

Visualizing Politics in Indonesia: The Design and Distribution of Election Posters

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Where studies have shown that visuals are the primary means of political communication, research continues to focus largely on text-based information. To add to our understanding of visual-political communications, this article analyses Indonesian election posters since the 1950s. Drawing on historical materials and on a content analysis of 4,000 election posters, it asks why election posters have been designed and distributed in particular ways. Findings indicate that in the past, posters used singular, though powerful, social symbols to mobilize demographic groups behind political parties. However, contemporary posters are more visually complex and more candidate-centered, making arguments as to what the candidates represent. Furthermore, although the wide distribution of posters has always been used to signify strength, the number of posters has proliferated in recent elections. These trends can be explained by underlying social forces, advances in technology, institutional reforms, and the identities and types of parties and candidates.

Keywords: visual communications, election posters, election campaigns, democracy, electoral systems, Indonesia

Over the last two centuries, campaign posters have been one of the most widespread and socially significant types of political visual communications (Seidman, 2008). This article gives them the attention they deserve by examining the visualization of politics in Indonesia, past and present, through a focus on the design and distribution of election posters. As in many countries around the world, election posters are a ubiquitous part of Indonesian campaigns, blanketing cities, towns, and villages during election season. Large, colorful, and sometimes humorous posters in recent years have featured candidates dressed as popular, mythical, and historical characters, such as Superman, James Bond, Barack Obama, Mr. Bean, David Beckham, Po the Panda, Gandalf, and Sylvester Stallone, as well as monkeys, tigers, goats, and a kangaroo. These humorous posters tend to get the greatest online attention, but most posters are less zany. Typically, they contain images of smiling candidates dressed in religious or ethnic garb, suits, or casual

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Date submitted: 2021-10-12

¹ I thank Ines Cute, Victoria Birrell, Husnul Isa Harahap, and Ibrahim Zafar for their excellent research assistance. In gathering contemporary Indonesian election posters, I was helped immensely by Jeremy Menchik, Firman Witoelar, and a network of researchers in Indonesia.

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political party jackets; backed by images of the Indonesian flag, a mosque, or a rally scene; with their name in bold; and accompanied by a slogan promising development and prosperity for all.

The visual imagery and symbolism of posters can have an enormously evocative power, conveying a sense of realism and drama that outstrips the impact of purely verbal campaign messaging (Blair, 2004, pp. 50–51). Indeed, research has found that visual media are actually the primary means of political communications, whereas the text is secondary (Grabe & Bucy, 2009). Furthermore, election posters have a significant impact on voters around the world (Seidman, 2008). In Indonesia, surveys have found that voters were more exposed to election posters than to other campaign methods (Muhtadi, 2019, p. 237) and that this exposure influenced vote choices. For instance, in voter surveys during regional head elections, Hill (2009) found that candidates' election posters and brochures influenced voters' choices as much as newspapers or TV. The prominence and effect of posters in Indonesian elections are, in part, due to the persistent downsides of other-using media—specifically, the expense of TV advertising and the limited reach of print, radio, and social media. As a result, election posters are the medium that many Indonesian candidates still favor. In interviews with candidates across Indonesia, Edward Aspinall found that they routinely list posters and banners as one of their major expenses (personal communication, April 22, 2022).

Despite their importance in campaigns, however, the study of election posters and of visuals more broadly tends to get the short shrift in the study of elections. It is far more common for researchers to gather and analyze text-based data sources. In part, this is because visuals, compared with text, are often seen as more ambiguous and because this ambiguity can present difficulties in terms of clear-cut interpretation, comparison, and generalization. This article contributes to our understanding of visual politics and situates Indonesian election posters in a larger historical context. By analyzing Indonesian election poster campaigns from the 1950s to the present, it engages in a longitudinal type of study that is widely lacking in the literature (Geise, 2017, p. 19). Specifically, it assesses the design and distribution of posters. It argues that social forces, advances in technology, institutional reforms, and the identities and types of parties and candidates can explain why posters were designed in a particular way and what factors affect their printing and placement.

The article studies secondary sources and unique collections of election posters through three political eras. First, historical accounts from Herbert Feith and other sources provide an understanding of poster campaigns from Indonesia's initial democratic election in 1955. Second, a unique study of 300 election posters gathered by Kutut Suwondo and coauthors during the legislative elections in 1982 (Suwondo, Budiman, & Dirdjonsanjoto, 1987) captures their design during Suharto's New Order regime from 1971 to 1997. Finally, content analysis of almost 4,000 election posters collected across Indonesia by the author in recent years offers a detailed understanding of the kinds of appeals they contain since Indonesia's democratic transition in 1999.

The Design and Distribution of Election Posters

Design

Election posters can vary in terms of their design (i.e., the choice, arrangement and layout of elements, their typographical styles, tonality, and the use of color and negative space). On one end of the spectrum, poster content can be as simple as a single party logo or candidate image along with a candidate's name. In contrast, posters can be more complex, involving a myriad of decisions on how and with whom candidates are photographed, the kinds of clothes worn, the choice of background imagery and symbols, the inclusion of other elites or individuals, and the use of textual messages and slogans.

