



Women, Do We Support One Another? Voting Behavior of Indonesian Female College Students for a Female Candidate amidst Covid-19

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Abstract

This study seeks to analyze and describe the voting behavior of female college students for a female candidate at Banjarmasin Mayoral Election in 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic. This election is special because it was held during the pandemic where political campaigns were mostly switched to communication and information technology with a lack of mass gatherings and direct political campaigns due to Covid-19 health protocols. In a predominantly Muslim and highly patriarchal society, this is also the second time in this province to have a female candidate for this position and the first time for this city. Amidst the negative stereotypes of a female candidate and the attacks from the opponents, this female candidate managed to gain second place. Disputes emerged, and the court decided to hold re-election in three sub-districts. The disputes and the campaign dynamics show how a female candidate is perceived by this society at large. This study elaborates the possible affecting factors in voting behavior, i.e., the role of religious interpretation, ethnicity, gender, the role of media, perceptions of voters related to candidate's age and programs, political party affiliation, the role of family, and peers. This research is based on online surveys and interviews of Lambung Mangkurat University students, Banjarmasin, South Kalimantan, Indonesia where the election was held. The selection for college student respondents is aimed to relatively control the variables of education, age, and socioeconomic factors of voters which are also often considered affecting variables in voting behavior.

Keywords: election, gender, media, religion, religious patriarchal society

Introduction

Indonesia is located in Southeast Asia and has a population of about 273 million of which half of them are women. However, women are still underrepresented at all levels of government and political positions even though there is no explicit legal limitation for women to hold those positions. The most difficult obstacles for women's political and professional participation are caused by the country's heavily patriarchal society which prevents women to get equal access (Parawansa, 2002). Under the New Order regime with the single majority party (Golkar Party), the majority of women sitting at the important positions had a familial connection or a close connection with important people at the central government. After the reformation in 1999,



Indonesians can enjoy direct free elections for the president and members of parliament. But it was several years later when Indonesians can directly vote for the local government leaders under Law No.32/2004 Regional Government on the introduction of direct, popular election for the heads of districts, mayors, and governors, which was previously elected by the local parliaments. This law still required the candidacy for those positions nominated by political parties. And it was Law No.12/2008 Regional Government that finally allows independent candidates (Buehler, 2010). Gender quota system has also been implemented to boost women's participation in politics. However, with all changes in the electoral system and more freedom of expression, the number of women in politics is still very small compared to men (Siregar, 2005; Parawansa, 2002; Prihatini, 2018).

Indonesia is highly patriarchal and a Muslim-majority country. Literature had mentioned how some interpretations of Islam had put obstacles to women's political participation. Modernization and the advancement of technology increase the use of media for campaigns with various effects on voters. The pandemic Covid-19 since 2020 has even pronounced the media usage as health protocols require social distancing. Hence, political campaigns were shifted to be heavily relying on electronic media sources i.e., the internet and televisions. As the fourth-biggest population in the world, Indonesians are also big users of social media. Political campaigns under this platform can instantly lead to a different variety of effects on voters with hoaxes are more prevalent and difficult to clarify.

There has been affirmative action at the parliamentary electoral process to increase women politicians, both at the local and national levels such as by the gender quota and zipper system in the political party nomination list (Bessel, 2010). However, there has been a lack of or absence of legal support and protection for women to participate in the local government head elections (Satriyo, 2010). Besides the cultural barriers to women's political participation, structural obstacles remain for local government elections. Under the direct and free election, men and women have equal freedom to decide their votes. With the number of women in Indonesia, why women are still far underrepresented in political seats? What factors affecting Indonesian voters at the election, particularly women voters? Does Indonesian voting behavior show a similar pattern with many other countries? If yes, in what aspects? Do Indonesian women tend to support women candidates? In an effort to answer these questions, we take the case of Banjarmasin Mayoral Election 2020 with a female candidate and focus on female college students to analyze "Do women voters tend to vote for a female candidate? What are the important factors determining these students in voting?"

Therefore, this study aims to explain these questions by focusing on young female politically educated voters. By selecting college students, this study controls for several socioeconomic factors i.e., age, education, and income/social class. To focus on the aspect of *homosocial capital* (Aspinall, et.al., 2021), it focuses on female college students' voting behavior towards a female mayoral candidate in Banjarmasin city, South Kalimantan, Indonesia. This small-scale study aims to contribute a specific piece of analysis on young educated female voters' attitude towards a female candidate which will be benefited to study Indonesian voting behavior in general. This research can also be replicated on a bigger scale.

