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To cite this article: Edward Aspinall, Diego Fossati, Burhanuddin Muhtadi & Eve Warburton (2019): Elites, masses, and democratic decline in Indonesia, Democratization, DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2019.1680971

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1680971

Published online: 28 Oct 2019.
Elites, masses, and democratic decline in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT
The current worldwide democratic regression has prompted debate about the drivers of democratic decline. One country experiencing decline is Indonesia, where most analysts blame the shift on actions of illiberal elites, casting the public as a democratic bulwark. Yet, as in other fragile democracies, regression in Indonesia has come at the hands of politicians enjoying popular support. To investigate drivers of democratic decline we ask: How democratic are Indonesian citizens when compared to the politicians they elect? We answer this question using an original, representative survey of provincial legislators, which we compare to a general survey of the Indonesian population. While both populations express overwhelming support for democratic government, we find significant differences between how elites and masses conceive of democracy, and in their commitment to liberal norms. Though neither group is a bulwark of liberal values, we find the legislators are systematically more liberal than voters. These findings challenge widely held assumptions about Indonesia’s political class, and suggest a public that is either indifferent to, or supportive of, an increasingly illiberal democratic order. Our study demonstrates that comparing elite and mass attitudes to democracy and liberalism is one fruitful technique for investigating sources of democratic resilience and fragility.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 10 May 2019; Accepted 15 September 2019

KEYWORDS democracy; illiberalism; illiberal democracy; elites; masses; congruence; democratic regression; political parties; Indonesia

Introduction
The world is experiencing democratic regression. After the so-called “third wave” of democratization, which began in the mid-1970s and peaked at the start of the twenty-first century, international indices have tracked successive falls in the number of democracies, and in aggregate global democracy scores. Unlike in earlier such periods, democratic erosion today occurs most often at the hands of democratically elected politicians, rather than being driven by extra-systemic actors, such as militaries or insurgent groups. Political elites are thus the main actors in processes of democratic unwinding. But the fact that these elites are mostly elected calls into question the people’s role in democratic erosion. In some countries – Russia, Hungary and
Turkey are prominent examples – leaders responsible for democratic erosion maintain significant mass support, and authoritarian-populist parties have received strong electoral backing in many parts of the globe.

This combination of circumstances raises the question: Even if democratic regression is a project executed by political elites, to what extent does it reflect popular preferences? In this article, we ask this question of the Indonesian case. Indonesia is one of the most important third-wave democracies. It is the world’s third most populous democracy, and the most populous majority-Muslim country. Democracy and direct elections enjoy strong public support in Indonesia. But over recent years, the quality of its democracy has markedly declined, a process that country experts agree is largely elite-driven.

Our primary objective in this article is to determine whether Indonesia’s political elites and the wider population conceive of democracy in similar terms, and whether they support both electoral aspects of democratic government and its liberal components – checks, balances, and protection of individual liberties. Our second line of inquiry examines whether undemocratic and illiberal attitudes, such that they exist, are evenly distributed across Indonesia’s elected elite, or whether they are concentrated in particular political parties – hence allowing us to identify with greater precision the driving forces of democratic decline.

To achieve these two goals, we use a tool that, to our knowledge, has never previously been tried in Indonesia: an elite survey in which we ascertained the views of a representative sample of Indonesian political elites drawn from the country’s provincial legislatures. We then compare those survey results with the findings of nationally representative general population surveys.

The results indicate that a majority of both elites and masses support democracy, think that democracy is a suitable form of government for Indonesia, and are broadly satisfied with how democracy works in the country. However, we find that politicians and citizens conceive of democracy in different ways: legislators tend to hold procedural views of democracy, equating it with free elections and, unsurprisingly, the exercise of legislative checking functions. A much larger proportion of the general population hold “substantive” interpretations of democracy, conceiving of democracy as a system that delivers economic welfare, equity, and similar outcomes.

Large proportions of both kinds of respondents also combine their support for democracy with various illiberal ideas about government, and few hold consistently liberal views. Yet, confounding conventional expectations, the legislative elites we surveyed are significantly more likely to view democracy favourably than the public at large, and they are also more inclined to hold liberal political views on a range of issues. Illiberal attitudes are diffusely distributed among the political parties, with some minor exceptions we analyse. Overall, no specific parties’ supporters or parliamentarians emerged as clear advocates for authoritarianism. But nor did any groups emerge as strong or coherent supporters of liberal democracy.

These survey results indicate that, while a majority of Indonesia’s politicians and public express support for democracy, a slice of the political class, and a much larger slice of the wider public, are illiberal democrats who embrace procedural aspects of democracy, but express only a shallow commitment to individual rights, liberties, checks, and balances. While we do not have evidence to support a causal argument, our findings suggest a conducive atmosphere for Indonesia’s current moment of
democratic decline, and for the illiberal drift that analysts have tracked over the past five years.

For the remainder of the article, we develop these arguments and explore their implications through several sections. First, we situate our study in a theoretical and comparative context, and locate it with regard to literature on Indonesia’s democracy and pressures for democratic decline. Second, we briefly describe our method. Third, we compare mass and elite support for, and conceptions of, democracy. A fourth section drills down into the spread and depth of liberal sentiments among legislators and the public using a novel measure: an illiberalism index. We then conclude by considering the implications of our findings for the analysis of democratic decline in Indonesia, and more generally.

