

Weak Parties, Strong Personalities: Persistence of Personalized Power in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

This study examines why personality politics in the Philippines has persisted across regime types and appears to have intensified in the era of platform-mediated communication. It aims to integrate three often fragmented bodies of literature – populism, mediatization, and clientelism – into a unified theoretical framework that explains personalized power as the product of their interaction rather than the outcome of a single dominant explanation. Using a critical, integrative conceptual review that combines theoretical synthesis, illustrative analyses of the 2016 presidential campaign of Rodrigo Duterte and the 2022 presidential campaign of Ferdinand Marcos Jr., and comparative regional analysis involving Indonesia, Thailand, and India, the paper proposes that populism supplies the rhetorical register, mediatization provides the infrastructure for continuous charismatic performance, and clientelism converts mediated affect into mobilized votes through dynastic networks, while weak party institutionalization removes a key structural constraint on this configuration. These propositions are grounded in literature synthesis and illustrative case interpretation rather than in original empirical testing. The paper concludes by outlining the implications of this framework for reforms in party institutionalization, resource-allocation transparency, and campaign communication, while acknowledging that their feasibility requires further empirical and legal assessment. It also identifies priorities for future empirical research to test the proposed framework using original data.

Keywords: personality politics, populism, mediatization, clientelism

I. INTRODUCTION

Few political systems in Southeast Asia have drawn as much scholarly attention to the personalization of power as the Philippines. From the postwar dominance of regional warlords, through the conjugal authoritarianism of Ferdinand E. Marcos Sr., the celebrity populism of Joseph Estrada, the polarizing strongman politics of Rodrigo R. Duterte, and the digitally orchestrated electoral restoration of Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr., Philippine politics has repeatedly defied expectations that modernization, electoral competition, and constitutional reform would shift political loyalties from individual leaders to programmatic parties. Personality, rather than policy platforms, remains the

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principal currency of political mobilization (Curato, 2017; Teehankee, 2016; Thompson, 2010).

Why has personality politics in the Philippines not only survived across regime types but also intensified in the era of platform-mediated communication? The dominant explanations point to three relatively distinct phenomena: the global rise of populist political styles (Moffitt, 2016; Mudde, 2004); the structural transformation of political communication under conditions of mediatization (Hjarvard, 2008; Strömbäck, 2008); and the deep historical embedding of clientelism and neopatrimonial exchange in Philippine state-society relations (Hicken, 2011; Hutchcroft, 1998; Sidel, 1999). Each tradition has produced rich empirical work in the Philippine context, yet these perspectives often remain analytically disconnected. Populism scholars emphasize discourse and affect. Mediatization scholars emphasize media logics and platform affordances. Clientelism scholars emphasize material exchange, brokerage networks, and the political economy of pork. The result is a fragmented account in which the same political leaders are described, at different moments, as populists, media phenomena, or patrons, when, in practice, they often embody all three simultaneously.

The central argument advanced here is that personality politics in the Philippines is best understood as the joint product of mediatized charismatic performance and neopatrimonial exchange, mediated by weak party institutionalization. Mediatization, in this framing, is not merely a technological backdrop but a structural logic that reshapes political competition by privileging personalities, affect, and continuous performance over programmatic deliberation. Clientelism is not an archaic residue but an active infrastructure of mobilization that translates mediated visibility into electoral returns. Populism serves as the rhetorical and stylistic register that fuses the two, mobilizing the affective resources of mediated charisma into the legitimating language of “the people” against “the elite.” Where party organizations are thin and ideologically promiscuous, this fusion encounters fewer institutional constraints and produces more volatile and personalized forms of governance.

The paper aims to make three contributions. The first is theoretical: it offers a synthesis that connects three previously separate strands of scholarship—populism, mediatization, and clientelism—into a coherent analytical framework. The second is empirical and methodological: by sketching a research design that triangulates discourse analysis, network analysis, and electoral data, the paper outlines a future research agenda for measuring political personalization in hybrid democracies. The third is normative: by clarifying the mechanisms that sustain personalized power, the paper identifies the policy reforms most likely to weaken those mechanisms.

Key Definitions and Research Questions

Personalization, personalism, charisma, populism, and personality politics are related terms, but they are not interchangeable. Personalization refers to the tendency for political authority and loyalty to attach to individuals rather than parties or programs. Personalism is a narrower, executive-centered manifestation of that tendency, in which power becomes concentrated in a single leader largely free from party or legislative constraints. Charisma, in the Weberian sense adopted here, refers to the extraordinary

qualities that followers attribute to a leader; it describes the leader-follower relationship rather than a communication style.

Populism, following Mudde (2004) and Moffitt (2016), is understood as either a political style or a thin ideology built around a moral binary between “the people” and “the elite,” and it can emerge with or without a personalist or charismatic leader. Personality politics is this paper’s umbrella term for the outcome it seeks to explain: a political configuration in which mediatized charisma and clientelist mobilization combine to sustain personalized power under conditions of weak party institutionalization. It is not synonymous with the other four terms.

