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# Legislative elections in Vietnam and Vietnamese perception of the 2016 National Assembly Election

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## **Abstract**

The Communist Party of Vietnam, the dictatorial ruling party of Vietnam since the unification of the country in April 1975, has based their legitimacy on the claims that they liberated the working class from feudal domination through proletarian revolution, fought for the independence of the country, and has been developing the economy of the country so as to give Vietnamese better standard of living. However, as waves of democratization sweeping the world and democracy is usually perceived as a more preferable system than dictatorship by the people, the Communist Party of Vietnam has been attempting to maintain their legitimacy by claiming that Vietnam is a democracy. One of the façades of democracy which has been putting up by the ruling party is the quinquennial National Assembly election. In this paper, the author examines the functions of the Fatherland Front, a pro-Communist mass-movement front, in legislative elections. The study pointed out that through the Fatherland Front the Communist Party could prevent undesirable candidates from taking part in the election and as such maintain their domination over the National Assembly of Vietnam. In order to study Vietnamese perception on the electoral system in general and the 2016 National Election in particular, a questionnaire which was carried out two weeks after the election, in which the author also interviewed more than one thousand Vietnamese. The outcomes were startling but not surprising, the majority of Vietnamese voters expressed disbelief on the country's electoral system. Respondents were also pessimistic about impacts, if any, that the 2016 election might have on the political environment of Vietnam.

**Keyword:** Vietnam, legislative election, public perception, electoral system

## **Introduction**

The weakening and consequently the downfall of the Soviet Union, one of the only two super powers in the world during the late 1980s and early 1990s, had led to the breakdown of the bipolar world order. This has inevitably resulted in the political changes in many countries with strong ties with the Soviet Union and Vietnam was not an exception. Between 1974 and 1990, more than thirty countries in Europe, Latin America, East Asia, and Eastern Europe shifted from authoritarianism and totalitarianism to more democratic forms of government (Huntington, 1991). However, while many former pro-Soviet were either overthrown or forced to democratize during later 1980s and 1990s, the Communist Party of Vietnam managed to endure this period of upheavals although not without struggles. While there were no transitions to democracy, in order to stay in power, the party had to initiate a series of economic and social reforms, which were known collectively as the “Doi Moi” (Beresford, 2006).

Prior to the reforms, due to economic mismanagement, Vietnam faced an enormous crisis which threatened the survival of the ruling regime (Van Arkadie & Mallon, 2003). Economic crisis eroded the legitimacy of the Communist Party of Vietnam, which had traditionally been based on its glorious proletarian revolution and its victorious struggle against foreign oppressors (Shiraishi, 2010). After shifting from a highly centralized planned economy which was not strikingly different from the economic model adopted by the Soviet Union, her allies in Eastern European, and China in the 1960s and 1970s to a socialist-oriented market economy as declared by the government, Vietnam enjoyed a period of rapid economic growth. Economic development became a timely source of the Communist Party’s legitimacy and the need for democratization was subdued. However, Vietnam was unable to avoid certain “seismic” impact from the 2008 global financial crisis (Cling et al., 2010). This combined with widespread corruption, which has been a persistent feature of the Vietnamese society has resulted in economic slowdown. The government’s handling of the territorial dispute in South China Sea which was deemed inadequate many Vietnamese and many newly surfaced political and economic scandals involving state-owned companies and high-ranking officials further eroded the legitimacy that the Communist Party gained through economic development. In the mean time, the world was experiencing what many scholars claimed to be the fourth wave of democratization (Diamond, 2004), and while people elsewhere are overthrowing their dictators, the Communist Party of Vietnam cannot enjoy complete impunity. Furthermore, as trade volume between Vietnam and the West increases, pressure to democratize and fight corruption also developed. The negative impacts of the aforementioned events were amplified by the proliferation of the Internet. In Vietnam, although Internet censorship does exist, it is poorly executed and blockage put on sites deemed illegal and “reactionary” by the government can usually be overcome with simple tools. With 52% of the population are now Internet users (Thach, 2016), Vietnamese citizens gain the potential to freely expose and discuss the ruling party’s bad governance, misuse of power, corruption, and violation of human rights which can have a negative effect on governments in the world community if they are cast as illegitimate, violent, dishonest, or untrustworthy (Best & Wade, 2009).

To regain its legitimacy, the Communist Party has been shifting its propaganda efforts to emphasize its democratization efforts. One of the main focuses of the Vietnamese democracy has been the National Assembly election which has been held every five years. Through its official media outlets, Communist Party has been maintaining its claim that Vietnam is a democratic country, as Vietnamese could “exercise the State power under the forms of direct democracy and of representative democracy through the National Assembly, the People’s Councils and other State agencies” (Constitution of Vietnam, 2013), an argument echoed by domestic scholars. In the book *A number of issues on theory and practice of direct democracy and universal suffrage in Vietnam and the world*, the authors claim that Vietnam is a socialist democracy (Dao & Trinh, 2014). Similarly, Le Huu Nghia (2016), in his article *Practice and Promote Democracy after 30 years of Doi Moi* argued that Vietnam is a Marxist democracy.

The argument that Vietnam is a democracy with a functional electoral system is disputed almost universally by foreign scholars. Kerkvliet, in the last chapter of the book *The Routledge Handbook of Southeast Asian Democratization*, describes the gap between theory and practice of procedural democracy in Vietnam, and the forecast that democratization would not be realized in the foreseeable future (Kerkvliet, 2015). A collection of works on modern Vietnamese politics, edited by London (2014), was published collectively as under the name *Politics in contemporary Vietnam*. The book, using mostly works by Western authors, provides the readers with a comprehensive view on the current dictatorial political system of Vietnam. Jefferies (2011), in his book titled *Contemporary Vietnam: A guide to Economic and Political Developments* discusses the domination of the Communist Party over the political system. Shiraishi (2000) also admitted to the lack of democracy within the structure of the current ruling regime in his books *Vietnam – the structure of the state*.

