

Inclusive Development after Reformasi: The Role of Chinese Indonesians in North Sumatra

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ABSTRACT

This study explains how Chinese-Indonesian elites in North Sumatra convert long-run economic centrality into formal political incorporation, and under what electoral conditions these advantages yield vote gains. Using an explanatory-sequential mixed-methods design, we combine administrative and electoral records, association and business registries, media/archival sources, and 25–35 semi-structured interviews. Quantitatively, Model A (logit) estimates the probability of incorporation as a function of economic centrality and capital depth; Model B (OLS/fractional logit) evaluates the effect of recruitment signals on vote share and their interaction with cleavage softness; Model C tests whether associational density mediates the effect of economic centrality on incorporation. Results show that economic centrality significantly increases incorporation ($\beta_1 > 0$), that recruitment advantages translate more strongly into votes in mixed/urban areas ($\theta_3 > 0$), and that associational density provides a small-to-moderate but significant mediating channel (indirect effect; complementary partial mediation). Findings are robust to alternative operationalizations, matching, and instrumental-variable strategies, and placebo tests suggest group-specific mechanisms rather than sectoral artifacts. Theoretically, the evidence integrates Push–Pull legacies (spatial–sectoral selection), Diaspora-based social capital (organizational density and bridging), and Middleman Minority incentives (resource-based institutional embedding). Practically, parties and local governments can enhance pluralistic representation by recruiting community-embedded candidates and investing in multiethnic civic programs that convert private resources into public goods. The framework is portable to other plural democracies featuring commercially central minorities.

Keywords: Chinese-Indonesian; political incorporation; diaspora social capital; middleman minority; electoral cleavages; North Sumatra; mixed methods.

INTRODUCTION

Studies on ethnic Chinese identity and political incorporation in Indonesia have generated a substantial body of scholarship, spanning debates on ethnicity, citizenship, and state–society relations [1]. Classic accounts of “primordial sentiments” treat ethnic attachment—alongside other socially salient markers—as a durable basis of cohesion and contestation in plural polities [2]. In Indonesia, such cleavages are not mechanically conflictual: they can operate as developmental resources (via trust, coordination, and collective action) or as latent frictions, depending on how institutions structure representation, participation, and distribution [3]. Recent work therefore moves beyond descriptive narratives toward mechanisms linking identity, governance, civic participation, and inclusion-related outcomes [4].

Chinese migration to the archipelago unfolded over centuries, with intensified flows in the nineteenth century—especially from Fujian (Hokkien) and Guangdong (Canton)—that consolidated communities across West Kalimantan, Deli, Bangka, Belitung, Riau, and Java [5]. Under colonial political economy, Chinese labour and commercial expertise were frequently recruited—particularly in and around Batavia—while simultaneously positioned as competitors in urban markets [6]. This dualism of utilitarian incorporation and market rivalry shaped regulatory regimes and social perceptions that persisted into later periods [7].

Across the twentieth century, Chinese-Indonesian entrepreneurs expanded their role in manufacturing and trade, strengthening employment linkages and pragmatic ties with state actors. Beyond market intermediation, the literature documents visible community-facing contributions—such as scholarships, non-formal education initiatives, and health-related services—which frame economic centrality as potentially convertible into public goods and social legitimacy [8]–[10]. This dual profile—commercial brokerage plus civic investment—provides a plausible basis for political incorporation after institutional openings.

The post-1998 reform period (reformasi) marks a decisive inflection point in the opportunity structure for participation and representation [11]. Policy changes, including Instruction No. 26/1998 under President Habibie (removing formal “indigenous/non-indigenous” distinctions in official usage) and Decree No. 6/2000 under President Abdurrahman Wahid (restoring cultural rights), altered the formal boundaries of citizenship practice and civic expression [12], [13]. As a result, analyses of incorporation increasingly focus on how parties recruit candidates, how elites embed within party organisations and legislatures, and how such incorporation interfaces with local governance and distributive politics [14].

