

Is money an insurmountable barrier to women's political representation in transactional democracies? Evidence from North Sumatera, Indonesia

By

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Abstract

Elections are expensive, disadvantaging women with limited access to financial resources. Strategies to address this problem have focused on increasing women's campaign funds or lowering costs such as nomination fees. While important, such strategies will not overcome the disadvantages women face in countries where 'transactional politics' is rife, with voter expectations for gifts and/or cash multiplying the costs of elections. Following the 2019 elections in Indonesia, women lamented that the only thing that mattered was: '*Isi ni tas?*'—how much money is in your bag?

This article contributes to the literature on money and women's underrepresentation by identifying what is at stake in electoral systems overwhelmed by 'money politics'. Our research in North Sumatera, Indonesia, demonstrates that women candidates can lower the cost of expensive election campaigns through practices that achieve the symbolic ends of money politics without cash transfers to voters and campaigners. Despite these possibilities, the perception that elections are unavoidably expensive continues to deter otherwise viable women candidates from stepping forward. The commonly held belief that elections are synonymous with money politics hence serves to sustain the dominance of Indonesian politics by privileged men. New narratives of electoral successes are required to address the underrepresentation of women.

Key words: women, campaign costs, money politics, transactional politics, gender and politics, Indonesia

Introduction

In Indonesia's most recent legislative elections in April 2019, only 118 women were elected as members of the House of Representatives out of a total of 575 seats (21 per cent). Although this is a slight increase from 2014 when only 97 women were elected, Indonesia remains short of the 30 per cent quota for women mandated by the Law on Elections No 10, 2008. Noting the importance of increasing woman legislators, the Chairman of the Indonesian Parliament Bambang Soesatyo asked political parties to work harder towards this aim by, for example, providing financial support for women candidates (Hidayah 2018). His suggestion points to what is widely known and understood in Indonesia: elections are outrageously expensive, making standing as a candidate out of the reach of most, with women particularly disadvantaged.

Barely four months after the election results were finalized, 'money politics' dominated focus group discussions (FGDs) with women candidates and activists in Medan (North Sumatera) and Jakarta (August 2019).ⁱ Election campaigns are not only expensive, the expectations of voters for cash payments or other goods have further increased costs, making it impossible for most women to contest. Participants lamented that what is most important to getting elected is not how good a candidate you are, but how much money you have in your bag: '*Isi ni tas?*' in the local Batak language. The cost of elections was still upmost in the minds of participants during field research 2020/2021; money was the biggest factor as to why women choose not to contest. Needing to have, spend and potentially lose a lot of money was seen as unavoidable, deterring women who would otherwise make excellent representatives.

A lack of access to campaign funding is a global problem. Much of the research as to its impacts and means to overcome this barrier has been conducted in Euro-America (for example Bernard et al. 2021; Sanbonmatsu and Gothreau 2021), but important works are emerging about countries in the global South (Murray et al. 2021; Piscopo et al. 2021; Muriaas et al. 2020; Kayuni and Muriaas 2014). This literature measures the extent to which women's ability to fundraise is constrained relative to men's (Piscopo et al. 2021), and evaluates the effectiveness of measures that fall under the umbrella of gendered electoral financing (GEF). GEF involves a broad range of initiatives, including top-down formal instruments by the state that incentivize the funding of women candidates or penalize parties that fail to do so, and bottom-up informal initiatives by societal actors that change the conversation around campaign finance or fundraise for women candidates (Muriaas et al. 2021). While the role of money in electoral campaigns has been examined across a wide sample of democracies, under-explored is how it effects women's underrepresentation in *transactional* democracies. In countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines and India, lowering the cost of campaigning is more important than ensuring women have equal access to campaign funds. Conventional approaches to GEF are therefore inappropriate, perhaps explaining the lack of state-led instruments to address the problem and the reluctance of civil society organizations to engage with the issue, at least in Indonesia. We argue that initiatives need to go beyond reducing the formal costs of elections to develop strategies that help women avoid the cash transfers and gifts that candidates are expected to give voters and volunteers.

The common belief among the Indonesian public is that elections are unavoidably expensive, yet recent research demonstrates they are not. A special issue on women's experiences in the 2019 election provides evidence that drawing upon women's networks—homosocial capital—is an effective strategy for women candidates that allows them to overcome structural barriers

to election, including money politics (Aspinall et al 2021; Mahsun et al. 2021; Novadona Bayo 2021). Our research too shows that money politics is not an insurmountable barrier for candidates who do not have access to large amounts of funding. We identify alternative electoral strategies that achieve the symbolic and practical ends of transfers without the expense. We are not suggesting campaigns are inexpensive, or denying that the majority of candidates elected have likely engaged in money politics. Our point is that to increase the political representation of women—who have less access to financial resources relative to men—these alternative strategies need to be promoted.