Theoretical Background

An election is essential to define a democratic system, as Schumpeter (1975) stated, "Democracy is a political method, ... a certain type of institutional arrangement for arriving at



political—legislative and administrative—decisions....“ (Schumpeter, 1975, 242). Therefore, it is principal to held elections and it is useful to understand how citizens make the decisions in voting. Research has been done to analyze reasons for voting and understand the patterns of voting behavior. National identity attachment and the way people perceive their nationalism may also affect their voting decision (Windari, 2021). Socioeconomic factors related to the demographic profile are often cited as influential, but the findings are still mixed across countries. The variables of demographic profile often studied are age, education, income/social class, urban vs rural residence, gender, religion, and ethnicity. Media use, political party affiliation, the influence of family and friends/peers, and rational calculations are also possible affecting components.

There are two important previous studies related to this research. First, the research conducted by Prihatini, Ella S (2018) on the voting behavior of young Indonesians toward female parliamentary candidates. In this study, she found that the majority of young Indonesian voters prioritized male candidates based on the perception that men are better leaders, and this belief is influenced by Islamic interpretation. Young female voters also show a less degree of political knowledge compared to young male voters while less informed society tends to prefer male candidates over females. Another important study was conducted by Aspinall, E., White, S., and Savirani, A. (2021) on women's political representation in Indonesia which analyzed how women candidates overcame structural and cultural barriers to win the seats. This research also illustrated the women's hardship in Indonesian highly patriarchal culture with a lack of structural supports for women. However, this research highlighted the role of *homosocial capital* where women candidates target women voters, especially in Muslim organizations in delivering women's success. Thus, they show that Islamic affiliation may provide leverage for women's political participation too, not just putting obstacles.

The role of media has been increasingly crucial for political participation, especially during the election period and during the pandemic. Unfortunately, the effects of media on voters are mixed, it may increase voter turnout or decrease it, or it may lead to more political polarization. As college students, the respondents of this study are categorized as young voters. Mujani, Liddle, and Ambardi (2018) may refer to them as *critical democrats* with the hopes of being critically evaluative of the socio-economic-political situations and politically rational in voting (Downs, 1957). But young voters can also be cynical and distrust the government and political institutions (Dermody, Hanmer- Lloyd, & Scullion, 2010). Those from a low socioeconomic background also tend to lack political cues to vote (Condon & Matthew, 2013). Age can also affect voting behavior in relation to constituents' socio-political-economic conditions (Inglehart and Norris, 2000).

Data and Method

This study was conducted in a qualitative method using an online survey via Qualtrics and follow-up interviews by phone to randomly selected survey respondents with semi-structured open questions. The respondents were college students at Lambung Mangkurat University, Banjarmasin, South Kalimantan, Indonesia. This university was selected because it is located in the district where the mayoral election was held. The respondents were the students at the school of social and political sciences for leveling the political knowledge. College students were selected to have less variation of age. Indonesian college students also generally do not



work, so their financial dependence on parents will not affect their voting behavior based on income/social class.

Banjarmasin's mayoral election was held in December 2020 and the re-election over the dispute was held in April 2021, this research was conducted between April to June 2021. Banjarmasin mayoral election was selected because it is the capital city of South Kalimantan province which is highly patriarchal where the majority of the population has a conservative tone of Islamic interpretation regarding the division of men and women's role in society, a factor that tends to put more obstacles for women holding political positions. Interestingly, the city of Banjarmasin had a female candidate for the mayor position for the first time.

The online surveys were circulated online to students and it was followed by telephone interviews to clarify the reasons for voting. The analysis focuses on motivations to vote based on selected components, i.e., religious interpretation, ethnicity, the role of media, voters' perception about the candidates' age and programs, political party affiliation, gender, and the role of family and friends. The analysis is based on self-reporting responses. It particularly concentrates on the voting behavior of female college students at a social and political sciences program under the notion that this group of voters is generally more politically knowledgeable and interested in politics compared to the general voters.

Findings and discussion

The responses of the online surveys were 40 but due to incompleteness of responses, only 36 were valid for analysis. The follow-up interviews were conducted with five female respondents from the survey respondents selected randomly. The majority of total respondents were female with 26 respondents and only 10 male respondents with the age range between 18 to 27 years. The majority of respondents were from the same dominant group similar to all candidates, i.e., Banjaresse ethnic group, and were Muslims.

