Politics

Identity Politics and Campaign Strategy Re-Formation

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Abstract

Why do political candidates choose to engage in identity politics, and how does this decision impact the effectiveness of their campaigns? This paper examines the use of identity politics through political campaigns in India, Indonesia, and Malaysia to explore how candidates use the identity of their voters as a tool in campaigning. The paper argues that candidates in these case studies have two possible ways to gain voters' support: either through a campaign based on policy issues (e.g., economics) or one centered on identity politics (an exclusive political alliance formed by a social identifier). This paper asserts that candidates turn to identity politics when they need to try a new method to revitalize their campaign because their policy platform fails to capture the attention of a large enough voter group. The case studies that follow assess the use of religious rhetoric by the Bharatiya Janata Party in India (1980-2014), the competing Islamic and Christian candidates vying for gubernatorial and presidential power in Indonesia (2014-2019), and the rise of the Perikatan Nasional Party in Malaysia (2008-2020). By looking at the successful election outcomes of these case studies, this paper argues that identity politics can be an effective campaign strategy for candidates and parties struggling with their current approach.

Introduction

In 1992, Muslims and Hindus fought against each other in India when a riot broke out at the Babri Masjid, resulting in the deaths of 2000 Hindus and Muslims; however, this protest was not what it may have initially appeared to be.[1] Although the event seemed like a spontaneous act of inter-religious hatred, the rally was part of a strategic campaign strategy of one of India's political parties, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The party had been trying to find a way to gain majority control in parliament for over 20 years. In these protests, the BJP tried a new strategy of mobilizing the Hindu community by engaging in identity politics to form a bond with voters around an issue of religious debate: whether a historic mosque should be replaced with a Hindu temple.[2]

The 1992 conflict between Hindus and Muslims over the Babri Masjid mosque is one example of politicians strategically engaging in identity politics. The conflict was vital to the BJP's campaign platform because of its timing, the bond it created between the party and voters, and the successful election outcome of gaining more seats in office due to a stronger connection with the Hindu voter base. By exploring current research on identity politics and introducing new ideas about the timing and outcome of cultivated religious dissension, this paper explains why the BJP's actions at the Babri Masjid were effective and argues for the strategic benefits of undertaking this method of identity conflict in other scenarios.

This paper examines three case studies of religious conflict that a candidate created by using identity politics as part of their campaign strategy. Using religion as an example of how politicians engage in identity politics by creating religious conflict leading up to elections, the case studies illustrate how identity conflict is a powerful way to connect with voters. Research shows that religion is used not as justification for the candidate's policy but rather as a source of debate to create an "us vs. them" mentality and produce a strong feeling of affinity with the "us" group. This source of affinity explains why intentionally creating religious conflict is vital in gaining voters' support. Candidates use religious statements to create a solidified "political affinity group" with voters of the same identity. They use religious rhetoric to convert policy

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[1] The BJP in Power: Indian Democracy and Religious Nationalism. Accessed August 22, 2023. https://carnegieendowment.org/files/BJP_In_Power_final.pdf.

[2] Sircar, Neelanjan. "Religion-as-Ethnicity and the Emerging Hindu Vote in India." *Studies in Indian Politics* 10, no. 1 (2022): 79–92. Accessed August 22, 2023. https://doi.org/10.1177/23210230221082824.

voters to identity-based voters who change their political affiliation because of religious sentiment.

This paper introduces and highlights two important concepts: the timing and outcome of applying this strategy of identity politics. Research shows that candidates have two ways to gain voters' support: through policy or identity issues. Through the case studies, this paper asserts that candidates use identity politics when their policy-based campaign fails to gain enough voters' support and needs help revitalizing their campaign. Candidates risk losing their current voters by creating religious conflict using the above strategy, hoping to create a new bond with voters. This strategy is examined through three case studies: the rise of the BJP in India (1980-2014), the Christian-Muslim political conflict in Indonesia (2014-2019), and the rise of the Perikatan Nasional Party in Malaysia (2008-2020). By looking at the successful election outcomes of political candidates engaging in identity politics and religious conflict to form a connection with voters, I claim that identity politics is a successful strategy when applied at the right time.