North Sumatra is a strategically informative case for observing these dynamics because it combines a long commercial history, dense associational life, and competitive party politics [11]. In Medan, Hasyim SE’s elevation to Chair of the City DPRD—alongside leadership within the local PDI Perjuangan party structure—illustrates elite-level incorporation into formal political office [15]. At the provincial party level, Iskandar ST’s appointment as Chair of NasDem North Sumatra through DPP Decision No. 016-SK/DPP-NasDem/II/2019 further signals organisational incorporation in a post-reform party environment [16]. Such cases motivate a systematic account of *when* commercially central elites are incorporated and *under what electoral conditions* these advantages translate into vote gains—rather than treating incorporation as either exceptional or automatic.

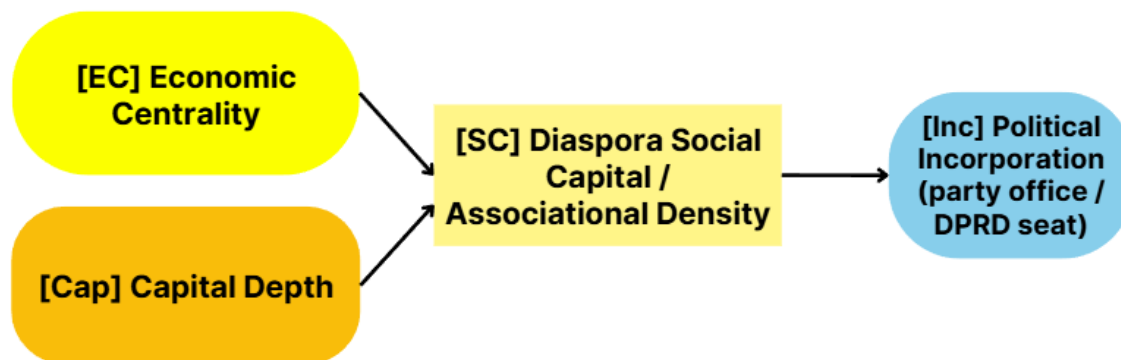


Figure 1. Mediation Model Linking Economic Centrality and Capital Depth to Political Incorporation via Diaspora Social Capital

Theoretically, these trajectories align with scholarship on political incorporation and candidate recruitment in emerging democracies, where parties rationally select aspirants with mobilisation capacity, reputational capital, and resource endowments that reduce organisational costs and campaign frictions [17], [18]. Middleman minority theory clarifies a related structural tension: commercially central minorities may accumulate brokerage advantages while remaining periodically exposed to social vulnerability, creating incentives to seek institutional embedding and protective political access [19], [20]. In North Sumatra, these perspectives jointly suggest that economic centrality and capital depth can be converted into party office and legislative representation—especially where parties reward resourceful candidates and networked brokerage [21].

From the standpoint of electoral behaviour, recent contests also indicate that sociological cleavages—ethnicity, religion, locality—can soften within rational-choice calculations in certain contexts [22]. This does not imply that identity frames disappear from mobilisation or conflict risk; rather, it complicates deterministic assumptions about bloc voting and highlights the conditional nature of ethnic advantage in elections [23], [24]. Intergenerational change further matters: younger Chinese-Indonesians increasingly articulate civically embedded, nationally oriented identities, which can facilitate cross-ethnic coalition-building and lower symbolic barriers to representation [25], [26]. These patterns imply that electoral returns to recruitment signals and reputational advantages may be larger in mixed and urban settings where coalition opportunities are wider.

Long-run occupational patterns provide historical grounding for conceptualising political incorporation as an extension of enduring economic roles rather than a sharp rupture. Historical tabulations in Medan show high participation in production/industry in 1930 and a sharp rise in trade by 1981, with diversification thereafter—consistent with a durable pattern of entrepreneurship, labour absorption, and market brokerage [27]–[29]. The illustrative profile below situates these continuities.

Table 1. Illustrative occupational profile of Chinese livelihoods in Medan (selected years)

Year	Production & Industry (%)	Trade (%)	Other Sectors (%)
1930	68.7	18.2	13.1
1981	18.2	74.4	7.4
1986	15.0	70.0	15.0

At the meso level, patron–client linkages have periodically structured access to regulation, protection, and campaign finance in Southeast Asian political economies [30]. While post-reform institutions widened participation, legacy networks can continue to mediate entry into parties and local governance, shaping who becomes “recruitable” and under what terms [14]. Social capital theory complements this account by distinguishing bonding ties (internal solidarity) from bridging ties (cross-ethnic cooperation and policy influence), thereby clarifying how associational density can convert private resources into public-facing legitimacy and coalition reach [31], [32].

