

Political Polarization in the 2018 North Sumatera Governor Election Campaign

Walid Musthafa Sembiring^a, Subhilhar, Heri Kusmanto^b and Hatta Ridho
*Doctoral Program of Development Studies, Faculty of Social Science and Political Science,
Universitas Sumatera Utara, Jl. Prof. Dr. A. Sofyan No. 1 Kampus USU, Medan, Indonesia*

Keywords: Political Polarization, Regional Head Elections, Political Campaigns

Abstract: In 2018, simultaneous regional head elections were held in 171 regions consisting of 17 provinces, 39 cities, and 115 regencies. North Sumatera Province is one of the regions that carry out elections. As the region with the fourth largest population in Indonesia, North Sumatera Province is one of the areas that gets the spotlight. Mainly because there were only two pairs of candidates who passed verification at the General Elections Commission, namely the Edy Rahmayadi-Musa Rajekshah pair and the Djarot Saiful Hidayat-Sihar Sitorus pair. In the campaign process, there is polarization in the main voters related to the sentiments of each candidate who is fighting. The purpose of this study is to analyze how political polarization is in the 2018 North Sumatera governor election campaign. This research is qualitative research with a constructivist paradigm. The results of this study indicate the causes of polarization, a strong polarization between each supporter of the candidate pair and the division of public opinion on social media.

1 INTRODUCTION

Political polarization has become a phenomenon that has strengthened in the last decade in Indonesia. The presidential election between the Joko Widodo-Jusuf Kalla pair against the Prabowo Subianto and Hatta Rarajasa pairs in 2014 became the main trigger. The presidential election with two pairs of candidates made the supporters' votes split to build a demarcation line. According to Wilson (2014) Polarization is a popular phenomenon that is more developed at the mass level than at the level of the political elite. explains that polarization occurs because of a strong commitment to a culture, ideology or candidate so that it divides one group from another (Groshek, Jacob & Michalska, 2017). Polarization makes a group think its views are the most correct, while the opposite group is a group that has the wrong political and moral views (Mason, 2015).

This situation continued in the DKI Jakarta Provincial Election campaign, at that time there were three pairs of candidates competing, namely the pair Agus Harimurti Yudhoyono and Sylviana Murni, the incumbent pair Basuki Tjahaja Purnama and

Djarot Saiful Hidayat and the pair Anies Baswedan and Sandiaga Uno. In the days prior to the incumbent campaign, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama mentioned the verse Al Maidah 51 in the Koran which made him a convict of blasphemy. The couple Anies Baswedan and Sandiaga Uno finally won the 2017 DKI Jakarta provincial head election.

After losing in DKI Jakarta, Djarot Saiful Hidayat ran again in the simultaneous regional head elections in 171 regions consisting of 17 provinces, 39 cities and 115 regencies. As for Djarot Saiful Hidayat, who was identified as being close to Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, negative sentiments about Djarot Saiful Hidayat's presence in North Sumatera received verbal rejection from Muslim voters (Xue, 2018). Moreover, Djarot Saiful Hidayat is paired with a Christian candidate, namely Sihar Sitorus, which further strengthens religious sentiment in the 2018 North Sumatera gubernatorial election.

At that time there were two pairs who passed the candidate verification at the General Elections Commission, namely the Edy Rahmayadi-Musa Rajekshah pair and the Djarot Saiful Hidayat-Sihar Sitorus pair. The election for the Governor of North

^a <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4419-5626>

^b <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1370-7876>

Sumatra became politically interesting because it was only followed by two pairs of candidates and were national figures from different institutions (Wanasari, 2019).

Edy Rahmayadi is one of the sons of the North Sumatra region who before the election was an active TNI with the rank of Lieutenant General and occupied a strategic position in the TNI as Commander of the Army Strategic Command (Pangkostrad). Edy Rahmayadi's partner is a young North Sumatran entrepreneur who is also widely known through the many institutions and organizations he is involved in, namely Musa Rajekshah.

This pair took the tagline ERAMAS with the vision of North Sumatra with dignity. While the pair of competitors is Djarot Syaiful Hidayat paired with Sihar Sitorus (DJOSS). Djarot is a national figure cadre of the PDI Perjuangan and previously was Deputy Governor of DKI Jakarta paired with Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), and later also served as Governor of DKI Jakarta replacing Ahok who was convicted of blasphemy against Islam. Meanwhile, his partner, Sihar Sitorus, is a PDI Perjuangan cadre who is also a big businessman from North Sumatra.

