

Public Opinion Polling and Post-truth Politics in Indonesia

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Public opinion polling plays a prominent role in Indonesian politics, but as the country grapples with democratic backsliding and post-truth politics, pollsters have faced serious challenges in their endeavour to enhance responsiveness, representation and accountability. This article analyses how the Indonesian polling industry has responded to these challenges since the 2014 presidential elections. It argues that Indonesia's most reputable pollsters have made important contributions to upholding the integrity of Indonesia's electoral regime due to increased transparency and new initiatives to improve media coverage of polling. At the same time, however, democratic responsiveness seems to have declined rather than improved despite an ever-growing number of public opinion surveys, while fragmentation and politicization within the polling industry have exacerbated some of the pathologies of contemporary Indonesian politics, including the explosion of electoral campaign costs and deepening polarization.

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Long regarded as an intrinsic part of contemporary democracy, public opinion polling has come under increasing criticism in recent years. Especially after their failure to correctly predict the outcomes of elections and referenda in the United States, the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia, pollsters around the globe have faced

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fundamental questions, not only about their methodologies but also about their impartiality and their broader role in electoral politics. In the aftermath of the 2019 federal election in Australia, for example, one analyst described the country's polling industry as "discredited, distrusted, even despised" and asked "how can one firm working for a major party also present itself as an impartial observer?"¹

Significantly, it is not only pollsters in mature Western democracies who are facing these kinds of questions. From Africa and Latin America to East and Southeast Asia, pollsters have often found themselves at the heart of controversy during election times. The focus of this article is Indonesia, an increasingly illiberal democracy in Southeast Asia where pollsters have been subject to scathing criticism, slander and even physical threats in recent years, even though—or perhaps precisely because—the country's top pollsters correctly predicted the winning candidates in all four presidential elections since 2004. In the most recent election in 2019, pollsters faced an unprecedented barrage of public abuse after the losing candidate, Prabowo Subianto, accused them of lying and manipulating surveys and quick count results.² Ironically, Prabowo himself referred to fabricated polling data when making his accusations.

The increasingly aggressive mistrust towards pollsters around the globe is part of a broader trend that is often captured under the term "post-truth politics". Popularized in the context of Donald Trump's 2016 election victory and the Brexit vote in the UK in the same year, the term refers to "a febrile environment, supercharged by online media, in which emotions overwhelm facts".³ In the post-truth era, more and more people have lost trust not only in elite politicians, but also in mainstream media and science. As a profession that relies heavily on complex scientific methodologies, pollsters have become popular targets in this post-truth environment. To make matters worse, some pollsters do in fact manipulate data, leaving the reputable institutions with the mammoth task of persuading voters and politicians of the value of surveys and their own credibility.

These developments raise new questions about the relationship between public opinion polling and democracy. While criticism of polling is not new, the changing political context of global democratic backsliding and post-truth politics poses novel challenges for polling as a tool to enhance key features of democracy such as electoral integrity, effective representation, accountability and responsiveness.⁴ This article analyses how the Indonesian polling industry has responded to these challenges since the 2014 presidential elections. It argues that Indonesia's most reputable pollsters have in fact made

important contributions to upholding the integrity of Indonesia's electoral regime, thanks to their professionalism, increased transparency and new initiatives to improve media coverage of polling. At the same time, however, democratic responsiveness seems to have declined rather than improved, despite an ever-growing number of public opinion surveys, while fragmentation and politicization within the polling industry have exacerbated some of the pathologies of contemporary Indonesian politics, including the explosion of electoral campaign costs and deepening polarization.

The article develops these arguments as follows. After this brief introduction, it will first review the academic literature on the relationship between polling and democracy. It will then link this overview to a brief discussion of democratic backsliding and post-truth politics and how these global trends affect Indonesia. The third part traces the rise of the Indonesian polling industry from the early post-Suharto years to the present, mapping its development onto distinct periods in Indonesia's regime trajectory. In this main section, the article will highlight the various initiatives taken by key players in the polling industry to raise the standards of scientific polling in Indonesia and to provide a bulwark against further democratic backsliding. The article then assesses the effectiveness of these efforts before concluding with a brief outlook for polling in Indonesia.

Polling and Democracy in the Post-truth Era

President Trump's Twitter-driven post-truth politics and the rise of right-wing populism around the world may have elevated mistrust against polling to new levels, but scepticism, criticism and ridicule have shadowed public opinion polling ever since George Gallup, the founding father of modern polling, published his first polls in the 1930s. For some critics, even trying to measure public opinion is fundamentally misguided because, as Pierre Bourdieu famously declared, "public opinion does not exist".⁵ According to this view, it is an illusion to believe that all respondents of public opinion surveys are knowledgeable enough to form an opinion about the matters they are being asked to comment on.⁶ These critics further maintain that not all opinions are equally weighted when it comes to matching opinion data to policy outcomes. Significantly, some recent research from the United States appears to confirm these concerns, suggesting that policy decisions are indeed often influenced more by lobbying from business leaders and wealthy citizens than

the opinions of the general public. As Jason Barabas states in his review of some of these studies, “some opinions matter more than others, and longitudinal trends appear to point to a decline in responsiveness”.⁷

Such data is concerning as it feeds directly into the increasingly well-established popular perception that modern democracy panders primarily to elite interests and that public opinion surveys can easily be manipulated to amplify this. Populist post-truth politics thrives on such perceptions. However, some studies have attempted to counter these perceptions, arguing that rather than ignore public opinion, politicians actually tend to overuse polling data and simply follow what public opinion dictates.⁸ Such over-reliance on public opinion can also be problematic for democracy, not only because it prioritizes the majoritarian character of democracy over other principles such as equality and protection of minorities, but also because it limits the scope for deliberation and negotiation among those citizens who are in fact well-informed.⁹ Moreover, it can have a corrosive effect on political leadership if policy-making is more determined by poll results than a leader’s convictions, expertise and judgement.¹⁰ For Robert Shapiro, the question “whether leaders should follow the wishes of voters or exercise their own judgment—*as leaders*” is one of the key dilemmas for democratically elected public officials. But “when they do the latter and act at odds with public opinion”, Shapiro continues, “they should *explain* why the course they choose is better than what the public wants”.¹¹