In this article, I highlight four primary factors that affect the design of election posters: social forces, technologies, institutions, and central actors in parties and campaigns. First, social forces, rooted in culture and history, often underlie the promotion and choice of specific visual elements in election posters. In many cases, political parties are forged out of historical social cleavages. As a result, visual elements such as party colors, logos, and icons that appear on political posters are often drawn from the party's original historical or social base (Bonnell, 1988). But even more broadly, visual politics often taps into ideas and norms that are broadly understood within society.

Second, advances in such technologies like printing, cameras, computers, and design software have all revolutionized the design and print industry over the years (Seidman, 2008, pp. 9–12). These advances together, with developments in graphic arts, have made it possible to produce far more visually complex and stylized posters than in the past.

Third, poster design is affected by institutional factors—such as the electoral rules, government regulations, and regime type—as these institutions provide the rules within which visual politics is constructed. For instance, one study found that posters designed for elections with proportional representation rules tended to dedicate more space to leaders, policies, slogans, and party-label elements, whereas in majoritarian elections, more space was dedicated to candidates (Fox, 2018a). Governments can place some restrictions on the content of election posters too. At a minimum, the content must follow laws on freedom of speech, libel, and defamation; some countries also regulate content that fosters ethnic and religious tensions or uses the national flag (Holtz-Bacha & Johansson, 2017, pp. 389–390). Authoritarian regimes take a heavier hand in restricting the content of election posters—at least those of opposition parties.

The final factor relates to the main actors—the types and identities of parties and candidates. Although there is an expansive literature on the impact of religious and ethnic identities on the campaigns of political parties and their candidates, other research has found that the size of political parties can affect the content and role of posters (Dumitrescu, 2012; Fox, 2018a).

Just as these four factors affect the design of posters, the design of posters can, in turn, affect constituents' political considerations. Even relatively simple poster designs can have a powerful effect. In the United States, Kam and Zechmeister (2013) showed that mere exposure to a candidate's name on a

poster induced support for the candidate. Meanwhile, Dumitrescu (2010) found that the use of a large candidate image on French election posters affected electoral performance. Indeed, studies have found that simple images of candidates can have a clear impact on people's evaluations of the candidate's attractiveness, competence, and likability, and the positive or negative nature of these evaluations is highly correlated with candidates' actual success or failure (Lawson, Lenz, Baker, & Myers, 2010; Mattes et al., 2010). The use of party logos and slogans on posters can also affect electoral performance (Dumitrescu, 2010). Party logos, beyond mobilizing partisan support, can tap into powerful social identities if they use elements drawn from religion or ethnicity, for instance. In this way, party logos can prime these social identities to be used as a basis for evaluating political parties and candidates.

Very often, communication in election posters is quite visually complex. This complexity allows candidates to make persuasive arguments to voters. Unlike the written or spoken word, visuals lack a syntax by which to make precise arguments; however, the choice and layout of elements can suggest associations, causal relationships, and generalizations. To do so, visuals rely on the use of images, often rooted in culture and history, that have meaning for the viewer (Schill, 2012, p. 122). These visuals often act as enthymemes, causing voters who see the various elements in an election poster to fill in, based on their own cultural and historical knowledge, the evidence or reasoning needed to complete the argument (Blair, 2004). Posters that contain images of candidates standing with the national flag, meeting with labor leaders, or dressing in Islamic garb or that feature ethnic dwellings are all presenting arguments—making associations, connections, and generalizations—about the candidate's character, identity, fitness for office, and key stands on core issues. Research has found that such visual imagery can contain more information than verbal messages, communicates ideas more quickly, is more memorable, and tends to override other message types (see Schill, 2012, pp. 121–123).

Overall, choices made in the poster-design process present to voters the particular attributes, identities, and issues that a campaign wants them to consider in the election. In this respect, posters potentially have an agenda-setting and priming effect, setting the evaluation criteria and proposing the most fitting candidate or party (Geise, 2017, p. 22). Notably, these effects may be more influential in local elections in developing countries, where candidates lack the resources for TV advertising and where a regional poster campaign can more effectively and efficiently target potential voters than social media or TV can.

Distribution

In addition to the content of election posters, parties and candidates must also consider the size of their poster campaigns. Generally, candidates tend to distribute and display posters in excessive numbers, at least when regulations permit. During Egypt's 2012 presidential campaign, journalists wrote that the country became awash with posters pasted thickly on walls and hanging from trees, with one candidate spending an astounding \$6.4 million USD on 10 million posters. In Ukraine, American consultants working on presidential elections were surprised by how nearly every billboard had a political message, and outdoor posters and billboards rivaled television advertising as the most popular medium for candidates (D'Aprile & Jacobs, 2010).

Evidence suggests that displaying posters en masse in a neighborhood can signal strength and credibility, foster a sense of momentum, and serve to mark territory. Through surveys and interviews with French and Belgian party members, Dumitrescu (2012) found that election posters were an important way for parties to indicate their strength to voters, supporters, and opponents. In Ireland, Marsh (2004) observed that putting up large numbers of posters established candidates' credibility. In the United States, observers have indicated that the 2016 Trump campaign's unusually large investment in posters (as well as other signage, such as shirts and hats) created a sense of momentum and persuaded voters that supporting him was safe (Johnson, 2020). Finally, there is a territorial aspect of where posters are placed, in that they can act as visual markers claiming areas for particular parties or candidates. This is particularly true when the posters are displayed en masse. Since the presence of posters can signify power and territorial control, it is not uncommon for opposing campaigns to steal or destroy each other's posters.