Three research questions correspond to the paper’s theoretical, empirical-methodological, and normative contributions, namely:

- 1) How do populism, mediatization, and clientelism interact to sustain personality politics in the Philippines, and what does each contribute that the others do not?
- 2) Does weak party institutionalization function as a cause of personalized power, a condition that mediates the relationship between mediatization and clientelism, or simply the absence of a constraint that would otherwise limit it?
- 3) How does the Philippine configuration compare, across explicit institutional dimensions, with other Southeast and South Asian democracies that exhibit significant personalization?

The propositions developed in the Analytical Synthesis and Discussion sections correspond directly to these research questions.

Literature Review

Populism as Political Style

The populism literature has moved beyond a narrow focus on Latin American economic populism toward a broader understanding of populism as either a thin-centered ideology (Mudde, 2004) or a political style (Moffitt, 2016). Mudde’s well-known formulation defines populism as an ideology that pits a homogeneous and morally pure “people” against a corrupt elite and holds that politics should express the *volonté générale* of the people. Building on performative approaches, Moffitt (2016) conceptualizes populism as a repertoire of stylistic practices, including appeals to “the people” versus “the elite,” the performance of crisis, and the cultivation of “bad manners”—the deliberate violation of accepted norms of political conduct.

In the Philippine context, populist styles have a long lineage. Estrada’s 1998 campaign mobilized the cinematic persona of a defender of the urban poor, while Duterte’s 2016 campaign projected the image of a disciplinarian mayor willing to break political norms in defense of an imperiled nation (Arguelles, 2019; Curato, 2016, 2017; Thompson, 2016). Arguelles (2019) demonstrates that Duterte’s populism combined hostility toward liberal elites with a moral economy of vengeance against criminals, producing what he terms “penal populism,” keyed to public anxieties about disorder. The 2022 presidential campaign of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. articulated a different populist register—nostalgic, conciliatory, and historically revisionist—yet remained equally

reliant on a binary framing of authentic popular will against discredited liberal elites (Aspinall et al., 2022; Webb & Curato, 2019).

Two analytical clarifications are useful. First, populism in the Philippine context is rarely ideologically pure. Successful populist appeals typically combine left-leaning redistributive promises with right-leaning law-and-order or moral-traditionalist commitments, calibrated to the specific electoral coalition the candidate seeks to assemble. Second, populist style does not exhaust the rhetorical repertoire of personalized politics. Charismatic appeals can be advanced through technocratic, paternalistic, or reformist registers without invoking populism's characteristic people-versus-elite binary. The intersection between populism and personalization is therefore historically variable; the expansion of mediatization has further strengthened this relationship.

Mediatization and Affective Attachment

Mediatization, in the sense developed by Hjarvard (2008) and Strömbäck (2008), refers to the long-term process through which social institutions, including political institutions, increasingly operate according to media logics. Strömbäck distinguishes four phases, culminating in a stage at which political actors internalize media logics in their organizational behavior, such that the boundary between politics and its mediated representation becomes increasingly blurred. In its platform-era extension, mediatization refers not only to the influence of broadcast media but also to the algorithmic, networked, and affective logics of social media platforms (Chadwick, 2017; Couldry & Hepp, 2017). Two implications are particularly relevant to the present argument. First, mediatization shifts the basis of political legitimacy from programmatic representation to continuous performance: politicians must not only act but also be seen to act, and the metrics by which they are seen are increasingly platform-native. Second, mediatization amplifies the role of affect. Platform algorithms reward content that elicits strong emotional responses (Papacharissi, 2015), and political communication adapted to this environment tends to privilege identification, indignation, and enthusiasm over deliberation. The implication for personality politics is direct: leaders who can perform charisma in mediated form acquire a structural advantage that has little to do with party organization or programmatic substance.

Recent scholarship on Philippine media has documented these dynamics in detail. Ong and Cabañes (2018) trace the architecture of paid disinformation networks built around political clients during the Duterte administration. Soriano and Gaw (2022) analyze how influencer ecologies have been mobilized in Philippine politics. Curato and Ong (2018) describe the affective logics of authoritarian populism online, in which solidarity is forged through the shared performance of contempt toward designated enemies. Sinpeng and Tapsell (2020) situate these developments within the broader context of Southeast Asia's hybrid media systems.

Clientelism and Neopatrimonial Exchange

The third pillar is the political economy literature on Philippine clientelism. Sidel (1999) analyzes "bossism" as a mode of local rule grounded in the monopolization of

coercive and economic resources. Hutchcroft (1998) characterizes the Philippine state as a “patrimonial oligarchic” order in which private actors capture public institutions to extract rents. McCoy’s (1993) edited volume traces the consolidation of political families as the dominant unit of provincial politics. Kerkvliet (1990) demonstrates how everyday relations of dependence and reciprocity structure rural political life. More recent quantitative research has refined these accounts through systematic empirical evidence, including studies by Mendoza et al. (2016) on political dynasties, Cruz et al. (2017) on political networks, and Ravanilla et al. (2022) on vote-buying.

