem*. It involves verbal attacks or insults against an individual’s character. An example is when someone dismisses an argument simply because the other person is considered “stupid,” “incompetent,” or has a bad reputation. This type of attack is not only irrelevant to the argument being presented, but also undermines ethical communication. Irving M. Copi notes that this form is often used in political contexts to undermine the credibility of an opponent without addressing the substance of their argument.

#### b. Circumstantial Ad Hominem

This type occurs when someone attacks an opponent's argument by suggesting that the argument is influenced by personal circumstances or interests. For example, if a scientist argues that renewable energy should be developed, the opponent might argue that the opinion is invalid because the scientist owns shares in a renewable energy company. This attack attempts to undermine the audience's belief in the argument based on the individual's personal context, even though that context is irrelevant to the truth of the argument itself.

#### c. Tu Quoque

This type is known as the "hypocrisy fallacy," where someone tries to refute an argument by showing that the individual making the argument is inconsistent in his or her actions. An example is when an environmental leader who campaigns for reducing carbon emissions is attacked for using a fuel-guzzling private vehicle. Tu Quoque does not prove that the argument is wrong; instead, it simply shifts attention from the substance of the argument to the individual's behavior.

#### d. Guilt by Association

Guilt by Association occurs when someone is attacked by associating them with a disliked group or individual. For example, if someone supports a particular policy, the opposing party may attempt to discredit their argument by associating it with a disreputable ideology or group, even though there is no direct connection between the argument and that association.

#### e. Ad Feminam

As a subcategory of Ad Hominem Abusive, Ad Feminam is an attack specifically directed at women based on their gender. Walton explains that this type is often used to discredit women's arguments in a biased way, such as downplaying women's emotions or experiences as the basis for their arguments.

### 3. Research Method

This study is concerned with the acts of ad hominem, as one of their rhetorical devices to gain more votes, used by the presidential candidates during the 2024 general election. In order to obtain more insightful interpretation on this phenomenon, this study was qualitatively approached. The case study was employed to obtain an in-depth understanding of the fallacy types and functions of ad hominem used within the context of Indonesian presidential debate events. Moreover, this study applied Korta & Perry's Critical Pragmatics framework (2006, 2008, 2011), as the theoretical basis of analyzing the pragmatic content of the debate, particularly the communicative functions or intentions, implied meanings, and the electoral impact of ad hominem use as a rhetorical tool in the debate.

The data of the study were the sets of statements containing acts of ad hominem articulated by president(vice) candidates during the official debate sessions in the 2024 presidential election. The debate sessions were held and organized by the Indonesian General Elections Commission (KPURI), comprising five series of official debate sessions. The debate sessions were held on

December, 12 and 22, 2023 for the first and second rounds and January 7 and 12, 2024 for the third and fourth rounds and on February 4, 2024, for the last round, at the KPURI headquarters as well as in Jakarta Convention Center. The data on the debates were derived from the official YouTube channel owned by Indonesian General Elections Commission (KPURI), i.e. (<https://youtube.com/@kpurepublikindonesia?si=2JSe7apcfWGLyQD5>). Besides, the researcher also utilized the debate transcripts publicly documented and published on the internet as the secondary data source. Each debate session was subdivided into four segments, i.e. opening statements, Q&A, closing remarks, and the interactive debate session among candidates.

The data collection was carried out through the following stages. First, the researcher repeatedly watched the recorded debate sessions on You-tube, while checking out and reading the relevant transcripts of all five debate series from the KPU website and other reliable websites on the internet. Secondly, the researcher compiled and segmented the transcripts based on debater's turns, topics, and sessions. At last, the researcher intensively and carefully read and identified every set of statements indicating an act of ad hominem. Concurrently, the researcher applied a coding framework to the identified statement(s). For instance, the researcher put a code like *DS-1/Pr/01.12/Ab*, which means the datum of ad hominem act was derived from debate session 1, the statement(s) of Prabowo, found in 1 hour:12 minutes, and of an abusive ad hominem category. Those stages were carefully and rigorously carried out to ensure the validity, accuracy, and saturation of the data.