I will draw on this understanding of the design and distribution of posters in the following sections on visual politics in Indonesia's past and present. Indonesia is a fascinating place to study visual politics. With a population of over 270 million, it is the third-largest democracy in the world, and its citizens exhibit great diversity of religious, ethnic, and regional identities. Since declaring independence from the Dutch in 1945, the country has experienced significant institutional reform. It held its first democratic elections in 1955 but then had three decades of authoritarian elections beginning in 1971. In 1999, Indonesia transitioned to democracy, and soon thereafter, it introduced reforms that shifted the country from a party-centric to a more candidate-centric electoral system (Fox, 2018b). While the dominant political cleavage has revolved around Islamic and nationalist orientations, political parties and candidates have drawn on a wide range of ethnic, religious, regional, nationalist, and class-based identities to mobilize support in elections over the years.

Visualizing Politics in the Past

Poster Campaigns of the 1955 Election

For the 1955 election, the Information Ministry posted several million large posters around the country to explain in uncomplicated terms that because Indonesia was now independent, elections were needed to make independence better (Feith, 1957, p. 52). For the election, the political parties' election posters were relatively simple in layout, containing just a party logo and the party name printed in black and white (see Figure 1). Limited technology, rather than government regulations, constrained the creation of more complex visuals. The emphasis on the party logo was driven by the fact that these were party-centric elections—citizens were voting for parties, not candidates. Despite their simplicity, the party logos integrated powerful symbols representing alternative ideologies and forms of identification that were rooted in social cleavages within Indonesian society. Practically all the party logos drew on some religious, nationalist, or socialist symbols: the star and crescent for Islam; the cross and rosary beads for Catholicism; the buffalo and rice for nationalism; and the wheel, hammer, and sickle for socialism.

Feith described the 1955 election as a conflict between these major symbols, all representing alternative ideologies. Symbols were particularly important in village areas where issues played no part in the campaign. To appeal to voters in these areas, candidates interpreted their parties' ideologies and

symbols in terms of local myths and values. Although the symbols were used for political competition, they originated from the local social arena (Feith, 1962, pp. 354–356). In observing the election in Java, Geertz (1957) explained,

Because the same symbols were used in both political and religious contexts people often regarded party struggle as involving not merely the usual ebb and flow of party maneuver, the necessary factional give and take of democratic government, but involving as well decisions on basic values and ultimates. (p. 51).

During this era in Indonesian history, visuals had a powerful societal symbolic function. To mobilize political support, parties tapped into the emotionally evocative power of iconic symbols.



Figure 1. Posters from Indonesia's 1955 election. Top left: The Socialist Party's poster with a star and a Hindu god of plenty in the center in Bali. Top right: The star and crescent of the Masyumi Party in front of an ethnic Batak house in North Sumatra. Bottom: Various posters in Jakarta. From left, the posters contain the Labour Party's wheel and bull (the bull, a symbol connected with Sukarno and his proletarian ideology of Marhaenisme, was also used by the Indonesian National Party [PNI]), the Patriot Party's fist, the Socialist Party's star, the Islamic Association Party's star and crescent, the Catholic Party's cross and rosary beads, and the Communist Party's hammer and sickle. Source: *Life* (1955, p. 48).

The campaign was of long duration, so political parties tended to make cloth banners, or billboards of wood or tin, as paper was less durable (Feith, 1957, p. 52). Feith (1957) provided some information on the extent of poster campaigns across political parties. The Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia or PKI) was the most active in displaying its logo (a hammer and sickle) and displayed large numbers of posters and billboards in every city and town, as well as in village areas. McVey (1996) noted that the Communist Party's strategy of blanketing regions with campaign materials bearing its hammer-and-sickle logo represented an effort "to convey an image of massiveness, of irresistible and inevitable expansion" (p. 111). The Islamic party Masjumi invested a similar number of resources in an extensive poster campaign. Overall, these two parties must have invested a large portion of their resources in posters, given the vast number of sheet-iron billboards produced.

In contrast, the Indonesian National Party (Partai Nasional Indonesia or PNI) was somewhat more limited in its poster campaign. So too was the Islamic party Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), which focused more on rural regions. The remaining parties, who fared poorly in the election, distributed smaller numbers of posters only in the cities and larger towns, ignoring the village areas. The 1955 election was deeply divisive at the social level, and there were numerous reports of election posters being torn down by opposing groups (Feith, 1957, pp. 22–27). The contentious politics during the election were fueled partly by the parties' use of these powerful symbols. This intense ideological contestation continued after the election until an attempted coup in 1965 resulted in the annihilation of the Communist Party, the massacre of suspected Communists, and the rise to power of General Suharto.

Poster Campaigns During the New Order

The next election occurred in 1971 under Suharto's New Order authoritarian regime and was won by the regime's political vehicle, Golkar. For the five elections from 1976 to 1997, competition was more tightly controlled, with institutional reforms that forced all opposition parties to combine into two—an Islamic party, PPP, and a nationalist party, PDI. This reduced the variety of party logos to just three. The PPP used the symbol of the Ka'bah shrine in Mecca, the PDI used the buffalo (previously used by the former nationalist party PNI), and Golkar used an image of the banyan tree (symbolizing protection and unity).

