Analyzing Indonesia's Populist Electorate

Demographic, Ideological, and Attitudinal Trends

ABSTRACT

Using original survey data, we test the level, distribution, and demographic patterns of populist attitudes in Indonesia. Populist attitudes are widely spread across the political spectrum; disproportionately high in the middle and upper classes; and particularly robust when coupled with other primary ideologies, such as Islamism and secularism.

KEYWORDS: populism, Islam, nationalism, ideology, Indonesia, democracy

IN RECENT YEARS, POPULISTS HAVE increasingly won elections around the world. From Italy to Brazil, from the Philippines to the United States, politicians promising to dismantle the existing political order in the name of “the people” have successfully tapped into widespread dissatisfaction with elites perceived as self-serving and corrupt. While it is important to recall that populism is not a new phenomenon, and that its roots can be traced back to the political and ideological upheaval of the 1920s,¹ it is equally crucial to recognize the specific characteristics, messages, and mobilization patterns of twenty-first-century populists and their supporters. Contemporary populists use social media to connect with their followers,² establishing a direct link to their base and feeding the narrative that mainstream outlets are part of the

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1. David Blackburn, *Populists and Patricians: Essays in Modern German History* (London: Routledge, 1987).

2. Sven Engesser, Nicole Ernst, Frank Esser, and Florin Büchel, “Populism and Social Media: How Politicians Spread a Fragmented Ideology,” *Information, Communication & Society* 20:8 (2014): 1109–26.

Asian Survey, Vol. 59, Number 5, pp. 769–794. ISSN 0004-4687, electronic ISSN 1533-838X. © 2019 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/AS.2019.59.5.769>.

status quo they despise. Today's populist voters, for their part, differ from previous populist generations in that they are mostly concerned about the threat of globalization to their previously protected way of life, with immigration often seen as the embodiment of these threats.³

Populism studies are still coming to terms with these changing patterns of populist leaders and movements. For example, much of the populism literature of the 1990s and early 2000s focused on the appeal of populists to poorer voters who expect their patron to turn against rich and corrupt elites.⁴ Venezuela's Hugo Chávez and Thailand's Thaksin Shinawatra, who both came to power at the turn of the millennium, were archetypes of these pro-poor populists with a corresponding underprivileged support base. But this socio-demographic pattern no longer holds: the middle and upper classes are now dominant in populist voter pools,⁵ hoping for protection against social redistribution demands and other pressures from the lower socioeconomic strata. There has also been an increasing alignment of populists with religious themes and groups, India's Narendra Modi being only one example. And finally, populism as an attitude has increasingly spread across party landscapes, as more conventional parties adopt populist strategies and thus blur the traditional dichotomy between the political establishment and populist outsiders.⁶

Indonesia is one country in which populists have taken central stage, but where political scientists are still struggling to interpret the phenomenon in a systematic manner. The world's third-largest democracy, Indonesia has witnessed a number of open populist challenges since 2014, both in and outside of the electoral arena.⁷ But while scholars of Indonesian politics generally acknowledge the existence of a populist stream, the agreement

3. Duane Swank and Hans-Georg Betz, "Globalization, the Welfare State and Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe," *Socio-Economic Review* 1:2 (2003): 215–45.

4. Carlos de la Torre, "The Resurgence of Radical Populism in Latin America," *Constellations* 14:3 (2007): 384–97.

5. Bo Rothstein and Sven Steinmo, "'Us Too!': The Rise of Middle-Class Populism in Sweden and Beyond," *Social Europe*, October 2018.

6. Gijs Schumacher and Kees van Kersbergen, "Do Mainstream Parties Adapt to the Welfare Chauvinism of Populist Parties?" *Party Politics* 22:3 (2016): 300–12.

7. Edward Aspinall, "Oligarchic Populism: Prabowo Subianto's Challenge to Indonesian Democracy," *Indonesia* 99 (2015): 1–28; Marcus Mietzner, "Fighting Illiberalism with Illiberalism: Islamist Populism and Democratic Deconsolidation in Indonesia," *Pacific Affairs* 91:2 (2018): 261–82.

ends there. There has been no consensus on which political actors use populist strategies; on the specific demographics populists draw from; what the grievances of populist supporters are; what role religion plays in Indonesia's populist surge; or the extent of the damage populism has done to the country's post-authoritarian democracy, two decades after the fall of long-time autocrat Suharto. It is these complex questions that we wish to address in this article, and we hope to do so with a methodological approach that helps move the discussion of populism forward, both in Indonesia and beyond.

To achieve this, this article turns the scholarly attention away from populist actors—the theme of most writings on Indonesian populism—and toward the electorate. In trying to understand what drives populist voters, what their socio-demographic backgrounds are, and whom they align with, we expect to complement existing populism studies and to map out populist streams better than has been possible thus far. The empirical and analytical basis of our discussion is an original survey of adult Indonesian citizens that gathered information on possible populist attitudes, and correlated it with demographic and other important markers. This allowed us to develop a comprehensive profile of Indonesian populist voters, and to come to a number of key conclusions. First, populism, as a political attitude, is widespread in Indonesia; second, it is particularly prominent in the middle and upper classes; third, Indonesian populist voters do not align themselves just with one figure, pointing to the deep penetration of the political mainstream by populist thought; and fourth, it correlates strongly with “thick” ideologies, especially Islamism and secularism—with damaging effects for the quality of Indonesian democracy.

The article proceeds as follows. We lay out a definition of populism, before presenting a brief overview of the state of populism studies in Indonesia. We then introduce the research design and survey methodology, followed by a summary of the results related to the general level of populist attitudes in Indonesia. The subsequent sections deal with the socio-demographic profile of populist supporters; their alignment (or non-alignment) with Prabowo Subianto, the populist much of the literature has concentrated on; the role of “thick” ideologies in Indonesian populism; and populist grievances. We end with some observations on the impact of growing populism on the quality of Indonesian democracy, and what the Indonesian case can contribute to global populism studies.

