

Power Relationships in Vote-Buying in Political Career Progression: A Rational Choice Theory Perspective

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Abstract

The term "vote-buying" is a phenomenon that is deeply ingrained in contemporary society, resonating even with individuals who may not be well-versed in politics. The prevalence of this phenomenon typically emphasizes the extent to which the practice has become pervasive, especially during election periods. Often viewed as a convenient and strategic means of securing votes, vote-buying serves as a shortcut for individuals or parties seeking to gain power. Therefore, this research aims to examine the phenomenon of vote-buying and selling in Indonesia from a political economy perspective while also exploring the rational choices made by voters in different circumstances, specifically during regional and national elections. In order to achieve the objectives, a literature review methodology was adopted and data was sourced from articles published in reputable national and international journals. The results showed that vote-buying in Indonesia was significantly influenced by economic disparities and limited educational attainment. In this context, voters tend to prioritize immediate financial benefits to address respective basic needs. For political candidates, this practice served as a calculated

strategy to gain support by exploiting the urgent economic challenges faced by the electorate. From a rational choice perspective, it was observed that voters often made decisions rooted in short-term economic considerations, rendering vote-buying a seemingly pragmatic choice in the context of both general and regional elections.

Keywords: *Vote-Buying; Politics; Elections*

Abstrak

Istilah jual beli suara sudah sangat akrab di telinga masyarakat, bahkan bagi masyarakat awam politik. Hal ini menunjukkan betapa mendarah dagingnya praktik jual beli suara, terutama pada saat pemilu. Jual beli suara masih dianggap sebagai jalan pintas untuk mendapatkan suara menuju kekuasaan. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui bagaimana fenomena jual beli suara di Indonesia ditinjau dari ekonomi politik serta bagaimana tindakan pilihan rasional pemilih dalam fenomena jual beli suara pada pemilihan kepala daerah/pemilu. Metode yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah studi literatur dengan perolehan data melalui artikel-artikel yang telah dipublikasikan di jurnal-jurnal nasional dan internasional bereputasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa fenomena jual beli suara di Indonesia dari perspektif ekonomi politik, dipicu oleh ketimpangan ekonomi dan rendahnya pendidikan, di mana pemilih memprioritaskan imbalan finansial untuk memenuhi kebutuhan hidup. Praktik ini menjadi strategi bagi kandidat politik untuk mengamankan dukungan dengan memanfaatkan kondisi ekonomi yang mendesak di masyarakat. Tindakan pilihan rasional pemilih didasarkan pada pertimbangan ekonomi jangka pendek, menjadikan jual beli suara sebagai keputusan logis dalam konteks pemilu dan pemilihan kepala daerah.

Kata kunci: Jual Beli Suara; Politik; Pemilihan Umum

INTRODUCTION

Political economy is defined as the analysis of political activities, which comprises the distribution of power in relation to economic sectors. This field views the economy as a framework for action, while politics serves as the arena in which the actions unfold (Aprianto & Edwin, 2017). A key approach in political economy is Rational Choice Theory (RCT), and from an economic perspective, rationality pertains to the act of selecting what is most beneficial. As succinctly stated, "Rationality, for economists, simply means that when you make a choice, you will select the thing you like best." According to previous research, a cornerstone of

economic analysis is RCT, which is built on the premise that humans are rational beings capable of deliberate consideration, decision-making, and purposeful action (Ura & Rima, 2022).

In Indonesia, the rational choice framework is frequently applied in the context of money politics, which has been observed to be a recurring phenomenon during democratic events such as general elections at both national and regional levels (Siregar & Maryanah, 2022). Typically, participation is considered a cornerstone of democracy, and this is because of the belief that citizens are the most competent judges of respective welfare (Firdaus, 2013).

Ideally, decisions about whom to support in elections should be based on objective criteria such as the vision, mission, and work program of a candidate, but money politics typically disrupts the integrity of electoral processes by offering financial or material inducements, undermining the objectivity of voters. This practice has also been observed to increase the inequalities in election campaigns, as financial power becomes a determining factor. As stated in previous research, large investors often dominate political contests because the costs of engaging in money politics are exorbitant, thereby automatically excluding candidates or political parties with limited financial resources and creating an uneven and unjust competitive landscape (Darma, 2022).