A collection of over 300 election poster photographs, *Pemilu Dalam Poster* (The General Election in Posters), captured the state of election posters in Central Java during the 1982 election (Suwondo et al., 1987). As these elections were still very party-centric, regular candidates were absent from the posters, but occasionally there would be references to Suharto (Golkar), Sukarno (PDI), or haji figures (PPP). In terms of messaging, parties would often combine some Bahasa Indonesia with Arabic (Golkar and PPP) and local languages like Javanese (Golkar and PDI).

The collection of posters highlights differences between the governing Golkar party and the opposition parties. Many of the PPP and PDI posters were similar to the posters of 1955, containing little more than a printed party logo and maybe a brief text invoking Islam or nationalism. For instance, the PPP had posters with a large Ka'bah logo and the message, "Memilih tanda gambar Ka'bah berjuang menuju Ridlo Allah" (Choose the sign of the Ka'bah, which strives for Allah's blessing; Suwondo et al., 1987, p. 73). PPP and PDI also often used cheap materials, such as scrapboard or woven bamboo, to make their posters,

partly because of their limited resources. However, some of the posters added complexity by incorporating hand-drawn imagery that referenced such themes as Java's traditional Wayang puppetry, anticorruption issues, and Indonesian youth. Unofficial messages using harsher language critical of Golkar were also painted on cardboard nailed to trees or scrawled directly on walls. In contrast, the governing party, Golkar, had far more resources to invest in its election posters and could take advantage of advances in poster design and production. Its more visually complex posters and large billboards with printed illustrations depicted Indonesians at work, school, and play, coupled with messages on a whole host of issues, such as education, healthcare, development, and nationalism.

Throughout the authoritarian years, Suharto's government used written and unwritten regulations to control the visualization of politics. Since the Communist Party was outlawed, the use of visual elements considered to represent communism, such as the hammer and sickle, has been forbidden. The PPP's explicit and potent Islamic symbol of the Ka'bah was also seen as a threat when it was put forward for the 1976 election. Wanting to obscure the Islamic nature of the party, the government introduced new regulations for the 1987 election, requiring all visual elements in a logo to be drawn from the symbol of the Republic of Indonesia. This forced the PPP to change its potent Islamic logo to a simple star.



Figure 2. Posters and political graffiti from Indonesia's 1982 election campaign in Central Java. Top left: Golkar poster with a campaign message on improving education, accompanied by imagery of a school, school children and teachers. Top right: PPP's Ka'bah logo with the message "the choice of the Islamic community." Bottom left: Handmade poster supporting PDI. It calls on the younger generation not to be provoked by emotion, to stay united, and to vote for PDI. Bottom right: Hand-painted message saying that Bung Karno's (Sukarno's) instruction is to vote for PDI. Source: Suwondo et al. (1987, pp. 28, 49, 64, 103).

The government also used regulations to control color by allowing party logos to be printed only in black and white from the 1976 election onward. Furthermore, creative uses of imagery were restricted. For instance, in 1987 the PDI advanced a very successful strategy of exploiting the image and symbolism of former president and nationalist icon, Sukarno. In PDI posters and campaign materials, the image of Sukarno often hovered over pictures of Megawati Sukarnoputri (the party leader and Sukarno's daughter),

reflecting a guardian spirit. Again, however, Suharto's government reacted by using its regulatory power to curtail the success of PDI's strategy: in the subsequent 1992 election, the use of pictures and slogans reflecting individual persons was prohibited (Eklöf, 1997, p. 150).

Suwondo and colleagues (1987) described how party posters were often put up at night by youth who supported that party. They were hung from electric poles and trees and strung across roads. Golkar tended to be more organized and was usually the first party to display posters. Although the opposition parties were a little slower in their distribution, they used the time lag to their advantage by placing their posters in a higher—and presumably a superior—position to Golkar's. In addition to posters, parties also placed temporary statues of their logos on the streets; for example, the PDI created bull statues (Suwondo et al., 1987). Overall, Golkar used its resources to dominate the realm of poster campaigns, as it had the largest, most numerous and most durable posters.

In addition to election posters, the color of a political party was also an important means by which parties could symbolically mark their territory. Until 1997, Golkar's yellow color predominated, being painted on road markers, street fences, and curbs in towns and villages during election time. But in the 1997 election, the opposition fought back against this kuningisasi (yellowization) by painting property in the colors of their party (green for the PPP, red for the PDI). In several cases, "color wars" between supporters of the PPP and Golkar erupted into violence (National Democratic Institute, 1997).

Compared to 1955, some things remained the same during New Order regime, as election posters continued to draw on potent social symbols and mobilize constituents behind political parties. But there were some new developments. Golkar drew on advances in design to include illustrations in its posters, creating a somewhat more sophisticated visual imagery than in the past. Meanwhile, its superior resources helped Golkar dominate geographic space with the largest poster campaigns. Although the opposition parties lacked Golkar's deep pockets, they innovated, creating homespun posters and more varied messaging. Regulations, however, constrained their use of visuals, particularly because of the Islamic symbolism of the PPP or the use of iconic images of Sukarno by the PDI. These constraints would be lifted in the new democratic era, contributing to a far richer visual politics.