Elites, masses, and the survival of democracy

Why study and compare the democratic preferences of a country’s political elite and citizenry? If elected representatives are not committed to democracy, this is a warning sign that democracy is in danger. By the same token, mass alienation from, or indifference to, democracy provides a supportive context in which political elites can take steps to erode democracy. Divergence between mass and elite attitudes can also threaten democracy. One study of post-Soviet society in the 1990s, for example, found that, in their interpretations of democracy, “[t]he elite tend to emphasize law and order and the rule of law, whereas the citizens stress freedoms in their understanding of democracy.” This finding seems important in retrospect given the subsequent top-down erosion of democratic institutions in Russia and much of the post-Soviet world.

Understanding the relationship or difference between elite and mass views on democracy has acquired greater urgency in the context of a global democratic recession. Some scholars have argued that falling popular support for democracy, and growing support for authoritarian alternatives, are signs of democratic deconsolidation even in advanced democracies. In this view, which might be called a “popular alienation” interpretation of democratic decline, regression is occurring as a result of deep processes of social and economic change, such as the decline of the middle class in advanced democracies, the hollowing of political parties and other intermediary organizations, and the rise of governance processes that are increasingly technocratic and remote from ordinary citizens. It follows that democracy is endangered by mass alienation, which in turn produces popular support for authoritarian-populist leaders and parties.

On the other hand, much of the actual regression that has taken place over the last decade has not occurred in established democracies, but rather in countries which had long-standing authoritarian regimes that fell during the third wave, and which, viewed in retrospect, were never properly consolidated democracies. Haggard and Kaufman, for example, attribute most reversals to what they call a “weak democracy syndrome” characterized by “praetoarism, weak institutionalization, and poor economic performance.” The cards were often stacked against democratic consolidation in third-wave democracies, because outgoing authoritarian elites engineered institutional forms that maintained their privileges, and enabled them to erode democratic governance once the initial euphoria of the transition passed. More fundamentally, democratic decline is intrinsically an elite-led process. As Tomini and Wagemann put it,
while “the involvement of the highest numbers of citizens in democratic practices is […] vital for the successful establishment of a democratic regime, the reverse process is primarily based on the rejection of democratic practices by elite actors.”\textsuperscript{11}

These analyses are relevant to contemporary debates concerning the fate of Indonesian democracy. Indonesia was the most populous country to make the transition to stable democracy during the third wave. Its transition was relatively swift: the authoritarian “New Order” regime (1966–98) of President Suharto collapsed in 1998, leading to rapid liberalization, democratic legislative elections in 1999, and the first direct presidential elections in 2004. Elections have been held regularly since that time, and public opinion polls have consistently demonstrated high levels of support for democracy, both in the abstract and as actually practised in Indonesia (Figure 1).\textsuperscript{12}

Although Indonesia’s democratic progress attracted much praise, the scholarly literature always accompanied this evaluation with caveats about the depth of Indonesian democracy. While some analysts argued that Indonesia’s democracy was becoming consolidated in the 2000s,\textsuperscript{13} most scholars have emphasized the country’s democratic weaknesses, and sources of continuity with the predecessor authoritarian regime.\textsuperscript{14} There is a broad consensus that a major source of democratic weakness has been adaptation of authoritarian-era elites to electoral competition, and their ability to capture many of Indonesia’s democratic institutions.\textsuperscript{15} A particularly influential variant of this argument proposes that Indonesia’s political parties are cartelized, engaging in a pattern of “collusive democracy” which provides their leaders with shared access to the patronage resources provided by the state in a context where ideological competition counts for little.\textsuperscript{16}

These arguments were extended when it became increasingly obvious over the last decade that Indonesia’s democratic transition had ended, and was giving way, first, to a period of democratic stagnation\textsuperscript{17} and, more recently, to the beginnings of democratic regression.\textsuperscript{18} This backsliding has been registered in global democracy indices: in 2018, for example, the Economist Intelligence Unit gave Indonesia its largest

![Figure 1](image-url). Support for democracy (%). Source: Indonesian Survey Institute (LSI), Asian Barometer and Saiful Mujani Research and Consulting (SMRC).
downgrading in its Democracy Index since scoring began in 2006. With a score of 6.39 out of a possible maximum of 10, the country is now bumping down towards the bottom of the index’s category of “flawed democracies,” on the verge of crossing into the category of “hybrid regime.”

Early on during this process, Mietzner argued that Indonesia’s democratic stagnation was driven by “conservative elements of the elite [which] have tried to recapture some of their old privileges despite continued societal support for democracy.” Mietzner emphasized that only open resistance by civil society groups had prevented democratic regression becoming more severe. Since he wrote that article, the national government has taken measures that decisively erode democracy: for example, Indonesia’s legislature passed a law in late 2014 to dispense with direct elections of regional government heads – one of the signature achievements of Indonesian reform – and the government revoked it only after a public outcry. More recently, growing political polarization has prompted the Joko Widodo (Jokowi) government to tighten controls on social organizations and pressure opponents. The government has taken this path in response to pressures from, first, the coalition of opposition parties headed by Widodo’s rival in the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections, the authoritarian-populist Prabowo Subianto, and, second, by a range of Islamist groups which have mobilized against Widodo on the streets and online. Mietzner has characterized Widodo’s approach as “fighting illiberalism with illiberalism.” To be sure, Indonesia has certainly not experienced outright democratic breakdown; elections are still vigorously contested and there is lively debate on political topics in the public sphere. However, democratic space has discernibly narrowed.