In contemporary contexts, digital media plays a very important role in communication, shaping economic, social, and political interactions. This influence extends to e-government adoption, where system quality is considered essential for public acceptance (Adhania & Nurdin, 2022; Iqbal & Fridayani, 2022; Madjid et al., 2024). Accordingly, effective public administration and collaborative management hinge on inter-agency cooperation and mutual accountability, underscoring the significance of the factors for policy success (Nurdin, 2022; Primastuti et al., 2023).

General elections are typically expected to serve as a fundamental expression of state sovereignty, embodying the principle of popular

sovereignty enshrined in Article 1 Paragraph 2 of the 1945 Constitution of Indonesia. This article, both before and after its amendment, asserts that "sovereignty is in the hands of the people and is exercised entirely by the Consultative Assembly of the People."

This principle underscores the essence of democracy, which is a governance system derived from the people, by the people, and for the people. In this context, democracy signifies a government rooted in the will of the people. Based on this elucidation, an inference can be made that the organization of government is typically expected to be a reflection of popular will, making it the cornerstone of democratic state administration. This connection underscores the intrinsic relationship between democracy and regional head elections and emphasizes the important role of the right possessed by the people to vote and participate in governance (Rowa & Si, 2015).

As elections draw nearer, candidates for regional head positions or legislative seats often make appealing promises to the electorate. Unfortunately, it is also common for certain candidates to distribute envelopes containing money or food parcels. These actions are what constitute money politics. As defined in a previous investigation, money politics is a corrupt practice that not only undermines the integrity of the democratic process but also fosters a broader culture of corruption (Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi, 2023). Despite

legal prohibitions, violations persist, with candidates engaging in money politics to secure electoral support, and this further erodes the principles of free and fair elections.

The concept of money politics, which is often equated with bribery, refers to the act of offering money, goods, or other incentives to persuade an individual to act or refrain from acting in line with the interests of the giver, even if the actions contravene the principles or legal obligations of the recipient (Riyanto, 2021).

The widespread use of money as a tool by candidates to securing public support has led to several detrimental outcomes. A significant outcome within this context is the having of not good voter behavior, where recipients feel obligated to reciprocate by voting for the candidates who provided financial incentives (Putra, 2017). This dynamic normally makes voters favoring candidates who engage in money politics above the ones who do not (Lampus et al., 2019). To further emphasize this point, research by Amrianto on the 2014 regional elections in Wakatobi Regency brought an economic dependency between the local community and the traditional elite. This dependency, which was observed to be typically sustained by the financial resources of the elites, pushed forward a lasting relationship between voters and candidates who have large economic capital (Rahmat, 2020).

Another research conducted by (Jati, 2022), looked at what money

politics, national economic conditions, and rational voting behavior have in common. The results showed that the factors were significantly important in the shape of political choices in Indonesia. According to the survey data from the 2014 and 2019 elections, Jati said the rational choice model as a framework that stands on external factors, such as the purpose and perceived benefits of an action. This model pretends that individuals that have sufficient information about candidates making calculated decisions to optimize personal advantages (Asmuni, 2020).

An investigation was further carried out by (Hawing & Hartaman, 2021) on money politics and democracy in Indonesia with the use of sociological, psychological, and rational choice approaches. The results mean that a strong relationship is there between the plenty happenings of money politics and its influence on voting preferences. The more larger the happenings of money politics, the more greater its impact on voter behavior during elections. In this type of context, RCT is a provision theory of valuable insights into the political economy strategies of candidates and the behavioral of voters. By applying the theory, understanding can be got on how voters rationalize respective actions in response to vote-buying practices during regional head elections or larger electoral contests. This research aims to dissect the rational decision-making processes of voters in the phenomenon of vote-buying, thereby providing valuable insights into

the intricate relationship between money politics and electoral behavior.

