Conceptualising trust in electoral behaviour in a transitional democracy: an intergenerational perspective

Introduction

With a population of 250 million people there has been significant academic interest in Indonesia’s transition from authoritarian rule to democracy. The driving force toward democratic transition was the ‘1998 reform’, which changed the election system from indirect to direct elections. However, critics of the New Order regime claimed it was a military dictatorship (Eklof, 1999) so argued not only for system change but also regime change, providing opportunities for new parties to come forward. In a transitional democracy there is evidence of instability as a wide number of parties emerge focusing on a variety of platforms, eventually they form coalitions with other parties; or find their ‘unique’ policies are taken on by larger parties; or their platform is too narrow to capture enough votes for electoral success (Duch, 2001). Therefore, in the transitional stage, information and trust are important factors for electoral decision making (Duch, 2001). Political information is an important part of the transitional democracy process as people are enthusiastic for the new political system and want to learn and engage in the democratic process. Political trust, on the other hand, is related to ethical qualities of public officials (Hosmer, 1995) and the level of trust for political actors and governmental institutions depends on the ethics and efficiency of government (Hetherington, 1998). Hence for a transitional democracy to succeed there needs to be transparency and probity in governmental activities; information; together with candidates who are seen as trustworthy.

Trust is pervasive in discussions of politics and public life (Newton, 2001; Hardin, 2002; Burns et al., 2003; Schiffman et al., 2010). Research has shown how and why people trust or distrust public officials and what the consequences are (Burns et al., 2003; Schiffman et al., 2010). These studies have shown that trust is pivotal in the discussion of politics. Scholars in the field of political marketing have developed the concepts of trust within a theoretical framework (e.g. Dermody and Hanmer-Lloyd, 2005a; 2005b; Dermody et al., 2010). Therefore, the aim of this study is to understand the importance of trust for citizens in a transitional democracy.

Literature review

From a political marketing perspective trust is critical for building bridges between politicians and citizens in order to develop a strong and vibrant democracy. Politicians need strong communications about their candidature platform whilst the government should also improve the way they communicate their policies. Further, understanding voters and devising appropriate political strategies that target their stakeholders are crucial for political parties and candidates (Dean and Croft, 2001) and the incumbent government. For Dermody and Hanmer-Lloyd (2004) “government can only govern through the consent of the people in a democratic structure”.

The concept of trust has gained considerable importance in the field of political marketing literature (Dermody et al., 2010). An examination of the political trust literature shows that political scientists and political marketing scholars have focused on trust relating to political candidates and political institutions (Schiffman et al., 2010); actions of political parties and political programmes (Brewer and Sigelman, 2002; Clark and Lee, 2001); outcomes of political campaigns (Craig et al., 1990; Dermody and Hanmer-Lloyd, 2005a); and trust related to political fund raising (Hetherington, 1998). Schiffman et al. (2010)
examined relationships between interpersonal trust and the three political trust-related constructs: trust of government forms, political cynicism, and incumbent trust. In addition, Dermody and Hanmer-Lloyd (2005a) focused on the national advertising campaigns for the Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties, during the UK 2005 General Election. In their previous works, Dermody and Hanmer-Lloyd (2004) proposed a conceptual framework that examines both trust and distrust and the impact upon political marketing strategy development. They identified four segments of young voters including those who are ambivalent, party loyalists, ardent cynics, and selfish voters. They argued that marketers are able to develop strategies that increase citizens’ trust and reduce distrust, thereby increasing their intention to vote in future elections.

In general, trust can be defined as a willingness to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations about others intentions or behaviour (Mayer et al., 1995; McEvily et al., 2003). Meanwhile, Lewicki et al. (1998) defined trust as ‘confident positive expectations regarding another's conduct and distrust in terms of confident negative expectations regarding another's conduct’. Lewicki et al. (1998) suggest that trust and distrust can be seen as distinct dimensions and that there are a number of elements that contribute to both the growth and decline of trust and distrust.

Moreover, for Dermody and Hanmer-Lloyd (2005a, 2005b) there are a number causes of the decline of trust in political parties and leaders. For instance, if politicians were regarded as unable to meet public expectations, and this was related to perceptions of how well the policy was pursued by the government. In addition, during election campaigns, negative advertising was largely devised to increase distrust in opposition parties. Berman (1997) identified a number of conditions that are required to restore trust in government after it has been elected. First, the government should be able to respond to peoples’ needs, second, citizens should be involved and influence the process of government decision making, and finally, government should be able to convey its policy according to public expectations. Therefore, citizens need to feel part of the process and empowered to engage in political activities such as voting.