Hicken’s (2011) general framework conceptualizes clientelism as a contingent exchange relationship between unequal partners that requires durable monitoring and brokerage. The Philippine variant is distinctive because of the depth and persistence of its dynastic structure. Scholars consistently find that political families control a majority of elective positions across most provinces and that dynastic incumbency is associated with weaker development outcomes (Mendoza et al., 2016; Querubín, 2016). Clientelism therefore functions not only as an alternative to programmatic competition but also as an active conversion mechanism: brokers transform mediated affect into electoral mobilization through the well-established instruments of patronage, bloc voting, and selective distribution of benefits.

Historical Context

To understand the present, it is useful to recall how deeply personality has been embedded in Philippine democratic practice. The post-1946 republic inherited a political class organized around landed family networks whose dominance predated independence (Cullinane, 2003; McCoy, 1993). The 1935 Constitution’s presidential system, combined with majoritarian electoral rules and weak ideological cleavages, encouraged candidate-centered competition. Political parties functioned primarily as instruments of elite coalition rather than as vehicles of programmatic representation, and turncoatism (*balimbing*) was a persistent feature of Philippine politics even before the declaration of martial law (Lande, 1965; Quimpo, 2008).

The Marcos Sr. dictatorship (1972–1986) personalized the state in unprecedented ways by fusing executive authority with the patronage networks of the conjugal partnership and the cronies associated with the “New Society” project. The 1986 People Power Revolution restored constitutional democracy but did not dismantle the underlying structures of dynastic dominance. The 1987 Constitution included an anti-dynasty provision (Article II, Section 26), although this provision has never been implemented because of sustained congressional resistance (Mendoza et al., 2016). Post-1986 elections exhibited a recurring pattern: presidential candidates with weak party organizations, charismatic personae, and broad anti-elite or anti-corruption appeals consistently outperformed candidates anchored in programmatic platforms (Teehankee, 2010; Thompson, 2010). Two developments distinguish the post-2010 period. The first is the saturation of political life by social media (We Are Social & Meltwater, 2024). The second is the visible erosion of liberal democratic norms across the region (Curato, 2019; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

II. METHODS

Research Design

This study uses a conceptual-synthetic design aimed at theoretical integration rather than original data collection. This approach is appropriate because three rich but distinct bodies of scholarship each explain Philippine personality politics only partially. The unit of analysis is personalized power as it appears in national elections and subnational dynastic politics from 1986 to 2024, a period chosen to capture both pre-platform and platform-saturated politics.

Following recent guidance on non-systematic reviews (Snyder, 2019), the study is best described as a critical, integrative conceptual review rather than a systematic review. Accordingly, it integrates a targeted body of literature rather than attempting an exhaustive synthesis, and it does not report a PRISMA-style flow diagram. Nevertheless, the sources were selected through a replicable procedure, described below, to enable readers to assess the breadth and transparency of the literature covered.

Sources and Selection Criteria

The study draws on three categories of secondary material. The first comprises peer-reviewed scholarship on populism, mediatization, and clientelism in the Philippines and comparable Southeast Asian polities, identified through systematic searches of Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Web of Science and limited to publications published between 1990 and 2025. The second consists of monographs and edited volumes from established academic publishers, included where they provide foundational theoretical perspectives or comprehensive case analyses. The third includes public-domain reports from established organizations (e.g., DataReportal and the ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute), which were incorporated only when they supplied empirical information unavailable in peer-reviewed sources.

Searches combined the terms “personality politics,” “populism,” “mediatization,” and “clientelism” with “Philippines.” Screening proceeded in two stages: an initial title and abstract screening based on the topical and temporal criteria described above, followed by full-text screening for methodological transparency, relevance to the three target literatures, and, where applicable, a focus on the Philippines or comparable Southeast or South Asian contexts. Source quality was assessed qualitatively using three criteria: peer review or equivalent scholarly vetting, transparency regarding the evidentiary basis, and direct engagement with at least one of the three target literatures.

Analytical Strategy

The analytical strategy comprises three components. The first is theoretical synthesis, in which each body of literature is examined independently before being compared to identify areas of convergence and divergence in central claims, scope conditions, and units of analysis. The second is illustrative case analysis, in which the 2016 presidential campaign of Rodrigo Duterte and the 2022 presidential campaign of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. are treated as paired cases that share mediatized charisma fused with dynastic infrastructure while differing in stylistic register. The third is comparative

regional analysis, using Indonesia, Thailand, and India to clarify what is distinctive about the Philippine configuration, following Aspinall et al. (2022) and Tapsell (2021).

