

UNINFORMED CHOICE: EXPLORING KNOWLEDGE GAPS AMONG FIRST-TIME VOTERS IN THE 2024 LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS

Wahyu Widiastuti

Communication Science Department

Universitas Bengkulu

w.widiastuti@unib.ac.id

Abstract

First-time voters represent a significant portion of the electorate, accounting for 13% of the 204.8 million eligible voters, making their participation crucial in determining election outcomes. The election of Regional Representative Council (DPD) members is as important as the election of House of Representatives (DPR) members. However, several studies reveal that many citizens, especially first-time voters, lack a complete understanding of the DPD's primary roles and responsibilities. This knowledge gap, particularly regarding the DPD elections, is worth further analysis, especially in the context of the 2024 DPD General Election in Bengkulu Province. This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to explore first-time voters' knowledge of the DPD election, the candidates running, and their voting choices. Field findings indicate a high level of awareness among novice voters in Bengkulu City but also reveal gaps in their understanding of the DPD election. Awareness of the election is primarily obtained through social media, including information from candidate accounts, influencers, and election organizers. The findings also highlight a tendency for delayed decision-making, raising concerns about potential vulnerability to money politics.

Keywords: novice voters, political information, money politics

Research Background

The 2024 Legislative General Election is being held to elect members of the House of Representatives (DPR) and the Regional House of Representatives at the provincial and regency/city levels for the 2024–2029 period. This legislative election, held simultaneously with the Indonesian Presidential Election, also aims to elect members of the Regional Representative Council (DPD). Eligible voters across Indonesia will elect four DPD members who will represent and advocate for regional interests in national policies, ensuring the preservation of national integration.

First-time voters are an essential and distinct segment of the electorate. According to Law No. 10 of 2008, Chapter IV, Article 198, Paragraphs 1 and 2, and Article 20, first-time voters are defined as Indonesian citizens who are 17 years of age or older on election day or those who have been or are married. These individuals, previously not included as voters due to legal provisions, are now eligible to vote. First-time voters account for 13% of the 204.8 million eligible voters, meaning their participation could significantly impact election outcomes (Inqrima et al., 2019). They are also part of Generation Z, making up nearly 60% of the electorate (Fernandes et al., 2023). As a result, these novice voters play a pivotal role in shaping the political landscape, democracy, and the future of governance in Indonesia.

In the 2024 election, first-time voters are estimated to be junior high school graduates, many of whom are senior high school students or recent graduates, with some transitioning to their first year of university. As this is their first voting experience, these voters often feel anxious and unsure of whom to vote for. According to Antar Venus in Martini et al. (2020), this anxiety stems from the slow introduction of political education to first-time voters. Their lack of political knowledge, combined with candidate campaigns, raises concerns about poor decision-making, which could ultimately be detrimental to the political system.

Homana (2018) examined the relationship between age and political participation, particularly in the United States. His findings indicate that young people are the most hesitant to engage in political activities, as evidenced by low voter turnout among students. This reluctance stems from their disinterest in political issues and limited involvement in community activities. They also feel that elected officials do not demonstrate significant achievements for the public. In Indonesia, Perludem (the Election Association for Democracy) conducted a study on the low participation of first-time voters in the 2014 Legislative and Presidential elections. The study revealed that 43% of first-time voters hesitated to vote due to a lack of political education.

The election of DPD members is as important as that of DPR members. However, research by Nurhotimah (2020) and Fitiani et al. (2020) shows that many citizens, particularly novice voters, do not fully understand the DPD's primary roles and functions. The lack of knowledge among first-time voters regarding the DPD elections is an exciting area for further analysis, especially in the context of the 2024 DPD General Election in Bengkulu Province.

This study aims to assess the awareness and knowledge of first-time voters regarding the DPD election, which is conducted simultaneously with the legislative and presidential elections for the 2024–2029 period. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, this study describes first-time voters' understanding of the DPD election, the candidates, and their voting choices. The population for this study consists of novice voters residing in Bengkulu City. The sample size is 153, selected through a simple random sampling method. Respondents were asked to complete a questionnaire distributed via Google Forms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In product marketing, research studies show that consumers will choose products they are familiar with because they can evaluate the product's features and anticipate its performance. This phenomenon is driven by the desire to control and minimize uncertainty in the decision-making process. By utilizing existing knowledge, consumers can make choices with more confidence, thereby reducing the cognitive burden and the possibility of regret, likewise, in political marketing. Political literacy is essential to enable voters in a democracy to be involved in the electoral decision-making process. Political literacy, or understanding political processes and institutions, is essential to effective election decision-making. Civic education, which aims to instill this political knowledge, is often seen as the key to increasing public participation in the democratic process. Civil literacy is an active and critical involvement in a very complex political landscape (Garcia & Mirra, 2020)

Political literacy suggests that individuals must possess the knowledge, skills, and values to navigate and engage effectively with public life (Hendrik & Danial, 2021). This idea is rooted in the belief that informed and empowered citizens are essential to a healthy democracy. Civic engagement, which includes political and non-political activities, is seen as a way for individuals to make a meaningful difference within their communities. (Turner, 2014). In countries that have just embraced the democratic system, political information and education levels are lower than in countries with more established democracies (Morduchowicz in Ihwan et al., 2019). This has implications for engagement and trust in political communication, affecting the quality of emerging democratic systems. Given the lack of political literacy in developing democracies, politicians must build their message through a recognizable symbolic narrative that their potential voters easily understand.