Meanwhile, the data validation was done by (i) comparing data across different debate segments to maintain the authenticity and consistency of the collected sets of sentences containing ad hominem acts. The Interpretation process was carefully cross-checked against key theoretical points of Korta & Perry, and other relevant empirical studies. Furthermore, the researcher also held some discussion sessions with colleagues whose expertise is in pragmatics and discourse analysis to enhance the validity of inferences made during data analysis. Hence, a researcher can reduce his subjectivity during the interpretation process so that the qualitative research rigors such as credibility, dependability, and confirmability, to certain extent, can be achieved.

The data analysis process was mainly geared to the taxonomic activity of the fallacy type of ad hominem act such as *abusive*, *circumstantial*, *tu quoque*, etc and the pragmatic interpretation of their functions. At a macro level, the data analysis in the study was conducted through some procedural stages following Miles and Huberman's (2014) iterative process, i.e. data condensation, presentation, conclusion and verification. This stage was also supported by data coding and categorization processes, mapping the relationships between the forms, types and functions of ad hominem found in data corpus. At the micro level, the analysis was based on Korta and Perry's Critical Pragmatics framework (2006, 2008, 2011), involving the following steps. First the researcher conducted micro-structural analysis in which the identification of lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic features of ad hominem. Next, the analysis proceeds to reveal the intentions and pragmatic inferences, determining the communicative functions of ad hominem acts such as criticizing, cornering, framing, discrediting, etc., occurring in the debate sessions.

Besides, Vedung's (1982) political message analysis was also applied, consisting of two interconnected components: content analysis and function analysis. The former focused on examining the semantic and pragmatic message of the ad hominem arguments, while the latter probed the underlying political motivations and goals driving the debaters to commit the ad hominem acts in their arguments (Fairclough, 2003; Van Dijk, 2008). By integrating these analytical frameworks, the researcher can systematically identify, categorize, and interpret ad hominem arguments, shedding light on meaningful interpretation of the presidential debate events 2024 within Indonesian political context.

#### 4. Findings

This section presents the findings of the research concerning with (i) types of ad hominem found in political debate, i.e. Presidential election 2024 and (ii) the functions of ad hominem according to the context where it occurs.

##### 4.1 Fallacy Types of Ad Hominem Found in the Presidential Election Debate 2024

After conducting data analysis, the researcher presents and discusses the findings, concerning the types of ad hominem acts in the 2024 presidential debate in the section below.

##### a. Abusive ad Hominem

Abusive ad hominem is commonly articulated in the form of an explicit verbal attack or insult referring to an individual's character of a debate opponent. Such a type of ad hominem is found in the data below.

1) Prabowo: *"Mas Anis... Saya berpendapat Mas Anis ini agak berlebihan. Mas Anies mengeluh tentang demokrasi dipilih jadi Gubernur DKI menghadapi pemerintah kalau demokrasi kita tidak berjalan tidak mungkin anda jadi gubernur."*

Brother Anis... I think brother Anis is a bit over the top. Bro Anies complained about the democracy system, but (remember) when you were elected as the Governor of Jakarta, (you were) confronting the government. If our democracy didn't work, you could not have become the elected governor.

The series of statements in data (1) represent an explicit attack delivered by Parbowo in the second round of the presidential debate. Such statements of attack can be categorized into *abusive ad hominem*, by which the debater directly gave a personally verbal attack to his opponent discussing the declining democracy system under Mr. Jokowi's administration. Instead of providing an argumentative response to the opponent's complaint, he judged the opponent as making an exaggerating statement and was overreacting in his complaints about the decline of democracy in Indonesia. The doer of ad hominem obviously refuted that his debater was "a bit exaggerating" and brought up the opponent's past, as having been successfully elected Governor of Jakarta as the evidence that Mr. Jokowi's regime did not interrupt the process of democracy then.

Another example of abusive ad hominem found in data corpus can be provided below.

