

I

Introduction

I.1 PUZZLE

Democracy is in decline in Indonesia. After the breakdown of authoritarianism in the late 1990s, this large and diverse country defied expectations by establishing democratic institutions and implementing several waves of free and fair national and local elections. For many years, Indonesia was hailed as a model for other young democracies, and its politics were praised for their stability, inclusiveness and ideological moderation. Recently, however, Indonesia's democratic trajectory has taken a darker turn, marked by a toxic mix of rising illiberalism, creeping polarization and executive overreach. Given this trend, which is widely acknowledged by observers of Indonesian politics, it would be reasonable to assume that ordinary Indonesians have become increasingly disillusioned with the country's democratic institutions. In theory, as the limitations of Indonesia's democracy become clearer, public dissatisfaction with democracy should increase.

However, public opinion data present a sharply contrasting picture. As shown in Figure 1.1, satisfaction with democracy in Indonesia has oscillated substantially among the Indonesian public since the mid-2000s, when the country's second democratic election was held and Indonesia completed its transition to democracy.¹ Crucially, the recent erosion of democracy has not been accompanied by a rise in public dissatisfaction with democracy. On the contrary, Indonesians have become more

¹ These data are from surveys implemented by Lembaga Survei Indonesia. I am grateful to Burhan Muhtadi for graciously sharing these data.

Introduction

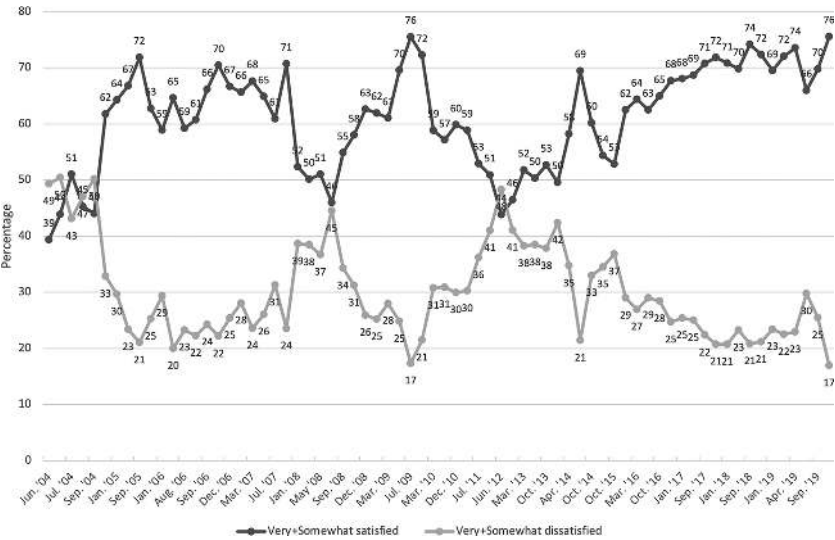


FIGURE 1.1. Public satisfaction with democracy in Indonesia, 2004–2020

satisfied with how democracy is practiced in their country, to the extent that in February 2020, satisfaction with democracy reached an all-time high of about 76%, with only 17% of the Indonesian public expressing dissatisfaction with democracy. Interestingly, this strong trend appears to have started in the mid-2010s, at about the same time that observers of Indonesian politics began to argue that the country’s democracy was deteriorating.

This intriguing pattern points to substantial dissonance between experts and the public in evaluations of democratic performance in Indonesia. For example, while political scientists consider Indonesia’s democracy to have been largely stable from its establishment to the mid-2010s (Aspinall, Mietzner and Tomsa 2015), in the eyes of ordinary Indonesians, its performance varied greatly during that period. Most importantly, the Indonesian public appears to be far less troubled by the recent erosion of Indonesia’s democracy than are scholars of Indonesian politics.

