

***Electoral Dynamics in Indonesia: Money Politics, Patronage and Clientelism at the Grassroots.* Edited by Edward Aspinall and Mada Sukmajati. Singapore: NUS Press, 2016. Softcover: 449pp.**

Saying that money plays a crucial role in Indonesian politics has become somewhat of a truism in recent years. Popular commentaries in the Indonesian press are replete with denunciations of “money politics”, a vague term used to refer to practices ranging from vote-buying to political finance. The prolific academic literature on the subject has exposed the organic relationship between money and politics in democratic Indonesia, focusing on the collusion between politicians and powerful interest groups and often portraying Indonesian politics as being dominated by patronage and clientelism. Nevertheless, as the editors of the book under review correctly note (p. 8), scholars typically only assert the dominance of patronage and clientelistic practices, neglecting the actual mechanisms through which politicians and voters engage in materialistic exchanges.

Electoral Dynamics in Indonesia, edited by Edward Aspinall and Mada Sukmajati, aims to tackle this lacuna with an exhaustive analysis of the 2014 legislative election campaign in several electoral districts. The book focuses on voter–politician linkages, shedding light on the appeals articulated by candidates during campaigns and the organizations created to convey such messages to voters. The volume opens with an introduction in which the editors define the empirical setting, outline the theoretical framework and summarize the key findings. Following that, the remaining twenty-two empirical chapters take the reader on a journey of remarkable empirical depth and geographical reach, covering most of the country’s regions. Unfortunately, the volume lacks a concluding chapter, which would have helped the reader appreciate the value of this project with regards to the comparative literature on clientelism and electoral politics in young democracies.

Overall, the book succeeds in its aim to unpack the “black box” of money politics thanks to its consistent, painstaking attention to the micro-level interactions between voters, candidates and brokers. The empirical chapters are well written and easy to read by way of comparative analysis, as they focus on a set of common research questions and follow the same methodological approach, based on a mix of interviews with informed respondents and ethnographic methods of observation.

The editors identify two main findings emerging from the empirics. First, patronage distribution is central to campaigning, and it usually trumps programmatic and identity-based appeals. Second, to manage their campaigns, candidates are more likely to rely on informal networks known as *tim sukses* (campaign teams) rather than party machines. Both claims resonate with what we already know about Indonesian electoral politics, but the exceptional richness of the empirical material analyzed adds value to the existing literature. Furthermore, the individual chapters offer interesting indications for further research by focusing in on specific aspects of campaigning that are understudied in the literature. Examples include the use of “formal contracts” between candidates and voters (Chapter 3 by Teuku Muhammad Jafar Sulaiman), the effect of gender quotas (Chapter 9 by Argoposo Cahyo Nugroho), the role of trade unions (Chapter 11 by Amalinda Savirani), the meticulous de-mobilizing work of gambling bosses who bet against certain candidates (Chapter 15 by Zusiana Elly Triantini), the timing of electorally-motivated intergovernmental transfers (Chapter 19 by Nono S.A. Sumampouw), and the intricacies of collective voting in Papua (Chapter 23 by Cillian Nolan).

While the volume’s contributions to the literature are empirical, there are two theoretical and methodological vectors that deserve scrutiny. First, the extent to which “clientelism” or “patronage” are helpful terms to characterize the dynamics explored in the case studies is debatable. As the introductory chapter observes, reciprocity is a key feature of both patronage and clientelistic relationships: voters are expected to provide political support in return for material benefits. However, the candidates interviewed in various regions of Indonesia are deeply sceptical that voters can be trusted to reciprocate their munificence. Given this recurrent and strong finding, does it still make sense to describe “money politics” as patronage or vote-buying? Since candidates distribute cash and small gifts with the primary goal of generating goodwill and abiding by established social and cultural norms, perhaps a more fruitful framework is to conceptualize these transactions as a variant of political communication, through which candidates attempt to strengthen or consolidate their image. Indeed, reading the candidates’ anxieties about voter reciprocation and broker reliability reported in the book (see for instance, p. 244), one is reminded of the famous quote attributed to the marketing pioneer, John Wanamaker: “Half the money I spend on advertising is wasted; the trouble is I don’t know which half.”

Second, the key argument that “patronage distribution is *the* central mode of political campaigning in Indonesian legislative elections” (p. 5, italics in the text) requires contextualization. While this claim is robustly corroborated by the empirics presented in the edited volume, it should be noted that this finding is also a result of the research design of the book, which looks exclusively at the grassroots level. At the grassroots, candidates and their brokers engage in direct contact with voters, and opportunities for vote-buying and the distribution of material benefits abound. Yet the evidence presented in the book does not allow us to gauge the incidence of these practices for the Indonesian electorate as a whole. If it is only a minority of the population who experience direct contact with candidates and brokers, we cannot exclude that, for a larger and electorally decisive segment of voters, political behaviour follows a logic where patronage considerations are marginal. As the editors observe (p. 16), Indonesian legislative elections are highly nationalized, and voters may be developing preferences over political parties or their leaders. The fact that patronage is dominant in electoral politics at the grassroots level does not imply that it is a key factor in orienting voting behaviour for most Indonesian voters.

These concerns aside, there is little doubt that *Electoral Dynamics in Indonesia* is a valuable contribution to the study of Indonesian politics. The editors should be praised for their commendable and successful effort of bringing together a talented pool of Indonesian researchers, coordinating their efforts, selecting their best research and bringing their insightful work to the attention of an international readership. The result is a collection of essays that will quickly become a reference point for scholars interested in electoral politics and voter–politician linkages in Indonesia.

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