Visualizing Politics in the Present

After Indonesia was hit hard by the Asian financial crisis in 1997 and 1998, protests erupted across the country, culminating in Suharto's resignation and democratic elections in 1999. During the election campaign, one popular item sold on the streets was a poster with the symbols of all 48 political parties. These multiparty posters, snapped up for 1,000 Rp. (about \$0.12), encapsulated the sheer joy of open political competition.

A Content Analysis of Contemporary Posters

To understand the design of election posters during Indonesia's new democratic era, I draw on a large and unique data set of election posters gathered during legislative and regional head elections from 2009 to 2011. A content analysis of the design elements in these posters offers a wealth of detail on how

candidates and parties mobilized support. Unlike posters from earlier elections, which featured party logos front and center, contemporary posters feature the images and names of individual candidates. The institutional reforms that have driven this change will be discussed below.

The election posters from the 2009 legislative elections and regional head elections held between 2010 and 2012 were photographed by the author and a network of researchers across Indonesia. Every effort was made to prevent bias and gather a reasonably representative sample. Posters were photographed on all the main islands; the number of rural and urban constituencies with posters was roughly proportional to the national averages; posters came from all political parties that competed (with more posters from the major parties); and the proportions of male and female candidates with posters were consistent with the proportions of candidates competing. The final poster data set contains 3,962 unique election posters of 2,148 candidates who competed in 129 constituencies across 20 (of Indonesia's 34) provinces.² Fifteen hundred and one election posters were from regional head elections and the rest were from the legislative elections.

To quantify the content of posters, I developed a codebook and built a database containing fields to code each poster's visual (images and candidate clothing) and textual elements. For clothing, I coded the type of clothing (Islamic, Javanese, military suit and tie, etc.), headdress, cloth accessory, and whether clothing was in the party color or used the party logo. For imagery, I coded the inclusion of supporting individuals and institutions, elite images, Indonesian flags, and other items such as buildings and monuments, symbols, landscapes, or maps. As for the text, I coded the use of non-Indonesian language (e.g., Arabic, Javanese) and transcribed all the textual content.³

The clothing, imagery, and textual elements in each poster were then interpreted in terms of eight descent-based and non-descent-based categories. These categories emerged from the manifest coding (visible or explicit content) of the posters. Descent-based categories are largely associated with ancestry and lineage, comprising the identities into which people are born; nationalism, religion, ethnicity, and regional affiliation were the four most prominent categories of this type. Political parties, populism,⁴ policy issues, and youth were the four most prominent non-descent-based categories. Notably, though some posters certainly did focus entirely on one type of category or the other, most mixed elements from multiple categories. Table 1 presents data on the percentage of posters with various categories of identity appeals.

Nationalism was the most prevalent descent-based category, as 45% of posters had at least one nationalist element. Although there were some references to nationalism in the text, this emphasis was most often relayed through the use of a billowing Indonesian flag behind the image of a smiling candidate.

Religious elements in election posters almost entirely related to Islam. Islamic clothing and headdress were by far the most common way in which candidates invoked their Islamic identity. But

² See Table 1 in the online supplementary materials at colmfox.com for a breakdown of posters, candidates, and constituencies by election and province.

³ See the online supplementary materials at colmfox.com for details.

⁴ Populism in posters was limited to the inclusion of people-centric images and textual elements.

candidates also used Arabic script or messages to invoke Islam. Islamic imagery, such as an image of a mosque, Mecca, or Islamic clerics, was used as well. In addition, Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (PKB) candidates frequently invoked their connection with the Islamic organization NU by using its logo and by displaying images of influential NU ulama (clerics). This prevalence of nationalist and Islamic symbolism in Indonesian posters was also noted by Duile and Tamma (2021) in the 2019 legislative elections.

Table 1. Percentage of Indonesian Posters With Various Categories of Poster Content.

		Clothing	Imagery	Text	Any Clothing/Images/ Text
Descent-Based Categories	Nationalism	–	41	7	45
	Religion	22	4	11	32
	Ethnicity	16	4	10	24
	Regionalism	–	8	3	11
	Any Descent-Based Category	34	51	27	75
Non-Descent- Based Categories	Party	25	31	17	49
	Policy	–	1	27	27
	Populism	–	4	23	26
	Youth	–	1	6	7
	Any Non-Descent-Based Category	25	34	53	72

Note. "Any Descent-Based Category" refers to the percentage of posters that contained at least one nationalist, religious, ethnic, or regional element. The same logic applies to "Any Non-Descent-Based Category."

Clothing was the most common way in which candidates evoked ethnicity. They might wear very formal and ornate ethnic clothing, more modern batik, or accessories with something like the woven ulos (scarf) hung over the shoulder. Ethnic languages were also quite common, from the Batak greeting Horas! to the use of the Javanese term Wong Cilik (the little, or poor, people). Although the use of Javanese and indigenous languages also occurred on posters in earlier periods, a new addition was the use of Mandarin writing and Chinese greetings, such as the Chinese New Year greeting Gong Xi Fat Chai. Occasionally, ethnicity was invoked through imagery—for example, by displaying ethnic dwellings such as the striking Minangkabau houses, or through scenes of ethnic events.