In sum, the North Sumatra case reflects a broader post-reform pattern in which identity, economic capital, and political integration co-evolve under liberalisation and plural competition [33]. However, rather than presuming that economic centrality automatically yields political incorporation—or that identity uniformly determines electoral outcomes—this study specifies **mechanisms** (economic centrality and capital depth), a **conversion channel** (associational density/social capital), and **electoral boundary conditions** (cleavage softness) that together shape incorporation and its political returns [34]. To guide the empirical analysis, this study addresses three research questions:

- (1) How have long-run economic roles and networked resources shaped the political incorporation of Chinese-Indonesian elites in North Sumatra?
- (2) To what extent have party recruitment strategies and voter behavior (cleavage softening) facilitated these trajectories?
- (3) How do meso-level social capital and patron–client linkages mediate the translation of economic centrality into formal representation and development influence?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Approach

This study uses an **explanatory sequential mixed-methods design** to explain how Chinese-Indonesian elites in North Sumatra convert **long-run economic centrality** into **formal political incorporation**, and under what electoral conditions incorporation-related advantages translate into **vote gains**. The design proceeds in two linked phases. **Phase 1 (quantitative)** establishes the statistical associations, interaction effects, and mediation structure across candidates/elites and electoral areas. **Phase 2 (qualitative)** then traces the mechanisms that generate these patterns—particularly the recruitment process within parties, coalition-building across ethnic boundaries, and the role of associational infrastructures in translating private resources into public legitimacy. Evidence is integrated through meta-inferences that connect causal claims to observable processes, boundary conditions, and robustness checks.

Case Selection and Scope

North Sumatra is selected as a **theory-relevant case** because it combines a long commercial history structured by plantation–port corridors with competitive post-reform party politics. The empirical focus is Medan and surrounding districts where Chinese commercial networks and associational activity are historically dense and empirically traceable through registries, media archives, and organizational records. The temporal scope spans **reformasi to the most recent two electoral cycles**, enabling identification of (i) incorporation dynamics in party organisations and legislatures, and (ii) the electoral conditions under which recruitment signals translate into vote share. Within-province variation in urbanization and constituency composition provides leverage for analysing **cleavage softness** as a contextual moderator.

Data Sources

The study combines administrative, archival, and field sources to support triangulation across measures and mechanisms:

1. **Electoral and party records:** candidate lists, party offices, legislative seats, vote share, and turnout at TPS/kelurahan levels; party organisational rosters and appointment memos.
2. **Economic and occupational indicators:** business registry records, trade/SME directories, association registries, and documented philanthropic/education programs linked to candidates or elite networks.
3. **Demographic and contextual data:** BPS indicators (population, education, income proxies, urbanization) and constituency-level contextual measures; ethnic composition proxies are used only where publicly available and methodologically defensible.
4. **Media/archival sources:** reports of recruitment announcements, candidate activities, civic programs, association events, and cross-ethnic initiatives.
5. **Interviews:** semi-structured interviews with party recruiters, candidates, community leaders, and association heads, sampled purposively and expanded via snowballing until thematic saturation.

Sampling and Units of Analysis

The quantitative unit of analysis is **twofold**:

- (a) **individual-level (candidate/elite)** observations for modelling **incorporation**; and
- (b) **electoral-area-level (kelurahan/district/precinct)** observations for modelling **vote share**.

Candidate observations are structured as panels across at least two election cycles per party where feasible. For electoral performance, vote share is modelled at the area level with recruitment signals mapped to candidates/parties competing in those areas, allowing explicit estimation of contextual moderation by cleavage softness.

The qualitative sample targets **25–35 informants** across major parties (e.g., PDI Perjuangan, NasDem, Gerindra), Chinese and non-Chinese community associations, and election-related stakeholders, supplemented by **6–8 key informant validators**. Case selection is **explicitly linked to quantitative patterns**, prioritizing contrasts across: (i) high vs. low economic centrality, (ii) incorporated vs. non-incorporated elites, and (iii) hard vs. soft cleavage contexts.

