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# Characterising Independent Candidates in Indonesian Local Politics

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## Abstract

This article examines the phenomenon of independent candidates (*calon perseorangan*) in Indonesia's regional executive elections (Pilkada) to better understand why candidates run as independents and whether independent candidacy has reduced political inequality in the electoral system. In this study, we compiled candidate information using Indonesia's General Election Commission's (Komisi Pemilihan Umum, KPU) database as well as structured open-source searches to develop a data set and profiles of independents over three election cycles. Using this data set, we distinguished three categories of independents – *partisan*, *non-partisan*, and *underdog* independents – by analysing differences in power resources and motivations among the candidates. We found that contrary to public perceptions in Indonesia, independent candidacy has not helped to alleviate unequal access to political office. Successful independents are predominantly political insiders and local notables. This finding has important implications for democracy in Indonesia – we show how the inability for political outsiders to win political office harms democratic representation.

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## Keywords

Indonesia, independents, local politics, election, Pilkada

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## Introduction

In 2015, M. Syahrial, a twenty-seven-year-old local legislator from the city of Tanjung Balai in North Sumatra, achieved a remarkable feat. Making a bold decision to resign from the local legislature, he contested the mayoral election as an independent with his running mate H. Ismail (a long-time civil servant). Although he was a Golkar party politician, the party had opted to support the nomination of incumbent Vice-Mayor Rolel Harahap. The Vice-Mayor was concurrently the chairman of the city's Golkar Party Regional Leadership Board, and his running mate Milvan Hadi was the eldest son of ex-Mayor Sutrisno Hadi between 2000 and 2010. Surprisingly, M. Syahrial and H. Ismail defeated their highly credentialled opponents with a plurality (47.34 per cent of votes), and this historic win made Syahrial the youngest politician to win a mayorship in Indonesia.

Such acts of triumph are no mean feat in Indonesian politics, because incumbent regional executives win between 60 per cent and 63 per cent of their electoral contests, which is a significant advantage (Aspinall and Berenschot, 2019; Mietzner, 2010a). More surprisingly, Syahrial won without the support of an established political party machinery. Instead, he relied on significant civil society mobilisation for his independent candidacy. He enjoyed strong organisational networks from his leadership of the city's Tarbiyah Youth Association (Ikatan Pemuda Tarbiyah), Indonesia Youth National Committee (Komite Nasional Pemuda Indonesia), and the Legal and Advocacy Assembly of Alwashliyah (Majelis Hukum dan Advokasi Alwashliyah Tanjung Balai). Ultimately, his victory constitutes a "synecdoche" of the broader rise of independent political candidates, henceforth referred to as independents, in Indonesia's regional executive elections (Pemilihan Kepala Daerah, Pilkada).

Indeed, data from the Indonesian General Election Commission (Komisi Pemilihan Umum, KPU) indicate that 289 pairs of independents had participated across three Pilkada held in 2015, 2017, and 2018. This means that independent pairs constitute about one-fifth (17.52 per cent) of 1,650 candidates, a sizeable proportion.<sup>1</sup> Despite the growing popularity of independent candidacy in Indonesia, the topic has attracted little scholarly attention, and there is only a small handful of studies conducted in both English and Bahasa Indonesia (Thaha and Haryanto, 2017; Widiptya and Soedarto, 2017). This is unfortunate because research on independents can tell us a great deal about the health of the party system – the failure of existing parties to address societal interests is one leading argument for the rise of independents (Brancati, 2008; Costar and Curtin, 2004).

Our research seeks to contribute to the literature by investigating two key questions. We asked why candidates run as independents, that is, their motivations to run despite the high barriers to entry and the low odds of success. We also asked how, if at all, independent candidacy addresses the issue of political inequality by providing an alternative route and contributing to a more level playing field for aspiring politicians. To answer these questions and develop our data set, we used the KPU's election database and collected information on the vote shares and backgrounds of 289 pairs of independents that ran for regional executive elections in 2015, 2017, and 2018. At the same time, using structured open-source searches, we developed profiles for all 289 pairs by analysing

official recommendation letters from political parties, each candidate's verified wealth report (Laporan Harta Kekayaan Penyelenggara Negara, LHKPN), their biography, and both offline and online news sources. Desk research was also performed to review the broader literature on independent candidates and democracy in both foreign countries and Indonesia. By utilising typological analysis to develop a set of categories within a phenomenon (Given, 2008; LeCompte et al., 1993), our research aims to provide useful generalisations and case studies to contribute to an understanding of independent candidacy in Indonesia.

Our research found that independent candidacy has not reduced political inequality in Indonesia. Instead, both political insiders and local notables have been the biggest beneficiaries of independent candidacy, which has become an alternative route for existing political players to compete in democratic elections. As a result, many of the profiles of independents are indistinguishable from party candidates, meaning that these independents are usually party politicians with strong brand recognition and socio-economic capital who have simply found it expedient to run as independents because of the flexibility it offers. We refer to these candidates as *partisan independents*. Moreover, we found that there is a sizeable minority of independents who cannot be easily classified as political insiders and outsiders. These independents often possess governing or other organisational experience, which gives them strong socio-economic capital and brand recognition. At the same time, they choose to avoid securing a party nomination and wish to remain unaffiliated with political parties. We refer to these candidates as *non-partisan independents*. Finally, we found a small minority of political outsiders with no governing experience or party affiliation, who are generally small-scale entrepreneurs or activists, and face serious structural barriers in electoral competition. We refer to these candidates as *underdog independents*.

This article is organised as follows. The next section discusses why and how independent candidacy has emerged as a viable electoral platform in the global context and its relationship with political inequality. The section titled "The Rise of Independents in Indonesia" explains the rise of independent candidacy in Indonesia's Pilkada, where the institutional framework provided by the Constitutional Court (Mahkamah Konstitusi) and the backdrop of party deconsolidation set the scene for the rise of independents. The following section provides a general illustration on the performance and background of independents in Indonesia, which we classify as *partisan*, *non-partisan*, and *underdog independents*. The "Key Findings" section discusses the key reasons and motivations of each type of independent and the overall assessment of whether the independent candidacy has reduced political inequality in Indonesia. The article concludes by outlining the findings and its contributions to the broader study of Indonesian local politics and the literature on independent candidacy.

## Independent Candidacy in the Global Context

Available studies suggest that independent candidates participate in electoral politics worldwide. Indeed, one cross-national study shows that independents are permitted

to run in the electoral systems of at least thirty-four democratic countries (Brancati, 2008). However, the prevalence and success of independent candidacy in different electoral systems vary according to electoral rules. For one, demanding ballot access requirements, such as the need to collect signatures or pay a deposit, may make independent candidacy less viable (Brancati, 2008; Ehin and Solvak, 2013). Additionally, seat allocation rules in different electoral systems (e.g. majority, plurality, and proportional representation systems) also affect the electability of independents. For instance, proportional representation promotes party consolidation and weakens the strength of independents (Brancati, 2008). On the other hand, the analysis of a data set of European elections found that relatively strong independent performance is associated with candidate-centric systems like plurality rule or candidate-friendly versions of proportional representation such as the single transferable vote (Ehin and Solvak, 2013).