Despite the readily available studies on the current political and electoral system of Vietnam, surveys about ordinary Vietnamese people’s on this topic are far and few between, perhaps due to the strict control of the Communist government. This paper aims to fill this gap by providing the readers with the results of a survey on Vietnamese people’s perception on election in their own country which was carried out after the 2016 National Assembly election of Vietnam.

This paper consists of two main parts. The first part discusses the entangled relationships between the Communist Party of Vietnam, the National Assembly, and the Fatherland Front. This part will also provide details on how the Fatherland Front has been dominating the electoral process in the favor the Communist Party. The second part will be devoted to the methodology and the results of the survey and their implications. Hopefully, this paper would be able to contribute towards the betterment of the knowledge about contemporary Vietnamese politics.

### **The political system of Vietnam and the intertwined relationship between the Communist Party of Vietnam, the National Assembly, and the Fatherland Front**

The ruling Communist Party has always been maintaining that the regime is a democracy. In the Proclamation of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam on

September 2<sup>nd</sup> 1945, Ho Chi Minh announced the birth of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and explicitly stated that

The French have fled, the Japanese have capitulated, and Emperor Bảo Đại has abdicated. Our people have broken the chains which for nearly a century have fettered them and have won independence for the Fatherland. Our people at the same time have overthrown the monarchic regime that has reigned supreme for dozens of centuries. In its place has been established the present Democratic Republic.” (Vietnam government, 2013)

This signified that the newly established political regime is a democratic one. Furthermore, in the first Chapter of the successive Constitutions of Vietnam from the first in 1946 until the most recent in 2013, an article has always been included to emphasize the democratic nature of the political system of Vietnam. The Constitutions also maintain that the people will be able to exercise state power through the National Assembly, and that the National Assembly is the highest representative body of the People and the highest state power body of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

There is no institutionalized relation between the Communist Party of Vietnam and the National Assembly. The Constitutions of Vietnam have been consistently sustaining the nominal independence of the National Assembly from the Communist Party. Being a member of the Communist Party of Vietnam is not a precondition to become a member of the National Assembly. Furthermore there is no regulation that a certain proportion of seats which must be held by members of the Communist Party, unlike the case of women and people from ethnic groups in Law and regulations on elections of representatives of the National Assembly and People Council (Election Law). Nevertheless, since the first election after the unification of the country in 1976, the share of Communist Party members in the National Assembly has been consistently at more than 90 percent (Office of the National Assembly of Vietnam, 2017).

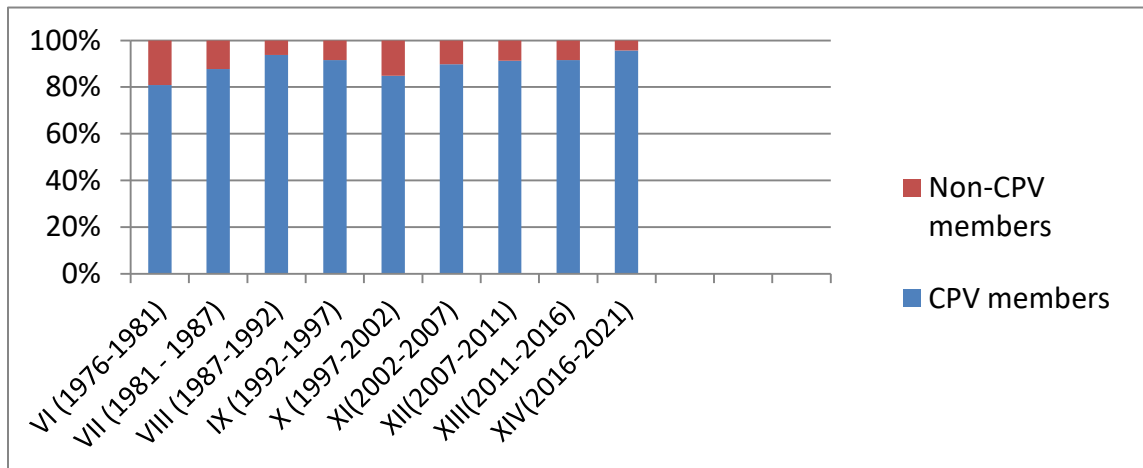


Chart 1: Composition of the National Assembly of Vietnam, 1976 - 2021

Six days after the proclaimed independence, on September 8<sup>th</sup> 1945 Ho Chi Minh, the leader of Viet Minh, signed Decree 14 which regulated the national assembly and its elections. Four months later the first legislative election was held under the tumultuous conditions of post-World War Vietnam (Nohlen et al., 2001). From then, despite the constant state of war, elections were held every five years in North Vietnam until 1975 with the exception of the period between the first and the second election in 1946 and 1960 respectively. After the unification of the country, elections were held every five years from 1976. Although the elections had little impact on the political environment of Vietnam, if any, they are held consistently even during war time as a façade for democracy. In order to maintain their absolute authority over the National Assembly while attempt to uphold the façade of a democracy, the Communist Party of Vietnam has been (1) barring other political parties from taking part in the elections, and (2) employing a complex control system through the Fatherland Front, a mass-movement organization which oversees the process of election in Vietnam, from candidate nomination to vote counting.

From 1975 until 1988, the Communist Party of Vietnam allowed two satellite parties, the Democratic Party of Vietnam and the Socialist Party of Vietnam, to function. However, the two parties were disbanded in 1988, leaving the Communist Party of Vietnam the sole legal party in all Vietnam. Although the constitution of Vietnam does not explicitly forbid the establishment and the existence of other political parties, it does state that:

The Communist Party of Vietnam - the Vanguard of the working class, concurrently the vanguard of the laboring people and Vietnamese nation, faithfully representing the interests of the working class, laboring people and entire nation, and acting upon the Marxist-Leninist doctrine and Ho Chi Minh Thought, is the force leading the State and society.