Politicians who struggle to provide adequate explanations for their decisions are likely to be seen as elitist and removed from the concerns of ordinary people. Such perceptions can lead to rapid declines in approval ratings and once an incumbent’s ratings drop, opponents can turn poll results into potent political ammunition. Around the world, elected but increasingly unpopular leaders have been removed from office before they had finished their terms, either by the threat of impeachment (e.g., Peruvian President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski in 2018) or through party backroom rebellions (e.g., various recent prime ministers of Australia). Polling figures were instrumental in all these cases, even though it should be noted that the declines in approval ratings were not always driven by perceptions about leadership, but also by cultural and ideological factors. Still, where polling data is used in purely opportunistic fashion to topple elected leaders who have not actually abused their office or faced other legal problems, polling can contribute to the erosion of accountability and the legitimacy of the electoral mandate.

Yet another form of criticism has focused on the relationship between polling and the media. In this context, Barabas has highlighted that despite the ubiquity of polls, too few polling questions actually engage with salient policy issues.¹² Even if they do, the media still prefers to report on “horse race” polls that focus on the popularity of parties and/or candidates rather than substantive policy issues.¹³ Depending on the political and socio-cultural context, this obsession with popularity or electability may reinforce stereotypes and biases against certain candidates including women or minorities. Generally, journalistic coverage of polls often lacks adequate contextual information or is laden with biased interpretations of the polling data.¹⁴ Taken together, pollsters and media organizations have therefore at least indirectly contributed to the transformation of electoral politics from contests of ideas into personality-driven popularity contests. An important side effect of this development has been the rapid commercialization of electoral politics, as candidates spend huge amounts of money to improve their personal image rather than formulate persuasive policy solutions.¹⁵

In addition to these critiques, pollsters have also faced increasing questions about their methodologies as the combination of new digital technologies, citizens’ enhanced mobility, volatile voting behaviour and growing scepticism towards polls have led to declining response rates and inaccuracies in survey data.¹⁶ For example, the rapid rise of mobile phone technology has made genuine random sampling—an essential component of professional polling—very difficult and onerous.¹⁷ Moreover, growing volatility in voting behaviour and large numbers of undecided voters who are prone to changing their mind throughout an election campaign pose methodological challenges for pollsters when they try to turn pre-election polling results into predictions for election day.¹⁸ Questions about how pollsters are handling these challenges gained particular traction after the spectacular failures to correctly predict the outcomes of the presidential elections in the United States (November 2016), the Brexit referendum in the UK (June 2016) and the federal elections in Australia (May 2019).

Nevertheless, polling remains central to democratic politics and has in fact not declined in accuracy by historical standards. Both global comparative data as well as studies about historical polling accuracy in the United States show that despite the odd remarkably wrong prediction, polling accuracy has actually remained fairly stable.¹⁹ Furthermore, proponents of polling can still point

to a large body of academic literature that highlights the potential benefits of professionally conducted public opinion polling for the quality of democracy. For example, in response to concerns about the weighting and value of individual opinions, scholars have emphasized that as long as pollsters apply systematic and ethical random sampling methods to recruit their respondents, polling can in fact enhance representation and political equality. In the words of Sidney Verba, “sample surveys provide the closest approximation to an unbiased representation of the public because participation in a survey requires no resources and because surveys eliminate the selection bias inherent in the fact that participants in politics are self-selected”.²⁰ Thus conceptualized, polling should not only ensure the equal representation of political views, but it can also constitute an alternative form of political participation that gives citizens a chance to express their approval or disapproval of political elites and the extent to which they are implementing their electoral mandate. In other words, polls provide a “feedback loop between elites and the public on matters of societal concern”²¹ which can ultimately contribute to enhancing the responsiveness of a democratic regime.

Proponents of polling also refute claims that public opinion polling is responsible for a growing lack of democratic responsiveness. Jacobs and Shapiro, for example, blame the media for this development, stating that “the use and reporting of polls are distorting the process of democratic accountability and responsiveness that they [the polls] were meant to support and strengthen”.²² According to this view, polling remains a potentially powerful tool to enhance the responsiveness of political elites outside electoral cycles, but its influence on policy-making is constrained by the media as well as other factors including, among others, institutional settings and issue salience.²³ In short, polling does not operate in a vacuum and its ability to enhance democratic responsiveness needs to be analysed in specific political contexts.