Selection of Case Studies

After determining that religious polarization is a repeated form of identity politics and an effective way of mobilizing voters, a subset of countries with known religious conflicts was selected to examine the strategy in more detail. The research process included looking to see where religion was used in political campaigns and voter mobilization strategies. This part of the literature review looked at the following countries: the United States, Mexico, Canada, South Korea, the United Kingdom, India, Australia, Norway, Japan, Taiwan, Chile, Argentina, Costa Rica, Indonesia, and Malaysia.

Indonesia, India, and Malaysia are repeated examples of countries where a politician started a religious conflict, leading to an election victory. All three of these countries are countries where Islam is a prevalent religion. This paper is not attempting to be Islamophobic or discriminatory by selecting these countries. These countries are not chosen for the beliefs within them – they are selected because of the perceived use of identity politics and religious conflict in campaign strategy.

In the preliminary research review on religion and identity politics in India, Indonesia, and Malaysia, there is already a lot of material about a candidate's religious rhetoric impacting how a voter chooses to change their vote based on the religious beliefs they align with. Although

political historians like Leo Suryadinata, S.S Friedman, and James Chin have studied the overall political strategy of politicians creating religious conflict through religious rhetoric to sway voters to take a side in the conflict and vote for the corresponding party, there is little research about the election outcome of this strategy.[3] Additionally, there is little current research about the timing of when a candidate chooses to leave behind their policy-based campaign and transition to mobilizing voters through their religious affiliation and beliefs.

Literature Review

Over the last few decades, Mary Bernstein, a sociologist studying political movements and identity since 1997, has been trying to understand the best approach to defining identity politics.[4] In her 2005 article "Identity Politics," Bernstein states that the term is used widely throughout the humanities and social sciences to refer to the intersection between social identity (e.g. race, gender, religion, class) and political affiliation in a country's political system.[5] Bernstein highlights the evolution of the term's definition, which helps contextualize how this paper approaches understanding identity politics.[6] In 1979, Renee Anspach, a sociologist studying qualitative approaches to understanding foreign cultures, was the first to use the term identity politics to refer to a group of people's activism.[7] Over the next decade, Marc Ross, a political historian of identity politics, ethnicity, and gender, came up with a new definition of identity politics: ethnicity as a contemporary form of politics.[8] In the 1990s, Meznaric and Alund, historical sociologists studying conflict, identity, and politics, described identity politics as violent ethnic conflict and nationalism.[9]

Bernstein considers these historical perceptions when she defines the concept in a 2018 paper as "any mobilization related to politics,

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[3] Identity Politics in Indonesia: The Meliana Case - iseas–Yusof Ishak … Accessed August 22, 2023.
https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2019_4.pdf.
[4] Bernstein, Mary. "Identity Politics." *Annual Review of Sociology* 31, no. 1 (2005): 47–74. Accessed August 22, 2023. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.29.010202.100054.
[5] Bernstein, Mary. "Identity Politics." *Annual Review of Sociology* 31, no. 1 (2005): 47–74. Accessed August 22, 2023. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.29.010202.100054.
[6] Bernstein, Mary. "Identity Politics." *Annual Review of Sociology* 31, no. 1 (2005): 47–74. Accessed August 22, 2023. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.29.010202.100054.
[7] Bernstein, Mary. "Identity Politics." *Annual Review of Sociology* 31, no. 1 (2005): 47–74. Accessed August 22, 2023. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.29.010202.100054.
[8] Bernstein, Mary. "Identity Politics." *Annual Review of Sociology* 31, no. 1 (2005): 47–74. Accessed August 22, 2023. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.29.010202.100054.
[9] Bernstein, Mary. "Identity Politics." *Annual Review of Sociology* 31, no. 1 (2005): 47–74. Accessed August 22, 2023. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.29.010202.100054.

culture, and identity."[10] This paper adopts Bernstein's overarching definition and slightly modifies it: identity politics is the interaction between identity and politics in political affairs where voters are mobilized because of their identities and sometimes forced into a situation of ethnic conflict.