What influences both the demand and supply for independents? On the demand side, two studies suggest that votes for independents are influenced by grievances against the political system. In the United States, anti-party sentiments and discontentment with the two-party duopoly was shown to drive voting for independents (Owen and Dennis, 1996). Similarly, in Europe, voters who support independents generally feel alienated from mainstream political parties and lack party identification (Ehin and Solvak, 2013). On the supply side, politicians are motivated to run as independents for a variety of reasons. In Ireland, candidates prefer to run as independents because of the flexibility and autonomy afforded to them to highlight important single issues, represent particular social groups, or give representation to local areas. Conversely, party backbenchers subsumed under party platforms and parliamentary party discipline enjoy far less autonomy (Bolleyer and Weeks, 2009). While independents in Ireland run with a clear activist orientation and therefore enhance the quality of democracy by raising pertinent issues not addressed by party platforms, the success of Irish independents in the democratic system appear to be the exception rather than the norm.

In our examination of various case studies, we find that independents are motivated to run due to tactical reasons that cannot be easily generalised. For instance, Indian parties in high stakes electoral competition may float independents just as a strategy to divert vote share from their rivals (Bhattacharya, 2014). Russian researchers also highlight the tendency for local bosses belonging to the administrative or economic elite to run as independents in Russia's regional executive elections (Golosov, 2003; Protsyk and Wilson, 2003). Post-2005, elected governorship gave way to appointed governorships, but in the recent 2019 Moscow city elections, we find that party members from Putin's United Russia registered as independents in response to the party's declining approval ratings (Step, 2019). Memorably, in the 2012 Russian Presidential Election, Putin's main contender Mikhail Prokhorov was also accused of being a fake independent candidate, highlighting that the independent channel is susceptible to exploitation by the ruling elite (Shuster, 2012). Thus, we find that independent candidacy in Russia appears to only serve as alternative electoral vehicles for the established elite or as a means for party members to escape political accountability. In these circumstances, the

independent route has not improved democratic representation but instead has benefitted existing power brokers.

In designing this study, we were interested to know the extent to which independent candidacy can alleviate political inequality. We define political inequality narrowly in this study as referring to unequal access to positions of political power.<sup>2</sup> If qualified candidates want to but are unable to register or make a credible bid at political office because of structural barriers such as a lack of wealth, connections, registration requirements, and the presence of a cartelistic party system, then democratic representation suffers. Indeed, representation in political office is so important that an entire subfield in political science is devoted to analysing imbalances in social group representation. Better known as descriptive representation, the premise of this subfield is that it is important for governing institutions to resemble the demographics and life experiences of the citizenry (Mansbridge, 1999). Extending from this logic, some countries have put in place gender quotas to ensure that there are enough women representatives to advocate for women's rights in parliaments (Devlin and Elgie, 2008).

Furthermore, representatives' "personal roots" can influence their governing preferences in ways that go beyond partisan and constituent interests (Burden, 2007). As a result, we stress that diverse representation in political office is crucial, either in legislature or executive positions. If too many political candidates come from similar backgrounds as a result of formal or informal barriers, then voters do not really enjoy real choice. Therefore, it follows logically that independent candidacy, by purporting to offer an alternative electoral pathway, should theoretically permit candidates previously excluded from the party nomination process to run and access political office.

However, in practice, that is not the case. Independent candidacy appears to be insufficient for promoting a competitive democratic system and increasing the diversity of democratic representation. To better shed light on why this is so, we analyse the independent phenomenon in Indonesia.

## **The Rise of Independents in Indonesia**

Independent candidacy is a relatively recent phenomenon in Indonesia. During the early democratic transition between 1999 and 2004, there were no provisions for independent candidacy. Instead, Indonesia's election laws were premised on a party-centric system that stipulated that only candidates nominated by a political party or a coalition of parties could run for direct presidential and direct regional executive elections (mayors, regents, and governors). Subsequently, two local regional executive candidates who were unable to obtain party nominations to run for the 2007 Jakarta gubernatorial election filed a lawsuit to Indonesia's Constitutional Court. The lawsuit sought a Constitutional Court assessment of the existing electoral laws and to ameliorate the political parties' stranglehold over candidate nomination (Mboi, 2009). The Constitutional Court found that prevailing election laws needed to be amended to allow independent candidacy based on Case Decision (Putusan Perkara) No. 5/PUU-V/2007 (Mietzner, 2010b).

**Table 1.** Comparison of Independent Candidates Regulations.

|                      | Law No. 12/2008             | Law No. 1/2015              | Law No. 8/2015               | Law No. 10/2016                          |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|--|
| Requirement          | 3%–6.5% of total population | 3%–6.5% of total population | 6.5%–10% of total population | 6.5%–10% of the final voters' list (DPT) |
| Amendment suggestion | Constitutional Court        | Government                  | DPR                          | Constitutional Court                     |

Note: DPT, Daftar Pemilih Tetap; DPR, Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat.

Source: Law No. 10/2016, Law No. 8/2015, Law No. 1/2015, and Law No. 12/2008, compiled by authors.

Thus, provisions for independents were first implemented in Law No. 12/2008 amending the 2004 Law on Regional Government. In Indonesia, independents are simply candidates that contest without party nominations. These provisions stipulate that independents must obtain photocopies of residents' identity cards above a specific threshold requirement of 3 per cent–6.5 per cent of the total population to qualify for independent candidacy. This requirement was increased to 6.5 per cent–10 per cent of the total population in 2015 and further amended in 2016 to 6.5 per cent–10 per cent of the final voters' list (Daftar Pemilih Tetap, DPT), that is, as a percentage of the number of eligible voters (Table 1).

For independents, the percentage requirement is a logistical nightmare for regions with large populations. With reference to Table 2, an independent running in a city/regency with a population of less than 250,000 voters must obtain identity card photocopies from at least 10 per cent of the final voter list to be eligible to run. If we use regional elections in North Sumatra province as an example, an independent in the city of Gunung Sitoli with a DPT of 87,869 must collect a minimum of 8,787 photocopies of residents' identity cards. On the other hand, independents running in the city of Medan with a DPT of 1,614,673 must collect a minimum of 104,954 photocopies (6.5 per cent of the DPT).

**Table 2.** Minimum Support Requirements for Independent Candidates.

| Region       | Number of voters            | % support needed |
|--------------|-----------------------------|------------------|
| Province     | 2 million voters or below   | 10.0             |
|              | 2–6 million voters          | 8.5              |
|              | 6–12 million voters         | 7.5              |
|              | More than 12 million voters | 6.5              |
| Regency/City | 250,000 voters or below     | 10.0             |
|              | 250,000–500,000 voters      | 8.5              |
|              | 500,000–1 million voters    | 7.5              |
|              | More than 1 million voters  | 6.5              |

Source: Law No. 10/2016.

Furthermore, this collection challenge is complicated by the fact that the independents must collect these photocopies across 50 per cent plus one of the subdistricts in the region being contested. These regulations require independents to build personal logistical and volunteer networks for the purposes of canvassing for door-to-door support, which entails substantial costs (Buehler, 2010). Nonetheless, independent candidacy provided a means for individuals to enter the electoral fray without party nominations. Since then, more independents have been running in provincial, regency, or city government elections.