Another argument in defence of polling is its contribution to improving electoral integrity in new and emerging democracies. In political environments where independent electoral management bodies lack the expertise, experience or resources to implement elections freely and fairly, election results are often subject to challenges from losing candidates who allege fraud and manipulation. Professional non-partisan pollsters can play an important role here in countering such narratives and strengthening trust in democratic procedures,²⁴ for example by publishing quick count results long

before the official election results are announced. It is noteworthy, however, that in reality pollsters in emerging and new democracies are rarely non-partisan.²⁵ As Graeme Ramshaw argued in his study of polling in four African states, “survey researchers in transitional societies are, by their very existence, political actors in that opinion polls and the information they provide can be construed as a tangible threat to the political elites in these countries”.²⁶

Polling in New Democracies

Overall, the role of polling and pollsters in new democracies is still fairly poorly understood as public opinion research remains dominated by studies from and about Western democracies, especially the United States. Only gradually are scholars expanding this body of literature to new and emerging democracies where the evolution of polling had long been thwarted by colonialism and post-colonial authoritarianism.²⁷ Indonesia is one of those new democracies where polling has quickly come to play an important role. The country only transitioned to democracy in 1998 and is currently classified as a partly free electoral democracy by Freedom House and a flawed democracy in *The Economist's* democracy index.²⁸ In the two decades since the beginning of democratization, Indonesia has undergone three distinct phases of political development: a turbulent but innovative early transition phase (1998–2004); a decade of stability and stagnation (2004–14); and, most recently, a period of democratic regression and polarization (2014–now).²⁹ Significantly, each of these phases corresponds to distinct periods in the trajectory of the country's polling industry, which can be categorized as formative years, expansion and fragmentation and, eventually, politicization and professionalization.

Previous studies on polling in Indonesia have only covered the first and second period. Contributions by Marcus Mietzner or Muhammad Qodari, for example, traced the origins and subsequent expansion of the industry in the first ten years, while Agus Trihartono examined the blurry links between polling and consulting in local politics during the period of expansion and fragmentation.³⁰ What all three studies have in common is that they highlight, to varying degrees, the tensions between the various democratic benefits of polling and the risks associated with an overly polling-obsessed polity. Furthermore, these early works echo Graeme Ramshaw's observation that pollsters are inherently political actors rather than just neutral providers of public opinion snapshots, especially because

many Indonesian pollsters do not just conduct public opinion surveys but also offer assistance with electoral campaign design and other consulting services.³¹

This politicization of the polling industry has taken on new dimensions since 2014. As Indonesia entered a new phase of democratic regression characterized by growing illiberalism, polarization and populist post-truth politics,³² pollsters have found themselves at the heart of controversy in both the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections. The following sections will examine the role of pollsters in these controversies and outline what steps leading industry players have taken to professionalize polling in the wake of these developments. First of all, however, it is useful to briefly review the evolution of Indonesia's polling industry and map its trajectory against broader political trends in Indonesia since 1998.

Indonesia's Polling Industry in the Early Transition Years (1998–2004)

Indonesia democratized in 1998 after President Suharto resigned following more than thirty years of authoritarian rule. A year later, the country held its first free and fair elections, followed by a series of constitutional changes that transformed Indonesia into a fully-fledged presidential multiparty system.³³ Meanwhile, political reform also extended to the subnational level as a massive decentralization programme was rolled out to address local grievances that had accumulated during the Suharto era. In short, this early transition period was characterized by a flurry of crisis-driven reform activities, yet at the same time many old elites also retained positions of power.³⁴ As a result, Indonesia's post-Suharto regime constituted itself as a heavily contested political landscape in which weak presidents had to navigate between popular reform demands from the electorate, the interests of a deeply entrenched oligarchy and a constantly evolving set of democratic institutions.³⁵

In this dynamic political climate, some non-governmental organizations as well as the respected *Kompas* newspaper conducted their first public opinion surveys to gauge public satisfaction with the performance of Presidents Abdurrahman Wahid (1999–2001) and Megawati Soekarnoputri (2001–4) and support for individual political parties as well as democracy more broadly.³⁶ International democracy promotion organizations from the United States and Japan sponsored several of these early polls, but many political actors including most party leaders remained sceptical about public

opinion polling. All in all, polling in these early years remained relatively marginal to the political process as the first pollsters had neither the methodological expertise nor the human and financial resources to conduct systematic polls across the whole archipelago. Nevertheless, even with limited resources, polling played a small but important part in lending credibility to the results of the 1999 elections. According to Qodari, the average gap between the predictions of these early surveys and the eventual election results was only 5 per cent³⁷—a rather large margin by today's standards, but a respectable achievement under the circumstances back then.

It did not take long for the pollsters to improve their methodological competence and the accuracy of their predictions. At the 2004 elections, the average gap between pre-election survey results and the real results was down to 2 per cent, while average sample size had shrunk from 5,000 to 2,500.³⁸ Most importantly though, pollsters correctly—and rather unexpectedly for many Indonesian politicians at the time—predicted the victory of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono in Indonesia's first-ever direct presidential election, which was held a few months after the 2004 legislative elections. The introduction of these direct elections shifted the focus of electoral politics from political parties to individual candidates who could appeal to voters without the shackles of party discipline. Voters responded enthusiastically to this change in the institutional framework and elected Yudhoyono as president even though the former general had no noteworthy party support apart from his hastily established Democratic Party (Partai Demokrat, PD). By correctly predicting this victory, pollsters not only cemented their place in electoral politics, but also convinced party elites, the media and many voters that public opinion surveys could also be a potent tool for electoral campaign purposes.³⁹

With the election of Yudhoyono, both the first phase of Indonesia's democratic transition as well as the formative period of the polling industry ended. By 2004, the main parameters of Indonesia's new political system were set and a sense of stability returned to Indonesian politics. Like the broader political system, the polling industry had taken some time to find its feet, but was now well established as an integral part of Indonesian politics. Despite limited resources and expertise, pollsters had managed to play a small role in assisting Indonesia's transition to democracy and they had certainly laid the groundwork for the subsequent expansion phase which began directly after the election of Yudhoyono.

