

Seminar: SWING VOTERS AND THE 2009 INDONESIAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION

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Executive summary

As Indonesia approaches its General Election in April 2009 where currently 38 political parties will compete in the Legislative Election, many polling institutes are undertaking quantitative surveys to gauge voter sentiment. At present, the biggest mystery remains the number of swing voters and their respective party preferences. Since the number of swing voters is a critical element in the election determining increases in the number of votes for political parties, the Indonesia Programme organized a seminar to analyse the latest polling data from Lembaga Survei Indonesia (LSI) - one of the leading polling institutes in Indonesia. Speaking at the seminar was leading Indonesian scholar Prof. R. William Liddle of Ohio State University presenting the findings of a recent study co-authored with LSI's Saiful Mujani which emphasized the swing voter phenomenon in Indonesia.

In an election year, there are voters who are uncertain over which individual or which party they will vote for. These people fall into the swing vote group category. In the case of Indonesia, the survey indicated that at least 33% of voters could be considered swing voters. They are impressionable and likely to change their minds between now and Election Day. Such a large number of voters will transform the electoral map in 2009.

The main cause of this phenomenon is weak voter party identification. The lack of party identity is linked to the generally poor public perception of parties. Nearly half of voters surveyed view all parties as corrupt, without good programmes, displaying lack of concern for public welfare, or have competent leaders.

These voters will make their choices based on retrospective evaluations of presidential performance and the association of the government with good national economic conditions. Prof. William Liddle also explained the value of TV campaigns and its close relationship with political parties branding and image as having great potential to influence the decisions of swing voters.

According to 2008 Lembaga Survei Indonesia polling, Partai Demokrat is likely to be the main beneficiary from swing voters. Critical in this regard is the perception among swing voters that the president had been successful in managing economy. Surveys show that most people were satisfied with SBY's performance with one of the most popular decisions being the moves taken by his government to reduce the price of refined petroleum products (Bahan Bakar Minyak, BBM). Furthermore, increased voter satisfaction over the performance of the Cabinet is reflected by only increased support for the Partai Demokrat but interestingly not for the other parties in the governing coalition.

However, this high rate of approval for Partai Demokrat does not mean that voters are loyal to the party. For the 2014 General Elections, the likelihood is that the emergence of new

parties and the presence of a younger generation of leaders may seize the opportunity presented by swing-voters.

The phenomena of swing voters is a reflection of the weakness of the party system in Indonesia; the impressionable nature of swing voters' choices; and a possible harbinger of government instability. Simultaneously, swing voters seem to be more focused on government performance. The existence of swing voters also provides for opportunity greater reform initiatives by new parties and leaders willing to take advantage this unattached "floating mass" with the potential of propelling them into power.