

## 1 Introduction

Populist leaders are currently in power in several of the world's most populous states and are on the brink of it in many others. Southeast Asia has been no exception to this general trend: the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, and arguably Timor-Leste and even Myanmar have all seen populists come to power in recent years. Yet in spite of the pervasiveness of populism in contemporary Southeast Asia's democracies, the region remains neglected in the comparative study of populism. Not only are there relatively few comparisons of Southeast Asian cases of populism against those in other regions (but see Hadiz 2016, Kenny 2017, Moffitt 2015, Phongpaichit and Baker 2008, Swamy 2013), but there are also few comparative analyses of Southeast Asian cases amongst one another (for exceptions see Case 2017, Hellmann 2017, Pepinsky 2017, Thompson 2016b). This is both an unfortunate gap in our knowledge of Southeast Asian politics and a missed opportunity to advance our understanding of the nature of populism and the reasons why it thrives in some places and times but not others.

My goals in this Element are explicitly comparative: I draw on the insights of populism studies elsewhere in the world to set out a conceptualization of populism that travels to Southeast Asia; I develop a theory that can account for the prevalence of populism across the major states in post-authoritarian Southeast Asia: the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand; and I extract lessons from these Southeast Asian cases for the broader study of populism.

The meaning of populism continues to be much disputed (e.g., Moffitt 2016). A central aspect of the debate is whether populism should be understood primarily as a political ideology or as a type of political strategy. There is of course no *true* definition of populism any more than there is a true definition of democracy or justice. What we need therefore is a definition of populism that is useful. A useful conceptualization of populism should adequately distinguish between positive and negative cases *and* facilitate the development of theoretical and empirical research. The first part of this Element develops what I call the *organizational* approach (see Section 2). This approach has its origins in the writings of German sociologist, Max Weber (1978), and has historically been the predominant way of understanding populism outside Western Europe (Di Tella 1965, Germani 1978, Mouzelis 1985, van Niekerk 1974, Weyland 2001). I define populism in this sense as *the charismatic mobilization of a mass movement in pursuit of political power*.

The idea that populism is a form of charismatic leadership of the masses implies that populist movements have two chief characteristics that set them apart from bureaucratic or clientelistic parties. First, authority within a populist

movement or organization is arbitrary and concentrated in the person of the leader. The leader is not constrained by organizational rules and has (near) total authority over personnel and strategic decisions within the organization. Populist leaders can and do utilize *followers* such as party cadres, members, and volunteers to mobilize support; but such followers are characterized by their loyalty to the leader rather than to a party. Thus, populism is distinct from regular party politics on the one hand (where rules over the distribution of authority are important), and mere independent or personalist politics on the other (where leaders lack such arbitrary control over a mass movement or party).

Second, and relatedly, populism is about the mobilization of the *masses* toward political ends. The people, or rather a large mass of them, are critical to any understanding of populism. Unlike conceptualizations of populism as an ideology, however, the concern in this sense is with how the people are politically incorporated, not with what they or their leaders believe (Mouzelis 1985). The people who become supporters of populist movements are mobilized less by clientelistic ties or membership in aligned party or civil society organizations than they are by a direct affinity for the leader. Although mobilization by loyal party activists is not precluded by definition, the direct mobilization of supporters by the leader through mass rallies and the mass media is critical to populist mobilization in a way that distinguishes populist parties from either bureaucratic or clientelistic ones (Kenny 2017).

In contrast to populist political organizations, bureaucratic parties are characterized by rules and procedures governing the distribution of authority within the organization and a range of institutionalized relationships with supporters externally (Panbianco 1988, Sartori 1976). Civil society organizations like unions, churches, and nationalist associations form the bedrock of such parties. Clientelistic parties engage in a *quid pro quo* with supporters in which support is exchanged for particularistic material benefits (Chandra 2004, Eisenstadt 1973, Eisenstadt and Roniger 1980, Hicken 2011, Scott 1969, Stokes, Dunning et al. 2013). Such parties are governed internally according to factional strength, itself determined by which groups can mobilize the most resources and blocs of clients (voters) (Landé 1965, Schmidt, Scott et al. 1977). Populist movements or parties thus organize the pursuit of power differently to bureaucratic and clientelistic parties (Mouzelis 1985).