There is also no guideline issued by the National Assembly or the government on how to legally establish new political parties. As such, attempts to found new political parties, both inside and outside Vietnam, are always classified as illegal by the authority. This partisan mechanism makes the Communist Party of Vietnam *de facto* the only Party which can legally take part in legislative elections.

In order to manipulate the proportion of non-partisan candidates in the National Assembly, the Communist Party of Vietnam actively selects and nominates desirable candidate from the populace while excluding candidates with questionable loyalty. The nominal third party assigned with the nomination and scrutiny of parliamentary candidates is the Fatherland Front of Vietnam. The Fatherland Front was only assigned to serve these purposes from 1980 but was founded in 1930 as the mass-movement front of the Communist Party of Vietnam. At that time, the Communist Party of Vietnam was known as the Indochinese Communist Party and the Fatherland Front's name was Indochinese Anti-imperialist Front (Fatherland Front 2012).

The Fatherland Front not only has a long history of close relations to but also regulated by law to follow the leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam (Charter of the Fatherland Front, 2014). The core leadership of the Fatherland Front is the Fatherland Front Central Committee. According to the Fatherland Front Charter, member of the Central Committee serves a five year term which no limitation of the number of terms. New members as well as the leadership of the Central Committee itself are selected by a process of nomination and negotiation between incumbent members (Ibid). This mechanism ensures that the Central Committee, which has always been dominated by members of the Communist Party of Vietnam, remains this way. Concurrently, the two highest positions in the Eighth Central Committee of the Fatherland Front, namely the chairman and the general secretary, as well as the majority of its 383 members are Communists.

### **The Fatherland Front absolute power over the electoral process**

The Fatherland Front is mandated by law to observe and thoroughly participate in the organization of the electoral process. According to Chapter 1, Article 4 of Fatherland Front Law states that “In accordance with the law, the Fatherland Front shall be in charge of the negotiation, selection, and nomination of suitable candidate for National Assembly elections and people’s committee elections as well as monitoring the voting process”. In other words, although according to the Election Law, Vietnamese citizens over 18 can vote, Fatherland Front has the power to choose who to vote for and the power to count the vote.

According to the 2015 Law on Election of Deputies to the National Assembly and Deputies to People’s Councils of Vietnam, Vietnamese citizen above 21 years of age are granted the right to be nominated or self-nominate for election. Candidates could be nominated by the central or local state agencies, socio-political, political, or social organizations, and the armed forces they work for.

The final list of nominated candidates will be decided after three rounds of negotiation at both central and local levels. The first round of negotiation would be held no later than 95 days before the Election Day by the Fatherland Front corresponding committee members and representatives from its member organization to decide the composition and the number of the nominees assigned to each organization. Based on the results of the first negotiation, each member organization of the Fatherland Front would draft a list of their nominated members. The second round would be held 65 days before the Election Day at the latest, also by the Fatherland Front and its member organizations’ representatives. The first draft of the nomination list would be composed based on the list submitted. Nominees would then undergo a vote of confidence cast by their neighborhood. Self-nominated candidates also have to undergo a vote of confidence cast by their co-workers. Based on this vote of confidence and the results of the previous negotiations, the final list of the candidate for the elections will be composed by the Fatherland Front in the last negotiation, which would be held no later than 35 days before the Election Day. It should be noted that the candidates are not allowed to be present at any of the aforementioned negotiations with the exception of the confidence vote. In the

2016 legislative election of Vietnamese, most of the self-nominated candidates were eliminated at the last round of negotiation (Election Law, 2015).

Preparation and implementation of the election and vote counting process will be carried out by the electoral committee and its subordinate agencies. By law, the local electoral committee's members are appointed by the standing Fatherland Front committee and the local government of the corresponding level. The vote counting process must also be observed by two non-candidate voters. Candidates or their representatives and reporters are allowed to monitor the vote counting process.

Being the only legal political party in Vietnam combined with complete domination of the Fatherland Front over the electoral system of Vietnam ensures that the Communist Party of Vietnam controls virtually all the seats in the National Assembly. This formed the first side of a triangle relationship between the Communist Party of Vietnam, the Fatherland Front, and the National Assembly. The National Assembly would then make and pass laws that maintain the political roles of the Communist Party and the Fatherland Front. In turn, the Communist Party would be able to retain its authority over both the National Assembly and the Fatherland Front, thus completes the triangle.

### **Result of the 2016 legislative election of Vietnam**

The 2016 legislative election of Vietnam was held on Sunday May 22<sup>nd</sup> 2016. According to official statistics, among 67,485,482 legal voters, 67,049,091 participated in the election to choose at maximum 500 congresspersons from 870 candidates approved by the Fatherland Front after three negotiation rounds (Vo, V. T., 2016). Of the 870 candidates, 197 were nominated by the central government, 673 were nominated by the local governments, and only 11 were self-nominated (Inter-Parliament Union, 2016). It should be noted that after the second negotiation round, of the remaining 1,146 candidates, 154 were self-nominated. 97 candidates were not members of the Communist Party of Vietnam. Counting the 66,284,625 valid votes, 496 representatives were finally elected. The election saw a significant change of membership of the National Assembly, as 317 among 496 seats were first-time elected. Of the successful candidates, 71 were under 40 years of age, 133 were women, and 86 were people from ethnic minorities. Among those newly elected congresspersons, only 21 were non-Communist. Only 2 self-nominated candidates passed the election, both were member of the Communist party (Vietnam Express, 2016). Explaining the gap between the numbers of independents passing the second and third negotiation round, Chief of Office of the National Electoral Committee Nguyen Hanh Phuc commented that it is a "normal thing" as "finalists must meet certain criteria" (Vo, H., 2016). Overall, despite a new wave of representatives being voted in, the result of the election was expected as every single seat in the National Assembly is either a Communist or nominated by the pro-Communist Fatherland Front (Election Law, 2015).



