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Local Pathways to the National Leadership?: International Perspectives on Southeast Asia's Presidential Democracies[1]

Abstract

This study analyzed how local leaders with no prior experience in countrywide politics could win national elections, focusing on Jejomar Binay and Joko Widodo in Southeast Asia's unitary presidential states: the Philippines and Indonesia. This study aims to contribute to the scant literature on outsider candidates and local-to-national leadership transitions. Using public administration theories on populism, participatory governance, and decision making, we propose a theoretical framework for analyzing these electoral triumphs. It is noteworthy that while past leaders experienced in national politics, the military, or business typically won high-level positions in these two countries, they did not. In this context, this study used qualitative methods (documentary research and thematic analysis of academic sources, communications, and campaign approaches) to examine local politicians' victories in their countries' highest echelons of power.

Keywords:

Introduction

In Southeast Asia, the Philippines and Indonesia have chosen a unitary presidential system to lead their people. It is an arrangement where the president is both the chief of the state and the head of the government, and the Vice President assists the former while always ready to assume the reins if needed (Zildjianda et al., 2024). Both former leaders, Binay and Widodo, achieved

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local governance success, which resonated with the many people in the Philippines and Indonesia. According to Teehankee and Thompson (2016), Binay, a long-time Mayor of Makati City, emphasized pro-poor policies, especially welfare programs for low-income groups. Similarly, Widodo's reformist and grassroots engagement in development, as a former Surakarta Mayor (informally known as Solo) (2005-2011), created a reputation that offered an alternative to conventional politics in Indonesia (Sanusi, 2018). Furthermore, this study was inspired by a former Filipino cabinet member's statement in a forum where s/he remarked that an emerging way of winning national elections would be influenced by local governance performance. It has become a set of credentials for a broader audience looking for change.

This article found that despite not having experience in national politics, local leaders can achieve policy success at the local level. Similarly, Carreras (2012) suggested that in future research, political strategies, including the communication style of so-called outsiders, should be studied to further evaluate this phenomenon. Bunnell et al. (2018) stated that they combine campaigns with good communication strategies (such as interviews, study trips, social media, international awards, and traditional media coverage), which would yield opportunities to capture the interest and support of the broader populace. It played a role in President Widodo's political ascendance to the Jakarta governor's seat. Abinales (2011) stated that, during the 2010 polls, Binay conducted a good campaign by utilizing well-cultivated relations with local chief executives and waiting as rivals weakened each other. This approach demonstrates that networks with local political leaders are important even during times of change.

Feierherd (2020) finds that mayors' reputations can help their party-mates and allied candidates win national elections. Thus, their track records can aid them in their presidential bids, because they enable the cultivation of strong grassroots networks. Even a mayoral position can be a gateway to realizing political aspirations. This situation was demonstrated even in the U.S., where politicians started at the local level before embarking on a quest for higher offices (Einstein et al., 2018). Winning a local government position is easier and costs less than a national position. It can give candidates the experience, self-assurance, and voter support that emboldens them to pursue higher political ambitions (Fox & Lawless, 2005, cited in Einstein et al., 2018).

These two former leaders can be considered outsiders because they mostly governed at the local level before a ripe opportunity came their way. Carreras (2014) described political outsiders as leaders and election candidates who are not part of national mainstream politics in their countries. Occasionally running as an independent figure, they may not have extensive experience with major political parties, cabinets, or the legislative branch. Furthermore, he added that studies of political outsiders are limited. Jungherr et al. (2019) stated that nontraditional candidates tend to follow a pattern to gain influence. First, they use digital media to signal their arrival as new champions for people. They then organize movements or parties depending on the politico-administrative system. In addition, they tend to balance their anti-establishment origins with the need to adapt to institutional norms. Once they secure power, they must maintain a wide-ranging coalition or engage in moderate policies to support their agenda. They may also continue to challenge the status quo to maintain the loyalty of core supporters.

Operational Definition of Political Outsider

A political outsider has been described and expounded in many ways in the literature. Barr (2009) described them as individuals who ran as independent and became popular through other means. They are not members of any traditional

party. Jungherr et al. (2019) stated that they are people who challenge the status quo, the political system's fairness, and typically gain attention by presenting another alternative. Once they win, they tend to build alliances and moderate some positions to maintain support. Setiawan et al. (2024) stated that they rise to prominence by opposing the political mainstream and frequently presenting themselves as reformers and champions of people. Their ascendance can be seen in countries such as Indonesia, Philippines, Germany, Thailand, and Bolivia. Although they have different priorities, their emergence is fueled by public disenchantment in the current governance climate. Borbáth (2024) describes them as little-known persons who may not trust institutions and have a small mainstream representation, but once they are able to mobilize supporters, they can challenge the status quo.

