VOTING BEHAVIOUR AND ITS ASSOCIATED FACTORS: A CASE OF THE LOCAL ELECTION IN MALAKA DISTRICT, INDONESIA

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify factors associated with voting behaviour of voters in the local election in Malaka district in 2015. One-on-one in-depth interviews were employed to collect data from the participants (n=35). Participants were recruited using purposive sampling technique. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis and guided by the theory of voting behaviour. The study results indicated that voting behaviour of the participants was determined by the voters' initial conditions including socio-cultural and traditional values, level of education and economic factor. Data, information and news were mass media factors that also influenced the voting behaviour of the participants. Candidate factors including performance records, political marketing and programmes offered by each candidate were also reported to influence the voting behaviour of the participants. Administrative and technical factors including double recording of the names of voters, invitation letter from regional electoral commission for voters did not arrive at designated address, and long distance of the voting places, were also associated with the lack of participation of the participants in voting for the candidates. This study indicates that there is a need for political education for society at large in order to increase their understanding and political participation.

Key words: Voting behaviour factors, local election, Malaka district, Indonesia

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INTRODUCTION

People's participation in political process especially during the general or local election reflects the progress of democracy in a country. Political participation is an individual or collective activity to actively take part in political process such as through voting or influencing governmental policy to promote common good as its final goal [1-3]. One type of the political participations performed by most of the people including in Indonesia is voting during the general or local election in every province or district. However, data indicate that people's participation in politics in Indonesia particularly through voting for their leaders at local level is still low [4].

In general, studies and reports have indicated several factors associated with low political participation of people in Indonesia especially in voting for candidates on the local elections both at province and district level. Several studies by Dwijayanto [4] and Arianto [5] have reported that low political participation of people in voting for a candidate at the polling day is mainly caused by several factors. They include, firstly, limited socialisation about the election itself. This is often due to the regional electoral commission as the main actor responsible for such socialisation does not function effectively in promoting the importance of the election for the future of the people and their region [4, 5]. Another factor influencing people's participation in voting is economic pressures which make them give high value to economic related activities and choose or prefer to work and generate income than to vote at the polling day [6]. Apathetic attitude of people towards election at province or district level due the notion that the election of a new governor or district chief is just a political routinity and will not bring about any positive changes to their life, district or province, has also been reported to influence voting behaviour of voters [4, 6]. Administrative factor such as unregistered as a voter or not having voting card, and technical factors including distance of the voting places, lack of time and having other activities at the polling day, have also been associated with low participation of people in voting for candidates [4-6]. Likewise, lack of interest in political matters has also been reported as an influencing factor for political engagement or unwillingness to vote for candidates at the polling day [5, 6].

Political participation of people in voting for candidates at the local election in Malaka district in 2015 was considered low as well. Data from the regional electoral

commission reported that of the total of 138,171 registered voters, only 60.27% voted, while 39.73 did not [7]. Despite the low percentage of political participation of people in voting in particular, limited evidence is available pertaining to factors that influence voting behaviour of people in the context of Malaka district. This study, therefore, aimed to identify factors associated with voting behaviour – defined as an individual decision to vote or not to vote for a candidate at the polling day [1, 8] - at the local election in Malaka district in 2015.

METHODS

Theoretical Framework

The study used the theory of voting behaviour as its theoretical framework in identifying factors associated with voting behaviour of voters. The theory explains that voting behaviour as a type of political participation is mainly determined by three factors. They include the voters' initial conditions, mass media, and candidates [9]. Voters' initial conditions that can influence their voting behaviour include socio-cultural and traditional values, level of education and economic condition. Mass media factors refer to data, information and news, experts' explanation, trending topic and latest development broadcasted on or published in mass media such as newspapers and television with the aim to influence the voting behaviour of voters. Candidate factors refer to the characteristics of candidates including their performance records and reputation, political marketing, programmes and value system, which can be used by voters as the basis to decide on a candidate they would vote for [9].