During his campaign, there was a sentiment that Edy Rahmayadi was negatively identified by DJOSS supporters as arrogant and temperamental. This is reinforced by the circulation of a video of Edy Rahmayadi arguing with one of the farmers in Ramunia Village, Deli Serdang District on social media while Musa Rajekshah received a negative sentiment, namely being portrayed as a figure close to the 212 group which was perceived by DJOSS supporters as an intolerant group. The symbolic battle between each of the supporters of the candidate pair for governor and deputy governor in North Sumatra strengthened at all levels of social groups. This polarization can be seen implicitly within the same social group, namely Islamic political groups and moderate groups.

In the event of the election campaign in North Sumatra, some of the affected voters were patterned into two opposing camps and had no common ground. They are opposite according to the pattern of support for each candidate pair. At this point, Muslim voters tend to support the ERAMAS pair, while moderate groups tend to choose the DJOSS pair. The support pattern on the surface follows moderate vs conservative cleavage.

Where moderate groups tend to support Djarot while conservative groups tend to support Edi Rahmayadi. This is clearly seen on the surface with strong polarization, where social reality is very

complex. The research entitled "Political Polarization in the 2018 North Sumatra Governor Election Campaign" would like to describe what causes polarization, how polarization occurs and what are the impacts of political polarization.

2 RESEARCH METHODS

This article is research with qualitative research methods with descriptive analysis analysis with a constructivist paradigm (Moleong, 2006). The use of this method is intended for researchers to be able to focus on phenomena that occur in problems or phenomena that are actual at the time the research is carried out, then describe the facts about the problem being investigated as they are accompanied by rational and accurate interpretations. This method will help researchers to understand the reality that occurs related to the polarization that occurred in the political campaign in the regional head election of North Sumatra Province in 2018. Then the primary data of this research was obtained by the authors from journals, books and documents or reports related to the research focus. The author then analyzes case phenomena inductively regarding the causes of polarization, polarization conditions and the impact of political polarization on regional head elections in North Sumatra Province in 2018.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Causes of Polarization in the 2018 North Sumatra Regional Head Election

In a broad understanding, political polarization is often linked to the context of ideology and religion. Although there are several understandings related to political polarization, polarization is often shown through differences of opinion, attitudes, or placement on a certain ideological axis of the respective communities involved in it. In particular, political polarization is divided into two levels, namely elite political polarization and mass political polarization. Elite polarization refers to the division that occurs between political parties within the government and political parties outside the government. Then mass polarization refers to a condition where the attitudes of voters/society towards political issues, figures, and other citizens are openly divided.

In the context of the 2018 election of the Governor and Deputy Governor of North Sumatra Province, the polarization that occurs is mass polarization. The reason for the split that occurred involved the attitude of voters towards political issues, the candidate's character and the candidate's religious issues which became the trigger for the split in political attitudes.

During the election campaign for the Governor of North Sumatra, the candidate pair Edy Rahmayadi-Musa Rajeckshah carried the campaign tagline: "North Sumatra with dignity" and came with a vision and mission that prioritized community programs as a trigger for their campaign to gain sympathy from Islamic groups. Not only that, the discourse of this pair being the son of the region was highlighted as a demarcation line with competitors who came from outside North Sumatra.

Meanwhile, the candidate pair Djarot Saiful Hidayat-Sihar Sitorus came with the campaign tagline: "All Affairs are Easy and Transparent" which emphasized the importance of a clean and professional bureaucracy in its vision and mission. Furthermore, the North Sumatra Smart Card, the Healthy North Sumatra Card and the Prosperous Family North Sumatra Card became the mainstay of the campaign for the Djarot Saiful Hidayat-Sihar Sitorus pair in overcoming strategic problems in North Sumatra.

This empirical fact is also the main reason for the 2018 gubernatorial election battle that cannot be separated from Islamic issues during the campaign. Moreover, Djarot Saiful Hidayat's partner, Sihar Sitorus, is a Christian candidate, making the fragmentation of Muslim voters even more extreme. This situation then has an impact on voters in the East Coast regions, which are the basis for the largest Islamic Permanent Voters List (DPT) in North Sumatra, which demographically amounts to 65 percent. As; Medan City, Deli Serdang Regency, Langkat Regency, Serdang Bedagai Regency, Asahan Regency and Batubara Regency.