Building on their findings, this research defines the political outsider as someone who combines a humble background, no ties with the elites, and those who find an opportunity to pursue higher office because of people's disenchantment with the current system. Thompson (2010) added that since the 1990s, both the Philippines and Indonesia have witnessed the rise of pro-reform leaders who use populist communication and promote social welfare. They are also relatable to many people because they emphasize the shared identity of having humble origins and pledging to help them.

Thus, this study's description is particularly suitable for examining figures such as Jejomar Binay and Joko Widodo, who emerged from local political backgrounds without prior experience in the national political landscape.

With good communication strategies using the media and presenting local governance triumphs for everyone to see, Widodo and Binay, having led cities near the capital cities of their nations, were in a good position to bid for national leadership positions as Indonesia's 7th President and the Philippines' 13th Vice President. As Berggruen and Gardels (2013) put it, the impact of localities and their surrounding places has expanded such that even mayors have a comparable influence, similar to central government authorities.

For its part, the study only seeks to study the electoral victories of local leaders in the Philippines and Indonesia, namely former Vice President Jejomar Binay in 2010 and President Joko Widodo in 2014. They did not examine the policies implemented after taking office. In addition, this study does not address the problem of vote buying because it is a delicate topic. These leaders can be considered outsider candidates since they are relatively unknown at the national-level politics during their terms in local governments, Binay as the previous Mayor of Makati City, while Widodo was a former Solo Mayor and Jakarta Governor. The paper is relatively limited to these two case studies: the Philippines and Indonesia. This study only examined electoral experience and glean policy lessons. It does not or intends to romanticize them. In addition, these events may have affected the development of leadership models in these two countries.

The Two Leaders' Profiles
Former Vice President Jejomar Binay

Former human rights attorney Jejomar "Jojo" Cabatauanan Binay, an ex-mayor of Makati, gained a reputation as a "populist" for his welfare projects for the less fortunate (Thompson, 2010, p.161). As a former City Mayor, Binay emphasized pro-poor programmes in Makati, where he helped address the needs of the urban poor early in his political career. His constituents regarded him as approachable and generous, as the LGU provided free medical care, senior citizen cash aid, and support for education. Even his political rivals respected him for his concern for the people (Calimbahin 2019; Curato 2016).

Table 1.
Voter Turnout in the 2010 Philippine Vice Presidential Elections

Candidate	Party	Votes	Percentage
Jejomar Binay	PDP Laban	14,645,574	41.65%
Manuel "Mar" Roxas	Liberal Party	13,918,490	39.59%
Loren Legarda	Nationalist People's Coalition	4,294,664	12.22%

Source: COMELEC (Commission on Elections: Komisyon sa Halalan)
https://comelec.gov.ph/php-tpls-attachments/References/Results/2010NLE/Results_Pres_VPres_2010_Elections.pdf
Note: Only the Top 3 candidates were included.

During the 2010 national polls, Binay's success came from Sen. Loren Legarda's vice-presidential campaign fall-through. Once Legarda joined Manuel "Manny" Bamba Villar, Jr.'s team for the 2010 presidential elections, her reputation dropped even if she denounced his misbehavior. Joseph Estrada and Villar divided the populist vote for President, while Binay won the vice presidency as Legarda's support fell. Binay showed that populist and reformist ideas were equally appealing by defeating Manuel "Mar" Araneta Roxas II (Thompson, 2010, p.161). He demonstrated charismatic leadership when he championed the poor's welfare, using symbolic actions, such as attending funeral wakes and having meals with them to cultivate personal links. Assistance programs in Makati and a nationwide network of local partnerships helped him solidify this reputation, which helped him boost his political success and populist appeal (Curato, 2016).

As shown in Table 1, Binay received 41.65% of the votes for the Vice Presidency, which was 2.06% higher than his nearest fellow candidate, Roxas, at 39.59%. Teehankee (2016) stated that Binay took a pro-poor narrative and won the Philippines's second highest office. Teehankee (2020) added that personality and appeal resonate more with voters in the Philippines than membership in a political party or any shared ideology.