This puzzle is not readily explained by either of the two prevailing approaches to analyzing democratic attitudes. The first approach is rooted in studies of political culture, which show that public understanding of democracy varies substantially by country and region (Dalton, Sin and Jou 2007; Norris 2011). From this perspective, it may simply be that political scholars’ concerns about rising illiberalism in Indonesia do not

resonate much with large segments of the Indonesian electorate. In Indonesia, as in many other Asian countries, liberal values are poorly consolidated in public opinion, because many people understand democracy in terms of policy outcomes rather than adherence to democratic principles (Aspinall et al. 2020). Consequently, the public may not perceive declining levels of liberalism as a reason for dissatisfaction with democratic governance. However, this explanation overlooks the fact that Indonesians are indeed aware of and concerned about democratic backsliding in their country. In a public opinion poll conducted in 2019, for example, a record number of Indonesian citizens reported being worried about discussing political issues in public, joining social organizations and practicing their religion freely; they even expressed fear of being arrested arbitrarily (Mujani and Liddle 2021, 77). While liberal values in Indonesia may be less consolidated than those in other political cultures, Indonesians are cognizant of democratic backsliding and anxious about its implications for civil freedoms.

The second approach to analyzing democratic attitudes views satisfaction with democracy, as with other political regimes, as resulting from evaluations of government performance (Gilley 2006; Ferrín and Kriesi 2016; Magalhães 2016). From this perspective, support for and satisfaction with democracy are tied to a democracy's ability to provide desirable public goods such as economic growth, security and broad-based social services. In addition, procedural issues related to democratic governance, such as curbing corruption and ensuring fairness and the rule of law, may play a crucial role in ensuring democratic legitimacy and support for democratic institutions. From this perspective, we should not expect to observe dramatic changes in public satisfaction with Indonesia's democracy over the last several years. Although Indonesia has made progress in reducing economic inequality, its economic performance, as captured by macroeconomic indicators such as growth, unemployment, inflation and exchange rates, has generally remained stable. Furthermore, the unpopular and controversial reform of Indonesia's anti-corruption agency, implemented in 2019, has been seen as a setback in the country's fight against notoriously widespread corruption. The trends displayed in Figure 1.1 thus reveal an interesting and as yet unaccounted for empirical anomaly.

In the Indonesian case and beyond, as I discuss later, focusing on mass democratic attitudes is a fruitful and valuable analytical approach, given the trend of democratic backsliding observed in many countries (Bermeo 2016; Mechkova, Lührmann and Lindberg 2017). While democratic

regimes are characterized by checks and balances, the degree to which institutional boundaries and limitations are respected ultimately depends on the existence of entrenched social norms (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). In the absence of voters who are willing to sanction incumbent politicians who engage in antidemocratic behavior, democratically elected politicians may gradually hollow out democratic institutions. Successful democracies therefore require engaged publics that are willing to defend democratic principles and institutions from the authoritarian ambitions of incumbent politicians. When ordinary citizens do not value democracy as a form of governance or when they are dissatisfied with how democracy is practiced in their country, they may be more receptive to authoritarian messages that undermine the legitimacy of democratic institutions. Understanding the drivers of public satisfaction or dissatisfaction with democracy is thus vital for research on democracy.

1.2 ARGUMENT

Why have Indonesians become increasingly satisfied with democracy despite their country's democratic decline in recent years? I answer this question by focusing on an overlooked aspect of democratic practice in Indonesia, namely political representation.

Although democracy in Indonesia has in many respects fallen short of expectations, the deep-rooted ideological division regarding the role of Islam in politics has provided Indonesian citizens with meaningful political choices, pitting pluralist understandings of society and politics against more exclusionary Islamist ideologies. This has given significance to political participation and allowed a degree of ideological representation that is not often observed in young democracies. Indonesians may be unhappy about some of Indonesia's democratic institutions and the slow pace of political reform, but they may still value their democracy's ability to provide political goods such as meaningful representation and avenues for participation. Studying democratic attitudes through this framework enables us to account for the puzzle presented above.

The recent trends of increasing polarization and Islamism may well be injurious to democracy in Indonesia, but in terms of their implications for political representation, they may help to explain why Indonesians have recently become more satisfied with the country's democracy. First, increasing partisan polarization may have further consolidated ideological division over the role of Islam in politics in the minds of the Indonesian public, thereby clarifying political alternatives and strengthening partisan

affiliations. Second, the increasing influence of radical Islam may have bolstered perceptions of fair representation, especially among Islamist Indonesians, a conspicuous minority in the electorate who have long been underrepresented in political institutions. Aggregate levels of public satisfaction with democracy may thus have risen because of the very developments that have prompted fears about democratic decline.