3.2 Political Polarization in Campaign

The battle that linked religious and regional issues in the 2018 North Sumatra gubernatorial election was very strong, especially on social media such as; Facebook, Twitter, Path, Youtube, WhatsApps, Instagram with features like, share-feed, tweet-retweet, upload-download, path-repath, selfie-regram, post-repost. Click activism on social media during the 2018 North Sumatra gubernatorial election shows a portrait of the people of North Sumatra in 2 conditions. First, social media users who access and

share information functionally, are more knowledgeable, more empowered, and have opportunities in many ways thanks to communication information technology related to religious issues (Hadiz & Teik, 2011).

Second, those who are technologically stuttering, only follow trends, become easy targets for the technology market, mainly related to politics and continue to struggle with impact stories about choosing non-Muslim leaders. According to data released by the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII) in 2018, which states that the largest contribution of internet users in Indonesia remains Java Island, which is 55.7 percent. Meanwhile, Sumatra Island is 21.6 percent, and the area of Eastern Indonesia is 10.9 percent. Specifically for North Sumatra Province, the highest percentage was on the island of Sumatra, namely 6.3 percent. Around 10.5 million people have experienced the internet in North Sumatra which has an impact on all things, especially those related to politics and elections, which are discussed via the internet, namely social media (APJII, 2018).

Discourses embodying political religion empirically do not only occur in determining the state constitution or in determining the paradigm of the relationship between religion and the state in a secularistic, integralistic and symbiotic context in social media. However, in the study of contemporary Islamic politics, religious and political discourse is more in the context of the issue of primordialism that occurs in every political interest (Strandberg, 2014). The issue of primordialism in the form of religion in politics is only an attempt to manipulate religious understanding or knowledge. Then from this understanding it is expressed in the form of propaganda, indoctrination, campaigns and socialization to form understanding as religious teachings or forms of ethnic values (Strandberg, 2011).

The strengthening of religion issues in the public sphere cannot be separated from the pressure to influence religious and ethnic consensus. The influence of the consensus is an effort to incorporate the fanatical interests of primordialism into the political agenda in order to influence people's opinions and conceptions (Supriyadi, 2018).

Furthermore, Djarot is a former deputy governor of DKI Jakarta who later paired with Asuki Tjahaya Purnama (Ahok) in the 2016 DKI Jakarta gubernatorial election. This situation has automatically had a lot of impact or influence on the people of North Sumatra. How about the 212 peaceful demonstration that raised the issue of Islam and hate

speech, which in the end wanted Ahok to lose in the DKI Jakarta Pilkada because they were considered to have insulted the Qur'an. This means that Djarot's presence in North Sumatra as a person who had formed a coalition with Ahok made it easy for some people to take advantage of and spread religious issues.

Team Edi Rahmayadi and Musa Rajeckshah also used this situation in their campaign strategy. Utilizing the issue of religious identity which is still warm and still embedded in the public's memory. Take advantage of the 212 moment that just happened and learn from Anis-Sandi's victory in the DKI Jakarta Pilkada. Meanwhile, the Djarot Saiful Hidayat-Sihar Sitorus pair also played with religious issues combined with ethnicity issues. Especially when the United Development Party (PPP) politician Muzakir Ridha said that the Javanese Bataks must unite, don't want to lose to the soldiers during the grand campaign of the DJOSS pair in Deli Serdang Regency, North Sumatra Province.

3.3 Polarization Impact

The polarization of society in elections always has an impact after the election. Aspinall (2014) explains that democracy in Indonesia has recorded a number of shortcomings in each of its implementations. However, a significant positive achievement must be explored further. Among the most populous provinces in Indonesia, North Sumatra Province is an area that is able to build a new democratic system since the wave of direct regional head elections was held. This certainly makes North Sumatra a mature democratic region in Indonesia.

At this point, the author strongly believes from each finding that the condition of political polarization in the political campaign for the regional head election in North Sumatra is very clearly visible, interestingly, although the polarization during the campaign was very strong, it did not reduce the spirit of diversity and tolerance post-election. Even though at the time of the campaign the potential for polarization was clear. However, the public easily saw the two pairs of candidates as the best leaders in North Sumatra.

The reconciliation process becomes very important after the election, the reason is that the support of voters who previously quickly formed in opposing positions, but after the election it has not been seen directly what the supporters of each candidate pair fear. In fact, during the campaign period, each candidate pair's supporters talked about their fears if the opposing pair was elected.