In 2019, political economists Tim Besley and Torsten Persson developed a model of electoral competition and identity formation.[11] Although hypothetical, the model argues that there is a connection between social identity, the mobilization of voters based on identity, and a voter's preference for or against a candidate of a specific identity. The model illustrates the connection between the mobilization of voters in identity politics and how this impacts a voter's views. Political historians Vaara, Tienari, and Koveshnikov argue that a bond forms between voters and the candidates because of voter mobilization based on social identity in their study in 2019.[12] They determine that through identity politics, "us vs. them" situations develop where voters become so aligned with the candidate that aligns with their identity. Voters are willing to support the candidate of the same social identifier in an "identity conflict" against the other group.

However, understanding identity politics in theory differs from considering what it looks like in practice. Researchers have examined caste and how a class-based connection between candidates and voters impacts who voters vote for. For example, cultural anthropologist Steven Folmar examined identity politics in Nepal in a 2007 paper.[13] In 2021, historians Arefin and Ritu did the same and determined how intentionally creating religious dissension creates an "us vs. them" relationship where politicians bond with voters through religious rhetoric.[14]

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[10] Bernstein, Mary. "Identity Politics." *Annual Review of Sociology* 31, no. 1 (2005): 47–74. Accessed August 22, 2023.
https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.29.010202.100054.
[11] The Rise of Identity Politics - Association of Swedish Development ... Accessed August 22, 2023.
http://perseus.iies.su.se/~tpers/courses/politec2019/BesleyPersson190330.pdf.
[12] From Cultural Differences to Identity Politics ... - Wiley Online Library. Accessed August 22, 2023. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/joms.12517.
[13] Identity Politics among Dalits in Nepal - Macalester College. Accessed August 22, 2023.
https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1728&context=himalaya.
[14] Arefin, Md. Nazmul, and Nousheen Sharmila Ritu. "Addressing the Political Dynamics of Radicalization Leading to Religious Extremism in Bangladesh." *Simulacra*. Accessed August 22, 2023.
https://journal.trunojoyo.ac.id/simulacra/article/view/10543/5729.

Religious dissension can also provoke religious extremism. Religious extremism – violent or radical actions justified by religious beliefs – is used in religion-based identity politics. Historians Dodego and Witro studied this concept within Indonesia in 2016 and determined that Indonesian politicians used religious extremism and rhetoric to create conflict.[15]

The historical representations of religious issues within countries are an important reason why religion is a repeated form of identity politics. Psychologists Liu and Hilton researched that socially shared representations of history are essential in determining a people's identity and how politicians connect with this identity. In a 2005 article, they determined that historical narratives help us understand how politicians engage in identity politics and form a bond with voters.[16] For example, a country like India, with a history of religious conflict or religion in social affairs like independence movements, is suitable for a politician to engage in identity politics because religion is an important social issue that is already polarized.

Case Study I: Rise of the BJP In India

The significant rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to control the Indian government highlights how identity politics is an effective strategy. To provide context on the BJP's rise to power and the religious strategy employed by Modi, it is first essential to examine the political party system leading up to the BJP's victory in 2014.

Overview of India's Political System

India uses a parliamentary system with a president and prime minister. The prime minister of India is the leader of the party or political alliance with a majority in their government. Therefore, the prime minister represents the "winning" party and party ideology. India has six political parties, and some of them were founded on religious principles. There is the National People's Party, the Indian National Congress Party, the Communist Party of India, The Bharatiya Janata Party, the Bahujan Samaj Party, and the Aam Aadmi Party. According to recent census data by the Pew Research Center, 79 percent of Indians

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[15] View of the Islamic Moderation and the Prevention of Radicalism and Religious Extremism in Indonesia. Accessed September 3, 2023. https://jurnaldialog.kemenag.go.id/index.php/dialog/article/view/375/212.