## **Sampling and implementation of the survey**

To evaluate the awareness on the electoral system of Vietnam in general and the 2016 National Assembly Election in particular, the author carried out a survey. The survey used convenience sampling, a type of non-probability sampling. Non-probability sampling is the sampling technique where respondents are not selected proportionally with the population and convenience sampling is the most common type of non-probability sampling (Tansey, 2007). Although true random sampling is preferable, convenience sampling was chosen due to its ease of use, cheapness, and simplicity. Furthermore, with a rather large population to sample, the author set out to collect as many responses as they could. With that in mind, the use of convenience sampling can be justified. Convenience sampling is also the least time-consuming sampling there is. Given the survey must be carried out within a short period of time right after the parliamentary election when public enthusiasm on politics is still high, convenience sampling proved to be the most advantageous method.

The survey was carried out over the course of two weeks after the 2016 legislative election of Vietnam. The election was held on 22 May 2016 and the survey was implemented from May 24th to June 6th. The reason for such timing was that people's enthusiasm about politics was expected to be higher. The survey was created using Google forms and was conducted using social network, mostly through Facebook. Respondents were contacted directly and asked to answer the survey, they are also asked to direct the author to political enthusiasts who might be interested in survey. Only one answer per person is accepted. All in all 1005 answers were collected during the course of the survey.

Although in principle, any Vietnamese who are interested in politics can response the survey, the fact that the author relies on social network to conduct the survey disproportionately affect the outcomes as only people with a Facebook account could be contacted. As of January 2016, Vietnam has more than 35 million monthly active Facebook users which accounted for nearly 40% of the population. However, the vast majority of Facebook users are 40 year-old or younger, which resulted in the fact that a significant proportion of the populace could not be reached (Internet World Stats, 2016). Young people are generally more open-minded and as they were born after the Vietnam War, they tend to be affected less by the Communist Party of Vietnam's legitimacy which based on military victories over France and the United States. Another short coming of the survey was the misbalance between respondents from urban and rural areas. As of 2016, 64.5% of Vietnamese population lived in rural areas (Xuan, 2016). However, Internet penetration rate in the country side is much lower than that of metropolitan areas. Consequently, farmers and agricultural workers are not well-represented in this survey. Furthermore, governmental employees and Communist Party members often showed hesitation to response to the survey. There are 2.8 million governmental employees (Vietnamnet, 2016) and 4.4 million Communist Party members in Vietnam (Nguyen, 2016), although these two numbers do, for the most part, overlap, it is logical to expect that these people were not proportionally represented in this survey.

## **Design of the survey**

The survey was designed to collect comprehensive information on Vietnamese attitude on democracy and elections in their own country. Based on the author's judgment, respondents may hesitate to answer questions which are deemed sensitive given the current political situation in the country, and as such, personal information which may lead to their identification were not asked. However, to confirm the aforementioned expected disproportion in the distribution of respondents' group age to that of the Vietnamese populace, respondents' age group was enquired in the first question. The provided age groups and their reasoning are as follow: under 18: people who could not vote legally according to the law; from 18 to 30: people who were born in 1986, at the beginning of Doi Moi; from 31 to 45: people who were born and grew up at the end of the Vietnam War; and over 60: retirees who could hold no important role in the Communist Party and the government. In the author's opinion, each age group represents a generation of Vietnamese which was marked by significant change and/or upheaval within the society. This would lead to notable differences in their mindset.

The second question addresses the issue of under-representation of farmers and people who live in rural areas by giving the respondents three multiple choices for their current location: urban Vietnam, rural Vietnam, and overseas. Location of the respondents may affect their educational level and interests in politics. Urban dwellers are expected to be more highly educated than their rural counterparts. Furthermore, overseas Vietnamese are predicted to be more open-minded about politics than people who are living in Vietnam. Respondents' occupation and whether or not they were working for the Vietnamese government was deemed sensitive information by the author and as such was not mentioned in the survey. However, in hindsight, a question should have been asked on whether or not a respondent works for the government or government-related organizations in order to confirm the theorized hesitation of governmental workers to answer the questionnaire. Nevertheless, of the seven governmental workers and Communist Party members known to the author at the time of the survey, five refused to response.

The next five questions were designed to evaluate the perception and participation of respondents in the elections in Vietnam in general and the 2016 Legislative election in particular. The third question in the questionnaire would provide respondents with four main options regarding their participation in the May 2016 election: (1) participated in the election, (2) asked somebody else to vote in their stead, (3) deliberately absented from voting, and (4) was not able to participate. In case of inability to participate, the respondents were also asked to state their reasons such as under legal voting age, under detention, or inaccessibility to access to a voting place. The fourth question is a multiple-answer question about the respondents' criteria in choosing a candidate to vote for. Provided options are academic and professional background, promised political policies during campaign, personalities, appearance, and political ideology. Respondents can also add their own criteria. More than one option may be selected. The fifth question examines the voters' perception on the gravity of their vote, they could select one of the provided answers: (1) yes, because suffrage is one of the basic rights of citizenship, (2) yes, because while individually, a single vote may not hold much power, collectively,

voting can make a difference, and (3) no, my participation in the election would have no meaning. The respondents could also state their own reasoning for their participation in the election or the lack thereof. The sixth question attempted to evaluate respondents' interest in the outcomes of the 2016 legislative elections. Respondents are asked if they are either (1) Very interested in the outcomes of the election, (2) Somewhat interested in the outcomes of the elections, or (3) completely uninterested in the outcomes of the elections. Respondents were asked to provide the reasons for their interest or indifference about the said outcomes. Finally, respondents were asked whether or not the outcomes of the elections could have any impact on the current political environment of Vietnam. Provided options by the author are (1) no impact, (2) minor impacts, (3) noteworthy impacts, and (4) I do not know. Again, respondents could further explain the reason behind their expectation.