Study design and recruitment

This qualitative study was conducted in Malaka district in 2016. In-depth interview method was employed to collect data from the participants. The use of qualitative study was useful since it enabled direct interaction between researcher and interviewees, and provided researcher with opportunities to observe the situation and setting where the respondents lived, worked and interacted [10, 11]. The participants (n=35) comprising the

voters of the previous local election in 2015 and the staff of the local electoral commission, were recruited using convenient sampling technique.

Prior to the interviews each participant was informed that ethical approval for this study was obtained from Nusa Cendana University, Kupang, Indonesia. They were advised that their participation in this study is voluntary and that there will be no benefits and consequences if they decide not to continue their participation during the interview. Before each interview, they were told that the interview will take approximately 40 to 60 minutes and that data or information provided during the interview will be anonymous and confidential. Each of them was provided with a consent form and signed it prior to the interview.

Data analysis

The recorded data were transcribed into coding sheets and translated into English. Data were analysed using a thematic analysis framework where the transcriptions from each respondent was repeatedly read and commented. Open coding was made to produce a long list of themes, followed by close coding where all the similar themes were grouped under the same theme to reduce the list of themes to a manageable number of themes. This process was guided by the theory of voting behaviour and themes emerging from the interviews were grouped accordingly [12].

RESULTS

Guided by the theory of voting behaviour the emerging themes from the interviews were classified into three main factors including the voters' initial condition, mass media and candidate factors. Administrative and technical factors were the added factors which were also associated with the voting behaviour of the participants. Each factor will be explained in detail below.

The initial conditions of voters

Socio-cultural factors seemed to play an important role in influencing the voters to vote or not to vote at the polling day. Respect, the use of cultural norms to solve problems, and fraternity were the socio-cultural aspects honoured by the majority of the participants and expected to be promoted by each candidate during their political campaigns. Lack of emphasis on these aspects by the candidates in their political communications influenced their decision to participate in voting at the polling day:

> "Respecting each other and applying cultural norms in solving problems are parts of our cultural. These aspects need to be preserved but I did not see any of the candidates had a strong commitment to promoting them. That was the reason why I did not vote" (Respondent 5).

> "We have our own socio-cultural characteristics such as respecting each other, helping each other in our society, and solving problems together. I see one of the candidates supported these aspects so I voted for him" (Respondent 22)

> "I did not vote because none of the candidates invited me to sit together and talk about what they are going to do during the campaigns and afterwards. This does not reflect our culture" (Respondent 13).

Traditional values seemed to also play a role in influencing the voting behaviour of the voters. Several participants commented that they expected a leader who firmly holds their traditional values such as politeness and hospitality because these values can help people get connected with each other within their groups, communities and societies.

> "…. if someone does not honour and practice traditional values or is not polite and sociable, then he or she will not have friends. The same thing applies to the leaders: during the previous election I was hoping that we would have a leader who has such characteristics. …. I voted for one of the three candidates because I was convinced he is polite and sociable" (Respondent 8).

> "Traditional values such as politeness and hospitality are what we honour because these are parts of our culture and have been passed down by our ancestors. I see that one of the previous candidates respects these values so I voted for him" (Respondent 33).

The level of education and economic condition of the voters were also identified to have significant influence on their voting behaviour. Level of education, for example, enabled the participants to critically analyse the programmes of the each candidate including how measurable and applicable they were before deciding to choose or vote a candidate.

Similarly, economic conditions of the voters were found to influence their decision either to vote or to work to generate incomes at the polling day.

> "I actively participated and voted for one candidate because I saw the programmes he offered during his campaigns or on the candidate debates were beneficial for people in Malaka and for the development of this district" (Respondent 3, with a bachelor degree).

> "I was hardly involved in the political campaigns prior to the [local] election because I do not really understand about politics and what the candidates are going to afterwards if they are elected. I did not even vote at the polling day because I worked get some money for my family" (Respondent 25, an elementary school graduate).

