

**THE IMPACTS OF SINGLE CANDIDATE ON PUBLIC  
PARTICIPATION IN VOTING:  
A CASE STUDY OF LOCAL ELECTION IN TIMOR  
TENGAH UTARA DISTRICT, INDONESIA**

**Sri Mulyawati<sup>1</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT**

Public participation in electoral political process is a crucial factor. The regional electoral commission report indicates that the number of people participating in voting in the 2015 local election in *Timor Tengah Utara* (TTU) district declined compared to that of previous election. This study therefore aimed at identifying the impacts of single candidate on public participation in voting in the local election in TTU district, Indonesia. A qualitative inquiry employing one-to-one in-depth interviews was used to collect the data from the participants. The participants (n=15) were recruited using convenience sampling technique. Data were analysed using a thematic qualitative data analysis framework. The results of the study indicated that local election with single candidate made people less enthusiastic and unwilling to participate in the electoral process or in voting. Socio-cultural, economic, political and technical factors were also associated with the reduction of public participation in the previous election. Further studies are recommended to identify other impacts of such election on public participation in voting, and to understand what can be done by the government and electoral commission to increase the participation of public in the election process and in voting.

***Key words:*** *Local election, single candidate, impacts, public participation, TTU district, Indonesia*

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**<sup>1</sup> Postgraduate program, Administrative Science, Nusa Cendana University, Kupang Indonesia.**

## INTRODUCTION

Democracy is a governmental system applied in many countries including Indonesia. It is a system of government by the whole population or all the eligible members of a state, typically through elected representatives (1). This indicates that public participation in election at both local and national level is a reflection of a democratic system. Here, election is defined as an occasion when citizens choose their officials and decide what they want the government to do, and through this decision or participation citizens determine what rights they want to have and keep (1-3).

In Indonesia, the participation of citizens in election either at local or national level has been reported to be influenced by a number of factors. For example, a study by Marpaung (4) has reported that the image and popularity of candidates, programs offered by candidates, and political parties play significant roles in influencing the voters either to vote or not to vote for a candidate. Political awareness of the people is another important factor indicated in studies by Kurniawan (5) and Malau (6) to influence public participation in voting. The higher the political awareness of the voters, the more likely they participate in voting for the candidates, and vice versa. Voters with high political awareness are rational voters who emphasise on factors such as problem solving strategies and programs of the candidates as the criteria to vote for a candidate (5, 6). Other factors that have also been reported to have significant influence on the public participation in electoral political process and in voting are the initial conditions of voters such as socio-cultural factors, traditional values, education level and economic condition, mass media factors including data, information and news disseminated through mass media, candidate factors such as performance records of candidates, political marketing, political communications and programs offered by each candidate, and administrative and technical factors (7-10). Limited socialisation about the election, lack of interest in political matters among voters, apathetic attitude of the public towards election due to the notion that local or regional election is just a political routinity, are other factors that have also been associated with the decrease of public participation in voting for their future leaders (7-10).

The percentage of public participation particularly in voting on the 2015 local election in *Timor Tengah Utara* (TTU) district, Indonesia, was 64.33% which was less than that of previous election. Due to the fact there was only one candidate who competed in the local election, this

study qualitative inquiry therefore aimed at identifying the impacts of single candidate on people's participation in voting at the pooling day.

## **METHODS**

### ***Study design***

This study employed a qualitative design using one-to-one in-depth interviews. Qualitative design was considered useful to be used in this study since it helped the research to observe the situations and settings where the respondents lived, worked and interacted, and provided a chance for direct interaction between the researcher and the participants (11-13).

### ***Recruitment and data collection***

The study involved 15 respondents in TTU district, Indonesia. They were recruited using convenience sampling technique. Data collection was conducted in 2017 and before the interviews the participants got an explanation about the nature and aim of the study. Each interview focused on identifying the impacts of local election with single candidate on the participation of the participants in voting at the pooling day. They were informed that their participation on this study was voluntary and they could withdraw their participation with no any consequences. Prior to the interviews, each participant was advised that the interview would take 30 to 60 minutes, and the data they provided in the interview would be treated confidentially and anonymously. Each participant signed and returned a written consent form at the interview day. Each participant was informed that ethical approval for this study was obtained from Nusa Cendana University, Kupang, Indonesia.

