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Less Determined, More Diverse

Sastramidjaja, Y.

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Three presidential candidates, Anies Baswedan (R), Ganjar Pranowo (C) and Prabowo Subianto greet each other after the first presidential election debate at the General Elections Commission (KPU) office in Jakarta on December 12, 2023. (Photo by Yasuyoshi CHIBA / AFP)

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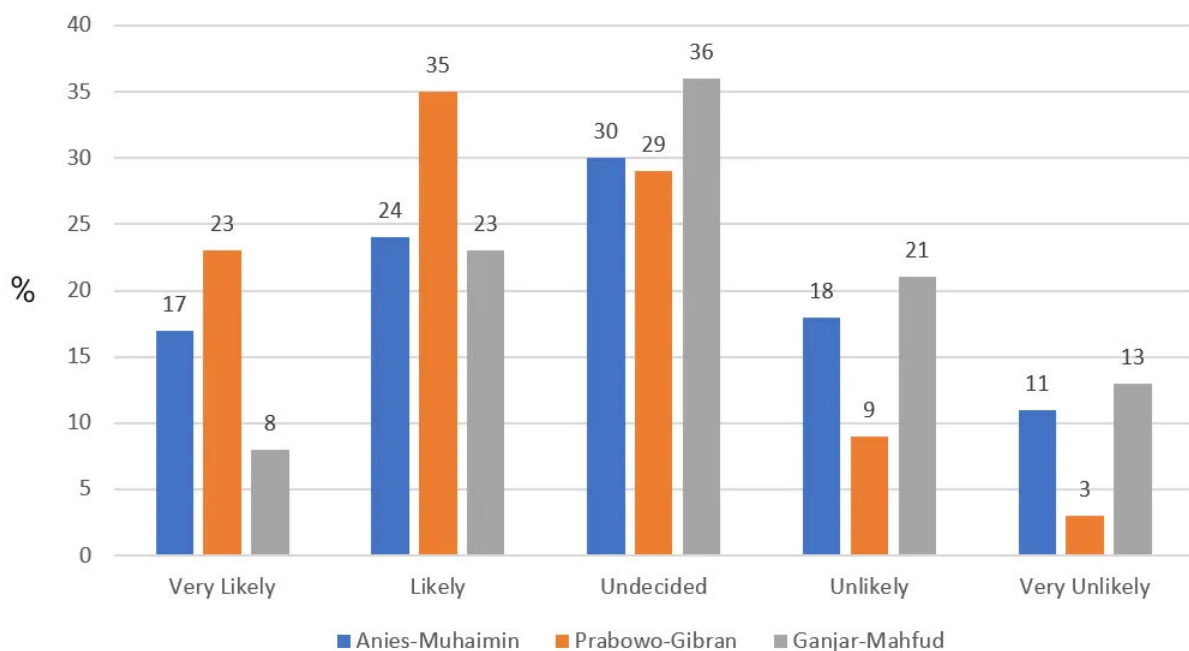
YATUN SASTRAMIDJAJA

A December 2023 ISEAS-Premise survey on Indonesian voters' reasons for liking and disliking the presidential candidates sheds more light on what voters want to see in their next president. Strength, intelligence and independence, not cuteness, are the keys to their ballot.

In the run-up to the 2024 presidential election on 14 February, new trends in Indonesian voter preferences have emerged. Previously, during the 2014 and 2019 elections, the electorate was sharply divided between supporters of current President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) and his opponent Prabowo Subianto, indicating an apparent ideological binary within Indonesia’s population. In this election, with three pairs of candidates running, Indonesian voters’ preferences are less pre-determined and their sentiments about the candidates are more diverse.

According to an online poll by ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, in collaboration with data services provider Premise, from 20 November to 1 December 2023, candidate Prabowo in 2024 enjoys a clear lead vis-à-vis his two opponents. This finding corroborates those of an earlier ISEAS-LSI [survey](#) and many recent polls by Indonesian survey companies.