Individuals and countries may differ substantially in their attachment to democratic values and satisfaction with democracy, yet a recurring assumption in the literature, following seminal work by Easton (1975), is that a political regime must deliver valuable policy outcomes to be perceived as legitimate by the public. As mentioned above, several studies find that support for democracy is related to macroeconomic performance, whereas others focus on how the provision of public goods such as public safety and bureaucratic efficiency strengthens support for democracy. Certainly, the ability of a political regime to deliver such desirable outcomes is not the sole determinant of the degree of support that the regime enjoys from its citizens, as the perceived legitimacy of political regimes may also be rooted in ideological and historical factors. Yet empirical research indicates that a regime's performance, broadly understood as its ability to provide a wide range of public goods, is crucial to determining whether citizens support its principles and institutions (Gilley 2006). Democracies need to "deliver"; otherwise, public disaffection may jeopardize their legitimacy. Indeed, a lack of public support may threaten a democracy's very survival (Claassen 2020).

This insight is not lost on experts of Indonesian politics. In a recent monograph, three leading scholars of voting behavior in Indonesia argue that Indonesian voters can be described as "critical democrats" (Mujani, Liddle and Ambardi 2018): While they are overwhelmingly supportive of democracy as a system of governance, this support is not unconditional.² Instead, as these scholars show empirically, Indonesians' support for democracy is shaped by their evaluation of democratic performance, which in turn "is apparently strongly influenced by the degree to which the citizen evaluates governmental performance in overcoming major problems confronted by the society, particularly involving the economy, corruption, security and order" (p. 18). In Indonesia, as elsewhere, democracy is therefore a garden that requires tending. Public support for and satisfaction with democracy are strengthened when democracy performs

² See also Mujani and Liddle (2015).

well in key governance areas, and they are eroded when policy outcomes fall short of expectations.

These explanations help to contextualize the Indonesian case, as they reveal a link between government performance and democratic support that political scientists have observed in other countries. However, the literature on public opinion and voting behavior in Indonesia suffers from a major deficiency in its treatment of democratic attitudes: It overlooks the fact that citizens may have different expectations of democracy. As democracy is a complex, multidimensional construct (Lindberg et al. 2014), citizens may have different yet overlapping interpretations of what democracy means. These different interpretations may generate different expectations of democratic governance, such that citizens judge democratic performance by different standards. More broadly, whereas some citizens may evaluate democracy in terms of the “outputs” that the government produces, such as economic performance, others may focus more on “inputs,” specifically a democracy’s ability to provide avenues for meaningful representation and participation (Norris 1999; Dahlberg, Linde and Holmberg 2015). However, research on public opinion in Indonesia focuses on government outputs, leaving the equally important dimension of democratic inputs largely unexplored.

The argument that intangible democratic qualities such as opportunities for representation and participation are crucial to evaluations of democratic performance is controversial in the Indonesian context. Although Indonesia is widely considered an electoral democracy, prevailing approaches to the study of Indonesian politics do not paint a flattering picture of the status of substantive representation in this country. Some scholars argue that clientelistic factors, not programmatic ones, shape citizen–politician linkages (Aspinall and Berenschot 2019). Others emphasize that Indonesia’s political parties all have the same economic policy platforms, which are designed to protect and consolidate the interests of predatory elites (Robison and Hadiz 2017). Still others note that political parties collude in large, heterogeneous coalitions that compromise accountability (Slater 2018). Research on voting behavior has long contended that evaluations of economic performance and candidate traits trump ideological considerations (Mujani, Liddle and Ambardi 2018). Given such negative assessments of the status of political representation in Indonesia, it is perhaps no surprise that substantive representation, understood as ideological congruence between citizens and their representatives, is not systematically studied in the Indonesian context.

