

The Impact of an Open-party List System on Incumbency Turnover and Political Representativeness in Indonesia

An Open Forum with

Dr. Michael Buehler and Dr. Philips J. Vermonte



June 26, 2012

Introduction

The continuing adoption of an open-party list system as the Indonesian electoral system raises an essential question of how it will affect political competitions in the wake of the 2014 elections. Particularly on the evolving concern of incumbency turnover, statistics from the 2009 elections indicate that only 25 percent of the incumbents were re-elected, while around 75 percent of the parliamentary seats went to newcomers. Does this number imply that the chance of incumbents to reclaim their seats at the parliament was reduced because the citizens were able to vote directly?

Another essential issue is the expectation for better political representativeness as an ideal aim of this system. Reflecting on the previous two elections, how has an open-party list system affected the voting behavior of Indonesian voters to translate this ideal?

On June 26, 2012, USINDO hosted an Open Forum with Dr. Michael Buehler and Dr. Philips J. Vermonte. Based on his recent research, Dr. Michael Buehler presented a

comprehensive analysis on the impact of vote-seeking strategy and voting behavior under an open-party list system on Indonesian politics and the incumbency turnover. Dr. Philips J. Vermonte further complemented the presentation with an insightful assessment on the relation between an open-party list system with the goal of creating a better political representativeness in Indonesia.

This brief is USINDO's summary of their talk.

Open-party List System in Indonesia and Its Underlying Premises

Electoral system is often unfairly regarded as the least important element of democracy. While it may be true that its role becomes noticeable mostly during the procedural period of elections, its very existence actually determines the quality of democracy. It significantly impacts the pattern of coalitions, the form of political cleavages, the political strategy of the candidates, and most importantly, the complex reactions from the citizens as the voters.

With regard to the supreme hope for a better quality of democracy, two major types of electoral systems then emerge to represent two different ideals. The plurality or majority system that advocates the concept of 'winner takes all' comes with the premise of a strong government and a more consolidated political system. The Proportional Representative (PR) system, on the other hand, promotes more proportionality in seat-allocation, thus guaranteeing a better representativeness. The adoption of a PR system unfortunately also comes with the risk of a more fragmented parliament.

Indonesia's decision to adopt a PR system from a closed-party list system in 1999 to an open-party list system in 2004 certainly raises the question of why a PR system is recently more favored. With the risk of having a fragmented parliament, why does Indonesia still want to adopt a PR system? What causes the shift from a closed-party list to an open-party list system? What ideals does an open-party list system promise that makes it last until now?

In order to comprehend the reasoning behind Indonesia's decision to adopt a PR system, we need to further track down the unpleasant history of social uprisings that has threatened national integration in Indonesia. The issue of national disintegration has been Indonesia's recurring fear since its independence in 1945. By this logic, even at the risk of having a more fragmented parliament, it is only understandable that Indonesia opts for a system that ensures all groups to be represented in the political system.

The shift from a closed-party list to an open-party list system can be further understood as a progressive attempt to achieve a better political representativeness. In this context, the idea of 'representativeness' does not only incorporate a narrow representation for political groups or parties. It must also acknowledge an ideally holistic representation for all citizens as rightful voters. In a closed-party list system, citizens were allowed to vote for party only, and party leaders eventually decided all their representatives that would be given seats in

the parliament. An open-party list system then touches the essence of this ideal representativeness by allowing citizens to vote for both party and candidates.

The premises of more voting leverage for voters and a more competitive political system under an open-party list system then create an interesting base for a deeper look on how the interplay between these two factors impact the rate of incumbency turnover in Indonesia.

The Interplay between Vote-seeking Strategy and Voting Behavior under an Open-party List System

Substantial change on the regulations concerning seat allocation under an open-party list system significantly impacts vote-seeking strategy from candidates. This change, as most recently imposed by Constitutional Court in December 2008, stipulates that seat allocation takes place solely based on the tally of personal votes accumulated directly from Indonesian voters.

With the above implication that voters decide which candidates will be their representatives in the parliament, an open-party list system further induces a more competitive political system with more equal chance for all candidates on the ballot list to get elected. Contrary to the previous elections in 1999 and 2004, the 2009 elections required each candidate to compete for the most votes in order to secure a seat in the parliament.

The vote-seeking strategy is therefore focused on the individual level instead of the party level. Personal reputation immediately becomes more important than party reputation for candidates to gain votes. Consequently, the strategy will be specified on individual efforts to run personal campaigns.