Although the political polarization that occurred in the 2018 North Sumatra gubernatorial election still has a strong impression that it affects the voters' perspective on politics, this kind of polarization must be minimized, one of which is the number of pairs of candidates at the time of the election is more than two pairs of candidates in the future. This means that the perspective in viewing political campaigns, both on policy and identity issues, is highly biased by the sentiment of political polarization. If the political polarization gets bigger or stronger, it is very worrying that the campaign in the upcoming North Sumatra gubernatorial election will actually be distracted by the negative sentiment that builds up, which in the end will harm the community.

At the same time, of course, the buzzer networks of the two groups during political campaigns should not have a tendency to amplify negative sentiments (Lim, 2014), rather than create a productive discourse in that development. Due to the fact that in campaign conditions, the issue of political and religious polarization is still the dominant commodity to spread hatred (Nastiti & Ratri, 2018). Because it would be very ironic if these hate groups were more dominant than critical and rational groups who tried to remind the public interest in the upcoming North Sumatra gubernatorial election.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Political polarization became one of the main problems in the 2018 election for governor and deputy governor of North Sumatra Province. The split in the public's attitude in viewing candidates and spreading issues on social media is a part that strengthens the polarization. In fact, the media, both conventional and new media, must be portrayed as an ideal means and information base to find out public opinion about policies and political positions, in addition to building community support for politicians who are campaigning. The ability to create a space for dialogue between politicians and the public as well as attracting the interest of novice voters/young voters makes social media increasingly important for politicians to attract the hearts of the main voters related to the issue of primordialism.

However, the game of religious symbols and regional issues in building polarization cannot be separated from the hope of gaining support from a specific mass base in the 2018 North Sumatra gubernatorial election. The construction of these symbols was deliberately presented by the campaign team to inspire potential voters with the pride and

fanaticism of religion, ethnicity and race. Aspects of identity politics continue to play, although to a relatively small degree. However, the lesson we can take is that the polarization in cyberspace at the time of political contestation is also not a matter of fighting right and wrong but how to present politics that builds togetherness as citizens.

19(4), pp. 509–527. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2018.1433021>.

REFERENCES

- Aspinall, E., Mietzner, M., 2014. Indonesian Politics in 2014: Democracy's Close Call. *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies*, Vol. 50(3), pp. 347-369. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00074918.2014.980375>.
- Groshek, Jacob, & Karolina Koc-Michalska. 2017. Helping Populism Win? Social Media Use, Filter Bubbles, And Support for Populist Presidential Candidates In The 2016 US Election Campaign. *Jurnal Information, Communication & Society*, Vol. 20(9), pp. 1389-1407. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1329334>.
- Hadiz, Vedi R., & Khoo Boo Teik. 2011. Approaching Islam and Politics from Political Economy: A Comparative Study of Indonesia and Malaysia. *Jurnal The Pacific Review*, Vol. 24(4), pp. 463-485. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2011.596561>.
- Lim, M., 2017. Freedom to Hate: social media, Algorithmic Enclaves, and the Rise of Tribal Nationalism in Indonesia. Vol. 49(3), pp. 411-427. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2017.1341188>.
- Mason, L. 2015. "I disrespectfully agree": The differential effects of partisan sorting on social and issue polarization. *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 59(1), pp. 128–145. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12089>.
- Moleong, L. J. 2006. *Metodologi Penelitian Kualitatif*, Rosda Karya. Bandung.
- Nastiti, A., & Ratri, S. 2018. Emotive Politics: Islamic Organizations and Religious Mobilization in Indonesia. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 40(2), pp. 196–221. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26539178>.
- Strandberg, Kim. 2011. A Social Media Revolution or Just a Case of History Repeating Itself? The Use of social media in the 2011 Finnish Parliamentary Elections. *Jurnal New Media & Society*, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1461444812470612>.
- Supriyadi, Mohammad. 2015. Politisasi Agama di Ruang Publik: Komunikasi SARA dalam Perdebatan Rational Choice Theory. *Jurnal Keamanan Nasional*, Vol. 1(3), pp. 387-426. <https://ojs.ubharajaya.ac.id/index.php/kamnas/article/view/32>.
- Wanasari, S. 2019. Komunikasi Pemasaran Politik Tim Pemenangan Edy Rahmayadi-Musa Rajekshah di Pilkada Sumut 2018. Master's Thesis. Faculty of Social Science and Political Science. Universitas Sumatera Utara.
- Xue, S. 2018. Ethnic Mobilization in 2015 Local Elections in North Sumatra, Indonesia. *Asian Ethnicity*, Vol.