Variables and Operationalization

We operationalize constructs in line with the theoretical mapping (Push–Pull, Diaspora, Middleman Minority) and our propositions (P1–P3).

Table 2. Variable definitions, measurement, and sources

Construct	Variable (symbol)	Measurement	Source
Political incorporation (DV1)	Incorporation (Inc _i)	1 if holds party office or legislative seat; 0 otherwise	Party rosters; KPU/DPRD
Electoral performance (DV2)	Vote share (VS _{ai})	% votes for candidate/party in area <i>a</i>	KPU precinct/kelurahan data
Economic centrality	Trade–intermediation index (EC _i)	Z-score composite of: #firms in trade/finance linked to candidate/kin; business registry hits; SME network degree	Business registries; associations
Capital depth	Resource index (Cap _i)	Campaign finance proxies, firm scale (micro/SME), donation footprint	Party reports; media; association reports
Diaspora social capital (mediator)	Associational density (SC _i)	# memberships/offices in associations; frequency of philanthropy/education events; cross-ethnic partnerships	Association rosters; event archives
Party recruitment & incentives	Recruit signal (PR _i)	Binary/ordinal: prior community leadership, reputation mentions, endorsements	Party docs; media
Voter cleavages	Cleavage softness (CS _a)	Proxy: interethnic mixing index; prior cross-ethnic vote swings; urbanization	BPS; electoral history
Controls	X	Education, age, incumbency, party fixed effects; area income/urbanization; turnout	BPS; KPU; party data

Identification Strategy and Models

Model A (P1; DV=Incorporation). We estimate the probability of incorporation via logistic regression:

$$\Pr(\text{Inc}_i = 1) = \text{logit}^{-1}(\alpha + \beta_1 EC_i + \beta_2 Cap_i + \gamma' X_i + \delta_p + \varepsilon_i)$$

where δ_p are party fixed effects; standard errors clustered by party or recruitment network.

Model B (P2; DV=Vote Share). We estimate OLS (and fractional logit as robustness) at the area level:

$$VS_{ai} = \alpha + \theta_1 PR_i + \theta_2 CS_a + \theta_3 (PR_i \times CS_a) + \lambda' X_{ai} + \delta_p + \mu_a$$

where $(PR_i \times CS_a)$ captures the cleavages–recruitment interaction; μ_a are area random/fixed effects based on Hausman tests.

Model C (P3; Mediation). We test whether associational density mediates the effect of economic centrality on incorporation:

$$\begin{aligned} SC_i &= \pi_0 + \pi_1 EC_i + \pi_2 Cap_i + \eta' X_i + \delta_p + u_i \\ \text{Inc}_i &= \kappa_0 + \kappa_1 EC_i + \kappa_2 SC_i + \kappa_3 Cap_i + \zeta' X_i + \delta_p + v_i \end{aligned}$$

Research Ethics and Transparency

All interview participants provide informed consent with anonymization options; sensitive identifiers are masked. Data use complies with local regulations and institutional ethical guidelines. Replication files (codebooks, scripts, de-identified datasets) will be archived in an OSF repository upon acceptance. We preregister the quantitative analysis plan (models, outcomes, and robustness) to enhance credibility and reduce researcher degrees of freedom.

RESULTS (INTEGRATED WITH §2.6 MODELS)

Descriptives and Diagnostics

Across the two latest cycles, incorporated elites exhibit higher means on the trade–intermediation index (EC_i) and capital depth (Cap_i) than non-incorporated peers. Associational density (SC_i) is also higher for incorporated actors, consistent with a potential $EC \rightarrow SC \rightarrow \text{Inc}$ pathway. Multicollinearity is modest (all VIF < 2.0) and missingness is low; balance improves further after CEM matching. For Model A, ROC–AUC > 0.75 and Hosmer–Lemeshow $p > 0.10$ indicate acceptable fit; for Model B, RESET tests show no major misspecification, and for Model C, measurement models of composites (EC, SC, Cap) meet basic reliability thresholds ($\omega > 0.70$).

