

LEFT-RIGHT SPECTRUM AND DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING: INDIA, INDONESIA, AND THE PHILIPPINES IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

The phenomena of democratic backsliding in Asia requires an in-depth analysis of social factors that contribute to the decline of democracy. This study will explore the intersections between a country's Left-Right (L-R) political spectrum, their state of political parties, and the rise of populist leaders. How far do these three political phenomena contribute to the occurrence of democratic backsliding? By comparing findings from India, Indonesia, and the Philippines, this study aims to explain how the L-R political spectrum of voters is related to their party preferences. The study finds this variable to be strongly related to the emergence of strong leaders who utilize identity politics and political ideology as an adhesive tool for gathering mass public support. These populist tactics, in turn, chisel away mechanisms and claims for democratic accountability.

Keywords: India, Indonesia, The Philippines, democratic backsliding, Left-Right Spectrum

Introduction

Over the past decade, various Asian countries have experienced a “democratic recession”, exemplified by, among others, the increasing prominence of identity politics in electoral battles. In India, the ascendancy of Narendra Modi to Presidency was accompanied by back-to-back victories of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 2014 and 2019 elections (Guardian, 2019). The BJP is widely regarded as the political wing of Indian Hindu Nationalists, who advocate for a clear status demarcation of castes in Indian society, support corporate-centered economic growth, and espouse an ideology of cultural conservatism.

While the BJP has been a trenchant supporter of Modi's populist rule, some aspects of their political strategy actually defy antagonistic principles that are often inseparable from populist logic. The BJP posits itself as an alternative to sectarianism and communalism; in the 2014 elections, it explicitly rejected the

use of identity politics in election campaigns. Instead, their policy framework focuses on “collective efforts and inclusive growth”, which is intended to cast a wide net for individual voters rather than pandering to specific religious groups or castes. The electoral campaign and policy programs of BJP, which pivoted from a narrow agenda of Hindu nationalism to a “post-populist” political strategy, suggests that an internal transformation had taken place within the party that merits to be studied.

Meanwhile, the intrusion of identity politics into Indonesian politics emerged ahead of the 2019 Presidential election (Hanan, 2020), where an Islamic populist front claiming to represent the Muslim majority put their support behind Presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto against the consolidated “nationalist” camp of Joko Widodo. Although the party composition and bases for electoral support in Indonesia are not as homogenous compared to India,

the past two Indonesian elections have proven that a populist tactic of leveraging religious sentiment remains effective in influencing voter preferences. The end result is an increasingly-consolidated partisan polarization (Fossati, 2019).

Finally, the victory of Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines Presidential elections showcases a different formation of populist sentiment—one that is divorced from the majority religion of a country. Contrary to the Hindu Nationalist movement backing Modi and the Islamic populism in Indonesia, Duterte’s firebrand populism did not acquire the support of the Filipino Catholic Church. Instead, his appeal to advocate “public demands” has been widely considered to lead the Philippines to an illiberal democracy or even autocracy, where the increasing centralization of power poses a serious threat to the nation’s democratic system. While his extremely violent “shoot-to-kill” policy in the Filipino war on drugs was widely condemned by the international community, it managed to receive positive support from more than 80 percent of Filipinos (NY Times, 2019). Meanwhile, senatorial candidates supported by Duterte also managed to win 12 out of the 24 senate seats, further emphasizing the popular support of his government—referred to as “Duterte Magic.”

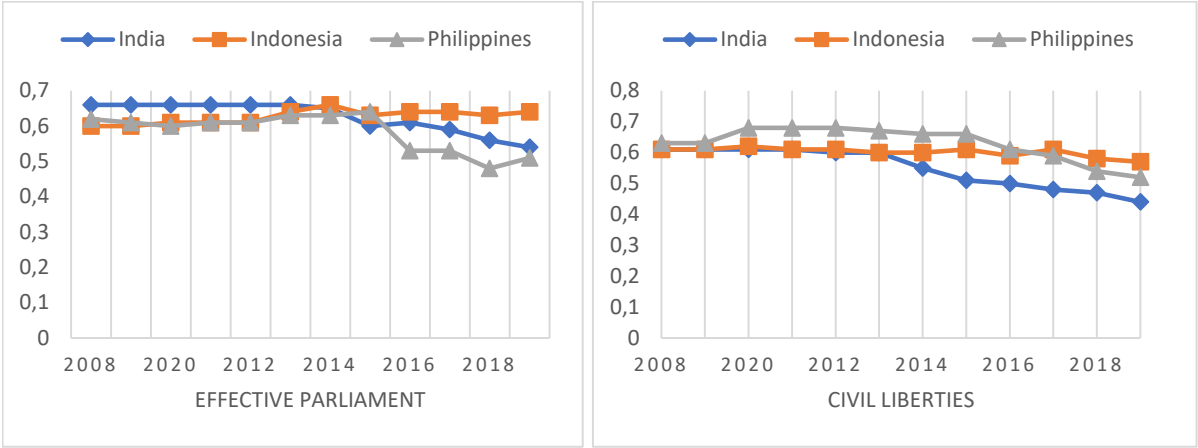
The 2019 Global State of Democracy Index categorized India, Indonesia, and the Philippines as “moderate backsliding”, citing political polarization and burgeoning populism as key factors of democratic decline (Brusis, 2019). As such, this article aims to prove that

