

Ahok's satisfied non-voters: an anatomy



Much of the debate on Jakarta's recent gubernatorial elections, in which the Chinese-Christian incumbent Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (or 'Ahok') was defeated in a landslide, has focused on the role of religion (and, interrelatedly, ethnicity) in sealing Ahok's fate. While some observers have viewed religious identity politics as the most decisive factor in the elections, others have pointed to class differences and Ahok's unpopular policies as equally significant. Some of these issues recently came to the fore in a debate between one of the authors of this article (Marcus Mietzner) and Ian Wilson [at Murdoch University](#).

In analysing the electoral outcome and the factors that caused it, we argue that it is crucial to focus on a particular segment of the electorate: that is, those voters who expressed satisfaction with Ahok's performance in office, but still voted against him. According to an exit poll conducted by Indikator Politik Indonesia on voting day, this was a whopping 30.1 percent of the electorate. The other two voting groups are much less intriguing: 41.5 percent of the electorate said they approved of Ahok's performance and voted for him. This included almost the entire religious minority vote and those Muslims for whom Ahok's religion was not a primary factor. Equally non-mysterious are the 26.4 percent of voters who were dissatisfied with Ahok and voted against him. This category

includes conservative Muslims who would have never voted for him, but also citizens who rejected the governor's eviction policies, the reclamation project and other decisions they viewed as having a negative impact for them.

We view the satisfied citizens who voted for Ahok and the dissatisfied Jakartans voting for Anies as less intriguing analytically for two main reasons. First, those voters aligned their voting choice with their assessment of the incumbent's performance—even if their satisfaction or dissatisfaction was already coloured by religious or other primordial considerations. And second, they weren't the ones who decided this election. They constituted the respective strongholds of loyalists from which both candidates started their campaign for the all-decisive swing vote in the political centre. This political centre consisted of voters who acknowledged that Ahok had delivered satisfactory policies, but were reluctant to vote for him. Thus, providing an anatomy of these voters—who were they, what motivated them?—gives important clues as to the key drivers behind the anti-Ahok vote. Interestingly, the data we analyse in this regard should ring alarm bells for Jokowi and his re-election campaign, for reasons we will describe below.

But let's first turn to a demographic and attitudinal analysis of Ahok's satisfied non-voters. Almost all of them—98.8 percent—were Muslim. They were predominantly Javanese (37.4 percent), Betawi (33.3 percent) and Sunda (20.7 percent)—exceeding, in all cases, these ethnicities' respective shares of the total electorate. Very young (below 26 years of age) and older (above 55 years) voters were overrepresented in this segment, while middle-aged voters were underrepresented. In terms of income, education and profession, those with lower levels of education and income were slightly stronger in this constituency than in the overall electorate, but not decisively so. Overall, then, the demographic profile of voters satisfied with Ahok but refusing to vote for him is unremarkable, with no clear standouts that could explain their concurrent endorsement of a candidate's performance and his electoral rejection.

It becomes far more interesting when we look at the attitudes of Ahok's satisfied non-voters. In this group, the number of respondents who pointed to common religious identity as their primary voting motivation stood at 54.5 percent—compared to 34 percent in the total electorate. Tellingly, no other of this constituency's reason for voting Anies reached double digits—the second most cited factor was 'ability to bring change', at 9.5 percent. 42.7 percent of respondents who were satisfied with but electorally opposed to Ahok said they 'always' or 'very often' consider religious directives or values. This makes this constituency somewhat less devout than the segment of voters who were dissatisfied with Ahok and voted against him—there, 62.2 percent professed to strictly observe religious guidelines. Crucially, however, both the satisfied and dissatisfied Ahok non-voters were more religiously pious than the constituency of Ahok voters, in which only 35.6 percent laid claim to religious firmness.

The impression of a religiously devout but not hard-line Muslim constituency of satisfied Ahok non-voters is confirmed when we draw from a pre-campaign Indikator poll conducted in May and June 2016, long before the blasphemy case broke in September. In that poll, the constellation was

similar. 27.1 percent of voters stated they were satisfied with Ahok but wouldn't vote him. Their demographic profile was almost identical, and 72 percent of respondents in this group stated they moderately or strongly agreed with the statement that 'a leader has to be of the same religion as I am'. In other words, even before the blasphemy case began, Ahok was fighting an uphill battle to appeal to voters who liked his policies but refused to vote for him.