2) Gibran: *Gus Muhaimin ini lucu ya? Mena...menanyakan masalah lingkungan hidup tapi itu*

*kok pakai botol-botol plastik itu. Padahal saya, Pak Ganjar, Prof. Mahfud pakai botol kaca... Itu gimana itu komitmennya. Botol plastik semua itu...* “Gus Muhaimin is funny, isn’t he? Asking about environmental issues, but he himself uses plastic bottles? Me, Mr. Ganjar, and Prof. Mahfud use glass bottles... Does he have a commitment (to the environment)? All those are plastic bottles...”

The series of statements in data 2 are the responses of vice president candidate number 2 after being asked a question by vice presidential candidate number 1 about bioregional-based development strategies. Instead of answering the question coherently, he launched an explicit personal attack on his opponent, judging him to be ‘funny and uncommitted to environmental issues because his opponent brought plastic drinking water containers.’

#### b. Circumstantial Ad Hominem Type.

As previously explained, circumstantial ad hominem is a form of attack on a debate opponent by suggesting that their argument is influenced by their circumstances or personal interests.

3) Anies: *Saya rasa lebih dari sekedar partai politik. Rakyat tidak percaya kepada proses demokrasi yang sekarang terjadi itu jauh lebih luas dari sekedar partai politik Ketika kita bicara demokrasi minimal ada tiga satu minimal tiga nih satu adalah adanya kebebasan berbicara yang kedua adanya oposisi yang bebas untuk mengkritik pemerintah dan menjadi penyeimbang pemerintah yang ketiga adanya proses pemilu proses Pilpres yang netral yang transparan jujur adil dan kalau kita saksikan hari hari ini dua ini mengalami problem kita menyaksikan bagaimana kebebasan berbicara menurun termasuk mengkritik partai politik dan angka demokrasi kita menurun indeks demokrasi kita bahkan pasal-pasal yang memberikan kewenangan untuk digunakan secara karet kepada pengkritik misalnya undang-undang ite atau pasal 14-15 undang-undang nomor 1 tahun 1946 ...* ‘I think more than just political parties, the people do not believe in the democratic process that is currently happening, it is much broader than just political parties. When we talk about democracy, there are at least three, one is the freedom of speech, second is the existence of an opposition that is free to criticize the government and become a counterweight to the government, third is the existence of a neutral, transparent, honest, and fair election process, three presidential election processes, and if we witness these days, these two are experiencing problems, we are witnessing how freedom of speech is declining, including criticizing political parties, and our democracy index is declining, even articles that give authority to be used in a flexible manner to critics, for example, the ITE law or article 14-15 of Law Number 1 of 1946.’

Anies’ statement in data 3 can be understood as an indirect attack on Prabowo who is paired with Gibran who has not yet met the minimum age limit of 40 years as a requirement to advance as a vice presidential candidate. The candidacy process was carried out by changing the legal regulations through the Constitutional Court. Circumstantial ad hominem actions can be identified through ‘*Saya rasa lebih dari sekedar partai politik rakyat tidak percaya kepada proses demokrasi yang sekarang terjadi...adanya proses pemilu proses Pilpres yang netral yang transparan jujur adil*’ (‘I think more than just political parties, the people do not believe in the current democratic process... the existence of a neutral, transparent, honest, and fair presidential election process’). The statement does not directly attack the Prabowo-Gibran pair

as individuals, but rather the circumstances or processes that allow Gibran to become Prabowo's partner, namely changing the rules through the Constitutional Court.

Another exemplified datum containing *circumstantial ad hominem* can be presented below.

4) *Kembali ke cita-cita para pendiri bangsa, bukan politik yang egois* "Return to the ideals of the nation's founders, not selfish politics."

In data 4, the contestants implicitly engage in *ad hominem*. The phrase "selfish politics" is a sarcasm aimed at attacking the Prabowo-Gibran candidate pair regarding their nomination of a vice-presidential candidate who is under 40 years of age. However, because the authorities were able to change this rule through the Constitutional Court, the presidential candidate was ultimately deemed constitutionally valid. Contestant number 1 viewed the authorities' behavior regarding the validity of this nomination as a selfish and group-centered approach that disregarded the values and ideals of independence exemplified by the founders of the Republic of Indonesia. This attack can be categorized as a *Circumstantial Ad Hominem*. Through this statement, contestant number 2 attacked his opponent, who was not related to contestant number 2's vision, mission, and programs, but only based on circumstances or alleged motives, not on arguments or facts relevant to the debate questions posed by the debate moderator.