The main contribution of this Element is to build a theory of why populists in this organizational sense are successful in Southeast Asia. For reasons explored further in Section 3, while it draws on survey evidence, it concentrates on explaining the structural factors that make populist support more likely at the aggregate rather than individual level. Existing macro-level theories, either

developed out of particular Southeast Asian case studies or from the broader Latin American and European experiences, point to a variety of causes of populist success including economic distress, whether due to long-term shifts in the economy (Autor, Dorn et al. 2016, Roberts 2014b) or short-term crises (Weyland 2006), and demographic shocks, especially due to immigration (Evans and Chzhen 2013, Kaufmann 2017, Mudde 1999, Rydgren 2008). None of these explanations works particularly well as a general model of populist success that travels across time and space in Southeast Asia.

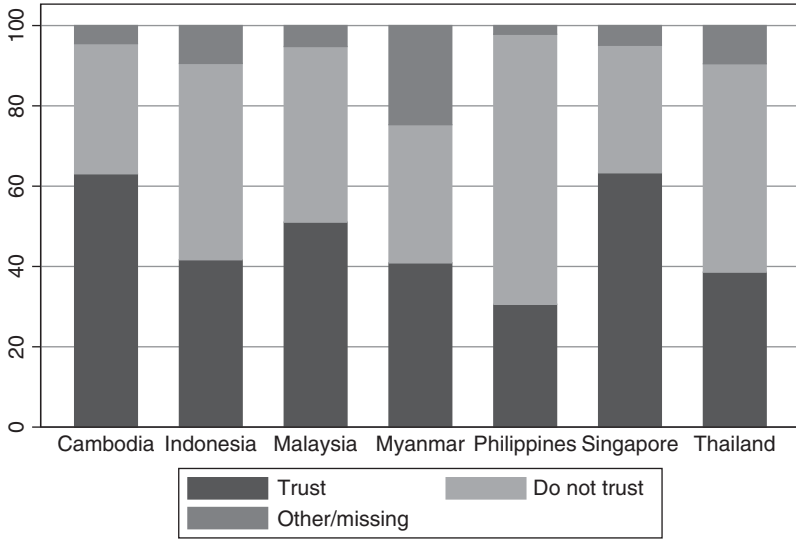
The main theoretical claim of this Element is that populist mobilization thrives where ties between voters and either bureaucratic or clientelistic parties do not exist or have decayed. This is because populists' ability to mobilize electoral support directly is made much more *likely* by voters not being deeply embedded in existing party networks. Populists attempt to establish direct relations with voters. This means that they employ frequent public appearances, mass rallies, the traditional mass media, and, increasingly, social media in connecting with voters. Although all political parties make use of such instruments to a degree, populists rely *primarily* on these direct connections rather than party members, sympathizers, or paid brokers to deliver votes for them. This lowers the *costs* of voter mobilization faced by populist organizations relative to other types of political party. Unlike the leaders of patronage parties, populists don't need a nationwide system of brokers to mobilize votes.<sup>1</sup> Analogously, unlike bureaucratic parties, populists don't need the deeply institutionalized links with supporters through interest groups and other civil society organizations that take many years to build. Populism is thus an efficient (low cost) form of political mobilization where bureaucratic and centralized clientelistic party building are inhibited.