Expansion and Fragmentation during the Yudhoyono Era (2004–14)

Yudhoyono was not only the first president of the democratic era who was elected directly, but he was also the first to serve two full terms in office. Despite this institutional stability, however, the Yudhoyono years were ultimately a missed opportunity to deepen democracy. After a relatively successful first term marked by economic recovery, the conclusion of large-scale communal and separatist conflicts and the introduction of direct local elections, scholars started to express concerns about rising religious intolerance, attempts to weaken the corruption eradication commission and a general lack of new reform initiatives.⁴⁰ When Yudhoyono left office in 2014, Edward Aspinall, Marcus Mietzner and Dirk Tomsa concluded that “Yudhoyono merely stabilised Indonesia’s fragile democracy without ensuring that democracy became the ‘only game in town’”.⁴¹

While the overall political reform process stagnated, polling transformed into a booming growth industry. Following the pollsters’ initial rise to prominence in the 2004 presidential election, two subsequent changes to the electoral system—first, the introduction of direct local elections in 2005 and then the switch from a semi-open to a fully open proportional representation list system for legislative elections in 2009—led to unprecedented demand for surveys from the thousands of candidates aspiring to compete for a seat in parliament or the offices of governor, mayor or district head. For these candidates, electability as measured in public opinion polls rather than behind-the-scenes lobbying quickly became the most effective way to secure a nomination from a political party.⁴² In response to the new demand, dozens of new survey institutes were founded and many of them seized the opportunity to expand their business from merely conducting surveys to also offering consultancy services, including fully-fledged image improvement campaigns.

As the industry expanded, divisions over adequate ethical standards for public opinion polling became more and more obvious. On the one hand stood a group of pollsters who saw themselves primarily as “part of an epistemological community” that is keen to generate its own data for the sake of making Indonesia more transparent and accountable.⁴³ Many of these pollsters were overseas-trained political scientists who had learned professional methods of random sampling and regression analysis during their postgraduate studies. The institutes founded and run by these “academic pollsters” quickly gained a reputation for accuracy and professionalism and many of these early trailblazers have continued to set the standard of Indonesian polling until today.⁴⁴

In the shadow of these professional pollsters, however, another crop of survey institutes with rather different ethical standards also became firmly established during this expansion phase. Many of these commercial pollsters had not only less experience and scientific training than the academic pollsters, but also fewer ethical reservations about manipulating survey data for partisan campaign purposes. According to industry insiders, the growth of these commercial pollsters with dubious work ethics was primarily facilitated by the switch to a highly personalistic electoral system which encouraged aspiring candidates to deliberately disseminate fake survey results in the hope of generating momentum for their candidature. One pollster described such surveys from dubious pollsters as “a candidate’s entry ticket to the marketplace of candidates”.⁴⁵ Armed with exaggerated numbers of their popularity, they would approach parties in the hope of securing a list place or a candidature for an executive post. In case of success, they would then turn to a more established and professional pollster to ask for assistance in developing their campaign.

The divisions over ethical standards and methodological rigour were epitomized in a widely publicized falling out between two protagonists of the polling industry, Saiful Mujani and Denny JA. While Mujani pledged to adhere to the normative ideals of polling as an instrument to enhance transparency and democratic representation through his Lembaga Survei Indonesia (LSI), Denny JA regarded polling more as a tool to become actively involved in consulting and electoral campaign design. To do that, he left Mujani’s LSI and established his own institute called Lingkaran Survei Indonesia (LSI Denny JA).⁴⁶ Over time, however, the line between academic and commercial polling became increasingly blurred as more and more pollsters added consulting and campaign assistance to their portfolio. Even Mujani himself eventually left LSI and set up his own consulting firm called Saiful Mujani Research and Consulting (SMRC) which lists “helping to win political competitions” as one of its core activities.⁴⁷

Qodari and Trihartono have described in detail how pollsters who provide both surveys and consultancy services use their survey data to devise entire campaign strategies.⁴⁸ Depending on a candidate’s level of name recognition and likeability, these strategies may range from mapping the client’s strengths and weaknesses vis-à-vis the closest competitors over public relations advice such as how to improve visual appearance and communication skills to crafting effective campaign materials and slogans. Significantly, some pollsters also began to use their data to map voters’ expectations

about candidates' distribution of gifts and patronage, thereby directly contributing to the growth in vote buying that has plagued legislative elections since the introduction of the open list PR system in 2009.⁴⁹

It is noteworthy that the animosities between Saiful Mujani and Denny JA also had broader implications for the organized representation of the polling industry's interests. By 2009, Indonesia had two separate professional associations who both claimed to represent the collective interests of the polling industry. The Indonesian Association for Public Opinion Research (Aropi) was founded by Denny JA in 2007, but many of the academic pollsters preferred to have their own organizational vehicle and set up the Indonesian Public Opinion Survey Association (Persepi), which held its first national congress in 2009.⁵⁰ The bitterness between the two sides was captured in a statement of Aropi co-founder Umar S. Bakry, who accused those who did not want to join Aropi of arrogance.⁵¹ While neither of the two organizations conducted regular activities to boost a collective identity or enhance visibility, Persepi at least signalled its commitment to scientific methodology and ethical standards by adopting a professional code of conduct that was modelled upon similar ethics codes in other polling associations around the world.⁵² Though rarely enforced in the early years, this code was to be severely tested in the aftermath of the 2014 election.

Politicization and Professionalization in Times of Heightened Polarization (2014–now)

The 2014 presidential election took place in an atmosphere of intense polarization and social tensions between supporters of the two presidential candidates Joko Widodo and Prabowo Subianto. After years of “promiscuous powersharing”⁵³ under Yudhoyono and his predecessors, the highly antagonistic and populist election campaign revealed deep fault lines in Indonesian society between those who favoured a moderate new impetus for democratic reform as symbolized by Jokowi and those who were more sympathetic to neo-authoritarian tendencies as espoused by Prabowo. Given the campaign narratives promoted by the two contenders, Jokowi's eventual victory was initially hailed as an important milestone for Indonesian democracy,⁵⁴ but it would ultimately prove to be the beginning of a period of deepening polarization in which the democratic stagnation of the Yudhoyono era slowly turned into democratic backsliding.