The final descent-based type of appeal in posters was regionalism. Although most regions in Indonesia are closely tied to a particular ethnic group, some imagery and textual elements invoked a broader regional identity. In this category, regional monuments or the local landscape—such as iconic mountains, scenic jungles, lakes, and coasts, or even cityscapes—were popular elements. References to terms such as *putra daerah* (sons of the soil) were also used on occasion.

Even though Indonesia's political parties are considered relatively weak, political party symbolism is still quite common. Candidates often invoked their party through images, with the most common visual trope being the party leader hovering above the candidate. Candidates particularly liked to feature well-known leaders from the largest parties, leaders who would go on to compete in the presidential election in the following months. Party clothing was popular too. The canary yellow Golkar suit jackets were a particular favorite, as was the sporty Democratic Party bomber jacket. Compared with expressing party connections visually, textual references to parties and party leaders were somewhat less common.

Although identity-related elements tended to dominate the posters, some did contain appeals related to policy and governance. Elements related to government institutions, such as city hall, or government services such as hospitals or ambulances did appear on some posters, but for the most part, policy and governance appeals were communicated through the poster text. Candidates had messages on improving the economy, offering better health and education services, tackling corruption and unemployment, and developing and modernizing the district.

Populism was largely invoked through text messages and slogans that appealed to the people (*rakyat*), workers (*pekerja*), farmers (*petani*), or the poor (*kemiskinan*). Populist visual elements included images of crowds and working people, photographed at markets, rallies, or other events. Sometimes these images of people served as a backdrop for the candidate, whereas on other occasions, the candidate was in the scene among the people. Finally, some posters attempted to appeal to Indonesia's large youth population. Often, these used images of young people, schools, and universities and coupled it with messages that they would champion the concerns of youth and students and would help to improve education and the availability of scholarships.

The descent-based categories of nationalism, religion, ethnicity, and regionalism were most often communicated visually, whereas non-descent-based categories were portrayed more often through text. Overall, 34% of the posters used ethnic or religious clothing; only 25% contained party clothing. Also, 51% contained some form of descent-based imagery, as opposed to 34% with non-descent-based imagery.

Explaining the Design of Contemporary Posters

Advances in technology, as well as institutional reforms, can help us understand two key changes over time in election posters: the introduction of more complex visual imagery and more personalized, candidate-centric poster designs. With the introduction of democracy, the business of election campaigns has become more professionalized. This process involved the emergence of new political actors such as polling firms and political consultants; new ways of understanding voter sentiments and candidates' strengths and weaknesses; and new approaches to building an appealing platform and an attractive image that will resonate with voters (Qodari, 2010).

In addition, technological advances in design, such as computers and design software, have expanded the possibilities for designers, allowing them to create more complex, full-color visual designs, which include a range of photographic and illustrated elements. For example, see Sigit Pramono's poster in Figure 3 (top left). The posters with unadorned black-and-white party logos that were common in the 1955

election and those with hand-drawn illustrations from the authoritarian era have disappeared, replaced by more professionally produced posters containing images of larger-than-life airbrushed candidates and a mix of signs, symbols, and slogans. Figure 3 (top right) shows a poster from Salatiga, Java, in 2011, the same place where the 1987 election posters discussed above and shown in Figure 2 were photographed. This poster visually demonstrates some of the advances in design and production since the 1980s.

Technological changes cannot, however, explain one major shift in the central focus of election posters—namely, a shift toward candidates. Personalized messages, imagery, and symbolism relating to individual candidates have increased, while elements relating to political parties have declined in prominence. This trend has largely been prompted by electoral reforms. In the past, Indonesians voted for a party in the legislative elections, and presidents and regional heads were appointed by legislatures. Today, voters make direct selections of candidates in all Indonesian elections. This is due to the introduction of direct presidential elections in 2004, the introduction of direct regional head elections in 2005, and the shift from closed-list to fully open-list proportional representation in the legislative elections beginning in 2009. These institutional reforms have made the electoral system more candidate-centric, prompting candidates to largely campaign for themselves rather than for their party as a whole.

Election posters, featuring the candidate's image and name prominently, are a critical means through which candidates foster name and face recognition. In preparing for a run, candidates sometimes display posters of themselves in the constituency even before registering, to boost their name recognition and likability (Qodari, 2010, pp. 122–139). But even for well-known candidates, maintaining public visibility is important. Indeed, incumbent candidates use posters in advance of elections, distributing government-sponsored posters of themselves coupled with a message on a local government initiative in which they were involved (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019, p. 195).



Figure 3. Contemporary posters from regional head elections in 2011. Top left: Medan, North Sumatra; top right: Salatiga, Central Java; bottom: Karo, North Sumatra. Source: Author.