Where the framework specifies categories for future empirical research, these categories are derived from established coding schemes. Populist content can be operationalized using the dimensions proposed by Hawkins (2009) and Bonikowski and Gidron (2016): people-versus-elite framing, crisis performance, and norm-violating rhetoric. Network analysis of clientelist exchange follows Cruz et al. (2017), drawing on genealogical, electoral, and procurement data to trace dynastic networks. Quantitative indicators of political personalization, including party-label stability, vote-share volatility, and campaign contribution concentration, are drawn from the comparative literature on hybrid democracies (Khemani, 2015).

The Duterte and Marcos Jr. campaigns were selected as a most-different systems case pairing (Seawright & Gerring, 2008): both produced successful, mediatized, dynastically anchored personalization, yet they differ substantially in populist style, ideological orientation, and historical positioning. Within a most-different systems design, convergence on a shared outcome across dissimilar cases provides stronger evidence that a common underlying mechanism, rather than case-specific factors, accounts for the observed outcome. Indonesia, Thailand, and India were selected as comparative cases because each exhibits substantial political personalization while differing from the Philippines—and from one another—across the institutional dimensions summarized in the Discussion section. This comparison helps isolate the institutional weaknesses most relevant to the Philippine case.

Ethical Considerations

All sources are publicly available scholarly publications and reports, and no primary data were collected. Direct quotation has been kept to the minimum necessary for analytical clarity, and all cited works are listed in the reference section. The author declares no conflicts of interest related to the substantive material analyzed.

Scope Conditions of the Method

Two scope conditions of this conceptual approach should be acknowledged at the outset. First, conceptual synthesis cannot resolve disagreements about magnitude or causal weight that only original empirical work can address; the framework is offered as a guide for such work rather than a substitute. Second, the illustrative case material draws on widely cited interpretations of recent Philippine campaigns. While these interpretations are well-supported in the secondary literature, they remain interpretations, and a fuller test of the framework would require independent coding of campaign materials and brokerage networks. These limitations are discussed further in the Limitations and Implications section.

III. RESULTS: ANALYTICAL SYNTHESIS

Because the analytical strategy is conceptual-synthetic rather than empirical, the discussion below presents the outputs of the integration procedure described in the Methods section: a thematic synthesis of the populism, mediatization, and clientelism

literatures, applied illustratively to the 2016 and 2022 Philippine presidential campaigns and the literature on subnational dynasties. The case narratives that follow are illustrative applications of the synthesized framework and interpretive readings of secondary sources; they do not constitute original empirical data, nor do they introduce new datasets or analytical matrices.

Mediatized Charisma in Recent Presidential Campaigns

The Duterte Phenomenon

Duterte's 2016 electoral victory was widely interpreted as a Philippine manifestation of the global populist wave (Curato, 2016; Thompson, 2016). Viewed through the framework proposed in this paper, however, it reflects a fusion of the three strands that the present framework brings into focus. Stylistically, Duterte deployed the full repertoire of populist performance, from constructing a national crisis around drugs and disorder to framing politics as a moral confrontation between the ordinary *tao* and a corrupt "yellow" elite, while cultivating the calculated "bad manners" of crude language and overt norm violation (Arguelles, 2019; Curato, 2017).

From a mediatization perspective, the campaign exploited the affordances of platform communication with unusual sophistication. Ong and Cabañes (2018) document an architecture of disinformation production in which paid trolls, micro-influencers, and platform-native content creators amplified pro-Duterte narratives while saturating the discursive space with attacks on critics. The campaign's social media operations did not invent political personalization; they institutionalized and scaled it, extending the affective appeal of a single political figure to a nationwide audience. The result was a continuous performance of charismatic authority that persisted well beyond the election campaign and into governance.

From a clientelist perspective, the campaign and the subsequent administration relied on alliances with established local dynasties and political brokers, particularly in Mindanao and the Visayas (Teehankee, 2016). Personalization did not displace patronage; rather, it reorganized patronage through mediated forms of political communication. Duterte's national visibility increased his value to local political brokers seeking access to executive resources, while their established networks enhanced his electoral competitiveness in jurisdictions where programmatic appeals alone were unlikely to secure broad support. It is this interaction among populism, mediatization, and clientelism that the proposed framework seeks to explain.

The Marcos Restoration

The 2022 election of Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr., who secured a majority of the valid votes—an unusual outcome under the Philippines' plurality electoral system—poses a different but related puzzle. Whereas Duterte was portrayed as a transgressive outsider, Marcos Jr. campaigned as a unifier and modernizer; whereas Duterte mobilized indignation, Marcos Jr. mobilized nostalgia (Aspinall et al., 2022; Teehankee, 2023). Yet the underlying mechanisms remain remarkably similar.