Although elite actors have driven the country’s democratic decline, bearing out the expectations of both comparative theory and country literature, there is still much we do not know about the social engines and ideational aspects of democratic decline in Indonesia. Three questions are particularly pertinent. First, is the political elite notably more authoritarian in its orientation than the public at large? Second, do elite and mass understandings of democracy differ significantly? Third, are anti-democratic attitudes uniformly distributed within the political elite? The general tenor of the Indonesia literature, with its emphasis on elite continuity between the authoritarian and democratic periods, and on the political uniformity of the elite, implies positive answers to all three questions, and suggests that elite hostility to democracy is a critical factor in the country’s democratic decline. But such questions have never been addressed systematically using survey research.

**Method and data**

Within the literature on democratic quality, one stream of scholarship leverages survey data to measure “congruence” between elite and mass views on a range of political and policy areas. We adopt this method to measure democratic support within elite and mass populations, and to compare how each population conceives of democracy. We start from the premise that if elites and masses interpret democracy in distinct ways, and regard different aspects of democratic government as more or less important, such differences can have important political consequences. Miller et al, for example, argue that “the process of democratization would be smoother in societies where political leaders and ordinary citizens share a common understanding of what democracy
means." The survey method also allows us to locate potential sources of authoritarian and illiberal thinking in both populations.

To achieve our goal, we conducted face-to-face interviews with 508 Indonesian legislators in provincial legislative councils (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah, or DPRD). We chose members of provincial legislatures for two reasons. First, while the story of Indonesian democratic decline has mostly played out at the national level, there is an important subnational component as well. As part of its post-Suharto reforms, Indonesia dramatically decentralized political power, granting new financial and political authority to provinces and districts. Scholarship on Indonesia’s subnational political elite mirrors that at the national level, and casts local legislatures and executives as largely dominated by authoritarian-era holdovers and other predatory actors. At the same time, district and provincial legislatures, while lacking the political authority to dismantle the basic architecture of Indonesian democracy, have been at the forefront of illiberal moves: for example, legislators around the country have passed an array of so-called shariah by-laws that aim to enact elements of Islamic law and some of which significantly restrict freedoms of religious minorities and non-conforming Muslims.

The second reason was more practical: past experience showed us it might be difficult to elicit responses from the 560 members of the national legislature, due to the time pressure these politicians experience. But we also believed that provincial-level legislators hold views that are broadly representative of Indonesia’s national elite (provincial legislators are members of the same limited group of parties as members of the national legislature; these parties are generally strongly vertically integrated; and candidates for national legislative seats often first serve in local legislatures).

The sampling frame from which we selected our respondents consisted of the 2073 individuals who were members of provincial DPRDs around the country, excepting the very small number of representatives from two micro parties and members of local parties in Aceh province (the only place where local parties are permitted). We selected our respondents with a stratified random selection cluster sampling design with provinces as the primary sampling unit. The population of provincial DPRD members was first stratified by macro-region (Sumatra, Java, others) to ensure sample quotas mirroring the population. After this, we selected 31 provinces from the 34 in Indonesia, including all provinces in Sumatra, all provinces in Java, and 15 provinces randomly selected in other regions. Finally, we randomly selected, on average, 15 DPRD members in each selected province and conducted face-to-face interviews with the 508 politicians between December 2017 and March 2018.

Personal interviews with respondents were conducted by qualified enumerators recruited by our local partner. Face-to-face interviews allow the possibility of conducting longer interviews than surveys conducted with web-based methods, and random sampling ensures a higher degree of representativeness than surveys with non-probability samples. Finally, this is one of the few studies of non-Western political systems in which inferences about elite attitudes are based on a large number of interviews. This is a notable improvement upon existing research, which is plagued by very small sample sizes and low response rates.

To allow us to compare elite and mass attitudes, our elite survey drew upon questions used in recent nationally representative surveys of the wider population. Specifically, we designed questions mirroring those asked in the Asian Barometer, one of the largest international survey research programmes, for which the latest national survey
was conducted in 2016, and those asked in the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute’s Indonesia National Survey, which was conducted in 2017.

Finally, as in all elite surveys, social desirability bias may affect how politicians responded to our survey. Such bias emerges when respondents answer questions in ways they believe will make a positive impression on enumerators or others interpreting the results, typically by conforming to widely-accepted cultural or political norms. Social desirability is particularly difficult to manage in elite surveys, given that elected officials are sensitive to both public opinion and to their own public image, and might adjust their preferences to reflect what they believe is socially desirable, or what they believe their constituents want.32

We took three steps to minimize the effect of such biases on our data. First, our questions on democracy were one small part of a large survey that covered a range of topics, from welfare interventions, political campaigns, and foreign investment. The democracy and liberalism questions represent about 15% of the 104 questions (many with sub-questions) on a wide array of issues, and which took on average 73 min to administer. Politicians were not, therefore, inclined to feel that their democratic preferences were the sole or even most important focus of the study, which might reduce the urge to conceal or exaggerate their beliefs.