In addition, party deconsolidation and the rise of candidate-centric patronage politics made party labels less valuable electoral resources (Aspinall and Berenschot, 2019; Tan, 2006, 2012). During the democratic interregnum between 1998 and 2004, Indonesian leaders renovated a skeletal parliamentary system where the president was elected by a super-legislature to a presidential system where sovereignty rested with the people. Since 1999, Indonesia has regularly held elections that are considered free and fair. However, a functioning electoral democracy has not led to a functional party system – parties are regularly surveyed as the least trusted political institutions in Indonesia. At the national level, parties are frequently described as “political cartels” and engage in “promiscuous power-sharing,” allying with any party in pragmatic alliances to access state resources for their private gain (Slater, 2004, 2018). As a result, party identification among voters has fallen dramatically, meaning that a candidate cannot leverage on party brand to win votes (Mietzner, 2013).

At the same time, election system design has fostered the personalisation of electoral politics, as the transition to direct regional elections contributes to a focus on personalities and the marginalisation of parties. Colloquially, candidates describe the process of obtaining a party nomination as “finding a vessel” (*mencari perahu*), that is, merely a convenient vehicle to enter elections. The two phenomena – the loss of voter identification with parties and the erosion of political candidates’ loyalty to parties – have contributed to the increasing deconsolidation of the party system. A clear indication of this phenomenon can be seen from the fact that party nominees tend to rely on non-party mobilisation mechanisms, such as “success teams” – a team centred on the candidate’s personal networks and volunteer groups (Aspinall and Berenschot, 2019; Tomsa and Setijadi, 2018). This deconsolidation has levelled the playing field to a certain degree for independents, as non-party candidates can also form success teams and mobilise volunteer groups for electoral campaigning.

In a nutshell, the development of the independent candidacy pathway and party deconsolidation are key factors facilitating the rise of independents. However, we must still ask why candidates run as independents and whether independent candidacy has alleviated political inequality in Indonesia. To address these questions, we assess the profiles of independents using both the open-source databases provided by KPU and structured open-source searches to collect information on the profiles and backgrounds of these independents.

## **Independents in Indonesia: Performance and Background**

Analyses of our data set of Indonesia’s regional executive elections (Pilkada) from 2015, 2017, and 2018 indicate that although a substantial number of candidates are competing



**Table 3.** Comparison of Winning Independents and Party-Nominated Candidates in 2015, 2017, and 2018 Pilkada.

| Type of candidates | Total | 2015 Pilkada | 2017 Pilkada | 2018 Pilkada | Success rate (%) |
|--------------------|-------|--------------|--------------|--------------|------------------|
| Independents       | 289   | 13           | 3            | 3            | 6.57             |
| Party nominees     | 1,361 | 254          | 96           | 165          | 37.84            |

Note: KPU, Komisi Pemilihan Umum.

Source: Indonesia's General Election Commission (KPU), compiled by authors.

as independents (17.5 per cent), independents have a very low success rate – only 19 out of 289 independent pairs or 6.57 per cent (Table 3). In contrast, party candidates accounted for the majority (82.5 per cent) of the candidate pairs, of which 515 out of 1,361 party pairs won the election, translating into a 37.84 per cent success rate. Based on our data, this means that a party candidate is six times more likely to win Pilkada than an independent, which confers a tremendous advantage for party nominees.

Furthermore, independent candidacy is by and large an Outer Islands phenomenon (i.e. the many islands surrounding Java Island; see Table 4). Of the 289 independent pairs, only thirty-seven pairs ran in the Java region. Only two candidate pairs in Bandung Regency, West Java, and Rembang Regency, East Java managed to win. On the other hand, 252 pairs of independents participated in Pilkada across the Outer Islands. Seventeen out of the 252 pairs secured electoral victory, with five winners in Sumatra, four in Kalimantan, three in both Sulawesi and Papua, and two in the East Nusa Tenggara Province. Although our sample size is small, we find that independent victories are mainly concentrated in the Outer Islands rather than on Java Island.

The compiled data set also suggests that many independents (233 pairs) that passed the verification process were predominantly based in regencies with smaller populations (Table 5). Out of 233 pairs, thirteen pairs won elections. Forty-nine pairs of independents passed through the administrative requirement at the city level and six of them secured victory, whereas only seven independents did at the provincial level with zero

**Table 4.** Independent Candidates Based on Region in 2015, 2017, and 2018 Pilkada.

| Region                 | Total pair of candidates | Winning pairs | Success rate (%) |
|------------------------|--------------------------|---------------|------------------|
| Sumatra                | 115                      | 5             | 1.73             |
| Java                   | 37                       | 2             | 0.69             |
| Kalimantan             | 39                       | 4             | 1.38             |
| Bali and Nusa Tenggara | 20                       | 2             | 0.69             |
| Eastern Indonesia      | 78                       | 6             | 2.08             |
| Total                  | 289                      | 19            | 6.57             |

Note: KPU, Komisi Pemilihan Umum.

Source: Indonesia's General Election Commission (KPU), compiled by authors.

**Table 5.** Independent Candidates Based on Electoral Level in 2015, 2017, and 2018 Pilkada.

| Pair of independent candidates | Region  |      |            |                        |                   | Total |
|--------------------------------|---------|------|------------|------------------------|-------------------|-------|
|                                | Sumatra | Java | Kalimantan | Bali and Nusa Tenggara | Eastern Indonesia |       |
| Provincial                     | 3       | 0    | 1          | 1                      | 2                 | 7     |
| Winning pair                   | 0       | 0    | 0          | 0                      | 0                 | 0     |
| City                           | 23      | 10   | 6          | 1                      | 9                 | 49    |
| Winning pair                   | 3       | 0    | 2          | 0                      | 1                 | 6     |
| Regency                        | 89      | 27   | 32         | 18                     | 67                | 233   |
| Winning pair                   | 2       | 2    | 2          | 2                      | 5                 | 13    |

Note: KPU, Komisi Pemilihan Umum.

Source: Indonesia's General Election Commission (KPU), compiled by authors.

successes. These data suggest that the population size of the electoral district impacted the ability of independents to both secure nominations and win elections.

We also found that a large majority of independents who ran in the 2015, 2017, and 2018 Pilkada were mainly active/retired local civil servants (24.91 per cent), figures from the private sector (20.07 per cent), wealthy entrepreneurs (19.72 per cent), former local legislators (12.11 per cent), and elected local executive officials (incumbent/former) such as regents and mayors (8.30 per cent). Their backgrounds largely conform to the findings of earlier studies. For instance, a study on the 2005 regional election showed that most regional executive candidates were high-ranking career bureaucrats, wealthy businessmen, and party politicians or members of regional legislatures (Mietzner, 2010a).