#### c. Ad Hominem Guilt by Association

*Ad hominem* by guilt association, namely attacking someone because of their association with other people or certain groups, can be found in data (2).

5) Mahfud: *Mas Gibran, saya sangat tertarik tentang IKN, dan itu bagus. Harus kita laksanakan sebagai warisan dari Pak Jokowi. Tapi, tadi saya tergelitik anggaran untuk IKN itu hanya 20% dari APBN dan sisanya dari investor. Sejauh yang kita baca, sampai sekarang belum ada satu pun investor yang masuk ke sana. Coba kalau ada, sebutkan. Kalau ada, sebutkan. Misalnya, dua atau satu gitu investor mana yang sudah masuk ke sana. Yang saya dengar justru ada ratusan ribu hektar tanah sudah dikuasai oleh pengusaha-pengusaha tertentu sekarang ini. Nah, saya setuju ke depannya itu agar mengundang investor. IKN harus diteruskan, tetapi pendanaannya harus sesuai dengan tujuan semula bahwa itu sebenarnya mengundang investor. Tapi, sekarang ini yang sudah jadi itu semuanya dari APBN, sehingga memang diperlukan langkah-langkah perbaikan agar warisan baik ke Presiden Jokowi ini bisa kita lanjutkan. Terima kasih. Selesai.* "Mahfud: Mr. Gibran, I am very interested in the IKN, and it is good. We must implement it as a legacy from Mr. Jokowi. However, I was intrigued earlier that the budget for the IKN is only 20% from the APBN and the rest from investors. As far as we read, not a single investor has come in there. If there are, please mention them. If there are, please mention them. For example, two or one investor who has come in there. What I heard is that hundreds of thousands of hectares of land are already controlled by certain entrepreneurs now. Well, I agree that going forward, we should invite investors. The IKN must continue, but the funding must be in accordance with its original purpose, which is to actually attract investors. However, now what has been done is all from the APBN, so corrective measures are needed so that we can continue this good legacy from President Jokowi. Thank you. Done.)"

In data 5, Mahfud MD indirectly attacked Gibran for his association with Mr. Jokowi, the president's son, who made policies regarding the new capital city (IKN) during his administration. This can be seen from the clause, '*saya sangat tertarik tentang IKN, dan itu bagus. Harus kita laksanakan sebagai warisan dari Pak Jokowi. Tapi, tadi saya tergelitik anggaran untuk IKN itu hanya 20% dari APBN dan sisanya dari investor. Sejauh yang kita baca, sampai sekarang belum ada satu pun investor yang masuk ke sana. Coba kalau ada, sebutkan. Kalau ada, sebutkan. Misalnya, dua atau satu gitu investor mana yang sudah masuk ke sana*' ("I am very interested in the new capital city, and it's good. We must implement it as a legacy from Mr. Jokowi. However, I was intrigued earlier that the budget for the new capital city is only 20% from the state budget (APBN), with the rest coming from investors. As far as we've read, not a single investor has come in yet. If there are, please name them. If there are, please name them. For example, two or one investor who has already come in.")

From Mahfud MD's statement, it is clear that Gibran was attacked because of his association as Mr. Jokowi's son who built the IKN. by mentioning that Gibran was accused of not having valid data regarding the IKN funding issue. as a result of not clearly stating who the investors who have entered and invested in the project. In addition, Mahfud MD also implied the possibility of abuse of power and violations of the law in the management of the IKN, namely the control of hundreds of thousands of hectares of land by a certain group of businessmen. In this context, Mahfud MD did not fully focus on the topic of discussion related to the importance of transparency and accountability in the management of the IKN, but subtly discredited the information conveyed by Gibran regarding the IKN budgeting which was considered less accountable. Mahfud's statement can be interpreted as an attack on Gibran who was not prepared or lacked accurate information regarding the IKN project problems so that the statement could indirectly weaken Gibran's credibility.