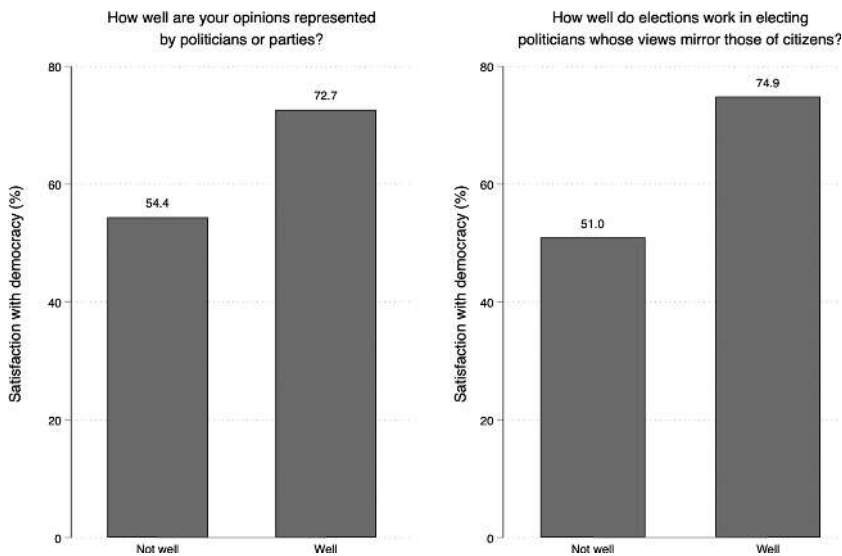


FIGURE 1.2. Perceptions of representation and satisfaction with democracy

Yet perceptions of representation matter for satisfaction with democracy in Indonesia. Consider, for instance, the data reported in Figure 1.2, which shows the association between evaluations of representation and satisfaction with democracy in Indonesia based on a nationally representative survey conducted in August 2020.³ The survey asked two questions that are commonly found in public opinion and elite surveys of attitudes toward representation:⁴

1. In general, how well do you think your opinions are represented by Indonesian politicians and political parties? (Very well, quite well, not very well or not well at all)
2. In your view, focusing on Indonesia’s current electoral system, how well do elections work in appointing members of parliament whose views mirror what voters want? (Very well, quite well, not very well or not well at all)

Figure 1.2 shows a strong association between the answers to each of these questions and satisfaction with democracy. Specifically, satisfaction

³ This was a telephone survey conducted by Lembaga Survei Indonesia with a sample of 1,220 participants. The respondents were drawn at random from a list of about 207,000 individuals who had previously participated in face-to-face surveys conducted by the polling institute between March 2018 and March 2020.

⁴ See, for instance, Dahlberg, Linde and Holmberg (2015).

with democracy was 18.3 % higher among respondents who felt that their opinions were well or very well represented by politicians and 23.9 % higher among respondents who felt that Indonesia's elections work well or very well (versus not very well or not well at all) in selecting a political class whose views are congruent with those of the citizens. These results from Indonesian public opinion echo findings of comparative research demonstrating that substantive representation and evaluations of democratic performance are closely intertwined (Reher 2015; Stecker and Tausendpfund 2016).

Popular views of representation are therefore consequential, and their omission from public opinion research hinders the study of democracy in contemporary Indonesia in three ways. First, our understanding of the relationship between democratic performance and satisfaction with – or support for – democracy among ordinary Indonesians is incomplete. When we focus primarily on the quality of governance in our analyses of satisfaction with democracy, we neglect the fact that a substantial proportion of the public may evaluate democracy according to other benchmarks, as they may hold alternative or more complex understandings of what a democracy is supposed to deliver. This perspective is explored in multiple comparative studies in other contexts (Canache, Mondak and Seligson 2001; Norris 2011; Dahlberg, Linde and Holmberg 2015) but overlooked in the literature on Indonesian politics. As a result, our ability to accurately identify public expectations of and pockets of discontent with democratic performance that may lead to questioning regarding the legitimacy of democratic institutions is limited. Studying substantive representation is therefore essential to explore the various paths that connect evaluations of democratic performance to public support for democracy and, ultimately, to democratic durability.

Second, this theoretical omission limits our ability to account for major political developments in contemporary Indonesia. The seemingly anomalous trends presented in Figure 1.1 offer a case in point. Indonesians' increasing satisfaction with democracy is difficult to explain for experts who see democracy from a liberal perspective, as Indonesian politics have become less rather than more liberal in recent years. It is equally problematic to see this surge in satisfaction as a result of improved economic–bureaucratic performance, as Indonesia has recently experienced only stable macroeconomic growth and has made no discernible progress in its fight against corruption. More broadly, a focus on economic performance is a blunt analytical tool in an era of increasing polarization and the resurgence of more radical forms of political Islam. By expanding our

conceptualization of democracy, we can develop new explanations for these apparent anomalies.

