

# Election in Indonesia: The Problem of Vote-Buying Practices

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**E**LECTION IS NOT MERELY about the sovereignty of the voters, electoral systems and regulations, and the readiness of all stakeholders to carry out all proceedings. As a selection process of public servants, who would run the country and manage the public resources (in particular economic resources), election becomes both an arena and a process where the public-oriented interests and private-oriented interests intersect.

It is common to find fraudulent practices and manipulations carried out during elections in various countries including Indonesia, as "money politics" has become the vocabulary to describe a variety of fraud, manipulation and violation during election (also other political activities outside of elections). The election process is certainly related to efforts to win the competition, be it with legal, extra-legal or illegal manners.

Vote-buying practices during elections is a phenomenon that require the understanding of why and when politicians decide to conduct such

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practices to win the contest, which include also manners of clientelism and patronage. On the other hand, the reaction and receptiveness of the voters to such approaches is a significant factor to elaborate.

This article is a summary of the result of a research conducted in five provinces (Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam, East Kalimantan, East Java, South Sulawesi, and East Nusa Tenggara), which looked at various practices of vote-buying and vote count manipulation in national elections (legislative and presidential) and local elections.<sup>1</sup> The research collected data and information from various resource persons who were involved in electoral proceedings (the local committee of election and the electoral monitoring committee), participants in election (candidates and political party officials), academics, activists from non-governmental organizations, journalists, and the voters. During the research, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were held in each of the five provinces and in Jakarta.

## Literature Survey: Theoretical Review

Election fraud, especially vote-buying and vote count manipulation, undermines the basic principles of democracy, delegitimizes democratization, weakens political accountability, weakens the political party system, and promotes corrupt politicians as it distorts electoral process.

Interestingly, vote-buying also generates other conditions on a particular situation and time, such as "lowering" the economic gap or "improving" welfare (additional funding, improvement of public/social facilities, access to public services) to the voters, especially those from poor economic background. The contradiction between the ideals of democracy with the anomalous condition attracted the attention of researchers to conduct a study to observe how much difference that can occur as a result of vote-buying.<sup>2</sup>

Vote-buying occurs generally right after the voters cast their votes in the poll stations. On the other hand, manipulation of the vote count generally begins after the poll in the recapitulation process at the district level, which are, in terms of space and time, no longer in the range of concerned voters and witnesses at the poll stations.

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1 This paper focuses in one section of the comprehensive research report. The research was funded by the Asian Foundation in 2012.

2 Fabrice Lehoucq, "When Does a Market for Votes Emerge?" in Frederic Charles Schaffer (ed). *Elections for Sale: The Causes and Consequences of Vote Buying* (Manila: Atenco de Manila University Press, 2007)

The open proportional system, adopted since the 2009 election, also provides institutional incentives for the ongoing practice of vote-buying and manipulation. Candidates with small votes and who relatively have no chance to obtain seats are incited to conducting vote-buying transactions with other candidates in the same district, who are in need of extra votes to win a set.

Past legislative elections, presidential elections and local elections in Indonesia show practices of electoral fraud. Vote-buying was often done both through the political machinery networks to the individual voters (also known as retail buying), and through influential public figures (also known as collective buying).

The relation between voters and political parties (candidates) is usually not on the basis of 'rationality' with regards to the parties'/candidate's policy; rather, there are instances that voters make decisions based on the lure of money or goods. Likewise, vote count manipulation occurs at levels where there is minimal involvement of the voters or the public in the process of calculation and tabulation.

Before elaborating the mechanism of the transaction and the factors that are closely related to the buying and selling of votes, definitions of some of the terminology used will be given. This article defines *vote-buying* as “*the exchange of votes with something (money, goods or services) offered by the candidate, broker, or their team.*”

*Clientilism* occurs when “*there is direct and personal transaction or exchange, during which votes are ‘traded’ with the sound of money, goods and or guaranteed access to public/ social services, and work opportunity.*”

*Patronage* is defined as “*a direct or indirect transaction, both personal or collective, in which the goods exchanged originates from the state.*”

