

# PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

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## **ISEAS Survey: Passive Indonesian Voters Place Candidate before Party**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Indonesia's political parties have had some success in building a network of branches and in managing elections, but continuous arrests of politicians and a lethargic parliament translate into their overall poor reputation, and public trust in them has always been low.
- Data from the Indonesia National Survey Project (INSP) recently commissioned by ISEAS confirm that, although voter turnout rates remain high, party membership rates are low, engagement with parties is minimal, and few Indonesians hold stable attachments to political parties.
- When choosing a party, voters sometimes rely on their peer groups and family. Furthermore, INSP data show that it is candidates that matter more. Candidates are the figures and faces voters look at and focus on, regardless of what parties they represent. Similarly, party leaders are key in determining party support.
- The INSP suggests that support for the major political parties has remained largely unchanged since the 2014 elections. President Widodo's PDI-P party, however, appears to have gained substantial ground over the smaller competitors. Results indicate that new parties will struggle to cross the electoral threshold of 3.5 percent in the 2019 elections.

*\* Ulla Fionna is Fellow in the Indonesia Studies Programme, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. This is the fifth Perspective in a series analysing data from the Indonesia National Survey Project commissioned by ISEAS in 2017. Its full details have been published in Trends in Southeast Asia, available at <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/trends-in-southeast-asia>.*

## INTRODUCTION

In recent times, Indonesia's political parties have had a mix of successes and failures. On the one hand, they have managed to establish branch infrastructures across the archipelago, and been agile balancing the demands of decentralisation and of local politics.<sup>1</sup> In some rare cases, parties have also taken to providing social services for local communities.<sup>2</sup> Yet on the other hand, parties continue to fail to conduct more functions (such as accommodating public interests and aspirations, and providing political education) and they tend to be absent at the grassroots level. This absence along with the general lethargic behaviour of parliamentary representatives have all contributed to negative perceptions of parties.

This translates into low public support, and their popularity remains low (see Figure 1), alongside other institutions long known for being dysfunctional and/or corrupt. Still, parties hold power in parliament and in local assemblies. This article attempts to shed some light on the nature of the support presently enjoyed by Indonesia's political parties. Using survey data from the Indonesia National Survey Project (INSP)<sup>3</sup> and comparing them with voting patterns from the 2014 elections, this Perspective discusses public assessments of political parties, and demonstrates that genuine support for these is low. Not only are party membership rates low, most voters do not feel any connection to the parties. This lack of connection often pushes voters to rely on their peers and family members to make their voting decisions for them. The popularity of parties has not changed since the 2014 elections. For the new parties intending to compete in the 2019 elections, success will still depend on party figures and on candidates.

## VOTING AND OTHER FORMS OF ENGAGEMENT

The survey data reveal that participation in elections has been high. In local, legislative, and presidential elections, more than 90 percent of respondents claimed that they voted (93 percent in Pilkada, 91.5 percent in legislative elections, and almost 94 percent in the presidential elections). Notably, these figures are much higher than the actual turnout levels of around 70-75 percent recorded in the 2014 elections.<sup>4</sup> (Explaining this discrepancy is beyond the scope of this article and the survey).

Aside from voting, however, engagement with parties is limited. For instance, only 5.31 percent of respondents have ever made direct contact with a politician. About 1.05 percent have donated money to a candidate or his/her campaign. About 6.4 percent of respondents have volunteered for a candidate or campaign, whereas slightly more than double that number or 13.27 percent, have participated in an electoral campaign event, and only about

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<sup>1</sup> Parties typically choose to support candidates even if these are not from the parties themselves, relying instead on the candidates' popularity and electability.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, PKS branches constantly provide health and social services at the grassroots level in East Java. To a lesser and less successful extent, parties such as PDI-P and Partai Golkar have also tried a similar approach.