Another cluster of questions to evaluate Vietnamese interest in politics was also included in the survey, but will not be discussed in this paper due to limitation in scope. This paper concerns only Vietnamese perception on legislative elections, in particular the May 2016 National Assembly election, not Vietnamese people interest in politics in general.

## Results of the survey

### First question: What was your age at the time of the election?

The answers to the first question confirmed the expected disproportionateness between the demographic of Vietnam and the age distribution of respondents. Chart 2 and Chart 3 represent the age distribution of respondents and the demographic of Vietnam in 2016, respectively. Please note that the age groups in two charts do not completely match with each other, due to the different sets of statistics that the author could access.

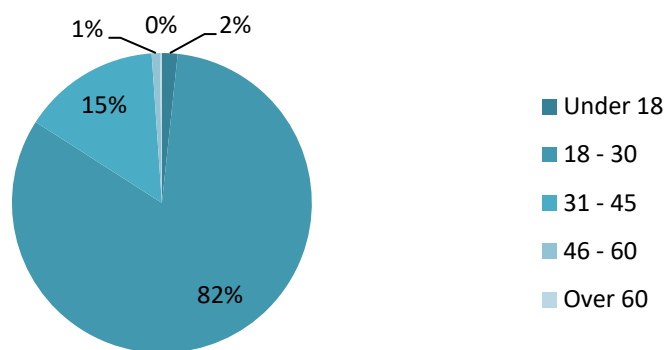
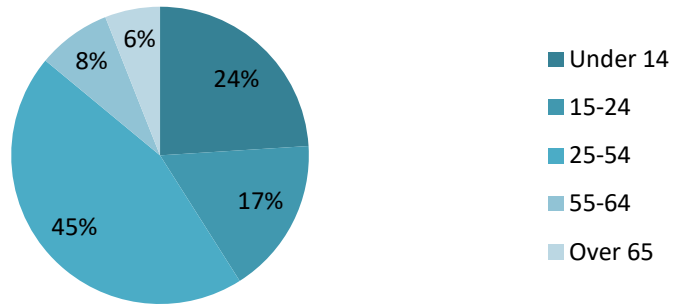


Chart 2: Age distribution of the respondents at the time of the election



*Chart 3: 2016 Demographic of Vietnam (CIA Factbook, 2017)*

The vast majority of respondents were between 18 and 30 year old while another significant proportion belongs to the 31 to 45 age group. Only two percent and one percent of the respondents were under 18 and between 46 and 60 year old, respectively. No respondent was over 60. The disproportionately distributed age group could be explained using low penetration rate of Internet among the elderly (International Market Research, 2017). The statistics shown in chart Table 1: Age distribution of Facebook users in Vietnam matched with the results displayed in Chart 2.

*Table 1: Age distribution of Facebook users in Vietnam*

Age	Total	Female	Male
Total	35,000,000	46%	54%
13-19	30%	15%	15%
20-29	45%	21%	25%
30-39	17%	8%	9%
40-49	5%	2%	3%
50-59	2%	1%	1%
60+	1%	0%	1%

### Second question: Where was your place of residence at the time of the election?

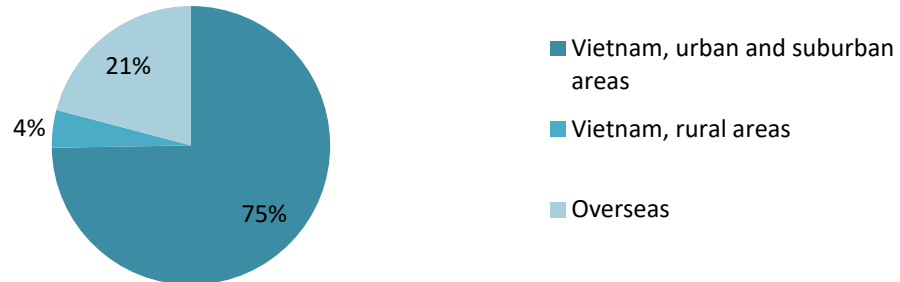


Chart 4: Location of the respondents at the time of the election

According to the results of the survey, the three fourths of respondents were living in urban and suburban Vietnam at the time of the elections. The vast majority of the remaining one-fourths lived were living overseas. Only approximately 4 percent of the respondents responded that they lived in rural Vietnam when the election was held. This imbalance in the location of the respondents was expected before the survey was carried out. As reported by Nielsen Rural Study 2014, Internet penetration rate in rural Vietnam among young people between the ages of 18 to 24 years old stood at 30 percent (Tuyet, 2014) while that in urban Vietnam was estimated to be around 95% (Cimigo, 2011). However, given the fact that in 2016, 64.5% of the Vietnamese population was rural dwellers, this level of disproportionateness came as a mild surprise to the author. Nevertheless, the answers to the second question confirmed another expected short-coming of the survey.

