

# **Political News and Early Voter Alienation: Why does not Political Knowledge Lead Early Voters to Use their Right to Vote?**

**Karim Suryadi**

Civic Education Department and Postgraduate Program  
Indonesia University of Education

## **Abstract**

Early voters whose backgrounds are senior high school level are believed to possess particular political knowledge. However, this group is suspected to be one of the nests of abstainers. Why does not political knowledge lead them to use their right to vote? To answer this question, a survey had been conducted toward 170 senior high school students in Kota Bandung and an intensive interview had been applied to 10 students. Statistical calculation shows that high correlation degree between political news influence and cognitive conception change of the students, but the degree is low to their political attitude. This discrepancy is caused by political news that is provided in newspaper which indirectly relates to the early voters' need, besides more impressive news diminishing government image than ones discussing election.

**Keywords:** political news, political cognition, political alienation, political marketing orientation

## **Introduction**

Relation between political news and early voter alienation is interesting to be researched for the following reasons. First, in last two years intensity of political news in national media significantly increased. This relates to the high frequencies of local government election in Indonesia. In 2008 there were 160 regions that conducted local leaders. In West Java, for instance, 16 regency leaders/mayors elections and one governor election were held in that year. The organization of local election has raised the appearance of political symbols in mass media, in the form of news, opinion, and advertisement. In only term of January – April 2008, local elections in many provinces and regencies boosted advertising expenditure up to 23% compared to the same period in 2007.

Second, mass media role in developing politics is mainly decided by political system. This

is based on the opinion of Merrill (1971) who states that mass media tends to defer to press system, meanwhile the press system defers to political system. This opinion is supported by empirical research conducted by Smith (1983) about press life in Indonesia in 1950-1965, showing that press life and existence are mainly decided by power.

Third, participation level and individual reactions on political system, for some, are decided by their cognitive responses. In their research on political participation, Sherman dan Kolker (1987) insists that there is an indication that citizens' cognition influences political participation level and their reactions on political system mechanism and political development. As that important the political cognition in supporting political development, this problem has been the

interest of political researchers for so long. Especially for development of democratic government system, since 9<sup>th</sup> century there has been growing confession from political researchers that democracy mainly depends on education, people's knowledge level and responsible acts based on general principles (Kraus dan Davis, 1978).

Forth, research on political news role in mass media in developing cognitive responses of early voters (mostly consisting of high school students) is regarded important, both because urgency of the students' political cognition development as part of young generation in healthy political system development context, and relating to possible role taken by mass media as one element of political infrastructure (Rusadi, 1988; Mowlana dan Wilson, 1990).

Nevertheless, the intensity of local election organization was also followed by the increase of people who didn't use their suffrage (abstainers). Moreover, in some areas, abstainer number is higher than percentage of votes gained by the candidate who became the winner.

Early voters (especially with teenage background) are suspected as group to be possibly abstainers. Then, it makes sense that the Election Commission places this group as their strategic target of election socialization. The high potential of abstainers in early voter group is greatly worrying as it may threaten roadmap of democracy in Indonesia.

Senior high school students are believed to have particular addictedness degree to political news. A survey conducted by Indonesia Research Survey (SRI) shows high usage of media among teenagers in Kota Bandung. Based on this fact, it is quite relevant that teenage time is regarded as 'the formative year in politics' (Easton, 1965) – phase in which they get political orientation affecting their political behavior in the next development phase (Alkin, 1981, in Nimmo & Sanders, 1981).

Out of the possibility of regime intervention in forming the news or distortion due to public limit in understanding message provided, political news is not only entertaining, but also contributing to cognitive development (Weckman

dan Wartella, 1977). This creates estimation that public knowledge on political system, for some, is decided by political news content provided by mass media they have. Nevertheless, how significant the role of political news in shaping cognitive responses of early voters and how their attitude in local leader election have not been factually identified yet.

## Research Problem

Research problem is not based on mass media influence on political life, but focusing on role of political news exposure provided by *Pikiran Rakyat* (the biggest daily newspaper in West Java) in shaping public cognitive responses on political system functions in Indonesia.