Southeast Asia thus provides fertile territory for populist mobilization. Across the region, as indicated by survey data from the Asian Barometer, there is a general lack of trust in and identification with political parties (Figure 1) (see also Tan 2012). In Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand, only three to four respondents out of ten trust political parties. In Indonesia in 2011, seven out of ten survey respondents identified with no party, while that number had risen to over eight out of ten in 2014 (Muhtadi 2018); in the Philippines in 2017, the figure was nine out of ten. It is in such contexts, where parties do not have enduring corporate identities with persistent and

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<sup>1</sup> As I explain further in Section 3, independent presidential candidates can build a loose network of brokers and their clients. In such a case, however, a candidate is dependent for her support on the loyalty of these brokers. A populist on the other hand, does not rely on such brokers, giving her much greater freedom of action. Mere presidential or independent campaigning is thus not equivalent to populism.

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*Populism in Southeast Asia***Figure 1** Trust in Parties in Southeast Asia

**Source:** Asian Barometer Waves 3 (Indonesia) and 4 (all others)

deeply institutionalized memberships, that populists thrive. For this reason, populism has been historically far more successful in Southeast Asia and Latin America than in Western Europe, at least until recent years (Kenny 2017).

Clientelistic party systems, such as those that have prevailed in Southeast Asia, have persistently been weaker and more susceptible to appeals by populists than bureaucratic ones. Between 1980 and 2010, worldwide, there were no cases of a populist winning sole executive control in a non-clientelistic party system (Kenny 2017: 188–189). In turn, however, some clientelistic party systems have been weaker and more susceptible to populist appeals than others. Clientelistic party systems in which the central leadership can maintain tight control over the distribution of patronage, such as the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) did in Japan for many years, can be enduring and resistant to populism. Where clientelism goes in tandem with the extensive autonomy of lower-level political intermediaries, parties tend to be weaker and such systems tend to more susceptible to populist appeals (Kenny 2017: 48–56). Explaining the success of populists in Southeast Asia, as elsewhere, requires understanding why the populace has not been incorporated into nationally cohesive bureaucratic parties on the one hand and why the clientelistic parties that did develop have been relatively fragmented (rather than centralized) on the other.

Country specialists will rightly argue that the reasons for the development of the mostly weak and factionalized clientelistic party systems in the region are unique to each case. However, we can identify some general patterns that apply across Southeast Asia. The proximate explanation is the political fragmentation that was built into these polities' systems at the time of their incorporation as modern states, and the acceleration of this process under periods of democratization and decentralization. The deeper explanation concerns the nature of political economic development in the region, which has led to the empowerment of elites who profit from their dominance over government at the subnational level.

These two factors – institutional and political-economic – explain why, on the one hand, bureaucratic national parties have been almost non-existent in democratic Southeast Asia; and why, on the other, clientelistic parties in the region have largely failed to form dominant and enduring national party machines. With the exception of the Communist movements of the 1930s to 1970s, and arguably some contemporary Islamic and ethnic political organizations, most parties in Southeast Asia have been clientelistic rather than bureaucratic. Citizens across the region are typically tied to political parties not via autonomous civil society organizations (e.g., labor unions, churches, nationalist associations), but through ties of patronage to locally prominent individual politicians and their political networks (Aspinall, Davidson et al. 2016, 2015, Hutchcroft 2014, Lande 1968, Scott 1972). Critically also, political loyalties have traditionally taken on a regional or local basis, making these national clientelistic parties particularly fragile. Even national patronage-based parties in the region are better understood as agglomerations of locally oriented networks of patrons and clients (Hicken 2006b). In Indonesia, the Philippines, and Myanmar local autonomy was built into the very nature of the colonial state. In Thailand, although never a formal colony and although bureaucratic centralization has been the stated rule, political party penetration in the local arena has always been shallow. Party institutionalization has been notoriously weak in the region, even in its most durable democracy, the Philippines (Hicken and Kuhonta 2014).<sup>2</sup>

In practice, local elites in the region, whether as landlords, employers, providers of credit, or later, government agents, were able to convert their local predominance into political power, effectively staving off political

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<sup>2</sup> The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) in Malaysia and the People's Action Party (PAP) in Singapore are partial exceptions to this general rule. Both UMNO and especially PAP, like the LDP in Japan, developed as relatively more institutionalized and centralized machine parties that also cultivated links with religious and ethnic associations through the distribution of patronage (Weiss and Hassan 2003).