> ".... working to generate incomes is more important than participating in politics because politics do not benefit me economically. The candidates made promises during their campaigns but they forgot it straightaway after the election" (Respondent 1).

Mass media factors

Data, information and news disseminated through mass media seemed to be important factors that had significant influence on the voting behaviour of the voters. They played a role in forming public opinion about candidates, hence influenced the voters to participate in political process through campaign and voting. Dissemination of positive data and information about candidates through mass media created positive image about them and motivated people to participate in the political process and vote for a candidate, while dissemination of negative data and information demotivated political participation of the people.

> "Initially I knew about the local election and the candidates through a local newspaper. It presented information about the candidates and their backgrounds and I saw that all of them were capable and eligible to be the chief of our district. I also joined a team that supported one candidate so I was actively involved and voted for him" (Respondent 35).

> "I was involved in discussions about the candidates through social media such as facebook. There were data and information about the candidates, and I used this information and data as the references to make my decision about which candidate I would vote for" (Respondent 6).

However, other mass media factors such as expert reviews, latest issues, and situation trends were not associated with the voting behaviour of the voters in the last local election in Malaka district in 2015. All the interviewees expressed that these factors were seen during the political process, hence did not have any influences on their decision to vote or not to vote at the polling day.

> "I read a few local newspapers that presented information about the last local election in Malaka in 2015 but I did not find any expert reviews or theories from an expert about the election or the candidates" (Respondent 2).

> I used to access information about the previous election in Malaka through newspaper but I did see any information related to the latest issues that made me confused and influenced my decision to participate in the last political process or to vote" (Respondent 8).

> "I never got information about latest developments and situation trends such as about the local election process, and programmes and polling schedule of the regional electoral commission. It was because I never read newspaper. So those factors did not have any influence on me at all" (Respondent 31).

Candidate factors

Performance records of candidates were also one of the candidate characteristics that seemed to have an influence on the voters at the past local election in Malaka district. Such records were used by the voters to evaluate whether or not a candidate would bring about positive changes to Malaka district. The majority of the participants stated that they tended to look the performance records of the candidates before making decision to support and vote for one of them or not to vote at all. Therefore, it seemed that performance records of the candidates had both positive and negative influences on the voting behaviour of the voters.

> "I saw that all the candidates have positive the performance records in the institutions or departments they headed before. One candidate is the former head of the provincial health department, another one is former vice chief of Belu district and the last one had been in the position as a head of department at district level. So I thought these candidates have experiences and are eligible to be the chief of Malaka district and can bring about positive changes to our district. This was the reason why I was actively involved in the previous election" (Respondent 28).

"I knew about the performance records of the three candidates and I thought their records are mediocre. I was sure that they would not bring about positive changes. We could see what they had previously contributed to this district, nothing. So they will be the same as they were before even though they promised many things during the campaigns. This was the reason I did not vote for any of them" (Respondent 9).

"Everybody knew the track records of the candidates and could evaluate what they had done for Malaka district before the election. They were in higher positions in the government both at the provincial and district level but they did not do anything. I think this why many people including me did not vote" (Respondent 4).

Political marketing was another candidate factor that played a role in influencing the voting behaviour of the voters. For example, political communications done by the teams of each candidate or the candidates themselves through personal and collective approach to getting closer to individuals were used as a strategy to convince voters to vote for them.

"I once got a visit from the team of a candidate, we talked a lot about politics and they explained all the benefits offered by their candidate. I knew they were trying to convince me to vote for the candidate they supported. I used such information to help me make decision on the candidate I would vote for" (Respondent 10).

"I did not vote for any of the three candidates at the previous election because each of them came to my house and asked for my support. It was burdensome to me, so I decided not to vote at the polling day" (Respondent 26).

Furthermore, the programmes each candidate will be implementing if elected were another candidate factor associated with the participants' voting behaviour. Several interviewees indicated that the programmes offered by the candidates were very important for them before they made decision about the candidate they would vote for in the last election in Malaka district.

"I knew the programmes of one candidate and I agreed that he wanted to promote and focus on agriculture. So I voted for him" (Respondent 4).