### Third question: Did you participate in the 2016 May National Congress Election?

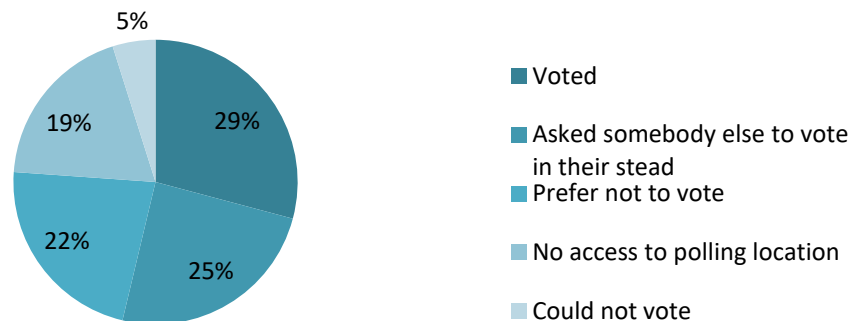


Chart 5: Respondents participant in the 2016 legislative election

According to official reports by the head of the Office of the National Assembly, the 2016 legislative election’s voter turnout was 98.77%. Given the exceedingly high voter turnouts reported by the government during consecutive legislative elections as demonstrated in chart 6, this came as no surprise. Since the first election after unification of Vietnam, voter turnout has been consistent at more than 98 percent and the latest election of 2016 was not an exception. In Vietnam, abstention is not a violation of law and as such does not entail a fine or legal charges. As a result, unusually high voter could possibly signal a fraudulent election.

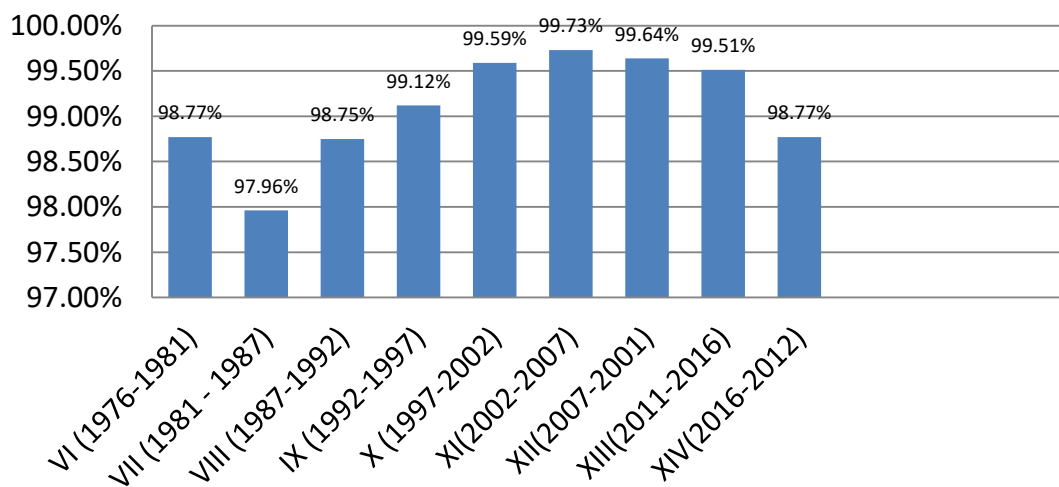


Chart 6: Vietnamese legislative elections’ voter turnout (1972-2016) (National Assembly Portal, 2016)

Official statistics contradicted with the findings of this questionnaire. Only 29 percent of the respondents said that they did go to a polling location and vote, combine with 25 percent who asked somebody else to voted in their stead, voter turnout barely reached 54 percent, 45 percent short of the official number. It should be noted that asking other people to vote in one’s stead is a violation to Article 69 of the Law and regulations on elections of representatives of the National Assembly and People Council. Voice of Vietnam, a state-owned news agency, admittedly stated that “it could be asserted that, it (voter turnout) was not 99 percent, but much lower” and also warned against unlawful voting (Nguyen A., 2016). Five people who were listed under the category of “asking somebody else to vote in their stead” added that their family members voted in their stead against their will. More than a dozen people who responded that they did vote further clarified that they either left the ballot blank or crossed all candidates’ name to express their dissatisfaction about the political system. Two persons specifically pointed out that they were forced to vote by the local authority and that abstention might result in their

family being warned. 22 percent said that they willingly abstained from voting. Most further explained that they refrained from voting because they were either busy or thought voting is meaningless.

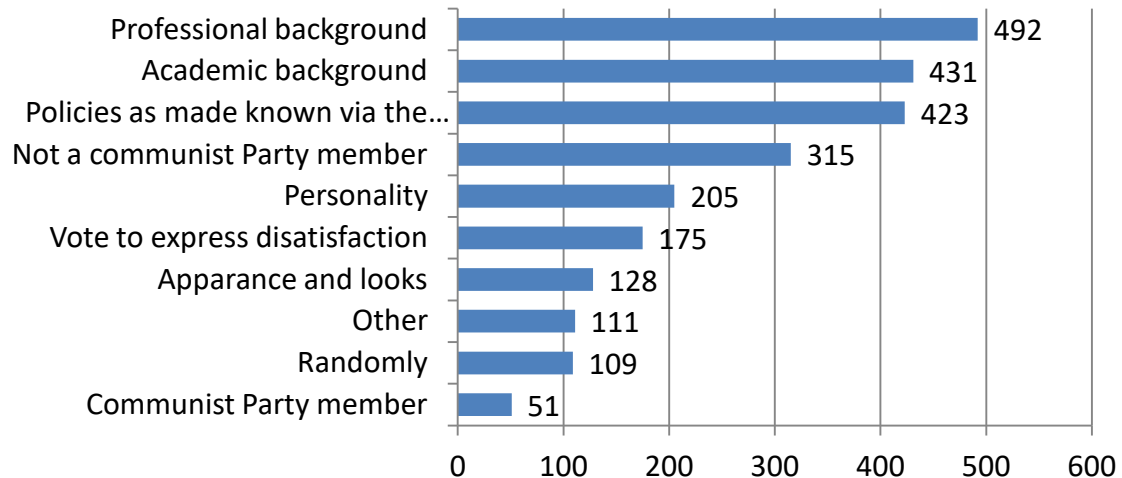
19 percent, most of those lived overseas, responded that they could not access to the voting place. Although the Constitution of Vietnam guarantees the right to vote for any Vietnamese citizen over 18 year old, it seemed that Vietnamese who were living abroad at the time of the election were not granted that right. The author of this survey personally contacted the Embassy of Vietnam in Tokyo to enquire about voting location but was replied that voting in Japan was not possible and as such was not able to legally cast his vote. As such, almost 200,000 Vietnamese (Japan Times, 2017) who were living in Japan at that time was denied of the right to vote. A vote registered under the author's name was later cast by a family member who was residing in Hanoi. The same situation was reported by Vietnamese who lived in other countries (Quoc, 2015) as well. Furthermore, most respondents elaborated that they were not informed about the election and voting method by the correspondent Vietnamese Embassy or the Consul-General at the country they were living in. A minority of the respondents who were not able to vote was living in Vietnam, mostly in rural areas, at the time of the election but could not reach the polling location due to the remoteness of their residence. It should be noted that the election was held on a normal Sunday, not amidst a long national holiday, so many people could not return to their home town to vote (Huong, 2011). Many respondents said that the paperwork needed to be able to vote as a temporary resident combined with the bureaucratic voter registration system discouraged them from voting.