Finally, by failing to acknowledge the complexity of the public's conceptions and expectations of democracy, we overlook an important dimension of democratic practice in Indonesia, namely that this country displays exceptionally high levels of civic and political engagement. Associational life in Indonesia is among the most vibrant in the world, thanks to a historical legacy of mutual help associations, charities, religious organizations and cooperatives, and electoral participation is similarly very high. However, although some scholars acknowledge the benefits of civic engagement in the Indonesian context (Lussier and Fish 2012), the implications of participatory politics for voting behavior and public opinion remain largely unexplored. By studying representation and participation more comprehensively, we can uncover whether and to what extent Indonesians understand democracy as being about inputs as well as outputs, and we can investigate how participatory conceptions of democracy in Indonesia are associated with support for and satisfaction with democracy. Doing so may provide new insight into an important strength of Indonesian democracy.

In this book, I build on theoretical and empirical research that conceptualizes representation as an essential feature of democratic politics (Pitkin 1967). As mentioned earlier, by “representation” I primarily mean substantive representation, which, following most empirical research on the subject, I understand as congruence in opinions between citizens and politicians (Dalton 1985; Powell 2004; Luna and Zechmeister 2005; Costello, Thomassen, and Rosema 2012). I first argue that Indonesia has performed well in this domain relative to other countries. Since the first democratic elections after the New Order in 1999, Indonesian democracy has offered something to ordinary citizens that many other fledgling democracies have not, as a deep-rooted ideological cleavage has structured political competition. This division is essentially religious in nature. While some Indonesians favor a greater role for Islam in social and political affairs, others support a clearer demarcation between the state and Islam and reject the idea that Islam should be prioritized over other religions. I refer to this axis of ideological competition as “political Islam,” and I devote the first part of the book to documenting its meanings and empirical manifestations among Indonesian citizens and politicians.

Second, I argue that the division over political Islam has been instrumental in ensuring public satisfaction with democracy in Indonesia and has thus contributed to the country's remarkably high levels of political

participation and, more broadly, to the resilience of its democratic institutions. I build on the idea outlined previously that democratic performance can be assessed from various points of view, some of which cannot be reduced to measures of economic and bureaucratic performance. From this perspective, enabling meaningful representation is a key goal for a democracy. Citizens are more engaged when they know that they have real political choices, as they are more likely to believe that their participation matters, to develop a sense of ownership of democratic institutions, to be willing to contribute to make these institutions work, and to defend them from authoritarian threats.

Advancing this argument in the Indonesian context requires evidence of the enduring relevance of political Islam in structuring Indonesian politics. Throughout this book, I show that this historical division still has profound implications for public opinion, electoral behavior, substantive representation, partisanship and public understandings of democracy. In short, the cleavage over political Islam has enabled ideological representation on an important issue that continues to resonate in society. In so doing, it has helped to give meaning to political participation, consolidate the legitimacy of democratic institutions in the minds of Indonesian citizens and ultimately sustain democracy in Indonesia.

1.3 CONTRIBUTION

The analysis presented in this book makes three main contributions to the study of Indonesian politics. First, I contribute to research on democracy in Indonesia by providing a novel perspective on why democracy, despite recent setbacks, has proven resilient in this country. Indonesia is often described as a harsh environment for democracy given its history of failed democratic experiments, military involvement in politics and poorly consolidated liberal values. In contrast with existing explanations of democratic success in Indonesia, which focus on structural and institutional factors such as patronage, inclusive power-sharing arrangements and legacies of state capacity (Aspinall 2010; Horowitz 2013; Slater 2020), I highlight the role of a major historical cultural–social cleavage in giving structure, depth and meaning to Indonesian politics. By shifting the analytical focus to concepts such as representation, legitimacy and participation, I bring ordinary citizens to the fore and emphasize their role in sustaining democratic practice. In this respect, I follow studies that similarly identify citizen engagement as crucial to explaining democratic survival in Indonesia (Lussier 2016; Dibley and Ford 2019). However,