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# The ground for the illiberal turn in the Philippines

Marco Garrido 

Sociology, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA

## ABSTRACT

We know a lot about the new wave of autocrats and how they operate but much less about why so many people, particularly in the developing world, are cheering them on. Case-in-point: How do we make sense of widespread popular support for Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte's strongman rule? Scholars generally cite frustration with a democracy widely regarded as elite-dominated and endemically corrupt, but this account is underspecified. Filipinos have been frustrated with liberal democracy for a long time and Duterte is not the first law-and-order candidate to seek the presidency. I will argue that we need to situate Duterte's election and enduring appeal in the conversation about democracy as it has unfolded on the ground. Specifically, (1) repeated failures to reform democracy have resulted in (2) conditional support for democracy and increasing openness to certain authoritarian forms of government. (3) These attitudes manifest on the ground as calls for "disciplining" democracy. (4) Rodrigo Duterte is seen as a "strong leader" and the answer to such calls, hence his enormous popularity. I will provide evidence for each of these claims and make the case for grounding the illiberal turn in people's experience of democracy.

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**KEYWORDS** Democratic backsliding; populism; popular support; illiberal democracy; Rodrigo Duterte; Philippines

The scholarship on democratic backsliding tends to focus on political leaders and the tactics they employ. The spotlight is on figures like Rodrigo Duterte, Narendra Modi, Jair Bolsonaro, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Victor Orbán, and others. These leaders are seen as dismantling democracy piece by piece. They are gutting institutional checks, sidelining opponents, muzzling the media, and curtailing people's civil and political rights.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, they are doing these things under cover of democratic legitimacy.<sup>2</sup> These leaders were elected by the people, after all. They are working to undermine institutions from within and claim to be acting in the name of democracy. Most puzzlingly, many of them enjoy unassailable popular mandates. Why this is, it's not entirely clear. We know a lot about the new wave of autocrats and how they operate but much less about why so many people, particularly in the developing world, are cheering them on.

The top-down focus of much of the literature suggests a view of ordinary people as being in thrall to populist leaders and supporting them blindly or unthinkingly. There are exceptions, but these mainly treat rightwing populism in the United States and

**CONTACT** Marco Garrido  garrido@uchicago.edu

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Europe.<sup>3</sup> Scholars are more likely to fault people in the developing world for “their unworthy sentiments and poor electoral choices.” As one prominent democracy scholar opined,

I certainly do not think [ordinary people] should be let off the hook. Where else, for example, should one place the blame for the sky-high support that President Duterte still holds in Philippine opinion polls despite some of his outrageously illiberal actions?<sup>4</sup>

I understand the frustration behind this sentiment, but this tack substitutes judgment for understanding and skirts the important question of why people are turning to illiberal leaders. The answer cannot simply be that they are misguided or have been misled.

On this question, the case of Rodrigo Duterte is certainly a good one to look into. Duterte’s administration has subverted liberal democratic norms and institutions and overseen a level of violence unprecedented in contemporary Philippine politics, most of it committed in the course of a ruthlessly prosecuted “war on drugs.” Its initial mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in one of the worst outbreaks in Southeast Asia. Throughout it all, however, popular support for Duterte has remained high. Indeed, Duterte is on track to complete his term as the most popular president since the restoration of democracy in 1986.

The focus of explanation has been on Duterte’s leadership. Scholars emphasize his personal charisma<sup>5</sup> and prowess as mayor of Davao City.<sup>6</sup> Duterte became infamous for having stamped out the city’s unruly elements – criminals, drug users, and Communist rebels – by taking a hardline approach, including the use of extrajudicial killings. Scholars cite his success in framing the country’s minor drug problem as a major social one, effectively manufacturing a crisis.<sup>7</sup> They underscore the tremendous appeal of Duterte’s punitive approach to social order, his “penal populism.”<sup>8</sup> Clearly, appeals to order and discipline resonate. The question is why. Answering it requires shifting our focus from leaders and their tactics to ordinary people and their experience of democracy.

Scholars generally point to frustration with a democracy widely regarded as elite-dominated and endemically corrupt.<sup>9</sup> This account is underspecified, however. It is not hard to believe that people are frustrated with democracy, but they have been frustrated for a long time, and Duterte was hardly the first law-and-order candidate to seek the presidency. Here scholars argue that frustration reached a boil with the Benigno “Noynoy” Aquino administration preceding Duterte’s. They cite Aquino’s failure to tackle systemic corruption.<sup>10</sup> This emphasis seems overstated. The Aquino administration was relatively clean and reasonably accomplished, after all. Why was it the one to have precipitated the “break” with liberal democracy? Disappointment with Aquino may have been the spark but only because sufficient tinder had accumulated over time. This process – of frustration not just mounting but clarifying into an alternative political vision – is precisely the one we need to bring into focus.

I will argue for looking beyond the political moment and situating Duterte’s election in the conversation about democracy as it has unfolded on the ground. From this perspective, we might see it as only the latest in a series of efforts to reform democracy. The break consists in the fact that previous efforts at reform were “liberal,” involving movements against authoritarianism, populism, and corruption, whereas Duterte’s election speaks to the failure of these efforts and represents an attempt to reform democracy according to an illiberal vision. Notably, the notion that the country needs a strong or quasi-autocratic leader is not particular to Duterte. It was

never fully repudiated to begin with and lived on as an electoral option throughout the democratic period. It inspired the numerous coup attempts led by military officers during Corazon “Cory” Aquino’s term. It was taken up by the various strongman candidates who have sought the presidency in nearly every election since democratization. In 1998, there was Alfredo Lim, who acquired the moniker “Dirty Harry” for his tough-on-crime policies as mayor of Manila City. Panfilo Lacson, who ran in 2004, was linked to the extrajudicial killing of criminals during his time as Chief of the Philippine National Police. In 2010, Richard Gordon and Bayani Fernando campaigned on a platform of transformation through “discipline.” Both men had cut their teeth as quasi-autocratic city mayors. In every election until 2016, however, strongman candidates were rejected as either unwinnable or too severe.

