

Exploring Plebiscitary Leader Democracy and Its Adaptability in the Modern Society

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Abstract: With the emergence of plebiscitary leadership worldwide, research concerning the practice of plebiscitary leader democracy has caught political scientists' attention. The research has mainly focused on the threats posed on modern democracy by plebiscitary leader democracy. To address the concerns over this threat, this paper explores the adaptability of plebiscitary leader democracy in modern society. This paper adopts literature research and historical analysis as its research methods and mainly uses Google Scholar as a platform to gather research works from the year 2010 to 2023, through which "plebiscitary leader democracy", "direct democracy" and "plebiscitary leadership" are used as keywords. This paper analyzed more than 15 research papers to conduct analysis and concludes that the adaptability of plebiscitary leader democracy in the modern world is a weak one mainly for two reasons - one is that plebiscitary leader democracy cannot adequately and truly represent people's will through direct democracy as it claims, the other is that the strong plebiscitary leadership opens the possibility to the personalization, centralization, and discretion of power.

Keywords: plebiscitary leader democracy, liberal democracy, people's will, the discretion of power

1. Introduction

The present-day has been a witness of the rise of plebiscitary leadership and similar leadership styles, which raised a wave of research on the practice of plebiscitary leader democracy (PLD) in the modern world. Unlike PLD's original sense proposed by Max Weber and his successor of Carl Schmitt, the common contemporary usage of the term is mainly a pejorative one and is to a great extent connected to anti-democracy such as authoritarianism and populism. This contrast calls for a need to explore the practice of PLD in the modern democracy. The argument of this paper shall seek to develop is the adaptability of PLD in the modern society, which is expected to help answer the question of the compatibility between PLD and a modern democracy. Contemporary political scholars have been proposed to explain the incompatibility between PLD and democracy, which mainly focuses on the potential consequences of the practice of PLD or similar leadership styles that emphasize direct popular participation and unchecked leadership. Although these research cover a wide variety of aspects and criticisms vary among political scientists who hold different views, their major conclusions center on PLD's threats posed on democratic values such as its tendency to authoritarianism and populism. For instance, Juan J. Linz argued that leaders who rely

on direct democracy and exert unchecked concentration of power can undermine democratic institutions and weaken checks and balances [1]. Nancy Bermeo examined the risks associated with political leaders who rely on direct popular support, claiming that such leadership can undermine democratic institutions and create an environment that is prone to authoritarian tendencies [2]. Cas Mudde has written extensively on the threats of leaders who emphasize direct popular participation, arguing that they can exploit divisions in a society, exclude marginalized groups, and consolidate power in an undemocratic manner [3]. These research, however, either pay attention to PLD's original claim to adequately represent people's will based on direct democracy, or the consequences caused by the strong plebiscitary leadership. The interrelation between the personalization, centralization, and discretion of plebiscitary leaders' power regarding PLD's conduct in the modern society has been understated. In order to enrich the exploration of PLD's adaptability in the modern society, this paper will focus individually on two major characteristics of PLD that emerge repeatedly throughout the literature reviewed - the representation of people's will and the potential risks of the strong power held in the hand of plebiscitary leaders. For the latter, this paper shall try to understand the correlation between the personalization, centralization and discretion of plebiscitary leaders' power. The paper is organized by two parts: (i) an overview of the concept of PLD in its contemporary interpretation and in its original sense; (ii) the adaptability of PLD in the modern society with concerns of representation of people's will based on direct democracy and the personalization, centralization and discretion of plebiscitary leaders' power.

2. The Concept of Plebiscitary Leadership Democracy

The etymology of "plebiscite" means "the decision of people" which implies that the PLD is linked to a society where people plays a direct and meaningful role in political decision-making process. However, as a political concept, PLD is yet to mature, it's hard for one to find an ordered and unified definition of it. It's more understood as a suggestive and descriptive term to characterize certain political systems or leadership styles that emphasize direct popular participation and a strong executive role.