Establishing the possibility of alternative strategies is only half the task; convincing more women to run for election in Indonesia must challenge the specter of money politics. The literature examining the role money plays in women's underrepresentation does not differentiate between the 'deterrent' effect of campaign expenses and money as a material barrier. It makes logical sense that when campaigns are expensive and women have limited access to funds (material barriers) they will be deterred from contesting. At the same time, there can be a mismatch, in that the perception of the extent and inescapability of the costs of campaigning may be higher than they actually are. In Indonesia, despite the success of many women campaigning on shoestring budgets, the perception as to the amount of money one needs remains high. Perpetuating the perception that expensive campaigns are inescapable is one mechanism sustaining male dominance of politics. We argue that differentiating between the 'deterrent' and 'material barrier' impact of money is relevant beyond Indonesia to discussions of money and women's underrepresentation more generally.

Money politics and women's underrepresentation

Among the myriad factors that result in women's political underrepresentation, money looms large (Murray et al. 2021; Piscopo et al. 2021). Campaigning costs have increased in many parts of the world, while the legacy of social institutions that made women dependent in the household have resulted in vast differences in wealth (Hawkesworth 2012). The high cost of elections is a factor in the over-representation of men, who benefit from homosocial-capital and greater access to wealthy donors (Murray et al. 2021). Women face additional challenges fundraising and have to work harder to achieve the same monetary support (Jenkins 2007; Piscopo et al. 2021). Recognition of the problem has prompted initiatives that fall under the umbrella of Gendered Electoral Financing (Muriaas et al. 2021). Initiatives, and in some cases electoral reform, aim to 'level the playing field' for men and women by directly raising funds for women candidates (Muriaas et al. 2020), penalizing or incentivizing parties to ensure they invest in women candidates (Piscopo et al. 2021), or reducing the costs for female candidates through, for example, subsidizing nomination fees (Muriaas et al. 2020).

Elections can be particularly expensive in countries where transactional politics, or so-called money politics, is part of political practice. Indonesia is one such country where elections are notoriously expensive on account of the prevalence of clientelism: "the practice of exchanging material resources or benefits (cash, goods, jobs, public services, government contracts, etc.) for political support (votes, campaign donations, campaign support, etc.)" (Aspinall and Berenschot 2019, 25). By one estimate, competing for a seat in the Indonesia's People's Representative Council (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat, DPR) in 2009-2014 cost an average of 3 billion Indonesian rupiah (231,269 USD) (Prihatini, 2018, 85). The average income of Indonesians is 3,911 USD, making contesting elections well out of reach for most. Such is the cost of elections in Indonesia that 'money' is cited as one of, if not the most important barrier

to women's political representation, and the reason quotas have failed to substantially increase women's representation (Hillman 2018; Prihatini 2019).

There are two set of practices that are equated with money politics with different implications for women's political representation. The first practice involves using one's position and access to power to direct services and resources to a particular community in return for electoral support. Practices include providing club goods to a bounded social group, or pork barrel projects, in which publicly funded programs are directed to a specific geographical area (Aspinall and Sukmajati 2016). Public officials and elected representatives have an advantage as they often hold "discretionary powers to channel public benefits to selected persons or groups" (de Wit 2017, 46), resulting in what should be entitlements being traded for electoral support. Hence there are a large number of candidates with a background in well-resourced ('wet', or *basah* in Indonesian parlance) government agencies, while incumbents also have an electoral advantage (Aspinall and Berenschot 2019). Women are disadvantaged within this 'patronage democracy' as they are grossly underrepresented in the top echelons of Indonesia's bureaucracy and less likely to be placed in 'wet' portfolios as elected officials.

The second set of practices—and the one that captures the public imagination—is direct vote-buying. Respondents commonly understood money politics as the distribution of cash and gifts within the electoral arena. Money is exchanged in the days prior to the election "with the implicit expectation that recipients will repay with their vote" (Aspinall and Sukmajati 2016, 20). Even if no cash is exchanged, the provision of individual gifts is widely expected by voters. These practices are not legal. Law No. 7/2017 concerning general elections clearly states that money politics is prohibited, with criminal sanctions for perpetrators. Nonetheless, these laws are widely flouted. Candidates describe money politics as the costs of politics relating to this

overall gift economy of election campaigns, making access to financial capital critical to success. As women are less likely to have their own wealth, to have access to family wealth, or receive financial support from others, they are disadvantaged within transactional political systems.

Institutional and electoral factors have made “patronage distribution...*the* central mode of political campaigning in Indonesian legislative elections” (Aspinall and Sukmajati 2016, 5). The Open Rank Proportionate Representation system (introduced 2009) mean candidates compete not only against other parties, but also candidates from their own parties. According to Aspinall and Sukmajati,

when candidates are running against candidates whose party identity—and therefore platform and official ideology—are the same, they face a strong incentive to differentiate themselves in other ways. Offering “concrete”...benefits to their constituents was one way to do this... (2016, 12-13).