The high potential of abstainers among teenagers indicates that there is a discrepancy between their knowledge development and political attitude. Why does not teenagers' knowledge on politics lead them to use their suffrage? This question is elaborated in several sub-problems as follows:

- a) How close is the correlation of governor election news reporting to the cognitive response of high school students in regard to input function, conversion process, and political system output?
- b) How close is the correlation of governor election news reporting to attitude change of high school students in regard to the importance of being involved in voting?

## Research Method

Method used in this research is correlational that is believed to identify correlation between variables (Jalaluddin Rakhmat, 1985). This method is selected because the research aims to clarify correlation level of political news exposure provided by *Pikiran Rakyat* and the change of cognitive responses of high school students on input function, conversion process, and output function of political system in the context in local leader election (to be called as local election).

Data are collected through questionnaire, library research, and interview. Questionnaires are distributed to respondents of population consisting high school students in Bandung. Sampling used is multi-stage cluster sampling because there is a difficulty in arranging complete sampling profile in the first stage of the research.

Based on the technique, there are 170 respondents from the biggest schools in five administrative areas in Kota Bandung. Sampling is using multi-stage cluster. Besides, an intensive interview has been held to 10 students to know more about their political attitude. Questions of survey and interview focus on the students' knowledge and response on news of governor election and national politics published in *Pikiran Rakyat* on March 27 to April 9 2008, in the time of campaign period of West Java governor election. *Pikiran Rakyat* is chosen as sample newspaper because this daily news is the most read newspaper by teenagers in Kota Bandung. Hypothetical test is conducted in correlation with qualitative data taken from the intensive interview.

The variable is in regard to cognitive change and political attitude of early voters on governor election process. Objects of cognitive change and political attitude conceptually focus on functions of political system in local election context.

Cognitive responses of high school students are gained using test containing a number of questions about political system functions in Indonesia that become agenda of *Pikiran Rakyat* published in campaign time of West Java governor election.

- 1) Input function, cognitive response of high school students on input function is measured based on understanding level of the students about news content presented by *Pikiran Rakyat* in regard to: (1) political party names involved in governor election as demands for participation in political system; (2) demands for the regulation of behavior; (3) demands for allocation of goods and services; and (4) demands for communication and information.

- 2) Conversion process function, cognitive response of the students on conversion process function is measured based on understanding level of the students about news content presented by *Pikiran Rakyat* in regard to: (1) interest articulation and aggregation) on governor direct election; (2) rule making and the application of people sovereignty principles; (3) rule application in demonstration case and regional leadership transfer; (4) rule adjudication on leadership transfer; and (5) communication of demonstration and message of sistem politik in terms of local leader recruitment and selections.
- 3) Output function, cognitive response of the students on output function is measured based on understanding level of the students about news content presented by *Pikiran Rakyat* in regard to: (1) extraction, in terms of demands of local election budget efficiency and corruption, collusion, and nepotism eradication; (2) distribution of opportunity to gain legal protection; (3) regulation of behavior in stating opinion, applying principles of presumption of innocence, and arranging and amending rules in central and local level; and (4) affirmation of values and symbolic output.

Based on the facts and relevant theories, the hypothesis of the research is that the higher the political news exposure presented by *Pikiran Rakyat*, the higher the change of cognitive response of high school students on input, conversion process, and output functions of political system in Indonesia. Beside positively correlated to political news exposure, cognitive response of the students on input, conversion process, and output functions and Indonesia political system capability positively correlates to their political attitude (response pattern) about governor election process.

Hypothesis is tested using correlation analysis, i.e. is statistic procedure to know

correlation between two variables or more as shown by correlation coefficient. Procedure to produce the correlation coefficient is called association measure based on data measurement scale (Jalaluddin Rakhmat, 1999).

Data used to test correlation between political news exposure and cognitive response change of the students on input, conversion process, and output functions of political system of early voters are interval and rational in scale. Therefore, association measure of dependent variable over independent variable is calculated based on Pearson correlation coefficient formula, meanwhile the significance is calculated using t-test.