DEFINITIONS: “THIN” IDEOLOGY AND ANTI-ESTABLISHMENT OUTSIDERS

Populism remains a controversially debated concept, and myriad definitions have been proposed. There are differences between the notions of populism as an organizational and discursive strategy⁸ versus as an ideological concept,⁹ and within the camp supporting the latter idea, authors disagree on whether populism is a “thick” or “thin” ideology—that is, whether it is an ideology in its own right or typically draws from other ideologies to develop its full power. While we do believe that the concepts of populism as organizational strategy and as ideology are compatible (in fact, they complement each other), in the internal debate between advocates of the latter, we endorse its being a thin ideology that couples with stronger ideological models. We find this conceptualization of populism more suitable for a country such as Indonesia, where pre-existing ideologies (both religious and non-religious) remain deeply anchored in the population, and where populist campaigns have drawn heavily from these ideologies. Indeed, one of the main goals of our article is to explore the correlation between populism and other ideologies prevalent in Indonesia—most notably, Islamism and nationalism.

Thus, in developing our survey questionnaire, we followed Cas Mudde’s definition of populism “as a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.”¹⁰ While we recognize weaknesses in Mudde’s approach (such as its poor applicability to societies where “thick” ideologies have weakened), we do not agree with Paris Aslanidis’s claim that Mudde’s “failure to acknowledge the graded nature of populist behavior [hinders] the further evolution of the field of populism studies.”¹¹ On the contrary, we believe that Mudde’s approach will

8. Kurt Weyland, “Populism: A Political-Strategic Approach,” in Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 48–72.

9. Margaret Canovan, “Taking Politics to the People: Populism as the Ideology of Democracy,” in Yves Mény and Yves Surel (eds.), *Democracies and the Populist Challenge* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002): 25–44.

10. Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government and Opposition* 39:4 (2004): 543.

11. Paris Aslanidis, “Is Populism an Ideology? A Refutation and a New Perspective,” *Political Studies* 64:1S (2016): 88.

become increasingly important in the study of populist surges in nations with strong religious streams, such as India and Indonesia.

As indicated above, we view the definition of populism as a thin ideology as reconcilable with the notion of populism as an organizational strategy. This is because Mudde's definition does not specify who the mobilizing users of this thin ideology are. Other authors have been clearer on this. For instance, Levitsky and Loxton have described populists as those who "mobilise mass support via anti-establishment appeals, . . . [and] rise through prominence outside the national party system," and profess to establish a direct "linkage" to "the people."¹² This focus on real or self-styled outsiders who claim to speak for the people operationalizes—and thus doesn't contradict—Mudde's description of populism as a thin ideology. In the Indonesian case, populists have invariably portrayed themselves as having risen outside of the established party channels, promoting the ideas referred to by Mudde. Accordingly, the description of populist beliefs and the analysis of populist leaders' strategies are treated, in this study, as two sides of the same coin.

POPULISM IN INDONESIA

Populism in Indonesia has strong historical roots. Founding President Sukarno was an archetypical populist, packaging his narrative of Indonesia's victimization by colonialists and imperialists in masterfully delivered oratory. Thus, Indonesians' propensity for populism as an interpretive framework for understanding their grievances, both as a nation and as individual citizens, should not be surprising. Sukarno's shadow remains strong in Indonesia, leading Prabowo and other populists to copy his rhetoric and style.

Nevertheless, populism has diversified significantly since the Sukarno period, and especially since Suharto's fall. Against this background, the scholarly debate about populism in contemporary Indonesia has focused on two broad questions. The first concerns the scope of post-Suharto populism, and the second, its effectiveness. In the first discussion, some authors have tied the occurrence of populism almost exclusively to Prabowo's electoral challenges. Prabowo, according to William Case, "adopted a classic

12. Steven Levitsky and James Loxton, "Populism and Competitive Authoritarianism in the Andes," *Democratization* 20:1 (2013): 110.

populist mien and repertoire of strategies,”¹³ among them fierce attacks on elites (to which, ironically, he belonged) and the claim to represent the will of the people. For Case, Indonesian populism has been largely limited to the Prabowo phenomenon, and other authors have also adopted this concentration on his campaigns.¹⁴ The opposing camp, by contrast, has described Indonesian populism as a much larger political stream, comprising of a number of sub-streams. One such sub-stream, according to some scholars, has been a more moderate variation of populism represented by Joko Widodo (or “Jokowi”), the winner of the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections.¹⁵ While not as aggressive in his political rhetoric as Prabowo, he too cultivated the image of an outsider with a direct link to the people, and he drove home his rejection of the elite by pointing out that he was not part of it. But for Case, to so broaden the scope of populism in Indonesia is “to so strip the concept of analytical assets that it loses much of the punch that only in its classic form can it convey.”¹⁶

The same applies, for Case, to the description of Islamism as a form of populism; for him, and others, populism and Islamism are simply different concepts. However, some authors have argued that focusing exclusively on conceptual distinctions between populism and Islamism overlooks that their empirical manifestations, in Indonesia and elsewhere, are often closely intertwined.¹⁷ This is because many forms of Islamism feature a compelling populist narrative, according to which the “pure people” (in this case, pious Muslims) stand against a corrupt elite of non-believers. In addition, key Islamist leaders have made forceful claims of embodying the will of the people, which they define as the collective determination to live in accordance with God’s law. The prominent Islamist Rizieq Shihab, for instance, has described himself as the “Great Leader of Indonesian Muslims,” proclaiming a theologically grounded authority to voice the people’s desire for a devout life and the removal of Islam’s enemies. In this respect, the

13. William Case, “Profiles in Populism: Southeast Asia,” *Comparative Politics Newsletter* 26:2 (2016): 23.

14. Dirk Tomsa, “Regime Resilience and Presidential Politics in Indonesia,” *Contemporary Politics*, 24:3 (2018), 266–85.

15. Marcus Mietzner, “Reinventing Asian Populism: Jokowi’s Rise, Democracy, and Political Contestation in Indonesia,” *Policy Studies* 72 (2015).