centralization and effective national party building as imperial influence waned in the middle of the twentieth century. Vote buying became prevalent across the region as democracy was introduced but these transactions did not generate enduring political loyalties. The growing importance of natural resources, from crude oil to palm oil, only increased the dependence of the economic elite on political connections and control over the enforcement of the law. Right from independence, weakly institutionalized national parties were formed, challenged, or captured by leaders with at least some populist characteristics: Sukarno in Indonesia, Ramon Magsaysay and Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines, and Tunku Abdul Rahman in Malaysia. The same probably would have been true of Aung San in Burma, had he lived, and was arguably true of U Nu in the latter part of his rule.

Across the region, long periods of authoritarian centralism emerged partly as a response to the political and economic fragmentation of the early post-independence period (Slater 2010). Yet, with the exception of the People's Action Party (PAP) in Singapore, and to a lesser extent the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) in Malaysia, bureaucratic parties failed to develop out of this restriction of the political space. Even in Indonesia, where Golkar, the party apparatus of the ruling Suharto regime, became a national party through its considerable presence in the burgeoning administrative machinery across the country, the party continued to be weakly embedded in society, while other parties were prohibited entirely from having a presence below the regency level (Tan 2012: 83). In Timor-Leste, the *Frente Revolucionaria de Timor-Leste Independente* (FRETILIN), which was the party most associated with winning independence, had the potential to entrench itself as a nationally representative bureaucratic party; however, it lost power after just a single term in government as voters abandoned it for a multitude of new alternatives (Hynd 2017). In Thailand, even a decade after the democratic transition of 1993, parties still had only a shallow penetration into large parts of the country, with local notables and factions having extensive influence (Ockey 2003).

In a deeper sense, the subnational political fragmentation of the region is due in part to its political economy. The concentration of elite capital in primary industries – plantation production and minerals among others – meant that there was little by way of an industrial elite centralizing counterweight to locally entrenched plutocrats as has existed in northeast Asia in more recent times (Robison 1986). As historical research on Europe and North America shows, such modern business groups played a key role in the consolidation of programmatic parties (Kuo 2018). In contrast, Southeast Asian elites, dependent on local monopolies for rents and the use of coercion to extract economic

surpluses from workers and peasants, have been best served by a system in which they retained effective political control. Rapid growth in recent decades has done little to alter this entrenched system, as powerful elites have the capacity to resist encroachment on their prerogatives (Winters 2011), while urban populations are fragmented by cross-cutting work status, class, ethnic, and religious cleavages.

The persistent weakness of national parties – both bureaucratic and clientelistic – has meant that the transitions to democracy in Southeast Asia beginning in the 1980s have been accompanied by the recurrent presence of populist campaigners who have relied on their charismatic appeal to link directly with voters without the baggage of densely institutionalized parties. Just as Corazon “Cory” Aquino, Joseph Estrada, and Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono challenged and defeated non-populist parties in the Philippines and Indonesia when they re-democratized in the 1980s and 1990s respectively, Thaksin Shinawatra came to power in Thailand through direct appeals to voters who were only weakly attached – if at all – to establishment non-populist national parties. In Timor-Leste, FRETILIN held power for just one term before losing to a coalition led by Xanana Gusmão’s populist electoral vehicle, the *Congresso Nacional da Reconstrucao Timorense* (CNRT), in 2007. The National League for Democracy’s (NLD) thumping victory in the 2015 parliamentary elections in Myanmar would have been inconceivable without the charismatic Aung San Suu Kyi at its helm on the one hand and the institutional weakness of the military-established Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) on the other. Populism, rather than representing something extraordinary, has been nearly ever-present in democratic Southeast Asia, existing in continual tension with clientelistic forms of party building (c.f., Hellmann 2017). At times the latter has been sufficient to produce ruling national coalitions, but these have rarely lasted more than one or two electoral cycles before being threatened or overturned by populist competitors.