To understand how the “illiberal option” became viable in 2016 and why, once realized, Filipinos largely embraced it, we have to put Duterte’s election in the context of repeated attempts to realize the promise of democracy. The first attempt was the people power movement in 1986 leading to the ouster of the dictator Ferdinand Marcos and the installation of Cory Aquino as president (Edsa 1). The second was Edsa 2 in 2001, the mass demonstrations resulting in the ouster of populist president Joseph Estrada and the accession of his vice-president, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. The third was the election of Benigno “Noynoy” Aquino in 2010, itself the result of a social movement against Arroyo’s legacy of corruption (Table 1). All of these attempts failed. They failed to transform a “traditional” politics characterized by corruption and patronage and institutionalize clean and effective government. In each case, hopes for democracy were dashed and frustration with democracy mounted. This string of failures has led many Filipinos to turn away from the promise of liberal democracy and reject people power as a means of achieving it. It has led them to orient towards a different sort of intervention coming in the form of a “strong leader” standing above and against traditional politics. This is less a break with democratic politics than a *turn* in the conversation about democracy. In a way, it represents the culmination of dynamics incubating throughout the democratic period.

My argument consists of four claims: (1) Repeated failures to reform democracy have resulted in (2) soft or largely conditional support for democracy and increasing openness to certain authoritarian forms of government. (3) These attitudes manifest on the ground as calls for “disciplining” democracy. (4) Rodrigo Duterte is seen as a “strong leader” and the answer to such calls, hence his enormous popularity. I will provide evidence for each of these claims in the sections following. In the concluding

**Table 1.** Democratic reform efforts.

President	Reform effort
Ferdinand Marcos, 1965–1986	Anti-authoritarian: Marcos ousted by popular uprising (Edsa 1); Aquino installed
<i>Democratic period</i>	
Corazon Aquino, 1986–1992	
Fidel Ramos, 1992–1998	
Joseph Estrada, 1998–2001	Anti-populist: Estrada ousted by popular uprising (Edsa 2); Arroyo installed
Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, 2001–2010	
Benigno Aquino III, 2010–2016	Anti-corruption: Aquino swept into power on a wave of anti-Arroyo sentiment
Rodrigo Duterte, 2016–2022	Anti-liberal: Duterte’s election a repudiation of liberal reform efforts

section, I make the case for grounding the illiberal turn in people's experience of democracy.

### **The failures of liberal democracy**

The first movement for democracy inaugurated the democratic period. It consisted in the ouster of the dictator Ferdinand Marcos in 1986 by a massive demonstration known as EDSA 1 (EDSA being short for Epifanio de los Santos Avenue, the staging ground of the protests), and the installation of Corazon Aquino as president. Aquino was the wife of Marcos' slain political rival and the figurehead of the opposition. In the wake of democratization, the country found itself in the grip of political turbulence, economic recession, and general disorder. Aquino was tasked with holding elections and drafting a new constitution. She had to contend with a newly free press, three separate insurgent groups, and repeated coup attempts. In Metro Manila, crime was rampant, particularly the kidnapping of Chinese Filipinos for ransom, power outages or "brownouts" struck periodically, uncollected garbage rotted in the streets, and traffic jams routinely paralyzed the metro. Given the scale of the problems at her feet and her own tenuous grip on power, Aquino governed conservatively. She leaned on the military for support, took care not to alienate powerful landed interests (undercutting her own agrarian reform legislation), and chose to honour rather than repudiate the enormous international debt Marcos had incurred. The euphoria that had greeted her accession soon turned to disappointment. Aquino came to be regarded as politically timid and ultimately ineffective in setting a new standard for politics. Critics pointed to her inability to stem the rent-seeking of her own relatives and allies.<sup>11</sup>

The second movement in the name of democracy resulted in the ouster of the populist president Joseph Estrada. Estrada, a former movie star and city mayor, ran on the promise of alleviating poverty and garnered substantial support among lower class Filipinos. His administration was plagued by scandal from the very beginning, however. His cronyism was flagrant. He distributed luxury vehicles seized by the Bureau of Customs to Cabinet members and political allies, used government pension funds to support a crony's corporate takeover, and helped another crony manipulate the stock market. The middle class in particular were mortified by Estrada's vulgar persona and haphazard style of governance. They considered him an embarrassment to the office of president, pointing to his "midnight cabinet" – late night drinking and gambling sessions with cronies – and to the mansions he had acquired for his several mistresses.<sup>12</sup> In 2000, one of Estrada's cronies, having been cut out of a deal, publicly accused him of receiving kickbacks from an illegal lottery. The allegations led to his impeachment, and when the trial was derailed by his supporters in Congress, it sparked massive demonstrations (EDSA 2) lasting a week and culminating in Estrada's ouster.

Estrada was succeeded by his vice-president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. Given the manner of her accession, Arroyo lacked legitimacy, particularly among Estrada's lower-class supporters. She tried to compensate by playing politics, but these efforts only served to undermine her credibility even further. Eventually, Arroyo renounced an independent bid for president in the upcoming election but reversed course nine months later, ostensibly in response to the public clamour for her to run and prevent the election of populist candidate Fernando Poe, Jr. She won the election in

2004 but was discovered to have interfered in the process. A recording surfaced of her instructing the elections commissioner Virgilio Garcillano to guarantee her a certain margin of victory. Although she apologized publicly for the incident, the “Hello Garci” scandal marked a turning point for all but her staunchest supporters. As the evidence of electoral fraud mounted, even people who had supported her initially turned against her with a vengeance.

People took to the streets following Hello Garci, and Arroyo’s political opponents tried to have her impeached (the first of three attempts), but she proved too adept at patronage politics. She cultivated key allies in Congress, the military, and Catholic Church, and repressed political protest. Contingent events, meanwhile, aligned in her favour. Her presidential rival, Fernando Poe, Jr., suffered a stroke and died a few months after the 2004 election. His death deprived the opposition of a figurehead. Arroyo’s vice-president, Noli de Castro, the anchor of a popular news show, was not a particularly compelling option. He was seen by many as a political lightweight and unqualified for the post.<sup>13</sup> Finally, there was a feeling of “people power fatigue” in the air.<sup>14</sup> People were disillusioned by the political fallout of Edsa 2 and wary of resorting to the same tactics that had led to the installation of Arroyo in the first place. Surviving the Hello Garci scandal apparently emboldened Arroyo, as a number of other scandals followed in its wake. She remained extremely unpopular over the course of her term. According to one survey, people considered her more corrupt than Estrada and even Marcos – no mean feat considering the competition.<sup>15</sup> Arroyo spent ten years in office altogether, serving the four-year balance of Estrada’s term plus her own six-year term. She presided over a full third of the democratic period.