METHODS

This present investigation adopts a literature review methodology, specifically using PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analyses) model. This approach was selected primarily because it provides a structured framework for systematically identifying, evaluating, and interpreting all relevant research related to the research. Accordingly, the methodology follows key stages namely identification, screening, and the application of inclusion and exclusion criteria. The adoption of PRISMA 2020 also offers significant advantages for readers through its detailed reporting system, which enhances the evaluation of methodological rigor and improves the level of confidence in the results. The Scopus database was utilized for the research, selected for its global recognition and comprehensive coverage of scholarly articles. The search terms "vote-buying in Indonesia and Rational Choice Theory Election" were adopted, and 17 relevant articles were obtained, as listed below:

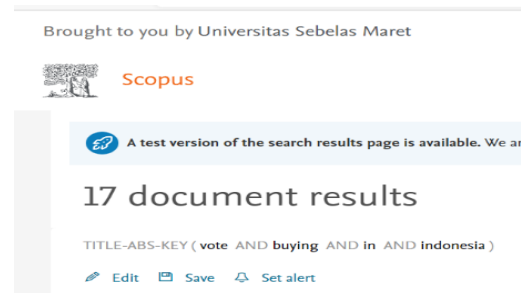
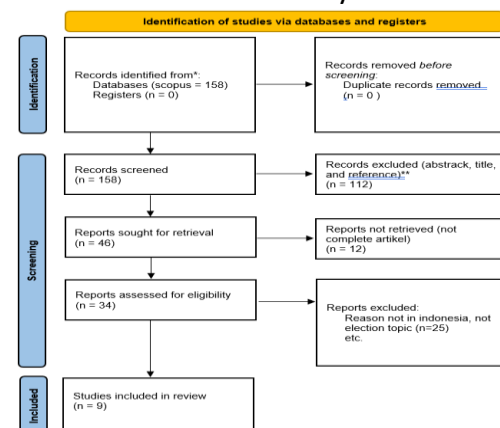


Figure 1. Search results with "vote-buying in Indonesia" keywords
Source: processed by the authors, 2024



The results of the search using "vote-buying in Indonesia" keyword through the Scopus page were 17 articles. Meanwhile, the 2nd keyword "rational choice theory election" led to the obtainance of 141 articles.

Figure 2. Search results with keywords "rational choice theory election"



Source: processed by the authors, 2024

Figure 3. PRISMA Flow Diagram

Source: processed by the authors, 2024

During the search for relevant articles, strict inclusion and exclusion criteria were included to ensure the relevance and quality of the selected publications. Papers meeting these criteria were further examined for detailed content assessment. The predetermined criteria for inclusion focused on articles with a complete body of content (including Introduction, Method, Results, and Analysis/Discussion), open access availability, a specific focus on Indonesia, and topics addressing vote-buying in general or regional head elections.

Figure 3 shows the results of the article retrieval process using the Systematic Literature Review approach. Initially, 158 articles were identified in the Scopus database. This included 17 articles from the keyword search "vote-buying in Indonesia" and 141 from the keyword search "rational choice election." Subsequently, the titles, abstracts, and bibliographies of each obtained publication were screened for references to vote-buying, elections, and rational choice, narrowing the selection to 46 articles. Further refinement excluded 12 publications that lacked a complete structure, leaving 34 articles. The final selection stage focused on the specificity of the topic, which led to the elimination of 25 additional overly broad or tangentially related articles. After these selection stages only nine publications addressing the topic of vote-buying in elections were selected for in-depth review.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The phenomenon of vote-buying in Indonesia from a political economy perspective

The democratic process in Indonesia has increasingly drawn public concern due to widespread electoral violations. These violations include the fact that political elites often resort to various means to secure victory for respective candidates, exploiting economically vulnerable communities that are more susceptible to influence over political choices. Civil society organizations, such as Joxzin, are perceived as weak due to the limited legitimacy and the dominance of political patronage in the organization. This dynamic forces groups such as Joxzin to engage in practices of patronage and clientelism, as evidenced by the collaboration between the organization and the PPP during the 2019 elections (Subandi et al., 2021). Regardless of the fact that many view vote-buying as detrimental to democratic integrity, others see it as a pragmatic way to secure immediate, but temporary, benefits for the community.