Weakly institutionalized party structures increase the role of money in elections. In India, candidates can rely on party allegiance for votes, and cadre for campaigners, thereby lowering campaigning costs (Aspinall and Berenschot 2019). In comparison, Indonesia’s parties lack clear ideology and programmatic positions, heightening the ‘personalization’ of campaigning and increasing the tendency towards vote-buying (Aspinall and Mietzner 2019).

While costly campaigning is seemingly the norm, it is not unavoidable. Women candidates have won with strategies that only minimally, or not at all, involve clientelistic exchange (Aspinall et al. 2021). Strategies included ‘tandem campaigning’—joining campaign teams across different levels in order to reduce campaign costs (Novadona Bayo 2021); harnessing women’s networks, focusing on gender issues to target women (Aspinall et al. 2021); and

drawing upon state-led women's organizations to build a support base (Ichsan Kabullah and Nurul Fajri 2021). As Mahsun et al. (2021, 75) concludes, women politicians were able to “develop campaign strategies that avoid becoming entrapped in money politics and instead prioritise democratic practices”. Campaigns can be fought, and won, without resorting to the worst excesses of money politics.

The literature on money politics indicates the impact high campaign expenses have on women's political underrepresentation, while more hopefully, identifying alternative strategies through which women have successfully campaigned. The implications go far beyond what has been explored in the extant literature on gender and political financing. Current formulations of Gendered Electoral Financing, or “money for electioneering” (Muriaas et al. 2021, 2) has limited application in countries where money politics, is part of political practice. In a context where electoral spending is excessive, morally dubious and technically illegal, it makes little sense to increase payments to women candidates, or to reduce formal electoral expenses that are only a small fraction of overall campaign costs. The question is, how can government and feminist organizations support women in alternative electoral strategies that overcome demands for cash by voters and campaigners, and what are the obstacles that remain?

Methodology

This research is based on empirical material generated between October 2020 and May 2021 in Medan, North Sumatera. With almost 2.5 million inhabitants Medan is the largest city in Indonesia outside Java, and the fifth largest overall. Medan is an important economic and commercial hub, with an ethnically diverse population. Ethnic and ethno-religious associations are strong in Medan, reflecting the religious diversity of the city where 68 per cent of the

population are Muslim: a relatively smaller percentage compared to the island of Sumatera as a whole (87 per cent). Ethnicity plays an important role in North Sumatran politics, with ethnic associations often used for electoral mobilization (Damanik 2016). Identity politics is entangled in money politics, with ethnic-based institutions providing “the mechanisms or networks for the distribution of patronage” (Damanik 2016, 71).

Our research methods comprised of sixteen interviews and five FGDs. We interviewed seven current female members of the Local People’s Representative Council (DPRD) at the City and Provincial level (Medan and North Sumatera respectively). While understanding the pathways of women who have entered politics can tell us much about how success can be achieved, they are limited in what they tell us about the reasons suitable women chose not to contest in the first place. We therefore also interviewed nine leaders of various organizations with strong connections to the community and a record of social and political activity but who have never contested an election. Due to the importance of religious and ethnic organizations, we recruited participants from Islamic, Christian, Buddhist and Hindu organizations, plus the heads of non-government organizations (NGOs), or other community-based organizations. Interviews lasted between 30 to 120 minutes and were recorded and transcribed with the consent of the interviewee.

From these interviews key themes were elicited that formed the basis of discussion in five FGDs held in April 2021. We identified pipeline activities for politics from the interviews with female legislators, and held separate FGDs with student activists; leaders of non-Muslim religious organizations; leaders of Muslim prayer groups; leaders of NGOs or community organizations, and; party cadre. All FGDs apart from the latter were with women only. Participants were recruited through our networks and snowball methods. Due to the covid

pandemic and restrictions on in-person gatherings, FGDs were held online using Zoom. While this medium impacted the flow of some FGDs, they nonetheless allowed us to further develop the meanings associated with various practices and to ascertain the impact of money politics on women's plans to enter the political arena. The research followed on from two FGDs held in August 2019, five months after the Indonesian elections in Medan (18 participants) and Jakarta (5 participants) with candidates and leaders of various social and activist organizations. It was these FGDs that underlined the centrality of money politics in early assessments as to why the 2019 elections failed to significantly increase women's representation.

Achieving the ends of money politics without the means

To understand the role of money politics in Indonesia's democracy, we need to examine what it achieves for candidates. Anthropologists have highlighted the multiple, cultural meanings that people ascribe to money in elections (Björkman 2014; Schaffer 2007). 'Buying a vote' is rarely just a transactional exchange, particularly as the reliability of voters to cast their vote as anticipated is uncertain (Banerjee 2020; Still and Dusi 2020). Instead, cash transfers are embedded in wider webs of meaning and according to different moral codes (Banerjee 2020; Still and Dusi 2020). Björkman's (2014) seminal article on Mumbai elections argues that money exchanges are a form of gift exchange that produces relations of debt and obligation. De Wit (2017, 209) finds that "money provided is not a one-time purchase; it serves to cement a (an enduring) relationship of reciprocity". Money is hence symbolic; what is important is not only the exchange of goods or money, but the feelings they engender and the relationships they forge. While anthropologists have developed rich analysis of the meaning of money in politics, they have been slow to draw out the implications for improving the electability of underrepresented groups, including women.