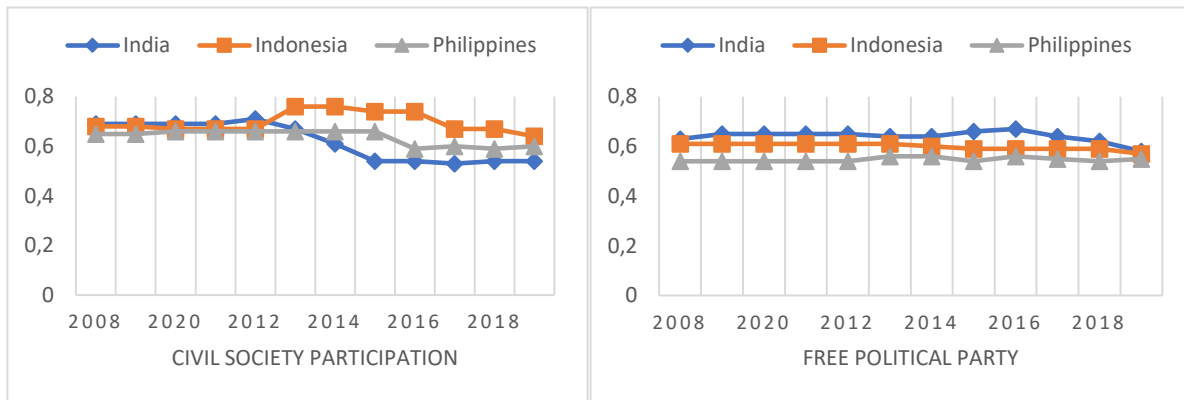
political polarization of voters and parties—which takes place in the ideological Left-Right (L-R) political spectrum—casts an important influence on the policies of the government. Conversely, this article also explores the extent in which a well-defined L-R political spectrum causes polarization amongst political parties; in other words, the identification of parties and voters within the L-R spectrum might also influence their decision to support or disavow government leaders.

Democratic Decline: A Prognosis

The index presented by International Institute for Democracy And Electoral Assistance (IDEA International) provides us information to construct a preliminary diagnosis of democratic decline in India, Indonesia, and the Philippines (Figure 1). IDEA International attributes four variables to the declining health of democracy in these three countries. *First*, the variable-free political party does not experience a large decrease where the party’s life still has an adequate level of stability. *Second*, in the last seven years, the condition of civil liberties has experienced a major setback, especially in India and the Philippines. *Third*, in the last five years, these two countries have also had parliaments that were no longer effective in carrying out their functions. *Fourth*, in the last eight years, India has experienced a setback with regard to civil society participation, followed by the Philippines. In this regard, only Indonesia has enjoyed a higher level of participation—albeit steadily decreasing in the past three years.

Figure 1. Democracy backsliding in India, Indonesia, and Philippines





Source: *Global State of Democracy, IDEA, 2019*

Several studies help us to further contextualize IDEA International’s diagnosis of democratic backsliding. In the case of Indonesia, the decline in the quality of democracy is caused by illiberal initiatives that aim to narrow the space for electoral competition. This illiberalism is accompanied by the mobilization of identity politics and consolidation of power in the executive branch—although the current holders of executive power are not necessarily the main triggers of Indonesia’s illiberal turn (Mietzner, 2019; Power, 2018). Meanwhile, political clientelism remains an entrenched problem in the Philippines, as the establishment of liberal democracy has nonetheless been ineffective in eroding socioeconomic disparities. Furthermore, their parliament has also failed to function as a counterweight to Presidential power, which pushes their quality of democracy to decline even further (Teehankee & Calimbahin, 2020). A comparative study of these two countries suggest three similar factors behind their democratic decline: the use of populism in electoral politics, political co-optation by Presidential power and the oligarchs that surround it, as well as the weakening of public institutions through policies that support the regime (Aminuddin, 2020).

In India, the BJP has become an effective political machine in sustaining Modi’s populist leadership (Basu, 2001; Sen & Wagner, 2009). This popular support has allowed executive power to function with increasingly-diminished transparency; dismantling mechanisms of check-and-balance of the Indian parliament; as well as rendering criticisms from civil society to be ineffectual, as various social antagonisms

become flattened out under the hegemonic idea of India being an essentially Hindu nation led by a Hindu strongman (Kaul, 2017; Ruparelia, 2015; Sharma, 2020).

Prior to the 2014 elections, Indian politics had a strong Federalist slant. As a result of decentralization, the efficacy of political institutions in various Indian states tend to differ from one another: for example, institutions in the state of Kerala are regarded as especially effective in managing social conflicts, often able to prevent them from mutating into a conflict between social classes (Heller, 2011). On the other hand, the shift to populism in India places politics back into the National scale: the 2014 elections saw a surge of mass media campaigns, as well as the expansion and reproduction of the concept of “the people”. The success of BJP in gaining votes and a consolidation of political elites surrounding Modi happened in tandem (Chakravarty & Roy, 2015). While Modi’s campaign has always echoed populist demands such as promising to overcome bureaucratic paralysis and acute corruption, the overwhelming support from BJP implied that Modi is expected to carry the duty as a preserver of social cohesion, and that he has to do so by catering to Hindu-nationalist social aspirations (Manor, 2016).

While recent trends of democratic decline are best exemplified by a diminishing of civil liberties (often to marginalized parts of the populace) in order to appease the demands of populist groups, other, “deeper” factors are also at play. A study of the Philippines suggests that a dysfunctional political system—one where political parties are closed-off, not properly

institutionalized, and managed by principles of oligarchism—breeds political polarization amongst elites, who operate under a strict code of patronage. For elites, polarization is not as much a commitment towards an ideology rather than the result of a high-stakes “winner-takes-all” political contestation. Nonetheless, the alliances between factions, parties, and political dynasties are vulnerable to change, resulting in a political landscape in which actors can jump from one network of patronage to another, but are required to throw their entire support every time (Thompson, 2018; Teehankee, 2020, 2013). As such, political elites become exponents of the circle of “private oligarchic capitalism” (Rodan, 2019).

What happened in the Philippines since early 2016 was an executive aggrandizement centered upon Presidential Authority, who now effectively hold control over state apparatus. While it cannot be stated that the concentration of political power on the President leads to autocracy—elections, after all, remains a viable mechanism for changing power—it does leave opposition forces to become weaker. Democratic Filipino CSOs do not have the resilience to continue protests and galvanize support through social media against Duterte’s supporters (Thompson, 2021), leaving them vulnerable to be co-opted by the political elite. To complicate matters, Duterte also gained strong support from the radical left coalition (Loersch, 2021), which bestows him with an aura of strong-handed progressiveness. While this leads to a polarization between populist and oligarchic elites, most of these political divides should be categorized as non-ideological. Duterte opted not to build his legitimacy using intermediaries such as the Catholic Church or the military, but his “Leftist” populism does not employ the usual abstract political rhetorics such as waging war against global capitalism: instead, he demonizes drug dealers and users as an epitome of social ills that can be feasibly eradicated (Thompson, 2016).