### ***Data analysis***

Data from the tape recorder were transcribed verbatim into coding sheets and translated into English for further analysis. The thematic analysis was guided by the five steps of qualitative data analysis framework by Ritchie and Spencer (14). They included familiarisation with the data by reading them line by line and making comments, identification of emerging themes, indexation to the entire data, charting the data, and mapping and interpretation of the data (14, 15). The framework analysis is a valid data process and provides a systematic approach to data management and enhances rigour, transparency, consistency and structure of the data (14).

## RESULTS

### *Characteristics of the participants*

The participants were from TTU district and in this region once the 2015 local election was held. They comprised the elected Chief of TTU district, chairman and vice chairman of the House of Representatives, the head of political parties at the district level, head and secretary of the regional electoral commission at TTU district level, community leader, and general population in the TTU district. The median age of the participants was 42 years. The majority of the participants had high level of education or held a bachelor degree.

### *The impacts of the single candidate on people's participation in voting*

Local election with single candidate in TTU district, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia seemed to have negative influence on the public participation particularly in voting. Several participants commented that decision of Constitutional Court (MK) that allows regional election with single candidate made people less enthusiastic to participate in the electoral political process especially in voting. People's decision to participate in voting for the candidate was mainly because they had no other choices and the candidate running for the district chief would win at the end no matter they voted for him or not.

“I voted for the candidate, the only one running for the district chief in the last election. I was not enthusiastic about the election because it felt different to the previous one in 2010. There was only one candidate in the 2015 election and whether people like him or not, vote for him or not, it does not matter, he will be the winner at the end” (Participant 3).

“The decision of Constitutional Court that allows electoral commission to run the previous local election even though there was only one candidate is not acceptable. Many people do not agree with such decision but cannot do anything about it. I was not happy with the candidate, so even though I participated, I mean I voted but I did not vote for the candidate” (Participant 7).

Unwillingness of people or potential voters in TTU district to take part in the electoral political process was also found to be another impact of the election with single candidate. For example, several study participants stated that they did not want to participate or vote because there was only one candidate and the candidate did not fulfil their criteria. Besides, the expectation to have

a new leader at the district level was also the reason underlying their decision not to participate at all in the previous electoral political process in TTU district.

“I did not participate during the campaigns because I thought there was no need for people including me to participate. There was only one candidate and he will win. I was not involved and did not vote because I felt the candidate did not fulfil my criteria to be our leader for the next 5 years” (Participant 9).

“I think many of us in Kefa [nick name for TTU district] were expecting to have a new leader in the previous election but there was only one candidate who was the incumbent. I think this is the reason why many people including me did not participate at all, neither during the campaign process nor at the polling day” (Participant 2).

However, local election with single candidate was also considered positive since it reduced the political cost during the electoral political process such as for the campaigns. A number of participants expressed that the previous local election with only one candidate running for the chief of TTU district was beneficial for both the local government and people in the district. Less budget, time and energy were spent during the electoral political process or for campaigns.

“I think the 2015 election was not costly compared to the previous one because there was no need to for the candidate and his campaign teams to intensively do the campaigns. And the government did not have to allocate high budget on this political process. Likewise, the supporters did not have to spend money on transport to attend campaigns or to support their candidate” (Participant 10).

“There were also positive sides of the previous election with single candidate. Time and energy spent during the political process were not that much. We can compare the election here with the elections in other regencies. People spend time and energy as well as money for campaigns to convince voters to for the candidate they support” (Participant 1).

Reduction of horizontal conflicts among supporters was indicated to be another positive impact of the local election with single candidate. A few interviewees indicated that there was not any horizontal conflict among people in the district during the campaign process and after the polling day. Likewise, high tension among supporters of different candidates that happened in the 2010 election did not occur in the 2015 election because there was only one candidate.

“The tension among supporters of different candidates tends to become higher during the electoral political process. But it did not happen here because we had only one candidate. So we hardly hear conflicts in the communities due to the election. This is a good side. Yet, I think it would be good if there were two or three candidates ....” (Participant 7).

“Election with single candidate like we had here in 2015 is not good for the development of our democracy. However, I can say that it has positive aspect: there was not dispute among people within our communities during or after the election” (Participant 15).