16. Case, “Profiles in Populism,” 23.

17. Vedi R. Hadiz and Richard Robison, “Competing Populisms in Post-authoritarian Indonesia,” *International Political Science Review* 38:4 (2017): 488–502.

amalgamation of specific versions of Islamism and populism in Indonesia is reminiscent of many cases of right-wing populism elsewhere, in which religious identity themes have become crucial elements of populist actors' platforms.¹⁸

However, Islamism as an independent sub-stream of populism in Indonesia is, for us at least, limited to actors operating outside of mainstream parties and Muslim organizations. Unlike the Islamic mainstream, Indonesia's Islamist populists seek the full Islamization of politics and society, distancing the country from its religiously pluralist constitution. Mainstream actors, including more classic populists such as Prabowo, typically borrow from the Islamists' agenda, but never fully endorse it. Prabowo had the support of Islamists in the 2014 and 2019 elections, but only because they preferred him to Jokowi.

The second major debate on Indonesian populism relates to its ability to challenge the country's established political channels and practices. Hadiz and Robison have argued that "rather than being transformative, these populisms are harnessed to the maintenance of oligarchic domination."¹⁹ In other words, populism, while relevant, has been used by oligarchic elites to consolidate their interests. Other authors, however, have pointed out that neither Jokowi nor the Islamist populists have been creations of the oligarchic elite, and that the latter had to deal with both phenomena through attempts at negotiation.²⁰ As even Hadiz and Robison emphasize, "the big bourgeoisie remains mainly ethnic Chinese";²¹ for this bourgeoisie, the rise of Islamist populism since the Rizieq-led mass demonstrations in 2016 against the Christian-Chinese governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (or "Ahok"), can hardly be a desired outcome. Thus, one can argue that while populism has been "transformative," it has shifted the country more toward religious identity politics than toward a populist emancipation of voters from traditional networks of patronage.

With the Indonesian populism debate concentrated on populist leaders and their politico-ideological streams, there has been very little analysis of populist voters. In some cases, votes for Prabowo in 2014 and 2019 have

18. Nadia Marzouki, Duncan McDonnell, and Olivier Roy (eds.), *Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

19. Hadiz and Robison, "Competing Populisms."

20. Mietzner, "Reinventing Asian Populism"; Mietzner, "Fighting Illiberalism with Illiberalism."

21. Hadiz and Robison, "Competing Populisms," 499.

been examined as populist votes in terms of their demographics and class patterns, assuming that support for him was an endorsement of populism.²² These analyses have been useful, revealing that contrary to his classic populist appeal to the poor, Prabowo in fact attracted urban, affluent, and highly educated voters. But given that one of the contested issues in the populism debate is whether populism as a political orientation is centered in Prabowo or goes beyond him, we need more systematic research on populist attitudes in the electorate. Our research aims to fill this gap by measuring and analyzing populist attitudes independently from other political variables such as partisanship, policy preferences, or support for specific political leaders. In doing so, we also contribute to the dominant areas of the Indonesian populism debate, that is, on its spread and how deeply it has affected the country's politics.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

As indicated above, our analysis of populist attitudes in Indonesia is based on original survey research. We collected data through Qualtrics, a web-based platform that is often used for academic research published in leading political science journals.²³ Respondents were recruited with the help of a local contractor, who offered various material incentives for participation. Between August and September 2018, potential respondents were sent a link through which they could access the questionnaire, and 1,422 people responded, with remarkable diversity in socioeconomic, demographic, and ideological background.

The use of online surveys with respondents recruited from existing panels or pools of volunteers or workers has grown exponentially in recent years, as this technology enables collecting data from samples that are substantially equivalent to those randomly selected from population frames. As a result, such online surveys have become widely accepted social science research tools. To be sure, the sampling strategy in online survey research is non-random, and this creates well-known issues of self-selection. Yet a growing

22. Edward Aspinall and Marcus Mietzner, "Indonesian Politics in 2014: Democracy's Close Call," *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* 50:3 (2014): 347–69.

23. See e.g. Kyla Jo McEntire, Michele Leiby, and Matthew Krain, "Human Rights Organizations as Agents of Change: An Experimental Examination of Framing and Micromobilization," *American Political Science Review* 109:3 (2015): 407–26.

body of research has compared data from online panels and marketplaces such as Amazon's Mechanical Turk with data from general populations, and suggested that concerns about the external validity of online samples are exaggerated.²⁴ More specifically, and highly relevant for our study, Clifford et al. have demonstrated that the relationship between political ideology, personality traits, and other ideational constructs is virtually identical across samples collected online and through face-to-face interviews.²⁵

This literature, therefore, reassures us that online samples are generally less different from the general population than commonly thought. However, in the context of a middle-income country such as Indonesia, where significant portions of the population may not have the facility to self-administer an online survey, online samples may be significantly skewed in terms of key population features such as age, gender, and education. To ensure representativeness of the general population, we placed sample quotas on age, gender, region (urban or rural), religion, and education. To facilitate self-administration among various population segments, we made the survey questionnaire easily available through personal devices such as smartphones.²⁶ Like most samples collected online, our final sample is biased in favor of males and younger, better-educated respondents. However, despite these differences between the sample and the general population, the large sample size ensures that hundreds of responses were collected even for under-represented population segments. The empirical associations we discuss in the next section are thus based on a robust number of observations.²⁷

We asked respondents about their views on a wide range of issues, including populist attitudes, political behavior, policy preferences, national identity, and ideological orientations. In deciding what measures to rely on in our survey of Indonesian voters, we chose not to design a new scale specifically for

24. See e.g. Kevin J. Mullinix et al., "The Generalizability of Survey Experiments," *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 2:2 (2015): 109–38; Adam J. Berinsky, Gregory A. Huber, and Gabriel S. Lenz, "Evaluating Online Labor Markets for Experimental Research: Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk," *Political Analysis* 20:3 (2012): 351–68.

25. Scott Clifford, Ryan M. Jewell, and Philip D. Waggoner, "Are Samples Drawn from Mechanical Turk Valid for Research on Political Ideology?" *Research & Politics* 2:4 (2015): 2053168015622072.