There are three major ways for a candidate to run personal campaigns. The first is through face recognition which is the prominent way for celebrities to enter the arena of politics. The next way is identified with the term 'legislative niche' in which candidates will establish themselves as intellectuals or experts in specific fields such as decentralization and anti-corruption. The last way, which is the most common in Indonesia, is through building personal networks in a clientelistic fashion. The most frequent examples are pork-barreling and direct cash payments which all involve money politics to mobilize votes.

Voting behavior under an open-party list system must then be understood as a reaction toward vote-seeking strategy. With more discretion to directly exercise their vote, Indonesian voters cast more preference-votes based on the personal appeal of candidates instead of parties.

As shown in the table below, there were only 20 percent – 40 percent of Indonesian voters that voted for party symbol in the 2009 elections.

Party	% Only Party Symbol Voted in the 2009 elections
Demokrat	38.4
Golkar	22.4
PDI-P	30.0
PKS	32.0
PAN	17.5
PPP	23.1
PKB	23.2
Gerindra	37.8
Hanura	30.0

The preference from Indonesian voters thus indicates the success of each personal campaign as the vote-seeking strategy to appeal on public sentiment.

Reflecting on the observation made during the 2009 elections, below are the impacts of the interplay between vote-seeking strategy and voting under an open-party list system in Indonesia.

Increased Intra-Party Competition and Campaign Spending

As the regulation on seat allocation changes, more intensified competitions between and within parties are in turn inevitable. While there have been some competitive rivalries between candidates from different parties in the 1999 elections and prior, the 2004 elections and onward witnessed even more heated competition between candidates from the same parties. This essentially means that each candidate would then face more challenges to win the support they need both from their party internally and Indonesian voters publicly.

Within parties, each candidate is at first required to compete in order to secure a spot on the ballot list. After successfully making it on the ballot list, each candidate is later faced with wider competitions from within and between parties in order to garner the most number of votes.

Furthermore, the inevitable need of each candidate to run personal campaigns amidst the heightened political competition then causes a tremendous increase in the amount of campaign spending. Building personal networks is especially very expensive. Cheap policy promise such as the provisions of public services needs to be abandoned as it is now already provided by political parties and no longer exclusive to win public sentiment. Candidates who rely on personal networks would especially spend the biggest amount on their campaign, consisting mostly of pork-barreling to appeal to certain groups they expect to vote.

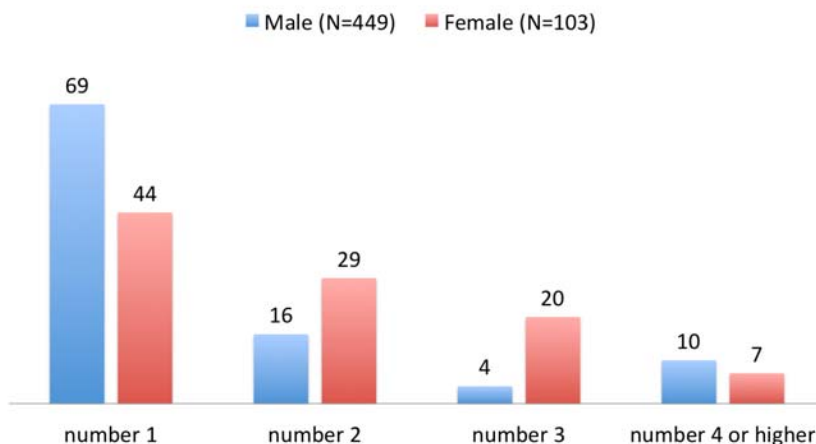
New Faces on the Party List

The fact that the political system becomes more competitive also creates a concern for parties that they may be quantitatively under-represented in the parliament. The concern grows even bigger as under an open-party list system voters can certainly decide to cast no votes for incumbents that they perceive as incapable. It further affects the wisdom of parties to only approve candidates on the ballot list based on the estimation of their potency to garner a large number of personal votes.

Little Disturbance of Party List by Voters

Interestingly, recent study on preference-votes cast by Indonesian voters also indicates that there is very little disturbance on the ranking order (*nomor urut*) of candidates submitted by party on their ballot lists. In other words, unless voters find the name of incumbents that they regard as incompetent at the top of the list, they still likely vote for the first three names on the list.

This quasi-rational behavior from Indonesian voters to keep voting for the top ranking names on the list is illustrated by the following graphic.