[16] Liu, James H., and Denis J. Hilton. "How the Past Weighs on the Present: Social Representations of History and Their Role in Identity Politics." *British Journal of Social Psychology* 44, no. 4 (2005): 537–56. Accessed August 22, 2023. https://doi.org/10.1348/014466605x27162.

are Hindus, and 15 percent are Muslims.[17] The BJP's central belief is Hindutva, an ideology of spreading Hindu dominance. This belief aligns with the majority of the Hindu population in India. It was not until recently, in 2014, that the religious extremism and dissension of the BJP paid off in an election.

When the BJP was first founded in 1980, it controlled almost no seats in the Lok Sabha, the governing body of India. Although the founding ideology of the BJP was Hindutva or Hindu Nationalism – the expression of political and social thought based on religious values – the party did not actively use this Hindu religious ideology in its campaign to form a connection with voters until 1984. Additionally, it was not until 2014 that this strategy paid off in terms of positive election results. Before 2014, Hinduism was a founding ideology for the party's policy and unification but not their election platform strategy of reaching voters and gaining more parliamentary seats.[18]

Origins of the BJP's Success

In 1980, the Indian National Congress was the controlling political body. The party dates back to imperial times and was the principal group involved in Indian independence. Because of the historical ties of the ideas of Indian civilization and liberty to the Indian National Congress and Indian independence, it was challenging for the BJP to unseat the Indian National Congress from political control. However, over the next 30 years, the BJP was able to do so by employing religious sentiment to increase the religious divide between Muslims and Hindus, create a bond with the Hindu majority, and gain their support in vital political races and moments.[19]

In 1984, the BJP only acquired two seats in the Lok Sabha. At this time, the BJP considered whether it should adopt a more secular stance of "Gandhian socialism" or go the other direction and use its founding value of Hinduism as a source of mobilization to form a religious bond with voters. The BJP considered which campaign strategy it should adopt for ten years and changed it in 1992. The BJP ultimately chose the latter option and launched a campaign to build a Ram Hindu

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[17] Mitchell, Travis. "1. Population Growth and Religious Composition." Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, October 27, 2022. Accessed August 22, 2023. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/09/21/population-growth-and-religious-composition/.

[18] The BJP in power: Indian democracy and Religious Nationalism. Accessed August 22, 2023. https://carnegieendowment.org/files/BJP_In_Power_final.pdf.

[19] The BJP in power: Indian democracy and Religious Nationalism. Accessed August 22, 2023. https://carnegieendowment.org/files/BJP_In_Power_final.pdf.

temple at the Babri masjid mosque site. This Muslim Mosque was a historic tourist attraction and one of India's most well-known Islamic landmarks. The new Hindu temple would be constructed at the birthplace of the Hindu deity Ram, which was the exact location of this Muslim site. By making this idea part of their platform, the BJP intentionally created a religious divide to appeal to Hindu voters and see if this could help them gain more seats in government. They chose to do this when their policy strategy focusing on economic reform failed to please enough voters.[20]

By making this decision, the BJP made the "identity choice" and left behind their prior campaign ideas focused on economic reform and state welfare programs. By using religious sentiment to create conflict between Hindus and Muslims, the BJP formed a strong affinity with the Hindu majority. While doing this, the BJP risked not getting any votes from the Muslim population. They angered the Muslim population with this new method by planning to destroy their historic worship site. The BJP was okay with taking this risk because they could solidify and grow their Hindu voter base and win the election without the 15 percent of Muslim voters if enough Hindus voted for them. This strategy led to protests and violence across India when Hindus attacked Muslim people around the mosque and destroyed the mosque. Some Hindus were so dedicated to the BJP supporting the expansion of the Hindu religion and the demise of an Islamic site that they used violence to show their dedication to the party's ideas. The riot was an attack of religious extremism inspired by the BJP's idea to repurpose the mosque site and support the religious beliefs of the majority Hindu group.[21]

Results of the BJP's Strategy

Not only can one see the dedication of some of the BJP's followers to religious extremism, but one can also see it in the election outcome. Using identity politics during this election, the BJP formed a connection with new Hindus, encouraging them to vote for their party and leading the BJP to increase power from two seats to 81 in the Lok Sabha. This first step in the rise of the BJP highlights the success of identity politics in creating a public debate that leads to a strong bond with a group of voters and steadfast supporters.