26. In Indonesia, Internet access rates are comparatively high. According to Google Consumer Barometer <<https://www.consumerbarometer.com>>, 60% of citizens were smartphone users in 2017.

27. The sample includes 597 females, 441 respondents with elementary or middle school education, and 385 respondents aged 45 or older.

the Indonesian case. As indicated in our introduction, there are strong parallels between the Indonesian case and the emergence of populist politics in other countries, and this suggests that measures of populist attitudes developed in comparative research should be applicable to the Indonesian electorate. Furthermore, we want our research to be usable in comparing Indonesia with other polities, and developing specific questions only for the Indonesian context would obstruct this potential comparability. Drawing from international survey research on populist attitudes minimizes the risk of developing a measure that generates mostly endogenous rather than conceptually valid results, and it allows us to put Indonesia on the map of comparative studies of populism.

Consequently, we have largely adopted measures developed by comparative populism scholars Van Hauwaert and van Kessel,²⁸ who drew on a seminal study by Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove.²⁹ Both studies of populist attitudes, are, like ours, based on analysis of survey data collected from non-random online samples. While Akkerman et al. drew from a sample of Dutch voters, the scale developed by Van Hauwaert and van Kessel was successfully tested on quota samples from nine diverse European countries. From the eight items in the scale, we selected seven for our Indonesian survey:

- “politicians in Indonesia need to follow the will of the people,”
- “the people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions,”
- “I would rather be represented by a citizen than by a specialized politician,”
- “elected officials talk too much and take too little action,”
- “politicians always end up agreeing when it comes to protecting their privileges,”
- “the particular interests of the political class negatively affect the welfare of the people,” and
- “what people call ‘compromises’ in politics are really just selling out one’s principles.”

28. Steven M. Van Hauwaert and Stijn van Kessel, “Beyond Protest and Discontent: A Cross-national Analysis of the Effect of Populist Attitudes and Issue Positions on Populist Party Support,” *European Journal of Political Research* 57:1 (2018): 68–92.

29. Agnes Akkerman, Cas Mudde, and Andrej Zaslove, “How Populist Are the People? Measuring Populist Attitudes in Voters,” *Comparative Political Studies* 47:9 (2014): 1324–53.

We dropped one measure used by Van Hauwaert and van Kessel, “the political differences between the elite and the people are larger than the differences among the people,” because we thought the wording might be confusing to Indonesian respondents.

In combination, these measures are designed to assess support for various defining features of a populist worldview. The items tap into populist tropes, such as the idea that decisions should be made directly by voters rather than by a class of professional politicians; various negative stereotypes of politicians as a homogeneous group of self-interested individuals; a contraposition of interests between political elites and citizens; and a distaste for compromise as a constitutive element of democratic politics. Following best practice in such surveys, we introduced a scale of support for each statement. As in the Van Hauwaert and van Kessel survey, our Indonesian respondents were asked to evaluate each item using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree). Having explained the systematic development of this survey around existing examples of populism research, we can now turn to analyzing the results.

THE LEVEL OF POPULIST ATTITUDES

The most general finding of our survey is that populist attitudes in Indonesia are comparatively strong. While support varies somewhat across the seven items (Table 1), the average score is 3.9, suggesting that overall there is strong support for the populist views we measure. Importantly, this score is higher than the averaged mean of 3.51 in the Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove survey on populist attitudes in the Netherlands, which used a near-identical set of questions.³⁰ In the Netherlands, right-wing populism has been on the rise since the late 2000s, with Geert Wilders’ Party for Freedom not only attracting much support but also forcing established parties to move to the right. Thus, populist attitudes are stronger in Indonesia than in a country that is representative of Western Europe’s trend toward anti-establishment, anti-immigration populism. The result, and its comparison with the Netherlands, also supports notions of populism as a thin ideology, given the very different ideological contexts in the two countries (as we will see below, Islamic

30. Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove, “How Populist are the People?” online appendix, 2.

TABLE 1. Scale of Populist Attitudes in Indonesia

	<i>Item</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
1	Politicians in Indonesia need to follow the will of the people.	1,391	4.26	0.93
2	The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions.	1,365	3.51	1.13
3	I would rather be represented by a citizen than by a specialized politician.	1,371	3.84	1.01
4	Elected officials talk too much and take too little action.	1,382	3.93	1.23
5	Politicians always end up agreeing when it comes to protecting their privileges.	1,370	3.93	1.17
6	The particular interests of the political class negatively affect the welfare of the people.	1,366	3.94	1.06
7	What people call “compromises” in politics are really just selling out one’s principles.	1,355	3.86	1.06

SOURCE: By authors.

conservatism is a substantial element of populism in Indonesia, while Islamophobia marks populism in the Netherlands).

Furthermore, the set of our survey items shows a fairly high level of internal consistency (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.73$), which indicates that our scale is reliable in measuring populist attitudes in the context of Indonesian politics and society.³¹ This reassures us that our seven questions are indeed capturing the underlying construct we are interested in, and that populism can be usefully conceptualized as an attitudinal dimension that varies across individuals.

To operationalize populism for our further analysis, we had to develop a threshold for whether an individual is considered populist or non-populist. For that purpose, we created a composite index: the arithmetic mean of responses to the seven items of the scale reported in Table 1. The index, which assumes higher values for greater support of populist attitudes, provides a convenient synthetic measure of “how populist” each survey respondent is. Very few respondents are highly critical of the populism statements as

31. Chronbach’s alpha is an indicator that is commonly used in survey research to measure the internal consistency of a set of items in a scale. If the scale is a reliable measure of the construct that the researcher intends to measure, its items will be highly correlated with one another, which in turn will correspond to a high value of alpha. In van Hauwaert and van Kessel’s research, the alpha of the nine samples was 0.88.