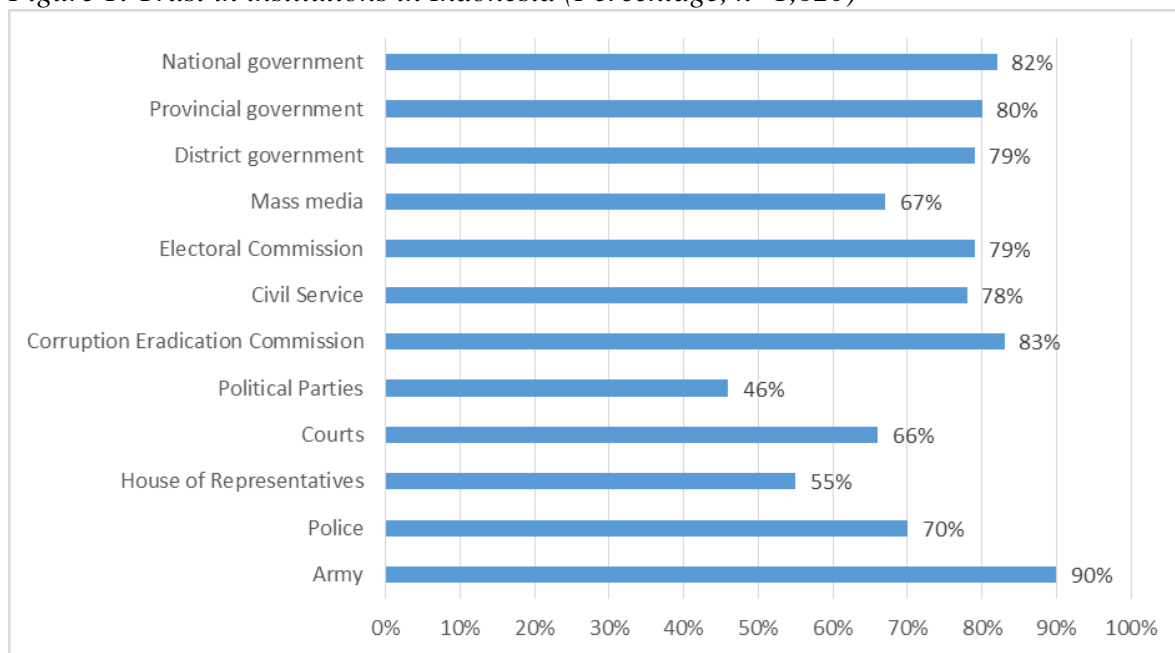
<sup>3</sup> Please see Appendix A for the survey methodology.

<sup>4</sup> "Partisipasi Pemilih di Pilpres 2014 Menurun, Ini Penjelasan KPU", detiknews, 23 July 2014, <https://news.detik.com/berita/2646389/partisipasi-pemilih-di-pilpres-2014-menurun-ini-penjelasan-kpu>, accessed 20 September 2017

2.6 percent have participated in demonstrations. In terms of more indirect ways of involvement, only around 5 percent claim to have used social media or messaging to receive/send information about politics.

This observation resonates with findings of studies that have discussed voter disillusionment with political parties and the various implications of this.<sup>5</sup> The survey figures are similar to those from an earlier survey, done in 2015 in selected cities.<sup>6</sup> Such stability in the figures indicates that voter sentiments towards the parties remain strong and steadfast.

*Figure 1: Trust in institutions in Indonesia (Percentage, n=1,620)*



Source: INSP, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute 2017

## **MEMBERSHIP RATES, CLOSENESS, AND REASONS TO SUPPORT PARTIES**

The survey also looks at membership rates of various socio-politico and religious organisations. Interestingly, the lowest rate of membership is recorded for political parties. Only 1.1 percent of the respondents are members.<sup>7</sup> This finding is consistent with global as well as national trends in Indonesia. While scholars have been discussing the decline of

<sup>5</sup> See for example Edward Aspinall and Mada Sukmajati (eds.), *Electoral Dynamics in Indonesia: Money Politics, Patronage and Clientelism at the Grassroots*, (Singapore: NUS Press, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> See Diego Fossati, “The State of Local Politics in Indonesia: Survey Evidence from Three Cities”, *Trends in Southeast Asia*, no. 5 2016.

<sup>7</sup> The highest membership rate is found for religious organisations at around 27.7 percent. Memberships of others, including labour unions, business/professional organisation, alumni association, and cooperative are lower than 10 percent, with the exception of farmer organisations at almost 12 percent. See Fossati, Diego, Yew-Foong Hui and Siwage Dharma Negara, “The Indonesia National Survey Project: Economy, Society and Politics”, *Trends in Southeast Asia*, No. 10 2017.

parties and party membership for decades now,<sup>8</sup> there are Indonesia-specific developments as well. Firstly, trust in parties as institutions remains low, particularly as corruption cases continue to mount against top party politicians.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, the fact that 351 regents/mayors/governors had been graft suspects in the past 20 years has put some dents in the reputation of the parties that they ran as candidates for.<sup>10</sup>

About 42 percent claim to be “not interested in politics”, and 25.9 percent are “not at all interested”. Another 24 percent are somewhat interested, and only 2.9 percent claim they are very interested. What is uncertain is what respondents would associate with interest – or disinterest – in politics, for instance whether interest in politics means finding out more about politics, discussing political issues, or even criticising and distancing oneself from political discussion because of personal beliefs. Taken at face value, this finding indicates that most respondents do not wish to discuss or get involved in politics.

