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## **Money Politics and the Prisoner's Dilemma**

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How prevalent is money politics in Indonesia, and under what conditions are they effective?

My PhD research deals with these two questions that have vexed Indonesianists for the last 15 years.

Based on the results from nationwide surveys and in-depth interviews with hundreds of successful and unsuccessful candidates, it is clear to see that money politics has become an important campaigning strategy in the country's electoral politics.

Money politics is the use or distribution of money or goods or benefits or patronage resources to gain political support, most typically voting.

It covers two key forms of behaviour; a 'retail strategy' which includes vote and turnout buying and a 'wholesale strategy', or the acquiring of club goods, which refers to goods, assistance, or donations for members' collective benefits. Examples include building or renovating houses of worship and schools, or repairing roads, bridges and irrigation systems for electoral purposes.

My recent study demonstrates the centrality of money politics to election campaigns in Indonesia. To detect such practices, I used a number of survey items of varying degrees of directness. The survey does not only rely on a direct question, but also uses a neighbourhood question by treating respondents as an 'observer' to assess the prevalence of vote buying incidents in their community.

Based on the survey and interview responses to all measures of vote buying, the estimated proportion of people engaging in this activity lies somewhere between 25 and 33 per cent. These figures, however, define a range, rather than an accurate point-estimate, of vote buying incidents in Indonesian electoral politics.

In Indonesia's 2014 legislative election, there were around 187 million registered domestic voters. Hence, the range between 25 and 33 per cent would mean an estimated 47 million to 62 million voters nationwide had been offered material benefits in return for their vote.

So how do we explain these massive vote buying practices in Indonesia? The [prisoner's dilemma](#) offers a potential answer. Candidates would stand to gain more if they didn't engage in vote buying. But the consequences and risk that if they don't and others do, means that they will do it anyway.

Applying the prisoner's dilemma to interactions between voters and party machines, a candidate might still find it in his/her interest to engage in vote trading particularly in the presence of other candidates doing the same thing to win elections. It's often seen as their best chance of stopping other candidates from winning votes.

For example, a successful candidate from Indonesia's biggest Islamic party admitted to pouring money into the electorate on voting day up until 9am, having seen an opponent distributing cash just before the polling stations opened.

He defended his actions:

It is not only a 'dawn attack' (a universally recognised term that reflects the fact that payments were sometimes distributed just after the dawn prayer). It is also a 'serangan duha' (*dhuha attack*) (referring to Duha prayer time, which covers sun rise to to about 20 minutes after sunrise, or until just before the sun passes its zenith).

Arsul Sani from the Islamist, United Development Party, or PPP, also admitted to engaging in vote trading in order to prevent other candidates from winning votes.

The one-time parliament member told me: "I will bet you. Cut off my finger if there is a MP in Indonesia today who gets elected without using money politics!"

Another successful local candidate relied on his patron KH SM (an influential religious scholar or *kiai* in Brebes, Central Java) who stated that no party was innocent of vote trading. Asked about the lawfulness of money politics, he asserted:

If we did not distribute cash during elections all we have done would be meaningless.

The well-respected *kiai* reportedly quoted an Arabic script that allows money politics from one of the major textbooks (*kitab*) studied in Islamic boarding schools.

The passage reads: عدل لأجل ذلك عن وخرج حرام الر شوة (Bribing voters is basically unlawful, but it could be permitted for fairness).

Additionally, the *kiai*, who sits on the moderate Islamic party's advisory board (*Dewan Syuro*), cited an Islamic jurisprudential maxim: واجب ف هو به إلا الواجب ي تم لا ما (That without which an obligation cannot be fulfilled is itself obligatory).

Based on this proposition, according to the *kiai*, the ultimate goal is the election of a good candidate with a religious cause. If good candidates are reluctant to spend money for vote buying, parliament will only be occupied by corrupt politicians.

As such, money politics is simply an electoral strategy for winning and preventing corrupt politicians from taking office. Accordingly, it is not only justifiable but also even necessary. For the *kiai*, his party should take an ends-justify-the-means approach. He labelled money politics alms giving (*sedekah*).

Nonetheless, efforts at money politics require high cost of resources. With limited budgets in hand and in an environment in which ballot secrecy is protected, candidates are concerned with its effectiveness in determining voting outcomes. Accordingly, they focus on the distribution of electoral incentives to some voters, but exclude others.

The conventional wisdom is that parties or candidates will not squander their restricted budgets on loyal supporters, but instead expend on swing voters. This is based on the underlying assumption that a loyal voter is already captive.

This dominant view, however, is not supported by strong evidence in the Indonesian case. My findings show that parties and candidates tend to target on their own lukewarm supporters, though without completely ignoring ideologically indifferent voters.

Loyal supporters are seen as the most predictable in getting votes since electoral competition has become tightened after the introduction of the open-list proportional system in 2009.

First-hand accounts of the core voter model in Indonesia confirms the clientelistic nature of the country's electoral politics.

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*This column is based on his thesis, 'Money Politics and Personalised Partisanship: The Interplay between Party Identification and Clientelism in Indonesia'.*