6) Anies: *Masalah terbesar adalah ketidaksetaraan dan ketidakadilan— beberapa elit hanya peduli pada kelompoknya sendiri* "The biggest problem is inequality and injustice—some elites only care about their own group."

The contestant's statement in data [6] can be categorized as ad hominem with guilt by association because the opponent is attacked based on their identity, which is indirectly associated with or affiliated with the ruling government; instead of examining the arguments or facts presented by the opponent. In this context, the opponent is accused of only caring about their own group when entrusted with the position. Thus, indirectly, the ad hominem perpetrator campaigns against the opponent's negative character, who is untrustworthy or prioritizes personal interests over the public interest.

#### d. Ad Hominem Tu Quoque

The ad hominem tu quoque type is an attack on the opponent in the debate by revealing the error of 'hypocrisy', namely by showing the inconsistency of the opponent in presenting his argument, in contrast to his actions in real life. This type of ad hominem can be found in data (3 7) Gibran: *Baik, saya izin menanggapi Gus Muhaimin. Saya ingat Gus Muhaimin dulu sempat ikut meresmikan dan potong tumpeng di IKN. Ini gimana ini? Enggak konsisten. Dulu dukung, sekarang enggak dukung karena menjadi wakilnya Pak Anies, yang mengusung tema*

*perubahan. Sekali lagi, Gus. Mohon maaf, IKN ini bukan hanya membangun bangunan pemerintah, tapi juga sebagai simbol pemerataan pembangunan di Indonesia, sebagai simbol transformasi pembangunan di Indonesia. Dan untuk menanggapi Prof Mahfud. Prof, mungkin nanti setelah pulang dari debat bisa di-Google, sudah banyak yang masuk. Hanya pada Agung Sedayu dan nanti akan tambah lagi. Mungkin setelah Pilpres, karena mereka pasti akan potensi melihat stabilitas politik di Indonesia. Terima kasih.*

‘Gibran: Okay, I’m allowed to respond to Gus Muhaimin. I remember Gus Muhaimin once participated in the inauguration and cutting of the tumpeng at the IKN. What’s this? Inconsistent. Previously supported, now no longer supported because he is Mr. Anies’ deputy, who carries the theme of change. Once again, Gus. I’m sorry, this IKN is not only building government buildings, but also as a symbol of equitable development in Indonesia, as a symbol of development transformation in Indonesia. And to respond to Prof. Mahfud. Prof, maybe after returning from the debate you can Google it, there are already many who have entered. Only on Agung Sedayu and later there will be more. Maybe after the Presidential Election, because they will certainly have the potential to see political stability in Indonesia. Thank you.)

In data 7, an ad hominem *tu quoque* has occurred. In this regard, Gibran implicitly attacked Muhaimin by bringing up Muhaimin’s past, who had participated in the inauguration and cutting of the tumpeng as part of the implementation of the IKN development. This attack can be interpreted as an accusation that Muhaimin did not show a consistent attitude or support for the IKN development process. Gibran implied that Muhaimin’s attitude was due to him having become Anies’s deputy, who is a political opponent of the Prabowo-Gibran pair. Gibran’s attack can be classified as Ad Hominem Tu Quoque because the attack contains the actions of the ad hominem victim in the past that are inconsistent with his current attitude, which deviates from the debate issue related to the IKN development policy directly.

Another reason why the attack can be categorized as Ad Hominem Tu Quoque is because Gibran also implied that Muhaimin’s change in attitude was due to personal political interests. The accusation can be interpreted as Muhaimin not having strong principles in politics and only following personal political ambitions. Thus, in the debate, Gibran did not focus on the topic discussed in the debate, but rather focused on attacking Muhaimin personally regarding his past attitudes.

8) Prabowo: *“Kami akan mengatasi kekurangan dokter dan memperbaiki kesehatan masyarakat, tidak seperti sebelumnya”*

*“We will address the doctor shortage and improve public health like never before.”*

The statement in the data [8] contains ad hominem tu quoque, which means....