Although posters overall have become more visually complex and candidate-centric, some variation in poster designs was associated with the identity of candidates. Table 2 presents data on the content of posters based on the gender and religion of candidates. One substantial gender-based difference was that 56% of female candidates wore religious clothing, compared with 27% of male candidates. This difference is largely because of females wearing the jilbab. Although in many of these cases, female candidates may

not be consciously trying to invoke Islam, candidates are aware of the importance of religious symbolism and the signal the headscarf sends. In the 2009 presidential election, Wiranto (Kalla's running mate) strongly believed that religious symbolism could sway voters. Although Wiranto's wife and Kalla's rarely wore headscarves in daily life, they did in election posters. Wiranto went on to claim that their wives wore headscarves regularly (Mujani, Liddle, & Ambardi, 2018, p. 68). A second major gender-based difference was that female candidates were far more likely to use party imagery and dress in party clothing in their election posters. I found that 65% of female candidate posters used party elements, as opposed to 46% of male candidates. A possible explanation for this difference is that many first-time female candidates were running in legislative elections and that they either chose to or were encouraged to align themselves more closely with their political party. Beyond those main differences, male candidates were slightly more prone to include regional, policy, and youth-related elements in their posters.

As for the candidate's religion, the most substantial differences concerned candidates' use of descent-based identity elements. Islamic candidates tended to emphasize their religious identity, while non-Islamic candidates were more likely to include regional, ethnic, and nationalist elements. Moreover, even when non-Islamic candidates included religious elements, these elements were almost always Islamic in nature—often displaying the candidate's Islamic running mate dressed in Islamic clothing on the poster. Overall, the inclusion of non-Islamic elements was extremely rare. This tendency is undoubtedly connected to Islam's prominence in public and political life.

Table 2. Percentage of Posters With Each Category of Element Across Female and Male Candidates, and Across Islamic and Non-Islamic Candidates.

Category	Candidate Gender					Candidate Religion				
	Female %	Male %	Diff. %	Sig.	χ^2	Islamic %	Non-Islamic %	Diff. %	Sig.	χ^2
Nationalism	46	45	1		0.36	45	54	-9	***	10.87
Religion	56	27	29	***	226.1	40	25	16	***	33.79
Ethnicity	24	24	0		0.08	31	51	-20	***	53.23
Regionalism	8	12	-4	***	7.50	10	25	-15	***	55.58
Party	65	46	19	***	89.01	9	6	3	**	4.82
Policy	22	28	-6	***	12.65	35	41	-7	**	5.60
Populism	27	26	1		0.55	22	18	4		2.56
Youth	4	8	-3	***	10.78	9	4	5	***	13.04

Note. *, **, *** indicate statistically significant differences (at the 0.05, 0.01, and 0.001 levels, respectively) between posters produced by female and male candidates or between Islamic and non-Islamic candidates for each type of poster content, using chi-square tests. The comparison between female versus male candidates used the entire data set ($N = 3,962$). Data on religion come from the regional head elections only ($n = 1,501$).

Although the study of recent posters indicates that the transition to democracy has been an important inflection point in the visualization of politics in Indonesia. Candidates have expanded their visual vocabulary beyond the singular symbols of 1955 and the simple illustrations of the New Order. Today, they present colorful posters with a wider array of themes, and they create richer enthymemes—or implied arguments constructed in part by the observer—on who the candidate is, what he or she stands for, and why he or she is fit for office.

The content analysis of contemporary posters described candidates' use of various costumes, buildings, landscapes, monuments, symbols, and elite images, all of which are rooted in local, historical, and common understandings. These elements connect with our symbol-interpreting apparatus rather than with our sense of reason and logic and create memorable impressions that can be quickly grasped and understood by passers-by (Blair, 2004, p. 58).

Many candidates, for instance, photographed themselves beside the national flag, in an attempt to co-opt its meaning and associate themselves with the nationalist ideas it evokes. This practice is, of course, not unique to Indonesia; the visual trope of "wrapping yourself in the flag" is common around the world (Schill, 2012, p. 122). Indonesian candidates also used religious symbols to appear pious and compassionate, ethnic imagery to indicate their rich ancestry, and local scenic views to connect them to the district. One poster contained images of the candidates literally growing out of the soil of the district, signaling their *putra dareah* (sons of the soil) credentials (see Figure 3, bottom). Candidates also used crowds and regular people, messages about "the people," or casual clothing in their posters as ways to present themselves as connected to the common people, down to earth, widely supported, and with campaign momentum.

Although election posters contain plenty of group appeals, they do not cast out-groups in a negative light. This tendency can be explained, in part, by specific regulations that prohibit campaigns from insulting an individual, religion, ethnicity, race, class, or other candidate. They also may not pit individuals and communities against each other. Moreover, strategic concerns may be present. Posters are visible to all members of a community, and negative poster appeals may alienate out-group as well as moderate in-group voters. Overall, in their efforts to mobilize support in the democratic era, Indonesian candidates are designing more posters that present a wide range of arguments as to why they should be elected.

The Distribution of Contemporary Posters

The total number of posters has increased considerably since the transition to democracy, largely because of technological advances in poster production and increased competition. Democracy has intensified political competition by introducing new direct elections for regional head and president, making it easier for new parties and candidates to enter politics, and reducing restrictions on campaigning. These factors have given candidates and parties additional incentives to create and display election posters. In each round of legislative elections, up to half a million candidates stand for election, and each one, striving for personal votes, engages in some kind of poster campaign. Candidates competing in regional head contests can face intense competition, as these positions have become quite lucrative since the introduction of decentralization. To outdo their competition, they often create many poster designs during a campaign.