In the context of elections, political literacy plays an essential role in the decision-making process. Voters who are well-informed about the political landscape, candidates, and critical issues can make more informed choices. However, civic education should not only focus on imparting knowledge but also on developing critical thinking skills and values necessary for active and engaged citizenship. The impact of limited knowledge among first-time voters can potentially affect the outcome of this election significantly (Hara et al., 2018). The uninformed choices made by these voters, who may not have a comprehensive understanding of the electoral system, political parties, and candidate platforms, can have far-reaching consequences on the country's representation and governance.

Voters who lack comprehensive information are particularly vulnerable to the manipulative effects of disinformation and propaganda (Pira, 2023). Money politics undermines democracy by creating injustice in the election process. Voters influenced by money politics no longer base their decisions on a candidate's credibility, vision, or

mission (Kartini & Sanusi, 2022). This practice leads to the election of incompetent candidates and ultimately casts doubt on the leadership quality of those elected.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

All respondents are aware of the 2024 simultaneous elections, having obtained information through various channels such as conventional mass media (e.g., television and newspapers) and social media platforms like Instagram, X, TikTok, and Facebook. Additionally, respondents received information from family, school, and friends. Social media sources include the official accounts of the General Election Commission, election candidates, influencers, and personal accounts. Some respondents received information directly from General Election Commission (KPU) representatives who conducted outreach in schools and campuses.

The information obtained by novice voters primarily focused on exercising their voting rights on election day. They also learned about the types of elections held by the KPU in 2024, the participants, the election timeline, and the procedures for voting. As a result, 100% of respondents know that in the 2024 election, in addition to electing the president and vice president, they will also vote for representatives in the legislature, including the Central People's Representative Council (DPR RI), provincial parliaments, and the Regional Representative Council (DPD).

While all respondents understand that the legislative election aims to elect representatives at both the central and regional levels, not all fully grasp the distinctions between the People's Representative Assembly, which in Indonesia is divided into the *DPD* (regional level) and the *DPR* (national level), both part of, although they studied state institutions in school, they do not fully understand the different roles, functions, and membership criteria of the DPR RI and the DPD.

Regarding the election of DPD members from Bengkulu Province, only 37.8% of respondents know the total number of candidates. Respondents primarily know candidates who frequently appear on social media timelines or advertise heavily in mainstream and outdoor media. Destita Khairilisani and Erlisa Ermasari are the most well-known candidates due to their extensive social and mass media use. Four respondents follow Destita Khairilisani, and three follow Erlisa Ermasari on social media platforms. Other candidates followed by respondents include Ahmad Kanedi (two respondents) and Sultan Najamudin (one respondent).

Two weeks before election day, less than 21.1% of respondents had decided on a candidate. However, 80.7% plan to seek additional information before voting, mainly through social media (67.4%) or by asking family members (11.1%) and friends (3.7%).

Regarding decision-making, 20.7% of respondents will consider the candidates' vision, mission, and proposed programs before choosing. However, 21.4% will choose candidates based on ethnic and religious similarities. Another 13.3% will vote based on the preferences of family and friends, while 11.8% will base their vote on the candidates'

physical attractiveness. If, by election day, respondents do not find a candidate that meets their criteria, 84.4% will still go to the polling station and make a random choice to fulfill their voting rights.

Regarding money politics, 53.3% of respondents will refuse money or goods offered by DPD election candidates, 33.5% are willing to accept them, and 13.14% are undecided. Those who refuse do so because they believe rejecting money politics will contribute to positive change in Indonesia's election process. They also feel that accepting money would conflict with their moral values and ideals. This political awareness stems from their observation of the many regional heads and legislators involved in corruption after being elected. Respondents gain political awareness through social media and digital platforms, and they view money politics as a form of corruption that undermines justice and equality.

Meanwhile, those willing to accept money acknowledge their financial need, even though they know the small amount will not solve their economic problems. Their distrust of the current political system and doubts about future improvements in democracy make them more pragmatic. They believe accepting or rejecting money politics will not significantly affect election outcomes, so they decide to benefit from the situation. Interestingly, some respondents who consider candidates' vision, mission, and track record influential in their decisions do not always reject money politics. They view it as the only tangible benefit they can derive from an unfair political system that they feel has little relevance to their lives.