Political theorists have long argued that populists paradoxically pose a threat to the very democratic institutions that allow them to come to power. In seeking to establish and maintain a *direct* relationship to supporters, populists are inherently driven to erode the intermediary institutions that might get in the way (Urbinati 2015); this includes parties, courts, legislatures, the press, the academy, or any other agency that purports to challenge the populist’s singular legitimacy. A growing body of empirical research now demonstrates that populists erode democracy across most measurable dimensions (Allred, Hawkins et al. 2015, Houle and Kenny 2018, Huber and Schimpf 2016, Kenny 2017: ch. 2, Kenny 2018, Ruth 2018). Liberal democracy seems to work only when coherent bureaucratic political parties exist to manage it.



Is this antagonistic relationship evident in Southeast Asia? On the one hand, populists such as Thaksin and Duterte have so eroded *liberal* procedures such as press freedom and the rule of law that their democratic credentials are in serious doubt. Other populists, however, such as Yudhoyono and Jokowi in Indonesia and Xanana Gusmão in Timor-Leste, even if they are best classified as *partial* populists (who were partly constrained by their legislative coalition partners), have been much more moderate. Moreover, non-populist governments in Southeast Asia, whether authoritarian or democratic have been frequent abusers of civil rights. Populist government in Thailand, for example, was ultimately curtailed by military intervention, which in turn resulted in even more severe repression of freedom of speech and other civil liberties. Given the frequency of coups in Thailand, it is hard to argue that this was a response to Thaksin's alleged abuses alone. Military rule in Indonesia and Myanmar has been savagely violent. Rather than populism being simply a "threat" to democracy, it seems that the perennial weakness of political parties in Southeast Asia sets up a recurrent three-way tension between populism, clientelistic democracy, and authoritarianism. The kinds of civil rights taken for granted in Western democracies have been weakly upheld by all types of government in the region. Populism is thus as much a symptom as a cause of weak democracy and weak parties in the region.

Section 2 develops the organizational conceptualization of populism. Section 3 discusses existing explanations for the prevalence of populism in the region and adds flesh to the theoretical framework introduced in Section 1. Section 4 outlines the historical political economic and institutional basis for the weakness of national parties in the region and Section 5 details how populists have taken advantage of this to appeal directly to voters in the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand. Section 6 concludes with some thoughts on what we can learn from these cases on the relationship between populism and democracy.

## 2 Defining Populism

Populism is a term used with such frequency in both academic and non-academic writing that its meaning can be difficult to fix. By almost any measure, populists are a diverse group with seemingly few shared commitments or characteristics. It has thus been a considerable challenge to develop a concept that has a consistent theoretical core and that adequately categorizes those groups classified as populist in ordinary language. Populism literally means "a practice, system, or doctrine of the people." How exactly this people-centric form of politics should be conceived of and operationalized remains an open question.



There are (at least) two major schools of thought on conceptualizing and operationalizing populism (for a thorough recent review, see Moffitt 2016). I call these the *ideational* and *organizational* approaches.<sup>3</sup> This Element builds on the organizational approach used in the early wave of political sociological studies of populism in Latin America (Di Tella 1965, Germani 1978, Mouzelis 1985, van Niekerk 1974), developed by Weyland (2001, 2017), and most recently operationalized by Kenny (2017). Populist movements or parties can be distinguished from both bureaucratic and clientelistic organizations based on how they are structured internally and how they mobilize support externally (Kenny 2017). In this sense, populism can be understood as *the charismatic mobilization of a mass movement in pursuit of political power*.