### ***Other factors associated with public participation in voting***

Socio-cultural and economic factors were also found to play important roles in influencing public participation in the 2015 election process in TTU district, Indonesia. For example, coming from a tribe which is different to that of the candidate was indicated to be a supporting factor for not participating in voting. This was brought forward due to the notion that most candidates who win the election are more likely to only help people who are known to them, and from their tribes, communities, and villages. Similarly, the consideration that election would to bring no economic benefits seemed to also hinder public participation in voting.

“The candidates will forget us after the election and the one who wins will take care of his people, his families, relatives and friends, and people who helped him to win. I am not his family, not from his tribe or community or village, so why I should vote for him....” (Participant 13).

“Voting or not voting will not have any impact on my life individually. The candidate will not give me money or make my life better after he gets elected. Our situation will be pretty much the

same as before. The election of our district leader will not help me economically” (Participant 11).

Lack of interest to politics seemed to also significantly influence the political participation of people in TTU district in the 2015 local election. Some interviewees clearly put forward that the main reasons for not participating in the election process were due to the fact that they did not have any interest in political matters and did not trust politicians. Politicians were seen as the people who strive for the own benefits or the benefits of their families and groups, but not for the common good.

“I do not know about politics and I am not interested in political matters either. .... About the last election, I did not vote” (Participant 6).

“Some of my colleagues and I did not participate in voting because we did not trust politicians, they do things for themselves and the benefits their families. They need us just for the election, not more than that” (Participant 14).

Technical factor was also associated with the lack of public participation in voting in the previous local election in TTU district. Registration of voters done by the regional electoral commission did not cover all the eligible voters, and as the consequence, many did not have voting cards with which they could vote at the polling day. Besides, unwillingness of people to report to the regional electoral commission staffers once they had not been registered was considered to be a hindering factor for the commission to covering as many voters as possible.

“I know many people including some friends of mine were not registered. As the consequence, they could not vote at the polling day because they did not have the voting cards. It is the rule that in order to be able to vote each voter should produce the card to the election officials at the polling station....” (Participant 12).

“Our staff had tried very hard to register all the potential voters but at the end there were voters who were not registered. There were people who were not present once our staff did the

registration but did not report to us afterwards, so it was difficult for us to identify the ones who had not been registered” (Participant 8).

## DISCUSSION

Regional or local election with single candidate running for governor or district chief is a new phenomenon in Indonesia. It started once the Constitutional Court decided (No. 100/PUU-XIII/2015) to allow the electoral commission to run regional or local election with single candidate. The current study suggests that regional and local election with single candidate had led to reducing public participation in electoral political process especially in voting. Feeling less enthusiastic and unwillingness to take part due to the single candidate did fulfil their criteria and expectation, were the factors supportive of their decision not to participate especially in voting. However, findings of this study also present several positive aspects of local election with single candidate including cost-effectiveness, less time and energy spent and reduction of horizontal conflicts among people or supporters within groups and communities.

In addition to the impacts of single candidate, the results of the current study also report that socio-cultural factors such as not having kinship ties with the candidate, and not coming from the same tribe or community or village as the candidate, influenced the participants’ decision to participate in the electoral political process. These are in line with the results of a recent study (10), indicating that socio-cultural values and norms are important influencing factors for people’s political participation in the election at both local and national level. Likewise, supporting the previous findings elsewhere (9, 10, 16-18), this study suggests that the notion that electoral political process does not bring economic benefits was found to hamper voters to actively taking part in both political campaigns and voting at the polling day.

Furthermore, the results of the current study also corroborate the findings of the previous studies (19, 20) that lack of interest in political matters due to limited possession of political knowledge and distrust towards politicians influenced people’s decision and willingness to contribute and participate in the electoral process and in voting. Similarly, technical factors such as not registered as voters and not having voting cards as have been indicated in the results of several previous studies (7, 8, 10), were also reported in the findings of the current study.

## CONCLUSIONS

The current study reports that regional or local election with single candidate has negative impacts on public participation in the electoral political process. It makes people less enthusiastic and unwilling to participate especially in voting at the polling day. This study also indicates several other factors that have significant influence on the political participation of voters in electoral process at local and regional level, including socio-cultural, economic, political and technical factors. However, it also suggests that local or regional election with single candidate leads to reducing election budget and horizontal conflicts among supporters within groups and communities. Due to the election with single candidate is a new phenomenon in the Indonesian politics and democracy, further studies are recommended to identify other impacts of such election on people's participation in the election process, and to understand what can be done by the government and electoral commission to increase the participation of public in the election process.

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