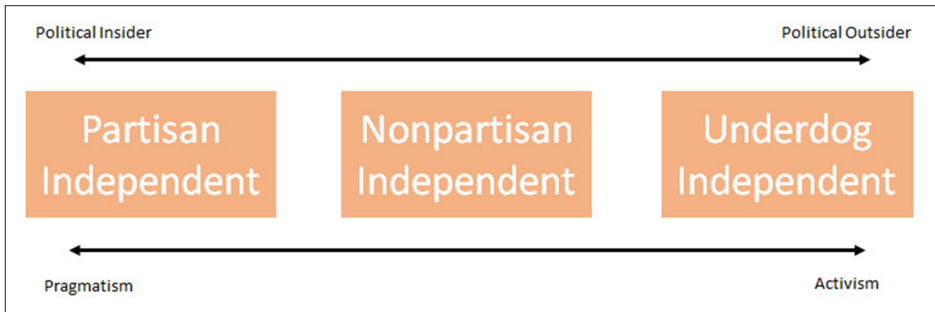
Table 6 illustrates our findings. The majority of independents tend to have careers in the civil service, the private sector, and entrepreneurship, and to have served as former or incumbent mayors and regents. Eighteen out of nineteen winning candidates originated from these backgrounds and their success rate varies – regents/mayors (16.67 per cent), local legislators (14.29 per cent), wealthy entrepreneurs (7.02 per cent), civil servants (5.56 per cent), and those in the private sector (1.75 per cent). Only one of the winners was a former national legislator (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat, DPR), Neni Moerniaeni, who won the 2015 election in the city of Bontang, East Kalimantan. The findings suggest that the profiles of independents are virtually indistinguishable from those of party candidates. In fact, they tend to be either political insiders or local notables with significant economic and social capital.

As a result, independents can be equally susceptible to “money politics” as a vote-getting strategy in ways that are indistinguishable from party candidates (Aspinall and Mas’udi, 2017; Simandjuntak, 2012). In fact, Dadang Naser, incumbent regent and independent running in the 2015 election, was accused of engaging in money politics in the 2010 Bandung Regency election in a lawsuit filed to the Constitutional Court. The allegations were that his father-in-law Obar Sobarna, who headed the regional government

**Table 6.** Background of Independent Candidate and Vice-Candidate in 2015, 2017, and 2018 Pilkada.

| Background                      | Independent candidate |    | Winning independent candidate |     | Success rate (%) |       | Independent vice-candidate |  | Winning independent vice-candidate |  | Success rate (%) |  | Occupation (%) |  |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------|----|-------------------------------|-----|------------------|-------|----------------------------|--|------------------------------------|--|------------------|--|----------------|--|
|                                 |                       |    |                               |     |                  |       |                            |  |                                    |  |                  |  |                |  |
| Civil servant (active/retired)  | 72                    | 4  | 5.56                          | 67  | 7                | 10.45 | 24.91                      |  |                                    |  |                  |  |                |  |
| Figures from the private sector | 57                    | 1  | 1.75                          | 104 | 5                | 4.81  | 19.72                      |  |                                    |  |                  |  |                |  |
| Wealthy entrepreneur            | 57                    | 4  | 7.02                          | 49  | 3                | 6.12  | 19.72                      |  |                                    |  |                  |  |                |  |
| Local legislator (DPRD)         | 35                    | 5  | 14.29                         | 14  | 2                | 14.29 | 12.11                      |  |                                    |  |                  |  |                |  |
| Regent/Mayor/Governor           | 24                    | 4  | 16.67                         | 6   | 1                | 16.67 | 8.30                       |  |                                    |  |                  |  |                |  |
| Retiree                         | 10                    | 0  | 0.00                          | 5   | 1                | 20.00 | 3.46                       |  |                                    |  |                  |  |                |  |
| Advocate                        | 4                     | 0  | 0.00                          | 5   | 0                | 0.00  | 1.38                       |  |                                    |  |                  |  |                |  |
| TNI/Police                      | 5                     | 0  | 0.00                          | 3   | 0                | 0.00  | 1.73                       |  |                                    |  |                  |  |                |  |
| Religious leader                | 3                     | 0  | 0.00                          | 6   | 0                | 0.00  | 1.04                       |  |                                    |  |                  |  |                |  |
| National legislator (DPR)       | 1                     | 1  | 100.00                        | 1   | 0                | 0.00  | 0.35                       |  |                                    |  |                  |  |                |  |
| Others                          | 10                    | 0  | 0.00                          | 18  | 0                | 0.00  | 3.47                       |  |                                    |  |                  |  |                |  |
| Unknown                         | 11                    | 0  | 0.00                          | 11  | 0                | 0.00  | 3.81                       |  |                                    |  |                  |  |                |  |
| Total/average                   | 289                   | 19 | 24.22                         | 289 | 19               | 12.06 | 100.00                     |  |                                    |  |                  |  |                |  |

Note: DPR, Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat; DPRD, Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah; TNI, Tentara Nasional Indonesia; KPU, Komisi Pemilihan Umum.  
Source: Indonesia's General Election Commission (KPU), compiled by authors.



**Figure 1.** Typology of Independents in Indonesia.

then, had distributed incentives to local community leaders to campaign for Dadang Naser (Hakim, 2010). In addition, independents such as the former Regent of Batubara OK Arya Zulkarnain and Kutai Kartanegara Rita Widyasari were subsequently convicted and implicated in corruption scandals (Aji, 2018; Simatupang, 2018).

The above shows that there is little to no linkage between independents and the popular characterisation that independents are more genuine and ready to serve the community than party candidates, and thereby provide genuine alternatives to a poorly functioning party system. In Indonesia, independents are seen by the public to be “cleaner” because they are political outsiders who challenge the established party elites (Nugroho and Syarief, 2012; Tomsa and Setijadi, 2018). Popularly, independents are referred to as a breath of fresh air (*udara segar*). They are perceived to be more trustworthy, selfless, and genuine about service to the community. However, our investigation shows that there is a clear disjoint between popular perceptions and the backgrounds of many independents.

In order to better understand the power resources and motivations of independents running in the 2015, 2017, and 2018 Pilkada, we conducted structured open-source searches of each pair of independents. We classified the independents in Indonesia into three categories: *partisan independents*, *non-partisan independents*, and *underdog independents* (Figure 1). To classify independents on our list, we looked at their affiliation to political parties, brand recognition (a candidate’s visibility to the public, accomplishments, and charisma), and socio-economic capital (financial resources and organisational networks).

We performed background checks to find information on their wealth and social networks/affiliations, separating independents with significant socioeconomic capital as well as those without. We then looked for signs of strong party affiliation – meaning that they were political party members with leadership positions and/or tried to register as party candidates before running as independents. At the same time, we looked for people belonging to the political establishment, which includes incumbent politicians from either the legislative or executive branch and senior bureaucrats. Based on these checks, we categorised individuals with significant socio-economic capital, strong party

**Table 7.** Numbers of Partisan, Non-Partisan, and Underdog Independents in 2015, 2017, and 2018 Pilkada.

| Typology                          | Pilkada |      |      | Total |
|-----------------------------------|---------|------|------|-------|
|                                   | 2015    | 2017 | 2018 |       |
| Partisan independents             | 44      | 36   | 53   | 133   |
| Winning partisan independents     | 10      | 1    | 3    | 14    |
| Success rate (%)                  | 22.73   | 2.78 | 5.66 | 10.53 |
| Non-partisan independents         | 56      | 23   | 20   | 99    |
| Winning non-partisan independents | 3       | 2    | 0    | 5     |
| Success rate (%)                  | 5.36    | 8.70 | 0.00 | 5.05  |
| Underdog independents             | 38      | 10   | 9    | 57    |
| Winning underdog independents     | 0       | 0    | 0    | 0     |
| Success rate (%)                  | 0.00    | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00  |

Note: KPU, Komisi Pemilihan Umum.

