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In 2017, a long, divisive campaign for the gubernatorial seat of Indonesia's capital city Jakarta ended with a victory for prejudice over pluralism.

The election saw an extraordinarily powerful campaign by Islamic groups to condemn the ethnic Chinese and Christian incumbent governor, Mr Basuki "Ahok" Tjahaja Purnama.

Ethnicity and religion often become politicised in elections. Research has found that this is particularly true during a transition to democracy.

During these times, fragile democratic rules and practices, coupled with strong ethnic bonds, often motivate aspiring politicians to bolster their support by appealing to voters' emotional allegiances to their tribe, ethnicity, or religion.

But, Indonesia's case is puzzling.

After three decades of authoritarian rule, Indonesia's transition to democracy in 1999 was rapid and violent, triggered by a severe economic crisis, mass demonstrations and riots.

Despite the turbulence of this period, my research shows that appeals to ethnic and religious groups actually declined during the 1999 election campaign.

But the research also shows that this pattern changed in the 2009 election campaigns, as candidates began to mobilise the support of local ethnic, religious, and community groups — 10 years after Indonesia's transition.

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Indeed, the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial race took place nearly two decades since Indonesia's democratic transition.

So, why have Indonesian politicians increasingly invoked ethnicity and religion in recent years?

In studying why Indonesian candidates politicise ethnicity and religion, I found that legislative electoral reforms instituted in 2009, which allow candidates to win seats based on their individual votes, have played a key role in the rise of ethnic and religious politics.

ELECTORAL REFORM

Before 2009, Indonesia used a closed-list proportional representation (PR) system.

Parties put forward a ranked list of candidates for each multi-member district. Constituents then voted for parties, not individuals.

Parties awarded any seats they won to their candidates according to their ranking, beginning at the top of their list.

In the 2009 election, the candidate lists were changed from closed to fully open. This change was ultimately the result of a December 2008 Constitutional Court ruling.

It was supported by non-governmental organisations and media commentators whose aim was to reduce the power of the elites who controlled Indonesia's political parties.

It meant that people could now vote for individual candidates, and parties had to allocate their seats to their candidates who obtained the highest number of votes.

This change has had a dramatic impact on how candidates campaign.

ELECTION CAMPAIGNS

To understand the impact of this rule change on campaigns, I studied hundreds of election newspaper reports published from 1997 to 2004, and compared them with reports from 2009 to 2014.

These reports were drawn from Waspada, a prominent regional newspaper that serves the diverse province of North Sumatra in Indonesia. Each report was coded for references to the types of campaign events held, endorsements, and any explicit appeals to particular groups.

Findings from pre-2009 election reports show that candidates campaigned primarily at large party rallies alongside party leaders and other candidates.

The candidates sought endorsements from regional and national party leaders and made verbal appeals to the party faithful.

Due to the closed-list PR system, candidates were primarily concerned with winning votes for their party and with where they were ranked on the candidate list.

To appease party leaders who controlled the candidate list and help the party get votes, candidates needed to emphasise their loyal connection to their party and campaign on the party's platform and quality of leadership.

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Therefore, campaigns were heavily party-centric.

Since 2009, because constituents can now vote for particular candidates, voters have taken a greater interest in who these candidates are.

To win personal votes, candidates changed tactics. Instead of appeasing party leaders, they began to focus more on voting constituencies — particularly local ethnic, religious, and community groups.

This should not be surprising, as these groups form the fabric of Indonesian society.

Evidence from the news reports reflects this change.

Since 2009, candidates have increasingly attended smaller ethnic, religious, and community groups' campaign events rather than large party rallies.

They have campaigned with local leaders rather than party leaders, crafted more ethnic and religious appeals, and switched the focus of their messages from party platforms to their traits, experience, and service.

Overall, legislative elections have become more candidate-centric.

From these findings, one might expect that Indonesian candidates appeal only to their own ethnic or religious groups and seek to dominate other out-groups.

This, however, is not the case.

I found that candidate messages were largely positive and that candidates avoided negative appeals or strategies that alienated other ethnic or religious groups.

Moreover, in diverse districts, it was common for candidates to visit, appeal to, and receive endorsements from ethnic and religious groups to which they did not belong.

On the whole, candidate-centric rules have, if anything, strengthened the personal connections between voters and their representatives: Indonesians are provided with more information about candidates now and have more time to engage with them.

THE 2020 REGIONAL ELECTIONS

Although my study focused on Indonesia's legislative elections, there is a strong parallel between the findings in legislative elections since 2009 and regional head elections, which are even more candidate-centric.

In the regional head elections, engaging with local ethnic, religious, and community groups through small events, endorsements, and appeals has been very prevalent.

However, the upcoming 2020 regional head election campaigns will be quite different due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

First and foremost, the in-person campaign events discussed above will be restricted, so new candidates will have fewer opportunities for face-to-face meetings with ethnic, religious, and community groups, giving an advantage to incumbents.

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However, since such events have long been a central part of campaigns, we can expect some violations of this restriction.

The registration phase in early September already saw hundreds of violations of health protocols.

Second, candidates will more intensively use other media — such as poster campaigns, the regional press, radio, social media, and teleconferencing — to connect with voters.

Research in the United States has found that political media content can inform and mobilise voters who are motivated to seek out political information.

However, it will have less impact on those who are not so interested in politics.

Overall, highly media-driven campaigns tend to have more limited effects on political knowledge and political participation than we might think. Some evidence suggests they may even foster higher levels of political apathy.

Finally, the democratic nature of these elections will likely be undermined by lower voter turnout due to voters' health concerns.

For these reasons, we can expect an unusual campaign season.

In an environment that pushes candidates to innovate, well-known candidates who can effectively use traditional and digital media to mobilise their networks of support will have a better chance of success at the polls. THE CONVERSATION

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