Second, while recognizing that questions about attitudes to democracy framed in very general terms might be subject to social desirability bias, we also asked two sets of questions about support for democracy and liberal values where our knowledge of the Indonesian political context leads us to believe that social desirability bias would be minimal. These questions, about the “essence” of democracy (Table 1) and support for liberal ideals such as freedom of expression and individual rights (Table 2) do not have obviously socially desirable answers in the Indonesian context, where illiberal ideas about the importance of social harmony, sacrifice of individual interests for the community, avoidance of social conflict, and respect for authority, have considerable social currency.33 Our findings in these areas also demonstrate significant divergence between legislators’ views and those of voters, suggesting also that

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question 1</th>
<th>Percentage of respondents that chose each option</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government narrows the gap between the rich and the poor.</td>
<td>13.81 13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People choose the government leaders in free and fair election.</td>
<td>41.68 60.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government does not waste any public money.</td>
<td>11.68 3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People are free to express their political views openly.</td>
<td>20.90 20.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 2</td>
<td>Percentage of respondents that chose each option</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The legislature has oversight over the government.</td>
<td>7.48 33.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic necessities, like food, clothes, shelter, are provided for all</td>
<td>27.10 16.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People are free to organize political groups.</td>
<td>10.71 9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government provides people with quality public services.</td>
<td>40.84 39.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 3</td>
<td>Percentage of respondents that chose each option</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government ensures law and order.</td>
<td>21.87 31.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media is free to criticize the things government does</td>
<td>8.19 8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government ensures job opportunities for all.</td>
<td>44.90 26.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple parties compete fairly in the election.</td>
<td>10.26 30.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 4</td>
<td>Percentage of respondents that chose each option</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People have the freedom to take part in protests and demonstrations.</td>
<td>10.77 13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics is clean and free of corruption.</td>
<td>41.42 68.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The court protects the ordinary people from the abuse of government power.</td>
<td>13.68 10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People receive state aid if they are unemployed.</td>
<td>20.32 3.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Respondents were asked, “If you have to choose only one from each four sets of statements that I am going to read, which one would you choose as the most essential characteristics of a democracy?”.
if legislators were engineering their views to match those of their constituents, they were unsuccessful at doing so.

Finally, we empirically explored the potential effects of social desirability bias on our results, but found little evidence in this regard. We did so by examining variation in support for liberalism and democracy among the legislators in our sample. If survey answers were biased because of social desirability, we should observe overall higher levels of support for democracy and liberalism in politicians who are more exposed to public scrutiny (for example, because of the prominent position they hold in their legislature or party, or because they have experience running for top elective posts such as district head or governor). Such respondents have more public exposure, and should have learned first-hand about the sanctions for advocating illiberal or anti-democratic ideas, should such sanctions exist. This group should, therefore, be more expedient than other legislators in concealing their unpopular inclinations. The data reported in Figures 2 and 3 suggest that this is not the case, as politicians with leadership positions or electoral experience are not any more likely to express support for democracy or liberalism (we explain our measures in greater length in subsequent sections).34 In fact, our data suggest that the group of highly visible politicians report slightly less

Table 2. Illiberalism index.
1. Harmony of the community will be disrupted if people organize into lots of groups.
2. When judges decide important cases, they should accept the view of the executive branch.
3. If the government is constantly checked [monitored and supervised] by the legislature, it cannot possibly accomplish great things.
4. If people have too many different ways of thinking society will be chaotic.
5. When a country faces a difficult situation, the government may ignore the law in an effort to resolve the issue.

Figure 2. Ideological profile based on liberalism index, by leadership position and election experience.
liberal attitudes than other legislators. This finding reassures us that social desirability bias, even if present in our survey results, is not sufficiently large so as to compromise our findings.\footnote{35}

Contested conceptions of democracy

Both elites and masses expressed overwhelming support for democracy. Our legislator respondents were, overall, more supportive of democracy than respondents in the general population, and this finding was consistent across a range of questions. We found, however, that each group conceived of democracy in remarkably different ways.

Both surveys included a set of direct questions designed to reveal respondents’ preference for democracy, as expressed in the most general and abstract terms. On these measures, the legislators generally demonstrated higher support for democracy than did members of the general population. For example, we asked respondents to judge the extent to which democracy was a system of government suitable for Indonesia on a scale where 1 indicated it was not at all suitable, and 10 indicated perfect suitability. Elite respondents scored on average 8.14, a full point higher than respondents in the population survey whose mean score was 7.14. In a similar vein, when asked to choose between economic development and democracy, over 60% of surveyed legislators chose democracy, while less than 45% of the respondents in the general survey did so.

At face value, these findings do not support the proposition that Indonesia’s political elite – at least that section of it represented in provincial parliaments – is more authoritarian in political outlook than the general population. However, as indicated above, we
still need to be aware of the danger of social desirability bias when support for democracy is framed in such general terms (for years, public polls in Indonesia have demonstrated high levels of public support for democracy).36

When it comes to questions about how people conceive of democracy, it is less likely that political elites would misreport at higher levels than the general population. We used a set of indirect questions commonly leveraged to uncover the “normative ground in which abstract preferences for democracy are anchored,”37 and for which there is no clear socially desirable answer in the Indonesian context where illiberal ideas have long been very influential. Analysing how people understand democracy is important given the “almost universal public aspiration”38 for democracy in the contemporary age, and the use of the term by all manner of political regimes to describe themselves. A rich body of research has shown that across countries, and among different groups within a single country, people attach different ideas to the concept of democracy.39 So, while Indonesia’s legislators appear to be committed democrats based on the data presented above, what precisely do they believe democracy is?