From a mediatization perspective, the Marcos campaign relied heavily on long-form vernacular content distributed through TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook, much of

it produced by sympathetic content creators rather than by the campaign itself (Gaw & Arugay, 2024; Soriano & Gaw, 2022). Historical revisionism, which reframed the martial law period as a golden age of order and prosperity, was disseminated through formats optimized for affective resonance rather than evidentiary engagement (Curaming, 2025). The campaign's relative absence from traditional media debate forums was strategic: visibility was secured through communication channels less amenable to contestation by liberal elites. From a clientelist perspective, the Marcos-Duterte UniTeam alliance combined two of the country's most extensive dynastic networks. The regional strongholds of these political families in Ilocos, Davao, and Leyte translated into organizational support for the national ticket, while Sara Duterte's vice-presidential candidacy consolidated electoral support across much of Mindanao.

Two cautions are in order. First, the foregoing analysis is illustrative rather than dispositive. Measuring the marginal contribution of mediated communication relative to on-the-ground brokerage in shaping electoral outcomes remains a methodological challenge that this paper does not seek to resolve. Second, the proposed framework should not obscure the important differences between Duterte's and Marcos Jr.'s populist styles. Their rhetorical registers, ideological orientations, and coalition-building strategies differ in ways that have important implications for governance. What they share is a common structural pattern: personalized appeals fused with dynastic infrastructure under conditions of mediatization.

Local Dynasties and Brokerage Networks

National-level personalization rests on a foundation of local political dynasties, whose persistence is among the most extensively documented features of Philippine politics. Mendoza et al. (2016) estimate that political families occupy a majority of elective positions across most provinces, with this proportion increasing in poorer and more geographically remote jurisdictions. Querubín (2016) demonstrates the persistence of dynastic incumbency despite the existence of term limits, with relatives replacing term-limited incumbents in patterns consistent with strategic family continuity rather than independent voter choice. Cruz et al. (2017) show that the structural position of families within local marriage networks predicts their political success and shapes patterns of redistribution.

These structures do not merely coexist with personality politics at the national level; they are constitutive of it. Three mechanisms link local dynasties to national personalization. First, dynastic networks constitute the principal infrastructure for vote mobilization, particularly among voters with limited access to information about national politics. Local political brokers translate the visibility of national candidates into concrete endorsements, transportation assistance, and voter mobilization, often coordinated through barangay-level operatives (Ravanilla et al., 2022). Second, dynasties function as institutional memory in a system characterized by weak political parties. Where party labels shift across electoral cycles, political families provide continuity in political identity, alliance formation, and electoral organization. Third, dynastic control over local resources—including public procurement, employment opportunities, and social

services—creates dependent constituencies whose support can be mobilized for national campaigns aligned with the family's political interests (Hutchcroft, 2008; Tusalem, 2020).

Mediatization has not eroded these structures so much as transformed them. National campaigns increasingly bypass local intermediaries in affective communication by reaching voters directly through digital platforms, while continuing to rely on those intermediaries for last-mile electoral mobilization. The result is a hybrid system in which mediated charisma shapes the broad contours of political preference formation, whereas dynastic networks facilitate its translation into electoral turnout. In some cases, political dynasties have themselves invested in digital communication infrastructures, developing family-branded social media operations that reproduce local patronage through mediated forms of political engagement (Soriano & Gaw, 2022).

A further mechanism worth specifying is what might be termed the “franchise” model of contemporary dynastic politics. Whereas dynasties were once relatively closed, kin-based enterprises, mediatization has created incentives for them to extend their political brand to a broader network of allied candidates—including in-laws, business partners, godchildren, and political protégés—who compete under the dynasty's informal endorsement and inherit its mobilizational machinery in exchange for political loyalty once in office. This franchise model resembles the organizational structure of a media-era political party but lacks the programmatic accountability and formal institutional rules that characterize parties in more institutionalized political systems. The party-list system, originally designed to enhance the representation of marginalized sectors, has in some cases been incorporated into such franchise arrangements (Hutchcroft, 2008; Teehanke, 2018).

IV. DISCUSSION

The Personalization-Patronage Nexus

Pulling these strands together, the framework rests on three propositions. First, mediatization restructures political competition by rewarding personalities over programs through the amplification of performance and continuous visibility. Second, clientelism functions as the conversion mechanism through which dynastic networks translate mediated affect into mobilized votes. Third, weak party institutionalization is not an independent causal mechanism but rather an absent constraint; it removes the programmatic branding, candidate vetting, and disciplined caucuses that would otherwise increase the costs of purely personalized appeals. This directly answers RQ2: weak parties function here as a scope condition for the other two mechanisms rather than as a fourth mechanism operating in parallel. Where party institutionalization is stronger, as in the Indonesian and Indian comparators discussed below, the same underlying pressures appear to produce less extreme forms of political personalization.

Two implications follow. The first concerns the scope conditions of populist success. Populist appeals require both an audience receptive to the rhetoric and an organizational infrastructure capable of converting that receptivity into electoral outcomes. The Philippine case suggests that populist style becomes more electorally consequential when it can draw upon pre-existing patronage networks than when it must rely on autonomous mobilization. Movements that combine populist rhetoric with weak

organizational foundations—whether independent reform movements or party-based alternatives—have repeatedly failed to convert public support into national political power, even when polling data indicate substantial latent demand.

