

■ PROGRAM ON SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CHANGE

# Polarization in the 2022 Philippine Presidential Election

Contending Frustrations with Post-EDSA I  
Democratization

Jessie S. Malibiran, Jr.



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"Voters seeking return of 'golden age' rally behind son of dictator Marcos"

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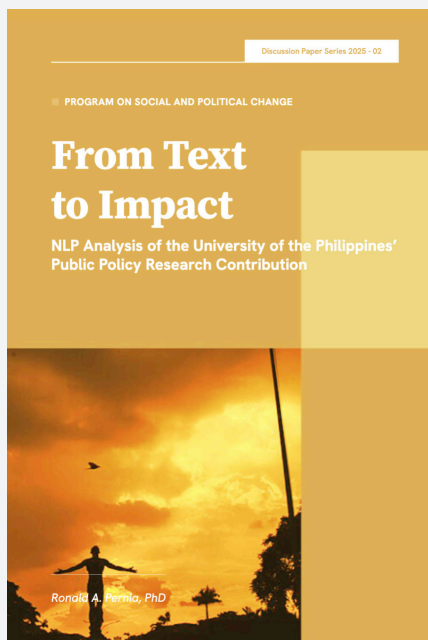
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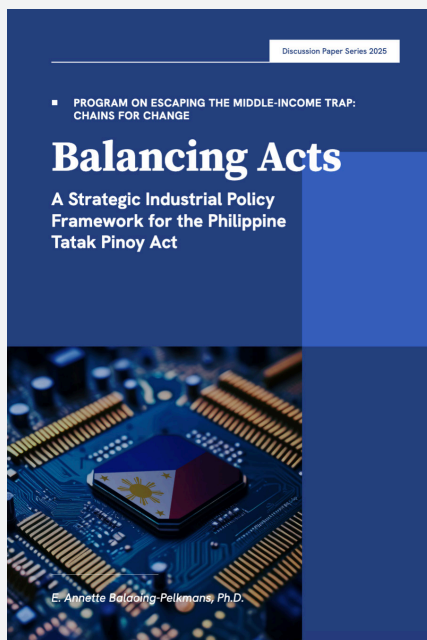
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# POLARIZATION IN THE 2022 PHILIPPINE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Contending Frustrations with  
Post-EDSA I Democratization<sup>1</sup>

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Jessie S. Malibiran, Jr.<sup>2</sup>

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- 1 This discussion paper is derived from sections of the author's undergraduate thesis submitted as a requirement of the Bachelor of Arts (Honors) in Political Science program of the University of the Philippines Diliman.
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# KEY TAKEAWAYS

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- The political polarization between the Marcos, Jr. and the Robredo camps during the 2022 Philippine presidential election must be understood as an episode of a long-standing division between liberal and populist identities in Philippine politics.
  - Support for both candidates and alignment with political identities are conditioned by contending interpretations of democracy and frustrations with the democratization process of the Philippines.
  - Elite-sponsored disinformation may have persuaded individual voters, but it does so by representing, exaggerating, and catalyzing pre-existing sentiments of exclusion from the political process.
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## INTRODUCTION

Civil public deliberation is the lifeblood of any genuine democracy, presupposing a baseline of shared values that allow competing perspectives to nonetheless compromise or, at the very least, coexist (Bruggemann and Meyer 2023). However, democracies across the globe have witnessed the intensification of hostilities to the point of mutual distrust, hatred, and even violence (Kingzette et al. 2021). Beset by political polarization, contending groups are no longer satisfied with compromise. Politics has become a zero-sum activity in which the identities and interests of groups rest on the hostile exclusion of the *other* (McCoy and Somer 2019; Kusaka 2017).

The 2022 Philippine presidential election is said to be the most polarized political juncture in contemporary Philippine history (Arugay and Baquisal 2022). The iteration has been dubbed as one of the most significant elections in the country as it served as a referendum on the legacies of the maverick Duterte administration, also occurring amid the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and widespread disinformation operations (Dulay et al. 2023). The presidential contest was arguably a two-way race. Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos, Jr. won with a landslide, garnering approximately 31 million votes or almost 59% of the total turnout, while Ma. Leonor “Leni” Robredo trailed



with around 15 million or 28% (COMELEC 2022). Marcos, Jr. and Robredo supporters have intensely clashed, leading to accounts of broken families, severed networks, and physical violence during and after the elections (McCargo 2022).

It is thus the aim of this paper to analyze this polarized dynamic and situate it within the broader history of political polarization in the Philippines. This paper draws from a metareview of extant literature on political polarization in the country as well as a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of news reports and of social media posts collected by the Philippine Media Monitoring (PMM) Laboratory's Digital Public Pulse (DPP) Project in 2022 (Bunquin et al. 2022; Wodak and Meyer 2009). The project collected publicly available data from Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter (now X) as the 2022 official campaign period unfolded. These might not capture the entirety of the discursive dynamics in the 2022 elections, but are nonetheless illustrative.