Our findings suggest a mismatch between how elites and citizens conceive of democracy, with our elite respondents emphasizing the procedural and representative aspects of democratic government, and citizens viewing democracy as a means of delivering social and economic benefits. We gave respondents a battery of questions that provided a range of potential meanings of democracy, and asked them to indicate which interpretation they thought best represented the “essential” characteristics of democracy. The alternatives included meanings derived from proceduralist interpretations, which stress competition in elections and other electoral features, individual rights interpretations, which stress civil-liberty protections, as well as substantive interpretations, which focus on economic, welfare, and equity outcomes.

Respondents among the general populace were more inclined to emphasize substantive rather than proceduralist or right-oriented interpretations of democracy, while the legislators took the opposite position (Table 1). For example, when offered a choice between four possible features of democracy that included “the government ensures availability of employment to all people” and “political parties compete fairly in elections,” almost half of respondents in the general population (44.9%) chose the full-employment option, far more than chose the electoral option (10.3%); among legislators, the figures were 26.6% and 30.5% respectively.

The overall pattern is consistent: in these and similar questions, respondents selected from the general population tended to give answers that emphasized economic and social justice; legislators were more inclined to provide answers that accorded with conventional democratic theory and emphasized electoral and representative mechanisms (and that were consistent with their own functions as elected legislators). Relatively few in either group selected answers stressing liberal rights or protections.

How should we interpret these findings? Indonesia is not unique in having a large proportion of its population indicating support for substantive interpretations of democracy. Similar results have been observed across East Asia40 and in the Arab World.41 Equating democracy with economic outcomes can, according to Doherty and Mecellem, be problematic: if “support for democracy rests on expectations of substantial changes in redistributive policies or economic conditions, this support may falter if expectations are not met.”42 The substantive interpretation of democracy held by many Indonesians points towards a potential constituency for an authoritarian or illiberal leader (or movement) that promises greater economic benefits.
By the same token, the greater support among legislators for proceduralist interpretations arguably provides evidence of their greater acculturation of democratic ideals and principles. Of course, their stronger commitment to institutions such as elections and parliamentary oversight is unsurprising given their chosen vocation, and could be interpreted as an expression of self-interested support for the institutions that sustain their professional careers and provide them access to power and resources. It is sobering that one of the most important bulwarks against further democratic decline in Indonesia may be the self-interest of legislators in preventing a more rapid slide away from electoral democracy. Importantly, few respondents in either population conceived of democracy in terms of rights and civil liberties, an important observation we turn to next.

**Democrats with adjectives**

It is not unusual for individuals to express strong support for democracy as an abstract, general concept, while simultaneously expressing ambivalence towards the norms and institutions that underpin a specifically liberal democratic order. Scholars have argued against using binary categories, like democrat or authoritarian, to describe people’s complex and multidimensional attitudes to democracy. In their work on “democrats with adjectives,” Schedler and Sarsfield, for example, argue in favour of labelling citizens in a similar vein to how scholars label subtypes of democratic government. An illiberal democracy, for example, is a system in which free and competitive elections continue, but where there is no “effective guarantee of civil liberties, including freedom of speech, assembly, and association.” This “diminished” sub-type of democratic government, as Collier and Levitsky call it, can be usefully adapted to individuals who support democracy in the abstract, and who favour procedural aspects of electoral democracy, but who show little concern for protecting civil liberties and individual freedoms. People who express this combination of preferences are best categorized as illiberal democrats.

In order to assess the extent to which Indonesian legislators and members of the public fit within this category of illiberal democrat, we borrow five questions from the Asian Barometer’s scale of liberal values. We chose these questions because, based upon our data, they are highly correlated with one another, which gives us confidence that the scale is loading upon a single underlying dimension (see Appendix A). Respondents were asked if they agreed, strongly agreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed with each of the five statements included in Table 2, with disagreement signifying a liberal position. We are confident that answers here will not be significantly affected by social desirability bias given the historical (and contemporary) weakness of liberal ideas in Indonesia. At the same time, we should stress that these questions primarily address issues of political liberalism, rather than social liberalism, including the place of religion in public life (an important topic in Indonesia, which we have addressed elsewhere).

Figure 4 shows the responses to these questions for both the mass and elite surveys, revealing that on this measure of support for liberal democracy, Indonesian provincial legislators are significantly more liberal than the population as a whole – particularly when it comes to the two questions that emphasize institutional checks and balances.

Using these findings, we then generate an illiberalism index. To do so, we recoded the responses to be a two-point scale (0 = strongly disagree/disagree, 1 = strongly agree/
agree). All neutral/don’t know/no response answers were coded as missing. The index is an additive scale based on responses to the battery of five measures described above. We use the Asian Barometer’s definition of liberal-democratic attitudes in order to classify respondents into categories of liberal (a perfect score of 0), leaning liberal (score of 1–2), leaning illiberal (score of 3–4) and illiberal (perfect score of 5).

Overall, legislators were markedly more liberal than the masses, with average scores of 1.2178 and 2.7165 respectively. Using these categories, we determine that 38.05% of DPRD members, and just 9.27% of the general population, can be considered liberal democrats. As Figure 5 illustrates, there are more leaning liberal legislators (46.93%) than citizens as well (34.29%), and many more leaning illiberal citizens (32.49%) than legislators (13.32%). In fact, a majority of Indonesian voters surveyed for this study fell in the leaning illiberal or illiberal category (56.43%) compared with just 15.01% of provincial legislators.