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[20] The BJP in Power: Indian Democracy and Religious Nationalism. Accessed August 22, 2023. https://carnegieendowment.org/files/BJP_In_Power_final.pdf.
[21] The BJP in Power: Indian Democracy and Religious Nationalism. Accessed August 22, 2023. https://carnegieendowment.org/files/BJP_In_Power_final.pdf.

Over the next 20 years, the BJP did not gain or lose many seats, and the party was stagnant. It was time for the party's leaders to consider revitalizing their election strategy to grow the party. The second phase of the BJP's rise to power occurred during Narendra Modi's 2014 election for Prime Minister. The BJP secured the majority (272) of the seats in the Lok Sabha in 2014. The catalyst of the rise of the BJP was Modi's affiliation with Hindus in rooting out Islamic nationalism from the country. In 2002, Modi had an alleged role in the 2002 Gujarat riots, where 1000 Muslim people were killed. His strong stance on Hindutva and rooting out Muslim nationalism from the country characterized him as an "unapologetic Hindu nationalist." Modi's followers came to call him "the ruler of Hindu hearts." By participating in protests against Muslims and positioning himself as a dedicated Hindu, Modi extended the divide between Hindus and Muslims and aligned with the majority group of Hindus in "us vs. them" dynamics. This choice of strategic religious dissent and the bond with voters he formed by positioning himself this way led him to gain the support of the public. Over the next ten years, Modi ran for higher-level positions in government. In 2014, he ran for Prime Minister.[22]

2014 Election and Strategy Results

In the 2014 election, Modi won the race for Prime Minister, and the BJP came to control the government. His success in bringing the BJP to majority control follows the same theme as the initial rise of the BJP because he intentionally created religious conflict and polarized issues toward alignment with the Hindus' opinions in his successful campaign strategy. Political historians have coined the term "the emerging Hindu vote" to describe the role of religious rhetoric and appeal as the BJP's primary cause of campaign success. The rise of the BJP from no seats to control of the government from 1980 to 2014 highlights the success of engaging in identity politics, creating religious dissension, and forming a bond with voters when a policy platform fails to captivate the attention of enough voters. Modi and the BJP's successful outcome of using identity politics was primarily because they turned to this strategy when their other economic reform policies failed to gain public support.

Case Study II: 2014, 2017, and 2019 Indonesian Elections

Indonesia's 2014 and 2017 elections illustrate how candidates engage in identity politics when their policy platform fails. Although the

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[22] The BJP in Power: Indian Democracy and Religious Nationalism. Accessed August 22, 2023. https://carnegieendowment.org/files/BJP_In_Power_final.pdf.

candidates that used religion in their campaigns were not initially successful, this strategy helped them win elections in later years. This case study of Indonesia highlights how religious conflict between two elections is vital to improving the chances of winning an election.

Overview of Indonesia's Political System

As a religiously diverse country, 86.7 percent of Indonesian voters are Muslim, and 10.7 percent are Christian.[23] Indonesia is also home to a variety of political parties. Some of the parties are more populist and slightly more secular, like the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle and the Party of Functional Groups. However, in the last two decades, new political parties like the Great Indonesia Movement Party have risen to power because of religious extremism in their platforms. In Indonesia, the primary debate between parties is about the role of Islam in public affairs. Because of this central dispute in Indonesian politics, many candidates have experimented with positioning their campaigns around siding or not siding with traditional Muslim values.