FIGURE 1. Distribution of Populist Attitudes

SOURCE: By authors.

a group, and much of the population falls between 4 and 5, which denotes agreement or strong agreement (Figure 1). Based on this observation, we adapted the composite index into a simpler, dichotomous measure of populist support. If a score of 4 is taken as the threshold to determine whether a certain respondent, on average, “agrees with” the scale items, it can be used as a cutoff for a binary indicator. By this measure, we classify survey respondents as “populist” if they score 4 or higher on the composite index (48% of our sample), and “non-populist” otherwise (52%). While some nuance is lost with this blunter operationalization, using a binary indicator increases the clarity of the analysis in the next sections.

THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF POPULISM

The data we collected on respondents’ socio-demographic characteristics allow us to analyze how support for populism in Indonesia differs across social and demographic groups. For some of the demographic variables, our data

suggest only a modest association with populist attitudes. For example, support for populism is only slightly higher in males (50%) than in females (45%), and in cities (49%) than in rural areas (47%). Nor is there a significant association with age. The association with religion, on the other hand, is significant. While about 50% of Muslim respondents are populist by our standards, only 41% of respondents from religious minorities are. This is a first suggestion that some forms of Indonesian populism have a religious (Islamic) dimension, as indicated by Hadiz and Robison. Nevertheless, among Muslim respondents, we find no association between support for populism and religious piety: 50% of the few respondents who consider themselves not religious at all are populist, and so are 48% of self-described “very religious” respondents. As we will show below, however, this picture changes once we shift our attention to support for Islamism as a political ideology.

The most important finding from the demographic analysis, and the most contentious in populism studies generally, is the correlation between populist attitudes and socioeconomic class. Recall that many past populism studies, as recent as the early 2000s, related populism to appeal to and support by the poor and otherwise underprivileged. This stream was informed by experiences in Latin America and Thaksin’s Thailand.

But our data point to a very different pattern. Table 2 shows how support for populism varies across population segments as defined by income and education.³² Looking at the joint distribution of the two variables, we see a clear pattern: supporters of populism in Indonesia are clustered in groups of higher socioeconomic status. While significantly less than half of poorly educated respondents in any income category or low-income respondents in any education category can be characterized as populists, the share of populist support rises to 52% in respondents with the highest socioeconomic status (highest education and income). Respondents of middle education and middle or high income are also predominantly populist. These data suggest that populist sentiments are *not* rooted in personal economic circumstances and frustrations, as we describe later. Indonesian populism has found more fertile ground in the middle and upper classes than among the citizens at the bottom of the social structure.

32. We report groups for which we have at least 100 observations. Thus, combinations of these two attributes that rarely appear in the data, such as low education and high income, are not displayed.

TABLE 2. Support for Populism by Income and Educational Attainment

		<i>Income</i>		
		<i>Low</i> (below IDR 2 million)	<i>Middle</i> (IDR 2–6 million)	<i>High</i> (over IDR 6 million)
Education	Low (elementary or less)	45% (N = 236)	46% (N = 114)	–
	Medium (middle or high school)	43% (N = 145)	53% (N = 328)	54% (N = 157)
	High (college or postgraduate)	–	–	52% (N = 193)

SOURCE: By authors.

This finding confirms previous indications of a more general switch of the populist pool from the underprivileged to the middle and upper classes. As indicated earlier, surveys undertaken in Indonesia during the 2014 elections showed that affluent and better educated voters were more likely than the lower classes to support Prabowo, who was widely identified as a representative of classic populism at the time.³³ Similarly, Rodrigo Duterte, another candidate who fit conventional populism criteria, drew more support from the middle and upper classes than from the poor when he won the presidency in the Philippines in 2016.³⁴ The same pattern could be found in Europe and the United States, where populists have often attracted a stronger following among middle-class voters than among the lowest social strata.³⁵ In most of these cases, the rise of populism also did not coincide with major economic downturns—indeed, it often occurred against the backdrop of healthy GDP growth. In Germany, for instance, the right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany (AfD) expanded rapidly while unemployment dropped to its lowest level since 1991.³⁶

This points to an increasingly complex picture of contemporary populism, one that is no longer centered on economic crises creating a precariat that

33. Aspinall and Mietzner, “Indonesian Politics in 2014.”

34. Social Weather Survey, “Exit Poll, Votes for President,” unpublished (2016).

35. Sebastian Friedrich, *Der Aufstieg der AfD: Neokonservative Mobilisierung in Deutschland* [The rise of the AfD: the neo-conservative mobilization in Germany] (Berlin: Bertz + Fischer, 2015).

36. “Herbstanfang drückt Arbeitslosenzahl auf niedrigsten Stand seit 1991” [Beginning of fall pushes number of unemployed to lowest level since 1991], *Der Spiegel*, September 28, 2018.

then turns to populist strongmen. Instead, populist dissatisfaction is building in the middle and upper classes. The reasons for this notable change are multi-layered. It appears, however, that higher social strata are particularly worried about the perceived disorderly penetration of their socioeconomic and cultural spheres by immigrants, foreign competition, and the poor. This latter constituency was, of course, previously thought to be the most prone to populism, but it now serves to fuel populist desires in the middle and upper classes. As Thomas Pepinsky has observed, in many countries of democratic Southeast Asia, “elites and many middle-class elements believe that strong, hierarchical authority is needed in order to manage the people.”³⁷ Thus, they support law-and-order figures who promise to neutralize the sources of disorder associated with the lower social classes and concurrently mitigate social injustice at the very top. Duterte’s deadly campaign against petty criminals, for instance, served this middle-class demand for social order.³⁸

Populist middle classes and elites, then, are concerned with protecting their achieved social status from a variety of threats, ranging from poor governance that is unable to provide stability for their socioeconomic lives, to members of the lower class who undermine public safety and order. In Pepinsky’s words, “The success of order-first political strategies reflects elite and middle-class frustrations with unstable and ineffective governance, combined with a historically rooted belief that political stability and material progress require the elimination of disorderly elements.”³⁹ We will return to the exact grievances of Indonesian populists, as reported in our survey, in a later section.