Gender

From the total respondents, there were 3 who did not vote in the election and 17 who voted for the female candidate. From these 17 votes for the female candidate, 16 were from the female respondents. It means the majority of female respondents voted for the female candidate (61.5%) and 38.5% of female respondents voted for male candidates. It confirms the previous research that votes for female candidates are more likely from female voters (Aspinall, et.al., 2021; Prihatini, 2018), and Indonesian voters are likely to vote for male candidates (Strachan, 2014). The quota system in elections tends to increase the number of women in politics, particularly in Indonesia with a highly patriarchal culture that also puts serious structural obstacles (Bessel, 2010; Siregar, 2005; Soedarwo, et.al., 2020). Banjarmasin people tend to consider gendered norms as traditional (Scarborough & Sin, 2020) where strict division labor roles are drawn between men and women with women are expected to stay at home. Different labor divisions related to socioeconomic factors may lead to different voting behavior between gender. It can be seen in the experiences of women through these roles through time that can shift women's political ideology from leaning towards the right-wing to the left-wing (Emmenegger & Manow, 2014; Giger, 2009; Inglehart & Norris, 2000). Gender has also affected voting behavior indirectly because voters are likely to have more demanding evaluations towards female candidates that may be biased with stereotypes. Thus, it leads to disadvantages for female candidates in elections (Ditonto, et.al., 2014).



Ireland is reported to be the ninth-best country in terms of gender equality (World Economic Forum, 2021) but the number of women in politics is still low. However, voters did not consider gender matters in casting their ballots (McElroy, 2018), it was more about political experiences and party affiliations (Quinlan & O'Malley, 2018). Nevertheless, women are likely to have much less political experience and weaker political party influence in most countries, including in Ireland. Financial resources and political networks are determinants for women to win seats (Aspinall, et.al., 2021; Satriyo, 2010). The hard barriers for entering politics often lead to women using dynastic connections (Aspinall, et.al., 2021) because adopting a popular political strategy does not guarantee success (Blackman & Jackson, 2019).

In this election, the female candidate namely Ananda has been known politically as she was the head of Banjarmasin local parliament. Her political career started since she was young at Golongan Karya Party, the long-established party in Indonesia that nominated her as the mayor candidate. She is also from a family with a strong political connection. Amongst all candidates, she was also the youngest, but her background provides her with political networks and financial resources, essential elements for winning elections (Aspinall, et.al., 2021; Satriyo, 2010).

Media access

Media access, particularly social media was mentioned by respondents to be the main source to get information about the election and the candidates. Instagram and WhatsApp were the major social media platforms used (84.6% used by the female respondents). The respondents tend to use their knowledge to analyze the candidates by using social media to mainly access the candidates' programs (54%). The program content focus accessed maybe because they are students of social and political sciences. However, the candidates' personal life and identity were still attractive (27%). Besides her long-established career in politics and family political networks, the female candidate is a widow and was the winner of the local pigeon contest. Being a widow and having a man as the candidate for her vice-mayor had resulted in religious-related debates. The female candidate used social media to inform the public of her political programs and campaign activities but also publicly displayed her marital status on the street banners and posters. All candidates perform to the public with Islamic symbols whether in their attires or speech.

Strandberg (2013) argued that the use of social media for political activities can predict voting behavior. Indonesia now has the fourth biggest users of social media in Asia, unlike in the previous elections where internet use was still limited (Mujani & Liddle, 2010). The number of internets and social media users in Indonesia keeps increasing with 61.8% of the population in 2021 (Data Reportal, 2021). Instagram and WhatsApp were mostly mentioned by respondents to describe the social media campaign platforms and the way respondents learn about the candidate, her activities, and political programs. The finding is similar to female voters in Malaysia where social media was the most used and trusted source for getting electoral information (Zakuan, et.al., 2018).

The candidates' programs accessed by the respondents may demonstrate the *critical democrats* (Mujani, et.al., 2018), and the interest in candidates' personal life and identity may illustrate the effect of religion and regionalism at the local elections (Strachan (2014). In the interview, one respondent delivered her religious concern about women as leaders. Yet, one respondent supported women in politics and believed that based on her interpretation, Islam does not forbid women to be leaders. Another respondent focused on the candidate's religious



affiliation. Most interviewed respondents did not clearly show their support or contradiction against this female candidate but their disinterest in the candidate's social media campaigns may indicate their doubt to support this female candidate.