While political engagement is limited, the voting rate is considerably high. Asked why they vote, some of the more popular responses given are: “like the party leaders” (20.59 percent), “the parties have better candidates” (14.6 percent), “the parties stand for reform” (12.63 percent), or they “agree with the parties’ policies” (13.04 percent). However, many have also responded that their votes depend on advice from their family (11.65 percent) or community (4.59 percent). Voters also care about the parties’ stance on religious matters—“this party supports my religion” has 8.04 percent, and “this party supports the rights of religious/ethnic minorities” has 3.94 percent. The option that the least number agree with are “the party has a record of delivering to my community/ethnic group” (1.8 percent), and “personal ties with some of this party’s members” (2.05 percent) (see Figure 2).

From the survey data, some trends in voting behaviour can be deduced. Firstly, voters’ main attraction are the figure(s) leading the parties and the candidates the parties presented as their choice.<sup>11</sup> The electoral system seems centred around individual candidates and as such, sidelines the parties and limits their role in elections.<sup>12</sup> Secondly, voters rely on party reputation. Popular answers such as “this party stands for reform, renewal of Indonesian politics”, and “I agree with this party’s policies” indicate that voters have formed certain perceptions of the parties and where they stand on certain issues. In the absence of clear

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<sup>8</sup> See for instance Russell Dalton, *Parties Without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Ingrid van Biezen, Peter Mair, and Thomas Poguntke, “Going, going... gone? The decline of party membership in contemporary Europe”, *European Journal of Political Research* 51: 24-56, 2012; Paul Whiteley, “Is the Party Over? The decline of party activism and membership across the democratic world”, *Party Politics* 17 (1): 21-44.

<sup>9</sup> One of the latest of which is against Golkar chairman Setya Novanto, also a suspect in a string of other cases, the latest concerning the national electronic ID card project.

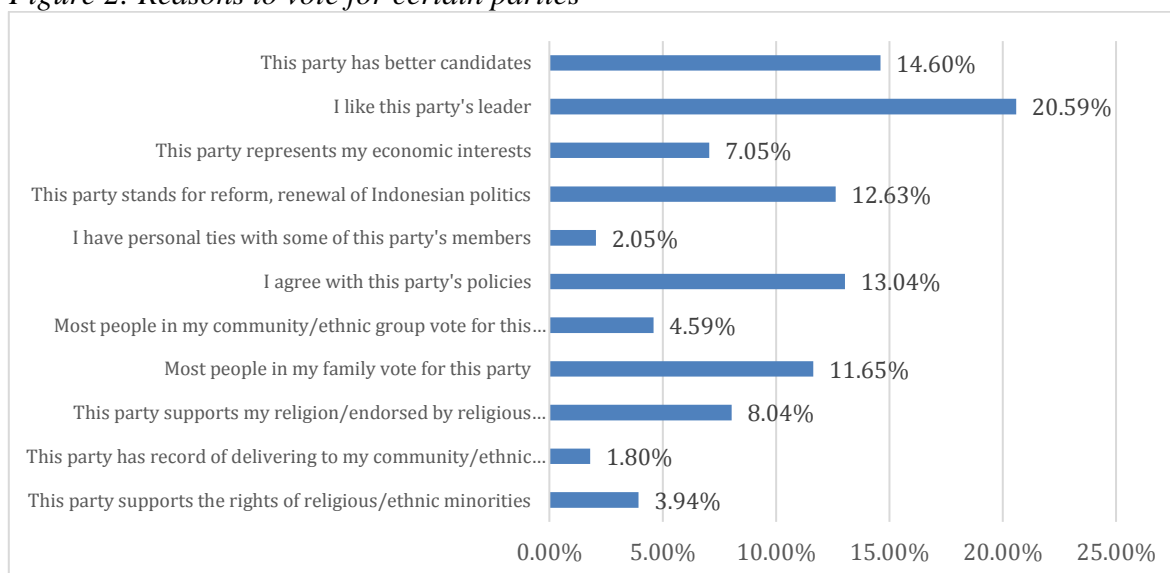
<sup>10</sup> In reality, candidates generally use parties as political vehicles. Only a handful of them are party cadres, while the majority are external candidates who are either recruited by the parties or who joined solely for the elections.