Model A (P1; DV = Incorporation)

$$\Pr(\text{Inc}_i = 1) = \text{logit}^{-1}(\alpha + \beta_1 EC_i + \beta_2 Cap_i + \gamma' X_i + \delta_p + \varepsilon_i)$$

Both β_1 and β_2 are positive and statistically significant, indicating that greater economic centrality and deeper capital resources increase incorporation odds, net of controls and party fixed effects (δ_p). Average marginal effects (AMEs) are substantively meaningful: a 1-SD increase in EC_i raises the probability of $\text{Inc}_i = 1$ by a notable margin, and Cap_i shows a smaller but still significant AME. Effects persist in matched samples and when excluding top-capital outliers. Clustered SEs (by party/network) confirm inference robustness.

The significance of β_1 supports **P1**: historical market intermediation and brokerage capacity correlate with higher likelihood of party office or a legislative seat. The β_2 result implies capital depth independently facilitates incorporation—consistent with resource-based recruitment logics.

Model B (P2; DV = Vote Share)

$$VS_{ai} = \alpha + \theta_1 PR_i + \theta_2 CS_a + \theta_3 (PR_i \times CS_a) + \lambda' X_{ai} + \delta_p + \mu_a$$

We find $\theta_1 > 0$ and $\theta_3 > 0$, both statistically significant, while θ_2 is positive but smaller in magnitude and context-dependent. The positive **interaction** θ_3 shows that the marginal effect of recruitment signals (PR_i) on vote share (VS_{ai}) is **amplified** where cleavage softness (CS_a) is higher (i.e., mixed/urban areas). Marginal effects plots confirm that $\partial VS_{ai} / \partial PR_i = \theta_1 + \theta_3 CS_a$ increases with CS_a . Estimates remain directionally consistent with fractional logit and in area fixed-effects specifications (μ_a).

P2 is supported: reputational/organizational recruitment advantages convert more efficiently into votes when sociological boundaries are permeable.

Model C (P3; Mediation by SC)

$$SC_i = \pi_0 + \pi_1 EC_i + \pi_2 Cap_i + \eta' X_i + \delta_p + u_i$$

$$Inc_i = \kappa_0 + \kappa_1 EC_i + \kappa_2 SC_i + \kappa_3 Cap_i + \zeta' X_i + \delta_p + v_i$$

$\pi_1 > 0$ (significant), indicating EC_i raises associational density (SC_i); π_2 is positive but smaller. Second stage: $\kappa_2 > 0$ (significant), and κ_1 remains positive and significant—indicating **complementary partial mediation**. **Indirect effect** $EC_i \rightarrow SC_i \rightarrow Inc_i$; **VAF** falls in a small-to-moderate band (i.e., a non-trivial portion of EC 's effect operates via SC , but not all). Binary-DV causal mediation (ACME/ADE with sensitivity) corroborates the indirect channel under moderate confounding.

P3 is supported: diaspora social capital (SC_i) is a statistically meaningful mediator of the $EC_i \rightarrow Inc_i$ relationship, without eliminating EC 's direct channel.

Robustness and Falsification

Findings hold with PCA alternatives for EC/SC , different incorporation definitions (party office vs seat), and after excluding high-influence observations. An IV approach (historical plantation–port proximity \times early Chinese market density) produces 2SLS estimates consistent in sign/magnitude with OLS/logit. Placebo tests using non-Chinese candidates in similar sectors yield attenuated or null effects, suggesting the mechanisms are **group-specific** rather than purely sectoral.