Source: General Election Commission (KPU) and open-data source, compiled by authors.

affiliation, and/or members of the political establishment as *partisan independents*. Individuals with no strong party affiliation, and who did not attempt to secure party nominations but possess significant socio-economic capital and brand recognition due to their past organisational work or other governing track record, are classified as *non-partisan independents*. Finally, independents with no clear governing track record, no party affiliation, who are not part of the political establishment, and have limited socio-economic capital are classified as *underdog independents*.

As shown in Table 7, partisan independents constitute the majority of independents in our data set. Out of 289 independents, 133 are partisan, 99 are non-partisan, and 57 are underdog independents. The data suggest that the independent candidacy route is predominantly utilised by political insiders and individuals with extensive socio-economic capital. The data also demonstrate that partisan and non-partisan independents enjoy higher rates of success in Pilkada, while there were no winning underdog independents. In the next section we investigate and account for the differences in success rates of the three types of independents and what they mean for political inequality in Indonesia.

### Key Findings: Analysing Why Independent Candidacy Failed to Alleviate Political Inequality

Independent candidacy has not alleviated political inequality in Indonesia because the independents best able translate their candidacy into electoral success tend to be existing political players. Successful independents tend to possess strong affiliations to political parties, track records in government, or strong personal social and economic capital. These qualities enable independents to compensate for the disadvantage of running

without party support. However, this implies that instead of providing an alternative channel for political outsiders, independent candidacy has largely benefited political insiders.

A majority of independents in our data set comprises individuals who are party members but made a calculated decision to run as independents because they failed to or prefer not to secure a party nomination. They possess significant resources, brand recognition, and networks of their own, which allow them to compensate for the lack of a party organisation and branding. Additionally, as they are usually political insiders, closely affiliated to political parties, and have high electability, parties sometimes choose to bandwagon with them and campaign on their behalf.

Partisan independents run as independents mainly for reasons of expediency, meaning that the independent route benefits or aligns with their political strategy. First, partisan candidates already possess strong brand recognition and incumbent advantage. Running as independents allows them to avoid the complex political dealings needed to secure party nomination. For instance, in the 2015 Rembang Regency elections, H. Abdul Hafidz ran as an independent despite being a cadre of the United Development Party (Partai Persatuan Pembangunan, PPP), because he was unable to cobble together enough party support to secure his nomination. Yet he enjoyed strong brand recognition as an incumbent, had previously served in the Regency's House of Representatives (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah) as a PPP politician, and was seen as a popular and incorrupt figure (Widiptya and Soedarto, 2017). To bolster the profile and financial resources of his campaign, he picked Bayu Andriyanto, a photogenic local businessman and politician from the Nasdem party, who was also the founder of the Rembang Foundation of Children Development (Yayasan Pendidikan Bina Anak Sholeh Rembang), to be his vice-regent candidate. The pair leveraged on their strong electoral profile to run as independents, which easily swept them to a convincing victory (68.53 per cent or 237,634 votes).

Second, partisan candidates are motivated by the electoral advantages of running as an independent. Specifically, the independent route is more economical because there is no need for the candidate to pay hefty political dowries to secure party nominations. Existing electoral regulations require candidate pairs to be nominated by a party or coalition of parties with 20 per cent of the number of the seats in the regional legislature. This regulation has been exploited by political parties in Indonesia (not all parties) to auction off nominations to the highest bidder. For instance, in the 2015 Gowa Regency election in South Sulawesi, a candidate pair had to buy a minimum of nine seats (20 per cent of forty-five seats) at a rate of 500 million rupiah per seat to secure a party nomination (Thaha and Haryanto, 2017). This translates to a minimum of 4.5 billion rupiah for a party nomination (USD 0.32 million). Independents can avoid such outlays. At the same time, independents have a distinct advantage over party candidates, because they benefit from a longer campaigning period beginning from the process of collecting photocopies of residents' identity cards (KTPs) to meet nomination requirements.

Third, partisan candidates with strong party affiliations and/or high electability may still obtain party support if parties choose to bandwagon with a winning candidate rather

than to nominate a less popular candidate with little prospects of victory. For instance, incumbent Regent Naser (Chairman of the Golkar Party Bandung Regency Regional Leadership Board) and Vice-Regent Gunawan (a cadre of Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, PKS) received the unofficial endorsement of Golkar, PKS, and Gerindra (Great Indonesia Movement Party) in the 2015 Bandung Regency elections. Similarly, although Abdul Hafidz and Bayu Andriyanto (introduced earlier) was running as an independent, they were party members of PPP and Nasdem, respectively. As a result, the two parties mobilised the party machinery on their behalf (Widiptya and Soedarto, 2017).

Generally, we found that partisan independents are better able to translate their candidacy into electoral success – 74 per cent (14/19) of independent victories in our data set were won by partisan independents. Table 8 clearly shows that most partisan candidates winning Pilkada are political insiders and have profiles indistinguishable from party candidates. The profiles of the winning partisan candidates demonstrate that they tend to enjoy significant popularity, especially those with strong governing records. It reflects that Indonesian voters make use of a politician's overall reputation and brand recognition of a candidate as a mental shortcut to find candidates with a strong governing record and able to deliver on their promises. In that regard, it is highly unlikely that rank political outsiders would be able to build up such a reputation, which is also why most of the winning partisan candidates are established political figures with a strong profile.

The typical profile of a winning partisan independent in Indonesia's Pilkada is that of individuals who enjoy strong socio-economic capital, strong party affiliations, and used a legislative career as a launchpad to executive office. Besides H. Abdul Hafidz (whom we encountered above), Neni Moerniaeni's career in Bontang City, East Kalimantan, is also illustrative. Moerniaeni started her career as a public doctor in a local hospital, launched popular reforms to expand free healthcare access to the needy, and later joined the local legislature and became the chairman of the Bontang City DPRD (2004–2014). She was elected as a member of the national legislature (2014–2019) as a Golkar politician for East Kalimantan, which meant that she had already built a strong voter base. Although she was focused on her DPR work, she was repeatedly urged by residents to run as mayor. However, nine political parties in Bontang City had already agreed to support incumbent Mayor Adi Dharma. As a result, she had to run as an independent. Her running mate Basri Base was another local notable – a member of the Bontang City DPRD (2014–2019) and also the chairman of the Hanura Party (People's Conscience Party) branch. The pair received overwhelming support, collecting 24,000 identity cards (15.31 per cent of the total voter list), far in excess of the nomination threshold. Ultimately, Neni convincingly trounced her opponent with 55.85 per cent of the votes.