<sup>11</sup> The same finding has also been discussed in Ulla Fionna, “The trap of pop-charisma for the institutionalization of Indonesia’s post-Suharto parties”, *Asian Journal of Political Science*, Volume 24, 2016 - Issue 1.

<sup>12</sup> See for example R. William Liddle and Saiful Mujani, “Leadership, Party, and Religion: Explaining Voting Behavior in Indonesia”, *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol 40, Issue 7, 2007.

platforms,<sup>13</sup> voters have had to depend on these general perceptions. Thirdly, as found during fieldwork observing local elections,<sup>14</sup> the candidate-centred system has driven voters to choose from among many candidates who are often unknown, especially in the cases of local and legislative elections. Understandably then, many seem to adopt easier ways to make their decision—taking their peer groups’ choice (family members, community/ethnic group, and religious organisations) as their own.

Figure 2: Reasons to vote for certain parties<sup>15</sup>



Source: INSP – ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2017

About 90 percent of respondents say that they do not feel close to any party. Still, among the 10 percent that say yes, most feel close to PDI-P (38.98 percent), Partai Golkar (18.2 percent), and PKB (7.8 percent). Quizzed about this “closeness”, only 16.23 percent say they feel very close, the majority at 46.1 percent say somewhat close, and 32.47 say not very close. This data point to a weak connection between voters and parties.

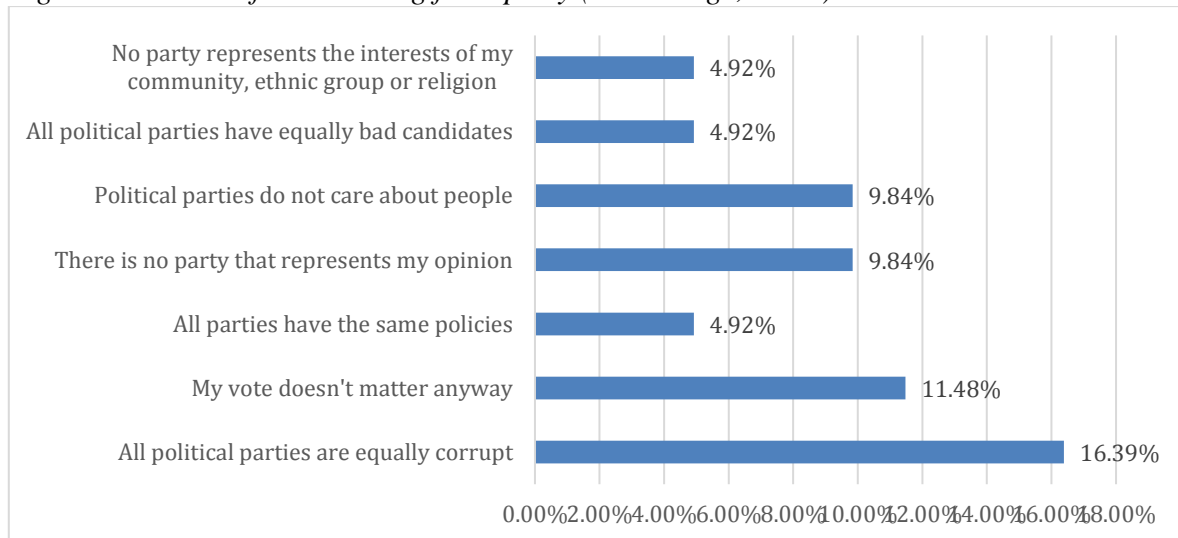
In terms of reasons why they would not vote for a party, perceptions that all parties are equally corrupt takes the top spot (16.39 percent). Beyond this reason, voters indicate their apathy by thinking that their votes do not matter anyway (11.48 percent), that no party represents their opinion (9.84 percent), and parties do not care about people (9.84 percent). As such, it is indicated in this survey that some perceived political parties to have failed to accommodate and further the interests of the voters. In contrast, the same group of voters think parties act for and preserve themselves only.