In contemporary political science, although PLD is not widely accepted, PLD and similar leadership styles have been analyzed by political scholars such as Juan J. Linz, Fareed Zakaria, Nancy Bermeo, Cas Mudde and so on. In most cases, PLD is regarded as a pejorative term subjected to criticisms from different perspectives. Among the critiques, one major concern is that the combination of a direct election based on plebiscites or referendum and strong political leadership can lead to democratic erosion such as a decline in checks and balances, a decrease in democratic accountability, potential risk for authoritarianism and a lead to populist leadership. However, this contemporary interpretation related to PLD is in contradiction with its earlier contributors in twentieth century, among whom the most significant ones were Max Weber and his successor Carl Schmitt. In the view of PLD's early proponents, PLD was considered as a suitable political structure that could help improve efficiency and represent people's will more adequately. Thus, it'll be helpful to understand PLD more comprehensively by returning to its original contributor's thoughts.

The political root of PLD can be traced back to the ancient form of direct democracy such as the Athenian model in Greece where citizens participated in decision-making process through assemblies and voting. However, it was until the twentieth century that PLD started prominently to emerge as a specific concept. The most important theorists were Max Weber and Carl Schmitt. Max Weber, a German political thinker, did not address the concept of PLD as it is understood today. However, in the case of PLD where the leader relies on direct popular support and emphasizes their personal appeal to govern, Weber's theories on legitimacy became relevant. Weber distinguished legitimacy as three types: traditional, charismatic and legal-rational. Charismatic legitimacy refers

to an individual who seems to have exceptional powers or properties such as personal magnetism, heroic leadership, or divine inspiration being selected as a political leader. In Weber's view, charismatic leaders can inspire loyalty and followership based on their extraordinary personal attributes and the belief in their mission. In terms of election institution, Weber was firstly convinced that such a leader was possible to emerge within a parliament. But from 1917 to 1919, Weber shifted this view and turned to believe that the parliament was incapable of selecting decisive leadership, especially in time of tensions, the national leader should be separated from the parliament and endowed with a separate power base [4]. According to Weber, the political leader should be elected on a plebiscitary basis. PLD draws on this idea, it emphasizes citizen's direct popular participation and a strong political leader who gains legitimacy through popular endorsement such as referendums or plebiscites. Another proponent of PLD is Carl Schmitt. Schmitt's advocacy of PLD started from his critiques on liberal parliamentary democracy. In accordance with Schmitt, liberal democracy bore at least two defects in the absence of strong political leadership. First, it was inefficient because political decisions were always hindered by the party politics or bureaucratic process. Second, a liberal parliamentary leader failed to adequately represent people's will. In order to address these two problems in liberal parliamentary democracy, Schmitt looked to PLD as a solution. Two specific characteristics in PLD had drawn Schmitt's attention, which were its strong political leadership and direct election system. Schmitt believed that a strong political leadership without the inhibitions from political parties and bureaucracy can actually make decision-making process more swift and effective. Further, a direct democracy has its emphasis on popular sovereignty, thus a political leader selected on such a system could embody people's will to the fullest extent. In a word, Schmitt believed that PLD can ensure an efficient, decisive governance and a more adequate representation of people's will by its combination of direct democracy and a strong leader [5].

3. PLD in the Modern Society

Plebiscitary leader democracy has been mainly used as a counter-liberal and negative term in contemporary politics to suggest a sham democracy in which popular decision making has become superficial, merely formal, and illusory. This pejorative term has called PLD's applicability in the modern society into question. General characteristics regarding the research of PLD's practice in the modern society mainly include the usage of mass media, the personalization of political power, the discretion of leadership, the creative power of the leader vis-à-vis public opinion and the popular will [6]. To be specific, these concerns rely on two potential risks that could render PLD an inapplicable one in the modern world - its capacity to represent people's will truly and adequately as it claims and the potential risks of plebiscitary leaders' power to threaten democracy in the contemporary society.