The second category of independents constitutes what we refer to as *non-partisan independents* (Table 9). Non-partisan independents are non-party candidates who run as independents because they do not want to be associated with any political party, but possess significant resources, brand recognition, and networks (party and non-party affiliations) of their own to stand a reasonable shot of winning the election. Although they are not part of any party, they enjoy tremendous socio-economic capital and goodwill because of their past organisational work or governing track record (such as a senior

**Table 8.** List of Winning Partisan Candidates.

| Region/Election year                               | Strong governing record-mayors, regents, bureaucrats  | Candidate background  | Vice-candidate background |
|--|---|---|---------------------------|
| Bandung Regency, West Java/2015                    | H. Dadang M. Naser<br>Incumbent regent (2009–2014)<br>Chairman of the Golkar Party Bandung<br>Regency DPD                     | H. Gun Gun Gunawan<br>Member of Bandung Regency DPRD (2009–2014)<br>PKS politician  |                           |
| Rembang Regency, Central Java/2015                 | H. Abdul Hafidz<br>Acting regent (2013–2015)<br>Elected as vice-regent<br>PPP politician in the local DPRD for three terms    | Bayu Andriyanto<br>Nasdem politician<br>Son-in-law of prominent local businessman<br>Founder of Rembang Foundation of Children<br>Development |                           |
| Kutai Kartanegara Regency,<br>East Kalimantan/2015 | Rita Widyasari<br>Incumbent Regent (2010–2015)<br>Golkar politician and chairman of the Kutai<br>Kartanegara DPRD (2009–2010) | Drs. Edi Damansyah<br>Regional secretary  |                           |
| Tomohon City, North Sulawesi/2015                  | Jimmy Feidie Eman<br>Incumbent Mayor<br>Chairman of Golkar Party Tomohon City<br>Leadership Board                             | Syerly Adelyn Sompotan<br>Private   |                           |
| Rejang Lebong Regency, Bengkulu/2015               | Ahmad Hijazi<br>Ex-regent (2000–2005)<br>Golkar politician  | Iqbal Bastari<br>Ex-vice regent (2005–2010)   |                           |
| Strong party affiliations and legislative record   |   |   |                           |
| Bontang City, East Kalimantan/2015                 | Neni Moerniaeni<br>DPR politician (2014–2019)<br>Chairman of Bontang City DPRD (2009–2014)                                    | Basri Base<br>Bontang City DPRD (2015–2019)<br>Chairman of Hanura Party Bontang City<br>Leadership Board                                      |                           |

(Continued)



**Table 8.** Continued

| Strong governing record-mayors, regents, bureaucrats |   | Candidate background | Vice-candidate background  |
|--|---|----------------------|--|
| Region/Election year                                 |   |                      |  |
| Ketapang Regency, West Kalimantan/2015               | Martin Rantan<br>Chairman of the Golkar Party Ketapang Leadership Board   |                      | Drs. S. Suprpto<br>Retiree   |
| Gowa Regency, South Sulawesi/2015                    | Three-time DPRD politician<br>Adnan Purichta Ichsan<br>Member of South Sulawesi DPRD (2009–2015)<br>Son of ex-regent Ichsan Yasin Limpo (2005–2015) |                      | H. Abdul Rauf Mallaganni<br>Civil servant                                |
| Tanjung Balai City, North Sumatra/2015               | M. Syahrrial<br>Golkar politician and chairman of the Tanjung Balai City DPRD in 2014   |                      | H. Ismail<br>Civil servant   |
| Banjarbaru City, South Kalimantan/2015               | H. Nadjmi Adhani<br>Golkar cadre  |                      | Darmawan Jaya Setiawan<br>PPP cadre<br>Entrepreneur in the coal industry |
| Boalemo Regency, Gorontalo/2017                      | Darwis Moridu<br>Entrepreneur with a strong PDIP connection<br>His wife Rensi Makuta and son Wahyudin Mordiu joined the DPRD on PDIP nominations.   |                      | H. Anas Jusuf<br>PAN cadre   |
| Deiyai Regency, Papua/2018                           | Ateng Edowai<br>PBB politician and vice-chairman of Deiyai DPRD   |                      | Hengky Pigai<br>Private  |
| Padang Sidempuan City, North Sumatra/2018            | Irsan Efendi Nasution<br>Golkar politician and member of Padang Sidempuan City DPRD (2014–2018)   |                      | Arwin Siregar<br>Civil servant   |

(Continued)

**Table 8.** Continued

| Strong governing record-mayors, regents, bureaucrats |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| Region/Election year                                 | Candidate background  | Vice-candidate background   |
| Sikka Regency, East Nusa Tenggara/2018               | Fransiskus Roberto Diogo<br>Closely affiliated to Golkar and PAN<br>Former sub-district head of Nelle | Romanus Woga<br>Former chairman of the Indonesian Credit Union National Office (Kantor Induk Koperasi Kredit Indonesia) |

Note: DPR, Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat; DPRD, Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah; DPD, Dewan Perwakilan Daerah; KPU, Komisi Pemilihan Umum; PKS, Partai Keadilan Sejahtera; PPP, Partai Persatuan Pembangunan; PAN, Partai Amanat Nasional; PBB, Partai Bulan Bintang.  
Source: General Election Commission (KPU) and open-data source, compiled by authors.

**Table 9.** List of Winning Non-Partisan Independents.

| Region/Election year                         | Candidate background  | Vice-candidate background  |
|--|---|--|
| Bukittinggi City, West Sumatera/2015         | M. Ramlan Nurmatias (Datuk Nan Basa)<br>Wealthy entrepreneur<br>Chairman of Regional Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KADIN)<br>Advisory Board of Regional Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals Association (ICMI)<br>Closely connected to Golkar and PDI-P | Irwandi (Datuk Batujuah)<br>Retired civil servant<br>Regional secretary of Payakumbuh City (2009–2013)<br>Head of Bukittinggi Development Planning Board (2007–2009) |
| Sabu Raijua Regency, East Nusa Tenggara/2015 | Ir. Marthen L. Dira Tome<br>Incumbent regent (2011–2016)<br>Bureaucrat-head of programme in the NTT Provincial Government.<br>Two-time independent winner, also won as an independent in 2011   | Drs. Nikodemus N. Rihl Heke<br>Incumbent vice-regent (2011–2016)   |
| Supiori Regency, Papua/2015                  | Jules F. Warikar<br>Acting regent 2004–2005<br>Regent 2005–2010<br>Assistant I to regional secretary 2001–2004  | Onesias Rumere<br>Acting regional secretary 2010–2011 and Acting regent 2010   |
| Sarmi Regency, Papua/2017                    | Eduard Fonataba<br>Ex-regent (2005–2010)<br>Vice-chairman of Unit for Acceleration of Development in Papua and West Papua (2012)  | Yosina T. Insyaf<br>Regional secretariat and head of General Subsection/<br>Agricultural Department Programme (2015)   |
| Pidie Regency, Aceh/2017                     | Roni Ahmad<br>Former deputy commander of GAM Pidie 2002–2005<br>Chairman of Aceh Transitional Committee 2010–2016   | Fadhilullah T.M. Daud<br>Co-ordinator of Programme Keluarga Harapan for Aceh, NTB, and NTT 2008–2009<br>DPR Expert Staff 2013  |

Note: KADIN, Kamar Dagang dan Industri Indonesia; ICMI, Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim Indonesia; Golkar, Golongan Karya; PDI-P, Partai Demokrasi Indonesia-Perjuangan; NTT, Nusa Tenggara Timur; GAM, Gerakan Aceh Merdeka; NTB, Nusa Tenggara Barat; DPR, Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat; KPU, Komisi Pemilihan Umum.