### Theoretical Review

Knowledge gaining and political attitude can be explained as social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), that in this context is shown by cognitive response change about civic literacy problems. Nevertheless, relation between the increase of political news intensity (even increase of event frequencies and political symbol appearances) and people's attitude is not running very well. Protrusion of political parties in moving political system dynamics is not responded very well by the people.

Political party role strengthens in political system in Indonesia in this last ten years. Unfortunately, the strengthening has not been followed by the needed competence enhancement. Communication predicament sometimes creates acts 'out of system'. Consequently, relation among citizens, political party and political system is arbitrary (pretend to be).

Therefore, many politicians revise their ways in selling their political idea. In England, for example, local politic marketing is set into various social services (Lilleker, 2006).

Political parties are formed to struggle for preference about dream of people and state. Political parties become an important source for sustainability of democratic political system more than roles from individual or regime.

Role of political parties as elements of democratic political system in articulating and

aggregating interests offers alternatives of policy and leader candidate as reflected in issue from the candidate. Besides, political parties acts out as conflict canalization, turning conflict potential into meaningful action and keeping communication channel open that people can connect to political process appropriately.

Political efficacy of citizens can only be considered if their political acts are connected to political process appropriately. In this time political agenda is symmetric to public. If political party performance in articulating and aggregating people's agenda is low, there are no reasons to political efficacy of the people.

Political efficacy is connected to effectiveness of people's political participation. A political act from people can be considered to have efficacy if it affects political system change. If the political change is not because of the people, political efficacy is still absent.

Basic reason to doubt political participation efficacy of people is the dominance of political party role in relation to the appearance of people's cynicism to party. This tendency appears because political change of party system does not run well substantively but structurally.

Though variety of ideologies found in people's life, there is no reason for political parties to force ideology choice without pre-confirmation to the constituents. Position in which people become only the 'eaters' should come into an end.

In other sides, though ideological changes appear among political parties, in modern democracy practice they have the same commitment to go through using constitutional ways in fighting for their objective by convincing people of the true of their ideologies and offering their policies to be tested in election periodically. If received mandate or rejected, they are ready to follow constitutional ways based on legal political system, appreciating their limit to apply policy until next election.

For political parties, good process described above depends on their ability in communicating their ideology and policy to publics that have and give legitimate to them.

Relation patters will determine quality of representativeness and democracy themselves.

That perspective is relevant to be used in analyzing how political parties, like government, are managed. Deutsch (1963) states that running government is just like driving a ship with direction based on route information passed and description of the ship position. In other words, formulating policies that will be applied and success indicators of government performance should be based on experiences and achievements as well as description of worker performance. In a specific context, how political parties continue their long tradition or destroy it with acts that distract political contract with their constituents reflected in their communication pattern, both in getting political aspiration and translating it into political policy.

Meanwhile, external communication patterns applied by political parties improve in line with expansion of vote right in many countries. When vote right in capitalist countries is limited to rich and educated people, it is enough for political parties to do various forms of interpersonal communication such as campaign and parade, supported by press release from media to reach their constituents. But in free election era (all adults have vote right), parties should use mass media. In this context, some communications are known: political marketing, political advertsing, and political public relations.

Political marketing is a strategy that includes techniques adopted from enterprise and business activity. Marketing is a study and technique to influence mass attitude in a competitive condition. Political marketing can be regarded as commercial marketing in a commercial organization in which they should have targets.

Political advertising is also determined based on principles based on business sector to exploit potentials influencing mass media to differentiate political party products (party and candidate) and understand them for 'consumers' as done by various political parties and candidates in campaign of election 2004.

As an advertisement, political massage management becomes commercial matter that its

appearance is determined by the number of spot paid by party or candidates. That is why 'white snout' more appeared in media in prime time (its tariff is higher) than 'umbrella advertisement'.

The third category that has commercial influence in political communication activity is public relation – management of media and information designed to ensure that a party can get advantageous publicity maximally and the negative one minimally. Activities on public relations include proactive ways such as 1) party conference which, in contemporary politics, is designed to attract positive media publication about an organization; 2) news conference that enable party to design political agenda, especially along election session, and the use of image managers to design perspective on a party and publics leaders.