While polarization amongst political parties also occurs in Indonesia, their arrangements have been more dynamic. In parliament, parties are led by their own specific

interests, leading them to occasionally form coalitions with other parties that they would normally deem as an opposition on a case-by-case basis. While Indonesian political parties operate as cartels with little-to-no accountability, the overall disregard for democratic rules in Indonesian politics means that any party might find themselves in a vulnerable position. In particular, Joko Widodo’s Presidency has seen an abuse of state tools and power to interfere in the internal affairs of opposition parties, which culminated in a statement of support for his government (Mietzner, 2016; Slater, 2018).

It is important that this method of consolidating power stems as a reply to populism in the past two Presidential elections in Indonesia. As Islamic populist forces galvanized behind Presidential opposition Prabowo Subianto in 2014 and 2019, Widodo’s cabinet found themselves needing to fend off demands, criticisms, and slander from a religious movement claiming to represent “the ummah” (Hadiz, 2018). While there are notions that Widodo’s campaign is also founded on a “nationalist” populist footing, this is largely a misrepresentation of his technocratic style, while Subianto more accurately represents a populist mold (Hatherell & Welsh, 2020). As the Indonesian political terrain becomes perceived as a “struggle for identity politics claims” with Islamic identity as the polarizing force, dismantling populist bases in parties and consolidating power amounts to transforming the rules of the game that is unfavorable for political functioning. Populism might be an unavoidable part of electoral battle, but for the ruling regime, preserving populist conflict during tenure has proven to be detrimental.

While the studies on India, Indonesia, and the Philippines have generated insightful accounts between the rise of populism and democratic backsliding in these respective countries, none of them situates a country’s political landscape—that has generated populist leaders and movements—in terms of a Left-Right spectrum of political ideologies. This analysis is pertinent for the Philippines considering how Duterte received broad support from the Filipino Leftist faction *without*

embodying leftist politics. Narendra Modi, too, while largely denounced for providing political platforms for the Hindu Right, is not rigidly defined as an “Anti-Left” politician in India. Finally, Indonesia provides an interesting yardstick to these two countries, as all political battles are waged on the right-side of the political spectrum due to the historical prohibition for the Left to organize itself as a legitimate political force.

Political Spectrum and Democratic Backsliding

This study refers to the term “democratic backsliding” to indicate a decline in the quality of democracy under a political regime, especially when an essential component of democracy loses its quality. Democratic backsliding can be triggered by leaders who are elected democratically (Bermeo, 2016; 2019), which indicates that political leaders in a formally and procedurally well-functioning electoral democracy are nonetheless unable to maintain the resilience of democratic values within state institutions. As a result, the democratic decline in countries categorized as “experiencing backsliding” takes place gradually, with clearly visible stages (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). A backsliding can be proven to take place by identifying a trend of regression within important variables, especially those pertaining to civil liberties and the performance of public institutions.

The process of democratic backsliding is exemplified by two categories: the classic path and the “new” path. The former begins with a weakening of rights and freedoms, such as freedom of expression, access to information, freedom of association, or civil liberties in general. Meanwhile, the latter occurs when there is a transfer of power to the executive that exceeds judicial and legislative power, or when institutions become “degraded” horizontally, resulting in a weak vertical accountability (Coppedge, 2017). Both paths can run in parallel or sequentially, with the curbing of civil liberties of the classic path foreshadowing the institutional dysfunctioning of the “new” path.

While the two paths have been irrevocably tied to episodes of democratic recession and breakdown, they are not generally proven to end in autocratic consolidation (Croissant & Haynes, 2021).

While this study departs from the theoretical assumption that democratic backsliding is characterized by an erosion of civic liberties and weak accountability, it also seeks to investigate the extent in which this turn towards autocracy is influenced by the political divisions of a country. Given how several recent phenomena of democratic backsliding are correlated to populism and polarization, it becomes paramount to see if these social divides correspond to an established political spectrum. In general, designating a party to fall somewhere within the Left-Right axis refers to their basis of social support and ideological orientation of their policies. As such, analyzing political landscapes through the L-R spectrum has proven beneficial to examine the interplay between religious and secular values; a high correlation in identifying industrial and economic strategies; as well for outlining if a society scores high in materialist or postmaterialist value orientations (Knutson, 1995).

However, the particularities, dimensions, and range of the L-R spectrum can vary from one country to another, as well as in different periods of time (Jahn, 2011). As such, while a populist-driven political polarization will invoke the idea of a L-R spectrum, it is not clear cut where a populist side will fall within this spectrum itself. Populism has been theorized in terms of its exclusivity and inclusivity, in which an emerging leader tries to provide resistance by promoting the so-called “native” constituencies to the estranged minority and raise their social strength (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013, 2018). In terms of populist mobilization, organization, and central issues, however, I consider that the utilization of identity—regardless if they are developed from religious, ethnicity or socio-economic bases—as effective. Populism is *always* a form of identity politics, in which populist actors coalesce under the banner that they hold a higher morality than other factions or the general public of their country (Müller, 2016).

There are three major approaches for examining populist movements, each focusing on their: a. Strategy of political mobilization; b. Ideology; c. Forms of political discourse (Bonikowski & Gidron, 2016). As a *strategy*, populism occurs when personalistic leaders aim to challenge government power without having to recourse to established political and economic mores and the elites that uphold them; instead, they opt to gather public support from a wide pool of disorganized masses, bypassing the conventional means of mediation and institutionalized mechanisms (Weyland, 2001; Mudde, 2004). Meanwhile, populism is an *ideology* when it functions as a binder between two different groups, namely homogenous and antagonistic groups.

Data and Method

The primary source of data for this quantitative study is derived from World Value Survey (WVS), particularly their Survey Waves 5 to 7, which spans from 2009-2014 and 2017-2022. Their global survey within this period also encompasses India, Indonesia, and the Philippines, which constitutes the unit of analysis for this study. WVS data is considered to be of adequate-to-high reliability due to their national scope; inclusive of all age ranges and demographic backgrounds; surveys a sufficient number of respondents, totalling 13,965 individuals throughout the three survey waves; and connects various variables, such as the intersection between democracy and trust, personal values, to subjective well-being.