The third movement for democracy came in the form of popular clamour for Benigno “Noynoy” Aquino to run for president. When Cory Aquino passed of cancer on 1 August 2009, people took to the streets in a show of mourning. Grief turned to anger at Arroyo and all the scandals and politicking attending her administration. She stood out against “Tita Cory” (Aunt Cory), whom people remembered as good hearted and personally clean – not to mention that, at the time, Arroyo was trying to change the presidential system into a parliamentary one, a move widely seen as paving the way for her return as prime minister. Calls arose for her son to enter the 2010 race. A Noynoy Aquino for President Movement formed, collecting over a million signatures, and Aquino topped prognostic polls. Despite a relatively undistinguished career in Congress, Noynoy was seen as trustworthy and clean like his mother. The moment demanded some sort of riposte, an antidote to Arroyo’s toxic legacy, and none of the presidential contenders seemed up to the task. They were seen as prone to corruption, proven corrupt (Estrada was in the running), or linked to Arroyo and thus corrupt by association. Meanwhile, the Liberal Party’s standard bearer, Mar Roxas, withdrew to make way for Aquino’s candidacy. In short order, Aquino emerged the most credible anti-Arroyo candidate. He ran on these grounds and won. A popular mobilization had swept him into office. While not an Edsa-type demonstration, it was a social movement nonetheless, at core a protest against the corruption and *trapo* or traditional politics Arroyo represented.

As president, Aquino pursued a reform agenda aimed squarely at combating corruption called *Daang Matuwid* or “the straight path.” The first item on the agenda was prosecuting Arroyo and her associates. Aquino had Arroyo arrested and the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, an Arroyo appointee, removed. He pursued reform in other areas as well, working to improve tax collection and pass the

Reproductive Health Law, which guaranteed universal access to contraception. Scandal visited his administration too, however. In 2013, it was revealed that ten billion pesos (USD 200 million) in discretionary or pork barrel funds had been diverted to shell companies and into the pockets of members of Congress and government officials. Aquino came under fire for holding his political opponents to account while overlooking the involvement of his political allies. Aquino's reformist bona fides were further undermined by his administration's clumsy and lackluster handling of relief operations in the wake of the destructive Typhoon Haiyan.

Philippine scholars have largely interpreted Duterte's election as a repudiation of the Aquino administration's "liberal reformism" – its pursuit of reforms through institutional avenues such as legislation, courts, and government agencies.<sup>16</sup> They argue that Aquino's efforts to eradicate corruption did not go far enough, and, moreover, that these efforts were politically biased. Aquino targeted political enemies while sparing allies. The sense developed among segments of the population that a stronger medicine was required; hence they rejected Aquino's chosen successor along with other establishment candidates running in 2016. I think this assessment is correct but short-sighted. We need to take a broader view. Duterte was not just elected out of disappointment with Aquino but in reaction to a series of disappointments over the course of the democratic period. The Aquino administration brought into power by an anti-authoritarian movement was disappointing, the Arroyo administration ushered in by an anti-populist movement was disappointing, and the Aquino administration swept into office by an anti-corruption movement was disappointing. The repeated failure of efforts to reform democracy has resulted in growing frustration with the liberal cast of reform. Many people have come to believe that democracy cannot be transformed by relying on the Constitution, Congress, the courts, government agencies, or the "parliament of the streets," people power. They have learned through experience that these means are limited or can be hijacked, and thus are exploring other, decidedly less liberal avenues of political renovation. I will examine these changing attitudes towards democracy in the following section.

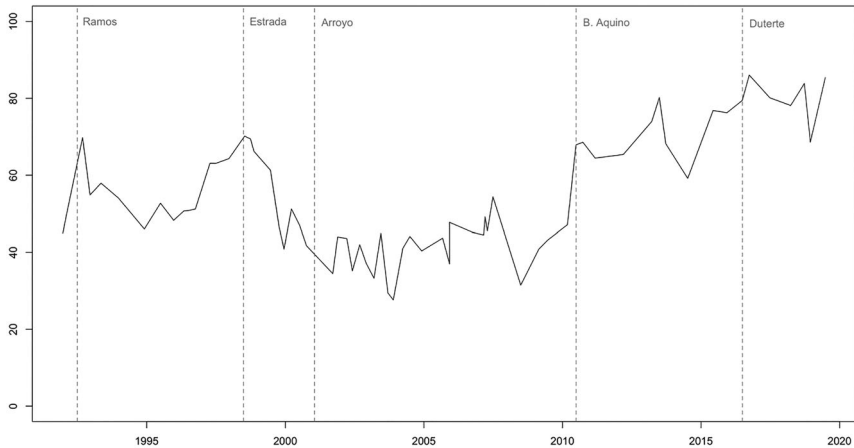
## Conditional support for democracy and a growing constituency for restrictions

Satisfaction with the way democracy works has been fickle, largely varying with administration (Figure 1).<sup>17</sup> Satisfaction slumped during Arroyo's administration, remaining below 50% for almost the entirety of her tenure. It spiked with Noyon Aquino's election and attained new heights following Duterte's. The extent of variation over the period is remarkable. Satisfaction with democracy has swung from a low of 28% to a high of 86%. For many people, moreover, support for democracy appears to be conditional (Table 2).<sup>18</sup> The percentage of people who view democracy as "always

**Table 2.** Preference for democracy.

	2002	2005	2010	2014	2019	Average, 2002–19
Democracy is always preferable	64	50	54	47	62	56
Authoritarianism is sometimes preferable	18	18	22	27	24	21
It does not matter to a person like me whether the regime is democratic or non-democratic	18	24	22	25	14	22