This behavior also partly explains the reason why parties place more new faces at the top of their list instead of incumbents who are considered more vulnerable to lose.

Higher Rate of Incumbency Turnover in Indonesia

The previous three impacts then influence the occurrence of higher incumbency turnover in Indonesia. Increased competition, new faces, and little disturbance of the party list from voters contribute to inducing higher turnover for the incumbents.

It is however important to establish an understanding that the widely acknowledged rate of 75 percent incumbency turnover from the 2009 elections as reported by media was exaggerated and insufficiently explained. It is even more important to comprehend that the preference of voters is not the only factor that determines the rate of incumbency turnover.

There was undeniably an increase in the rate of incumbency turnover under an open-party list system in the 2009 elections. It is true that Indonesian voters tended to vote the undesired incumbents out of offices. However this turnover was not purely induced by voters.

This is how the significantly high rate of incumbency turnover in 2004 and 2009 elections can be partly explained. In order to dominate the elections, parties increase the number of new faces that are more appealing to the public on their party lists. Supporting this logic, 42 percent of all 1999 incumbents and 34.1 percent of all 2004 incumbents dropped out prior to the 2004 and 2009 elections.

Taking the above finding into account, we can draw a conclusion that under an open-party list system, there was already an ongoing dynamic within parties that caused the incumbents to leave before the elections and the party leaders to prioritize new appealing faces on their list.

Meeting the End Goal: Political Representativeness in Indonesia under an Open-Party List System

In the end, it is fairly essential to measure the responsiveness of Indonesian voters to use their voting power to better represent themselves. As has been addressed before, the ideal goal of representativeness is essentially larger than the representativeness of political groups or parties. It signifies the very essence of representativeness for the people. How well has an open-party list system helped establish a better political representativeness in Indonesia?

Observation of the 2004 and 2009 elections has proven that Indonesian voters actually exercised their voting leverage to vote undesired incumbents out of office. The result of both elections also indicates an overall more proportional allocation of seats to all major parties that competed. Various political parties in Indonesia have clearly been well represented.

It is also important to reemphasize that under an open-party list system, incumbents may be faced with two major challenges in order to succeed in the elections. The first challenge is from the parties that are now more careful in approving their candidates who are running for the office. The second challenge is from the voters who can directly exercise their voting powers to determine the reelection of incumbents. Poor performance of incumbents on their previous terms and their lack of public appeals will certainly cost them the chance of getting approved by parties and reelected by voters.

However, a legitimate concern regarding rationality of the voters remains. As evidenced by the result of the elections in 2004 and 2009, Indonesian voters were not completely rational in casting their votes yet. They only avoided voting for incumbents they perceived as incompetent, yet they still mostly voted for the top three names on the ballot list without proper assessment and adequate knowledge.

While the arena of Indonesian politics is currently more competitive, the lack of rationality in the behavior of Indonesian voters suggests the very need to improve the quality of political educations for its citizens. Only with politically well-informed voters can the full sense of representativeness be truly achieved.

Questions and Answers

Q: Dr. Buehler, you mentioned that there are three options for the candidates to garner the votes; by face recognition (i.e., celebrities), political networks, and expertise. Which of these groups has the biggest chance to dominate the 2014 elections? How will this affect the effectiveness of DPRD?

Dr. Buehler – I have no data on this. But my guess is that most politicians in Indonesia will establish themselves and campaign by using ‘clientelistic networks’, so the celebrities and experts are still in the minority. In regard to the functioning of the DPRD (*Dewan perwakilan rakyat daerah* or the local legislative parliament), it is rather hard to measure it because Indonesia never really had the DPRD that did something under the old system. If we look at who actually implemented laws in Indonesia, especially at the local level, in about 95 percent of all cases it was always the executive branch that initiated, formulated, and drafted new regulations. This imbalance does not particularly happen in Indonesia, but it is highly extreme in Indonesia with 95 percent – 99 percent of the local laws and regulations pushed by the executive branch, not by the parliament. The parliament is perceived more as a market where negotiation about certain interest takes place. So I am not sure how to measure the impact of the new system on the functioning of the parliament because it was already dysfunctional.

Q: I think the main reason why the incumbents were reelected during the 2009 elections is because they had either money or real political expertise. With money they could contribute more to social developments like healthcare and education, thus able to mobilize public support. I think it would not be a problem for those celebrities to run for parliament as long as they have proper educational background and political expertise. It is therefore important for political parties to carefully select their members and even more important for all electoral bodies to uphold laws and regulations.