**Table 1: Comparing Distributional Strategies of Electoral Mobilization**

<b>Distribution Strategy of Electoral Mobilization</b>	<b>Scope</b> (How widely are material benefits distributed?)	<b>Timing</b> (When are material benefit distributed?)	<b>Legality</b> (Is the distribution of material benefits legal?)
Allocation policies	All classes of voters (including elderly, unemployed, etc.)	Can occur at any time during the electoral cycle	Legal
Pork-barrel spending	Local districts	Can occur at any time during the electoral cycle	Legal



<b>Distribution Strategy of Electoral Mobilization</b>	<b>Scope</b> (How widely are material benefits distributed?)	<b>Timing</b> (When are material benefit distributed?)	<b>Legality</b> (Is the distribution of material benefits legal?)
Patronage	Neighborhoods, villages, families, individuals	Ongoing throughout the electoral cycle	Grey legal status
Vote-buying	Families, individuals	Days or hours before election day, or on election day	Illegal

Source: Frederic Charles Schaffer, "How Effective is Voter Education?" in Frederic Charles Schaffer (Ed.), *Elections for Sale: The Causes and Consequences of Vote Buying*, (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2007).

A number of studies examine the regulatory and institutional aspects as factors that provide opportunities for the practice of vote-buying. The electoral system and the election model give different effects on the practice of vote-buying.<sup>3</sup> There are also impacts of the electoral districts, where small districts (with a small number of voter) or the number of voters per poll station facilitates vote-buying as monitoring mechanisms (and sanctions) can be applied effectively by politicians and brokers.<sup>4</sup>

Other studies highlight the political culture as an aspect that influences the occurrence of vote-buying. There is a relationship between ethnic-based party with wider social networks as a prerequisite for effective vote-buying.<sup>5</sup> Weak party discipline could also be a factor that triggers the politicians to conduct election fraud.

Generally, vote-buying practices are intertwined with other forms of manipulative social relations such as clientelism, patronage, and sometimes accompanied by intimidation.<sup>6</sup> Vote-buying practices are often associated with the relation between political and economic power,<sup>7</sup> the dominance

3 Lehoucq, "When Does a Market for Votes Emerge?"

4 Ibid.

5 See, for example, Allen D. Hicken, "How Effective are Institutional Reforms?" in Frederic Charles Schaffer (ed.), *Elections for Sale: The Causes and Consequences of Vote Buying* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2007)

6 See Ibid. See also Frederic Charles Schaffer, "How Effective is Voter Education?" in Frederic Charles Schaffer (Ed.), *Elections for Sale: The Causes and Consequences of Vote Buying*, (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2007).

7 William A. Callahan "The Discourse of Vote Buying and Political Reform in Thailand", *Pacific Affairs* Volume 78, Number 1, Spring 2005, pp. 95-113.

of local elites (bossism),<sup>8</sup> and the inequality liberalization process and institutionalization of democracy.<sup>9</sup> The forms can vary, including the mobilization of voters to vote (also known as turnout buying), and preventing supporters to vote (negative turnout buying), with a variety of techniques as well.

Departing from previous studies that critically assess efforts to prevent practices of vote-buying in some countries, this study critically reviews efforts to prevent vote-buying, which tend to be biased with regards to the voters, especially voters from the lower classes.<sup>10</sup> This segment of voters are often categorized as irrational voters, who do not understand the essence of democracy and elections, come from poor economic background with low education, and are seen to easily exchange vote with money or goods.

The mainstream understanding of vote-buying assumes that the practice is done in a “top-down” way by politicians, who generally come from a more superior socio-economic background, to the “irrational” voters, who generally come from an inferior socio-economic background. Nonetheless, the experience during the 2009 election in Indonesia shows the contrary. In a number of districts, based on media reporting, the voters are the ones who decide the transaction process of vote-buying.

## Research Findings: Are Voters Similar to Mercenaries?

From the in-depth interviews and FGDs of this study, the dominant method of vote-buying during both national and local elections is the practice of direct distribution of money during campaign. The distribution can be both direct and open, or disguised under the pretext of transport money for campaigners.