Within Indonesia's 'transactional' politics, patronage is important for creating "a sense of 'solidarity, meaning and participation' in the social relationship" (Rohi 2016, 378). Rohi's (2016, 378) study of East Nusa Tenggara in Indonesia finds that "It was not necessarily the size of the gifts that counted, but their appropriateness, the intensity of the social interactions in which they are embedded and the networks through which they were distributed". Money or gifts that do not evoke the right meaning, or engender the right feelings, can be counter-productive. In Kupang, Tidey (2018) found that when politicians attempt to 'buy a vote' without it being crafted as an act of care and recognition, the money was taken, but with a determination to not vote for the giver. For this reason, candidates often use intermediaries to distribute gifts and money at election time, as a person who is known and trusted to the voter is more likely to "elicit feelings of gratitude and obligation" (Aspinall and Sukmajati 2016, 29). In order to be an effective candidate, one needs to understand what meanings gift and money have for the voters they are seeking to win over, and select appropriate tokens and practices that engender the right feelings.

In North Sumatera, the exchange of money or gifts has two meanings: as denoting one's care or attention to the recipient, or as a share of (government) resources. A common saying is '*tak kenal maka tak sayang*', or if they do not know us, they cannot love us. People show that they care by genuinely knowing and providing support for the people. People who have a record of making contributions to the society will have the people's confidence that they care, and hence their support come election time. Alternatively, candidates with no record of attentiveness will need to take short-cuts in the form of donations of money or gifts. That is, rather than an initial strategy to be elected, the distribution of cash can be considered a fallback option when candidates have not done the groundwork of building relationships with constituents. That

envelopes stuffed with cash is such a ubiquitous sight during elections speaks to the track-record of candidates, or lack thereof.

Attentiveness is demonstrated through ongoing engagement with the community. Sariⁱⁱ always attends special occasions such as funerals, weddings, and traditional ceremonies; “people remember that I am always there”, helping her to win the election in 2019. Berlian, also elected in 2019, describes the acceleration of acts of attentiveness leading up to the election as *sosialisasi* (socialization): a common term in Indonesia used to describe the persuasion of people, often by becoming close to them (Gibbings 2017). Berlian conveys her programs to the people, but to help cement a relationship, she also brings *oleh-oleh*: a small gift or souvenir such as food, a headscarf or sarong. Even candidates with a track record of caring for the people provide gifts to reaffirm their commitment during election time, however the size of the gift is significantly reduced: a *token* of their love and support compared to a larger cash donation which is a *substitute* for it.

Gender norms converge with meanings of this gift economy in ways that increase the expectations and costs for women. Women are expected to be more attentive (to care more) than men. While men can get away without a track record, women are seen as needing to be appropriately prepared, as Imelda explained:

You have to have a different strategy to men to attract [people’s] attention....When [men] want to be elected, then they start their campaign and they can win...for women...it is like we are making our home. Before... move in to a new house, we clean it first...we make the house beautiful, only then we are fit to enter the house. Men don't do that. [they move in] “then we'll clean everything after that”, right?

Men's capacity to decide to run and *then* get one's house in order, contrasts to women, who must devote more time to preparing the ground. Society demands that women be present in social affairs more than men. They are expected to help when residents get sick or married, and are a source of gossip if they do not. A man's absent is 'understandable', and their lack of attentiveness made up for later by distributing cash and gifts. Imelda does not see this as an effective strategy for women: "You have to make sure you are a woman who deserves to sit there", spending considerable time and resources well before the campaign period.

The appropriateness of gifts to cement one's relationships during campaigning is also gendered. Berlian claims that the *oleh-oleh* given by women is more expensive:

Men only have to give cigarettes and that is enough. We have to bring *belau* (betel leaf). One complete box of *belau* is 100,000 rupiah...And when we visit someone sick, we will not hesitate to hug her and tell her, "I'll buy you some food". It is different with men. "Say hello, goodbye", coffee shop, then it is done.

Friendship between men can be built on relatively cheap cigarettes, but this is inappropriate for women. Further, women are expected to show sympathy, to be moved by the plight of others, taking action such as buying basic food items. In this way, the costs associated with demonstrating one 'cares' can be higher for women.