<sup>13</sup> Most parties adopt the state ideology Pancasila, and while others claim to adopt Islam as their ideology, they have different stances on basic issues such as whether or not Islam should be the state ideology, etc.

<sup>14</sup> Various interviews with voters since the 2015 round of elections revealed that many were overwhelmed by the idea of getting to know candidates before voting, especially as there were often tens of candidates for every vote.

<sup>15</sup> Respondents could choose up to three answers. The figure shows the total frequency percentage of each reason for party choice out of a total of 1331 answers delivered by the 1100 respondents who gave an indication that they would vote for a political party.

Figure 3: Reasons for not voting for a party (Percentage, n=61)<sup>16</sup>



Source: INSP – ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2017

## SUPPORT FOR INDIVIDUAL PARTIES

With 20 months to go before the 2019 general election, support for the most popular parties in the 2014 has largely remained stable (see Table 1).<sup>17</sup> If elections had been held in May 2017, the survey suggests that PDI-P would have won and Golkar Party would have been the runner-up. The PDI-P would have increased their vote share to 32.8 percent, while Partai Golkar would have increased their share of votes by 2.25 percent. Positions 3, 4, and 5 are more interesting to look at closely. Although they should be retained by the same parties, there are some changes. The PKB would be the third largest party (up from fifth in 2014), Gerindra Party slides from third to fourth, while Democrat Party drops from fourth position to fifth.

The survey suggests that PDIP, Golkar, and PKB would have increased their vote shares, while other parties would have lost theirs. PAN, Hanura Party, and Nasdem Party score the biggest losses. Hanura Party may not even pass the electoral threshold in the next election. Given that party leaders are the main attraction for voters, the PDI-P seems to have benefited from being associated with the popular President Jokowi.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, the loss of popularity for the other parties may be attributed to the failure of party leaders to win voter support.

<sup>16</sup> This question was only answered by respondents who had answered that they do not want to vote for all parties. There were 61 respondents for this question.

<sup>17</sup> Recently, another survey also revealed that PDIP would come first, although Gerindra was second instead of Golkar in this one. See “Survei CSIS: Elektabilitas Golkar Merosot, Disalip Gerindra”, detiknews, 12 September 2017 (<https://news.detik.com/berita/3639958/survei-csis-elektabilitas-golkar-merosot-disalip-gerindra>), accessed 9 October 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Although he does not officially hold a party position, Jokowi is generally seen as a PDIP leader. Jokowi’s approval rating was recorded at 66 percent in March 2017 (see “Jokowi’s approval rating reaches 66 percent: Survey”, The Jakarta Post, 22 March 2017, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/03/22/jokowis-approval-rating-reaches-66-percent-survey.html>); and at 68 percent in September 2017 (see “Jokowi’s approval rating remains high”, The Jakarta Post, 12 September 2017, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/09/12/jokowis-approval-rating-remains-high.html> )

Most disturbing, however, is the percentage of potential non-voters (not included in Table 1). The survey data reveal that as many as 32 percent (the 3.77 percent who claim they do not want to vote for any party plus the 28.33 percent who answer that they do not know) of eligible voters may choose not to vote. Not only does this again strongly support the finding mentioned earlier about weak partisanship and disenchantment, it also shows that the inclusion of the new parties may still fail to capture more votes than in the 2014 elections. Worryingly, this also signals a potential jump in the number of non-voters, which was last recorded at just under 25 percent.

The emerging new parties will face stiff competition from the more experienced parties, and they will need to strategise further in order to win votes. Parties such as Partai Persatuan Indonesia (Perindo Party, United Indonesia Party) and Partai Solidaritas Indonesia (PSI, Indonesian Solidarity Party) seem to have realised the importance of leaders and candidates. Perindo,<sup>19</sup> for instance, is led by Hary Tanoesoedibjo, a media mogul with a reputation as an ambitious politician who first joined Nasdem Party and then defected to Hanura Party before establishing his own political vehicle. PSI is led by Grace Natalie, former news anchor and journalist who worked in political consultancy before entering politics. PSI claims to promote diversity and progress, and carries an image as a young vibrant media-savvy party. It has aggressively recruited young prominent celebrities and public figures, and run a recruitment campaign for legislative candidates on its website.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See Perindo's website: <https://partaiperindo.com/>