The second method is the distribution of good during social events, sporting events, or religious or traditional ceremonies. Often these social

8 John T. Sidel, “Bossism and Democracy in the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia: Towards an Alternative Framework for the Study of ‘Local Strongmen,’” in John Harris, Kristian Stokke, and Olle Tornquist (Eds.), *Politicising Democracy: Local Politics and Democratisation in Developing Countries* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 51-74.

9 Choi Nankyung, “Democracy and Patrimonial Politics in Local Indonesia,” *Indonesia*, Vol. 88 (2009), pp. 131-64.

10 See Kevin Hewison, “Neo-liberal and Domestic Capital: the Political Outcomes of the Economic crisis in Thailand”. *Journal of Development Studies* 41, Issue 2 (2005); and Anek Laothamatas, “A Tale of Two Democracies: Conflicting Perceptions of Elections and Democracy,” in R.H Taylor (Ed.), *Thailand, The Politics of Elections in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996)

events are punctuated by prize distribution.<sup>11</sup> Other types of social events are, for example, free medical care and mass circumcision.<sup>12</sup> This study found from the interviews with politicians and the campaign team of candidates that these social events are regularly done in their electoral districts.<sup>13</sup>

Another method is by building public facilities infrastructure, such as local health facilities, or installing paving blocks on roads, building a multi-purpose house, or providing equipment for special purposes.<sup>14</sup> This method is similar to “pork-barrel” and is usually done before the election is held. The construction of public or social facilities often uses government funds (both central and local governments), through infrastructure projects and grants. Reports from non-governmental organizations have highlighted the problem of the use of these funds, for example, FITRA highlights the use of social aid funds allocated in the state budget in some ministries, while the Indonesian Corruption Watch (ICW) observes the budget allocation for community organizations such as those in the province of Banten.

This study found that there is a need to regulate the use of such grants and social funds, particularly by mapping the direct impacts of such pork-barrel practices. Does the use of these grants and social funds impact on vote gains? Is the allocation intended to the supporters of particular candidates, or to the swing voters?

During the 2009 election, this study found that in a number of local elections, voters are able to negotiate and even dictate the nominal of the money to be exchanged with votes. Such negotiation occurs because the voters have realized that the candidates are in need of their votes during elections, but when they are elected they would forget about these voters (constituents). Elections provide an opportunity for voters to use their votes as a bargaining tool with particular material benefits. This shows that the voters (from the lower classes) realize their bargaining power against

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11 Interviews with Abdul Haeba Ramli, the former Head of Election Monitoring Committee of South Sulawesi (interview was held in Makassar on 24 October 2012) and Parno, the former Commissioner of the Election Monitoring Committee of Surabaya (interview was held in Surabaya, 17 October 2012).

12 Interview with Carolus Tuah (the coordinator of Pokja 30, in Samarinda, 8 October 2012), Abdul Haeda Ramli (former Head of Election Monitoring Committee of South Sulawesi, in Makassar, November 2012), and an activist from PIAR (in Kupang, November 2012).

13 Interview with Burhanuddin Demmu (Deputy Chairman of the Local House of Representative of Kutai Kartanegara, in Samarinda, 10 October 2012). Also interviews with a member of the campaign team of the Surabaya mayor (in Surabaya, November 2012), and Ilham Arief Sirajuddin, the mayor of Makassar (in Makassar, November 2012).

14 Information gathered during the Focus Group Discussions in Samarinda (16 October 2012), and in Kupang (30 October 2012).



politicians and exploit the situation.<sup>15</sup>

Voters from this category of social class want the fulfillment of their actual needs, and not something abstract like democratic values.<sup>16</sup> The same thing was found during a focus group discussion with a group of residents in Makassar, and also through this study's interview with some residents of Jakarta, Surabaya and Kupang, where voters want the fulfillment of concrete things.<sup>17</sup>

Several studies in Thailand, the Philippines and Taiwan also confirm this trend, where voters take up the offer of money or goods from the candidates because they want direct benefits.<sup>18</sup> However, the voters accept the offers after carefully calculating the social, economic and political aspects of the offers.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, the agreement between voters and politicians are not entirely linear and dictated by politicians; rather, it is very complex.