A significant portion of individuals have been observed to show ambivalence toward vote-buying. Although these individuals typically recognize the act as unethical or corrupt, the willingness to accept financial incentives from candidates is often possessed. Economic and educational difference play a very important role in shaping these attitudes. This is in following with the "demand-side" theory of vote-buying,

which points out that individuals with lower incomes can give up more to economic pressures by accept monetary compensation without changing normal views on vote-buying. It is important to further know that education also significantly influences both normal attitudes and the probability of accept money, with higher levels of education correlating with stronger opposition vote-buying practices. As for policymakers in Indonesia looking to fight vote-buying, these results show crucial challenges. As elucidated by (Tawakkal et al., 2017), individuals who justify vote-buying often belong to lower-income groups, while those with higher incomes recognize its unethical nature and normally are financially to refuse offers from candidates. (Aspinall & Rohman, 2017) further stated that in rural Indonesia, local elections frequently included patronage practices where goods and money were exchanged for votes. Meanwhile, in areas such as Way Kanan and Pringsewu, many farmers and laborers have been seen to view the election process as a disturb to work and income. Based on these grounds, the individuals are usually agree to accept financial or material compensation in exchange for respective participation and political support (Kurniawan et al., 2017).

According to (Chotim, 2019), the many happenings of money politics in Belitung is because of various factors, including the lack of political aware, the cultural tradition of gift-giving perceived as an act of courtesy instead of corrupt practices, and the mistrust of political

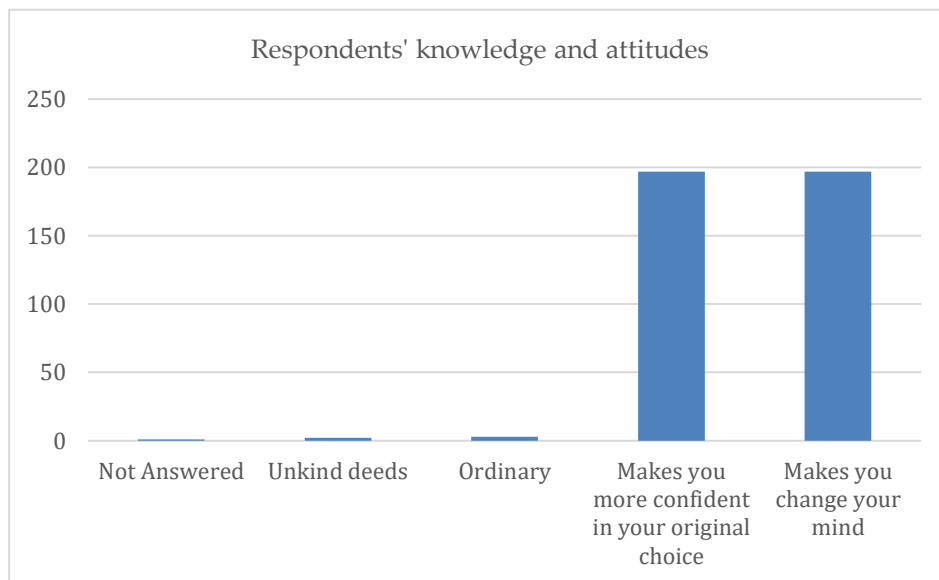
processes by the community. Furthermore, (Aspinall et al., 2017) emphasis the role of "social network machines" and the influence of well-established political parties in orchestrating vote-buying practices. Despite the prevalence of vote-buying, uncertainty lingers as there is no guarantee that voters who accept material inducements will correspond respective votes with the intentions of the buyers on election day. For instance, residents of Bandar Selamat have limited understand democracy and see elections as just formalities that mostly benefit legislative candidates alongside respective success teams. (Barus et al., 2019) also report that at the 2019 election, voter behavior and political engagement strongly depended on material incentives or immediate financial rewards.