From at least 2016 onwards, this polarization took on a decidedly religious tone as conservative Muslims and radical Islamists rallied

behind Prabowo to first bring down the ethnic Chinese Christian Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, aka Ahok, in the 2017 gubernatorial election and then attack Jokowi with a similarly sectarian campaign. In the end, Jokowi staved off the challenge with another election victory in 2019, but the scars of three divisive election campaigns may well have a lasting impact on the fabric of Indonesian politics and society, despite the controversial post-election reconciliation between the two presidential candidates.⁵⁵

They certainly had an impact on the polling industry. Prior to 2014, it was common practice for most pollsters to offer their services to politicians from across the entire party spectrum, both in national and local elections. Thus, while the industry was already deeply entrenched in processes of political contestation, partisan affiliations of pollsters were usually fluid and often dependant on local political contexts. With the emergence of Prabowo Subianto as a presidential contender in 2014, however, these dynamics changed. Given Prabowo's extensive ties to the New Order regime and his alleged involvement in multiple gross human rights violations, some pollsters now openly voiced their in-principle opposition against the former general's candidature, thereby at least indirectly feeding into the emerging social polarization.

Among the most outspoken was Saiful Mujani, whose blog published a number of anti-Prabowo writings in 2013 and 2014.⁵⁶ About a month before the presidential election, Mujani himself was quoted as saying, "If I'm forced to express my political views, then I'd say blatantly 'do not vote for Prabowo'".⁵⁷ As the campaign heated up and Prabowo closed the gap in many opinion polls, some pro-Jokowi pollsters were accused of withholding survey results in order not to further embolden Prabowo. Four days before the election, Philips Vermonte from the Centre of Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) appeared in a pro-Jokowi YouTube clip entitled "60 seconds for those of you who are still undecided".⁵⁸ The Prabowo camp reacted by reporting SMRC, CSIS and one other pollster to the election supervisory board (Bawaslu), alleging they had violated a passage in the election law which required providers of quick counts to be non-partisan.⁵⁹

While key mainstream pollsters rallied behind Jokowi, the Prabowo camp tapped into the vast pool of smaller new polling institutes that had been established during the expansion phase. Prabowo's goal, however, was not to obtain formal statements of support. Rather, he and his allies paid these pollsters to publish survey results that contradicted the findings from the established

institutes and showed the former general in the lead instead. Significantly, the mastermind behind this strategy was not an Indonesian consultant but Prabowo's American campaign adviser Rob Allyn who, according to Aspinall and Mietzner, "has been known not only for his expertise in negative campaigning but also for producing surveys which create the impression that an electorally weak candidate is competitive, and using the subsequent confusion among the electorate to manoeuvre this candidate into a more favourable position".⁶⁰ With the support from several media moguls, Prabowo pursued this strategy until election day, so that voters following the announcement of quick count results on live television that day were faced with a bizarre scenario: while some television channels hosted pollsters who proclaimed that Jokowi had won, other channels hosted pollsters who declared Prabowo victorious. In the end, the General Election Commission announced that Jokowi had won and the results were later confirmed by the Constitutional Court.

The farcical events around the 2014 election threatened to damage the reputation of the entire polling industry. The Press Council and the Indonesian Broadcasting Commission reportedly even considered a proposal to ban airing quick count results on television.⁶¹ Desperate to isolate the black sheep responsible for the situation, leading pro-Jokowi pollsters resorted to Persepi to step up and enforce its code of conduct. In response, Persepi requested all its member institutes which conducted a quick count during the 2014 election to be subjected to an independent audit. As anticipated, the institutes which had declared Prabowo the winner refused to comply with the request, causing Persepi's ethics council to decide to expel these institutes for violating the organization's code of conduct.⁶²

The decision sent a clear statement that Persepi was determined not to tolerate pollsters with questionable track records among its ranks. In the following years, especially after the election of CSIS Executive Director Philips Vermonte as chairman in 2016, the association and some of its leading members built on this assertiveness and took some active steps to restore public trust and enforce professional ethical standards in public opinion research. First, the association began conducting workshops and seminars on polling-related topics including the 2016 US election and the 2017 Jakarta election. Then, as the 2019 election approached, it joined forces with the Alliance of Independent Journalists (*Aliansi Jurnalis Independen*, AJI) to co-host a workshop on strategies to improve journalists' political literacy and their ability to provide critical

reporting on opinion polls. It also organized a large international conference on “Asking Sensitive Questions in Surveys on Religious and Non-religious Extremism” at CSIS in December 2018, which was livestreamed via YouTube.⁶³

Second, it intensified its communication with the media at various levels. Good relations between Persepi-affiliated pollsters and selected television stations had in fact existed for a while, allowing some pollsters to become quasi-celebrities over time, thanks to their frequent appearances as political analysts in news programmes and talk shows. According to Djayadi Hanan, it was not unusual for him to receive almost daily invitations to appear on television while he was working for SMRC.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, unprofessional and uncritical reporting on opinion polls remained a problem in Indonesia’s highly politicized media landscape where most media conglomerates are owned by prominent political power brokers.⁶⁵ For example, during the polling industry’s expansion phase, Indonesian media outlets had rarely provided background data about the track record of pollsters when reporting on survey results.