## Variables that Define the Formula of Vote-Buying

How can we understand the agreement between the voters and the candidate? The mechanism to determine the "price" of a vote does not follow the law of supply-and-demand; rather, it is more determined by variables that are difficult to measure. The general tendency is that politicians dare to raise the prices, hence a price war to get votes exists.<sup>20</sup> Vote-buying does not follow the laws of the market economy,<sup>21</sup> so the question now: what variables are influential in the buying and selling of votes?

This study's findings from five provinces indicate several variables that

15 This situation is explained by the right by Anek Laothamatas that especially for lower-class voters, democracy (and the election) is the moment to balance the inequality which they have experienced. See Laothamatas, "A Tale of Two Democracies: Conflicting Perceptions of Elections and Democracy."

16 See Ibid.

17 FGD in Makassar was held on 23 October 2012.

18 Lehoucq, "When Does a Market for Votes Emerge?"; Schaffer, "How Effective is Voter Education?"; and Wang Chin-Shou dan Charles Kurzman, "The Logistics: How to Buy Votes," in Frederic Charles Schaffer (Ed.), *Elections for Sale: The Causes and Consequences of Vote Buying* (Manila: Atenco de Manila University, 2007)

19 Schaffer, "How Effective is Voter Education?"

20 According to Arief Rahman, a candidate for the regent of Magetan, before the enactment of the Candidate List of legislators, senior politicians «advised» not to be hasty juniors meet constituent demands and give large amounts of money that would damage the «market price» (interview in Surabaya, 18 October 2012).

21 See Frederic Charles Schaffer and Andreas Schedler, "What is Vote Buying?" in Frederic Charles Schaffer (Ed.), *Elections for Sale: The Causes and Consequences of Vote Buying* (Manila: Atenco de Manila University Press, 2007); and Lehoucq, "When Does a Market for Votes Emerge?"

make up the formula of vote-buying. The first variable is related to *the economic conditions of the voters*. The argument that is often raised is that voters would easily decide to receive money or goods offered by politicians due to their economic difficulties.<sup>22</sup>

The second variable is the *structural dependence of the voters on the patron*. In conditions where the people are socio-economically dependent on patrons, such as landlords, business owners, or public figures, they would be under a hegemony in determining their political choice. For example, voters who work in plantations or mining industries in East Kalimantan, and the voters from the lower social class (caste) in Sumba, East Nusa Tenggara, do not have the freedom to vote outside of the wish of their patrons, as they would risk facing social and economic consequences.<sup>23</sup> This type of voters are called “locked-in electorates” who do not have any choice other than following the political direction of their patron.<sup>24</sup>

The third variable is *the timing or the moment when the money or goods is given*.<sup>25</sup> This study found that every region has its own character of electoral fraud. In Aceh and East Nusa Tenggara, for example, the first giver is the one who would win the receiver’s vote, as voters appreciated the effort of the first “buyer”.<sup>26</sup> The gift or offer from the next politician would still be accepted but they would not be given the vote.

In contrast, in South Sulawesi, the common practice is to give the vote to the last “buyer,” although the value of the gift might be less.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, voters in East Kalimantan and East Java would generally choose the giver/buyer with the largest amount of money (or highest value of goods).<sup>28</sup> According to some resource persons, *the timing* and the amount would weigh differently when related to certain religious ceremony, cultural proceedings, or social activities, which complicates the calculus of vote-buying.<sup>29</sup>

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22 See Choi Nankyung, “Democracy and Patrimonial Politics in Local Indonesia”; Hicken, “How Effective are Institutional Reforms?”; and Taylor (Ed.), *Thailand, The Politics of Elections in Southeast Asia*.

23 Interviews with Herdiansyah Hamzah, a lecturer of Mulawarman University (in Samarinda, 11 October 2012), and Rudi Rohi, a lecturer of Nusa Cendana University (in Kupang, 31 October 2012).

24 James C. Scott “Corruption, Machine Politics and Political Change,” in A. Heidenheimer and Michael Johnston (eds.), *Political Corruption: Concepts and Contexts* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2002).

25 Schaffer, “How Effective is Voter Education?”

26 Information gathered during the Focus Group Discussion in Aceh (2 October 2012) and in East Nusa Tenggara (30 October 2012).