The second implication concerns the relationship between charisma and institution-building. Classical Weberian theory anticipates that charismatic authority tends to become routinized, eventually being absorbed into bureaucratic or traditional structures. In the Philippine case, however, mediatization works against this process by making continuous personal performance an indispensable source of political legitimacy. Leaders who attempt to translate charismatic authority into durable party organization find that the very platforms on which their charisma depends reward continued personalization rather than institutional consolidation. The result is a recurring pattern of personalized administrations whose programmatic legacies remain limited and whose successors must reconstruct charismatic legitimacy anew. Figure 1 below depicts this framework schematically.

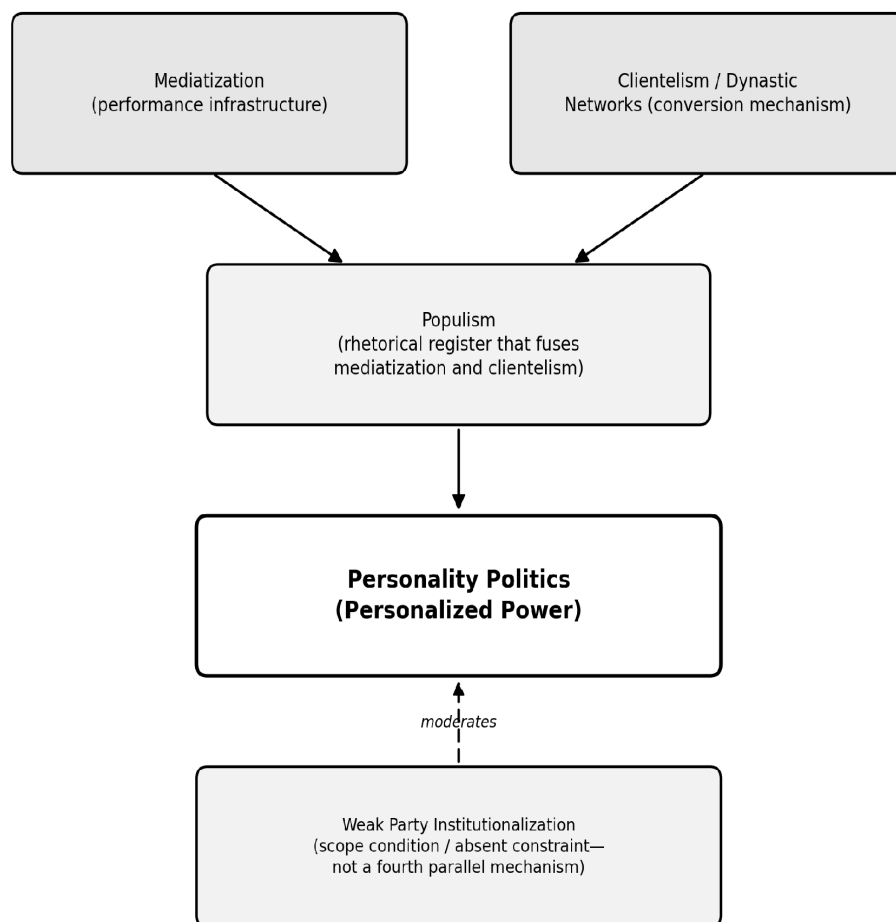


Figure 1. *Theoretical framework of personality politics in the Philippines.*

Table 1.*Framework propositions and empirical indicators*

Proposition	Statement	Illustrative support	Testable empirical indicator
P1	Mediatization increases the electoral premium on charismatic performance relative to programmatic communication.	Duterte (2016) and Marcos Jr. (2022) campaign analysis	Share of candidate media coverage/engagement driven by personality-focused versus policy-focused content, tracked over time
P2	Clientelist and dynastic networks convert mediatised visibility into turnout, especially where voters have low information about national candidates.	Local brokerage patterns in the 2016 anti-drug campaign (Ravanilla et al., 2022)	Correlation between local dynastic density and candidate vote share, controlling for national media exposure
P3	Weak party institutionalization amplifies the relationship between mediatised charisma, clientelist mobilization, and personalized governance outcomes.	Contrast with Indonesian and Indian party systems (Table 2)	Cross-national variation in personalization indices as a function of party-institutionalization scores, holding media penetration and dynastic density constant

Alternative Explanations and Comparative Perspective

It is useful to evaluate the proposed framework against several plausible alternative explanations. One emphasizes voter rationality. In a low-information environment, voters may rely on personality cues as efficient heuristics for predicting political behavior, in which case personalization represents a functional response to information costs rather than a pathology of weak institutions. The framework developed here is compatible with this interpretation but argues that the relevant heuristics are themselves shaped by media systems and patronage networks. Voters do not assess political personalities in a vacuum; rather, the cues available to them are filtered through actors with strong interests in promoting personalization.