A second meaning of cash transfers is money as a 'share', or *bagi*. In contexts where politicians have access to state resources or illicit flows of money, elections can be seen as a time to share the spoils. In North Sumatera a moral logic of '*bagi-bagi*' exists of maneuvering to get a share of resources that flow from the state (Jakimow 2018). During election time, vote-buying can be considered a practice consistent with this moral logic, performing an important role in

ensuring some state resources trickle down to ordinary voters (Tidey 2018). Such expectations for redistribution do not reflect a relationship with future ties of obligation, but rather disillusionment with politics, and a desire to get something out of the system that mostly lets voters down. Writing on India, Still and Dusi (2020, 112) observe that politicians are seen as being brutally self-interested, and as such, “the least they can do to offer some of their spoils, so the thinking goes”. The often-missed implication of this logic is that voter expectations on politicians are based on the positions they have held, and their financial situation (Weiss 2016).

Bagi-bagi has particular implications for incumbents. In Rita’s first election in 2014, she gave what she considered to be a modest amount for people to come to her ‘socialization’ events. These expenses multiplied several times when she competed as an incumbent in 2019. She explained:

The more terms you have served, the more expensive the cost....The first time, I only gave a small scarf for 10,000 rupiah and I was elected. Then the second time was like this, "Mam, you have been sitting, you used to have an Avanza car, now you ride a Pajero."...The higher we rise, the higher the political cost.

The expectation that Rita will give a share of the government largess increased her campaign expenses. While in other contexts incumbents enjoy reduced campaigning expenses and/or increased ability to fundraise (Piscopo et al. 2021), within the political idiom of money politics and *bagi-bagi*, it can increase costs in Indonesia (although see Sherry’s experience below). The assumption is that elected officials have access to government largess and that they should *share* the spoils. These assumptions are less accurate for women representatives who tend not to hold portfolios conducive to patronage.

The moral logic of *bagi-bagi* also increases costs incurred in building campaign teams. Candidates must pay for accommodation and transportation, particularly in larger constituencies. While these positions might be filled by volunteers in other countries, in Indonesia, the social norm is to pay people for their time. ‘Witnesses’, or scrutineers are needed, not only to ensure other parties do not cheat, but also to keep an eye on one’s own party candidates. Much of the overall cost of campaigning is therefore not directed to voters, but to people on the same team. While some may consider these expenses as falling outside money politics as defined above, we see it as part of the same logic. That is, payment to campaign workers demonstrates one is committed to them, and is also seen as a ‘fair’ share of the spoils circulated at election time. The correspondence between payments to voters and payments to team members is also evident when we look at the strategies candidates deploy to lower these costs.

Money politics as neither inescapable, nor always effective

Despite the transactional nature of *most* of North Sumatran politics (Simandjuntak 2012), it is not an insurmountable barrier to being elected. We identify five strategies that men and women deploy to achieve the aim of money politics—demonstrating a commitment and one’s attentiveness to the people—without the notorious practices associated with it. We are not arguing that these strategies are effective in getting everyone’s vote. As our respondents explained, there are always people for whom a cash payment is seductive or needed enough to be taken, of which a portion of recipients will feel obligated to vote for the candidate. Nor are we saying that elections can be costless, or even inexpensive. *Oleh-oleh* and paying for campaign teams are part of all candidate expenses. Rather the aim is to reduce these costs as much as possible so that they become affordable.

The first strategy is 'sowing and harvesting'. Imelda is a young woman in her late 20s who is establishing a track record of service in order to launch a political career later in life. She holds a position within a catholic organization, and works in two NGOs. She has the advantage of belonging to a clan with considerable political clout in her constituency, but name alone is not enough to be elected, or at least not without resorting to distributing cash. She has therefore turned down parties requesting her to contest elections in order to put in the ground work required. According to Imelda:

if you do not want to be involved in money politics, you have to start serving the people; that is, a system of sowing and harvesting... The community appreciate little acts of kindness, and they will remember it. So winning people's heart is quite easy.... Before the election, you have to make the area feel a debt of gratitude.

Indebted in ways other than giving money.... Plant the good there, like planting a tree. Money disappears right away, right?

Sowing and harvesting conveys the different timing of a campaign based on acts of kindness over a long period compared to the short-cut of cash transfers. Imelda explains, if a candidate who appears only when an election is about to be held, then the people ask for "the contents of the bag".

Such a strategy may be less costly in terms of money, but more costly in terms of time: a resource also in short supply for women (Murray et al. 2021). For many women in Indonesia, however, they simply capitalize on the work they are already doing in the community. Rani was a nurse in the community and knew little of campaigning before being approached by a party. She simply continued her community work but oriented towards getting votes: "During the campaign I provided free medical treatment... We organized doctors, free medicine, ten or

more nurses. That was my campaign. If it is about money, sorry...I don't have it". Rani gave some money for people's transport and the opportunity cost of attending events as 'the moral thing to do'. But payments of any size do not necessarily win elections. "By my principle, if you want to be elected do not campaign with your lips but with your heart. Build the strong relationship with the people instead of relying on money". She defeated several 'newcomers' who gave large volumes of cash, but were not elected as they did not have those relationships. The flip side to this second strategy of capitalizing on an existing track record of community service is that women who have not been strategic earlier in life struggle to make up for lost ground if they want to become a candidate later on. For example, some women undertook significant social work, but in areas that did not coincide with electoral boundaries.