The key distinguishing feature of populism in this formulation is charismatic mobilization. I follow Max Weber's (1978: 1111–1114) well-known tripartite distinction between bureaucratic, patrimonial, and charismatic forms of authority. The exercise of authority within bureaucratic parties is bound by rules and procedures, while externally they are founded on stable institutionalized relationships with supporters (Panebianco 1988, Sartori 1976). Analogously, in patrimonial organizations, authority is both traditional and transactional. Leadership is often inherited and privileges are distributed to supporters in return for their loyalty. Externally, such patronage-based parties engage in a quid pro quo with supporters in which votes are exchanged for particularistic material benefits (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1980, Hicken 2011, Scott 1972, Stokes, Dunning et al. 2013). Charismatic authority is instead characterized by the concentration of arbitrary control in the person of a popularly acclaimed leader.

While this tripartite schema – bureaucratic, clientelistic, and populist – resembles that of Kitschelt's (2000) party typology, our understandings of “bureaucratic” or “programmatic” party linkages differ. Thus, for clarity in this Element, I generally use Weber's original, but less familiar, terminology of the *bureaucratic* party rather than that of the programmatic party, although I take the two to be synonymous (see Kenny 2017). In contrast to Kitschelt (2000), bureaucratic (or programmatic) parties are not defined herein by their association with a particular ideology or set of policies. Parties of all types, not least populist ones, frequently make policy-based (or programmatic in Kitschelt's sense) appeals to voters (Barr 2009). One of the novel contributions

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<sup>3</sup> This Element's focus on organizations and strategies is not to suggest that the rhetoric or policy positions of populist actors do not matter. On the contrary, they matter a great deal. They are the *means* by which populist actors mobilize electoral support. However, the “anti-establishment” or “anti-elite” discourse that is so common to such actors is, I argue, endogenous to how their movements are *organized* (Kenny 2017: 24–28).

of the organizational conceptualization of populism advanced here is the idea that policy-based appeals are in fact an important part of what populists do. As scholars in the *ideational* school have long recognized, populism often combines with other *host* ideologies (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018: 4). In turn, following Weber (1978), bureaucratic or programmatic parties are defined by the institutionalization of their internal management and external relationships with supporters. It is a description of how they are organized rather than of the messages or policies they advocate.

Charismatic authority is defined by the situating of authority within the arbitrary control of the leader. Charismatic leadership is often thought to be a description of a leader's character. It would seem, in this sense, to have little relation to "the people." However, Weber (1978) was in fact clear that the distinctive element of charismatic authority was that it depends not on rules or tradition but on popular acclamation. For Weber (1978), a leader is charismatic only to the extent that his followers treat him as such. As he put it, "It is recognition on the part of those subject to authority which is decisive for the validity of charisma" (242). Charisma, in other words, is "an attribute of the belief of the followers and not of the quality of the leader" (Bensman and Givant 1975: 578). Charismatic leadership thus describes a relationship or a type of formal or informal organization, not a set of character traits.

Even more than for bureaucratic or patrimonial organizations, the people are the key actors in understanding how charisma works in practice. Weber (1978: 1114–1115) writes, the "genuinely charismatic ruler" is "responsible to the ruled – responsible, that is, to prove that he himself is indeed the master willed by God . . . If the people withdraw their recognition, the master becomes a mere private person." It is the fact that supporters can withdraw their support that makes the charismatic leadership of the masses a people-centric form of politics. Mere charismatic leadership, it should be noted, however, is not the same thing as populism. To the extent that charismatic leadership is possible in more conspiratorial form – think of Hitler's Nazi Party of the early 1920s or Lenin's Bolshevik faction prior to the First World War – we have to draw a further contrast between mere charismatic leadership and populism. A large mass of the people is critical to populism in a way that is distinct from charismatic leadership per se. Hence populism refers to the charismatic mobilization of a *mass* movement.

Populists seek to connect *directly*, figuratively if not literally, with the masses who become their *supporters*. Supporters are mobilized less by clientelistic ties or membership in aligned parties or civil society organizations than they are by a direct *affinity for the leader* (Weyland 2001: 14, Wiles 1969: 167). Although populists sometimes utilize parties, unions, and other organizations in their efforts