The paper ultimately argues that the 2022 Philippine presidential elections featured a polarized dynamic between the Marcos, Jr. camp and Robredo camp with their respective views of democracy. The 2022 electoral result should not be reduced to individual civic failure on the part of *bobotantes* (stupid voters) nor attributed to the persuasion of disinformation narratives. Support for Marcos, Jr. and Robredo are respectively conditioned not merely by false narratives, but by long-standing grievances with the democratization process of the Philippines. The 2022 electoral result and the polarization must not be exceptionalized; it should rather be understood as an episode of a long-standing division in Philippine politics between a liberal and populist identity.

In what follows, the paper first discusses existing conceptualizations of political polarization and argues for the applicability of the discursive approach to the Philippine context. Second, it reviews the extant literature on polarization in the Philippines. It argues that Filipinos are divided between liberal and populist identities that emerged since the ouster of former president Joseph Estrada in 2001. Third, it situates the 2022 presidential election within this broader history, arguing that the Robredo and Marcos, Jr. camps are the respective contemporary faces of the liberal and populist identities. Finally, it suggests redirections for academics, civil society, policymakers, and politicians amid this polarized dynamic.

## CONCEPTUALIZING POLITICAL POLARIZATION

Political polarization has been conceptualized in ideological and affective terms. *Ideological polarization* refers to the increasing divergence of stances on salient issues, conventionally operationalized in terms of the distance and extremity of positions on the left-right political spectrum (Fiorina and Abrams 2008). *Affective polarization* refers to hyperpartisanship manifested in ingroup favoritism and outgroup aversion, conventionally operationalized as varying levels of affinity with particular political identities (Iyengar et al. 2019). Arguing that these conceptualizations merely capture symptoms of a much deeper fracture, scholars have increasingly viewed ideological and affective polarization as reciprocal aspects of the same discursive phenomenon.

With this, scholars have asserted that political polarization is best defined as divergences in discourse (Bruggemann and Meyer 2023; McCoy and Somer 2019; Meislová 2019). Ideological conflicts are part and parcel of democracy if not an indicator of its health, but this pluralism assumes a baseline degree of intergroup consensus on values and assumptions. *Discursive polarization* occurs when this baseline is fractured or absent. Hence, contending groups have different epistemic and normative assumptions—different views on the *what should be* and *what is* of democracy (Bruggemann and Meyer 2023).

What differentiates pluralism from polarization is the emergence of a *master cleavage* between or among increasingly homogenous political identities, which override other social cleavages (McCoy and Somer 2019). This antagonism is especially pronounced in cases of *negative identification* or when political identities are based more on a shared rejection of the *other* rather than support for common values (Areal 2022; Shahin 2023). With this comes a Manichean moral discourse of the ingroup as good and the outgroup as the evil enemy to be defeated by any means necessary (Kusaka 2017). Authoritarian and violent practices are thus legitimized, leading to democratic backsliding or erosion (Orhan 2022; Kingzette et al. 2021). Politics becomes a zero-sum game and this negativity spills over to social relations.

McCoy and Somer (2019) further argue that this phenomenon takes its most pernicious form when political leaders construct the divide around a *formative rift*, defined as “social or political rifts that arise during the fundamental formation/reformation of a nation-state” (p. 1). Elites are incentivized to do

so when executives are directly elected and electoral systems operate on a winner-take-all logic (Vegetti 2019). Overall, this shows that the former conceptualizations merely capture symptoms of a much deeper fracture. This also allows the diagnosis of political polarization based on dimensions beyond the conventional ideological spectrum (see McCoy and Somer 2019, 238). The discursive conceptualization is appropriate for the Philippine context as discussed in what follows.

## POLITICAL POLARIZATION IN THE PHILIPPINES

### The Liberal Identity versus the Populist Identity

Prototypical works on political polarization in the Philippines characterize it mainly as a class divide. Guerrero's (1971) Marxist analysis asserts that Philippine society is polarized between the capitalist elite and the oppressed masses composed of the proletariat and the peasantry. Kerkvliet (1995) mentions a divide between elites who weaponize elections for private interests and ordinary Filipinos who leverage elections as means to pursue more principle-based goals and collective interests. However, these analyses fail to capture intraclass contradictions, especially in the case of the rising middle-class (Webb 2022). Socioeconomic classes have not figured as significant political identities in the country since they themselves are divided by vertical alliances anchored on elite personalities (Arugay and Slater 2019).