Unprofessional coverage of polls of course culminated in the 2014 presidential election disaster when television stations owned by then-Prabowo allies Aburizal Bakrie and Hary Tanoesoedibjo broadcast fake quick count results declaring Prabowo the winner of the election. Significantly, one of the pollsters involved in these quick counts later admitted that Hary Tanoe’s MNC Group had paid his company for the quick count.⁶⁶ Although a repeat of the 2014 events in the 2019 elections was always unlikely once Hary Tanoe and Bakrie’s Golkar switched their allegiance to Jokowi for 2019, Persepi still approached the 2019 elections proactively, as was exemplified in the aforementioned workshop co-organized with AJI and frequent appearances of Persepi members in public forums where they tirelessly explained how to distinguish credible from unreliable polls.⁶⁷

Third, Persepi also sought to provide new incentives for pollsters to join the association. For example, the association introduced a membership fee in order to be able to offer professional development opportunities for new pollsters, especially from the regions.⁶⁸ Moreover, the Persepi chairman lobbied the General Election Commission for a better accreditation system for pollsters ahead of the 2019 elections. While not all proposals were heeded by the Komisi Pemilihan Umum (KPU),⁶⁹ the commission did issue a regulation in 2018 that required pollsters intent on conducting a quick count on

election day to be not only registered with the KPU but also with a professional association such as Persepi. In order to be formally accredited with the KPU, pollsters had to commit to reporting details about their methodology and data as well as the sources of funding used for their quick counts.⁷⁰

All in all, the various efforts to professionalize Indonesian polling yielded mixed results. Untrustworthy pollsters still published polls ahead of the 2019 elections and much of the reporting on these polls remained remarkably uncritical, but at least some media outlets moved in a more critical direction. For example, when a pollster called Indomatrik published survey results in February 2019 that saw unusually high levels of support for Prabowo, several media reports pointed out that this institute's executive director was the same person who had previously led Puskaptis, one of the institutes that had published fake quick counts in 2014.⁷¹ Other media reports no longer just mentioned the questionable poll, but compared the results to others, highlighting the discrepancy between Indomatrik and more established pollsters. On election day, there was not a single pollster who was willing to declare Prabowo the winner. Instead, all polling institutes which conducted quick counts on the day, including a less reputable organization such as Median which in the past had faced allegations of publishing questionable survey results, announced that Jokowi had won (see Table 1).

Nevertheless, Prabowo did not concede defeat. With no pollster at hand to support him, he claimed that "internal" exit poll and quick count data showed that he, not Jokowi, had won the election. He also accused the mainstream pollsters of lying and suggested, rather bizarrely, they move to Antarctica to spread their lies to penguins.⁷² Subsequently, he incited an aggressive anti-pollster discourse which resulted in massive online abuse and threats against prominent pollsters like Burhanuddin Muhtadi (Indikator) or Yunarto Wijaya (Charta Politika). The latter in particular became a target due to his frequent criticism of Prabowo in the run-up to the election. In June, police confirmed that Yunarto had even been targeted in an obscure murder plot.⁷³

Faced with these unprecedented levels of hostility, the polling industry responded with remarkable professionalism. In the immediate aftermath of the election, when Prabowo supporters launched frequent attacks against the credibility of the pollsters, Persepi held a press conference where eight of its member organizations opened their quick count data to the public and challenged Prabowo and his team to do the same with their internal data.⁷⁴ Persepi chairman

Philips Vermonte subsequently posted a brief statement about the event on his Facebook account which was liked by more than 4,300 people and shared more than 2,000 times. The Prabowo team did not respond to the challenge, and the pollsters were eventually officially vindicated when first the General Election Commission and, a bit later, the Constitutional Court confirmed Jokowi as the clear winner. As it turned out, all quick count results were within about 1 per cent of the official KPU result (see Table 1).

Table 1
Comparison of the 2019 Presidential Election Results and Quick Count Results

<i>Name of Institution</i>	<i>Vote Share in % Jokowi-Ma'ruf Amin</i>	<i>Vote Share in % Prabowo-Sandiaga Uno</i>	<i>Difference to KPU Result</i>
KPU (official result)	55.50	44.50	
CSIS-Cyrus	55.62	44.38	0.12
LSI Denny JA	55.71	44.29	0.21
Poltracking	54.98	45.02	0.52
SMRC	54.89	45.11	0.61
Charta Politika	54.71	45.29	0.79
Indikator	54.58	45.42	0.92
Median	54.57	45.43	0.93
Litbang Kompas	54.45	45.55	1.05
Indo Barometer	54.35	45.65	1.15
Populi Center	54.03	45.97	1.47
Kedai Kopi	53.68	46.32	1.82

Sources: Divisi Riset SMRC, *Perbandingan Quick Count dan Rekapitulasi KPU Pilpres 2019* [Comparison Quick Count and KPU Recapitulation for the 2019 Presidential Election] (Jakarta: SMRC, 2019); "Quick Count Median: Jokowi-Amin Menang" [Median's Quick Count: Jokowi-Amin Win], *Tribun News*, 18 April 2019, <https://www.tribunnews.com/pilpres-2019/2019/04/18/quick-count-median-jokowi-amin-menang>; Fitri Wulandari, "Jokowi-Maruf Unggul dalam Hasil Quick Count Kedai Kopi, Ini Distribusi Suaranya" [Jokowi-Maruf Lead in Kedai Kopi's Quick Count, this is the Vote Distribution], *Tribun News*, 18 April 2019, <https://www.tribunnews.com/pilpres-2019/2019/04/18/jokowi-maruf-unggul-dalam-hasil-quick-count-kedai-kopi-ini-distribusi-suaranya>.

The Impact of Polling on Indonesian Democracy

The events surrounding the 2014 and 2019 elections show that pollsters have had at least one demonstrable positive impact on Indonesian democracy, namely to enhance the integrity of elections. In both 2014 and 2019, Prabowo exhibited utter disdain for democratic institutions and processes, but pollsters made a significant contribution to thwart the former general's attempts to steal the elections through their quick counts and their willingness to open their databases. Although dishonest pollsters have by no means vanished yet, the 2019 election did indicate that a natural selection process has eventually begun to separate the wheat from the chaff in the polling industry. Indonesia now has a well-known group of highly respected pollsters with proven track records whose commitment to scientific methodology and ethical standards puts them in a prime position to make further positive contributions to strengthening Indonesia's increasingly fragile democracy.