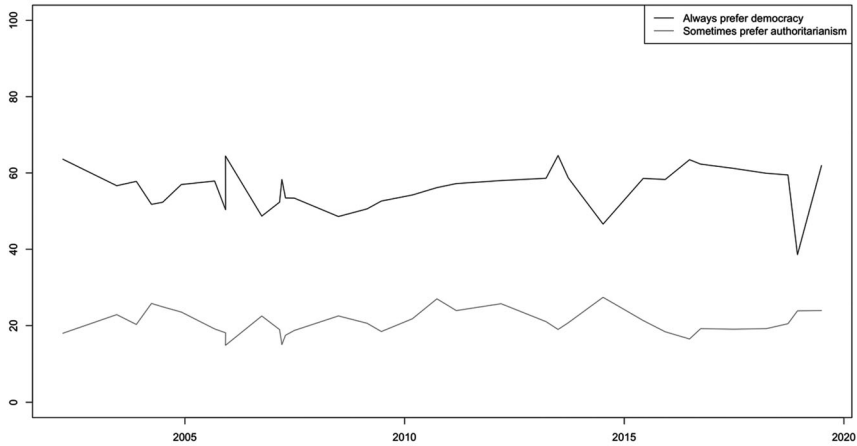
**Figure 1.** Satisfaction with the way democracy works, 1991–2020.

preferable” – so called committed democrats – was an average of 56% between the years 2002 and 2019. Meanwhile, the percentage of people who view authoritarianism as “sometimes preferable” was an average of 21%. If we add people who disavow the choice, claiming that “it does not matter to them” whether or not the regime is democratic, the figure rises to 43%. We might view this figure as representing the percentage of people who are less than fully committed to democracy. There does not seem to be a clear trend in either direction. While the proportions of committed and less-than-committed democrats have fluctuated over the years, support for democracy does not appear to be growing or diminishing overall (Figure 2a). Rather, the data suggest a durable “ambivalence” towards democracy.<sup>19</sup>

Compared to national trends, the democratic preferences of the upper and middle class have exhibited remarkable volatility (Figure 2b).<sup>20</sup> The volatility suggests a sensitivity to political events and changes in presidential administrations as well as perhaps a plasticity of preferences. This is interesting given the group’s role in Duterte’s election. Despite a greater preference for democracy than other class groups, the upper and middle class emerged as Duterte’s leading supporters. They showed the strongest support for his candidacy early on and throughout the race. According to exit polls, a higher proportion of the upper and middle class voted for Duterte than any other class group (46% compared to 40% of the working class and 35% of the poor). A higher proportion of college graduates did so as well (49% compared to 35% of Filipinos with only some high school education).<sup>21</sup>

These trends appear contradictory on the face of it. Satisfaction with democracy hit an all-time high following Duterte’s election: 86% in 2016 compared to an average of 51% between the years 1991 and 2015. Filipinos’ preference for democracy is higher under Duterte than it was at any time under the latter Aquino’s administration. The upper and middle class and college graduates – groups preferring democracy in relatively higher proportions – have proven to be Duterte’s leading supporters. All this is ironic given that Duterte has been the country’s most anti-democratic president since Marcos, but it’s also revealing. It suggests a vision of democracy that is different from the liberal one we tend to look for. It suggests the ascendance of an *illiberal* vision of democracy.

(a) Philippines/total



(b) Philippines/upper and middle class

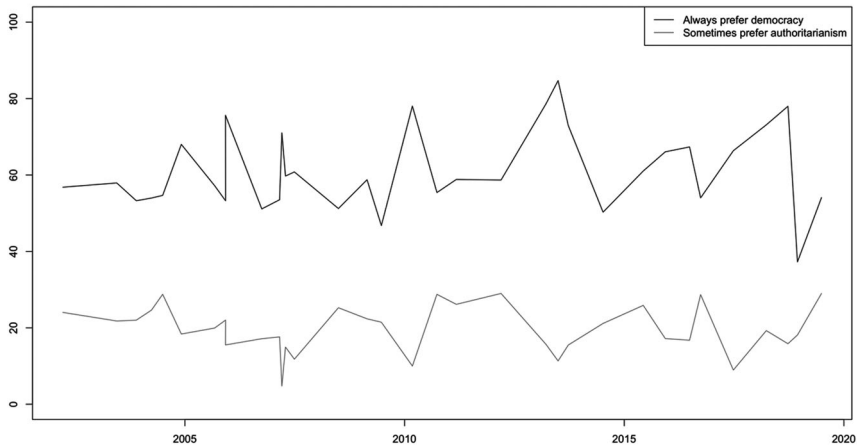
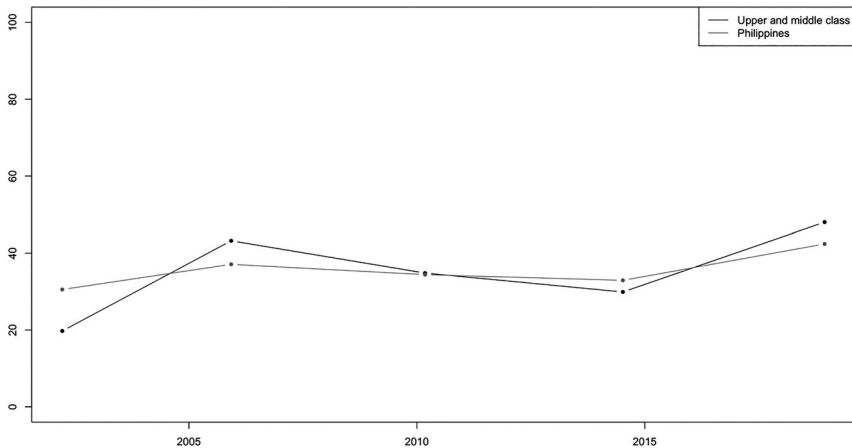


Figure 2. Preference for democracy, 2002–2020.

Consider the data on attitudes towards various authoritarian forms of government (Table 3).<sup>22</sup> They show Filipinos to be increasingly open to rule by a strong leader, the military, or experts, or to elections limited to one party. Indeed, a majority approved at least one of these “authoritarian options.” This openness has grown under Duterte’s

Table 3. Openness to authoritarian options.