There is existing consensus that the master cleavage in Philippine politics concerns the substantive content of democracy: how Philippine democracy should be. Notwithstanding the various terms used by scholars, Philippine society is said to be divided into a *liberal* political identity and a *populist* political identity (McCoy and Somer 2019; Arugay and Slater 2019; Kusaka 2017; Thompson 2010). The liberal *civic sphere* is anchored on the problem of accountability and good governance. They advocate for limited government and the end of traditional politics through the greater participation of citizens against dynastic clans and *trapos* (traditional politicians) (Teehankee 2016; Kusaka 2017). Meanwhile, the populist *mass sphere* is primarily concerned with the problem of equity and representation. They advocate for strong government and the redistribution of politico-economic resources for the marginalized masses, thus casting support for unorthodox and charismatic outsiders against morally bankrupt elites (Teehankee 2016; Kusaka 2017).

Contrary to popular discourse, alignment with either of these identities does not neatly coincide with socioeconomic class. The liberal civic sphere is usually viewed as composed of the elite and upper-middle class, while the populist mass sphere is usually viewed as composed of the lower-middle class and the poor. However, both identities recruit their respective members from all classes (Kusaka 2017). Rather, what neatly divides the two is their contending narratives of democracy. These narratives condition their divergent interpretations of political events and thus their contending assessments of the democratization process.

## Elite or Mass Polarization?

There is debate as to the causal mechanism of this polarization. How does this polarization emerge? Some scholars argue that polarization in the Philippines is mainly elite-led, with warring elites acting as discursive entrepreneurs to selectively recruit certain sectors of the public to their cause and turn them against others (Arugay and Slater 2019; Thompson 2010). Polarization is thus conjured by elites to legitimize (extra)constitutional attacks on another section of elites (Arugay and Slater 2019). Meanwhile, other scholars argue that the polarization operates at the mass-level (Kusaka 2017; Uyheng and Montiel 2021). Sections of the Filipino public align themselves with the liberal or populist identity depending on their own assessments of the political order and throw their support to a figurehead that best represents such evaluation. This paper first argues that these assertions are not mutually exclusive by examining an individual-level contradiction in Filipino political behavior.

At the individual-level, the liberal and populist identities are not clear-cut. Webb (2022) has called this a *democratic ambivalence* among the Filipinos, especially the middle-class. Pernia and Pano (2023) conceptualize this as a *delegative democratic attitude* that combines support for procedural democracy and “for strong executive power with limited legislative intervention” (p. 359). Scholars have noted that among Filipinos, support for liberal democracy coexists with a concern for disciplining freedom through authoritarian leadership, and this is conditioned by their frustrations with democratization (Webb 2022; Garrido 2020; Kasuya and Calimbahin 2022; Borja 2023). However, what pushes individuals into one side of this individual-level contradiction, such that they express their position as a political identity at the societal level?

Borja (2023) argues that “the source of coherence for these conflicting tendencies is the primacy of political agency (leadership and citizenship)” (p. 74). Given the personalistic and elite character of Philippine politics, leaders serve as cues that allow voters to resolve this tension (Pernia and Panao 2023; Garrido 2020). As Kasuya and Calimbahin (2022, 7) argue in the case of former president Rodrigo Duterte, “Filipinos are not becoming illiberal and consequently supporting Duterte; Filipinos have supported Duterte but not necessarily because they preferred illiberal rule.” This shows that Filipinos do not align with political identities and then align with elites. Rather, their alignment with elites constitutes their political identities. The discourses of elites thus tip the scale in favor of one pole of this individual contradiction.

At first glance, these findings substantiate the assertions of polarization as mainly elite-led. However, Filipinos’ elite preference may have “as much to do with the discrediting of other presidential contenders and disappointment with the previous administration” (Garrido 2020, 4 as cited in Kasuya and Calimbahin 2022, 5). Hence, while elite preference constitutes political identities, such elite preference is still based on the people’s own evaluations of the political order. For instance, a Filipino voter’s preference for Duterte aligns them with the populist identity, and their preference for Duterte is conditioned by their frustrations with the liberal order. In sum, the causal chain from the evaluation of the political order to elite preference, and then political identity, shows the reciprocal and interactive dynamic between elite-level and mass-level polarization. An ordinary Filipino likely evaluates the status quo and then aligns with an elite that articulates such assessment, thereby constituting a political identity through this voter-elite correspondence.

## **The Origins of Polarization: The 2001 Estrada Ouster**

The contemporary democratization process of the Philippines began when former president and dictator Ferdinand E. Marcos, Sr. was deposed by the People Power Revolt or EDSA I in 1986. Nonetheless, this juncture did not constitute a polarizing formative rift at the time according to scholars. The antagonistic relation was not between sections of society but between a society united against the dictatorial Marcos, Sr. regime (Arugay and Slater 2019). Instead, polarization emerged due to a democratic crisis in the turn of the millennium: the 2001 ouster of former president Joseph “Erap” Estrada (Arugay and Slater 2019; Kusaka 2017). Estrada’s rise in national politics during

the 1990s is said to have marked the contemporary rise of populism in the country and thus the initial articulation of the populist identity post EDSA I (Thompson 2010). Estrada's outsider image born out of his action star career and his appeals to the poor propelled him to the presidency in 1998.