In an election in Medan, a regional city in Sumatra, I photographed over 80 different poster designs by just one candidate.

Technological changes have also aided the design and production of election posters in the democratic era. They can be produced more quickly, more cheaply, and with more durable materials, such as corrugated plastic sheets and PVC plastic. Competition and technological advances have, in turn, fostered many election-related business opportunities for fledgling survey companies, media outlets, designers, and printers involved in the production and distribution of campaign materials and advertising.

The prevalence and popularity of contemporary posters can be explained in part by exploring the legal restrictions, costs, and reach of other forms of campaign advertising. Although over 90% of constituents watch TV, this medium is prohibitively expensive for most candidates. For the very few who can afford it, candidates are limited to 10 spots with a maximum of 30 seconds a day. There are more opportunities to advertise in the local press, and some of the wealthier candidates do so, usually reprinting replicas of their election posters; however, this too can be costly and print readership is quite low (Muhtadi, 2019). Online campaigning is still relatively new in Indonesia. Although there are no specific restrictions on online campaigning (it was only mentioned in the electoral regulations of 2017), it is not a prominent part of campaigns for most local candidates. One reason is that using online media to target potential voters in relatively small constituencies (where most candidates compete) is relatively difficult and requires specialized expertise.

Beyond the low costs, limited legal regulations on posting election posters make them a very appealing form of advertising for all candidates. Candidates are free to post posters in any public spaces except schools, government offices, and places of worship. Posters can also be displayed on private property with the owner's permission. To post posters, candidates have recruited teams of brokers and volunteers. Most candidates try to display some posters in town centers, but additionally, they often target particular neighborhoods with their posters. The intensive nature of their placement is a way of marking territory and gives the impression of strength, credibility, and popularity. It sends a message to residents that they should vote for that candidate and tells rivals that it would not be worth their time to campaign there (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019, pp. 107–108). In addition, candidates reluctant to spend resources on posters may be pressured by their supporters to post more. In one example, a candidate who printed only 200 posters remarked that supporters demanded that her poster campaign should match that of the other candidates, arguing that they needed an equivalent number of posters to campaign effectively for her (Dewi, 2009). Overall, with the introduction of democracy, the production of posters has become a major business, and cities, towns, and villages across Indonesia have been blanketed with mass-produced posters in advance of and during election campaigns.

Conclusions

This article has discussed the development of visual politics in Indonesia by analyzing election posters. I have argued that social forces, technologies, institutions, parties, and candidates have helped to shape both the design and distribution of posters over time. The general trend in design has been toward increasing visual complexity—moving from party-centric posters with singular, potent symbols

during the 1950s to more candidate-centric posters that use a mix of elements to argue why the candidate deserves voter support. Recent electoral reforms have played a critical role in changing the design and function of election posters, shifting them from a medium to mobilize *party* support toward one that mobilizes *candidate* support. In terms of distribution, posters have been and continue to be used to signify strength and popularity. In recent years, heightened competition has increased the intensity with which posters are displayed.

Despite the availability of other forms of print, TV, radio, and online campaign advertising, the humble election poster remains a cost-effective way for candidates to target regionally concentrated groups. This is evident from the massive proliferation of posters I observed not only in Indonesia, but also during elections in neighboring countries, such as Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines.

Looking to the future, there are signs that the prominence of election posters may have peaked in Indonesia. In Jakarta's 2017 gubernatorial election, the incumbent Basuki Tjahaja (Ahok) asked his campaign team to limit the use of banners, posters, and stickers. His opponents, Anies Baswedan and Agus Yudhoyono, followed suit, also limiting their production of campaign paraphernalia. As a result, printing companies noted a sharp drop in orders for printed campaign materials. The candidates explained this change by saying that banners, posters, and stickers were eyesores and bad for the environment, but it was also an effort to shift campaign resources from print to online advertising ("Printers suffer as campaigns," 2016). This shift is readily understandable for gubernatorial candidates who need to reach a larger population of voters. However, for candidates competing in smaller races and trying to reach a relatively small and geographically concentrated set of voters, election posters will remain a popular campaign method for some time. Posters still have some key advantages: They are a cost-effective way to target specific communities, they reach voters who are not online, and they are accessible to the more illiterate parts of the population or those who primarily speak a local dialect.

Nevertheless, in the coming years, we can expect to see the humble printed election posters evolve with changes in technology. With advances in digital communication, greater use of online election posters, which can be downloaded and spread via social media, is likely, along with increased use of digital posters and billboards that can serve up dynamic content, moving images, and animation (Baldwin-Philippi, 2015, p. 79; Lee & Campbell, 2016). Other creative efforts include posters that can be scanned on a smartphone to bring up a speaking candidate, as well as the use of virtual election posters in video games (Holtz-Bacha & Johansson, 2017, p. 392; Taylor & Ortiz, 2020). Beyond these technologically based developments, as long as Indonesian elections remain candidate-centric, we can expect the personal image of candidates and their identities to remain prominent.

Some reduction in the number of physical election posters may be a good thing, particularly in terms of lessening environmental damage. Still, their removal, whether because of regulation, environmental concerns, or a pragmatic shift to online forms of communication, will undoubtedly lessen the carnival atmosphere that has been a prominent part of Indonesian elections past and present.

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