These findings are unexpected given the strong emphasis in the country literature on the illiberal character of Indonesia’s ruling elite, and in a global context in which elected leaders are frequently responsible for eroding democratic institutions. Instead, our findings paint a picture of a set of politicians who have not only learned the skills to win elections in the new system, and therefore value the system that has rewarded them, but have also come to value many of its underlying democratic principles. The results also, however, indicate that a notable minority of elites, and a remarkable majority of the public, favour illiberal versions of democracy. Again, these findings suggest a political climate conducive to a further slide towards illiberalism.

Next, we determine whether specific parties are attracting legislators and voters with particularly illiberal viewpoints or agendas (Figure 6). We might hypothesize, for example, that members and supporters of authoritarian legacy parties – i.e. parties that were founded during the New Order or by prominent figures associated with that regime – may express lower support for liberal democratic principles. To explore such possibilities, we perform cross-tabulations by party. The results, displayed in Figure 6, show that most legislators across all parties fell into the leaning liberal
category, and many had a sizeable minority that were consistently liberal. Consistent with our expectation about authoritarian legacy parties, the most illiberal parties were those established by former military generals or other figures associated with the New Order regime: Gerindra (Greater Indonesia Movement), Golkar (Functional Groups), Hanura (People’s Conscience) and Nasdem (National Democrats) – though the total number of illiberals in each case was still small (between approximately 12% and 20%). There was one surprising addition to this list: the party to which President

Figure 5. Liberals versus illiberals (%).

Figure 6. Liberal and illiberal legislators by party (%).
Jokowi belongs, PDI-P (Indonesia Democracy Party-Struggle), had the largest proportion of leaning illiberal or illiberal legislators, with 23.5% falling in these categories, perhaps reflecting the origins of that party in a stream of communitarian thought associated with Indonesia’s first president, Sukarno. Another possible explanation is that the PDI-P was in power nationally at the time of the survey, perhaps motivating dislike for potential constraints on the executive. The Islamic parties tended to have the fewest legislators with illiberal tendencies, based on our measures, with PKS (Prosperous Justice Party) legislators emerging as the least politically illiberal. This finding confounds assumptions sometimes found in the literature that Islamist and/or Islamic parties will necessarily be as illiberal on political issues as they are in the social arena (our focus here was on political rather than social and/or religious pluralism); but the results arguably reflect the relatively marginal role that Islamic parties have played at the apex of political power in Indonesia, and hence their desire to support limits on governmental authority. It is particularly noteworthy that the PKS was excluded from the national coalition government at the time of the survey.

The results for the wider population were remarkably different (Figure 7). Respondents were asked whether they voted in the 2014 legislative elections and, if so, which party they chose. We used these answers to examine whether supporters of particular parties were more illiberal or liberal than others. This time, PKS emerged with the most illiberal voters (69.2%), followed by Nasdem (65.5%) and Gerindra (64.4%). But the differences overall were relatively slim between parties, with few counting many consistently liberal supporters, and most having a sizeable majority of supporters leaning illiberal.

What do these results tell us about the nature of support for liberal democratic government in Indonesia, both amongst elites and the masses? Overall, there are few clear or striking patterns in the distribution of illiberal and liberal views on democracy among legislators. While personalist parties led by former New Order generals had a slightly
higher proportion of illiberal and illiberal leaning legislators, they were still in the minority; it was PDI-P, the party most supportive of social pluralism, and one that had been marginal within Suharto’s authoritarian regime, which had the highest proportion of political illiberals within its ranks, a finding that is consistent with the ideological heritage of that party. Still, there was no clear clustering around political parties, let alone polarization. These results indicate that illiberalism is diffusely distributed throughout Indonesia’s political elite and amongst the masses, with the latter demonstrating far greater sympathy for illiberal political positions.

**Conclusion**

Insights from both comparative scholarship on the global democratic regression, and from the country literature, suggest Indonesia’s ruling political elite is the force behind democratic decline. The country literature in particular has emphasized the authoritarian origins and anti-democratic proclivities of this group. Accordingly, this article presented the first systematic study of elite views on democracy in Indonesia.

We found little evidence to support the proposition that Indonesia’s governing elite – at least that part of it represented in provincial legislatures – is more authoritarian in inclination than the population as a whole. On the contrary, we find the reverse – levels of support for democracy appear to be higher among elites than in the wider public. Stronger direct support for democracy amongst elected politicians can potentially be explained in terms of a social desirability bias, given that politicians may be unwilling to reveal undemocratic preferences publicly in a country where democracy and direct elections are popular (though controlling for political expedience did not provide evidence of such bias). We have less reason to expect elite responses to suffer this kind of misreporting bias when it comes to indirect questions about conceptions of democracy and support for liberal values. On these measures, we find remarkable differences between elites and masses. Not only did elites view democracy in more proceduralist than substantive terms, they were also more politically liberal than their constituents overall.51

How should we account for this unexpected result? While our article presents the first effort to explore this complex issue, and should therefore be treated cautiously, we believe our findings indicate that a significant section of Indonesia’s new governing elite has both adapted to, and become ideologically supportive of, representative democracy and some of the liberal norms that underpin such a system; shaped by democratic institutions, this elite is prospering within them and, it would seem, finds its interests well served by the democratic status quo. The fact that some of the measures on which the elite is significantly more liberal than the general population – for example, harmony and free thinking – are not areas that are directly linked to their material and political interests lends support to our assessment that these measures do capture a degree of genuine ideological divergence. Though there are clear pockets of support for authoritarianism among legislators, these are far from being dominant or consistently organized along party lines. We believe these findings provide new evidence that the reservoir of authoritarian support is perhaps not as deep amongst Indonesian politicians as is often assumed.