2014 Election

In 2014, a candidate named Prabowo Subianto ran for President with an election platform that integrated Islamic rhetoric as a campaign instrument. Prabowo strategized that he would need to use religious rhetoric and his identity as a dedicated Muslim to compete against his competitor, Joko Widodo (Jokowi), who did not use religious sentiment as a campaign strategy. They both competed against Ahok, a Christian-Chinese Indonesian. Jokowi won the election with his secular movement. However, marginal analysis revealed that Subianto outperformed polling predictions by using identity politics to gain the support of militant Islamist groups. Similarly, Ahok's Christian appeals captivated most of the country's Chinese population. In this first election, candidates experimented with religious rhetoric and inspired future candidates to try the same.[24]

2017 Election

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[23] "Indonesia's Election Exposes Growing Religious Divide." Council on Foreign Relations. Accessed August 22, 2023. https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/indonesias-election-exposes-growing-religious-divide.

[24] "Democracy and Religion in Indonesian Diversity." Global Ministries, December 16, 2020. Accessed August 22, 2023. https://www.globalministries.org/southernasiainitiative/democracy_and_religion_in_indonesian_diversity/.

In the 2017 Jakarta Gubernatorial election, Baswedan used the strategy of identity politics in his campaign, which proved effective. Ahok, from the 2014 presidential election, was the incumbent of this governor seat. Ahok faced a big obstacle of keeping his seat, as Chinese people and Christians are minority populations in Indonesia. As Ahok led in the early polls, his competitors, including Anies Baswedan, started to draw up campaign strategies. Baswedan, a conservative Muslim, did not face as much opposition as Ahok, as he was a Muslim in a Muslim-majority district. Baswedan started his campaign by focusing on issues like public transportation, education, and environmental concerns. However, his strategy was not capturing enough attention in the polls, and he was losing despite representing the majority social group.

Baswedan's analysts determined he was losing because he was not using his identity in his campaign. They decided he would need to "play the religion card" and use his identity as a Muslim in an Islamic area to win the election.[25] Luckily, Baswedan had the perfect opportunity to do this when a religious conflict emerged. In a speech, Ahok made comments that were considered anti-Muslim by quoting a verse from the Qur'an, which is regarded as an offensive act for a non-Muslim in the country. This led to a heated civil debate called the Al-Maida case against Ahok for breaking religious laws and quoting the holy text of Islam.[26]

Baswedan capitalized on this scandal by trying to gain support and used religious sentiment to attract people hurt by Ahok's comments. He tried to create religious discord around Ahok's statements. He rallied all the Muslims to vote for him, choose the Muslim "we group," and stand against offensive comments about the Islamic religion. He encouraged Muslims to vote for him if they cared about their religion.[27] Baswedan positioned his campaign around rooting out non-Muslims from office so the integrity of the faith could be protected. To do this, he went out to mosques and gave speeches. By positioning himself as a part of the majority Muslim group, Baswedan created a bond with Muslim voters. In this way, Baswedan swooped in with a landslide victory. By engaging in identity politics, Baswedan formed a strong bond

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[25] "Democracy and Religion in Indonesian Diversity." Global Ministries, December 16, 2020. Accessed August 22, 2023. https://www.globalministries.org/southernasiainitiative/democracy_and_religion_in_indonesian_diversity/.

[26] "Indonesia's Election Exposes Growing Religious Divide." Council on Foreign Relations. Accessed August 22, 2023. https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/indonesias-election-exposes-growing-religious-divide.

[27] "Indonesia's Election Exposes Growing Religious Divide." Council on Foreign Relations. Accessed August 22, 2023. https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/indonesias-election-exposes-growing-religious-divide.

with Muslim voters and created a religious persona that appealed to people with varying levels of religious devotion.

2019 Election

In the 2019 presidential election, Prabowo decided to run again for President against Joko Widodo, whom he faced before in 2014. Prabowo chose not to focus on his ideas around affordable housing in his speeches but on Islamic prayers. Prabowo connected himself to important Islamic political figures like Amien Rais or Rizieq Shihab and had these figures endorse his campaign.[28] By doing this, he appealed to the Muslim majority, who choose not to care about a candidate's political policies but whether they share the same religious beliefs and affiliation. He mobilized many new voters and made the election much closer than in 2014. This threatened Jokowi and made him make more decisive moves to secure the Islamic community by creating new religious schools.