Former President Joko Widodo

Former President Widodo, then Mayor of Solo, a small city, built a strong reputation for local governance through the non-violent relocation of street vendors, which garnered media coverage, national awards, and international praise. Although he won an overwhelming mandate in Solo in 2011, he and his team used study tours, awards, and media attention to sustain a positive image beyond Solo. He was also known for his surprise visits to other government offices and places (Bunnell et al., 2018).

After his tenure as Solo Mayor, he won the Jakarta governorship. Lee (2021) stated that Jokowi reached the middle class and increased development using Jakarta's economic strength and urban appeal. While Jakarta's vital influence on politics and the press reflected his managerial approach across Indonesia, he advocated local reform and creativity via decentralization. His emphasis on blusukan (direct impromptu visits), e-budgeting, and openness to government officials' salaries helped to create public confidence and reinforce his image as a reformist manager, concentrating on inclusiveness and effectiveness.

He eventually swayed Indonesia's elite and public when he entered national politics in 2012. Political leaders had to change their approach to the campaign since the media closely observed their actions and words. Widodo was indispensable for the 2014 parliamentary election campaign, and most post-election studies have concentrated on the seeming Jokowi phenomenon. His path is remarkable, from small-town furniture businessmen to presidential candidates and pop culture (Mietzner, 2014).

Table 2.
Voter Turnout in 2014 Indonesian Presidential Elections

Candidate	Party	Votes	Percentage
Joko Widodo	PDI-P (Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle: Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan)	70,997,833	53.15%
Prabowo Subianto	GERINDRA (Great Indonesia Movement Party: Partai Gerakan Indonesia Raya)	62,576,444	46.85%

Source: Indonesia's KPU (Komisi Pemilihan Umum: General Election Commission) as reported by KAS International Reports, https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/253252/7_dokument_dok_ pdf_39340_2.pdf/9155dec8-b3fe-5363-8b9b-badca0988bc5?version=1.0&t=1539660679863

When he became a favored presidential candidate in 2010, Joko Widodo (Jokowi) wanted meaningful government transformation. Then-Pres. Yudhoyono's leadership upsets some Indonesians who longed for leaders, emphasizing greater fairness in income distribution, direct communication, and decisive action. However, most showed little desire to return to authoritarianism. Emphasizing efficiency over demagoguery, Indonesian people generally desired a realistic, inclusive, and democratic kind of national leadership (Mietzner, 2015). Unlike Indonesia's political establishment, Jokowi represented modest populism. Born in 1961 in Solo from a lower middle-class family—not a political or military elite—his father was a carpenter and his mother was a homemaker. Unlike many Indonesian leaders, Jokowi's early years were ordinary, with little political or ideological activity (Mietzner 2015; Sanusi 2018). His rise to the pinnacle of Indonesia's political establishment is impressive because it had many obstacles and was largely controlled by the elites (Hadiz & Robison, 2013, cited in Setiawan et al., 2024).

Over the years, his achievements in local governance have become stories. With Solo city's success, a political brand paved the way for national prominence (Bunnell et al., 2018; Kimura, 2017). When he became Jakarta Governor, he quickly became well known in a few months about Indonesia's national politics and media scene (Woischnik, 2014).

As illustrated in Table 2, Widodo won with 6.3% lead. Woischnik (2014) pointed out that Jokowi's victory reflects Indonesia's political culture, where personality trumps party affiliation, similar to Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's[2] 2004 election win. Jokowi's image as an honest and modest person with a humble background resonated with young voters. He was also supported by former President Megawati Sukarnoputri[3], leader of the PDI-P party.

National Political Climate

The national context of the 2010 elections in the Philippines must also consider the underlying influence of Manila. Yusingco (2018) stated that the city enjoys a prominent position in the country, as it holds the Malacañang Palace, presidential office, and state's highest authority. Kusaka (2017) points out that the urban Manila and its surrounding cities (collectively known as Metro Manila or the National Capital Region) is the country's command center and a commercial hub. It is also where business, national politics, and widespread images of development converge as it brings together the middle class, low-income populace, and civil society in close interactions. Furthermore, many mainstream media firms are based there, which shape narratives on matters such as governance. Many small groups travel to cities and conduct demonstrations to make their causes more evident and impactful.