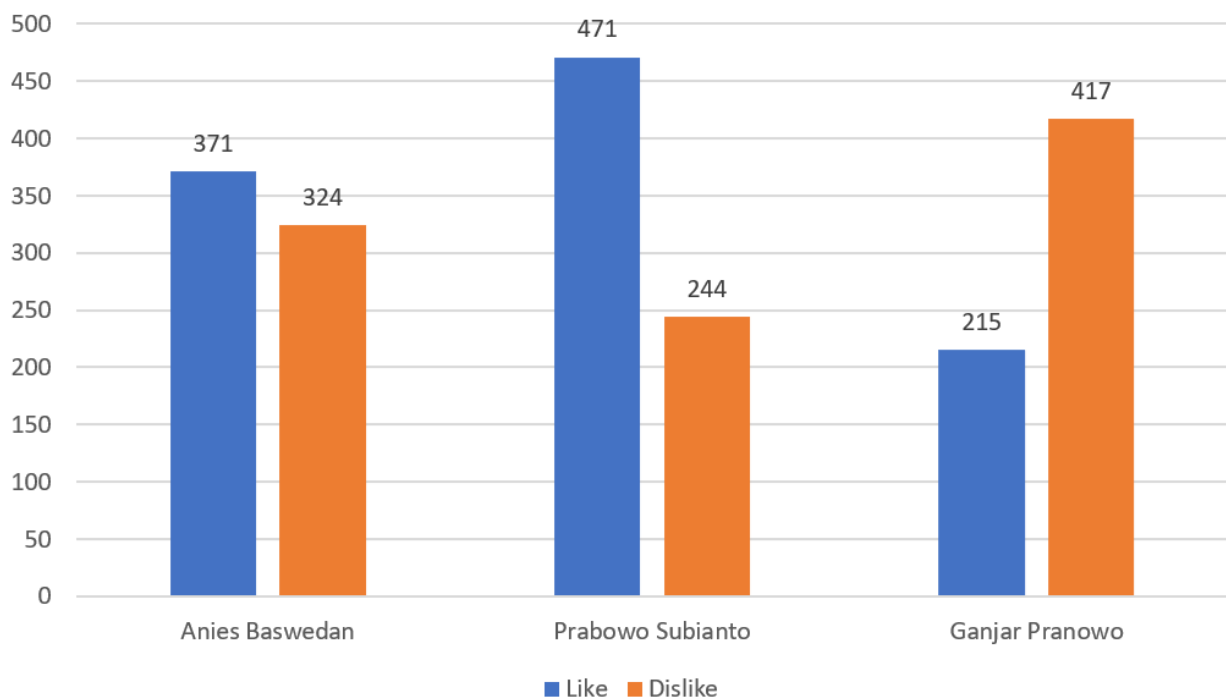
Figure 1. Indonesian Respondents’ Inclination to Vote for Presidential Candidates



Source: ISEAS-Premise survey, December 2023, N=1,358

The survey polled 1,358 respondents: 724 in the age group 18–34 years and 634 in the age group 35 years and older (35+) across all provinces. The majority (1,103) live in urban areas. In sum, 58 per cent of respondents said they were either “Very likely” or “Likely” to vote for the Prabowo Subianto-Gibran Rakabuming Raka pairing. This is compared to 41 per cent for the Anies Baswedan-Muhaimin Iskandar pair and 31 per cent for Ganjar Pranowo-Mahfud MD (Figure 1).

Figure 2. Respondents Who “Like” or “Dislike” PE2024 Candidates



Source: ISEAS-Premise Survey, December 2023

Note: Respondents were asked to explain, in an open-ended question, what they liked or disliked about the candidates. Some respondents gave positive and negative comments about *each* of the three candidates, while others gave positive and/or negative comments about two, one, or none. The above table is the result of the author's manual tabulation and analysis of the qualitative comments received for each candidate.

As the poll platform allowed open-ended questions, the survey designers obtained more granular and candid comments compared to most other surveys on why respondents liked or disliked each candidate (Figure 2). Prabowo's popularity was reflected by the largest number of positive comments and the smallest number of negative comments from respondents when asked to explain their like and/or dislike of each candidate. For Prabowo, 28.7 per cent of those respondents who gave reasons for liking him (135 of 471) used the word "firm", while 25.3 per cent (119) used related terms like "authoritative", "tough" and "disciplined" or highlighted Prabowo's patriotic spirit as reflected by his military background and experience as defence minister.

Taken together, around 54 per cent of the respondents who liked Prabowo apparently did so because of his "strongman" image. This was the image emphasised in Prabowo's presidential bids in 2014 and 2019. It is the opposite of the "cuddly" (*gemoy*) image being used to promote Prabowo in his current campaign, where he has been **rebranded** as a funny grandpa or uncle, doing TikTok-style dance moves, presumably to attract young voters, who make up over 50 per cent of the electorate. This image does not sell with his prospective voters. In the group that "liked" him, less than 1 per cent (4 out of 471) mentioned *gemoy* as a positive trait. Two other respondents who "disliked" him said they were put off by it.