Authoritarian options	2002	2005	2010	2014	2018
We should get rid of parliament and elections and have a strong leader decide things	31	37	34	33	42
Only one political party should be allowed to stand for election and hold office	30	32	32	29	43
The military should govern the country	37	24	24	28	44
We should get rid of parliament and elections and have experts make decisions	23	–	17	18	23
Approve at least one authoritarian option	64	60	57	54	72



**Figure 3.** Upper- and middle-class support for a “strong leader,” 2002–2018.

administration. As of the latest survey in 2018, support for every single option increased, and a whopping 72% endorse at least one option. The trajectory of the upper and middle class is worth highlighting. Their openness to authoritarian options increased markedly, from 43% in 2014 to 72% in 2018. In particular, their approval of having “a strong leader decide things” in place of Congress rose from 20% in 2002 to 48% in 2018, surpassing the figure for the nation as a whole (Figure 3).

### Calls for discipline

Qualitative research gives us a clearer idea of how these attitudes come to be articulated on the ground. Adele Webb asked middle class informants in Metro Manila and the Central Visayas region about their views on democracy. Democracy means freedom, they told her, but freedom must be balanced by “discipline” and “restraint.”<sup>23</sup> David Timberman writes that Filipinos see *disiplina* as being imposed from above by a strong leader.<sup>24</sup> Al McCoy roots the appeal of a strong leader in traditional conceptions of political authority, and Pernia in latent authoritarian values.<sup>25</sup> Pernia sees Duterte as having “activated” these values in the population. Others offer more sociological accounts. Timberman ascribes Duterte’s appeal to overseas Filipino workers’ exposure to authoritarian forms of government in Singapore and the Middle East (although see Kessler and Rother’s work on “political remittances”).<sup>26</sup> He and Webb point to the continuing draw of the Marcos era, which they see as increasing as the passage of time renders the worst abuses of the dictatorship abstract. Nicole Curato suggests that Duterte tapped into this current of authoritarian nostalgia and fashioned a politics of discipline compatible with electoral democracy.<sup>27</sup>

In previous work, I argue that the notion of discipline is predicated on a view of the democratic state as a source of disorder: as corrupt, pliant (vulnerable to depredation by powerful actors), and “populist” (catering primarily to the lower class).<sup>28</sup> Discipline represents a fantasy of remediation. As my informants imagine it, the disciplinary state is one where a strong leader steps in and imposes order by strictly enforcing valued rules. In doing so, it cultivates a disposition for order among the populace. “Strong

leaders” can be presidents or prime ministers, city mayors, police chiefs, heads of agencies, and other types of administrators. What distinguishes them is their embrace of executive powers to correct, reform, and punish – discipline – wayward behaviour. They do so often in spite of, and with palpable spite for, normative and legal checks on their power. Indeed, their willingness to overreach traditional bounds is a large part of their appeal.

Notably, the disciplinary state is not necessarily an undemocratic one. Informants were generally wary of dictatorship and intent on preserving the trappings of democracy. They sought, rather, to “discipline” democracy by circumscribing its scope with respect to certain freedoms, particularly due process and the right to vote. Informants did not see themselves as moving away from democracy towards authoritarianism but, rather, as staking out a different, hybrid position combining elements of both “democracy” and “authoritarianism.”<sup>29</sup> In working out this position, the notion of discipline was key, serving to link discontent with liberal democracy to support for authoritarian forms of governance.

This was not the only vision of democracy on the ground, to be sure – a number of informants subscribed to a more conventionally liberal vision – but it was certainly a seductive one. Its appeal lay in the prospect of transformation, not through an array of bureaucratic techniques or a developmental state, not through incremental reforms over decades, but all at once through the agency of a charismatic leader (hence its compatibility with populism). A man – and it is usually a man – of prowess and little fear, possessed of “political will,” as informants say, is seen as bringing about a truly modern political order, essentially by forcing people to behave. This vision was already popular in upper- and middle-class circles during my fieldwork in 2010 and has since become empowered with Duterte’s election.

### **Rodrigo Duterte as a “strong leader”**

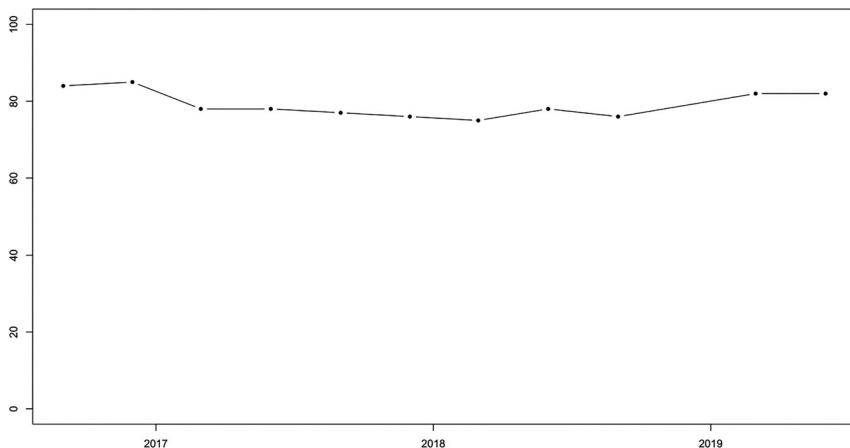
By 2016, the luster of Aquino’s reformist agenda had faded in the face of persistent corruption, rampant smuggling, chronic deficiencies in infrastructure and public services, and rising crime and drug use. To many, the limits of reformism within the framework of liberal institutions had become apparent. Duterte, meanwhile, benefited from entering the race late and representing a genuine alternative to the usual bevy of establishment, reformist, and populist candidates. He promised change and could point to his bailiwick, Davao City, as evidence of his ability to deliver. His simple message struck a chord given the particular political moment. Moreover, his competition had been serially discredited over the course of the campaign period. Aquino’s designated successor, Mar Roxas, was weighed down by criticism of his handling of relief efforts following Typhoon Haiyan. Jejomar Binay inherited the populist mantle from Estrada but was unable to shake corruption allegations from his time as mayor of Makati City. Grace Poe, the daughter of Arroyo’s presidential rival in 2004 and a reformist candidate, was discredited for having acquired US citizenship. Miriam Defensor-Santiago had stage-four lung cancer.

These contingent developments presented a unique opening for the politics of discipline. At another moment, Duterte may have been sidelined as other strongmen candidates had been, but at this moment, he struck enough people as the right answer to the question of the hour. His candidacy gained momentum, in Manila particularly, where the percentage of people preferring Duterte for president jumped from 7 to

40% in the year preceding the election.<sup>30</sup> He won with 39% of the vote, decisively but not overwhelmingly. His election, nonetheless, altered the course of Philippine politics and the conversation about democracy.