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2 He was Indonesia's first popularly elected President (the 6th) and a former military officer (Fealy, 2025).

3 She is the daughter of Indonesia's first President, Soekarno, the one who helped secure the nation's independence (Setiawan et al., 2024).

Makati City is known as the finance hub of the country, and is one of Metro Manila's 17 local governments. It has a population of approximately half a million. It hosts many prominent banks, companies, embassies, and luxury neighborhoods (Tomeldan et al., 2014). Before Binay became Makati's Mayor, during the time of former President Corazon Aquino in 1986, he shaped a pro-poor leadership in the city. He used his humble beginnings and legal background during the Marcos Sr. era to promote ties with the working class, cultivating an image as a defender against elites. He institutionalized social assistance programs and made himself a relatable and active leader, making him and his family strongholds in Makati (Garrido, 2013, cited in Curato, 2016). Thus, all these factors, along with the socio-political environment that Thompson (2014) described as having a narrative centered on integrity, democratic reforms, and pro- and poor leadership.

Long before Jokowi's rise to national prominence, Indonesian national politics was dominated by elites, such as political families, military leaders, and large business owners. He had limited sway over the legislature and depended on coalitions with groups that reflected that power is still in the existing circles. Some resisted reforms that would reduce their privileges (Hamayotsu 2015; Lee 2021). Hadiz and Robison (2013) and Lee (2021) stated that Jokowi's Indonesian Presidency win in 2014 occurred within a national climate of political decentralization, where there are considerable incidences of dividing provinces into smaller towns (locally called pemekaran) and the electorate's changing expectations. Indonesia's rapid urban expansion has increased the number of middle-class and urban poor (Lee 2021).

Furthermore, Jokowi's technocratic and consultative leadership in Solo and Jakarta resonated with urban voters when discussing issues such as public goods and traffic management.

The post-Suharto devolution enabled local leaders to gain a more national perception. Jakarta is regarded as the center that conveys an image of national transformation, and Jakarta-based media outlets are prominent in the country's discourses. Furthermore, Jakarta Governorship augmented his reputation as a capable leader, allowing him to circumvent traditional elites. This broader sociopolitical environment turned him from a local leader into a winnable national candidate, going beyond the explanation of his popular appeal (Bunnell et al., 2018; Lee, 2021).

Campaign Approaches
Binay's good relations with the inner circle and local governments.

Here, the Binay camp's messaging choices proved important, as they steadily increased the former Mayor's survey rating in 2009. Hofileña and Go (2011) narrated that he and his team went to far provinces and rural areas of the country while his rivals, such as Manuel "Mar" Roxas and Sen. Loren Legarda, focused on Metro Manila. He mounted an extensive campaign with good advertisements and visited local radio and cable TV firms. His slogan was "Makati Ngayon, Pilipinas Bukas" (Makati Today, The Philippines Tomorrow) (p.156). Makati helped many local governments in the countryside through its sister city program, which made them friendly and helpful, lending their local networks to support them (Abinales, 2011; Flores, 2019).

For local leadership, his long-time experience as a Mayor and Makati's progress was presented in ads. When it came to decisions, his strength was his small inner circle of trusted advisers, where there were no factions, only professional respect and deep discussions (Hofileña & Go, 2011). Regarding participatory governance, he occasionally interacted and even ate with people experiencing poverty to hear their concerns (Curato, 2016). His administration in the city presided over several well-received infrastructure

programs such as basketball courts, schools, and roads (Shatkin, 2000). All these became his credentials in the campaign when he mounted his bid for the Vice Presidency.

Widodo focused on reformist policies and direct engagement with citizens.

People's expectations for Jokowi were high because of his humble beginnings and success in local governance, where he is also seen as a leader of the common people. Before he launched his bid for the national office, he strengthened democratic governance through encouragement of citizen participation, promotion of transparency through digital tools, and direct dialogue, such as on-the-spot visits to understand people's needs. His time at the local level focused on health, education, and combating poverty (Sanusi 2018; Sucharithanarugse 2017; Yuwono 2014). As Solo's Mayor, he also pursued policies such as expanded access to medical care and education for low-income persons. He also sought government reforms to root out corruption, streamline bureaucracy, and promote investment, which were praised by business groups and the marginalized sector (Kimura & Kuhonta, 2018).