In this case, the debater attacks the opponent by pointing out past mistakes or failures instead of criticizing the ideas expressed in the vision and mission statement or the facts or reasoning developed by the opponent. Implicitly, the opponent is deemed incapable of addressing past public health issues and therefore cannot be trusted to address emerging health problems in the community.

#### 4.2 Functions of *Ad Hominem*

The functions of *ad hominem* revealed from the data corpus can be categorized into the functions of (i) criticizing the policies and performance of the contestants or parties related to the contestants, (ii) cornering the opinions of the debate opponent in order to create a negative image of the debate opponent, and (iii) belittling the credibility or capacity of the debate opponent in order to create the impression of being superior to the debate opponent in terms of the insight and capacity of the receiver of *ad hominem*.

a. Criticizing the policies and performance of the contestants while holding office or parties related to the contestants.

Data 3, 4, and 6 are examples of *ad hominem* arguments which are used to criticize a policy related to the debate opponent. The use of *ad hominem* in data [3] is intended to indirectly criticize Gibran's candidacy process as Prabowo's partner as implied by the phrase 'the people do not believe in the democratic process that is currently taking place, which is much broader than just political parties'.

In this context, the criticism does not directly attack Gibran as an individual, but rather the circumstances or process that allowed Gibran to become Prabowo's running mate, namely the rule change through the Constitutional Court. The criticism also does not directly attack Prabowo as an individual, but rather the process involving Gibran as Prabowo's running mate. However, it is important to remember that such criticism can still be considered *ad hominem* if it does not directly address the substance of the policies or decisions made by Gibran or Prabowo, but rather the circumstances or process that allowed them to become running mates.

In data 4, the contestant criticized the authorities in modifying the rule of vice-president nomination through the Constitutional Court. Such authoritative behaviour does reflect a selfish interest. The phrase "selfish politics" is an insinuation to the constitutionality of the nomination of a vice-presidential candidate. In [6], Anies criticized the inequality and injustice that occur in the country due to in-group orientation, prioritizing personal matters other than public interests.

b. Cornering the Debate Opponent

*Ad hominem* can function as a tool to corner the opponent as found in data [2] and 7. In data 2, Gibran cornered Muhaimin by unfolding the inconsistency of Muhaimin in terms of environmental issues since he was caught red-handed using plastic bottles for his drinking water. In data 7, Gibran indirectly cornered his debate opponent by using *Ad Hominem*. He revealed Muhaimin's inconsistent attitude regarding the IKN issue, by bringing up Muhaimin's participation in the inauguration and cutting off the tumpeng for the IKN development. This can be interpreted as an attack that corners Muhaimin who previously supported the IKN and changed his stance against the IKN development after becoming a vice presidential candidate.

c. Belittling the credibility or capacity of the debate opponent.

The use of *ad hominem* arguments to belittle the credibility of the debate opponent can be found in data 5. This can be inferred from the clause conveyed by Mahfud, '*...saya tergelitik*

*anggaran untuk IKN itu hanya 20% dari APBN dan sisanya dari investor. Sejauh yang kita baca, sampai sekarang belum ada satu pun investor yang masuk ke sana. Coba kalau ada, sebutkan.* (‘...I am intrigued that the budget for the IKN is only 20% from the APBN and the rest from investors. As far as we have read, not a single investor has come in there. If there is, please mention it.’) Mahfud’s statement indirectly refutes Gibran’s statement regarding his claim that funding for the IKN development does not depend on the APBN but on foreign investment. Gibran’s credibility, who arbitrarily made baseless claims about IKN funding, was firmly denied by Mahfud. As a vice presidential candidate, it is inappropriate to provide invalid information and mislead the public. Thus, Mahfud’s ad hominem has the potential to damage Gibran’s credibility in the eyes of voters.

In addition, Mahfud MD also suspected abuse of power and violations of the law in the management of the IKN, related to the control of hundreds of thousands of hectares of land by a certain group of businessmen close to power. Subtly, this statement also has the potential to discredit Gibran regarding the government led by his father as president.