Strategy and Political Outcome

Jokowi decided to make his campaign more religious in other ways as well. The primary way he made his campaign more Islamic was with his choice for vice-president, Ma'aruf Amin. Amin is a Muslim cleric and one of Indonesia's strongest leaders in Islamic movements.[29] By making a VP choice that would appeal to both Muslim moderates and conservative Muslims, Jokowi could keep his incumbent seat. Before this move, he was predicted to lose his seat to Prabowo. Jokowi's decision to engage in identity politics with Prabowo was vital because it helped him compete with the religious campaign of Prabowo. If he did not turn to identity politics, Jokowi would not have won the election. In this election, identity politics helped a candidate make the race closer and then helped the other candidate win. Candidates received their best respective outcomes by choosing to use religion in their platforms to form a connection with voters after policy ideas failed to reach their goals.

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[28] Simandjuntak, Deasy. "Identity Politics Looms over Indonesia's Presidential Election." East Asia Forum, August 10, 2023. Accessed August 22, 2023. https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/11/10/identity-politics-looms-over-indonesias-presidential-election/.
[29] Simandjuntak, Deasy. "Identity Politics Looms over Indonesia's Presidential Election." East Asia Forum, August 10, 2023. Accessed August 22, 2023. https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/11/10/identity-politics-looms-over-indonesias-presidential-election/.

The growing importance of religious views in political strategy in the 2014, 2017, and 2019 Indonesian elections highlights the efficacy of identity-based mobilization of voters. In the latter two elections, candidates capitalized on religious conflict and their identities to engage in identity politics and form a bond with voters, leading to a steadfast group of campaign supporters. Both candidates won their races, illustrating the efficacy of using identity politics at the right time when policy ideas fail to please voters.

Case Study III: Rise of Perikatan Nasional in Malaysia

The final case study comes from Malaysia and follows the formation of the Perikatan Nasional Party through identity politics. As in India and Indonesia, religion-backed political parties exist in Malaysia, with the main differences between parties lying in religious values. Newly formed parties have solid Islamic ties, whereas Perikatan Harapan and Barisan Nasional are more secular. In the last twenty years, a pivotal reform movement against the United Malays National Organization formed after Malaysian independence in 1957.[30]

Overview of Malaysia's Political System

Between 2008 and 2015, new parties were formed in response to poor governance, corruption, and persecution occurring in the newly formed independent Malaysian state. Although the country remains race and religion divided, with 61 percent of the population being Muslim, 20 percent being Buddhist, 10 percent being Christian, and 40 percent not being Indigenous Malays, many parties looked to close this divide and unite the different social groups.[31] New parties emerged, like the Peoples Justice Party and the Islamist national group. The United Malays National Organization, formed at Malaysian independence, started to fall in 2018 as these new parties emerged.

2018 Election

In the 2018 election, the opposition group Pakatan Harapan took control. Pakatan Harapan, or Alliance of Hope in English, won the 2018 election. This political group intended to be more secular and avoid the religious and racial divides that had existed in the nation for many

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[30] Malaysia's Political Polarization: Race, Religion, and Reform. Accessed August 22, 2023. https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/08/18/malaysia-s-political-polarization-race-religion-and-reform-pub-82436.

[31] "Topic: Demographics of Malaysia." Statista. Accessed August 22, 2023. https://www.statista.com/topics/8993/demographics-of-malaysia/#editorsPicks.

years.[32] The group focused on environmental sustainability, increasing investment in healthcare, and protecting human rights. However, the ideas and support of the party lasted only a short time, as it collapsed in February 2020 due to internal issues. The Prime Minister of the time, Mahathir Mohamad, was unwilling to remain secular because he associated secularism with the party's failure. The Prime Minister then created religious divisions within the party, causing the party to split in half based on whether the members wanted to use religion in governance or not.