The centrepiece of Duterte's administration has been a ruthlessly prosecuted war on drugs. The Philippine Commission on Human Rights has put the number of casualties – mainly the result of extrajudicial killings by the police and vigilante groups – at a staggering 27,000.<sup>31</sup> The official figure is between five and six thousand. Duterte has pledged himself to the fight against corruption but, unlike Aquino, not hesitated to clean house, summarily removing department heads and Cabinet secretaries on the mere whiff of scandal. He has been quick to weed out dissent, actively persecuting opponents and critics. He had an opposition party senator arrested on alleged links to the drug trade, banned his vice-president (a vocal critic) from attending Cabinet meetings, and stripped four opposition party senators of their positions. His allies have filed impeachment cases against the Commissioner on Elections, Ombudsman, and Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. His administration has attacked the press, closing down media giant ABS-CBN and harassing the news website Rappler with spurious lawsuits. These moves represent an arrogation of political power, a disabling of the opposition, and a cowering of the press. They amount to political repression and effectively subvert liberal democratic norms and institutions.<sup>32</sup>

Reaction to Duterte's administration has been nothing short of complex. Filipinos have expressed considerable unease with Duterte's handling of the drug war, for instance. Sixty-nine percent describe extrajudicial killings as a serious problem.<sup>33</sup> Seventy-eight percent fear that someone from their family will become a victim. Nearly everyone (94%) believes that it is important to keep suspects alive. Moreover, a majority of people do not trust the police. Seventy-four percent doubt that the police are telling the truth when they claim that the drug suspects they killed had fought back.<sup>34</sup> Seventy-eight percent believe that the police resell the very drugs that they confiscate. On the other hand, satisfaction with the drug war is not only high but has remained high – above 75% – over the course of Duterte's term (see Figure 4). Eighty-eight percent of respondents claim to have seen an attenuation of



**Figure 4.** Satisfaction with the Duterte Administration's Campaign against illegal drugs.

the drug problem in their neighbourhoods since Duterte took office.<sup>35</sup> Seventy percent believe that the administration is serious about solving cases of extrajudicial killings. More than half of all respondents expect Duterte to fulfil most or all of his campaign promises, compared to 19% for Arroyo and 44% for Noynoy Aquino.<sup>36</sup> In short, although people may regard Duterte's methods as questionable or unsavory, they see him as effective. Consequently, satisfaction with his administration is not only higher than it was with preceding administrations but, contrary to previous trends, has been going up rather than down (Figure 5).

Popular support has helped Duterte consolidate political power in two main ways. First, electorally: Allied senatorial candidates swept the midterm elections in 2019, and now Duterte's administration controls both houses of Congress, the Supreme Court, and most of the country's local governments. Second, by undercutting opposition from civil society: Previous presidents Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and Joseph Estrada also attempted to disable institutions but, lacking the same levels of popular support, faced constant and debilitating challenges from civil society. Not so with Duterte. A normally contentious civil society has been unusually muted of its own accord and not just because Duterte's critics have been muzzled.<sup>37</sup>

The data suggest that Filipinos are willing to put up with extrajudicial killings, political repression, and the gutting of liberal institutions because they see Duterte as a strong leader. They question his methods but not their effectiveness. If a normally critical civil society has largely abided his disciplinary rule, this is because it accords with a popular vision of what order looks like and what it takes to achieve. Greater openness to authoritarian forms of government in 2018 may reflect an accommodation of the new political reality. In other words, it is not just the case that attitudes towards democracy prefigured Duterte's election, but that these attitudes are being *reconfigured* in light of Duterte's administration. While there remains significant opposition to Duterte's strongman tactics, it would seem that in general Filipinos are developing a taste for illiberal rule.

The breaking news at the time of writing is Duterte's announcement that he will no longer seek political office once his term concludes (he had previously

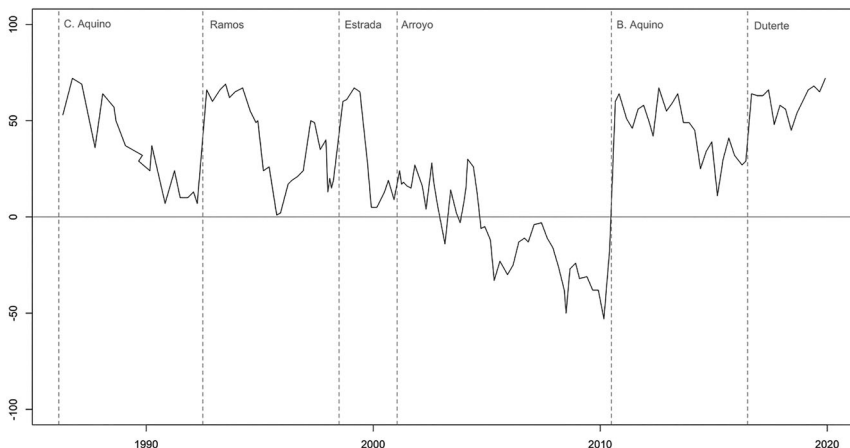


Figure 5. Net satisfaction ratings of Philippine presidents, 1986–2020.

contemplated a vice-presidential bid). He will no doubt continue to be influential, a kingmaker even, given his enduring popularity. The elections are coming up in May 2022. His daughter, Sara, may yet run for president, while his lieutenant (Bong Go) and erstwhile ally (Manny Pacquiao) are certainly running. But the man himself will bow out “in obedience to the will of the people.” “To my countrymen,” he said, apparently in response to polls showing people to be ambivalent about his vice-presidential run, “I will follow what you want.”<sup>38</sup> I would suggest that the issue is not whether Duterte remains in power beyond his term like the dictators of old, but, rather, how his example has changed the conversation about democracy. The bar for what Filipinos will accept in their quest for “good governance” has been lowered. Presidential power has been expanded, overawing other branches of government, and civil and human rights shown to be expendable. This is not a model that will go away once Duterte leaves office but one that will continue to guide Philippine politics, even if only in the form of a possibility proven, for the time to come.