THE POLITICAL SPREAD OF POPULISM

One of the most important debates in the study of Indonesian populism has been on its spread across political and ideological spectrums. It will be recalled that some authors view the phenomenon of Indonesian populism as limited to Prabowo’s campaign, while others have also identified populism in Jokowi’s political persona and in the Islamist movement. We thus decided to explore correlations between populist attitudes and support for Prabowo. We

37. Thomas Pepinsky, “Southeast Asia: Voting against Disorder,” *Journal of Democracy* 28:2 (2017): 126.

38. Mark R. Thompson, “Bloodied Democracy: Duterte and the Death of Liberal Reformism in the Philippines,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 35(3): 39–68.

39. Pepinsky, “Southeast Asia,” 121.

asked respondents to what extent they agree that Prabowo is the right person to lead Indonesia, again on a five-point scale.⁴⁰ We found no positive relationship between support for Prabowo's leadership and endorsement of populist views. In fact, populist respondents constitute a larger share (57%) among those who hold a negative view of Prabowo than among respondents with a positive view (52%). While we have no measure of support for other political leaders in our survey, we have established that populism in Indonesia is spread much wider than just among the Prabowo constituency. By implication, supporters of Jokowi, Islamism, and other figures and streams are just as likely to be holding populist attitudes as voters for Indonesia's archetypal populist, Prabowo.

We also examined the relationship between populist support and party choice. We found that populist attitudes are spread widely across the party spectrum, and not limited to Prabowo's Great Indonesia Movement (Gerindra). Despite this spread, some characteristics stood out. Populist attitudes were strongest (i.e., higher than average) among followers of parties with three distinct features. First, there are the parties affiliated with Golkar, the electoral machine of Suharto's strongman regime. These include Golkar itself (61%), as well as its spin-offs National Democrats (NasDem) at 66%, Gerindra at 51%, and the Democrats (the party of former President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono) at 56%. Second, the conservative Islamic Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) had a populism rate of 53%, demonstrating again the existence of a specifically Islamic stream of populism. And third, populists were strongly represented among parties in opposition to the incumbent Jokowi government (such as Democrats, Gerindra, and PKS), highlighting the correlation between dissatisfaction with the existing order and populist attitudes. Further confirming this pattern is the fact that supporters of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), the leading party in Jokowi's government coalition, are substantially less likely to report populist attitudes (45%). While PDI-P has a long history rooted in Sukarno's anti-colonial populism, its supporters seem reasonably satisfied with the current political order that their party presides over.

Our finding that populist attitudes go well beyond Prabowo supporters to include voters of various partisan orientations both advances and complicates

40. Respondents who disagree or strongly disagree that Prabowo is the right person to lead Indonesia constitute 30% of our sample, and those who agree or strongly agree, 43%.

the study of populism in Indonesia. It demonstrates that populist ideas are more widespread in society than previously thought, and ends the narrow focus on Prabowo as the sole populist vehicle. The following section further identifies the multiple politico-ideological locations in which populist thought is most deeply anchored.

POPULISM AND IDEOLOGY

There has been an intense debate among scholars about the continued relevance, or growing insignificance, of ideology in shaping political behavior in Indonesia. While authors have advanced a variety of positions, there has been broad consensus on two key points. First, Indonesia does not have a typical left–right ideological divide, and ideological differences between parties on key policy areas (foreign affairs, taxation, economy) have been diminishing over the years. Second, however, there is also agreement that one major ideological cleavage remains: the division between constitutional pluralism and Islamism. Advocates of constitutional pluralism believe that the state should dispense services and protections to all citizens regardless of religion. Islamism views Islamic scripture as the only acceptable source of socio-political norms, and therefore believes that the state has an obligation to assimilate its rules to those of Islamic teachings.⁴¹

In line with our notion of populism as a thin ideology, we are interested in the extent to which populists align with either of the two ideological camps mentioned above. Like populism, support for Islamism can be treated as a complex ideological construct that is best measured with attitudinal scales.⁴² However, to better operationalize the correlation between populism and Islamism, we measure preferences for the role of Islam in politics with a single, easily understood question: “To what extent do you agree or disagree that the Indonesian government should prioritize Islam over other religions?” This question captures the essence of the divide between constitutional pluralists and Islamists as defined and discussed above.⁴³ Responses

41. Edward Aspinall, Diego Fossati, Burhanuddin Muhtadi, and Eve Warburton, “Mapping the Indonesian Political Spectrum,” *New Mandala*, April 24, 2018.

42. Thomas B. Pepinsky, R. William Liddle, and Saiful Mujani, *Piety and Public Opinion: Understanding Indonesian Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

43. The translation in Bahasa Indonesia reads, “Pemerintah harus memprioritaskan Islam di atas agama-agama lain.”

FIGURE 2. Populism and Political Ideology (Responses to the Proposition, “The Indonesian Government Should Prioritize Islam over Other Religions”)

SOURCE: By authors.

are then leveraged to infer an individual's positioning on an ideological scale that ranges from strongly secularist (“strongly disagree”) to strongly Islamist (“strongly agree”).

The results of our data analysis substantiate the concept of populism as a thin ideology: support for populism is strongest in respondents that endorse either solidly secularist or Islamist positions, and is weakest among centrists (Figure 2). This suggests that populist rhetoric in Indonesia resonates most with people who hold strong views, in either direction, on the issue of the role of Islam in public life. This finding once again challenges notions that populism is a monopoly of Prabowo and the Islamists who supported him in 2014 and 2019. Populism and endorsement of antidemocratic ideas are strong among the pluralist segment of Indonesian politics as well. This pattern became apparent in the 2019 elections, when pluralists campaigned on the need to defeat Prabowo's Islamist allies at all cost—including at the cost of civic and democratic freedoms. Some authors have

identified this new trend of “illiberal pluralism” as a significant threat to democracy, almost on a par with Islamism itself.⁴⁴ Our survey confirms the existence of such democracy-undermining attitudes in a community long thought to hold the most solid democratic values.