The variety of activities initiated by Persepi and some of its members before and after the 2019 elections, along with the immense accuracy of their surveys and quick counts, point to a renewed sense of strength and commitment by pollsters to help improve not only the reputation of their industry, but also the quality of Indonesia's precarious democracy more broadly. Indeed, for many of the pollsters now organized in Persepi, normative considerations about the value of scientific polling for democratic representation, accountability and responsiveness constituted an important motivation for joining or establishing a polling institute. Qodari, for example, believes that "the increased professionalization of campaigns is in fact making Indonesian politics *more* responsive to the views and aspirations of ordinary citizens". Claiming that pollsters "invest great expertise and effort in investigating the views and political preferences of the population, and in encouraging politicians to respond accordingly", he asks rhetorically "what can be more democratic than that?"⁷⁵

However, it is difficult to measure the actual effectiveness of these efforts in encouraging politicians to be more responsive. Asked if they could name a concrete issue where public policy was directly or at least indirectly influenced by public opinion polling, one prominent pollster pointed to Yudhoyono's reluctant, but eventually forthcoming support for the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) in its power battle with Jakarta's elite in 2009.⁷⁶ Only after Yudhoyono saw evidence that public opinion overwhelmingly supported the KPK, so the narrative, did the president also back the

commission. Later on, his successor Jokowi also waited until he had reliable survey data before defending the KPK when it came under attack again. By the end of his first presidential term, however, Jokowi seemed to have given up on following the public will as he eventually endorsed revisions to the KPK law which effectively spelt the end of the commission's independence. A public opinion survey released shortly after the passing of the revised law showed that 76.3 per cent of Indonesians wanted the president to issue a presidential decree to nullify the legislation,⁷⁷ but despite the survey results and mass demonstrations in the streets demanding a presidential decree, Jokowi refused to bow to public pressure.

In this context, it is important to note that using public opinion data to encourage politicians to be more responsive in a political environment characterized by deepening polarization and widespread illiberal sentiments can be a double-edged sword. While the survey data on the KPK showed overwhelming public support for strengthening important aspects of democracy such as accountability and the rule of law, the Indonesian electorate holds rather ambivalent views on several other issues, especially the kinds of liberal democratic values that should ideally buttress the quality of democracy. As other observers have shown in their analyses of a range of public opinion surveys, significant proportions of Indonesians not only perceive democracy largely in terms of economic performance rather than political values,⁷⁸ but are in fact opposed to key liberal values such as gender equality or the political rights of religious minorities.⁷⁹ In view of such ambivalent public attitudes towards key democratic indicators, the importance of workshops on how to design surveys on religiously sensitive issues cannot be overstated. Similarly, improving the standards of media reporting on survey results is also vital if Indonesia is to contain populist exploitation of public illiberal sentiments.

Beyond the potentially problematic links between issue-based survey data and responsiveness, the main impact of polling has been on electoral and party politics. Candidate selection processes for all types of elections are now heavily driven by polling results, with often detrimental consequences for the quality of democracy. Two main problems in particular stand out. First, pollsters have exacerbated the rise in money politics which was initially triggered by the introduction of direct executive elections and the open list system for parliamentary elections. As polling data became highly desirable for aspiring candidates seeking a party nomination, pollsters swiftly embraced the new opportunities, charging politicians

exorbitant amounts of money for their surveys. This has not only made it virtually impossible for large parts of the population to pursue a political career (including many women, as they often lack the financial resources to compete),⁸⁰ but it has also fuelled the spiral of vote buying and corruption as candidates use survey data to maximize the effectiveness of their vote buying and later engage in corruption when they seek to recoup their pre-election investments. For pollsters concerned about the quality of democracy in Indonesia, this poses a dilemma, as Muhtadi readily admits: “I sometimes feel sorry about the pollsters’ indirect contribution to the explosion of money politics. Normatively, I would prefer a return to the closed list system, but I’m also fully aware that this would harm Indikator’s business as far less candidates would ask for surveys.”⁸¹

Second, and directly related to the first issue, the high costs of financing a campaign and the obsession with candidates’ popularity have contributed to an increase in the number of local executive elections with only one candidate.⁸² Between 2015 and 2018, the number of such elections where voters only have the choice between endorsing or rejecting a sole contender rose from three in 2015 to nine in 2017 and 16 in 2018.⁸³ Tellingly, the only sole contender who by the time of writing in December 2019 had ever lost an uncontested election, Munafri Arifuddin in Makassar, was actually an unpopular oligarch who had defied adverse polling figures and tried to secure his election by instigating the disqualification of his far more popular rival. In response, voters bestowed him with the dubious honour of becoming the first sole candidate to lose an election against the empty box.

Conclusion

This article has outlined the trajectory of Indonesia’s polling industry and linked its development to broader political trends in Indonesia. Just like the country’s general political development which has been usefully divided into periods of transition, stability and stagnation and eventually polarization, the polling industry, too, has gone through distinct periods which this article has described as formation, expansion and fragmentation, and finally politicization and professionalization. With regards to the third period, the article highlighted how the polarization of politics since the 2014 presidential election has transformed the role of pollsters from influential but mainly behind-the-scenes players with fluid political

affiliations to partisan political figures at the forefront of national political contestation. This politicization has posed new challenges to the polling industry which culminated in Prabowo's systematic campaign to discredit the mainstream pollsters ahead of the 2019 elections.