By October 2000, reports of Estrada's involvement in *jueteng*, a form of illegal gambling, constituted grounds for Congress to initiate impeachment proceedings. However, during the Senate trial in January 2001, majority of the senators voted to block the examination of evidence, rousing people to protest once again at the Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (EDSA). Considering the similarities of this protest with the People Power Revolt dubbed EDSA I, this protest against Estrada was dubbed EDSA II. The protest, along with then Vice President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's accession to the presidency, compelled Estrada to leave the Malacañang Palace. Estrada's departure was declared by the Supreme Court as his de facto resignation in *Estrada v. Desierto* (G.R. No. 146710-15). The EDSA II protest, with its insistence on good governance, served to initially define the liberal identity against the pro-Estrada camp.

These developments stoked sentiments of alienation among his supporters who then reacted with the EDSA III counter-protest. Considering the violent dispersals and the attempted seizure of the Malacañang, Arroyo declared a state of rebellion. Although EDSA III failed to oust Arroyo, the counter-protest served to initially define the populist identity against the anti-Estrada elements. Estrada supporters viewed EDSA II as an unjust and illegitimate *coup* against their champion and they alleged that such protest was not representative of the Filipino public considering the supposed leadership of the middle class (Kusaka 2017). Reciprocally, the Estrada critics that joined EDSA II questioned the representative character of EDSA III, alleging that the latter was merely a brainwashed mob composed of society's *scum* (Kusaka 2017).

These two episodes of collective action laid the ground for the formation of the liberal and populist camps as polarized political identities in Philippine politics. Each camp defined themselves against the other. The liberal camp constructed themselves as *citizens* insistent on accountability, attributing the ills of Philippine politics to the *manipulable* character of the *masses*. Meanwhile, the populist camp constructed themselves as the masses concerned with representation, attributing their marginalization to the exclusionary tactics of the *elite* (Kusaka 2017; Thompson 2010).

## Provisional Unities: The 2004 and 2010 Elections

This polarization further evolved during the 2004 presidential election. Arroyo's reelection bid was challenged by Fernando Poe, Jr., another action star who galvanized Estrada supporters. Although Arroyo was ultimately declared president, the legitimacy of her victory was compromised by the Hello Garci scandal. Wiretapped conversations between Arroyo and Virgilio Garcillano, an official of the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) were leaked, rousing sentiments among Poe supporters that the masses were once again cheated by the liberal elites. Arroyo admitted that it was her voice on the recordings and publicly apologized, but maintained that no electoral fraud was involved. Because of Arroyo's stained legitimacy, she earned the lowest approval ratings of any Philippine president post-EDSA I then and until now (Ducanes, Rood, and Tigno 2023) and contended with various coup attempts during her term.

This scandal angered both the liberal and populist identities, resulting in the former's abandonment of Arroyo as a key figure despite initially supporting her reelection bid to stop the rise of another macho-populist candidate. Such a provisional unity was evinced by calls for Arroyo's impeachment and ouster coming from both liberal and populist elements. Arroyo's stained term made good governance and reform a winning platform in the 2010 presidential election (Thompson 2010). It is with such promises that Benigno Aquino III, son of former president Corazon Aquino, won. However, this provisional unity ought not to be interpreted as reconciliation.

Support for Aquino III from the populist identity is considered less as substantial support for the liberal himself and more as a rejection of Arroyo. Aquino III likely benefitted as well from a sympathy vote, considering his mother's death that actually compelled his party to elect him as the standard-bearer instead of initial candidate Manuel Roxas III. It is also crucial to note that the more adamant elements of the populist camp were divided between Estrada who vied for reelection and Manuel Villar, Jr. whose rags-to-riches storyline also appealed to the lower strata of Philippine society. Nonetheless, the polarization between the liberal and populist identities became relatively muted because the chief antagonistic relation was not between the two, but between them and Arroyo (Kusaka 2017).

## The Resurgence of Polarization: The 2016 Elections

Aquino III's popularity waned as his administration contended with various crises such as Typhoon Haiyan (Yolanda), the Mamasapano clash, and the *tanim-bala* or *laglag-bala* (bullet-planting) scandal in the Ninoy Aquino International Airport (NAIA). These issues inflamed sentiments of exclusion among Filipinos in the Visayas and Mindanao and made security a top concern among the public leading up to the 2016 elections. During this juncture, the populist identity found renewed vigor through the candidacy of Rodrigo Duterte, a sharp-tongued politician from Davao City whose tough stance on criminality appealed to many Filipinos. Although Duterte entered the race relatively late, he won with massive support from Visayas, Mindanao, and the Greater Manila Area. The liberal identity, constituted at this time by voters who rejected Duterte's demeanor and stances, was divided between the other presidential candidates such as administration bet Manuel Roxas III and Grace Poe.