From the WVS data, I focus on two types of questions, namely: 1. Questions pertaining to the position of respondents in the L-R spectrum, and; 2. Questions indicating the first political party of choice of the respondent. These two variables are then contrasted to map the overall L-R spectrum in each country, in which the personal values of respondents within the L-R spectrum correlates with the political position of their preferred parties, including party stance on public issues and the votes they give in parliament. The aggregate connection between these data points on the national level becomes the basis for the overall L-R spectrum in each country.

As a result, the conception of a L-R political spectrum in this article does not necessarily correspond to the specific political or economic ideologies of each party—their avowed or recognized “Leftness” or “Rightness”. Furthermore, this study acknowledges that L-R voting is multidimensional in nature, as it is a condensation of multiple sets of economic and non-economic value orientations. One theory which is still widely-held today suggests that L-R polarization in a multiparty system is significant in shaping the terrain for political competition, as the L-R spectrum is defined along the lines of specific socio-economic values (Freire, 2015). In this article, however, I do not provide an overarching discussion on these socio-economic values—which is also inseparable with discussions of “party ideology”—but is limited to an explanation of the *specific* positions of political parties, and how far they differ from one another.

Figure 2. L-R Spectrum Based on Respondents’ Choice

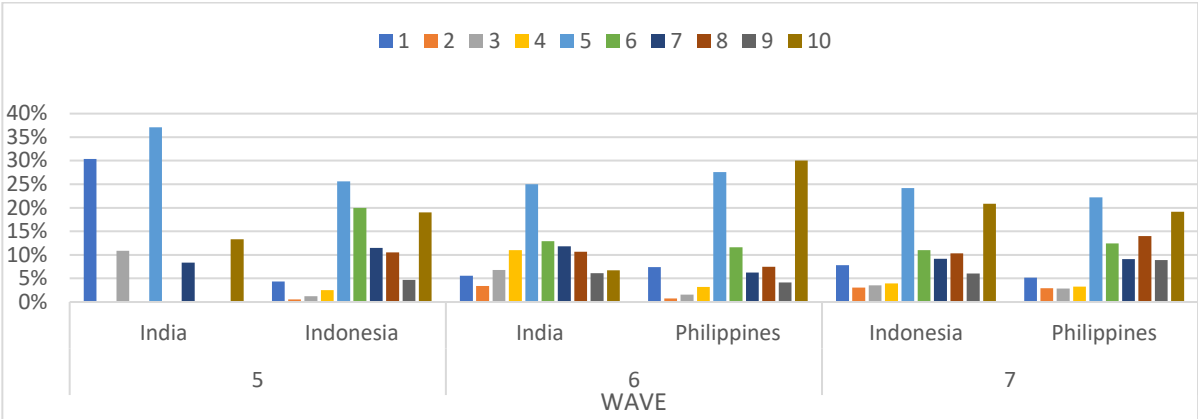


Figure 2 demonstrates how distribution within the L-R spectrum in each country has shifted throughout the survey waves, with early numbers (1-2) indicating a Left political leaning. Conversely, rightist aspirations are indicated in later numbers (9-10), while anything in between (3-8) falls into a degree of centrism. In Wave 1, respondents in India who declared themselves to be squarely on the left spectrum (1) scores second-highest compared to through-and-through centrists (5). Meanwhile, only less than 15 percent of respondents can be identified as thoroughly right (10). However, in Wave 2, the share of respondents identifying themselves in the Right spectrum increased drastically, while the distribution in the Left fell sharply from 30 percent to less than 5 percent. In Wave 3, the spectrum distribution is spread far more from the center to the right, but still retains a balance with distribution in the left. In Indonesia, Wave 5 and 7 sees a significant shift towards the right of the spectrum, where the initial center-right position (6) becomes more even with positions 7 and 8.

Interestingly, the Far-Left position (1) has increased throughout each survey wave, which coincides with fewer distributions in Leftist positions that are closer to center (2, 3, and 4). In Wave 6, the Far-Right position (10) in the Philippines reached 30 percent of their total national respondents, while the Far-Left (1) only scored 7 percent. This changed in Wave 7, where the Far-Right position was spread towards the center, particularly in positions 6 and 8. Overall, the Centrist position dominates each Survey Wave in the three countries, followed by the Far-Right and Center-Right positions, whose distribution fluctuates in each wave. Distribution within the left side of the spectrum can be seen to have risen slightly in the Philippines and Indonesia, while India has always had a constant support base on the left, which functions as a counterbalance to their rising right.

The distribution data provides three general descriptions. *First*, the most dominant ideological position in the three countries is “Pure Centrist” (5) with an average of above 20 percent. The prevalence of position (5) has

not changed significantly throughout every survey wave, suggesting that fluctuations over time only occur within the left and right positions. *Second*, Indonesia and the Philippines have a significant Far-Right social base (10) that tends to be stable; fluctuations within the right spectrum only occur within more centrist positions (7, 8, 9). *Third*, only India has a strong Far-Left social base (1) in a degree comparable to the country’s Far-Right (10), which has failed to fully develop nonetheless.