The pollsters' response was a powerful defence of polling's scientific credentials and its value for democracy as a tool to enhance accountability and lend credibility to elections. However, in a political atmosphere where emotions trump facts, such efforts to actively defend democracy are up against new kinds of narratives that depict pollsters as biased and untrustworthy. Prabowo's refusal to concede defeat, his attacks on the pollsters and the KPU as well as the riots that followed the official announcement of the results in May 2019 all demonstrated just how deeply Indonesia is now engulfed in the era of post-truth politics. In view of this broader political environment, it is unlikely that Persepi's unprecedented public commitment to transparency persuaded many opponents of Jokowi to trust the quick count results.⁸⁴

Nevertheless, the fact that in 2019 none of the KPU-registered polling institutes dared to fabricate quick count results gives reason to hope that the professionalization drive is bearing fruit. Pollsters now need to build on the initiatives discussed in this article and continue to professionalize the industry. Persepi chairman Philips Vermonte has identified improving transparency and especially capacity-building as two of the most important challenges for Indonesia's polling industry.⁸⁵ But the association may also need to critically reassess the blurry boundaries between public opinion polling and consulting which many of its members routinely intersect. As long as ethically questionable practices like the lack of disclosure about funding or the use of polling data for campaign purposes continue virtually unregulated, all pollsters, regardless of associational affiliation, will remain vulnerable to accusations of politicization. In order to address these thorny issues, a rapprochement between Persepi and its rival association Aropi, where many of the less prominent pollsters and consultancies are organized, may be necessary in the medium to long term.

The next litmus test to observe the trajectory of Indonesia's polling industry is not far away. In September 2020, no less than 270 local elections (*pilkada*) are scheduled to take place, and surveys about the electability of certain candidates were already circulating shortly after the 2019 elections. In the past, local elections have at times proven to be more difficult to predict than national elections as

pollsters faced some significant methodological challenges. Against the background of recent experiences, most pollsters will hope that they can steer clear of controversy in these and other future elections.

NOTES

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- ⁴⁴ Among the most prominent “academic pollsters” with overseas degrees are Saiful Mujani (founder of Lembaga Survei Indonesia, LSI, and later Saiful Mujani Research and Consulting, SMRC), Kuskridho Ambardi (formerly LSI), Djayadi

- Hanan (formerly SMRC, now LSI), Muhammad Qodari (formerly LSI, now Indo Barometer), Burhanuddin Muhtadi (Indikator), Philips Vermonte (CSIS) and Nico Harjanto (formerly Populi Center). It is noteworthy that Denny JA, the founder of Lingkaran Survei Indonesia (also known as “LSI Denny JA”), also has a PhD from the United States but he is usually not regarded as part of the “academic pollsters” due to his role in a public clash with Saiful Mujani in 2005–6. See below for details.
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- ⁴⁶ Mietzner, “Political Opinion Polling in Post-Authoritarian Indonesia”, pp. 117–21.
- ⁴⁷ For details, see <http://www.saifulmujani.com/about>.
- ⁴⁸ Qodari, “The Professionalisation of Politics”, pp. 132–36; Trihartono, “Beyond Measuring the Voice of the People”, p. 159.
- ⁴⁹ Edward Aspinall and Mada Sukmajati, eds., *Electoral Dynamics in Indonesia: Money Politics, Patronage and Clientelism at the Grassroots* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2016). According to Muhtadi, in the 2014 legislative election some consultancies were even directly complicit in the practice as they simultaneously acted as campaign managers for candidates who distributed goods to voters. See Burhanuddin Muhtadi, *Vote Buying in Indonesia: The Mechanics of Electoral Bribery* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 160.
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- ⁸⁰ Ella S. Prihatini, “Women’s Views and Experiences of Accessing National Parliament: Evidence from Indonesia”, *Women’s Studies International Forum* 74 (May–June 2019): 84–90.
- ⁸¹ Author interview with Burhanuddin Muhtadi, *Indikator*, Jakarta, 10 January 2018.
- ⁸² Cornelis Lay, Hasrul Hanif, Ridwan and Noor Rohman, “The Rise of Uncontested Elections in Indonesia: Case Studies of Pati and Jayapura”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 39, no. 3 (December 2017): 427–48.
- ⁸³ “Berapa Calon Tunggal di Pilkada Serentak 2018?” [How Many Single Candidates were there in the 2018 Simultaneous Local Elections?], *Katadata*, <https://databoks.katadata.co.id/datapublish/2018/06/26/berapa-pasangan-calon-tunggal-di-pilkada-serentak-2018>.
- ⁸⁴ National survey data from after the elections showed that around 27 per cent of respondents regarded the presidential elections as *not* honest and fair. This figure was higher than the number of people who prior to the election had expressed mistrust in the KPU (13 per cent), but the Prabowo team still questioned the validity of the findings, claiming that they “did not reflect the facts on the ground”. See Muhammad Fida Ul Haq, “69% Publik Nilai Pilpres 2019 Jurdil Versi SMRC, BPN: Sembunyikan Kebenaran” [69% of the Public Judge the 2019 Presidential Elections to be Honest and Fair According to SMRC, BPN: Hiding the Truth], *detik.com*, 17 June 2019, [https://saifulmujani.com/80-persen-warga-percaya-kemampuan-kpu-dan-bawaslu/](https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4588410/69-publik-nilai-pilpres-2019-jurdil-versi-smrc-bpn-sembunyikan-kebenaran; SMRC, “80 Persen Warga Percaya Kemampuan KPU dan Bawaslu” [80 per cent of Citizens Trust the Capabilities of the KPU and Bawaslu], 10 March 2019, https://saifulmujani.com/80-persen-warga-percaya-kemampuan-kpu-dan-bawaslu/).
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