A third strategy is to find alternative ways to get the public's attention, demonstrate one's attentiveness to them, and sustain an emotional connection. Sherry is a female legislature who has built a large support base through her efforts connecting to people at the 'grassroots'. She uses social media to grab people's attention, and then organizes well-attended events. In her early days, she would sing at these events so that the voters remembered her. Even though she is now an incumbent, she claims that there are limited expectations on her to provide gifts when she comes to the people. "My expenses are not too high. Why? Because I get down [to the grassroots] more, sleep less, socialize more, talk to more people....Maybe you don't have anything to sell, you just sit down". Sherry describes the building of connections that comes from speaking with people *at their level*, that is, not considering oneself higher than them, showing that she understands their circumstances. Sherry has seen her fellow incumbents invest a large amount of money in elections, only to lose. "They received less votes than me. Why? Because they didn't come down to the people".

Religion is also a means into people's hearts. Erlina is the leader of one Islamic women's organization, and while she has not been a candidate herself, she has learnt how it is possible to win elections without money. As part of the campaign team for a male religious leader:

we did not spend money on anything.... People asked what we needed and then sincerely made flyers, banners...They raised funds. This is called *ikhlas* (sincerity). Look at the person. If s/he has got a place in the hearts of the people, then they do not have to use money politics.

Ikhlas is an important principle for Muslim Indonesians. It is used to describe action done not for personal interest, only the reward received from God. The line between politics and religion is blurred for many in Indonesia. According to one party administrator, if politics is presented as being a form of worship, then candidates can be elected without money politics. While men are more likely to be religious leaders, women have also used their standing among faith-based communities to be elected (Dewi 2017). Two women in our small sample—Fatma and Erlina—saw the success of male religious leaders in elections as evidence that they too could one day contest without resorting to money politics.

The final strategy is related to the above: building networks of committed women (and men) who will volunteer their time during elections without the need for payment. Women who 'run as women' capitalize on both voter sentiment and the support networks of women's organizations in aid of their campaign (Mahsun et al. 2021). There are several established women networks in Indonesia attached to religious organizations (such as Nahdlatul Ulama), and state-led women's institutions (such as the Empowerment of Family Welfare) (Ichsan and Fajri 2021). Several women in our study had experience of leading, or being part of campaign teams that drew upon their collective networks and social capital to build support without draining the candidate's resources: "[She] took the initiative to contest the election....We were

not paid; we supported ourselves to win her the seat. Day and night we went to many areas to campaign for her, we were really in the spirit of ‘winning women’ at that time”. Hanum and her friends even paid for travel to remote locations themselves. The women activists were part of a women’s organization committed to empowering women as leaders, and campaigning was seen as an extension of this commitment.

Rather than considering expensive campaigns as unavoidable in order to win an election, many successful candidates described how distributing cash was an unsuccessful strategy. Sari explained how money was irrelevant to her win:

Even if we did money politics, if people do not like us, we will not be elected. Many of my competitors [gave money but] did not get a seat. We must be recognized first, our root [history, who we are] is known. Even though we are known, if we do not give something, someone else will. We did have political costs, but many friends spent two billion, but they were not elected.

Sari’s account underlines what is the truth for many: giving money is expected, but it does not guarantee, or even contribute towards a win. There is a common saying in Medan, “*ambil uangnya, jangan pilih orangnya*” [take the money, don’t vote the person]. As the distribution of cash has become common in Indonesian elections, people have become cynical. Money does not signal attentiveness, commitment, nor engender feelings of obligation, making it less effective as a campaign tool.

The question is why do people engage in money politics—at least in its most crude form of distributing cash and gifts—when the evidence it wins elections is slim and contradictory. Such a question is relevant to other transactional electoral cultures, such as India. Chauchard (2018) describes the practice in Mumbai’s elections as a ‘prisoner’s dilemma’, in which giving money

is seen as ineffective, but candidates must do so to neutralize opponents. Candidates in Andhra Pradesh had too much at stake, most notably ego and local prestige, to find out whether or not vote-buying was necessary to win local elections (Still and Dusi's 2020). The potential shame of a huge loss in municipal elections in Dehradun compelled at least one candidate with no chance of winning to invest in buying votes to save face (Jakimow 2020). The great deal at stake can make candidates risk adverse once they have committed to the campaign. The 'just in case they make a difference' cash transfers perpetuate the perception that money politics is inescapable.