But this finding comes with important qualifications. First, while our study does not provide evidence of strong support for authoritarian regression among Indonesian politicians, it also shows no evidence of deep or widespread support for the precepts of a
liberal democracy that emphasize civil liberties and individual freedom. Instead, provincial politicians viewed democracy in largely procedural terms, and were most committed to the democratic norms and institutions in which their careers were embedded, such as electoral competition and legislative checks and balances. This self-interest may ultimately prove to be at best a weak impediment to Indonesia’s further evolution towards illiberalism.

Moreover, the defining characteristic of the party map we have presented is the generalized but weak diffusion of democratic attitudes through the entire party spectrum and a strong undercurrent of illiberalism amongst both masses and elites across all parties and demographics. No party could be identified as the liberal party in terms of both its politicians and its voters; but nor was there a clear concentration of illiberal or authoritarian attitudes in particular parties. This diffuseness and ideological amorphousness, at least with regard to democratic issues, reflects the historical weakness of liberal ideology in the Southeast Asian region, and is a sign of the patronage orientation of most Indonesian parties and of their weak differentiation in programmatic and ideological terms (except on the issue of Islam). This ideological amorphousness is arguably therefore not a sign of the strength of Indonesian democracy, but yet another sign of its fragility.

Second, our study has focused only on one slice of Indonesia’s governing elite, and a slice that has adapted most effectively to the new democratic order, managing to win elected office. Our survey tells us nothing about other elite political actors – for example, bureaucrats and army officers – who have lost political authority and status since the transition to democracy. Though these actors lack access to levers to insert themselves directly in the political sphere, we cannot rule out future attempts to draw them back into politics – indeed, the Joko Widodo government has been engaged in a tentative re-engagement of the security forces at least at the fringes of political life.52

Finally, and arguably more importantly, though our method has provided an unprecedented representative sample of elite views on democracy, there are legitimate questions about the degree to which it allows us to get to the heart of the dynamic of democratic decline. In the contemporary period, democratic decline is largely not driven by ideologically motivated authoritarians. In earlier times, varieties of fascist, militarist, corporatist, organicist, communist, and other ideologies explicitly challenged core tenets of representative democracy and democratic liberalism; today, the erosion of democracy is frequently driven by populist leaders such as Viktor Orbán in Hungary or Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, who come to power promising to represent democratic principles but erode them in order to entrench themselves in office. The construction of an ideological justification for authoritarian regression thus frequently follows, or at least coincides with, regression rather than preceding it. This dynamic mirrors the more widely recognized tendency of individuals to adapt their issue positions in response to partisanship and cues from in-groups and political leaders, rather than an individual’s issue positions always shaping which party, group or leader that individual supports.53

The finding that the majority of Indonesia’s provincial legislators – and even more so the wider population – are committed democrats, but not consistent liberals, arguably provides few reasons to be sanguine about Indonesia’s democratic consolidation. Mietzner notes how the erosion of Indonesia’s democratic institutions in recent years involves “an exceptionally broad mix of actors,” and “the drivers are equally spread at the
collective elite, opposition and executive levels." The public, civil society, the media and political parties, meanwhile, have offered inconsistent and sporadic resistance to this trend. Our results help explain this passive response, because they indicate no strong ideational basis for opposition to illiberal trends. Instead, the picture that emerges is one in which the political preferences of many Indonesians, both within the political class and the wider public, provide a conducive environment for democratic decline.

Notes

1. Diamond, “Indonesia’s Place in Global Democracy”; Mujani et al., Voting Behaviour in Indonesia Since Democratization.
6. For example, Fukuyama, “The Future of History.”
7. Mair, Ruling the Void.
8. For example, Mounk, The People Vs. Democracy, 53–98.
12. See for example, Diamond, “Indonesia’s Place in Global Democracy.”
13. Liddle et al., “Indonesian Democracy.”
14. See the debate in Ford and Pepinsky, Beyond Oligarchy.
15. See especially Robison and Hadiz, Reorganising Power in Indonesia.
16. See especially Slater, “Indonesia’s Accountability Trap”; For a critique see Mietzner, Money, Power, and Ideology.
17. Aspinall et al., The Yudhoyono Presidency; Mietzner, “Indonesia’s Democratic Stagnation.”
20. Power, “Jokowi’s Authoritarian Turn and Indonesia’s Democratic Decline.”
24. The most comprehensive articulation of this viewpoint is Hadiz, Localising Power in Post-Authoritarian Indonesia.
26. As Sumatra accounted for 29.5% of the total legislator population, we selected 150 respondents for our sample from this region. An additional 136 legislators were selected from DPRDs in Java (26.8%) and the remaining 222 (43.7%) were sampled from other provinces.
27. This has excluded from our sample the provinces of North Kalimantan, West Papua and West Sulawesi.
28. The number of legislators selected in each DPRD varies because of varying DPRD size across province. For example, provincial councils in large Javanese provinces can reach 100 members, while smaller provinces may have half as many seats.
29. The survey was implemented by Lembaga Survei Indonesia.
31. We were assisted in our ability to do so by the fact that one of the authors, Burhanuddin Muhtadi, directs one of Indonesia’s best established national public opinion polling institutes.