### Conclusion: a turn in the conversation

Rodrigo Duterte’s election has been described as a break with the “Edsa system,” the liberal democratic regime brought into being by Edsa 1.<sup>39</sup> It has been portrayed as a repudiation of a democracy regarded as elite dominated, endemically corrupt, and ultimately ineffective in improving people’s lives. Framing Duterte’s election in terms of discontinuity makes it seem as if it came out of nowhere and may lead us to seek explanations in external factors or new developments: The arrival on the scene of a charismatic leader, the rise of a reactionary middle class, the consolidation of overseas Filipino workers as a voting bloc, or the figure of a “troll army” overwhelming social media.<sup>40</sup> This approach may obscure the event’s connections to past events and local perspectives. We end up missing the fact that, while newly realized, the possibility of a “strong leader” had existed *in potentia* for quite some time, incubating as it were.

I have argued for putting popular support for Duterte in the context of the conversation about democracy as it has unfolded over the course of the democratic period. In this view, Duterte’s election was a reaction against the dysfunction of liberal institutions and perceived excesses of democracy but also the latest in a series of efforts to realize the promise of democracy. It was not just a break with the liberal order but the culmination of illiberal currents running through it. In this respect, it has been long in the making. I traced the relevant sequence of events – repeated attempts to reform democratic governance – and argued that as a result of these failures, many Filipinos support democracy conditionally and remain open to authoritarian forms of government. These attitudes are articulated on the ground as calls for disciplining democracy. They prefigured Duterte’s apprehension as a “strong leader” and have been reconfigured in light of his administration. I argued that Filipinos are developing a taste for illiberal rule.

Taking a step back, we might say that people are seeking new solutions to an abiding problem, one the Italian philosopher Norberto Bobbio filed under “democracy and ungovernability.”<sup>41</sup> In the latter half of the twentieth century, this problem was identified with newly democratizing countries in Latin America, South and Southeast Asia, and Africa. It had two dimensions. The state was seen as incapable of governing

effectively, and the people were seen as “ungovernable” or unequipped to participate appropriately in a democratic polity. The situation was marked by a sense of perpetual political crisis and gave rise to calls for political order. Guillermo O’Donnell, writing about Latin America’s authoritarian turn in the 1960s, highlighted three processes: the strengthening of executive power, the weakening of mechanisms of accountability, and the exclusion of groups deemed unfit to participate fully in democracy.<sup>42</sup> The first two processes are already underway in the Philippines, and the third is not inconceivable politically.

However, the situation is also different this time. Just because people are turning away from liberal norms does not mean that they are rejecting democracy tout court. After all this time, people have become habituated to democracy. They accept the idea that the people decide who gets to rule but disagree on the matter of how they should be ruled. Hence the decoupling between elections and rights as noted by Ding and Slater and others; elections largely remain robust while civil rights and institutional checks are being degraded.<sup>43</sup> We are not seeing a return to old-style authoritarianism – Duterte is not simply Marcos redux – but something new: the ascendance of an illiberal vision of democratic governance emerging largely in reaction to the serial failures of liberal democratic rule. This development is not particular to the Philippines. The sequence of political events may be, but discontent with actually existing democracy and the desire to renovate it somehow? Hardly. The citizens of developing country democracies from India to Indonesia have been complaining about the conduct of democratic politics for several decades now.<sup>44</sup> Many reject its clientelist, elite, and “populist” character and repudiate the whole business of politics as corrupt. As Philippe Schmitter has observed, many of the people challenging democracy today see themselves as engaged in an effort to work out a mode of democratic governance more appropriate to their societies. They do not count themselves among democracy’s “declared enemies” but, rather, its “avowed supporters.”<sup>45</sup> The fact that the middle class have emerged as leaders in this endeavour may be surprising given their conventional depiction as a democratic force. It makes sense, however, given their stake in curbing social disorder from above and below in the forms of corruption, elite impunity, informal settlement, and the “populist” orientation of local politics.<sup>46</sup> The demographic and political power of the middle class may be newfound, but their tendency to close off democracy around themselves is not.<sup>47</sup> That’s the empirical news.

Analytically, the article innovates by focusing on the social context of democratic backsliding. Popular support for Duterte may be remarkably high, but it’s far from exceptional. Majorities have applauded illiberal leaders around the world. In Indonesia, Aspinall et al. have found citizens more likely to hold illiberal attitudes than elites.<sup>48</sup> They describe “an atmosphere [conducive] to democratic decline.” This “mental atmosphere” (following Marcel Mauss) merits exploration in a sociological key. Second, the article traced the *trajectory* of democracy as experienced on the ground. Here the focus is less on the myriad ways democratic institutions fall short and more on how people have made sense of these deficiencies in the long run. The move is to view people’s relation to democracy as dynamic, developing in response to events both singly and serially – that is, to situate it in time. As I hope to have demonstrated, this approach helps us better understand popular support for illiberal measures today.



The scholarship on democratic backsliding has successfully established the “what” and “how” of the phenomenon, documenting the trend and identifying various authoritarian practices. It is wrestling with the “why”; as Croissant and Haynes put it, the “deep causes” behind democratic regression.<sup>49</sup> Scholars have pointed to leaders and their tactics, but these are conceived and take shape within particular social contexts. They must be understood as growing out of the conversation about democracy on the ground. To get at this conversation, we need to look beyond illiberal leaders and unpack how people relate to democracy and politics generally. We need to look past the current “populist” moment and trace how this relationship has been constructed historically. The questions we need to pursue – How do people conceive of democracy and what do they want from it? How have their conceptions changed over the course of democracy? How have the country’s political institutions shaped these conceptions? – require us to go deeper than the existing data allow. They call for a bottom-up and *longue durée* approach to the study of democratic backsliding. This approach requires a “thick description” of people’s experience of democracy utilizing in-depth qualitative methods to faithfully depict their views and practices as they understand them.<sup>50</sup> It requires a kind of “history from below” in the vein of social historian E. P. Thompson tracking ordinary people’s experience of “patrimonial politics” and “elite democracy” over time and connecting it to support for illiberal rulers. If we hope to truly grasp why so many people in the Philippines and other developing country democracies are embracing illiberal leaders, then we can’t simply write them off or blame them. We need to understand them by embedding their views of democracy in the lifeworlds they inhabit and tracing the formation of their political dispositions over time and in relation to their experience of political institutions.