Another important development during the 2016 elections was the beginnings of the repoliticization of EDSA I in national discourse. Parallels were drawn between EDSA I and the vice presidential race given the competition between Ma. Leonor Robredo, another widow turned politician like Corazon Aquino, and Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., the namesake son of the late dictator. Robredo, winning with a slim margin, became the new figurehead of the liberal identity especially as she blocked the restoration of the Marcoses to a national executive seat and opposed Duterte's authoritarian policies. Discussions on EDSA I and its legacy were reinvigorated by this contest, coming to the fore even further when Marcos, Sr.'s remains were buried at the *Libingan ng mga Bayani* (Cemetery of Heroes) in 2016. With the victory of Duterte and Robredo, the populist and liberal identities were once again articulated respectively.

These contending identities were then polarized by issues throughout the Duterte administration. The war on drugs marred by extrajudicial killings serves as a case-in-point of how their contending views of democracy influenced their interpretations of political events. Aligned with the aforementioned scholars, Uyheng and Montiel (2021) found that Filipinos were polarized into two camps regarding the war on drugs. The populist identity supported the punitive response to narcotics. They emphasized the discourse of effective government in securing community security, articulated



mostly in the vernaculars and in Filipino. The liberal identity critiqued the war on drugs and advocated instead for a rehabilitative approach. They highlighted the discourse of limited government to sustain democratic accountability, articulated mainly in English. This echoes Kusaka's (2017) assertion; that social institutions such as language (local languages versus English), media (mainstream versus tabloids), living spaces (informal settlements vs. gated subdivisions), etc., ideologically and materially reinforce the enduring polarization in the country. This, among other issues during the Duterte administration such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the government's response to the communist elements, further polarized Philippine society along this liberal-populist cleavage.

Overall, the above discussion mainly asserts that there has been an enduring polarization in the Philippines between liberal and populist identities with their contending views of how democracy should be. This polarization is an interactive dynamic between elites and the people. The identities form as sections of the public align themselves with elites, and this alignment is conditioned by popular frustrations with the existing political order. This contemporary polarization emerged during the 2001 ouster of Estrada, became latent as the public generally united against Arroyo and rallied around Aquino III, and resurged during the 2016 elections with the respective leadership of Duterte and Robredo. This historicization reveals how the 2022 electoral result should be understood not as a surprising or unprecedented event as some pundits and scholars claim, but as a mere episode and consequence of an enduring division.

## **POLARIZATION IN THE 2022 PHILIPPINE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION**

Elections are critical junctures in themselves, yet the significance of the 2022 iteration is magnified by the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, disinformation, and its role in either entrenching or rejecting the impact of the Duterte administration (Curato 2022; Arugay and Baquisal 2022; Ong 2022). The presidential contest was arguably a two-way race: Marcos, Jr. won with a landslide, garnering approximately 31 million votes or almost 59% of the total turnout, while Robredo trailed with around 15 million or 28% (COMELEC 2022). Marcos, Jr.'s running-mate and outgoing president's daughter Sara Duterte also won the vice presidency.

Several explanations have been fielded for the electoral result, but according to Dulay et al. (2023, 1), “continuity, coalition, history, and identity” emerge the strongest. First, Marcos, Jr. aligned himself with the highly popular Duterte administration thus positioning him as the continuity candidate. Note that Duterte’s popularity ratings proved exceptional, with Duterte maintaining *honeymoon* levels of presidential satisfaction until the end of his term according to opinion polling (Ducanes, Rood, and Tigno 2023). Second, this alignment with Duterte was substantiated by his political marriage with Sara Duterte as his vice president, forming the Uniteam as a formidable coalition (Arguelles 2022).

Third, these two dynasties are notorious for employing *influence operations* that have distorted perceptions of oppositional actors and critical historical moments, particularly EDSA I and Martial Law (Espiritu and Cristobal 2022). These narratives have produced a sense of authoritarian nostalgia that portrays Marcos, Sr.’s rule as a *golden age* that their supposedly scorned family vows to restore (Teehankee 2023). Fourth, this Marcos-Duterte alliance have united the votes of their respective bailiwicks, the Ilocos Region Solid North and the Mindanao South (Espiritu and Cristobal 2022), weaponizing the conventional Filipino political behavior of voting based on geographic or ethnolinguistic identity.