Source: General Election Commission (KPU) and open-data source, compiled by authors.

bureaucrat), which means that they can also significantly offset the disadvantage of running without a party vehicle. Non-partisan independents run as independents for various reasons, but they are certainly well-positioned to join a political party and run as a party candidate or a partisan independent.

Non-partisan independents that leverage a successful bureaucratic career to enter politics have a good shot at demonstrating the necessary track record to win elections. Of the nineteen winning independents in 2015, 2017, and 2018, non-partisan independents won 5/19 (26 per cent).<sup>3</sup> For instance, in the Sabu Raijua Regency of East Nusa Tenggara, Dira Tome and Nikodemus won a convincing victory of 59.26 per cent of the votes (23,912 votes) as incumbent regent and vice-regent, defeating their party candidate opponents. The pair won as independents twice, in 2010 and 2015, with both having successful bureaucratic careers. Dira Tome had a background in provincial administration, well-known among locals for the successful implementation of a skills programme known as “Extra-Curricular Education” (Pendidikan Luar Sekolah, PLS). PLS was tremendously popular because it was designed for adults to obtain various employable skills with limited access to formal education. At the same time, vice-candidate Nikodemus was the acting regent in 2009 and had helmed various provincial departments. During their first term of office, Dira Tome-Nikodemus was credited with working tirelessly to improve the conditions of the ordinary people in the regency. Such a strong governing track record gave the pair very high electability and credibility, which led to both Nasdem and Gerindra supporting their candidacy. As a clear sign of their non-partisanship, the pair campaigned as independents on a platform of returning sovereignty to the people by allowing voters to decide on their leaders without the intervention of political parties.

While non-partisan and partisan independents differ in terms of their willingness to cultivate and leverage on party affiliation to support their candidacy, the third category of independents constitute a minority and are genuine political outsiders with no connections to the political and business elite. They have limited local profiles and possess private resources and personal networks, but are usually unable to secure a party nomination because of their platforms (e.g. anti-party platforms) and generally have low electability. Nonetheless, they run as independents because they want to campaign for certain socio-political causes and local issues. We refer to these candidates as *underdog independents*. Underdog independents constitute a minority because their pathways to power are deeply frustrated by structural barriers. They do not possess the resources or networks to compensate for the lack of a party vehicle, although they may be able to mobilise volunteers and existing organisations to support their efforts. From fifty-seven pairs of underdog independents, we selected three cases for illustration (Table 10).

Why do candidates with such limited financial and organisational resources run for political office as independents even though they are unlikely to win? Candidate activism plays a key role. In 2015, Muhammad Yunus and Ahmad Muslimin ran as underdog independents in the city of Bandar Lampung in Lampung Province. Yunus is an advocate and director of the Lampung Anti-Corruption Coalition, a civil society organisation established in 1999 to fight corruption in Lampung Province. In 2013, the Coalition led

**Table 10.** List of Underdog Independents.

| Region/Election year  | Candidate background  | Vice-candidate background  |
|---|---|--|
| Penukal Abab Lematang Ilir Regency, South Sumatera/2015 (2.07%) | Sukarman<br>Entrepreneur/small-scale business owner<br>Honorary teacher<br>Chairman of the local Indonesian Archer Association                    | Almarizan<br>Entrepreneur/Small-scale business owner   |
| Bandar Lampung City, Lampung/2015 (1.99%)                       | Muhammad Yunus<br>Advocate and director of the Lampung Anti-Corruption Coalition<br>Lawyer and managing partner at Yunus and Mitra Bandar Lampung | Ahmad Muslimin<br>Agate businessman<br>Manager of the Bureau of Organisation/Administration in the Lampung Democratic People Party<br>Chairman of the Indonesia Poor People Union (Lampung branch) |
| Nagekeo Regency, East Nusa Tenggara/2018 (3.9%)                 | Paskalis MB Ledo Bude<br>Private<br>Lecturer of Aksema Dharma Budhi Bakti Jakarta   | Oskarianus Meta<br>Founder of Peilihara CSO for literacy   |

Note: KPU, Komisi Pemilihan Umum; CSO, Civil Society Organisation.

Source: General Election Commission (KPU) and open-data source, compiled by authors.

by Yunus spearheaded a campaign against the inefficient usage of central government funds earmarked for schools (Dana Bantuan Operasional Sekolah, Dana BOS) to tackle educational inequality arising from high school fees. Yunus built on his advocacy efforts to run for mayorship as an independent on an anti-establishment platform, critiquing individuals who misuse their power to silence public discussion of wrongdoings *Republika* (2015). His running mate, Ahmad Muslimin, was an agate businessman with organisational experience, serving as the chairman of the Lampung branch of the Indonesia Poor People Union. Although Yunus received the support of other activists in the city, the independents did not have sufficient brand recognition. A survey conducted six months prior to the election showed that Yunus had a name recognition rate of only 34.3 per cent, compared to incumbent Partai Demokrasi Indonesia-Perjuangan Mayor Herman HN at 78.2 per cent, as well as an acceptability rate of 7.2 per cent versus Herman's 29.3 per cent (Putra, 2015).

Similarly, in the 2018 Pilkada in Nagekeo Regency, East Nusa Tenggara, an independent pair Paskalis Ledo and Oskarianus Meta ran on a reformist platform. Paskalis is a lecturer at the Aksema Dharma Budhi Bakti Jakarta, while Oskarianus is the founder of Pelihara, a civil society organisation for literacy. They do not possess political party affiliation, although Paskalis is acquainted with current Minister of Communications and Information Technology Johnny Plate from Nasdem. Nonetheless, neither of the candidates are prominent locally. Although they campaigned on a platform of reforming the corrupt bureaucracy and revitalising the education system in Nagekeo, the pair was only able to gain about 3.9 per cent of the vote share.

Not all underdog independents are activists and advocates campaigning on social and political causes, although they are among the most interesting individuals. More commonly, underdog independents do not come from activist backgrounds. They tend to be small-time entrepreneurs or work in the private sector, lacking resources, networks, and brand recognition. For instance, in Penukal Abab Lematang Ilir Regency, South Sumatra, independent pair Sukarman and Almarizan were small-business owners in the region. Sukarman previously worked in a junior high school (Sekolah Menengah Pertama, SMP) as an honorary teacher and chaired the local Indonesian Archer Association. The pair ran the campaign on a relatively modest budget of around 2.5 billion IDR (USD 178,700), and because of their modest profile and financial resources they obtained only around 2 per cent of the vote share. Eftiyani, another independent in the same regency, secured about 22 per cent of the vote due to her higher profile and visibility as the ex-chairwoman of the Palembang KPU.

Underdog independents appear to best fit popular media portrayals of genuine political outsiders and activists wanting to reform the government and serve the community, but, due to their lack of organisational and financial resources, they also have the lowest electability among the three categories of independents. We argue that it is not that Indonesian voters find activism unappealing, but it has to be backed first by a convincingly strong profile and a solid track record. As a result, it is often a candidate combining both a strong profile and the ability to sell fresh ideas who is more successful. M. Syahril, who we discussed at the beginning of the article, proved to be tremendously

popular precisely because of his organisational work experience and his ability to present a fresh youthful image to the voters of Tanjung Balai. Underdog independents with neither resources nor networks face uphill challenges in organising campaign teams and increasing their visibility and electability. As a result, based on our analysis of the 2015, 2017, and 2018 Pilkada, underdog independents have not won a single election.