Rise of Perikatan Nasional

The United Malays National Organization sought a comeback after the party fell in 2018. As their policy of increasing technology and governmental communication did not please the Malaysian population, the party considered whether it could use its founding religious values from independence to gain public support. To do this, they joined the Islamist stronghold group that split from Pakatan Harapan to re-create the country's religious divide to regain political control under a new party.[33] The two groups formed Perikatan Nasional or the National Alliance in English, and this group worked from 2018 to 2020 to develop a campaign for control. Muhyiddin Yassin, the leader of this group, became Prime Minister. The group created a campaign image of being Malay-dominant, pro-Islamist, and approachable for devoted Muslims of all social classes. Perikatan Nasional engaged in identity politics because they thought that Pakatan Harapan had collapsed from removing religion from politics.

Strategy Outcome

By targeting the accessible voters, they could secure by creating a sense of religious solidarity, Perikatan Nasional capitalized on the slight majority of conservative Muslims in the country, which helped the group take control of the electorate. With a tiny majority in parliament, Perikatan Nasional knew that they had to gain the votes of the majority of the population, and they recognized that religious debate and anti-secularism were the way to gain the support of this group. The party engaged in identity politics through political rallies that sparked debate

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[32] Malaysia's Political Polarization: Race, Religion, and Reform. Accessed August 22, 2023. https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/08/18/malaysia-s-political-polarization-race-religion-and-reform-pub-82436.

[33] Malaysia's Political Polarization: Race, Religion, and Reform. Accessed August 22, 2023. https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/08/18/malaysia-s-political-polarization-race-religion-and-reform-pub-82436.

on whether religion and the state should be connected by quoting religious texts.[34] These rallies helped the party form a common bond with voters believing religion should be a central dictator of livelihood. These voters wanted to join Perikatan Nasional to fight "the common enemy" of those who supported the infusion of Islamic ideas in governance.

Perikatan Nasional engaged in identity politics to gain government control after seeing how moving from religion to economic and social issues led to an unstable party. It was this choice to revitalize their strategy by creating public debate around whether religion should return as the central value of politics that characterized the party's success. As Perikatan Nasional split from its failing predecessor, Malaysian politics illustrate how identity politics is an essential strategy for parties looking to revise the unsuccessful political approaches of the past. Like in India and Indonesia, identity politics proved to be a rewarding choice of strategy to engage in and led to successful election outcomes.

Conclusion

The three case studies from India, Indonesia, and Malaysia illustrate the application of identity politics to a campaign strategy of religious conflict. This promotion of religious conflict leads candidates to form "political affinity groups" with groups of the population that feel a bond to the candidate's religious affiliation. Modi, Prabowo, Subianto, and Perikatan Nasional all chose to engage in this strategy when their policy campaigns were not capturing voters' support. Each candidate or party struggled and was either maintaining their minority share of government or losing in a race. At this time, each candidate turned to identity politics, intentionally created religious conflict, and, as a result, formed a bond with voters through the thing they hold most strongly: their identities. By revitalizing their campaign strategy to turn policy-based voters into identity-based voters, parties and candidates in these case studies were successful in their campaigns. Identity politics helped the candidates get successful election outcomes, illustrating the efficacy of the strategy.

As the United States looks ahead to the 2024 US presidential election, it will be necessary for candidates to consider whether they will apply identity politics in their campaign strategy. Identity is an

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[34] Malaysia's Political Polarization: Race, Religion, and Reform. Accessed August 22, 2023. https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/08/18/malaysia-s-political-polarization-race-religion-and-reform-pub-82436.

increasingly polarized issue in the United States. With identity as an increasingly important campaign topic, will candidates choose to engage in identity politics? If they do, candidates should be aware of how to properly time the use of this strategy to get optimal results. If candidates use the strategy of identity politics, voters must also be mindful of the strategy as they seek to understand the candidates' views and determine who to vote for. Voters should understand the mobilization tactics and determine if they feel comfortable voting for someone based on their and the politician's identity. Just as candidates have an important choice of whether to engage in identity politics, so do voters.

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