## 5. Discussion

The data analysis found that from five debate sessions held by KPU in the 2024 presidential election, ad hominem acts were committed by the presidential as well as vice presidential candidates. The data analysis found four types of ad hominem that have appeared in the debate series, i.e. *abusive*, *circumstantial*, *tu quoque*, and *guilt by association* types. Meanwhile, seen from its function, ad hominem is used by the contestants to (i) criticize the policies and performance of the contestants or parties related to the contestants, (ii) corner the opinions of the debate opponents to give the impression to the public that the ad hominem user is superior to his debate opponent in terms of idea-insight and capacity, and (iii) undermine the credibility of the debate opponent.

In the 2024 presidential debate series, ad hominem acts generally committed by contestants were conveyed either explicitly or implicitly. An explicit ad hominem act, as found in the data corpus, has been featured by direct personal attacks on the opponent, for example, accusing the other contestant of doing an ethical violation; labelling rivals as self-serving or pursuing narrow group interests to the detriment of national unity; questioning the opponent’s integrity as a leader who can be a role model regarding leadership ethics, etc. This finding aligns with research conducted by Walton (2020) and Tindale (2020), who identified such an explicit ad hominem as abusive; it is an attack in the form of an argument focused on personal imperfections, thus deviating from the substance of the opposing party’s policy plan being presented or discussed.

Meanwhile, implicit ad hominem usually takes the form of subtle innuendo and sarcasm hidden behind language that appears natural to the layperson. Implicit ad hominem usually carries a message related to the incompetence, hypocrisy, or elitism of the opposing party. Phrases such as “*leaders must not overreact to criticism*” or “*no more stories of intolerance—leaders must match words with deeds*” are often used by contestants to express doubt about the capacity, credibility, and moral fortitude of their opponents, making them known to the public. Thus, the ad hominem actors indirectly campaign against their opponent’s

shortcomings as a potential leader. Implicit acts of ad hominem found in this study can be categorized into circumstantial, guilt by association and tu quoque ad hominem. Such findings are aligned with those of Chilton (2020) and Charteris-Black (2021), which revealed the use of ad hominem as a common cultural narrative and public sentiment to increase their electoral advantage in the eyes of the public.

An interesting thing to note about the finding of this study is that there is a symmetrical trending pattern between the frequency of ad hominem use in debates and the paired candidates' vote gaining. As we know, the Indonesian presidential election 2024 was contested by three pairs of candidates. They are candidate number one, i.e., Anis-Muhaimin, candidate number two, Prabowo-Gibran, and candidate number three, Ganjar-Mahfud. Based on analysis of the collected data, it was found that each pair had committed ad hominem acts during the five debate sessions held by the General Elections Commission (KPU), both involving the presidential and vice-presidential candidates from the competing pairs. From the most to the least frequent users of ad hominem are respectively candidate number two, followed by candidate number one and candidate number three. Symmetrically, the totalled vote-gains obtained by all pairs of candidates are exactly of the same order as the frequency of ad hominem use. Candidate pair number 2 received the highest total vote count, followed by candidate pair number 1, and candidate pair number 3 received the least.

This symmetrical trending pattern between the frequency of ad hominem use in debates and vote gaining suggests that ad hominem appears to be a fairly effective rhetorical tool for obtaining votes in an electoral contest. interpreted as an effective strategy in winning a presidential contest. This is in line with Jamieson's (1992) opinion on *Dirty Politics: Deception, Distraction, and Democracy*, which essentially discusses how politics can become "dirty" by using tactics such as ad hominem to influence public opinion and discredit political opponents. The effectiveness of ad hominem as a rhetorical tool for winning an electoral contest seems to be confirmed by the case of Donald Trump who won two presidential elections in the United States. He often used ad hominem to attack his opponents in several presidential debate sessions. In the context of the US election, people are more likely to vote for candidates who attack their political opponents. With the existence of social media, ad hominem can spread quickly and widely so that ad hominem users become more popular among the public. In this regard, ad hominem has a positive impact on its user's perspective. On the other hand, it can damage the credibility, reputation, and image of the opponent as the victim.