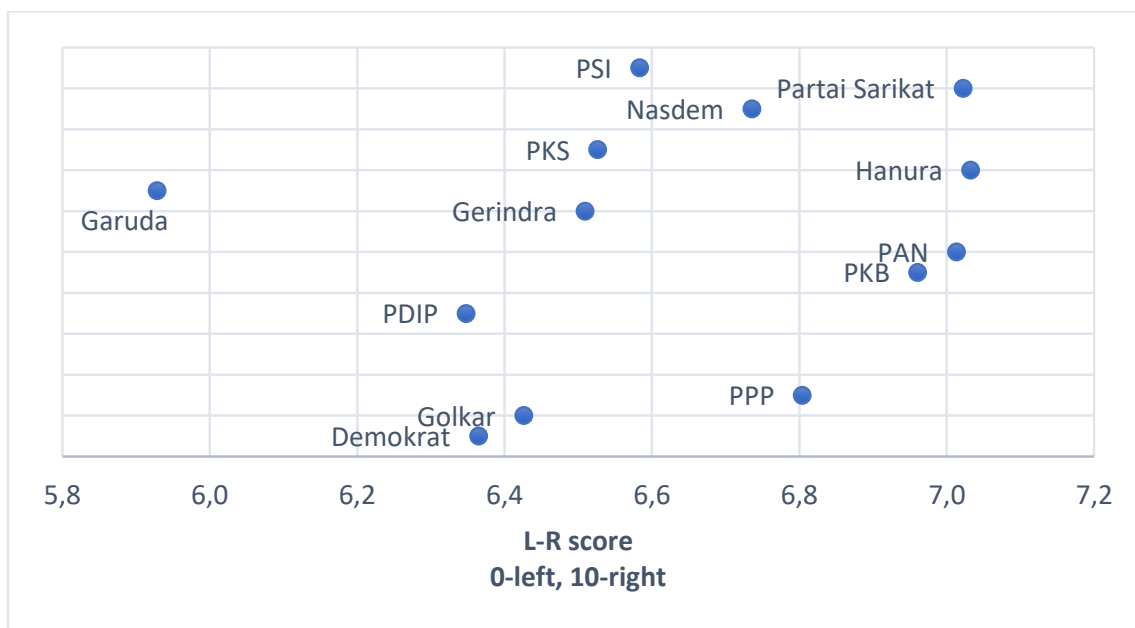
Discussion

Indonesia

To analyze the relationship between populist actors and their impact towards democracy, it is pertinent to survey the dominant ideological variables that make up populist movements and provide justification towards their mode of doing politics (Huber and Schimpf, 2017). In the case of Indonesia, ideology plays an important role in shaping party preferences. While political parties in Indonesia are governed by a personalistic pattern of clientelism, they nonetheless operate under the claims of representing a particular ideology or political tradition. This shows that even a democratic system dominated by patronage and personal elite interests is not monolithic and contains many different dimensions (Fossati, et al, 2020; Hendrawan et al, 2021).

Nonetheless, the L-R spectrum is barely ever referred to within Indonesian political discourse. Instead, research on party ideology in Indonesia utilizes a method of self-identification, in which political elites are asked to define their party within a “Progressive/Liberal” versus “Conservative” orientation on a scale of 1-10 (Aspinall, et al, 2018). The result of this study can be found in Figure 3, which shows that most Indonesian parties view themselves as situated within the right side of the political spectrum—or to be precise, Center-Right.

Figure 3. Respondents' Political Party of Choice in Indonesia within the L-R Spectrum



While the bedrock of political polarization in Indonesia is often perceived as the antagonism between secular-nationalist and conservative-religious forces, Figure 3 suggests that “nationalist” parties such as PDIP, Golkar, and Partai Demokrat share the same Center-Right space with parties espousing Islamic ideology such as PKS. Even traditionalist Islamic parties that are widely-considered to be pluralist and moderate such as PKB and PAN identify themselves as more Right-Wing (position 7) compared to PKS. Even so, parties such as PDIP, which has historically been acknowledged to be more accommodative of left-wing exponents within the party structure, share the same voter base with the traditionally Right-Wing Golkar party. This indicates a discordance between the mainstream or public perception of a party’s ideological makeup and the self-identification of party elites: the existence of acknowledged leftist elements within PDIP, after all, does not transform it to become a Center-Left party.

Results of the World Value Survey Wave 5-7 show that all Indonesian parties fall into scores 5.9 to 7, indicating a homogenous mold of Center-Right ideology. The absence of a Left-wing party in Indonesia is generally attributed with the destruction and censorship of the Indonesian Communist Party in 1965-1966, as well as the emergence of Islamist groups involved in the communist purge as the only

viable opposition to the hegemonic nationalist secularism. Interestingly, after the fall of the authoritarian New Order regime, Islamic populism in Indonesia has never been mobilized under the banner of a piety that opposes the un-Islamic neoliberal market economy (Hadiz, 2018). Consequently, the social bases of Islamic politics fall into two main forces, namely centrist-moderates and right-wing fundamentalists, with no iteration of a “Leftist Islamism”.

The homogenous Center-Right composition of Indonesian political parties is also reflected in the government coalition. In his successful bid for President in the 2014 and 2019 elections, Joko Widodo was endorsed by PDIP, in which he is a card-carrying member. During his first tenure, Widodo’s cabinet comprised all parties across the secular-nationalist and religious-conservative divide, with Gerindra, the Democratic Party (*Partai Demokrat*), and PKS as opposition. Gerindra would join the coalition in Widodo’s second tenure in 2019, leaving *Partai Demokrat* and PKS as the two only oppositions.

Nonetheless, all major parties in the government coalition—including *Nasdem*, *Golkar*, *PKB*, *Hanura*, and *PPP*—can be identified as adhering to right-wing economic policies, in spite of espousing different social and cultural aspirations. This suggests that

political polarization amongst parties—such as in terms of their social bases—does not necessarily entail a polarized reception for government policy amongst parties, particularly for policies that accommodate economic liberalization or promote conservative-religious aspirations. This configuration also enables Widodo’s regime to safely advance policies that satisfy the interests of Center-Right political elites, whilst simultaneously restraining the growth of Far-Right political forces.

Unsurprisingly, political moves that invite resistance and scrutiny—such as strengthening executive power, bolstering the security sector, or co-opting the parliament—have nonetheless been carried out with relative ease. Several executive-proposed policies that easily received a majority of parliamentary votes include the Jobs Creation Bill “Omnibus Law”, which amends 77 laws in one fell swoop and bestows full authority to the central government to determine investment projects—a mandate previously held by the local government (Nugroho, 2020). Another policy that was passed smoothly in the parliament is the ambitious project of relocating the capital city from Jakarta to Kalimantan, which is estimated to amount to USD 32.7 Billion (Jakarta Post,