Rather than a winning election strategy, distributing cash and gifts should be considered a strategy of last resort. As Imelda states, "I observe these candidates who have not done anything [in the community]. Inevitably, the only effective strategy left is to 'fill this bag'". The strategies outlined above—develop relationships, build a track record of community service, establish an emotional connection, capitalize on religious affiliations and mobilize networks—are not particular to transactional democracies. What is distinctive in countries where money politics is rife is that distributions of cash and gifts has become a widespread short-cut to this more long-term strategy, or, to enable candidates to compete in elections without the necessary background. In addition to asking how money politics is a barrier for 'good' candidates, we therefore also need to consider how money politics facilitates the election of 'bad' candidates. While not all female candidates are 'good' and male candidates 'bad', due to the distribution of wealth in Indonesian society, expensive campaigns are one explanation for male overrepresentation. As we aim to show in the next section, the *perception* that money politics is unavoidable, rather than the fact of a lack of alternatives, further sustains male political dominance.

Money politics as a deterrent

In August 2019, five months from the elections held in April, nobody was talking about the strategies of women successfully elected. In a seminar room on the University of North Sumatera campus with 19 men and women (activists, academics, leaders of religious and other non-government organizations, and one unsuccessful candidate), there were only laments about the failure to elect more women. The elections were described as ‘brutal’, ‘not in the right spirit’, ‘complicated, competitive and expensive’. The prevalence of practices of vote-buying, the ‘dawn raids’ in which teams present voters with stuffed envelopes just before they vote, made contesting an election an unattractive proposition. As one participant said: “I immediately saw the cost of the election and being a candidate: indeed, it is the price of economic death. I don't know about the game of money politics, but the minimum cost of politics is definitely a lot of money”. The specter of money politics loomed large in the appraisals of what had gone wrong for women candidates. The question is, did these participants over-estimate the importance of money for electoral success?

As we know from the above narratives, ‘good women candidates’, those with “a strong base of community support through leadership in organizations of various sorts, and who are motivated to serve their communities through political participation” (White and Aspinall (2019, 3), can get elected. Yet even though candidates can limit their expenditure, and excessive spending on campaigns does not necessarily yield electoral success, most of the women we identified as ‘good women candidates’ were still deterred by money politics. Hanum, now in her fifties, has spent thirty years working with grassroots women's movements and has built an NGO that mobilizes women to talk, organize and eventually become leaders in their communities. She motivated women in her village who were uneducated and married at a young age to work in

the field of children's education so that eventually they could establish their own NGOs and help empower other women. She is passionate about women's leadership, is well-known in her constituency, and has a large network of supporters.

Despite being a credible candidate, Hanum has rejected the invitation by parties to contest elections due to money politics.

Even though women have space to do politics, the [financial] capital is not enough....if we talk about practical politics, it is not enough to be well-known or smart, right? You need money too. Money, money, I don't have any money at all. Let's say I need 200 million rupiah, I do not even have 20 million to be allocated for that need...So we do not prepare ourselves from the beginning, we do not think about going into practical [party] politics one day.

Despite her vast experience and networks developed through decades of social activity, and her own experience as a member of a campaign team that successfully reduced costs, she underestimated her capacity to win an election without vast sums of money.

Younger generations have grown up in an environment in which money politics is the norm, and hence a political career is never entertained. Meliana, a woman in her 20s, was a student activist and has worked in an NGO since graduation. In 2019, two parties approached her to be on their ticket. She knew that if she became a candidate, her extended family would support her and she could rely on their votes. She refused, however: "Now money politics has become more widespread. This is one of the most extraordinary challenges for the millennial generation, like us...We have the ability [but], 'oh, no money, what will you do?'" money politics shapes the way Meliana and her friends see the practice and possibilities of representative politics. Melania is not ignorant of the potential for alternative pathways, but her

youth works against her. It takes time to undertake the groundwork so that one does not have to offer money. While Meliana may one day be in a position to ‘reap’ what she has ‘sown’, she is denied opportunities in youth to develop her political skills and leadership.

Older women have more of an established track record, but are afraid that when it comes to the final count, it will not be enough without distributing cash. As elections require at least some monetary investment—costs of elections can be reduced, but are never costless—women with limited wealth were deterred from contesting. They feared the amounts required in the end would exceed what they have. For others, they stood for election but did not compete optimally, believing in the end that they would be outspent by other candidates. One such candidate, Utari, did not dare to spend all the money she had available. She worried that her son's college funds would be disrupted. She has seen other candidates spend money with abandon and this frightened her. According to her, “even close friends can forget us at the ballot box if they are given as little as 200,000 rupiah [14 USD]”. Women make calculations as to the likelihood of winning against the costs. Women’s relative reluctance to divert personal resources from family to their political career is common beyond Indonesia, and puts women at a disadvantage in expensive electoral systems (Piscopo et al. 2021, Murray 2021).