27 Information gathered during the Focus Group Discussion in South Sulawesi (23 October 2012).

28 Information gathered during the Focus Group Discussion in East Kalimantan (9 October 2012) and East Java (16 October 2012).

29 Interview with Wens Mangut, a journalist with the VivaNews, in Jakarta, 18 September 2012.



Fourth, *who is giving* is also influential. With a vast district and large number of voters, it is almost impossible for the candidate to personally hand out money and goods to voters. Moreover, they would not do it with the intention to avoid being caught red-handed while distributing money or goods. Thus, the role of an intermediary or a broker is required. Nonetheless, not all gifts from brokers would be accepted.

For example, studies in Taiwan and the Philippines show that only brokers with certain social attributes can approach the voters and persuade them to exchange votes with gifts.<sup>30</sup> Brokers are often people who have kinship relations with the voters. Because they have received the gift from a related, people would usually feel indebted, thus would their votes on the election day.<sup>31</sup>

Fifth, *the region of origin, ethnic background, and kinship* also play a role in determining support/vote. This is more common in areas that have diverse ethnic groups such as in East Kalimantan, South Sulawesi and East Nusa Tenggara, compared to the relatively homogeneous regions such as Aceh and East Java. In areas with diverse ethnic composition of the group, the tendency to gain support from the same ethnicity becomes important.<sup>32</sup> Candidates often approach ethnic-based groups as mediator and mobilizer of voters from a particular ethnicity.

Sixth, *the socio-political relations* is a variable to scrutinize the relationship between voters and the “local boss.” A study conducted by John Sidel,<sup>33</sup> Alejo, Rivera and Valencia in the Philippines,<sup>34</sup> and Daniel Arghiros in Thailand<sup>35</sup> reveal that voters choose a candidate by following the advice of a patron who is an influential figure in the social and political aspects, for example village chiefs (*barangay* captain), district heads and cultural leaders.

This is quite common, for example in East Nusa Tenggara, where voters favor candidates from a higher socio-political class.<sup>36</sup> Voters from the lower social structure tend to be easily influenced by the political

30 Wang and Kurzman, “The Logistics: How to Buy Votes.”

31 Interview with Chairul Fahmi from the Aceh Institute, in Banda Aceh, 3 October 2012.

32 Interviews with Heriansyah Hamzah, a lecturer at Mulawarman University (in Samarinda, 11 October 2012); Wens Mangut, a journalist with the VivaNews (in Jakarta, 16 September 2012); and Sarah Lery Mboek, a member of the Regional Representative Council (in Kupang, 30 October 2012).

33 Sidel, “Bossism and Democracy in the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia.”

34 Myrna Alejo, Maria Elena Rivera, and Noel Inocencio Valencia, *Describing Elections: A Study of Elections in the Lifework of San Isidro* (Quezon City: Institute for Popular Democracy, 1996)

35 Daniel Arghiros, *Democracy, Development, and Decentralization in Provincial Thailand* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2001)

36 Interviews with Rudi Rohi, a lecturer of Undana University (in Kupang, 31 October 2012); and Paul Sinhoel, the coordinator of PIAR in East Nusa Tenggara (in Kupang, 1 November 2012).

choices of those from a higher social structure.

In contrast to a common market transaction, the vote-buying market does not have a legally binding contract between the buyer and the seller. Candidates would rationally avoid a written contract because it can be used as evidence in legal proceedings. They would rely only on a “gentleman agreement.” On the other hand, the seller (voter) is protected by the confidentiality principle of the election, so that their actual votes are confidential. Candidates are thus in an inferior position to the broker, hence many of them are fooled by the brokers. As acknowledged by a politician, “if one conducts money politics, the most they can hope for is 30%.”<sup>37</sup>

Because of its non-contract basis, *an effective monitoring mechanism* is crucial in order to ensure the provision of gifts would be positively manifested in the actual votes.<sup>38</sup> Contrary to some of the more advanced countries in monitoring mechanisms, such as Taiwan, Thailand, the Philippines, Russia and Mexico, this study found that in the five provinces there is not yet a sophisticated monitoring technology used by the politicians.