Such a result has compelled scholars and pundits to view the result as a supposedly clear manifestation of democratic backsliding, considering the victory of two authoritarian families enabled by disinformation operations (Coronel 2022). Curato (2022) argues that the result manifests a decisive rejection of the post-EDSA I *normative order* characterized by the moral defense of freedom and democracy. The new order maintains a veneer of democracy while impunity is tolerated if not embraced. The risk with these declarations is the privileging of a *correct* or *textbook* definition of democracy that might not be shared by the Filipino public. This paper argues that the 2022 elections does not necessarily manifest a total rejection of democracy, but a triumph of a different interpretation. As aforementioned, the populist identity that propelled the Marcos-Duterte tandem to power as explained shortly, interprets democracy as strong and effective government that is more representative of those excluded by the liberal view.

Scholars have found evidence of polarization in the 2022 elections especially in social media which reciprocally informed hostilities offline (Arugay and Baquisal 2022; Mendoza 2022). Through a network analysis of social media platforms, Bunquin et al. (2022) show significant clustering among Marcos-aligned and Robredo-aligned actors respectively. This polarization is attributed to the increasing influence of alternative and social media and their susceptibility to covert influence operations that spread propaganda (Bunquin et al. 2022; Gaw et al. 2023). Such disinformation operations played a heavy role in creating parallel public spheres lacking legitimate consensus on issues (Ong et al. 2022). Of course, such are not unique to the 2022 elections, but they have intensified due to the heightened reliance on remote communications during the pandemic and the complexification of the disinformation industry (Gaw et al. 2023).

However, one must not exaggerate the persuasive effect of disinformation, for this reinforces the *bobotante* (stupid voter) stereotype (Ong 2022; Ong et al. 2022). Kneejerk evaluations have reduced the electoral result to civic failure on the part of voters, effectively diminishing the grievances that compelled them to align with Marcos and Duterte. Ruud and Endresen (2022) qualify:

...that Filipinos were not harking back to a golden past, *but used both the Marcos era and its aftermath as inchoate illustrations of political, cultural and social anxieties in contemporary society*. Their apparently straightforward opinions about the presidential candidates, if considered as legitimatizing narratives, *became acts of hyperbole and paraphrasing that stood in for their non-verbalized sentiments* (405; emphasis supplied).

Hence, while elite-sponsored disinformation may have persuaded individual voters, it does so by representing, exaggerating, and catalyzing latent evaluations of particular elites and events. Simply, Filipinos may not necessarily believe the lies, but engage with them because the lies represent their unarticulated frustrations with democratization. This calls for attention to how Filipinos rationalized their political preferences and constituted their political identities during the 2022 elections.

The Robredo camp constituted itself as the contemporary face of the liberal identity. Robredo's focal message was to ensure a transparency and

accountability of government: '[sa] gobyernong tapat, angat buhay lahat' (better life for all through honest government). Robredo lambasted the corrupt status quo, critiquing the Marcos and Duterte families' lies and abuses of power. Robredo herself framed her candidacy as a means to block Marcos, Jr.'s bid, declaring her candidacy late and in haste only after Marcos, Jr. declared his. This discourse of limited government, morality, decency, and good governance is characteristic of the liberal political identity (Thompson 2010; Teehankee 2016).

Furthermore, Robredo supporters drew parallels between their *kakampink* (pink allies) movement and EDSA I, even reappropriating the 'L' hand gesture popularized by Aquino to denote support for Leni. Amid disinformation narratives that tarnished public memory of EDSA I and the liberal EDSA II, the Robredo camp strived to maintain or restore the democratic spirit of these movements. One Robredo-aligned post in Facebook shows the connection best:

Unity they say? Unity? Isn't that what overthrew the Marcoses in 1986? Yes, Filipinos unite if it's against a dictator, electoral fraud, Martial Law atrocities, murder of heroes, and widespread thievery and corruption! It's called People Power—the strength of the people! That is also what overthrew Erap in EDSA II. And now in 2022, the people are uniting again in choosing and supporting Leni and Kiko!

These comparisons with EDSA I were also enabled by the campaign's decentralized and grassroots character that juxtaposed the Marcos, Jr.'s top-down machinery (Encinas-Franco and De Luna 2024). Compelled by rapid propaganda from the Marcos camp and a secondary position in the pre-election polls, the Robredo campaign was an underdog people's campaign largely animated by the volunteerism of supporters as their own *ambag* (contribution) to the nation. Robredo's position as the lone female presidential candidate and as a non-dynastic public official resonated with these volunteers frustrated with traditional politics in the country.