A second alternative emphasizes cultural variables, such as Philippine norms of *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude) or the historical resonance of patron-client ties in Southeast Asian moral economies. Cultural variables undoubtedly matter, but they are insufficient on their own. The same cultural environment supported the relatively programmatic political competition of the late 1950s as well as the highly personalized competition of the present.

A further alternative concerns causal ordering. The framework as presented treats mediatization and clientelism as parallel inputs that populism integrates, but an alternative sequencing is also plausible. Weak party institutionalization could constitute the prior causal condition that makes politicians dependent on dynastic networks in the first place, with mediatization subsequently amplifying a process of personalization already underway for reasons unrelated to platform technology. Under this alternative

sequence, mediatization would be better understood as an accelerant of a pre-existing dynamic rather than as a co-equal mechanism. The illustrative material assembled here does not adjudicate between these competing sequences because it is not structured as a time-series analysis of causal priority. Resolving this question forms part of the empirical research agenda outlined in the Implications for Future Research section.

A regional comparison helps situate the Philippine case. Indonesia's post-Suharto democracy has experienced significant political personalization at the presidential level, most notably under Joko Widodo, but this has occurred within a more institutionalized party system and under stronger formal constraints on dynastic succession. Thailand's populism has likewise been highly personalized, yet it has operated alongside a far more interventionist military and judiciary that have periodically displaced electoral outcomes. India's contemporary personalization is rooted in a mass political party with deep organizational foundations.

Table 2.

Comparative institutional environments for personalized power

Dimension	Philippines	Indonesia	Thailand	India
Party institutionalization	Weak; personalistic, coalition-based, low programmatic anchoring	Moderate; established parties structure competition despite personalization at the top	Weak to moderate; parties fragmented and periodically dissolved	Strong; competition anchored in mass parties with deep organizational roots
Formal constraints on dynastic succession	Minimal; the constitutional anti-dynasty provision remains unimplemented	More robust; formal rules and internal party vetting limit direct succession	Limited; dynastic influence present but less institutionally constrained	Present but incomplete; formal rules constrain without eliminating dynastic candidacies within parties
Military/judicial intervention in elections	Limited; civilian electoral processes largely undisturbed	Limited; civilian process generally respected	High; military and judicial intervention has repeatedly displaced elected governments	Limited; judiciary occasionally arbitrates disputes but does not displace outcomes
Net structural brake on personalization	Weakest among the four cases	Moderate, exercised mainly through the party system	Moderate, exercised mainly through military and judicial checks	Moderate, exercised mainly through party organization

The Philippines, by contrast, combines high levels of mediatization, weak political parties, entrenched dynastic dominance, and limited military intervention in electoral

competition—a configuration that places fewer institutional constraints on personalization than those found in any of these neighboring democracies. The comparative literature therefore suggests that what distinguishes the Philippine case is not political personalization itself but the structural permissiveness of the institutional environment within which it operates (Aspinall et al., 2022; Tapsell, 2021).

Governance Outcomes

These governance implications follow from the framework's logic rather than from original outcome data; they are propositions generated by the framework rather than empirically demonstrated effects. Three propositions follow from this framework. First, the post-2016 period has been characterized by pronounced personalization of executive authority, with administrations shaped by the president's personal preferences and rhetorical priorities. This pattern is not new—Marcos Sr. and Estrada also presided over highly personalized administrations—but mediatization has intensified it by making the executive's mediated performance a near-daily feature of political life (Curato, 2019; Webb & Curato, 2019). Under these conditions, policymaking tends to follow rhetorical and reputational logics rather than programmatic priorities.

Second, legislative oversight is weakened. The Philippine legislature has long exercised limited autonomy from the executive, owing partly to the constitutional powers of the presidency and partly to legislators' dependence on executive-controlled resources. The personalization of national politics intensifies this dynamic by making membership in the president's governing coalition a prerequisite for political survival in many electoral districts. As a result, legislative oversight of executive action becomes contingent on the president's political strength or weakness rather than on stable institutional norms (Quimpo, 2008; Teehankee, 2018).

Third, policy outputs at the local level become more volatile. Where local politics is dominated by dynastic personalization, policy is likely to reflect family priorities rather than constituent preferences. Empirical research on local public goods provision finds substantial variation in policy outputs across jurisdictions with similar fiscal capacities, much of which is explained by differences in dynastic structure (Mendoza et al., 2016; Tusalem, 2020). Mediatization compounds this volatility by creating incentives for local incumbents to invest in highly visible projects rather than in less visible but more developmentally consequential public investments.

V. LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Limitations

Several limitations qualify this argument. First, the illustrative case material is drawn from secondary sources rather than primary empirical research, and the framework's central claims require systematic testing using original empirical data. Second, the relative importance of the three components—mediatization, weak party institutionalization, and clientelism—likely varies across regions, electoral levels, and historical periods in ways that this paper does not specify. Third, comparative research involving other Southeast Asian democracies would help distinguish claims that are specific to the Philippines from those reflecting broader regional patterns. Fourth, the

framework is most applicable to electoral mobilization in geographically defined contests; it has less explanatory leverage with respect to bureaucratic institutions, courts, and the security sector, where different dynamics of personalization operate. Subsequent research will address each of these limitations.

Implications for Theory

The framework suggests three theoretical refinements. First, populism, mediatization, and clientelism should be analyzed as interacting rather than competing explanations of personalized power. Second, the standard distinction between “mass” and “personal” politics is less useful than a distinction between political systems that institutionalize personalization through media-patronage hybrids and those that do not. Third, the Weberian expectation of charismatic routinization needs revision under conditions of platform-mediated politics, where continuous personal performance is itself a resource of legitimacy.

Implications for Policy

The framework points toward three policy directions. None is entirely novel, but each gains greater coherence when grounded in a unified account of the political dynamics it seeks to address.

The first concerns strengthening party institutionalization. The single most consequential reform would increase the costs of party-switching while lowering the costs of programmatic party-building. Public financing tied to programmatic development, restrictions on mid-term party defection, and electoral reforms favoring more stable list-based representation have all been proposed (Hicken & Kuhonta, 2015; Teehankee, 2018). Their implementation remains politically difficult precisely because incumbent legislators benefit from the existing system. Nevertheless, the absence of such reforms preserves the structural conditions under which personalization flourishes.

The second concerns improving transparency in public resource allocation. The conversion of public resources into patronage constitutes the core mechanism of clientelism. Reforms that increase transparency in procurement, social protection allocation, and intergovernmental transfers reduce the discretion available to political brokers while increasing the political costs of misuse (Mendoza et al., 2013). Recent investments in open-data infrastructure represent useful progress but require sustained institutional and civil society engagement to generate meaningful political effects.

The third concerns reforming media ownership and platform governance. Mediatization itself cannot be reversed, but its political consequences can be shaped. Greater disclosure of paid political content, restrictions on platform-based microtargeting, and stronger enforcement against coordinated disinformation campaigns could reduce some of the most significant distortions (Ong & Cabañes, 2018; Soriano & Gaw, 2022).

These three proposals are not equally feasible. Disclosure requirements appear to be the most politically tractable because they have precedents in existing election law. Restrictions on microtargeting are more difficult to implement because they depend on platform cooperation and technical auditing capacities that Philippine regulators do not

yet possess. More stringent anti-disinformation enforcement also carries the risk of selective application against government critics, much as anti-corruption institutions discussed elsewhere in this literature have occasionally been used selectively. Any such regulation therefore needs to be narrowly tailored and paired with independent oversight so that it curbs manipulation rather than becoming a tool through which incumbents suppress legitimate political speech. The tension between reducing platform-enabled distortion and protecting freedom of expression is not resolved here; rather, it constitutes a design constraint for future policy development.

Implications for Future Research

A research agenda follows from the methodological framework outlined in the Methods section. Discourse and content analyses of campaign speeches, official communications, and social media posts can facilitate systematic measurement of populist style, while comparable analyses of platform-native content will require coding schemes adapted to the multimodal nature of contemporary political communication. Social network analysis of clientelist exchanges using genealogical, electoral, and procurement data can map brokerage structures across selected provinces. Quantitative analyses of electoral returns and institutional indicators can identify the macro-level signatures of political personalization, including declining party-label stability, increasing vote-share volatility, and greater concentration of campaign resources and political visibility around individual candidates. Cross-national comparisons, particularly with Indonesia, Thailand, and India, provide useful baselines for distinguishing which features are genuinely distinctive to the Philippine case.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that personality politics in the Philippines is best understood not as the product of populism alone, mediatization alone, or clientelism alone, but as the interaction of all three under conditions of weak party institutionalization. Mediatization provides the infrastructure for charismatic performance, populism supplies its rhetorical register, and clientelism furnishes the mechanism through which mediated affect is converted into mobilized electoral support. Together, these mechanisms produce a political order in which personalized power is structurally favored and difficult to displace through ordinary electoral competition.

Not all elements of this framework rest on the same evidentiary foundation. The propositions concerning the interaction of populism, mediatization, and clientelism (P1–P3; Table 1) are supported by convergent findings across the existing literature and are therefore advanced with a relatively high degree of confidence. By contrast, the governance outcomes associated with this configuration—including weakened legislative oversight, policy volatility, and the comparative implications drawn from Indonesia, Thailand, and India—are more appropriately understood as theoretically informed hypotheses that remain to be tested through original empirical research. The framework is offered as a conceptual synthesis of a phenomenon too often examined in isolation and as a research agenda that future empirical studies can use to test, refine, or revise its central claims.

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