The absence of an effective monitoring mechanism is compensated by an instrument of intimidation to voters, for example what happened in Aceh, where voters had been subtly warned of the consequences if they voted for certain candidates, mobilized by force to vote in the polling station.<sup>39</sup> Another “smoother” is to manipulate the perception of voters so that voters feel that their vote can be known to certain people.<sup>40</sup> As a result, voters tend to vote for candidates that are deemed socially-and politically-correct.

If we look at the description of the variables that construct the formula of vote-buying, the “role” of money (or goods) is actually not dominant. Contrary to the mainstream understanding that considers money (or goods) as the main variable, this study found that money (or goods) is just one variable in addition to seven other variables.<sup>41</sup> This study groups these variables into four clusters.

The first cluster relates to the socio-economic relations between

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37 Interview with Arief Sirajuddin, the mayor of Makassar (in Makassar, 24 October 2012).

38 Lehoucq, “When Does a Market for Votes Emerge?”

39 Information gathered in the Focus Group Discussion in Banda Aceh (2 October 2012). For further details, see a publication by the NGO forum of Aceh and the Aceh Institute, *Kekerasan dalam Bingkai Demokrasi*, (2012).

40 Interview with Tenri A. Pallalo, a former commissioner of the local Election Committee of the Makassar city (in Makassar, 23 October 2012).

41 This study emphasizes that the eight variables that are covered are not considered complete, and that there is always the possibility of other variables existing. Nonetheless, this article highlights only these eight variables.

the voters and the political candidates, which imply socio-economic dependence, socio-political relations, similar region of origin, ethnic background and kinship. The second cluster is based on the characteristics of transactions, including the timing or the moment of giving and who is the giver.

The third cluster is based on the legal aspect and monitoring aspect, which includes the existence of a written contract and monitoring mechanism. The fourth cluster is based on the economic condition of the voters, which relates to direct exchange of money/goods.

Looking at these clusters, this study emphasizes that the role of money and goods is not always dominant as a deciding factor. Depending on the context and background, certain variables will be more dominant and decisive than the other variables. Thus, efforts to restrict such transactions must pay attention to the locality where such practices take place.

Vote-buying is closely related to the origins of the money being disbursed, and the availability of such large amount of cash. In this regard, the role of some institutions responsible for the distribution of cash is significant, although these institutions are outside of the electoral committee, for example the Bank of Indonesia and Pusat Pelaporan dan Analisis Transaksi Keuangan (PPATK). There is a technique of vote-buying known as “*serangan fajar*” (pre-dawn raid). There are two scenarios for this.<sup>42</sup> First, cash is withdrawn from banks in other regions later moved to the area in question so as not to be detected. Second, cash is withdrawn long before the election day.

## Concluding Notes

This study emphasizes that vote-buying basically involves two parties: voters and candidates or political parties. In this regard, while the role of supply-side (the candidates/political parties) has been discussed widely, the demand-side (the voters) needs to be considered and analyzed.

The punishment/reward mechanism in voting behavior that are common in mature democracies allows voters to re-elect politicians/parties that perform well and do not choose politicians/parties that did not perform well during his/her tenure. Such mechanism can work well if the voters have a strong bargaining position against the politicians or political parties. A strong bargaining position could exist if the voters are

42 Information gathered in the Focus Group Discussion in Jakarta, 11 December 2012.



viewed by politicians or political parties as credible constituents that can monitor his/her work performance.

This point is the exact issue facing the voters in Indonesia, as they cannot evaluate the performance of politicians or parliamentarians in a credible manner, due to at least two reasons. First, the general level of education is low. Therefore, the ability to process information in order to carefully weigh the existing options is also weak. Second, as a consequence of a multiparty system and the number of candidates or politicians to be evaluated by the constituents, it is very difficult for voters to evaluate “correctly.”

In this regard, the bargaining power of voters is weak in the eyes of politicians. As a result, voters view that election period is the most appropriate time to “sell.”<sup>43</sup> Only during the election period can the voters judge which politician or party is “credible,” based on the amount of money or goods offered to them. On the other hand, voters may also view that selling their votes is a momentum for “revenge” against politicians or parties that are generally view as corrupt.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Information gathered during the Focus Group Discussion in East Nusa Tenggara, 30 October 2012.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.