The three categories are something familiar in sophisticated political reality in Indonesia (and West Java). But, various forms and message content have not been presented yet in ways that are regarded to be important and interesting for voter candidate.

Syndrome of duplicating resides in almost all campaign teams after election 2004. using acronym in introducing candidate and arranging banner along the streets are communication forms that are held without auditing the effectiveness first.

Acronym is only easy to say but it makes voter candidates difficult in associating candidate figures that are campaigning, number and acronym for so long introduced.

The effectiveness of using banner as media for socializing candidates and potential figures is doubted. Banner expresses eager to get power more than to recognize people's need and record public image.

### **Political Engagement versus Political Alienation**

Researcher does not regard knowledge as the only one factor that influences engagement level of individual in political area. This research focuses merely on political knowledge gain in line with the fact that the more massive the political



message distribution in one side, the more the worry of abstainers in other side.

Political news presented in media is not designed to have a specific purpose. The possibility of political participation development is as big as one of political alienation. This possibility is worsened by the fact that distrust to political parties and their figures widens to almost all segments of society.

Decreasing emotional attachment to political parties is not a phenomenon that happens merely in Indonesia. Diamond and Gunther (2001) noted that decreasing participation happened in countries adopting modern democracy in these 25 years. However, the strong erosion of distrust to political parties in Indonesia has led to the condition that the high number of people who do not use their suffrage was surprising as in previous election (in New Order era), the participation was always over 80%.

Besides the political mobilization pattern applied by New Order, this condition implies the low quality of political literacy of most people. Meanwhile, political literacy becomes clip hanger that connects political institution and policy choice taken by government (Milner, 2002).

To revive people's trust to government, politics, and election, there is no other way but persuading the voters to trust that officer elect will serve their need. In the same time, it insists that the voters have power to change condition by means of their choice in election day. The widening mistrust will foster cynicism, even people alienation. In such a condition, the choice of not using the suffrage will blast. Those dimensions were carefully illustrated by Dermody and Hanmer-Lloyd (2003) as follows:

#### Picture 1: Dimensions of Political Engagement and Alienation

Theoretically, styles of advertisement and political campaign are believed to influence political participation degree (Lilleker, Jackson & Scullion, 2006). However, this factor is not specifically analyzed as campaign styles of most political parties and candidates competing in election in Indonesia do not show sufficient contrast. Therefore, the difference of campaign messages among political parties and candidates is gradual.

#### Findings

Findings show that there is a discrepancy between political knowledge gain and political attitude among the students. Political news presentation has a high correlation on cognitive response change, though low correlation to

attitude change. Partially, the correlation between political news presentation and cognitive response change on input function is 0,678530 or 0,768342 after the conversion process. And, the correlation of political news presentation and cognitive response change on output function of political system is 0,657328. Meanwhile, the correlation between political news presentation and political system change of senior high school students in Kota Bandung is only 0,334318. Based in the determinant coefficient, contribution of political news presentation to structuring political cognition is greater than its capability of fostering political involvement.

The discrepancy between political knowledge gain and attitude change due to the students' activity in reading *Pikiran Rakyat* is

elaborated through the intensive interview. The data from interview show that the low interest to vote is caused by several reasons. First, concerning political news presentation, publications on natural disasters, collapse schools, suffering of poor people who cannot have medication, and high threat of work discharge, are more contrast and impressive than ones of election. Second, in regard to campaign content, the message sold is out of the students' need map. Moreover, issues about education and unemployment do not get any serious attention. Third, political party aggressiveness is in contrast with people's response in general. The people tend to be passive in the middle of massive advertising from political parties. In other words, passive attitude from the teenagers is supported by the surrounding. Fourth, there is low trust on governor election efficacy in improving condition. Furthermore, some of the research subjects strongly state that they do not trust governor election as the best way to improve condition, but only places some elites to the power.

### **Understand, but do not Join**

Senior high school students in Kota Bandung understand political party role in political system mechanism in Indonesia. Moreover, they know the urgency of election as recruitment mechanism for political leaders. However, their low trust to the impact of the political process in making improvement of some problems creates low political participation. This shows that political participation is not only formed by political knowledge but also situation when the election is held.