Dr. Buehler – Based on my observation, I don’t think there were many incumbents reelected in the 2009 elections. I want to respond to this by reemphasizing that the number of a 75 percent incumbency turnover as generally reported by media is incorrect and in fact much lower. The reason for this is because a lot of candidates were kicked off the ballot list before the elections. It is also important to establish the fact that more incumbents made it to the ballot list and also ended up losing in 2009 than in 2004. So it is basically not true that most incumbents were winning.

Indonesian voters did not do anything to disturb the ballot list. The tendency observed from the 2009 elections is that voters would mostly vote for the first three names while some incumbents were placed lower on the list. In conclusion, these incumbents did not lose

because of the voters but more because of the fact that something else was going on within parties.

Dr. Vermonte – It is also important to note that the decision of party leaders is not the only factor that determines the list of incumbents on the ballot. There were also dynamics in 2009 where politicians sometimes moved to other political parties. Aside from that, I also think that there is a huge disconnect between voters and politicians. I suspect that politicians think differently than voters. Voters tend to expect politicians to be honest and free of corruption. On other hand, integrity is the last thing most politicians would address. So what we really need to do is to understand how both politicians and voters think.

Q: Do you have any explanation on how some incumbents were kicked out from their party? Or was it because they did not want to run for the parliament anymore?

Dr. Buehler – There could be a lot of explanations for it. The best way to understand it is that some of these incumbents just had a change in focus or priority. They might have simply gone to smaller parties, run for a new playing field like provincial level, or were just retired and no longer interested. We cannot exactly figure out the reason of why the incumbency turnover is so high within parties because the data is just incomplete at the moment.

Q: Under the current open-party list system, what is the correlation between pork-barreling as a way to buy votes with the opportunity for candidates and parties to claim more seats in the parliament? I feel like we are ignoring this possibility just because this system is identified as more democratic.

Dr. Buehler – I do not think that we are ignoring this possibility. My personal opinion of why parties in Indonesia are in for a change is because an open-party list system unveils more opportunity for more candidates to compete for more seats. This chance is even wider since the transaction of votes is now more supported under this system. What I find interesting is that, this transaction of votes occurs not in the form of vote-buying but instead in the form of vote-selling between parties with the election commission as its intermediary. Consequently, the election commission is therefore under serious threat of getting increasingly more corrupted.

Q: Do you think that the upcoming 2014 elections will be highly corrupted? Will the result depend on money politics and the power of branding?

Dr. Vermonte – I think we need two more elections for Indonesia to be a fully mature democracy. The reason is because, according to the Indonesia Statistic Agency (BPS), more than 60 percent of Indonesian voters have less than six years of education. This automatically impacts the rationality of the voters, in the sense that they cannot properly judge all the programs, track records of candidates, et cetera. An example of this irrational calculation was the loss of Megawati in the 2004 elections, notwithstanding all the good indicators of the Indonesian economy at that time. We need more time to improve the level of education in Indonesia so that the voters can be more rational.

Dr. Buehler – Money is a necessary condition but not a sufficient one. You need money to run for the elections but it is simply not enough to guarantee the winning. As an example, in some districts in Indonesia, voters still vote for one particular candidate despite taking some money from other candidates. More than just money, to guarantee better results in elections, candidates will need to affiliate themselves with stronger political and grass root networks.

Q: How do you see an open-party list system relates to the efforts of the parliament's institutional development? I am specifically talking about the hope for better quality of democracy, consolidation, and transparency of the entire political system in Indonesia.

Dr. Vermonte – The problem with DPR that has been barely touched upon by academics and NGOs is the peculiar way they vote in parliament. It depends on the decision of faction instead of individual politicians. This rule substantially differs with the direct election that we have. As a consequence, members of the parliament are then responsible to the party not to their voters anymore. This suggests the need for substantial reform and restructuring in the way that voting takes place in the parliament, in order to truly achieve significant institutional development.

Q: How do we establish a sufficient system to control and minimize vote manipulation that frequently takes place in the General Elections Commission (KPU)?

Dr. Vermonte – We recently have this controlling body called Election Organizers Ethics Council (DKPP). We can only hope DKPP would provide an effective control on the frequent issues of manipulation in KPU. Regardless the recent dysfunction of manipulation in the 2009 elections, the founding of DKPP is essentially a significant step to embark on a bigger measure.