Having said that, Figure 2 also shows that populists constitute a larger share of Islamist (63%) than secularist (55%) respondents. Put differently, Islamists form a larger group among those who support populist attitudes than among those who don’t (26% and 14%, respectively). This suggests that Indonesian populism, while it may be associated with both pluralist-secularist and Islamic ideological orientations, is more likely to be of an Islamist than a secularist flavor. Given the strong populist narrative that some forms of Islamism have developed in contemporary Indonesian politics, and the self-proclaimed role of Islamist leaders as mouthpieces of a victimized, pious Muslim community, this finding is, as we indicated earlier, not unexpected. More surprising is the prevalence of similar attitudes in the pluralist camp.

Populism also interrelates with another thin ideology, nationalism. Like populism, nationalism can couple with other, highly diverse ideological concepts.⁴⁵ This is the case in Indonesia too, where both the secularist and Islamist ends of the ideological spectrum lay claim to high levels of nationalism. To measure attachment to national identity, and then examine its relationship with populism, we asked survey respondents to say whether they feel very close, somewhat close, not very close, or not close at all to their nation. Cross-tabulation between this variable and our binary indicator of populist support shows that support for populist attitudes is indeed higher among those who feel very close to Indonesia (53%) than in other respondents (46%). This finding suggests that strong nationalist sentiments compound support for populist worldviews. Table 3 illustrates this point by showing how strong or weak nationalist attachment influences the level of support for populism across ideological groups. Populist attitudes resonate the least (34%) among ideologically centrist respondents who do not feel “very close” to their national identity, and the most (62%) among Islamists with a very strong sense of national identity. For any ideological group, the strongest supporters of populist attitudes are individuals with a robust sense of nationalism. Confirming

44. Ary Hermawan, “Illiberal Pluralism Threat to Democracy,” *Jakarta Post*, July 5, 2019.

45. Michael Freedman, “Is Nationalism a Distinct Ideology?” *Political Studies* 46:4 (1998): 748–65.

TABLE 3. Nationalism, Ideological Position on Islam, and Support for Populism

		<i>Ideological Position</i>		
		<i>Secularist</i>	<i>Centrist</i>	<i>Islamist</i>
Nationalism	Not very strong	49.7% (<i>N</i> = 338)	33.6% (<i>N</i> = 286)	54.7% (<i>N</i> = 269)
	Very strong	53.2% (<i>N</i> = 186)	39.6% (<i>N</i> = 102)	61.7% (<i>N</i> = 167)

SOURCE: By authors.

the significant relationship between Islamism and populism, however, Islamists with weak nationalist attitudes are still more populist than highly nationalist secularists and centrists.

POPULIST GRIEVANCES

Most populism studies suggest that populist sentiments thrive on dissatisfaction, and that they grow in parallel to voters' disillusionment with the existing social, political, and economic system.⁴⁶ To test whether such a correlation between populist attitudes and general discontent with the status quo also exists in Indonesia, we examined whether there are higher levels of support for populist attitudes among respondents who are critical of Indonesia's achievements in the post-Suharto era. For that purpose, we asked respondents to state how proud they are of Indonesia's achievements in a wide range of areas. Using a four-point scale (1 = not proud at all, 2 = not very proud, 3 = somewhat proud, 4 = very proud), respondents indicated their pride, or lack thereof, in how democracy is working in Indonesia; Indonesia's political influence in the world; Indonesia's social security system; Indonesia's "fair and equal treatment of all groups in society"; and the country's achievements in the economy, the arts and literature, science and technology, and sports.

The data suggest a significant relationship between dissatisfaction with Indonesia's achievements and support for populism. While in some areas, such as performance in the arts or science, there appears to be no association between populism and public discontent, respondents who are not proud of

46. Shaun Bowler, David Denemark, Todd Donovan, and Duncan McDonnell, "Right-Wing Populist Party Supporters: Dissatisfied but Not Direct Democrats," *European Journal of Political Research* 56:1 (2017): 70–91.

FIGURE 3. Populist Support versus Pride in Indonesia’s Achievements

SOURCE: By authors.

their country’s performance in domains that are more closely associated with democracy, economic outcomes, and social justice are systematically more likely to endorse populist attitudes. Figure 3 illustrates this association with some examples, by plotting bar charts of populist support broken down by pride in four areas. There is a substantially higher share of populist respondents among those who express dissatisfaction with Indonesia’s performance in democratic governance, economic performance, and achievements in social security and ensuring fairness for all. For example, 57% of those who are not proud of how democracy is working in Indonesia can be characterized as populists.⁴⁷ By contrast, among those who express pride in how democracy is working, populists are a minority (44%). These findings substantiate that Indonesian populism, like populism elsewhere, is related to general dissatisfaction over policy outcomes delivered by the current political system, with

47. Overall, 66% of respondents are proud of how democracy is working in Indonesia, while 34% are not.

particularly strong discontent regarding socioeconomic justice and the state's social protection services.

But while there is much in the Indonesian post-Suharto order to hold genuine grievances about, the case of the economy reveals interesting self-contradictions in populist worldviews. We have already established that populists are more likely to come from middle- and upper-class contexts than from the lower socioeconomic strata—and yet the former are the least satisfied with the economy. Further gauging respondents' views of the economy, we found a very strong correlation between populist attitudes and evaluations of the current conditions of the Indonesian economy. Populists constituted a majority of respondents who view the economy as being very bad or bad (60% and 53%, respectively), and their numbers declined among those who express a neutral assessment (48%) or rate the Indonesian economy as good (45%) or very good (39%). Yet, economic vulnerability is not associated with support for populism. To measure economic insecurity in our respondents, we asked them how much they worry about losing their job or not having enough money to pay the rent. In both cases, we found that more-vulnerable respondents are no more likely to support populist attitudes than those who are a more financially secure.