When then-presidential candidate Joko Widodo and his team went to campaign, the blusukan (or impromptu visits) to people to see their living conditions were conducted (Sucharithanarugse, 2017). During the 2014 polls, he presented himself as a populist like Prabowo, but promoted institutional reform, inclusive policies, and political moderation (Aji & Dartanto, 2018; Mietzner, 2015). They also extensively use social media and volunteers to reach a broad swath of voters (Widodo, 2014). Although there were some non-democratic elements, Jokowi's 2014 election campaign was also supported by volunteerism by civic-minded citizens and non-governmental organizations because they were motivated by his track record for transparency and people-centered governance in response to public anger towards corruption and incompetent leadership (Lay, 2018, cited in Lee, 2021).

When it was decided for the 2014 campaign, Widodo and his team adopted a campaign strategy and did not respond to negative information. They went on many coalition-building efforts, partnered with media entities, and communicated clean, reform-oriented leadership if he won. He also made Jusuf Kalla his running mate to augment local political and financial support from parties such as NasDem (Nasional Demokrat: The National Democrats) and PKB (Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa: The National Awakening Party). Despite many attempts to discredit him, he maintained a message of humility while emphasizing grassroots mobilization and social media. Eventually, his image as a modest, capable leader, different from the traditional political and military elites, connected to many voters who wanted democratic governance (Fukuoka & Na Thalang, 2014; Yuliatiningtyas, 2022).

Focusing on reform, pro-poor narratives, and humble backgrounds as people.

In Binay's 2010 campaign approach, messaging had a clear theme of appealing to people because of his humble beginnings and the results he brought with Makati as an exhibit, a potential national development model. Hofileña, & Go (2011, p.163) narrated this when the ads of his team were like "Ganito Kami sa Makati" (This is how we do things in Makati to show the city's progress and its services), "May Pag-ahon, May Pag-asa" (We can rise use because there is hope to show that Binay had an ordinary life like most Filipinos before he entered politics), and "Kay Binay, Gaganda ang Buhay" (Binay can help uplift people's lives because he has lived like the masses and has the leadership experience to deliver results). Furthermore, he was a human rights lawyer who defended Martial Law victims who helped build his democratic credentials. Thus, Binay's messaging had the overarching

themes of living the life of a common person, resilience to rise in life, and the experience of bringing development to low-income citizens, a rags-to-riches narrative that can resonate with many voters.

Widodo connected well with the masses because he and his team organized well-coordinated visits and dialogues with communities with many low-income people. His communication approach did not involve combative or garnered supporters (Basuki, 2017). He also used language to appeal to unity in Indonesia. Firdaus et al. (2020, p.3) analyzed the 2014 inaugural speech of then-President Widodo, where he stated:

"I am certain we will be able to carry this challenging test of history with unity, cooperation [gotong royong], and hard work. We will never be great if we are trapped in divisions and unities. Furthermore, we will never be truly free without hard work. The government I lead will ensure that all people in all corners of the country feel the presence of government services. I am sure that this country will be stronger and dignified if all state agencies work, bearing the mandate given by the Constitution."

Here, he spoke about pledges on what the government would do in the future to improve public goods provision nationwide. These statements convey authority, understanding, and benefits (Firdaus et al., 2020). Modesty aside,

they appear to align well with their track record at the local level of prioritizing pragmatism and inclusive policies.

In essence, this study frames Binay and Widodo's political careers as distinct pathways through which each person accumulates governance experience, media exposure, and eventually political legitimacy. Both began as mayors of influential cities – Makati and Solo– who prioritized direct, personal, and informal interactions with their people. Nevertheless, Binay's path reflects a local network of supporters from friendly rural local governments before going to the Philippine Vice Presidency. In comparison, Widodo was a technocratic style with plenty of media coverage of Solo's progress before running for Jakarta's governorship and, eventually, Indonesia's presidency. The proposed local-national transition framework enables a deeper understanding of how combining populist messaging, culturally appropriate decisions, and a participatory approach can increase the chances of a political outsider securing a national electoral victory in the context of developing countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia.