32. Bundi et al., “Self-Selection and Misreporting in Legislative Surveys,” 772–5; see also Caprara et al., “Personalities of Politicians and Voters.”


34. Figure 2 is generated with the same classification of respondent ideology used elsewhere in this article (liberal, leaning liberal, leaning illiberal and illiberal). To identify respondents in leadership positions and with high-level electoral experience, we rely on questions on political background included in our questionnaire. Respondents who are DPRD chairman or vice-chairman are coded as having a leadership position in the local legislature (this group constitutes 8.5% of the sample); respondents who are chairman or vice-chairman of national, provincial or district-level party branches are coded as having party leadership positions (44.5%); respondents who have run for governor, vice-governor, district head or vice-district head are coded as having high-level electoral experience (23.2%). As for Figure 3, support for democracy was measured by asking respondents the extent to which they agree or disagree with the statement “If Indonesia has to choose between democracy and development, then democracy is more important.”

35. Two other approaches to estimate social desirability bias are possible. First, experimental methods such as list experiments may be useful when trying to elicit preferences on sensitive issues. However, because of the relatively small sample size of the elite survey, we did not include an experiment in our questionnaire. Second, attitudinal data could be matched with behavioural data, such as legislator voting behaviour on specific bills, to ascertain if the two are consistent. Unfortunately, this method is not suitable for Indonesia, where decisions in local legislatures are generally taken by consensus, without voting: Sherlock, “The Parliament in Indonesia’s Decade of Democracy,” 168–9. Studying other forms of behaviour—such as whether legislators’ participation in vote-buying or their support for illiberal groups—is possible in principle, but is exceedingly costly in practice; this might be a promising avenue for future research.

36. A second possible explanation for diverging support for democracy between elites and masses is that the difference may be due to the fact that the elite sample had, on average, respondents who were wealthier, better educated, older and more likely to be males and from religious minorities. To explore this possibility, we estimated a set of regression models in which support for democracy among DPRD members is a function of a host of sociodemographic variables and partisanship. Results, available upon request, suggest that age, education, ethnicity and religion are not associated with support for democracy. We find, however, that males are substantially more pro-democracy than females.


38. Norris, Democratic Deficit, 114.


41. Doherty and Mecellem, “Conceptions of Democracy in the Arab World.”

42. ibid., 3.

43. This argument has also been suggested in Aspinall and Mietzner, “Indonesia’s Democratic Paradox.”


45. Schedler and Sarsfield, “Democrats with Adjectives.”


47. Shin, “The Third Wave in East Asia,” 19; Collier and Levitsky, “Democracy with Adjectives.”


49. See Aspinall et al., “Mapping the Indonesian Political Spectrum.”

50. It should be noted that none of the questions we used focus on issues of toleration, pluralism and minority rights, major concerns of scholars who have focused on the role of conservative Muslim actors in diminishing Indonesia’s democratic quality: see for example Menchik, Islam and Democracy in Indonesia. Had our focus been on social rather than political liberalism,
we would likely have produced a very different finding. See Aspinall et al., “Mapping the Indonesian Political Spectrum.”

51. Similar results are found even in China: Ji and Jiang, "Enlightened One-Party Rule?"
52. Power, “Jokowi’s Authoritarian Turn and Indonesia’s Democratic Decline,” 332–33.
53. For a discussion of this trend in the United States, see Mason, Uncivil Agreement.
55. As we finalized this article for publication, one important exception was underway – an upsurge of student protest triggered by legislative attempts to gut the country’s Corruption Eradication Commission: Warburton, “Indonesia’s Pro-Democracy Protests.”

Acknowledgments

The authors thank the anonymous reviewers, as well as Colm Fox and Matthew Singer, for their very helpful comments on earlier drafts, the Asia Research Institute at the National University of Singapore for hosting a workshop at which the paper was first discussed, and the Australian Research Council for funding the research on which it is based.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by Australian Research Council [grant number FT120100742].

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Bibliography


Appendix A

Reliability Test for Illiberalism Index (Legislators)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>a. Harmony of the community</th>
<th>b. Judges accept executive’s view</th>
<th>c. Govt checked by legislature cannot accomplish great things</th>
<th>d. Many ways of thinking will be chaotic</th>
<th>e. The government may ignore the law, when facing a difficult situation</th>
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<td>a. Harmony of the community</td>
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<td>0.324</td>
<td>0.350</td>
<td>0.176</td>
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<td>0.251</td>
<td>0.354</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.273</td>
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<td>d. Many ways of thinking will be chaotic</td>
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<td>0.251</td>
<td>0.235</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>0.253</td>
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<td>0.176</td>
<td>0.354</td>
<td>0.273</td>
<td>0.253</td>
<td>1.000</td>
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</table>

Item Scale: 1-4 (1=Strongly Liberal, 4=Strongly Illiberal; DK/NA=missing)
Cronbach’s Alpha = 0.674
Valid N = 473

Reliability Test for Illiberalism Index (public)

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>b. Judges accept executive’s view</th>
<th>c. Govt checked by legislature cannot accomplish great things</th>
<th>d. Many ways of thinking will be chaotic</th>
<th>e. The government may ignore the law, when facing a difficult situation</th>
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<td>0.191</td>
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<td>0.235</td>
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</table>

Item Scale: 1-4 (1=Strongly Liberal, 4=Strongly Illiberal; DK/NA=missing)
Cronbach’s Alpha = 0.565
Valid N = 1111