## Notes

1. Diamond, “Facing Up to Democratic Recession”; Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding”; Waldner and Lust, “Unwelcome Change”; Lührmann and Lindberg, “A Third Wave of Autocratization.”
2. Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding”; Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*.
3. Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment*; Hochschild, *Strangers in their Own Land*; Veugelers, *Empire’s Legacy*.
4. Plattner, “Liberal Democracy’s Fading Allure,” 13.
5. Bello, “A Dangerous Liaison?”
6. Thompson, “Bloodied Democracy”; Curato, “We Need to Talk about Rody.”
7. Thompson, “Bloodied Democracy”; Quimpo, “Duterte’s ‘War on Drugs.’”
8. Curato, “Politics of Anxiety, Politics of Hope.”
9. Bello, “The Spider Spins His Web”; Casiple, “The Duterte Presidency as a Phenomenon”; Curato, “We Need to Talk about Rody”; Heydarian, *The Rise of Duterte*; Teehankee, “Duterte’s Resurgent Nationalism in the Philippines”; Timberman, “Elite Democracy Disrupted?”
10. Thompson, “Bloodied Democracy”; Teehankee and Thompson, “Electing a Strongman.”
11. Hernandez, “The Philippines in 1987”; Timberman, “The Philippines in 1989”; Brillantes, “The Philippines in 1992.”
12. Garrido, *The Patchwork City*.
13. Hutchcroft, “The Arroyo Imbroglio.”
14. Coronel, “The Philippines in 2006.”
15. Hicken, “The Philippines in 2007.”
16. Thompson, “Bloodied Democracy”; Teehankee and Thompson, “Electing a Strongman.”
17. Social Weather Stations, “Satisfaction with the Way Democracy Works.”

18. Social Weather Stations, “Democratic v. Authoritarian Government.” Sample size: 46,474 people nationwide. Question: “Which of the following comes closest to your own opinion? Democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government. Under some circumstances, an authoritarian government can be preferable to a democratic one. For people like me, it does not matter whether we have a democratic or non-democratic regime.”
19. On “democratic ambivalence” see Webb, “Why Are the Middle Class Misbehaving?”
20. Social Weather Stations, “Democratic v. Authoritarian Government.” The survey firm Social Weather Stations uses an A through E classification scheme to indicate social class, with AB equivalent to the upper and upper middle, C the middle, and D and E the lower classes, the “working class” and “poor,” respectively. The categories are based on the household head’s occupation, household income, housing quality, and the presence of certain commodities – e.g. flushing toilet, cell phone, car – within a household. Generally, survey data treat the upper and middle class as one category: ABC. See Roberto, *The Marketer’s Guide to Socioeconomic Classification of Consumers*.
21. Social Weather Stations, “Exit Poll” and “Voter Preference for Rodrigo Duterte.”
22. Social Weather Stations, “Authoritarian Detachment.” Sample size: 46,474 people nationwide. Question: “As you know, there are some people in our country who would like to change the way in which our country is governed. We would like to know what you think of their views. For each statement, would you say you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree?” Strongly or somewhat agreeing to the various options is taken as openness.
23. Webb, “Why Are the Middle Class Misbehaving?”
24. Timberman, “Elite Democracy Disrupted?”
25. McCoy, “Philippine Populism”; Pernia, “Human Rights in a Time of Populism.”
26. In *Democratization through Migration?*, Kessler and Rother find little evidence that working in authoritarian countries changes the political attitudes of overseas Filipino workers.
27. Curato, “Flirting with Authoritarian Fantasies?”
28. I conducted 81 interviews with upper- and middle-class residents of Metro Manila: 66 with the residents of four subdivisions and 15 with members of government, civic, and business organizations. Interviews were conducted between 2009 and 2014. See Garrido, “Disciplining Democracy.” for more details.
29. On the increasing modality of hybrid regimes see Diamond, “Elections without Democracy” and Shin, “Cultural Hybridization in East Asia.”
30. Holmes, “The Dark Side of Electoralism.”
31. Atienza, “The Philippines in 2019.”
32. Timberman, “Philippine Politics under Duterte”; Arugay, “The 2019 Philippine Elections.”
33. Social Weather Stations, “Government Campaign against Illegal Drugs.”
34. Social Weather Stations, “The War on Illegal Drugs.”
35. Social Weather Stations, “Government Campaign against Illegal Drugs.”
36. Social Weather Stations, “Satisfaction with Pres. Duterte, by Expected Fulfillment of His Promises.”
37. Lorch, “Elite Capture.”
38. *Rappler*, “Duterte says he’s retiring from politics as Filipinos reject his VP run,” October 2.
39. Bello, “The Spider Spins His Web”; Casiple, “The Duterte Presidency as a Phenomenon”; Heydarian, *The Rise of Duterte*; Teehankee, “Duterte’s Resurgent Nationalism in the Philippines”; Timberman, “Elite Democracy Disrupted?”
40. Bello, “A Dangerous Liaison?”; Bradshaw and Howard, “Troops, Trolls, and Troublemakers”; Cook and Salazar, “The Differences Duterte Relied Upon to Win.”
41. Bobbio, *Liberalism and Democracy*.
42. O’Donnell, *Modernization and Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism*.
43. Ding and Slater, “Democratic Decoupling.”
44. Kohli, *Democracy and Discontent*, and Aspinall and Berenschot, *Democracy for Sale*.
45. Schmitter, “Crisis and Transition, but Not Decline.”
46. Garrido, “Democracy as Disorder.”
47. In Latin America, for example, the middle class pushed for democracy but also played a role in restricting it. See Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy*.
48. Aspinall et al., “Elite, Masses, and Democratic Decline in Indonesia.”
49. Croissant and Haynes, “Democratic Regression in Asia.”
50. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*.

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## Notes on contributor

*Marco Garrido* is an associate professor of sociology at the University of Chicago. He is the author of *The Patchwork City: Class, Space, and Politics in Metro Manila*. His work on democratic recession in the Philippines appears in *Social Forces*, *Qualitative Sociology*, *International Sociology*, and the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*.

## ORCID

Marco Garrido  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7764-7513>

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