Methods

This study combined three (3) theories of public administration: populism theory, participatory governance theory, and decision
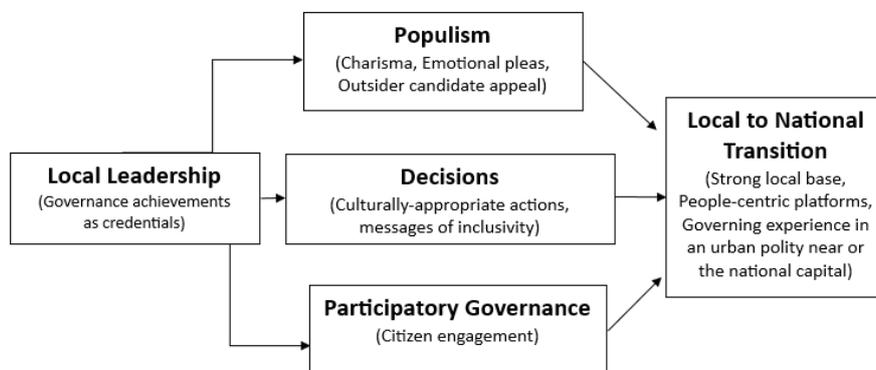

Figure 1. A Proposed Theoretical Framework on Local to National Transition

Source: Author

theory. First, let us explore these theories and how they help us understand why these three (3) local leaders won in their countries' national elections.

These theories are explained briefly. First, populism occurs when leaders use charismatic communication to cultivate voter support. This pertains to inspirational leadership, in which an individual harnesses a social movement to secure power. Its two main characteristics are that supporters are committed to the leader, not a party, and that control resides in the ruler, who determines choices and personnel and faces little or no restraint in exercising power. Second, unlike previous political trends such as party politics or patronage, populism highlights the organization of large numbers of citizens via demonstrations and the media (Kenny, 2019).

Populist leaders use basic, straightforward, and personal language, which follows a pattern of emulating common people. This approach helps them combine subtler performative behavior that depicts them as people with anti-elitist discourse (Martelli & Jaffrelot, 2023). They tend to say that they represent the masses and oppose the elite; however, populism can also be paradoxical. It can help bridge the gap between elites and the public but may also weaken democratic institutions (Urbinati, 2018). The skill in using language to mobilize followers is remarkable in sparking interest among people (Heydarian, 2021).

Certainly, populism is a powerful force that can mobilize people to support charismatic figure by putting them in high places of power. Abou-Khalil and Aoun (2020, cited in Setiawan et al., 2024) stated that when electorates with elevated hopes frequently lose faith in a political establishment after a while, political outsiders can become enticing choices for a change. This advantage benefits them because they are seen to come with a clean record and may become populists once they secure mass support by setting themselves apart from the underperforming traditional authorities. Ufen (2018) stated that under certain circumstances,

there can be an inclusive populism that can address the people's challenges in the peripheries, stand up to corrupt elites, and deliver socio-economic reforms that benefit the marginalized, as demonstrated in Latin America. On the other hand, Ufen (2018) found that some populist leaders, once in power, can use their mandate to dismantle institutional safeguards and use divisive language that can alienate others and isolate opposition or critics. A real challenge occurs once they employ their office's vast powers to weaken the judiciary, muffle the media, or contest the poll results when they lose.

Paradoxically, Case (2017) argues that while there are populist movements in the Philippines and Indonesia, they struggle to challenge the ruling class's power or severely damage democratic institutions for different reasons. In the Philippines, there are weak institutions, low urbanization in most of the country, and the inability to mobilize trans-class alliances, especially among the urban poor and middle class. Indonesia's populace has diverse ethno-religious and regional makeups. Under these conditions, populism cannot significantly challenge the elites' power or democratic order. These two states are yet to see populism as a force that can facilitate systemic change and transformation. Based on these findings, populism is not bad per se, as long as there is a strong commitment to pro-poor policies and a reform agenda and inflammatory language is avoided.

Second, participatory governance underscores citizens' involvement in policy decisions to improve democracy and outcomes (Bussu et al., 2022). According to Van der Wel et al. (2025), people generally support policies that ask for citizen input, but may feel that the process has shortcomings, such as fairness or unclear roles. People's past experiences reflect the need for good relations because these connections facilitate cooperation and improve the perception of policies. Similarly, Widodo demonstrated a citizen-centered approach for

solving social challenges. His administration treated street vendors with dignity to manage the balance between income and environmental cleanliness better (Bland 2021; Sanusi 2018). In time, he and his team could amicably resettle them elsewhere, while promising that their new place would be promoted in the media and provide public transport to entice customers (Bunnell et al., 2018; Sanusi, 2018).