Research Methodology

This study used a grounded theory approach (Glaser, 1978). The data was collected using in-depth interviews with thirty two respondents consisting of adult children and their parents who live in either urban and rural areas. The rationale for selecting this sample is based on the idea that there are differences in the level of trust in urban and rural areas (Duch, 2001). In addition, this research focuses on theoretical sampling which enables the generation of data from the sample until data saturation. Participants were selected through purposive sampling and included sixteen young voters and sixteen parents. This sample was selected because parental influence plays an important role in political socialization (Pacheco, 2008; Achen, 2002; Ichilov, 1988; Sears, 1975) and also to gain intergenerational perspective between parents and their children. The sample was further broken down into geographic location, occupation, and education level to provide different views of voters on how they trust candidates and the political system in the context of the Indonesian transitional democracy. Individual in-depth interviews were conducted in the form of unstructured interviews, conversational in nature, in order to build an understanding of respondents’ everyday live experiences. The interview then focused on political and social issues from local, national and international perspective which they believed to have importance or influence in their life; as well as how and where they get information. Finally interview explored voters’ idea of a good politician, their electoral participation, as well as to
understand any changes in trust over time and identify the reason for any changes. Data analysis commenced by examining the data through numerous readings of the transcriptions, reflective diaries, and field notes. This was followed by repeated sorting, coding and comparison, which are run throughout the whole analytical process (Charmaz, 2006).

**Findings and Discussion**

The results of this study revealed that trust in the context of Indonesian electoral behaviour is divided into two main categories, namely trust in political system and trust in political candidate. There was increased trust in the new political system compared with the previous system and trust in political candidate was strongly related to their behaviour and perceived capabilities.

**Trust political system and voting behaviour**

The aim of the 1998 reformation in Indonesia was to change the election system from an indirect to a direct electorate system. Citizens were positive about the new political system because they believe it to be supported by good institutional mechanisms. People also feel empowered and proud to be good citizens who have civic responsibility. Along with electoral reform there was increased freedom of the press leading to a proliferation of publishing and people enjoying the freedom to express their opinion. A direct election ensures that every citizen can make choices according to their opinions independently. Thus, the transition to democracy in Indonesia is not only the change of electoral system but also a change in freedom of thought, expression, and choice.

Trust in the political system will encourages people to participate in politics and levels of election participation is the main indicator in democracy. High participation rates show support for the development of democracy, and vice versa. This study found that people had faith in the new direct election system were more willing to vote for their preferred candidate. Many participants supported the new election system and this is crucial in the context of transitional democracy. Indeed, some participants did not mind whether their selected candidate won or lost. The important thing was that they were able to participate in the election.

_"I’d rather do direct election... I’d choose this one. Whether my decision is a winner or not...the important thing is I’m sure with this choice." (Rural_2/Father/Farmer)_

There is no doubt that the participants reflect the longed for change to a democratic system since Indonesia has implemented direct elections since 1999 with little controversy. One key issues in Indonesian politics is corruption (Henderson and Kuncoro, 2011). Results from this study indicate that although citizens trust the new direct election system, some people do not trust the candidates. Citizens evaluate the performance of the leader or politician and several cases of corruption reported by the media undermine citizens’ trust in the system.

_"The candidate is just look for the position only...however it’s hard to find an honest candidate in this current time which uses money politics." (Rural_04/Son/Employee)_

A fundamental problem in the transition to democracy is the level of trust of citizens. Performance evaluation of the incumbent government will occur during the period of office. If the incumbent government cannot demonstrate a good performance to the public, trust in government will decrease.

**Trust political candidate and voting behaviour**

Trust in the political candidate relates to the candidate's character and capabilities. Participants evaluated political candidates by assessing their past performance and their characteristics. The results of this study showed that there are a number of components of
trust in political candidate including personal character, perceived capability, and candidate experience.

The dimensions of trust in political candidate are very similar to Aristotle’s components of rhetoric (Cope, 1867) most notably, pathos for the emotional connection to the citizen, logos for the perceived capability, and ethos for the candidate experience and character. According to Gottweis (2007), “logos is characterized by reasoning and presentation of fact, evidence and empirical proofs, pathos operates with empathy, sympathy, sensibilities, while ethos functions with trust, respect authority, honesty, credibility and considerations of the desirable.”

However, results of this study also indicate the existence of distrust toward a candidate. People consider many politicians are incapable and corrupt. Politicians are considered to be selfish because they think only about their own interest rather than peoples’ interest. Although many participants in this research generally do not trust politicians, they still participate in the elections. This finding is very important because it involves public support for change in the political system. The democratic transition will continue to progress because even though people do not fully trust the politicians, they still participate in the election because they believe in the political system. This shows that the citizens support democracy.

As a good citizen we should vote, give our voice... give suggestion. (Urban_01/Son/Student-internship)

I always vote for presidential election even my candidate was not elected as a president, the most important thing as a good citizen must vote its leader...it is a duty from a country I will, if none is good I will vote for the candidate with not really bad, because he is the only remaining. (Rural_06/Father/Entrepreneur)

Furthermore, the crucial issue in every election is how to ensure the highest level of participation and has a direct relationship with the legitimacy of the elected government. The level of public participation in elections cannot be separated from the assessment of a politician’s performance. For some people abstention is preferred when candidates do not fulfill their criteria.