These patterns underscore the need to thoroughly reassess the role of economic dissatisfaction in populism. Our data show a wide gap between populists' unhappiness with the economy on the one hand and their privileged economic status and financial security on the other. This suggests that populists are not necessarily discontented with what the economy delivers for them—but they may be frustrated that it hands even more to “undeserving” others (as indicated by the populists' concurrent dissatisfaction with fairness). Explaining the rise of populism in societies with strong economic growth and expanding prosperity, the Indonesian data connect well with other cases around the world where populism is strongest in middle classes that are both anti-elite and anti-poor. Studies on populism in the United States have showed that one of the main drivers of support for Trump was white-middle-class resentment of welfare payments to other ethnic groups, such as African Americans and immigrants.⁴⁸ It wasn't primarily the white middle class's own

48. Matthew D. Luttig, Christopher M. Frederico, and Howard Lavine, “Supporters and Opponents of Donald Trump Respond Differently to Racial Cues: An Experimental Analysis,” *Research and Politics*, October-December 2017: 1–8.

economic predicament that fueled their anger, but as a survey experiment demonstrated, “whites’ sense of their economic advantage over minorities [being threatened] led whites to report greater opposition to welfare programs, but only if these programs were portrayed as primarily benefiting minorities.”⁴⁹ Economic issues, then, are deeply intertwined with racial, religious, and other identity tensions, in the United States as well as in Indonesia and elsewhere.

This also means that anti-globalization sentiment—frequently seen as going hand in hand with populism—may be more closely associated with cultural factors than with technical issues of economic governance. For instance, we found no indication that respondents with populist attitudes are more likely to reject economic globalization than those with a non-populist outlook. However, there is much evidence (outside of our survey) that populist citizens are often more concerned about the cultural impact of globalization, with open borders viewed as enabling infiltration by foreign values, religions, and customs. In the West, this is expressed in the close association between populism and Islamophobia,⁵⁰ while in Indonesia it finds its manifestation in Islamist views that Indonesian morals are undermined by secularism, liberalism, and social decay. The growing campaign against Indonesia’s LGBTI community, which Islamist leaders package as a defense against the country’s subversion by Western values,⁵¹ is a prime example of this cultural anti-globalization. In our survey, it shows up in the close correlation between populism and anti-minority, Islamist attitudes.

CONCLUSION: INDONESIAN POPULISM, DEMOCRACY, AND GLOBAL TRENDS

Let us now summarize the findings of our survey analysis, before concluding with some observations on the impact of populism on Indonesian democracy, and what the Indonesian case can contribute to studies of global populism.

49. Rachel Wetts and Robb Willer, “Privilege on the Precipice: Perceived Racial Status Threats Lead White Americans to Oppose Welfare Programs,” *Social Forces* 97:2 (2018): 793–822.

50. Hans-Georg Betz, “Mosques, Minarets, Burqas and other Essential Threats: The Populist Right’s Campaign against Islam in Western Europe,” in Ruth Wodak, Majid KhosraviNik, and Brigitte Mral (eds.), *Right-Wing Populism in Europe: Politics and Discourse* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013): 71–88.

51. Sharyn Graham Davies, “Indonesian ‘Tolerance’ under Strain as Anti-LGBT Furore Grows,” *Asian Currents*, March 21, 2016.

Our study has produced a number of key findings on the extent, spread, and character of populist attitudes in Indonesia. First, populist attitudes are comparatively strong in Indonesia, with about half of the population holding views associated with a populist rejection of established politics. Second, most populist citizens are from the middle and upper classes, and personally have no anxiety over their financial circumstances. Third, populism in Indonesia is not limited to Prabowo's electorate but is spread much wider. Fourth, and related to the previous point, there is a strong correlation between populist attitudes and support for Islamism. At the same time, populists are also strongly represented in the opposing ideological camp, the constitutional pluralists, who are generally affiliated with Jokowi. And finally, after looking at the concrete grievances of populists, we suggest that they are more likely to be related to a general resentment of perceived unfairness in the established politico-economic system, rather than concrete unhappiness with specific aspects of trade or governance. The latter point requires deeper study of the interrelationship between populist sentiments and identity politics.

Our study also indicates that populism has a largely negative effect on democracy, but not in the way that many comparative populism scholars suggest. For many authors, populism is an inescapably illiberal ideology, given its dismissal of diversity and individualism. But as far as populists represent legitimate critiques of the existing democratic order, the anti-democratic impetus of populism lies not so much in populism *per se* but in its coupling with, and its serving as a catalyst for, stronger, primary ideologies. In Indonesia, these are Islamism and its ideological opponent, ethno-religious pluralism. The anti-democratic nature of Islamism is obvious in its rejection of minority rights and democratic procedures outside of God's law; the populism and illiberalism among Indonesian pluralists, however, seems almost paradoxical and requires deeper examination.

Indonesian populism, then, is not only spread wider than often claimed, but also has had a bigger impact than authors such as Hadiz and Robison have suggested. Of course, they measured populism's expected effect against its ability to challenge clientelistic structures and practices, and by that measurement, it has predictably fallen short. But in the way it has both reinforced and drawn from its strongest host ideologies, populism has played a significant role in eroding Indonesian democracy. On the one hand, populism's coupling with Islamism has helped move Indonesian society to the (religious) right; on the other hand, its combination with secularism has led to the endorsement

by the pluralist community of anti-democratic measures—if those measures are used to stem the Islamist threat. These concurrent trends have produced the strong polarization observed in the 2019 elections, with traditional Islamist strongholds voting overwhelmingly for Prabowo, while non-Muslim provinces supported Jokowi with large (and increased) majorities.

Our exposition of Indonesian populism as a thin ideology coupled with primary ideologies resonates with other cases of populist surges around the world. Trump's populism, for instance, would not have worked without its underlying ideology of white privilege and the protection of Christian civilization from the threats of immigration and globalization. Similarly, Modi's populist campaign in India was only made possible through its successful coupling with ideas of Hindu supremacy. In Europe, too, populism is primarily drawing on the idea of the Western value system being under threat from culturally incompatible forces—mostly Islam. In the Indonesian case, as in the examples listed here, populism did *not* feed off economic decline and anxiety over citizens' financial future. Rather, it facilitated the strengthening of preexisting sectarian ideologies, which celebrated a renaissance on the back of populism's appeal to voters disillusioned with established democratic politics. It is this interaction between populism and mostly illiberal ideologies defending ethnic, religious, or national identities that has played a key role in the post-2006 global democratic recession, and there are no signs that this process will come to an end anytime soon.