Third, decision theory emphasizes strategic thinking on customs before acting to secure favorable outcomes (Frederickson et al., 2011). In this context, Binay emphasized social welfare in Makati (Calimbahin, 2019). In addition, Widodo underscored urban development (Bunnell et al., 2018). When applying this theoretical lens, when the Binay and Widodo teams anticipated the likely polls' results, they continued their efforts to appeal to voters. They aligned their decisions with cultural expectations, where Binay cultivated his image as a caring and competent leader. Widodo nurtured his reputation as a leader of ordinary people.

Without being presumptuous, the local–national electoral transition theory, which integrates local governance achievements, messaging (through media coverage), and participatory governance to explain how local leaders can climb to the national stage, is proposed within this context.

This study used a qualitative approach to analyze the electoral experiences of former Vice President Binay (2010) and ex-President Widodo (2014). The documentary analysis method was employed, in which various references such as books, academic journals, and other scholarly sources were examined to understand the development of the phenomenon (Tight, 2019). A comparative case study approach was used to explore the parallels and divergences between the two experiences. It emphasizes discerning connections and patterns across different contexts, unlike conventional methods that treat cases as separate. This encourages the discovery and deeper comprehension of a phenomenon and how ideas and policies transform across different settings (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). In this study, their communication styles during the campaign were also studied. It also employed thematic analysis, which Ahmed et al. (2025) described as a popular approach to qualitative research. This offers an adaptable approach for identifying and comprehending patterns.

The themes revealed in Binay and Widodo's experiences were being an outsider, perceived genuineness, and populist messaging with a pro-poor and reform intent. It demonstrates how local leaders used track records and relational messaging to accumulate electoral support in the context of developing states.

Findings and Discussion
Local governance leadership

Both Joko Widodo (Jokowi) and Jejomar Binay ascended to national prominence through their leadership of major urban centers adjacent to or encompassing their countries' capitals - Jokowi as Governor of Jakarta and Binay as Mayor of Makati. Jokowi and Binay served as local government leaders before ascending to the national leadership. Their leadership experiences and efforts to implement pro-poor and reformist policies enabled them to bolster their reputations as pragmatic officials. Jokowi's term in Solo was known for citizen engagement and improvements to government services. When it became known, he had a high chance of Jakarta's governorship. Similarly, Binay's tenure in Makati presided over welfare programs and infrastructure development for roads and schools. He also showed his willingness to interact with low-income people, which may have endeared him to them.

Populist Messaging

Both leaders employed populist strategies, positioning themselves as champions of the common people against the entrenched elites.

Owing to their humble backgrounds, both men employed pro-poor populist communication during their campaigns. Jokowi and Binay communicated to their local and national audiences about their efforts as people who rose through sheer hard work. As they did not belong to the national political scene, they took advantage of their reputation as outsiders. This messaging may have taken advantage of people's dissatisfaction with the previous administration and alleged failures of the elites.

Culturally Appropriate Decisions and Actions

Jokowi and Binay were willing to learn about the local culture and nuances during public interactions. Jokowi's campaign approach was direct and informal because of the blusukan, which enabled him to engage with ordinary people and convey authenticity. Before he campaigned, Binay also did this when he was Mayor, where he would jog early in the morning and eat with ordinary people in carinderias (small eateries in the Philippines), as he spoke with them. Their approach may resonate culturally with the audience.

Participatory Governance

Jokowi's and Binay's campaigns are known to engage people frequently. Jokowi's blusukan not only made for appealing media coverage but fostered a sense of participatory approach to governance. He listened to people's concerns: Binay's approach was similar; he reached out to the poor and built local networks with local governments in rural areas. Their ability to organize grassroots support proved vital in their campaigns, since their fellow candidates had more available resources.

Urban Governance Experience Near or in the Capital City

The significance of having led an urban polity (like Jakarta and Makati) near or in the national capital is advantageous. Both Jakarta and Makati serve as important cities that provide leaders with better access to national media and opportunities to address governance challenges. These local executive experiences allowed Jokowi and Binay to showcase tangible achievements and persuasively appeal to national audiences for their readiness to shoulder the national leadership. Their track records became exhibits of the policies they promised to implement nationwide.