...because there were no right person who fits my personal criteria, that is the reason, sometimes we only elect, there are not polling available for the personal opinion for the president. What happened was there were a number of candidates, so like or not, if there is no capability, I will tend to be abstain. (Urban_06/Son/Employee)

Moreover, many participants appear to be traumatized by the political condition in the past. People think that politicians just focus on their own self interest and do not rely on promises.

I am not talking about Suharto’s era, but the fact is that today’s political condition is so unkempt. Our country is full of cheats. If we don’t elect, people will say that we do not care about the country. When we finally elected, we cannot see any change. We are being betrayed (Rural_07/Father/Trader).

To be honest, there are many politicians in Indonesia who do not count on their promises for example they promised to take care and prosper the people in their promotion before the election in DPR or else, but after they are elected, they usually forget with their promises (Urban_04/Father/Entrepreneur)

‘New’ politicians in the new political system

Hence politicians from the previous political system were also associated with the corruption which meant both the system and the politician were both distrusted. Our study
also identified that people needed a ‘new’ politician who has a reputation for incorruptibility, honest, and down to earth. Joko Widodo, better known by his nick name Jokowi, is one Indonesian politicians who is reported by media as a humble person and has followed the practice of an ‘unscheduled visit’ known as blusukan. He also seen as a ‘new and clean’ leader comparing with the ‘old’ style of politics in Indonesia and has been ranked third in the annual World Mayor Prize. He represents a good politician who elected for mayor of Surakarta district by direct election in 2005 and won again in 2010. He was also elected governor of Jakarta in 2012 defeating the incumbent governor and more recently he has been identified as a strong potential candidate for Indonesian presidential election in 2014.

So the leader should be like Jokowi. Even though many people have doubted him, but he kept in silent but in fact he made it, that is, do not too much talk, not greedy, not arrogant, humble, and finally many people chose him, so if someone asked me about the criteria of the leader, it should be like it. There is no one else...He is honest, protect the low people, not glamour and simple. Maybe in the future he can be the president. (Urban_06/Father/Salesman)

The new election system provides an opportunity for citizens to choose a candidate directly. The direct system allows the ‘new’ politician to prove that they are clean and have capability because people able to evaluate their character, performance, and their experience then choose directly depending on their own beliefs.

To be honest, for me recently is more democratic because we can elect directly, compared with the previous one where the DPR (House of Parliament) choose the president...but people could choose depends on their belief whereas the previous one, the people did not know therefore the people just accept the regulation from DPR (Urban_04/Father/Entrepreneur)

Democratic issues in Indonesia are not only defined by a single issue, for example, corruption but also by the complexity of election mechanisms (Sebastian, 2004). According to this research political parties seemed to be more concerned with their own interest rather than the nation’s interest. It requires initiatives to develop a better democracy in the future because “without trust a democracy cannot stand” (Dermody and Hanmer-Lloyd, 2004). From the empirical research a conceptual model has been developed to illustrate how voters in Indonesia’s transitional democracy behave. This study concludes that trust plays an important role in levels of participation. This study contributes to operationalization of the concept of trust in the context of electoral behaviour. Figure 1 seeks to demonstrate how the citizen makes their voting decision. The model explains how the decision making process in election occurs in a transitional democracy and if there no trust in the candidate then the belief in the political system takes over and the citizen will vote. Clearly in this transitional democracy the overarching concern is to support political system despite their trust in the political candidate. However, for a small number of participants they didn’t approve of the new system therefore they abstained. As an Islamic country there was evidence that a secular political system was frowned upon.
In summary, there are some components of trust in the context of electoral behaviour in Indonesia referring to parents’ and children’s perspective. Empowerment is one of the antecedents of trust political system emerged from parents’ perspective whilst belief, institutional mechanisms, and civic responsibility emerged from both parents and children’s perspective. Young Indonesian people also reflected the general malaise of cynicism and lack of interest in the political system all of them emerged from the young voters. There showed more cynicism than their parents. However, parents and children have a similar attitude regarding the antecedents of trust in a political candidate which are character, capability, and experience and antecedents of distrust in political candidate which are self-interest, corrupt, and incapable.

Conclusion
This research identified that trust in the political system is far more important than the political candidate. As a fledgling democracy, Indonesia faces some challenging times but the faith that the citizens’ place in the democratic system will enable it to develop further. There are key issues to be addressed; however, this is particularly pertinent when looking at citizens’ attitudes towards political candidates. Trust in political candidates is still important and the key components are their character, their capability, and their experience and background which is a measure of their capability. However, if democracy is to flourish then corruption needs to be addressed, moreover candidates need to ensure that they put their citizens’ needs before their own and that will ensure that they are able to be elected to office.
References