However, the decentralized campaign also created a discursive dissonance within the Robredo camp. Despite the focal message of inclusivity, Robredo supporters constructed the Marcos supporters as *bayaran* (paid), *bobotante* (stupid voters), or *tangasuporta* (foolish supporters) whose supposed

blindness to truth warrants their messianic *pagmulat* (enlightenment). The Robredo camp played into the elitist framing of the Marcos camp, appearing hypocritical amid their claims of *radikal na pagmamahal* (radical love). This tendency of the liberal identity to promote good governance while blaming the poor for tolerating corrupt politicians has alienated the populist identity historically (Kusaka 2017). Hence, it is unsurprising that the good governance and reformist discourse has lost its flavor in the 2022 elections (Claudio 2022). By attributing Marcos' popularity to individual civic failure and the lack of civilized citizenship among the masses, the Robredo camp failed to reconcile their message of inclusivity with the struggles of the disenfranchised Marcos supporters. The *bobotante* discourse arrests the symptoms and the victims, not the underlying maladies and their causes.

Meanwhile, the Marcos camp constituted itself as the contemporary face of the populist identity. The Marcos camp corresponded to the mass sphere, constructing themselves as the *masa* (masses)—the ordinary Filipinos whose hardships are attributed to the failures of post-EDSA I order purportedly sustained by the liberal *dilawans* (yellows) and the radical communists represented by the Robredo camp. Extant studies and reports have pointed to intensive disinformation operations favoring Marcos during the 2022 elections with Robredo at the crosshairs of most negative propaganda (Gaw et al. 2023; Mendoza 2022; Arugay and Baquisal 2022; Ong et al. 2022). At the core of the disinformation narratives were the sanitization of the atrocities of the Marcos, Sr. regime and the problematization of the legitimacy of EDSA I and the political order it ushered. These Marcos-aligned posts best illustrate these narratives:

Thank you EDSA 1986. Because of you we have suffered and been one of the most poor countries. Thanks to the dilawans. While you are eating steak, there are Pinoys who are dying of hunger. That is what the Aquinos have done which they say we are indebted for.

Who will now emerge as the fucking demon and cancer of the Philippines? It is the Aquinos and the Lopez oligarchs and the communist lot who have conspired with various sectors of their various organizations with America complicit. And that is what they don't want to happen. That's why they ganged up when they kicked out Apo Lakay [Marcos Sr.] (1986), Erap Estrada (2002), and poisoned [Fernando Poe Jr.].

Marcos was placed in the pantheon of the mass sphere's populist champions victimized by the post-EDSA I order. These evince how the polarization of the 2022 race is a continuation of the latently enduring polarization caused by Estrada's ouster in 2001 and by Poe's controversial defeat to Arroyo in the 2004 presidential election. Marcos' promise of '*sama-sama tayong babangon muli*' (together, we will rise again) was hardly substantiated in his own pronouncements given the lack of a clear critique of the status quo, but it became an empty signifier through which Marcos supporters were able to articulate a populist backlash against the liberal post-EDSA I order given its failure to address popular frustrations.

With these, Marcos Jr. was fashioned as the restorer of the supposed *golden age* of his father's rule and as the vindicator of the masses. While he did not obscure his elite character and hardly measured up to the macho-charismatic allure of Estrada, Poe, or Duterte, Marcos, Jr. appealed to popular disenfranchisement through his family's own narrative of victimhood vis-a-vis EDSA I. Far from a democratizing movement, EDSA I was framed as an unjust rebellion that exiled the Marcoses, ending the purported prosperity and discipline of the Marcos, Sr. regime. This was Marcos, Jr.'s clearly successful attempt at resonating with the frustrations of the public with EDSA I's promises. Marcos, Jr., like the masses, was a *victim* of the liberal counter-elites.

Marcos, Jr. became an alternative to the supposed gutter politics and hateful discourse of the Robredo camp. Although the criticisms of the opposition were well-founded, the Marcos camp disdained the condescending and thus elitist manner by which they were aired, and these further reinforced Marcos supporters' deep-seated sentiments of exclusion. Marcos, Jr.'s official benign image, hollow rhetoric, and silence on issues rendered him as an empty signifier, a blank canvas on which disenfranchised Filipinos imputed their hopes of redemption and vindication.

Overall, these respective discourses show that the Robredo and Marcos, Jr. camp respectively constituted themselves as the contemporary faces of the liberal and populist identities in Philippine politics. The Robredo camp emphasized democratic accountability, while the Marcos camp emphasized democratic representation. Both identities reinterpreted democracy but in different ways and attributed the ills of Philippine society to different causes. The liberal Robredo camp points to the traditional clientelistic and corrupt

politics of the other, while the populist Marcos camp points to the exclusivism and hollow reformism of the other.

## **EDSA I AS A RETROSPECTIVE FORMATIVE RIFT**

The polarized discourses discussed above are noteworthy in three main ways. First, the invocations of EDSA II and EDSA III show that the polarization in 2022 must be understood as a continuation of such that began with the 2001 ouster of Estrada and the subsequent clashes between the liberal and populist identities. This shows, for instance, that support for Marcos, Jr. was not necessarily a mere product of disinformation—an effect of ignorance or overnight persuasion as others might think—but an act conditioned by a long-standing grievance of exclusion from the political process. Conversely, support for Robredo was also conditioned by a long-standing frustration with the persistence of impunity in Philippine politics.