In summary, the electoral triumphs of Binay in 2010 and Widodo in 2014 illustrate the tension between the outsider populist campaign approach and existing institutional restraints in developing democracies. Both local leaders employed their local experiences to marshal voter support against elite-led structures, reflecting the populism's anti-establishment allure. However, their campaign approaches may be at odds with the existing checks and balances.

Binay's 2010 vice presidential campaign mobilized support from many local political networks (Hofileña & Go, 2011). His ascendance from the third to leading vice-presidential candidate in 2010 demonstrated the importance of network cultivation, which gave him alliances and resources. There were grassroots efforts to use personal relationships with many Filipino local government leaders to win. His approach is not a full-blown populist, but it shares some characteristics, such as personally engaging people and framing himself as an outsider, challenging the status quo (Tordesillas & YOUTHVOTEPHILIPPINES, 2010). Certainly, their support is helpful, but they may also require accommodation and restrained policies. This case underscores how populist leaders, or those with an outsider populist image, must be able to balance different campaign modes with the realities of a delicate democratic setting, like the Philippines.

Binay's success in the 2010 Philippine national polls reflected a strong personal appeal, an approachable reputation, and the electoral

dynamics. Hofileña and Go (2011) stated that he interacted with many people personally, even in localities that were not vote-rich. He once visited the island province of Palawan without informing the local governments. He went to a public market, met people, and then ate carinderia. He ensured that he had good links with many elected officials from 379 towns with a sister city program with Makati. He participated in the capacity development for these localities, presenting Makati as a model worth emulating. Eventually, his relations with them became like "pare" (close buddies) (Hofileña & Go, 2011, p.168). In addition, the Philippines is known to have a weak, highly fluid multiparty system in which allegiances can easily change (Perdana et al., 2024; Teehankee, 2020). Furthermore, high voter participation that supported him from urban places, in Luzon, enhanced his advantages over his rival, Manuel "Mar" Roxas. Binay was the first official to ascend directly from a local position to the Philippines' second highest office (Chavez & Pulumbarit, 2016). Thus, all these factors may have enabled him to secure victory.

Widodo's 2014 presidential campaign reflected moderate outsider populism with a technocratic approach. It balances popular allures with institutional practicality. Harnessing his image as a reformist leader, he obtained broad support from the Indonesian electorate by underscoring inclusivity and pragmatic policies, while avoiding divisive language against other groups (Hatherell & Welsh, 2019). His 2014 election victory featured a blend of charisma and structural dynamics. His story strongly resonated with low-income groups and the middle class because his blusukan (impromptu visits) and outsider images were communicated by social media. When he was forming his first administration's cabinet, he reluctantly proceeded with alliance-building with the elites and some influential parties such as the PDI-P and the People's Consultative Assembly (Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat), Indonesia's national legislature (Aspinall

& Mietzner, 2014). While populism has disruptive potential, an outsider, moderate form can work around institutional limits, which is good for policies.

Conclusion

Jokowi and Binay's triumphs underscore the potential of local leadership experience in an urban center, the pro-poor messaging, and engaging people in a direct, informal way publicly. Their campaigns responded to the prevalent public disillusionment with the traditional elites. They also leverage track records to entice voters. However, after assuming office, they struggled with populist appeals and institutional establishment. Existing elite-driven patronage structures can restrain any leader and their policies. However, Binay cultivated many partnerships at the local level, and Widodo's engagement with influential parties enabled him to navigate the existing political-administrative framework. Popularity helps an official; however, it cannot remove structural obstacles. Cooperation and compromise with political realities can be more beneficial. Indonesia and the Philippines' political contexts may differ, but these experiences show how local leadership, communication, and awareness of cultural nuances can help win political offices.

Based on the discussions above, the following policy options are offered for future governance and election campaigns, which may be useful for both developed and developing countries.

1. Streamline bureaucracy to prioritize reforms that make government services more effective, efficient, and transparent.
2. Promote citizen engagement to ensure that government policies reflect citizens' needs and build trust.
3. Promote local innovation to facilitate policy adaptation at the national level.
4. The pro-poor, reform, authentic messaging, and a person's humble background and achievements can go a long way.

5. Populist messaging should be combined with a moderate language. Blend digital and grassroots engagements with people to expand outreach. Showcase the candidate's governance track record as evidence of leadership competence.

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