Approximately five percent responded that they could not vote. Among those, 14 were underage. In the first question, 17 said that they were under the age of 18. Explanations were given by the respondents as follow: two of them were actually under 18, but their birth was registered one year earlier by their parents so that they could attend kindergarten sooner. This is not an uncommon practice in Vietnam. The last person said that he was 17 year old and six months at the time of the election but was granted the right to vote nevertheless. 16 said that they could not vote due to procedural issues, either they were not allowed to register to vote in their temporary residence or they were not issued a voter identification card. When further enquired, all of them responded that the blame lay on the organizers, namely the local government and the Fatherland Front. Two people said that they were either detained or lost their citizenship at the time of the election and were not able to vote.

**Fourth question: On which criteria would you vote for a candidate? (Multiple answer possible)**

As mentioned earlier, in Vietnam there is *de facto* only one legal political party, The Communist Party of Vietnam. Furthermore, independent candidates must be approved by the pro-Communist Fatherland Front. As a result, to Vietnamese voter, candidate's political ideology is not as important as that to voters in a country with functional multi-party system. Expectedly, the three most important criteria to Vietnamese voters were professional background, academic background, and promised policies of the candidates. Surprisingly, more than one third of the voter said that they would prefer a candidate who

is not a Communist. This result contradicted the outcome of the elections, as for 496 seats in the National Assembly, only 21 non-communist candidates were elected. Also contradicted with election results was the fact that only 51 respondents said that they prefer Communist party members over independent candidates.



*Chart 7: Respondents' criteria in choosing their representative*

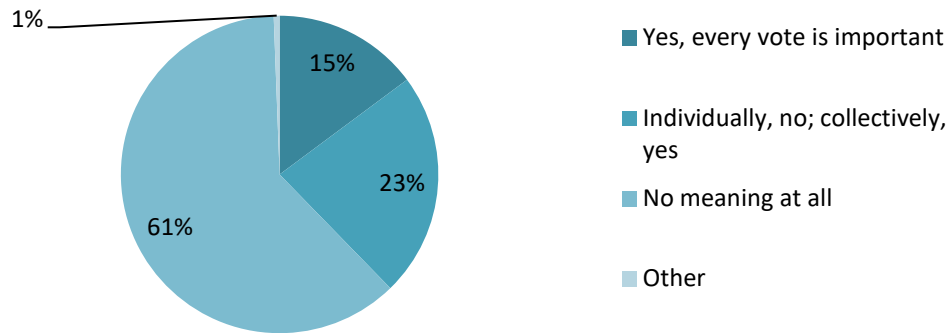
One third of the voters thought that the personality of the candidate is important. However, most voters did not choose this criterion, reasoning that they did not know the candidates in person. For the most part, most candidates did not make any significant attempt to campaign or make themselves known to the public. The number of the voters who would cast the donkey-vote or choose their representatives based on looks is unexpectedly high. This represents the indifference of a sizeable proportion of Vietnamese voters to the current political environment of the country. 175 respondents would vote to express their dissatisfaction with the election and the political system. This number could be higher as many people who chose "other" further explained that they would not vote due to the perceived meaningless nature of the election. A number of respondents who chose "other" said that they received instructions on who to vote for from their family members or the local authority. Other criteria listed by respondents were the candidate's social influence, age, and sex. Voters who listed those criteria tended to prefer younger or female candidates with considerable social influence.

**Fifth question: Do you think that your vote would have meaningful consequences?**

Most respondents expressed pessimism over the meaningfulness of their vote, with 61 percent said that they do not think that their vote matters at all. Most attributed the current dictatorial political system to their cynicism, explaining that voting for candidates nominated by only one political party is pointless. Other also pointed out that poor management of the election process by local committees further eroded their trust in the



fairness of the election. Some added that they believe that elections are meaningful in democracies.



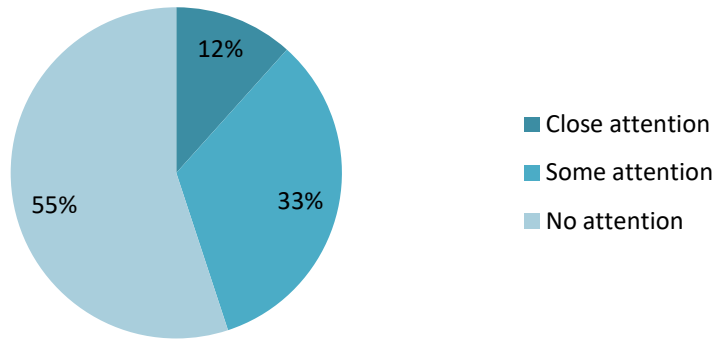
*Chart 8: Respondents' perception on the meaning of their vote*

One fourth among the respondents believed that individually their votes are irrelevant but collectively they could make some meaningful change to the political environment of Vietnam. Some clarified this notion, further noted that among a list of candidates provided by the Fatherland Front, they hoped to nevertheless find somebody worth voting for.