## Conclusion

To make sense of the diversity of independents in Indonesia, we developed a typology to segment independents based on two axes: (1) their available power resources (i.e. as political insiders or outsiders), and (2) their motivations (i.e. pragmatism or activism). We explored a range of possibilities that account for why candidates possessing different levels of power resources have different motivations for competing in Pilkada through the independent track. We showed that *partisan independents* are political insiders and enjoy strong party affiliations. They made a calculated decision to run as independents because they failed to or prefer not to secure a party nomination. Possessing significant resources, brand recognition, and networks of their own, they can compensate for the lack of a party organisation and branding. At the same time, they can avoid the political bargaining associated with party nominations. Nonetheless, due to their close links to parties and high electability, parties sometimes choose to bandwagon with and campaign for them. For partisan candidates, independent candidacy is merely a different route to securing a nomination.

At times, local notables possessing significant governing experience (such as a senior bureaucrat) or are well-known due to past achievements (such as a former commander of the Free Aceh Movement, GAM) avoid formal associations with political parties. These *non-partisan independents* position themselves as politically unaffiliated or neutral either because they are confident of offsetting the lack of party support or to offer voters a genuine non-party alternative. Finally, *underdog independents* are political outsiders with no connections to the political and business elite and have limited resources, networks, and no possibility of securing a party nomination. They run to highlight important socio-political and local causes, but they have not been able to find electoral success due to both formal and informal barriers to entry, which constitutes a tremendous loss of democratic representation for voters. We find that this framework is very useful in helping us make sense of independent candidacy in Indonesia, with potential applications in other contexts.

At this juncture, we also want to address a hitherto unexplored possibility – that some independents running for political office in Indonesia are actually “puppet candidates” (*calon boneka*). This Indonesian phenomenon is a common accusation directed at some political candidates (either party nominees or independents) – that they are only running for political office to give the appearance of political competition (Mietzner, 2015). There are three main motives for electoral forerunners to find puppet candidates. First, an old regulation by Indonesia’s Electoral Commission prohibits a candidate pair from being elected in an uncontested election. Therefore, a puppet candidate circumvents this

regulation. However, a new ruling from the Constitutional Court in 2015 now permits uncontested elections, but the candidate pair must win more than 50 per cent of the votes against an empty seat (*kursi kosong*) to be elected. Second, under the new system, an electoral forerunner may still find it useful to recruit a puppet candidate, because he will only need to win a plurality against the puppet candidate, instead of a majority. Third, in close electoral fights, a puppet candidate can potentially dilute vote share and help secure victory for another candidate.

Nonetheless, it is very difficult to prove whether any independents in our data set are puppet candidates. Additionally, as pointed out above, independents face onerous requirements. A puppet candidate will face similar challenges in collecting the required numbers of identity cards photocopies, as compared to the relative ease of obtaining a nomination letter from a political party (Buehler, 2010). We examined an election in Mojokerto Regency to highlight our point. Misnan Gatot, an independent running for the 2015 Mojokerto Regency election, was accused of being a puppet candidate for the incumbent regent Mustofa Kamal Pasa due to his close ties with the incumbent's father (Ishomuddin, 2015a). However, he was a party cadre (i.e. long political service) affiliated to a major Islamic organisation, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), and a well-respected entrepreneur in the agricultural sector. Thus, he was supported by farmers and NU members to run as independent (Ishomuddin, 2015b). Furthermore, there were three candidate pairs when registration closed, so it makes no sense to argue that Misnan was running to help the incumbent avoid an uncontested election. Nonetheless, we hope that this exploration can benefit other researchers who can find parallels in their own countries, and highlight a potential avenue for future research.

Our research found that independents are structurally disadvantaged as compared to party candidates. The data from 2015, 2017, and 2018 show that party candidates are six times more likely than an independent to win. Formal barriers to entry include the fact that independents face onerous nomination requirements, which require significant personal resources and networks to surmount. Informally, the lack of a ready-made party machinery to support campaign efforts is a significant impediment to independents' electoral success. The presence of these barriers explains why partisan independents and non-partisan independents have found electoral success while utilising the independent route, because these individuals possess resources to compensate for these disadvantages. Additionally, the plight of underdog independents shows that party affiliation, socio-economic capital, and governing experience are the most important predictors of electoral success in Indonesia. As a result, successful independents are largely political insiders. This means that independent candidacy has failed to alleviate unequal access to political office and increase democratic representation in Indonesia.

Our study on independents highlights several important observations regarding the health of the party system and democracy in Indonesia. First, our study indicates that political parties' abuse of election laws to seek political dowries for party nominations has serious consequences for access to political office. Even partisan independents, political insiders with socio-economic capital, prefer to avoid having to pay huge sums and cobble together a coalition of parties needed to obtain the minimum threshold for party



nominations. Like local bosses in Russia prior to the 2005 switch to appointed rather than elected governors, partisan independents can run and win solely based on the strength of their profile and socio-economic capital. Second, non-partisan independents highlight that local notables position themselves as politically unaffiliated to capture votes from voters disillusioned with party candidates and party politics, as studies in Europe and the United States have shown.

Third, underdog independents underscore that some candidates are motivated to run for socio-political and local causes, just like in Ireland. While underdog independents underscore why an independent nomination mechanism is needed for individuals without socio-economic capital to run, underdog independents are not very effective in the Indonesian context. This is because the level of political inequality in Indonesia remains very high. The overwhelming importance of money politics and socio-economic capital in elections mean that underdogs (even if they are well-meaning policy entrepreneurs) face tremendous structural challenges. Unsurprisingly, our data show that there are no academics, members of civil society groups, or religious groups, who have won an election as an independent.

We assess that the independent candidacy will continue to be an important dimension of electoral competition moving forward in Indonesia. According to the latest data, about ninety-six independent pairs registered to compete for the upcoming Pilkada scheduled in December 2020 but only twenty-three of them were eligible to contest after passing the Electoral Commission's administrative verification process. This means that about 8.5 per cent of all contestable regions (270) for 2020 will have at least one pair of independents competing in their local election (Puspitasari, 2020). The main beneficiaries of such competition will likely be political insiders and those with strong socio-economic capital. This is because the flexibility of independent candidacy will remain a major advantage for these candidates.

The issues of democratic representation and political inequality has obvious salience in other countries and other contexts. After all, political equality is "a fundamental premise of democracy" (Dahl, 2006). First, our research proves that there is no reasonable basis to assume that independent candidacy can be a panacea for alleviating unequal access to political office in other parts of the world in itself. Second, we argue that independent candidacy is the metaphorical canary in a coal mine, where a high incidence of independent candidacy can suggest that the party system itself is dysfunctional. Finally, we end with a call to action – we stress that it is important for democratic countries all around the world to relook at how their electoral institutions can perpetuate unequal access to political office, because they can have major consequences for democratic representation.

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### Notes

1. The rest of the candidates participated in Pilkada through the party nomination route.
2. For a more comprehensive treatment, see Dubrow (2014, 2015).
3. Of the five non-partisan independents, one winner was a special case – he won an election versus a fellow independent, because the incumbent was disqualified for violating election rules.

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