However, this doesn't mean that the blasphemy case didn't matter. Indeed, it is the most compelling standout in terms of a clear correlation between attitude and voting behaviour. Among Ahok's satisfied non-voters, 73.5 percent stated in the Indikator exit poll that they believed Ahok was guilty of blasphemy, and 12.1 percent weren't sure. Only 14.4 percent in this group thought he was not guilty—as opposed to 32 percent in the overall electorate. The impact of this assessment of the blasphemy case by the voters who mattered most—the relatively moderate Muslims in the political centre—is measurable: between May and June 2016 and voting day, the group of satisfied Ahok voters shrunk from 49.4 percent to 41.5 percent, and the segment of Ahok's satisfied non-voters increased by three percentage points. It appears, therefore, that while even without the blasphemy case Ahok would have struggled to get across the 50-percent mark, it was this very case that robbed him of the chance of being competitive.

As [Eve Warburton and Liam Gammon have pointed out](#), and [as Ian Wilson has reminded us](#), this polling data is the starting point for, not the final word in the debate on how religion, class, ethnicity and performance evaluations interrelated in this election. But it is worth emphasising once more that we focused in our analysis on citizens who expressed general satisfaction with Ahok's policies. Thus, those citizens who viewed Ahok as an agent of ethnic Chinese crony capitalism; were deeply dissatisfied with the economic and social divisions that his developmentalist approach aggravated; or believed that his governorship only benefitted the middle and upper classes—were highly unlikely to have expressed satisfaction with his performance in opinion polls. These surveys, which were uniform in recording Ahok's unusually high approval ratings, also captured the economically, politically or socially motivated dissatisfaction with Ahok, which was generally in the 30 percent range. However, as stated above, we were less interested in those who were dissatisfied and voted accordingly. What our analysis was exclusively concerned with were voters who approved of what Anok did in office, but still found it impossible to vote for him. And the data presented points to a) belief in the necessity for a governor from the majority religion, and b) conviction that Ahok was guilty of blasphemy as the strongest explanatory propositions for that choice.

Why, then, should Jokowi too be worried about this data emerging from the Jakarta elections? This is because the group of voters who liked Ahok's performance but voted against him currently view Jokowi through a similar lens. In the Indikator exit poll, 82.1 percent of Ahok's satisfied non-voters expressed satisfaction with the president's performance. But a plurality of them—32.9 percent—stated that they would vote for Prabowo if the presidential elections were held today. Jokowi only received 22.8 percent support from this segment of voters. Overall, Jokowi's approval rating among the Jakarta electorate stood at 73.8 percent, but only 33.4 percent said they would

vote for him. Among the total Jakarta electorate, Jokowi still leads Prabowo by 9 percentage points, but the vast majority of that support is drawn from his loyalists: minority and liberal Muslim voters who supported Ahok in the 2017 election. Once we zoom in on the moderately or strictly devout Muslim electorate, Jokowi appears to struggle, and much more so than in 2014. Among our satisfied non-voters of Ahok, 45.6 percent voted for Jokowi in 2014, while 39.9 percent opted for Prabowo (reflecting the actual 6-percent-margin of the final result). But of these same voters, only half say they would vote for Jokowi again.

Obviously, a number of caveats are in order. First, the polling data above only reflects the current constellation in Jakarta, and does not take into account nationwide dynamics. We will have to wait for post-Jakarta national surveys on Jokowi's approval rating and electability to properly assess whether his standing has been affected by Ahok's loss. Second, in the most recent national surveys (before the Jakarta election), Jokowi still beat Prabowo routinely (and comfortably) in a head-to-head scenario. Moreover, he is still ahead of Prabowo in the overall Jakarta electorate too. But the available data from the Jakarta polls shows that an overwhelming approval rating can be trumped by whipping up primordial sentiments or other emotions unrelated to the assessment of performance. And the data shows that this phenomenon has not only affected Ahok, but is beginning to have repercussions for Jokowi as well. It is likely that the same group of voters that settled Ahok's defeat—moderately devout Muslims not always dictated by but susceptible to religious directives—could be decisive again in 2019. Hence, Jokowi would be well advised not to ignore this data, given that smear campaigns tailored specifically to him—depicting him as a communist, secularist, and defender of blasphemy – are already well underway.

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