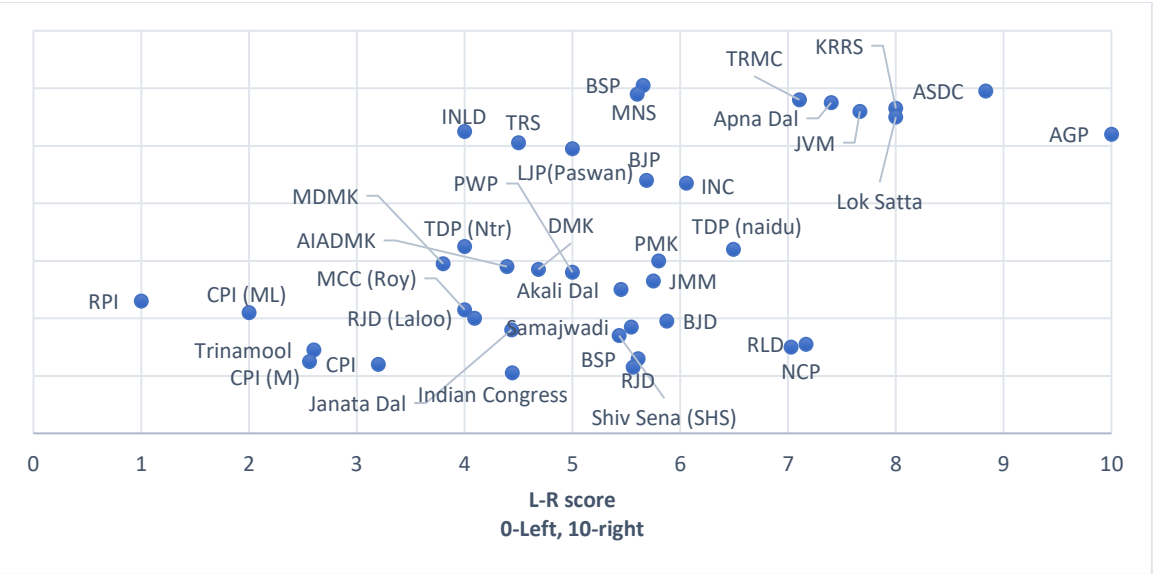
13/03/2022).

While several of President Widodo’s policies are geared to prioritize growth in the economic sector—particularly by building large-scale infrastructure with the help of foreign debt funds—this “economy-first” focus is also accompanied by criticisms on how his administration has abandoned initial commitments to uphold political and civil rights. Instead, his administration has supported strengthening the role and authority of the military, intelligence and security apparatus in public life. There are also indications of a growing Widodo dynasty in national politics, particularly after his son and son-in-law managed to win mayoral elections in the city of Surakarta and Medan, respectively (Fealy, 2020).

India

Compared to Indonesia, political parties in India are more equally distributed in Left, Center, and Right positions across the political spectrum, which also comprises several strong local parties competing in national elections. Several major parties, like the Indian Congress, are located within the Center-Left position.

Figure 4. Respondents’ Political Party of Choice in India within the L-R Spectrum



Interestingly, while the ruling BJP party is often associated as representing right or even Far-Right voters, their actual position is squarely centrist, as indicated in Figure 4. One explanation behind this discordance is that several of BJP's policies are actually a direct response against political programs brought by the Indian Left—which has struggled to score electoral victories—while their avowed political ideology utilizes Far-Right rhetoric. In 2018, for example, the BJP offered a saffron planting program in West Bengal to alleviate the welfare of the state's rural population, who had suffered from massive land acquisitions since 1994 to make way for the industrialization policy favored by the Left government.

As such, the BJP presented itself as troubleshooting problems left over by previous left-leaning regimes by providing concrete solutions in the agricultural sector. Combined with the erosion of left-wing bases in India, such as the dismal turnout of the All India Trinamool Congress led by Mamata Banerjee in 2011, voters who still harbored left-leaning aspirations would begin to anchor their choice to Center-Left, Center, and even Center-Right political parties instead. It appears that voters are becoming disillusioned with prioritizing ideological alignment with parties, and favor those which seem more promising in delivering change (IndianExpress, 2018).

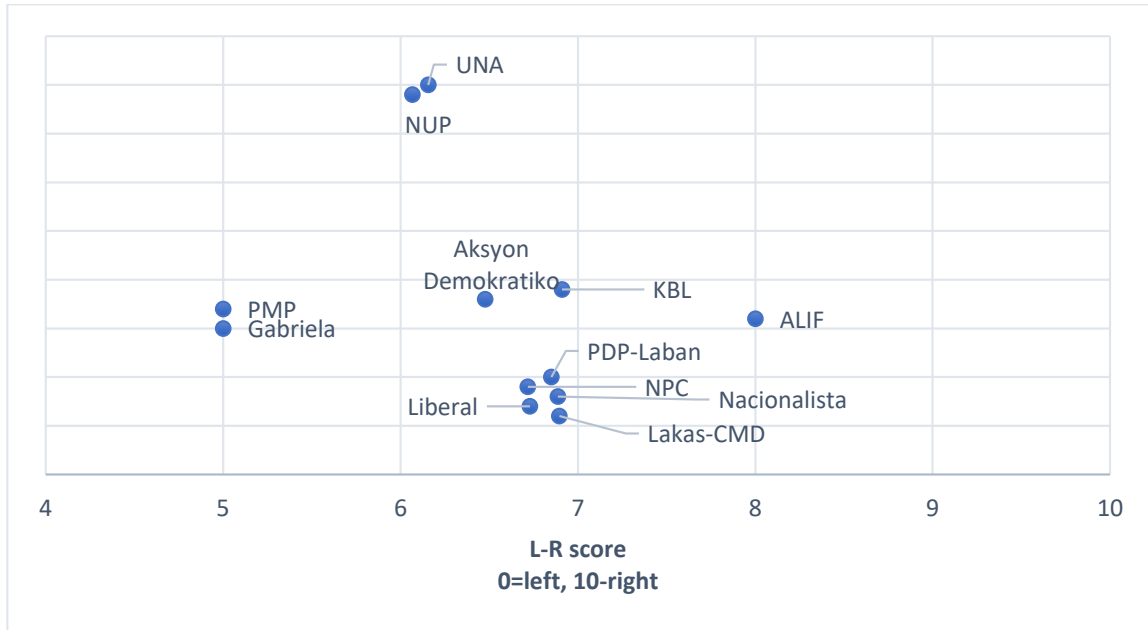
While Indian leftist parties have found themselves weakened in the majority of states as the result of BJP hijacking their social bases, there are exceptions to this case. The Left Democratic Front (LDF) defeat in the state of Kerala, for example, warrants a different diagnosis compared to the exodus of Communist Party India (CPI) cadres to BJP in West Bengal. While the Indian Left have failed in advancing their own political position, the ideas and programs they espoused can still be identified in other formats (Yadav, 2019). BJP's rapid progress can be attributed to its ideological flexibility, such as co-opting the anti-colonial national movement and principles of secular governance into their Hindutva core (Venkatesh, 2019). As such, the Modi-era BJP government successfully combines religious and nationalist

aspirations coming from the right side of the political spectrum, but mobilizes socioeconomic programs and ideas plundered from the Left in congress and other non-executive institutions (Gupta, 2021). Paradoxically, the initial allure of the BJO as an “alternative choice” in Indian politics is a result of its thorough Centrist position instead of Far-Rightness.