The relationship between news consumption of various media sources and life preferences has been complex (Swart, et.al., 2017). Electoral-related information is important in shaping voting behavior. At the local elections, the lack of local information may increase the degree of American political polarization (Darr, et.al., 2018) and women's reluctance to vote in Pakistan (Gine & Mansuri, 2018). More newspapers exposure may increase American voter turnout (Gerber, et.al., 2009) and information on political education can also increase voter turnout in Mozambique (Fafchamps, et.al., 2020) although more internet access in Germany had decreased it (Falck, et.al., 2014).

Television consumption in Indonesia is not clearly politically divided as in the US (Ksiazek, et.al., 2019). Debates on television have been the campaign norm. The use of television campaigns pronounces the personalization of candidates through images (Garzia, 2020). While television debates do not always affect voters directly, they may do so indirectly (Goldberg & Ischen, 2020). Furthermore, television news accessed may increase voter turnout (Ksiazek, et.al., 2019). In this study, most respondents used social media rather than television to access news and electoral-related information. However, television debates were also carried out. Further research is needed to see the effect of television debates. Nevertheless, social media and the internet analyzed the debates and online polling has increasingly been popular too, which makes television debates may indirectly affect voters.

The role of family and peers

In this research, the role of parents is still convincing with 38.5% asked their parents before voting and 34.6% had the same choice as their parents. This result confirmed Siegel-Stechler (2021) on the strong correlation between parents' encouragement and children's voting turnout. But more than 20% admitted making their own decision and had a different vote from their parents. This small gap between these groups demonstrates that the respondents were able to make their own political decision without so much family influence. It confirms the research on the relationship between family and political participation (Brooks, 2002). Fauzi, et.al. (2019) found that Indonesian parents of urban families tend to let their children making their own voting decisions and having fewer political discussions because the parents believe that the media and the General Election Commission have provided a lot of information on elections. The number of female respondents who disclosed their discussions with their parents but still decided their own choice differently from their parents or did not disclose their votes to their family shows the capacity of children to observe and evaluate critically their parents' attitudes and values before making their own decisions (Ojeda & Hatemi, 2015). Although this research did not scrutinize the detail of political discussion to analyze the effect of parents' political influence on their children, it shows a lack of support for Campbell, et.al. (1960) because children's political decision is not always heavily influenced by their parents.

Previous research on the role of the family towards children's political participation can be seen in the effect of political discussion on children political views (Johnson, et.al., 2019), which can be predicted through the pattern of family communication (Graham, et.al., 2020), and the family's role on children's left-wing affiliation based on social learning theory (Rico & Jennings, 2016).



Friends were also important in young people's political participation illustrated by most of the female respondents discussing the candidates amongst themselves (61.5%). The confidence in the benefit of political education can be concluded from the capacity of respondents to keep their votes secret despite their political discussions with friends; it shows that *social secrecy* (Gerber, et.al., 2013) is respected. Voters may lack social secrecy by sharing their votes with family and friends which may influence their voting or lead to discomfort consequences (Gerber, et.al., 2013). This study's result also does not show the stronger impacts of peers on voting compared to the impacts of parents, contrary to Ekstrom and Ostman (2013) because although the female respondents like discussing the candidates, the majority kept their votes secret (61.5%), with 38.5% analyzed the candidates by themselves while still keeping their votes secret. However, given the slight difference result between the influence of family and friends and the nature of social-political science program students to discuss politics, it will be valuable to further analyze the links. It is worth noting that the findings of current research on the role of family and friends in voting behavior across countries are still mixed and complex.

Religion and Ethnicity

Religious identity in Indonesia has never been really tested in Indonesian elections because most candidates are from the local dominant religious groups. It means that the predominantly Moslem society tends to have Moslem candidates or the people from the minority groups tend to be reluctant to join the political contestation. When they compete, they are more likely to lose, for example Ahok (Chinese descendant and Christian-from an ethnic and religious minority group) vs Anies Baswedan (local and Muslim-from the dominant group) at Jakarta gubernatorial election. It shows that Indonesians have a high tendency to vote for candidates from the same religious group. But further research is needed as mostly the contestation is among the Moslem candidates (members of the dominant group), so the competition is mostly between the Geertzian Muslim division, *santri* (orthodox) vs *abangan* (heterodox) (Mujani, 2020). Even though there was a salience increase in religious polarization in Indonesia at the 2014 election as demonstrated by religious-related political parties, Indonesian voters generally do not have a strong attachment to any particular identity, including political party identity. It was due to *critical democrats* that consisted of younger, more urban, more educated, and middle-class voters that are believed to be more rational in vote choice (Mujani, et.al., 2018). Religious orientation was not influential compared to leadership and political party identification, with Islamic influence was limited only to explain voters for two big political parties (Liddle & Mujani, 2007).