As for why respondents disliked Prabowo, 18 per cent (44 of 244) cited Prabowo's **military track record** as a grim fact, mentioning his alleged human rights violations, the May 1998 riots and **abduction** of activists, and his association with Suharto's New Order regime. This group comprised 19 younger and 25 older (35+) respondents, challenging the stereotype that younger voters are oblivious to the country's past. Still, most of the dislikes did not relate to Prabowo's controversial past but more to his recent political choices. Fifty respondents out of 244 (20.5 per cent) lamented his choice of Jokowi's eldest son Gibran as his running mate and

Prabowo's association with Jokowi.

Besides Gibran's inexperience, several mentioned the "nepotistic" Constitutional Court decision that facilitated his vice-presidential candidacy or expressed dissatisfaction with Prabowo's "co-optation" into Jokowi's "dynasty", which "lessens Prabowo's charisma". For others, Prabowo is "too ambitious" or so "hungry for power" that he would forge any alliance for political gain. Taken together, these negative sentiments account for 32.8 per cent of the dislikes (80 of 244), comprising 6 per cent of all younger respondents polled (43 out of 724) and 6 per cent of the older respondents polled (37 of 634). Thus, Prabowo's strategy to bring Gibran on board to attract young voters and Jokowi loyalists appears to have backfired for a significant group of prospective voters.

For Anies, 17.5 per cent of respondents who liked him (65 of 371) used words like "smart", "intelligent" and "educated", while others who liked him frequently mentioned positive character traits ("humble", "honest", "polite"). However, 16.6 per cent of respondents who disliked him (54 of 324) were put off by his intellectual image, citing he was "too much talk", "too theoretical", or even blaming his "complex vocabulary". Respondents were equally divided over Anies' track record as former Jakarta governor.

One frequently cited reason for disliking Anies was his perceived association with "religious politics" due to his Islamic support base and coalition with Islamic parties, especially during his gubernatorial campaign in 2017 (less prominently so in his current campaign). Some 14.5 per cent of respondents who disliked Anies (47 of 324) raised the issue of his "Islamic bias" and "identity politics" against a handful citing his "piety" as a positive trait. Thus far, Anies' perceived [image](#) is difficult to shake for those undecided voters who might otherwise be attracted to his promise of progressive change.

Ganjar, who is still struggling to gain traction with younger voters, seems to be the least liked and most disliked. Only 4 per cent of all younger respondents polled said they were "Very likely" and 19 per cent "Likely", to vote for Ganjar, compared to 10 per cent and 27 per cent respectively of all 35+ respondents. Those who disliked him frequently offered three types of reasons: Ganjar's personal characteristics and behaviour (including his alleged vices, blunders on social media, "childishness", or "arrogance"); his track record as former Central Java governor; and most conspicuously, his close association with the ruling party, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle, PDI-P.

This three-horse race now seems more likely to become a duel between Prabowo and Anies, who looks poised to overtake Ganjar as the prospective runner-up.

Some 30.5 per cent of respondents who disliked Ganjar (127 of 417) cited his party affiliation as a reason for opposing his candidacy, even if some did like his "people-oriented" leadership style. As one respondent saw it, especially among youth, PDI-P has been branded as "rotten" (*buruk*). Given that PDI-P's leadership, especially chairperson Megawati Sukarnoputri, continues to be conspicuous in Ganjar's campaign, this antipathy is unlikely to change in the coming two weeks to voting day.

A takeaway from the qualitative analysis of respondents' likes and dislikes of the candidates is that the appeal of a "strongman" leader still resonates among Indonesia's prospective voters. This partly explains why Prabowo-Gibran continues to enjoy such a commanding lead. With

other polls showing that support for Prabowo-Gibran has yet to breach the 50 per cent threshold, however, a one-round knockout remains remote unless something dramatic happens soon.

This three-horse race now seems more likely to become a duel between Prabowo and Anies, who looks poised to overtake Ganjar as the prospective runner-up. As the results of the ISEAS-Premise survey suggest, if a run-off election takes place in late June, it may be more helpful for the candidates to portray themselves as more “firm” and less “cute” and to steer away from party and identity politics.

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Yatun Sastramidjaja is a Visiting Fellow with the Regional Strategic and Political Studies Programme at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. She is also a Lecturer in Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam.

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