Indeed, this study suggests that, pragmatically, the use of ad hominem in political debate is one of determining factors in electoral success. However, further studies with more valid and reliable data and more methodologically controlled variables need to be conducted to ensure the influence of ad hominem use on people's voting behaviour. Therefore, the effectiveness of ad hominem use as a rhetorical tool in political debates on vote acquisition requires further study with more valid and reliable data.

On the other hand, the use of ad hominem as a tool of political rhetoric may also be an indicator of political education failure in creating healthy political discourse in democratic society. As a political debate is filled with acts of ad hominem, it must have some negative impacts on the

quality of democracy. For one reason is that ad hominem can generally reduce the clarity of discussion, as suggested by Isotalus (2011), and thus can influence public opinion and reduce the quality of discussion. Furthermore, ad hominem can also damage interpersonal relationships and hinder decision-making. Also, ad hominem can be used as a tactic to distract the audience from important issues and the real arguments, leading to unproductive discussions (Walton, 1998).

If this is the case, the people's right to consume healthy political discourse is at stake.

The public may have difficulty determining the quality of their prospective leaders because they cannot obtain objective and comprehensive information about them. A candidate's reputation, even if good, can be damaged by ad hominem, while a candidate with poor qualities can appear more attractive and win over voters. Thus, the indirect impact of ad hominem is that candidates who truly possess the capacity and integrity to steer the nation's great ship toward a better, more prosperous, and more prosperous life are not elected.

Another more serious impact of the use of ad hominem on presidential debates in 2024 is the sharp polarization of voters in the realm of public opinion. This is in line with Syahputra's study (2021) which underscores that the spread of hate speech on social media can influence public opinion and exacerbate Indonesian political polarization. In 2024, immediately after either presidential or vice-presidential debate events were held, various social media channels were filled with comments attacking each other between supporters and sympathizers of the candidates. The occurring polarization phenomena can trigger physical and verbal violence within the community, potentially creating a disintegration of the nation. For example, there are groups who call themselves 'anak Abah', 'oke gas', and various verbal stigmatizations such as 'omon-omon', 'angin tak ber-ktp', 'plonga-plongo', etc. As a result of this ad hominem, an unhealthy political culture and social division is very likely to occur, making society more intolerant of differences in opinion.

In fact, ad hominem may be used as a common tactic in political campaigns, and there is no significant objection to its use in a political context. From a pragmatic perspective, ad hominem can be an effective strategy for candidates to win elections. However, it may bring about negative impacts on the political system and democracy in Indonesia. The use of ad hominem as the powerful and effective rhetoric tool in political debate may reinforce Bourdieu's argument that language is not only a means of communication but also a medium of power that individuals use to achieve their interests and demonstrate practical competence in political discourse.

## 6. Conclusions

Based on the results of the data analysis and previous discussions, this study concludes several important points. First, in the 2024 presidential election debate, the common ad hominem acts appearing in several debate sessions are *abusive*, *circumstantial*, *tu quoque*, and *guilt by association*. Viewed from its function, the ad hominem serves as a tool to criticise, corner, and belittle or undermine the credibility of the debate opponent, bringing about a negative perception to voters. Second, in formal logic, an ad hominem argument is a form of logical

fallacy; an attempt to divert the topic of discussion to what it should be. However, in political debates, ad hominem is not always considered negative, even considered a rhetorical strategy to win a debate, ultimately leading to winning the hearts of voters and electoral success.

Indeed, ad hominem arguments are generally considered invalid reasoning because they attack someone's character rather than addressing the substance of the argument being debated. However, to a particular extent, it is considered acceptable, especially when used to assess one's credibility in making a factual statement. In political debates, it is often used as an effective strategy in debate, as was the case in Trump's electoral victory. Furthermore, in political debates, language is used not only to convey messages but also to motivate and carry out political calculations in the electoral competition.

This study also indicates that there is a symmetrical trending pattern between the frequency of ad hominem use in debates and the candidates' electoral success, suggesting its 'effective' use as a rhetorical strategy. Hence, future studies on similar topics with broader, more comprehensive data coverage need to be conducted to obtain more valid and insightful conclusions. Furthermore, research may shift its focus to other pragmatic aspects, such as reasoning quality, rhetoric, or critical discourse analysis.

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