Right-wing forces in India are still characterized by their strong religious, dogmatic, anti-low caste, and fervent Hindu nationalism. From an economic perspective, however, the most important forces supporting BJP, such as the *Sangh Parivar* movement, can be identified as left-leaning—hostile to multinational companies, as well as a trenchant believer of *swadeshi* (self-sufficiency). BJP's economic platform takes an oppositional stance against foreign direct investment in the retail market (Ghose, 2013), while their primary working-class base under the *Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh* trade union have supported centralist planning for state ownership of production activities. Furthermore, Modi's administration has also advocated for stronger market intervention, as well as increasing investment in the field of innovation. From a policy standpoint, both Modi and the BJP government could be seen to represent a political ideology dubbed as “Hindu-Left” (Majumdar, 2021; The Print, 2021). This incorporation of leftist programs is what sets them apart from outright Right-wing parties such *Asom Gana Parishad* (AGP) or Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) located in positions 7-9 within the spectrum.

Nonetheless, BJP's willingness to accommodate left-leaning economic policies is not accompanied with a strong commitment for egalitarian justice, such as alleviating inequality and discrimination amongst religions and classes. Instead, the dominance of BJP and its allies in parliament provides a strong impetus for the emergence of authoritarian, one-sided, and injurious policies that betray the principles of multi-party democracy. The resolution of the Jammu-Kashmir and Ladakh conflicts, for example, was carried out without consultation with regional representatives, while key political figures such as Omar Abdullah and Mehbooba

Figure 5. Respondents' Political Party of Choice in the Philippines within the L-R Spectrum



Mufti were placed under house arrest, with a series of additional troops deployed to prevent any protest (Tremblay, 2019). In Agra, the BJP-affiliated *Bajrang Dal* group burned down Santa Claus statues and accused Christian missionaries of trying to convert the populace. Persecutions also took place in Assam and Haryana, where statues of Jesus Christ were vandalized, church activities being forcefully put to a halt, and an anti-Muslim movement gained widespread traction (Ganguly, 2021; Chowdhury, 2021).

The Philippines

As shown in Figure 5, all political parties in the Philippines are located on positions 5-8 within the political spectrum. Some major parties, including *PDB-Laban*, *Nacionalista* and *Aksyon* occupy the most-rightwing position within their national political landscape, which ends at Center-Right.

While Duterte's regime is widely regarded to have strong support from the left, a closer look suggests that this support only comes from several activist elites, and does not include any representation within the Filipino parliament. Duterte is well-known to have close ties to leftist rebel groups in Mindanao, assuming the role of consultant in the National Democratic Front (NDF) and had offered them three cabinet

positions. These cordial relations with forces that could have easily been ideological foes, above everything, allows Duterte's regime to maintain peace with militias in Mindanao without having to take military action, such as by introducing an agrarian reform program to distribute free land to small farmers. Aside from this, Duterte's economic policies remain heavily influenced by his pro-market economic team. The majority of his closest aides and high-ranking military officers are also staunch anti-communists (Palatino, 2017).

However peculiar, the leftist elements within Duterte's populist strategy should be seen as a strategy to counterbalance support from political parties with seats in the parliament with an extra-parliamentary leftist movement. Combined together, these odd bedfellows ensure his policies will pass with minimal resistance and receive wide public support. While this strategy can be seen populism par excellence, Duterte is tasked with the delicate job of appeasing his right-wing supporters made up of conservatives, financiers, and the hard-line military, while simultaneously catering to the popular economic policies advocated by both communist and nationalist political parties. While antagonism between these two camps will likely resurface in the future, Duterte made best use of their support by co-opting the parliament,

ensuring his own political safety through the backing of security forces and silencing other public criticisms by rallying support from extra-parliamentary left-wing groups. He would even go the lengths of bulldozing Human Rights to gain popular support—best exemplified by his violent crusade against criminals and drug dealers.

In contrast to the Center to Center-Right (5 to 8) positions of Filipino political parties, voters in the Philippines fall between 4.5 to 5.5, indicating an overwhelmingly Centrist aspiration. Aside from the Lakas-CMD coalition on the far right of the spectrum and LP on the far left, parties generally do not have a clear program differentiation with one another. As such, gaining votes from the median voter becomes a bone of contention in elections. Furthermore, Filipino parties are managed by principles of patronage, heavily relying on networks of clientele pooled around a handful of elite families. This is the reason why party coalitions cannot be carried out in accordance with ideological closeness, as seen in the unlikely K-4 coalition consisting of Lakas, NPC and LP (Jou, 2010: 382). Almost all parties only operate during election years (Lorenzana, 2021). As such, political parties might be able to galvanize support to secure a seat in parliament, but end up having little-to-no control over the policy-making choices of their representatives.

The concentration of power amongst popular figures ultimately forces parties to think of alternative strategies—either joining a government coalition, or doubling-down their outsider role by remaining as an opposition. There are no guarantees that any of these gambits will pull off: for example, the *Otso Diretso* Coalition consisting of Liberals, the Democratic-Socialist *Akbayan* and *Aksyon* had failed to provide a counterweight to Duterte's interests. In the 2022 elections, the UniTeam Coalition of HNP, PDB-Laban and Lakas-CMD was formed to pave the way for securing Bongbong Marcos' Presidency, along with Duterte's daughter, Sara Duterte, as Vice-President in a separate ballot. Marcos' ascendancy was enabled by his wealth of resources: all parties require patrons to survive, with the highest patron controlling

a web of politician clients, exchanging funding for campaigns for support in specific policies.