Second, the 2022 electoral dynamic demonstrates the causal mechanism of polarization discussed earlier. Although Marcos supporters constituted themselves as the populist identity by virtue of their support for Marcos, Jr., their alignment with Marcos, Jr. in the first place was conditioned by their evaluation of the liberal post-EDSA I political order and rejection of the Robredo counter-elite. The same conversely applies to the Robredo supporters. The polarization in the 2022 elections demonstrate the interactive dynamic between elite-level and mass-level polarization: Elites weaponized polarization to defeat a counter-elite by entrepreneurially diffusing particular discourses, but these discourses nonetheless coincided with the public's respective assessments of the political order and their normative views of democracy.

Third, while the identities attribute the problems of the post-EDSA I order to different causes, what their respective discourses both imply is that EDSA I's promises have been largely unfulfilled. Hence, while previous scholarship has considered EDSA I not as a formative rift crucial to the generation of political polarization during its actual occurrence (Arugay and Slater 2019; McCoy and Somer 2019), this paper ultimately argues that EDSA I has become a formative rift in *retrospect*. The contending discourses of elites on the juncture along with the public's differential evaluation of its legacies reveal that EDSA I has

become a polarizing point in Philippine politics. The liberal and populist identities now define themselves in reference to this juncture.

It could be argued that the emergence of EDSA I as a retrospective formative rift is merely incidental to the disinformation narratives. Had another event figured as the target of propaganda, it could have had the same polarizing effect. It could also be deemed merely incidental to the contending candidacies of Marcos, Jr. and Robredo who have been discoursed as the contemporary faces of Marcos, Sr. and Aquino respectively. Had other candidates run, EDSA I might not be as polarizing. However, EDSA I's repoliticization is also logical, given that it triggered the democratization process which has earned competing evaluations from the Filipino public. It also established the political institutions that have been weaponized and subverted by the liberal and populist identities in their mutual counterattacks. Hence, the 2022 presidential election shows the possibility of a historical juncture becoming a formative rift in hindsight. The newfound role of EDSA I as a litmus test of political identity is likely to continue as the Marcos family sustains their positions in national politics.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, this paper has argued that the 2022 Philippine presidential elections featured a polarized dynamic between the Robredo and Marcos camps with their respective views of democracy and evaluations of the democratization process. The 2022 electoral result and the polarization must not be exceptionalized; it should rather be understood as an episode of a long-standing division in Philippine politics between a liberal and populist identity traceable to the 2001 Estrada ouster. Nonetheless, the 2022 polarization, while proving to be a continuity of this fracture, also reveals a crucial shift: the repoliticization of EDSA I as a formative rift in retrospect. EDSA I has become a reference point by which contending political identities are formed.

Given this context, it is crucial for academics to recognize the implicit insistence on a *correct* and *textbook* definition of democracy which has led some to disregard the valid frustrations of the public as mere unsophistication, ignorance, or civic failure. This might also explain the public's dismissal of the academe's discourse. This calls for more scholarship that conceptualize democracy straight from the horse's mouth, that is, by reconceptualizing



democracy in the public's own terms and accommodating the heterogeneity of what might be encountered.

Second, it is crucial for politicians and policymakers to recognize the diminished appeal of the liberal discourse of limited government, morality, and good governance. The link between good governance and controlled inflation, basic necessities, and job security which are long-standing concerns of Filipinos remains unclear and idealistic. Hungry Filipinos cannot be nourished by '*kulay rosas na bukas*' (rose-colored future). '*Gobyernong tapat*' (honest government) cannot ensure precarious Filipinos stable sources of income. The links remain unclear and inaccessibly articulated. As Claudio (2022) argues, messages of inclusivity will fall on deaf ears if the opposition does not articulate a clear vision for development that responds to the grievances of many Filipino voters. The liberal opposition needs to prove that democracy as a lofty ideal will effectively generate tangible benefits for the people.

Third, it is crucial for civil society, policymakers, and scholars to rethink approaches in combatting disinformation in the country. The supply-side of disinformation has already been explored as evinced by the budding literature on disinformation operations. However, the demand-side of disinformation has been left relatively underexplored: why has disinformation appeared to appeal to many Filipino voters? This paper has incidentally shown that one potential reason is that these narratives, no matter how absurd or false, appeal to voters' long-standing grievances and articulate these for them albeit in exaggerated fashion (Ong 2022; Ruud and Endresen 2022). This implies that fact-checking and media literacy efforts are important yet insufficient, for these gloss over the structural causes of disinformation's appeal, particularly the sentiments of exclusion and frustrations with the democratization process.

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