People in Indonesia see 2008 as a tiring year. Thousands of local elections were conducted but the economic declination worsens the condition. Local elections became daily agenda of local and national media until there was no day without local election news. Those enclose the political symbols into daily life of the people.

Unfortunately, main necessities tend to disappear from markers in the middle of massive political symbols and events. Everywhere was

long queue of people buying oil, gasoline, and main necessities. The peaceful condition was sometimes distracted by some local elections with mass amok.

Democracy as an idea has not been described in democratization practices in Indonesia. Paradox life often teases people to turn back to the time in democracy was formed by New Order, an era in which economy development was the main course.

Policy choices mostly taken by government do not provide any optimal leverage for developing people prosperity. This condition makes most teenagers be quiet when others are standing in line before voting booth. They know that voting is important but are not interested in to take part as they doubt the efficacy on the economy condition in the country.

### **How should Political Message be Constructed?**

Campaigns of legislative and presidential election are conducted in the middle of voters' tiredness due to long series of local elections and low efficacy of election. Slow performances of local leaders elect in making their promises to be true and the condition to get better accelerate the coming of people's disappointment. Therefore, election 2009 is passively responded in several areas in Indonesia.

Many political parties and candidates fail to understand political marketing orientation in Indonesia. More political parties and candidates fail to build campaign strategy appropriate with market sentiment. If many people vote, their choice is not based on their understanding on political party or candidate excellences, but to use their obligation to vote. In other words, voters' preference is not developed based on excellences of a political party or candidate compared to others.

Two approaches to understand political marketing orientations are commonly applied (Dermody dan Hanmer-Lloyd, 2003). First, market is regarded as a set of managerial attitude especially on organization ability to generalize, disseminate, and act with market intelligence. This concept holistically follows consumer

orientation perspective by seeing competitors and stakeholders as consumers. Second, marketing orientation is regarded as organization culture by focusing on subscribers, competitors, and all ways I all units.

These two approaches are adopted from business concept. It is rational as politics has also grown as an industry. Political activities (especially in election context) need not only amount fund but also net support and products that should be designed to be attractive for buyers.

Though politics owe much from business (marketing), there is philosophical difference that forms posture of campaign team and strategy chosen. If business applies philosophy that consumers are king (who controls market), politicians with marketing orientation see that need factors are more important in controlling markets.

Politicians with marketing orientation will realize that to exist they need to be more sensitive to constituents' attitude and stakeholders' need, and use information to build policy and programs. Therefore, there are four important variables in considering program development and campaign techniques: 1) internal orientation, based on party members (party elites, incumbent, etc.) (colleagues) as an offer; 2) voter orientation, analyzing various indications on party perspective and politicians relating to voters' knowledge and opinion that become voters' attention central (contrasting); 3) competitor orientation, legislative candidates' acceptance for competitors; and 4) external orientation, consciousness and expression about the existence of need possessors who are not voters, competitors, or sympathizers (Dermody dan Hanmer-Lloyd, 2003).

Seen from this perspective, campaign message should be designed in special ways to encourage early voters' engagement. To them, the meaning of election as entry point of political cycle is not well explained, and there is a need for message design and campaign styles as follow. First, message should be segmented. In other words, map of needs, hopes, and worries of early voters becomes inspiration source of promises and rules of platform implementation into

campaign messages. Therefore, campaign messages will not be alike. Message segmentation should be form based on age, geographical background, social and demographic characteristics.

Second, political party approach to early voters should be personal. In other words, political parties and candidates should be able to get what the early voters think. Therefore, campaign style that only presents candidates' need but fails to catch voter candidates' signals (through billboard, banner, pamphlet, and alike) should be accompanied by dialogue and other personal contacts.

Third, there should be common platform that contains prompt answers and agenda to handle national fundamental problems that tie political parties and candidates to be concerned on national problems. Thus, messages that are designed by political parties and candidates are operationalizing of the common platform. The differences of the campaign message among political parties are shaped in line with political platform of the party different one another. The existence of common platform will provide an opportunity for political parties and candidates to present interesting answers for problems faced by this nation, but still loyal to fundamental national policy, democracy, and human right.

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