<sup>20</sup> See PSI's website: <https://psi.id/>



*Table 1: Comparison between Votes in 2014 and Support in May 2017 for Political Parties*

Political Parties	Percentage of Votes in Legislative Election 2014	“If elections for the DPR were held today (May 2017), what party do you vote for? (%)”	Difference
Partai Nasdem	6.72	3.4	-3.32
Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa	9.04 (5)	10 (3)	+0.96
Partai Keadilan Sejahtera	6.79	4.2	-2.59
PDI Perjuangan	18.95 (1)	32.8 (1)	+13.85
Partai Golongan Karya	14.75 (2)	17 (2)	+2.25
Partai Gerindra	11.81 (3)	9.8 (4)	-2.01
Partai Demokrat	10.19 (4)	9 (5)	-1.19
Partai Amanat Nasional	7.59	2.8	-4.79
Partai Persatuan Pembangunan	6.53	6.5	-0.03
Partai Hanura	5.26	1	-4.26
Partai Bulan Bintang	1.46	0.4	-1.06
Partai Perindo	n.a.	2.6	n.a.
Partai Solidaritas Indonesia	n.a.	0.4	n.a.
Others	n.a.	0.2	n.a.

Source: KPU and INSP (ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute)

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The survey data strongly support previous studies and confirm that support for and attachment to parties are low and superficial. Party membership rates are low, engagement with parties is limited, and much support is due to party personalities. Disillusionment has even driven some voters to leave their voting decision to their peers and family. All this strongly indicates that Indonesia’s parties – although relatively successful in building nation-wide networks of branches – have failed in accommodating public interests and bridging the gap between voters and government. Instead, they have adjusted to the candidate-centred system in elections, where their primary focus in the elections is the most electable candidate(s).

The data strongly suggest that voters will continue to focus on candidates. Low trust in parties, low party membership, weak connections with the parties, as well as non-party related reasons to vote – will likely remain significant in the next few years. While these



trends may have been around for a few elections and are unlikely to cause serious disruptions to elections or jeopardize democracy in general, they should not be dismissed. For one thing, they serve to signal the lack of connection between voters and government which have long been ignored. The findings also point to the continuing failure of parties in engaging voters beyond the candidates who use their paraphernalia, and also the continuing lack of any mechanism for improvement. Juxtaposing these realities with the fact that parties still play important roles in parliament and in elections, there is a serious gap between the power of parties and their lack of capacity. Left untreated, this may see public trust in democracy plunging further to dangerously low levels.

**Appendix A: Survey Methodology<sup>21</sup>**

The survey was designed to obtain a representative sample of the Indonesian population. Conventional quantitative tests conducted by LSI using data from the 2010 Population Census suggest that this goal was achieved, as our sample closely mirrors the composition of the Indonesian population in terms of gender, region, location of residency (urban versus rural), religion and ethnicity. Data were gathered through face-to-face interviews with 1,620 adult Indonesian citizens (17 years old and above and/or married), a method that allowed us to collect high quality information on a wider range of issues than typically allowed by web-based surveys. As for the sampling strategy, a multi-stage cluster sampling method was employed. In the first stage, the population was stratified based on the proportional population of each of the 34 provinces throughout Indonesia, location of domicile (rural or urban; about 50 per cent each) and gender (about 50 per cent each). In the second stage, villages or kelurahan (the smallest administrative area in Indonesia) were selected as the primary sampling unit (PSU), and systematic random sampling was done on the villages (urban or rural) selected in each province according to its respective proportion of population. In total, 162 rural and urban villages were selected at random systematically. In the third stage, all Rukun Tetangga (RT), dusun or lingkungan (the smallest neighbourhood units) in the selected villages were listed, and 5 of them were selected at random. In the fourth stage, all households in each selected neighbourhood unit were listed, and two households were selected at random. Finally, at the fifth stage, all household members who were 17 years or older in each selected household were listed, and one member selected to be a respondent with the aid of the Kish Grid. If a female respondent was selected from one household, a male respondent would be selected from another household. In case the selected respondent could not be interviewed for various reasons (not available after two visits during interview time in the village, refused to be interviewed, etc.), the respondent was substituted by repeating stages 4 and 5 above. As a result, from each selected PSU, 10 respondents were selected, which added up to a total of 1,620 respondents for the survey.

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<sup>21</sup> This section is directly extracted from Fossati, Hui and Negara, “The Indonesian National Survey Project: Economy, Society, and Politics”.

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