The state of left-wing factions in the Philippines is not so different from their Indian counterparts: both have been poor in their electoral performance. From 2016-2019, votes for main left parties decreased by 41 parties, while smaller and regional left parties saw their votes decrease by up to 73 percent. On one hand, Left parties are lacking in material resources, making them easily defeated by vote-buying. On the other hand, the programs they offer also lack innovation, often rallying around the single issue of social inequality (Tadem, 2019).

Throughout Duterte's ascendancy to become President of the Philippines, there is no evidence of polarization amongst political parties. The party organization is a peripheral player in the national political constellation, often primarily functioning as political vehicles for oligarchic figures and clans. The *Nacionalista*, for example, is under the control of Manuel Villar; NUP by Enrique Razon; and NPC by Eduardo Cojuangco Jr. The party Duterte controlled in 2016, PDP-Laban, only managed to secure 3 seats in Congress, while Duterte himself was able to win 39 percent of votes in the Presidential election (Kenny, 2020). As political parties failed to function as a dependable social base, populist leaders such as Duterte resorted to alternative or extra-parliamentary movements for mobilization of popular support. Given they are managed effectively, these unofficial political factions have provided him the power to balance strong oligarch control over political parties and the parliament.

Conclusion

So far, the composition of political parties within a country along the Left-Right spectrum has been a largely neglected variable in diagnosing democratic decline. However, a closer analysis of populism, polarization, and democratic backsliding in India, Indonesia, and the Philippines suggests that populist leaders managed to come to power only by addressing or exploiting a certain gap within their country's political landscape. These countries demonstrate

that the L-R spectrum does not necessarily amount to a predetermined battle between ideologically-committed factions, but rather a horizon for the feasibility of political ideas, programs, and alliances—which nonetheless can assume various kinds of permutations in a rather flexible manner.

In the case of Indonesia, pro-market economic policies were not met with meaningful resistance from the parliament, as the government regime has gained support from the majority of parties in the legislative branch. The homogenous position of Indonesian parties within the Center to Center-Right entails a likely degree of adherence for neoliberal frameworks of economic growth; as such, the already-castrated opposition parties never presented alternative programs, and contestation solely rested on the matter of *who* wields the political power over these programs. The combination of majoritarianism and unavailability of alternatives has led to an agglomeration of executive power in Indonesia, which becomes the country's defining feature in its move towards autocracy.

Meanwhile, left-wing parties in the Philippines remain barred from accessing parliamentary power as a consequence of their poor electoral performance. Outside elections, however, left-wing movements have proven to be effective in channeling public support for the government regime. This discordance, which is the result of the overall tendency of voters to put their support to parties within the Center-Right position in the political spectrum, suggests some similarity between the Philippines and Indonesia. Their difference lies in that Filipino political parties are only vehicles for the elite to participate in elections, in which they are able to channel their material resources directly into political power. While political parties in Indonesia also operate under a similar system of patronage, they still have better organizational prowess to broker a contract with potential leaders, determining the extent of compensation in exchange of ensuring party support in parliament.

Finally, the decline in electoral performance amongst left-wing parties in India means that

their voter base has become scattered and put their support somewhere else. This also led to an exodus of left-wing cadres, who opted to join the ruling party and enact “change from within”—ensuring that their economic policies do not steer to unmitigated liberal territory. The price to be paid for this strategy is ultimately political: Indian left-wing forces no longer possess social and political influence to counter the religious primordialism and racial policies brought by factions of Hindu Nationalists in the ruling parties and governing regime.

Amongst the three countries, India has the widest political spectrum spanning from left to right; Indonesia scores almost exclusively on the center; while the Philippines range from center to center-right. Taken together, their L-R spectrum distribution is located dominantly within the Center-Right position. This varied distribution suggests that the L-R political spectrum is a useful variable to analyze the specific trajectories of democratic decline within different countries. In general, the L-R political spectrum of voters demonstrates the basis of political legitimacy for political parties, as well as the tactics and coalitions they have to resort to when such legitimacy is absent or not self-evident. Taken dialectically, the trend of burgeoning political innovations in the right-side of the spectrum cannot be separated from the state of the left—be it cooptation as in the case of India, discordance between electoral and extra-electoral performance in the Philippines, or outright absence as in the case of Indonesia.

This article concludes that the phenomena of democracy backsliding in these three countries is the byproduct of an imbalance within their political spectrum. While homogenous, Indonesia's overwhelmingly Centrist position nonetheless suggests a more “balanced” constellation compared to, for example, India, which has enabled elites to further their interests without having to resort to dismantling their country's democracy in dramatic fashion. Meanwhile, the emergence of populist figures to prominence were apparently not so much influenced by the L-R spectrum of political parties; if anything, populist leaders actually have the potential to weaken the role of parties,

as they are able to harness public support directly and bypass traditional mediators. Furthermore, this allows populist leaders to ignore brokering deals with parties and their representatives in parliament, allowing them to exert control over state apparatus and ignore mechanisms of check-and-balance between institutions.

Ultimately, the phenomena of populism suggests a “dealignment” between the political spectrum of voters and the ideological polarization of political parties, in which parties lose their influence as aggregators and representatives of certain voter group interests. While this has led parties themselves to abandon traditional ideological cleavages and adopt a populist strategy of casting as wide of a net as possible to attract votes, populist leaders emerge as an alternative of a political actor who embodies this populist logic without the constraints of patronage systems embedded within political parties. As such, this study showcases political parties to be an important variable in explaining the correlation between democratic decline and emergence of populist leaders. Specifically, the trajectory and specificities of democratic decline will depend on the degree of support received by populist leaders from political parties. A leader heavily-backed by certain parties will likely cater to the ideological position of its voter bases, even if these aspirations entail the marginalization of other groups; consequently, a leader who bypasses party mediators might indicate the poor mediation power of political parties in the first place, hence allowing them to pragmatically pander to various popular aspirations.

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