Around 15 percent maintained that their votes were important to the election. However, most of those added that importance was not in the sense that a single vote could have any impact, but rather it was meaningful in the sense that they had carried out their rights and responsibilities to the country. Only a few respondents believed that their vote truly counts towards the outcome of the election. One percent gave inconclusive answers, either saying they do not know or they do not care about their votes and the elections. From the answers provided by the respondents, it could be concluded that, in general, Vietnamese harbor strong suspicion that the results of the election were fraudulent and prearranged. The election itself was considered by many among the voters to be nothing more than a masquerade of democracy.

#### **Sixth question: Do you pay attention to the results of the election?**

More than half of the respondents did not pay attention to the outcome of the election. This result is logical, given 60 percent already said that they do not think the election will have any meaningful consequence. When questioned about their indifference, the respondents confirmed that their disbelief in a fair and meaningful election naturally led to disregard for the results. When enquired further about the creditability of the election, around a half of respondents said that the election was fraudulent and just for show.

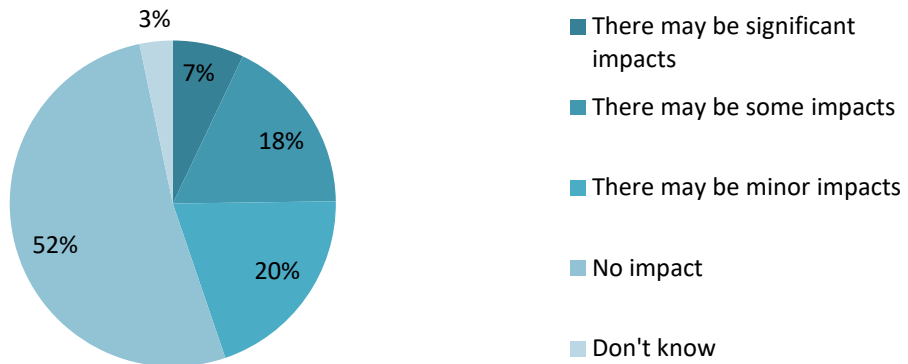


*Chart 9: Respondents' attention about the results of 2016 legislative election*

One third would pay some attention to the results; some among those reasoned that despite their distrust, they want to confirm their expectation that the results are defrauded. Although almost no respondent had a candidate that they are strongly rooted for, some revealed that they cared about independent candidates. 12 percent said that they paid close attention to the outcome of the election. This number, for the most part, overlaps with the 17 percent who thought that their votes were of some relevance.

The responses to the sixth question suggest that Vietnamese appeared indifferent when it comes to election results. Based on the explanation they provided, it is logical to conclude that their indifference derived from their deep distrust about the electoral process. This conclusion also confirmed the results of the fifth question of this survey.

**Seventh question: Do you think that the election has meaningful impacts on the current political situation in Vietnam?**



*Chart 10: Respondents' expectation on the political impact of 2016 legislative election*

The responses provided in the seventh question were also consistent with the results of the fifth and sixth question. It echoed the argument that the electoral system holds little creditability with Vietnamese voters. More than half of the respondents rejected outright the possibility that the election might bring changes to the current political environment of Vietnam. Most of them repeated their reasoning that the elected members of the National Assembly were pre-appointed and the election was in fact a façade organized by the Communist Party of Vietnam in order to maintain their control over the National Assembly. 18 percent of the respondents believed that despite the fraudulent nature of the election, minor changes could still happen with a new generation of representatives being voted in. In addition to the changes in membership of the National Assembly, other respondents pointed out that a new law was passed in 2014 which allows top official of the government, the Communist Party, and the National Assembly to be openly scrutinized through vote of confidence (Decision 262-QĐ/TW, 2014). This resulted in roughly one in five respondents believing that gradually noticeable changes would happen. Seven percent firmly believe that significant impacts, which might alter the political scene of Vietnam, would happen. Three percent were unsure about the impacts, if any, that the election might have. In general, Vietnamese tend to have a realistic perception about the improvement to the political situation in their country that the election might bring as almost three in four respondents expressed their pessimism about changes. However, one fourths of the respondents still expect the election to bring forward something new. It should be noted that, at least a dozen people who said that there would be noticeable or significant changes further explained that the changes they were expecting were not improvement but rather deterioration in the political landscape.

## **Conclusion**

The Communist Party of Vietnam, the National Assembly, and the Fatherland Front share a long and entwined history. The role of the National Assembly as a democratic symbol has only become important when there were signs that traditional sources of the Party's legitimacy were failing to attract support from the populace. Under the leadership of the Communist Party, the Fatherland Front and its predecessors have played many important roles, but the responsibility to organize elections only assigned to the Fatherland Front in the early 1980s.

The National Assembly and its elections remain the focal point of the Communist Party's attempts to represent itself as democracy in order to regain its legitimacy. Despite persistent propaganda broadcast by the government, the findings presented in this study suggest that Vietnamese seem to be aware of the un-democratic nature of the regime. Surveyed Vietnamese voters showed a deep disbelief about the gravity of their votes and the changes that voting might bring. However, respondents also express their hopeful thinking that a more fair and square electoral system would bring forward positive and meaningful changes to Vietnam. Nevertheless, there remains the question why dissatisfaction among the populace failed to translate into more impactful transformation in the electoral system of Vietnam.

Due to the flawed methodology and limited resources, some findings of this study may be incomplete and in a sense, biased. It is the author's hope that other works on Vietnamese people's perception on elections will be considered alongside this one to arrive at even greater understanding about the current state of affairs of politics in Vietnam.

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