(Pradhanawati et al., 2019) observed significant variations in voter responses to vote-buying practices. According to the research, voters that knows to "vote their conscience" while rejecting monetary inducements were normally low-income voters with higher education levels. However, individuals that can accept money and vote for candidates who offer the money include party loyalists, employees, and voters with lower income and education levels. Citizens from middle and upper-income backgrounds with formal education were observed to be more knowing to reject monetary offers. (Berenschot, 2018) further observed that there was a relatively low Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) score in Java, meaning that

place with diversified economies and broader economic power distribution may block clientelistic practices. In these areas, factors such as ethnicity play a diminished role in promoting political corruption.

Voters' rational choice actions in vote-buying phenomenon of regional head elections/elections

According to data published by the Indonesian Central Bureau of Statistics (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2022), the number of poverty individuals in Indonesia is around 26.5 million. This socio-economic factor renders vote-buying a rational and practical action for many in impoverished communities, as it provides immediate benefits to those facing financial hardship. As further



The phenomenon of vote purchasing remains prevalent across Indonesia. This is because the different people of the country playing a significant role in sustain the practice. As emphasized in previous research, individuals with limited financial and low educational are usually the primary participants in vote-buying activities. This behavior is support with RCT, which focuses on understanding the explanatory power behind decision-making (Fumagalli, 2020).

supported by (Kurniawan et al., 2017), individuals with low incomes often perceive participation in political campaigns as an inefficient use of respective time. These individuals are often more inclined to support a candidate if monetary or material compensation is offered, thereby expediting vote-buying process and ensuring tangible returns for participation.

Figure 4. Respondents' Knowledge and Attitudes Towards the Offer of Money in the 2018 Temanggung Regional Election

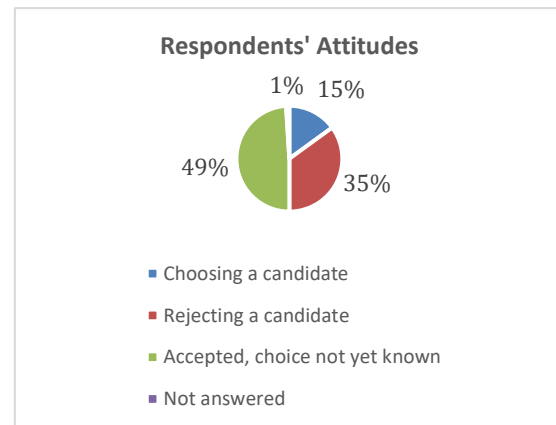
Source: (Asmuni, 2020)

The data collected from 197 respondents regarding respective individual knowledge and attitudes toward vote-buying practices showed that while many individuals may not alter inherent initial decisions, these individuals are still open to changing respective minds. This typically shows the impartiality inherent in the candidate funding process. During the data collection process, some respondents refrained from providing answers, while others arrived at a neutral or indifferent conclusion. Regardless of the fact that the acceptance or rejection of vote-buying is influenced by individual personalities, the core issue remains the prioritization of personal conscience. This suggests that a significant portion of the population tends to view vote-buying as a natural and accepted practice, reflecting a long-standing normalization of this behavior in society.

Figure 5. Respondents' Attitudes Towards the Offering of Money in the 2010 Blitar Regional Head Election

Source: (Sahab, 2012)

The rationality of the community



in engaging in vote-buying practices can be understood as an economic behavior, which is primarily influenced by respective limited income sources. For members of the community, the decision to cast a vote is often financially motivated. However, financial factors have been observed to not be the sole determinants, as evidenced by the fact that social pressure and the low levels of education in the community also played a significant role. Individuals with higher education levels tend to reject vote-buying and perceive it as a form of corruption, while those with lower educational levels may view the practice, particularly in the form of gifts or money, as an honorable exchange. The following are factors that influence how the community reacts to the occurrence of vote-buying:

Table 1. Public Reaction to Vote-Buying

No.	Contributing Factors	Retrieved from	Principal Assumptions of RCT
1.	Poverty	Individuals struggle to meet their necessities. Due to disparities in policy preferences as well as a direct need for financial help, this generates a "demand" for money.	Have consistent preferences.
2.	Education	Strong human capital creates values that are more pro-democracy and less tolerant of corruption, which acts as a counterbalance to vote-buying. There exists a conditional link in which the impact of education on income levels varies.	Can weakly organize their goals (i.e., given a set of alternatives, they will prefer one or the other or be indifferent).
3.	Social	Brokers and political parties can use social pressure to sway people's opinions in favor of the candidate who is providing the funding. This may occur because people looking to community leaders who serve as brokers for advice, because they already endorse the party and its leader, or even because there is an overtly clientelistic relationship between the public and the broker or party.	Selecting the means, they consider most probably produce the desired goal.

Souce: adaptation of (Geddes, 1995; Pradhanawati et al., 2019)

Using RCT, the practice of vote-buying in Indonesia can be viewed through a lens similar to the decision-making process of a criminal, as discussed by (Rossmo & Summers, 2022). Typically, the decision of a criminal to commit a crime is driven by a combination of needs and desires, creating a relationship between value

and utility in RCT perspective. Although existing literature on RCT is applicable to the phenomenon of vote-buying, this present research aims to offer an alternative analysis by extending knowledge on economic factors in voting decisions through RCT lens. (Geddes, 1995) reported a key misperception in RCT, namely the idea

that all individuals are solely driven by material interests, often referred to as "homo economicus." However, it is important to comprehend that the perspective, popularized by economists, fails to account for the full range of human motivations in political and economic behavior.

From this standpoint, the manner in which RCT explains the actions of political candidates engaging in vote-buying can be effectively explained. Regardless of the fact that the goal of a political candidate may be to accumulate wealth, the benefits of political success extend beyond financial gains. Winning an election opens doors to opportunities such as access to influential networks, greater social status, and the chance to wield power, all of which enhance the persona of the candidate and provide non-material advantages. Therefore, RCT can also be used to understand why political candidates prefer to buy votes using financial resources. This analysis extends the scope of RCT, recognizing that motivations in political behavior are not solely driven by economic interests but also by broader social and status-related incentives.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the phenomenon of vote-buying in Indonesia, when examined through the lens of political economy, showed the deep-seated economic inequality and the fragility of the democratic system in the country. Voters from low-income and less-educated backgrounds were observed

to be particularly vulnerable to vote-buying practices, as these individuals often prioritize immediate economic needs over considering the broader political vision or mission of candidates. In this context, political candidates typically exploited economic hardship to secure votes, which undermined the integrity of the democratic process. Economic inequality, manifested in limited access to education and heavy reliance on political elites, further entrenches patronage and clientelism in the Indonesian political system.

From the perspective of RCT, the decisions of voters in the context of vote-buying was understood as rational choices driven by economic factors. For low-income voters, political campaigns were observed to be viewed as a waste of time that could otherwise be spent working, leading the demographic to accept money or goods in exchange for respective votes. Although more educated individuals viewed the act of vote-buying as corruption, voters with limited economic resources accepted financial incentives as a rational decision. This underscored the significant role economic motivations play in shaping voter behavior in Indonesia, where decisions to accept bribes or gifts were often a response to immediate financial needs.

Based on the observations made during the course of this research, the prevalence of vote-buying in Indonesia, when viewed from both a political economy perspective and through RCT, was primarily driven by weak economic conditions and low voter education

levels. These factors made vote-buying a rational strategy for voters seeking to fulfill short-term economic needs. In terms of scope, the present research is limited by its reliance on secondary data and no consideration for the local social, cultural, and political factors that may also shape voter behavior. Considering this limitation, further research is recommended to explore the influence of social and cultural dynamics, as well as a comparative analysis between urban and rural areas, to provide a more holistic understanding of vote-buying phenomenon in Indonesia.

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