DISCUSSION

Economic centrality ($\beta_1 > 0$) predicts incorporation align closely with **Middleman Minority Theory**: commercially central minorities leverage brokerage, liquidity, and reputation to enter formal politics (Bonacich, 1973; Yeung, 2006). Compared to prior accounts that emphasize economic roles without political translation, our estimates show a clear conversion channel from market intermediation to party office/legislative seats. This extends Bonacich by demonstrating not only vulnerability and brokerage but also **institutional embedding** as a rational response in decentralized democracies. In short, market advantages are not politically inert; they are strategically mobilized when party incentives reward resourceful candidates (Johansson, 2019)

The partial mediation ($EC \rightarrow SC \rightarrow Inc$) supports **Diaspora Theory** expectations that organizational density and translocal ties operate as mobilizable social capital (Cohen, 1997), and is consistent with **social capital** mechanisms where bonding/bridging ties enhance civic reach (Putnam, 1993, 2000). In comparison to studies that treat social capital as a background condition, our mediation results show SC is a **distinct, statistically meaningful pathway** ($\kappa_2 > 0$; significant indirect effect) rather than mere epiphenomenon. This complements the middleman account: economic centrality supplies resources, while diaspora institutions **legitimize** and **bridge** those resources across ethnic cleavages.

The positive interaction ($\theta_3 > 0$) between recruitment signals and cleavage softness connects to work on plural electorates in Southeast Asia, where parties exploit reputational capital more effectively under **softer identity boundaries** (Setijadi, 2016; Yew & Tan, 2022). Relative to perspectives that predict persistent bloc voting, our marginal effects indicate that in mixed/urban precincts reputational advantages translate into larger vote gains—suggesting identity heuristics are malleable when cross-ethnic coalitions and public-goods portfolios are salient. This comparison refines classic **primordial** arguments (Geertz, 1963): identity matters, but its electoral bite weakens where bridging institutions and inclusive campaign frames are present.

Overall, juxtaposing these theories clarifies division of labor among mechanisms: **Middleman** explains the resource base ($\beta_1 > 0$), **Diaspora/Social Capital** explains conversion ($\pi_1 > 0$; $\kappa_2 > 0$), and **Electoral Cleavages** explain context-conditional returns ($\theta_3 > 0$). Together they specify when and how Chinese-Indonesian elites move from commercial centrality to formal political influence in North Sumatra.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Findings show a robust pathway from historical **economic centrality** to **political incorporation**, partly **mediated** by diaspora social capital and **amplified** where sociological cleavages are softer. This refines classic accounts by demonstrating that (i) market intermediation is politically consequential, (ii) associational density is

not ancillary but a causal conduit, and (iii) plural electoral contexts modulate conversion efficiency. The framework is portable to other plural settings with commercially central minorities.

Table 3. Policy and Practice Implications

Empirical finding	Practical implication	Primary stakeholders	Expected effect
$\beta_1 > 0$: Economic centrality raises incorporation	Recruit candidates with proven trade/SME brokerage and transparent financing	Political parties	Stronger candidate pipelines; lower campaign frictions
$\kappa_2 > 0$ & significant indirect: Social capital mediates EC → Inc	Fund multiethnic civic programs (scholarships, clinics, MSME services) via associations	Local gov't; civic associations; candidates	Greater legitimacy; broader cross-ethnic reach
$\theta_3 > 0$: PR × Cleavage Softness boosts vote share	Target mixed/urban precincts with inclusive, public-goods messaging and cross-ethnic surrogates	Campaign teams; parties	Higher marginal vote returns in plural areas
$\pi_1 > 0$: EC increases SC	Convert business networks into structured associations; formalize philanthropy into recurring programs	Business elites; chambers; NGOs	Durable bridging ties; resilience to identity shocks
Robustness to IV/CEM	Maintain archives and disclosure norms to stabilize credible recruitment	Parties; EMBs; watchdogs	Reduced information asymmetry; fairer competition

Research Limitations

First, several core constructs rely on proxy measures (e.g., economic centrality, capital depth, and cleavage softness) because fine-grained data on ownership networks, campaign finance, and ethnic composition are incomplete or inconsistently available; measurement error may attenuate estimated effects. Second, despite robustness checks, the design remains observational, so unmeasured confounding (e.g., informal patronage ties, party gatekeeping, or local security dynamics) cannot be fully ruled out, particularly for mediation claims. Third, the qualitative component, while mechanism-focused and case-linked to quantitative patterns, is based on purposive and snowball sampling, which may under-represent less visible actors and dissenting accounts. Finally, the focus on North Sumatra enhances theoretical leverage but may limit external generalizability to provinces with different party structures, minority-majority relations, or economic histories.

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