Nevertheless, this research revealed that 53.8% of female respondents admitted their preference to vote for candidates belonging to the same religious group. Interview findings also demonstrated their concern about religious consideration when voting, including in their perception of a female candidate based on their religious interpretation. Even though some respondents believed that her religious belief/Islam does not forbid women to be leaders and supported women leaders, but when the respondents were asked to rank their preference to consider for making voting decisions, religion was ranked second place after the program evaluation.

American politics cannot be separated from racial identity. Empirical evidence shows that misperception tends to occur when constituents are deciding to vote amongst candidates of a different race (Jacobsmeier, 2015). This study found that 80% of respondents claimed that ethnicity did not affect how they voted and ethnic identity was not mentioned as important



during the interview. But given the condition that 73% of voters were also Banjarese and all candidates were from the same ethnic group, further research is needed.

Religious and ethnic identity may affect voters in the election and most voters prefer candidates of the same religious group or avoid voting for candidates of the minority groups due to in-group preference (Kalkan, et.al., 2018). Religion may affect voting behavior depending upon the religious context and its interactions, whether voters live in a strong religious context with high intensity of interaction (Goldberg, 2014). In the US, religious factors cannot be separated from a racial identity where opposite directions emerge between evangelical white and evangelical African Americans (Lockerbie, 2013). Ethnocultural factors cannot also be separated from economic considerations in voting and their political party affiliations (DeCanio, 2007). However, in Banjarmasin, the big majority of the population consists of one ethnic and religious group (Banjarese and Muslims). It may lead ethnic issues less controversial, and Islam may affect the voting behavior only in its interpretation of women as leaders. Huber (2012) argues that “ethnicization increases when group identity becomes more salient to vote choice” (Huber, 2012, p. 986), but this study did not show the salience of ethnic group identity amongst respondents even though further research is needed because of its homogenous nature of ethnic and religious identity. Mujani and Liddle (2010) believe that religion and regionalism did not affect voting much, but Strachan (2014) argues they are important for local elections.

Political Party and Voters' perception of the candidates' age and programs (leadership)

This study shown that the female respondents considered the individual figure of candidates, or the role of the leaders was more important (77%) compared to political party identification (23%). The interview also revealed that political party was not influential in voting choice. Hence, it confirms the previous finding that Indonesian voters are not strong partisans (Mujani, et.al., 2018), unlike Americans (DeCanio, 2007; Ksiazek, et.al., 2019). The majority of respondents also expressed their priority of the candidates' programs and preference for young leaders (50%); it may describe the presence of critical democrat characteristics (Mujani, et.al., 2018) as these respondents are young, more politically educated, and live in an urban area. Young women candidates may increase their electability compared to old women candidates (Prihatini, 2019). This finding confirms the young leader preference as the female candidate is the youngest candidate in this election.

Conclusion

Most of the research on voting behavior is quantitative, but this study focuses more on understanding voters' motivation beyond numbers. To investigate gender-related issues on voting, religious interpretation may be equally important as religious membership and, in most cases, it cannot be separated from culture and tradition. Structural barriers may be shaped by religious cultural context. This study illustrates that college students tend to vote for male candidates and the supports for the female candidate are more likely from female voters. However, it is worth remembering that the assumption of women votes for women is too simplistic, the current political context also matters (Campbell & Heath, 2017). College students who study social and political sciences demonstrated the capacity to vote based on the evaluation of candidates' programs rather than candidates' personal identity. However, religious interpretation matters, and it may lead to the preference of male leaders. During the



pandemic Covid-19, the social media role for campaigns increased. As media is increasingly used to navigate voting choices, it is essential to deliver reliable information, monitor hoaxes, and educate constituents. But political information and political knowledge do not guarantee bias-free electoral decisions. Nonetheless, the lack of information, misinformation, and lack of political education may enhance confusion that increases voters to use heuristics (Dancey & Sheagley, 2013), the practice of vote-buying (Siswanto, et.al., 2020), or unfairly benefited the incumbents because of their social policy (Zucco Jr., 2013).

The family's role is still important while peers' influence, ethnicity, and party identification are less. Young female educated voters do not guarantee support for female candidates. This study found that it may be affected by highly patriarchal culture and religious interpretation. Future research is important to analyze the incumbent effect because the winner was the incumbent and incumbents may possess huge advantages to win (More, et.al., 2017).

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