"There were too many programmes offered by the candidates during their campaigns, so I do not remember them all. The one that I still remember is

related agriculture offered by one of the candidates. I like that programme" (Respondent 34).

Administrative and technical factors

Administrative and technical factors were also associated with the voting behaviour of the participants in past local election in Malaka district. Invitation letter from regional electoral commission for voters did not arrive to designated address, names were recorded twice or listed in voting place different to where they live, and the distance of voting place was too far, were the examples of the administrative and technical factors expressed by the participants to influence their decision to participate in voting.

> "I did not vote because my name was listed in the voting place which was different to the place where I live, so I did not go there at the polling day" (Respondent 20).

> "I did not get the invitation letter from the regional electoral commission, so I did not vote. I thought my name was not in the list of the voters" (Respondent 17).

> ".... the voting place where I should go was too far. I do not know why they [regional electoral commission] separated my name from the names of my neighbour. I was just lazy to go to the voting place at the polling day" (Respondent 7).

DISCUSSION

Studies and reports elsewhere [8, 9, 13-15] have reported factors associated with voting behaviour of the voters. Consistent with the results of previous studies [13, 15], the current study confirms that level of education of voters had significant influence on the voting behaviour of the participants. Those with high level of education were able to critically analyse or assess programmes offered by each participant before deciding to vote for a candidate. However, those with low level of education tended to ignore programmes offered by each participant due to lack of understanding and use other factors including family ties and friendships as the basis to vote for a candidate, or not to vote at all. This study findings are also in line with the previous findings elsewhere [14, 16, 17], suggesting

that economic condition influenced the voting behaviour of the majority of the respondents particularly the unemployed participants who chose to work to generate incomes rather than to vote at the polling day. This study also reports that socio-cultural and traditional values such as respect, using cultural norms as the basis to solve problems, politeness, hospitality, and fraternity had significant influence on the decision of the majority of the participants to choose or not to choose a candidate. Candidates who promoted these values or had practiced them in their social and cultural life prior to the election were more likely to be voted by the participants.

The results of the current study also support the previous findings by Firmanzah [9], Surbakti [8] and Arianto [5], indicating that data, information and news about the election, and the candidates and their track records broadcasted on or published in mass media influenced the decision of the participants to participate in the local election in Malaka or to vote. However, other factors such expert reviews, latest issues, and situation trends as previously reported in several studies [8, 9] to play a role in influencing voting behaviour of the voters, were not diagnosed in the current study. This was because the majority of the participants did not have much access to mass media and there had not been any expert reviews and latest issues and trends that were broadcasted on or published in mass media during the election process.

In line with the previous findings [17-20], this study indicates that voters judged the candidates by their personal characteristics including performance records, experiences, competence, and leadership ability. These factors, therefore, influenced their decision to vote a candidate or not to vote at all in the previous local election in Malaka district. However, other personal characteristics such as honesty, morality, and compassion, which have previously been associated with voting behaviour of the voters, were not identified in the current study [17-20]. Other factors such as political marketing and programmes offered by each candidates reported in the findings of studies by Firmanzah [9], KPU Sambas [6] and Surbakti [8], were also identified in this study. Likewise, administrative and technical factors which have been reported in the results of previous studies [4-6] such as double registration of the names of voters, voters were registered in the voting places different to the places where they lived, and long distance of the voting places, were also found in the current

study as the barriers to the participation of the respondents in voting for candidates in past local election.

CONCLUSIONS

The current study reports that voters' initial conditions including socio-cultural and traditional values, level of education and economic condition were the factors that determined voting behaviour of the participants. It also indicates that mass media factors such as data, information and news, and candidate factors including performance records, political marketing and programmes offered by each candidate, have significant influence on the decision of the voters to vote for a candidate or not to vote at all. Findings of this study indicate that there is a need to promote political education to increase understanding of society at large about the importance of their political participation especially in voting for the best candidate who could bring about positive changes to their districts or provinces.

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