CONCLUSION

1. High Awareness but Gap in Understanding

All first-time voters know about the 2024 legislative election and have received information from various sources, including social media, family, school, and friends. However, despite this awareness, there remains a significant gap in understanding the different roles and functions of the DPR and DPD, with many respondents unable to distinguish between these two legislative bodies fully.

2. Media Influence on Candidate Awareness

The visibility of DPD candidates is primarily influenced by their presence on social and mainstream media. Only 37.8% of respondents were aware of the DPD election candidates, with most recognizing only the most prominent ones, such as Destita Khairilisani and Erlisa Ermasari, who have extensively utilized social media, mass media, and outdoor advertisements.

3. Delay in Decision Making

Most respondents had not decided on a candidate two weeks before the election and planned to seek more information closer to Election Day. However, 84.4% of respondents still intend to vote, even if they do not find a suitable candidate.

4. Attitudes Towards Money Politics

53.3% of respondents reject money politics, believing it undermines justice and equality. On the other hand, 33.5% are willing to accept money due to economic needs and distrust of the political system. There is a paradox, however, as some respondents who prioritize a candidate's vision and track record are still willing to accept money from candidates.

SUGGESTIONS

1. Strengthening Voter Education and Media Engagement

The KPU and media should collaborate to create educational campaigns focused on general elections, state institutions elected through the election process, and candidate information. These campaigns should be easily accessible to first-time voters through engaging formats like infographics, videos, and social media. Schools and universities should enhance political education through workshops and collaborations with the KPU.

2. Encouraging Informed Voting and Early Decision-Making

Voter education campaigns should include detailed information about candidates, including their profiles and programs. These efforts should reduce random and uninformed voting by emphasizing the importance of understanding candidate qualifications and fostering a sense of civic responsibility.

3. Combating Money Politics and Distrust in the System

Anti-money politics campaigns should be intensified, focusing on the moral implications and long-term negative consequences of accepting money in elections. Campaigns should also address economic realities and work to reduce distrust in the political system by promoting transparency and strengthening democratic institutions.

Reference

Fernandes, Arya., Suryahudaya, Edbert Gani., Okthariza, Noory. *Pemilih Muda Dalam Pemilihan Umum 2024 : Dinamis, Adaptif dan Responsif*. Departemen Politik dan Perubahan Sosial CSIS 2023.

Fitrani, A S., Rosid, M A., Muharram, F., & Kodriyah, F L. (2020, April 1). Attribute analysis with classification algorithm on election participation. IOP Publishing, 821(1), 012034-012034. <https://doi.org/10.1088/1757-899x/821/1/012034>

Garcia, A., & Mirra, N. (2020, September 10). *Writing Toward Justice: Youth Speculative Civic Literacies in Online Policy Discourse*. SAGE Publishing, 56(4), 640-669. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085920953881>

Hara, A E., Trihartono, A., & Viartasiwi, N. (2018, January 1). Democracy and Continuing Marginalization of Women in Indonesian Politics. *EDP Sciences*, 73, 11005-11005.

<https://doi.org/10.1051/e3sconf/20187311005>

Hendrik, A., & Danial, E. (2021, October 17). Strategi pembinaan kader politik melalui literasi politik. , 21(1), 42-47. <https://doi.org/10.21009/jimd.v21i1.22399>

Humana, G.A. (2018), "Youth political engagement in Australia and the United States: Student councils and volunteer organizations as communities of practice," *Journal of Social Science Education*, Vol. 17 No. 1, pp. 41-54.

Ihwan Susila, Dianne Dean, Raja Nerina Raja Yusof, Anton Agus Setyawan & Farid Wajdi (2019): Symbolic Political Communication, and Trust: A Young Voters' Perspective of the Indonesian Presidential Election, *Journal of Political Marketing*, DOI: 10.1080/15377857.2019.1652224

Iqrima, N., Zakso, A., & Supriadi, S. (2019, December 24). TINGKAT PARTISIPASI POLITIK PEMILIH PEMULA PADA PILKADA GUBERNUR 2018 DITINJAU DARI JENIS KELAMIN DAN PENDIDIKAN. *Tanjungpura University*, 2(2), 256-256.
<https://doi.org/10.26418/icote.v2i2.38238>

Martini, M., Irawaty, I., & Lubis, E. (2020, November 11). Student First-Time Voters' Perception in Jakarta Toward Election System in Indonesia: Through Their Participation in Election. *Knowledge E*. <https://doi.org/10.18502/kss.v4i14.7893>

Nurchotimah, A S I. (2020, June 29). The forms of Political Participation in General Elections by Beginner Voters. , 5(2), 235-244. <https://doi.org/10.26618/jed.v5i2.3440>

Turner, C C. (2014, April 1). Civic Engagement in the Capstone: The "State of the Community" Event. *Cambridge University Press*, 47(02), 497-501.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/s1049096514000444>