As long as money politics is the dominant political imaginary of Indonesian elections, contesting will be considered too much of a gamble by many worthwhile candidates. While some women seem to overestimate the importance of money and underestimate their own chances of success, for others, money politics shifted the calculations they made as to whether competing was worth the gamble. The theoretical possibility of winning without distributing cash, or without access to government resources to distribute as ‘club goods’, may not be enough to convince risk-adverse women to become candidates. It is important to consider not

only who is excluded from political leadership as a consequence (women, people without access to wealth, and cumulatively, women from modest backgrounds) but also who such a political imaginary benefits. As ‘good candidates’ do not step forward, the political ground is left open for candidates without a track record of social action and community relationships to take short-cuts to election through cash, thereby perpetuating the belief that money politics is unavoidable.

Conclusion

The literature examining the impact of gendered wealth gaps on democratic politics has focused on the material disadvantages women face in campaigning and the effectiveness of strategies such as gender campaign financing to overcome them. While this literature has recently expanded to case studies outside of Euro-America, few, if any, have examined patronage democracies through a gendered lens. Indonesia, as a country in which money politics is rife, holds important lessons for scholars of gender and politics. Our findings are based on qualitative interviews and FGDs with a small number of participants, and are suggestive rather than conclusive. Nonetheless our research makes an important contribution in a context where money is the biggest factor in women’s political underrepresentation, yet gendered electoral financing initiatives are lacking. We identify two lessons to guide programs and initiatives seeking to increase women’s representation in countries where money politics is established political practice.

First, initiatives to fund women’s campaigns so that they can compete on an equal footing to men are unlikely to succeed, and are arguably unethical. Where the ‘sky is the limit’ in terms of how much political candidates will invest, the goal must be to support women to minimize

the costs of their campaign. Programs to get more women into politics in Indonesia should focus on identifying potential candidates early and guiding them in building careers in community action that ‘sow the right seeds’ to become a viable candidate in the future. Feminist organizations can help mobilize supporters willing to support a campaign without payment. Mentoring can help would-be candidates develop the emotional connections and gain the attention of the people so that they are well-known and loved prior to the election. Rather than increase access to money, enquiring into what money does in elections, and finding alternative ways to achieve the same outcome without the large financial investment, is a more appropriate approach to increasing women’s representation.

Second, perhaps more important than these initiatives to increase women’s representation is the promotion of narratives that it is possible to win elections on the cheap. The *perception* that distributing cash is unavoidable is as effective in sustaining political dominance by privileged men as the material advantages they enjoy. Perpetuating the belief that campaigns are expensive is not only an effective mechanism for male dominance in Indonesia. Recent research in Australia has revealed how some men have sought to deter women from contesting council elections by exaggerating the costs of campaigning when offering (unsolicited) ‘advice’.ⁱⁱⁱ Not only do women need to know that alternative electoral strategies can lead to success, but also that the chances of success are such that the gamble is worth taking. The more we publicize the narratives of women (and men) who win elections without resorting to patronage and distribution of goods and cash, the more the political imaginary of money politics as an inevitable feature of Indonesia’s democracy will be challenged.

It is not all about perception and imagination however; money politics is a material problem in Indonesia that has a negative impact on women’s political representation. Advocacy is required

to reform those aspects of electoral systems that perpetuate related practices. Research of how money politics works has identified several priorities for electoral reform (Aspinall and Berenschot 2019; Aspinall and Mietzner 2019). These include changing the ‘open-list’ proportionate system that has led to the personalization of campaigns and strengthening political parties so that they develop stronger policy positions. FGD participants also claimed that the four per cent threshold required by parties to occupy seats in the DPR, and the simultaneous Presidential and Parliamentary elections, encouraged parties to select candidates with independent wealth or celebrity status to increase the overall party vote. Transforming the electoral system to reduce the reliance and effectiveness of practices associated with money politics will help address not only the underrepresentation of women in Indonesia, but also the overrepresentation of men and women from ‘elite’ and wealthy backgrounds.

We see two research priorities to further enhance our understand of the gendered impacts of money politics in transactional democracies. First, is to consider the gendered impact of government-resourced clientelism, including analysis of the differential power to distribute government resources. The distribution of public services, government contracts, jobs and so on, is perhaps a more significant a source of patronage than the more notorious practices of direct vote-buying. As the state exercises a large degree of control over these resources in Indonesia, women’s underrepresentation in the upper echelons of the civil service in well-resourced departments, is closely connected to their political underrepresentation. Second, following the political careers of men and women who are successfully elected without resorting to money politics will help us better understand the impacts of incumbency. Does holding a position of elected representative make the distribution of club goods, cash, and other resources more necessary in order to win subsequent elections? Understanding (and potentially

challenging) voter expectations of incumbents and politicians' long-term calculations is also important to transform electoral practices in Indonesia.^{iv}

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ⁱ The Jakarta FGD was held at Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI). We thank Kurniawati Dewi for organising this event. The FGD underlined the importance of money in Indonesia's elections, but we have not drawn upon the data further in this paper that focuses on North Sumatera.

ⁱⁱ All names are pseudonyms

ⁱⁱⁱ Research on the New South Wales council elections is being undertaken by Tanya Jakimow.

^{iv} We thank an anonymous reviewer for this insight.