3.1. The Representation of People's Will

Plebiscitary leader democracy, characterized by direct popular participation and decision-making, is often associated with claims of a more adequate representation of people's will. As one of Weber's successors Joseph Schumpeter claimed, within a competitive election, citizens have the opportunity to select leaders who align with their preferences, and elected representatives act as "trustees" of the public interest [7]. However questions have been raised about PLD's capacity to represent people's will, which are the inadequacy of representation and the manipulation of people's will.

Firstly, Direct democracy could fail to represent people's will adequately in a heterogeneous society due to its homogeneous traits. Although the proponents of PLD did not clearly claim that direct democracy is impossible in all situations, some certain characteristics for its implementation

were inexplicably pointed out. First, the society to implement direct democracy is where the members have in common difficulty conceiving of others as supreme. For instance, according to the concrete examples given by Weber to exert direct democracy, such as the Swiss *Landesgemeinden*, certain American townships, certain groups of academics or associations of aristocrats, and certain religious sects, members are generally treated by one another as from equal social status [8]. Second, the electorate organization must be local, which means that the electorates within it and the electorates' social positions are supposed to be similar to each other [9]. The two characteristics imply that direct democracy should be implemented in a society that exhibits more homogeneous traits. While when it comes to a country which presents heterogeneity, these conditions are impossible to meet. Because in a heterogeneous society where people belong to various social groups and possess diverse backgrounds, values, and identities, the issues of social justice and equal voice are in relation to the inclusiveness of representation, to be specific, not only the major groups, but also the marginalized groups should be represented in decision-making bodies [10]. In a word, the election institution demands to be more inclusive. However, direct democracy with its emphasis on homogeneous interests, would fail to mirror the demographic diversity and characteristics of the society they serve, especially when it comes to the representation of minority groups. This would lead to an inadequate political representation. Even worse, in a heterogeneous society, direct democracy would cause a radical increase in the probability of oppressive minority rule [9].

Secondly, what is also a concern regarding PLD's capacity to represent people's will is that leaders can shape and even manipulate the majoritarian will. One major value of PLD's democratic institution is its efficiency to select strong political leadership. In other words, the democratic institution in PLD has less to do with the realization of democratic ideals such as freedom, equality, self-rule and the sovereignty of people [11]. As Weber claimed, plebiscitary democracy is a market place where robust charismatic leaders can be identified and elected. Plebiscite only serves as a form of legitimation underpinning the leader's authority, it gives no power to the governed masses [12]. The role of people in plebiscitary election is conceived as a means for selecting political leaders but not citizens of a regime where their self-rule should be achieved. As David Held mentioned when he analyzed Weber's envision on plebiscitary democracy, it provides little more than a way to establish qualified leadership in which people's political rights are actually confined [9]. In this sense, the electorate model of PLD is not based on the true public interests but on opinion and resolve [13]. This subordinate role of public interest in PLD encourages plebiscitary leaders to shape public opinion and majoritarian will instead of pursuing the authentic interest of people. Because for a politician who run for leadership, what comes as a priority is to produce—or, more cynically, manipulate—public support for themselves and their policies. As Kösösényi describes, the rivalry in leadership democracy determines that politicians can gain greater support by trying to manipulate the public and produce public preferences themselves [14].

3.2. The Plebiscitary Leadership's Power

A plebiscitary leader is someone who is deemed as being extraordinary by the masses. The modern society has been a witness of a growing emergence of plebiscitary leadership, from Donald Trump (the United States), Recep Tayyip Erdogan (Turkey), Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro (Venezuela), Rodrigo Duterte (Philippines) to Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil). As aforementioned, the concern over PLD's practice in the modern society resides in the powers held by the plebiscitary leaders. In the modern world, three major characteristics have stood out concerning plebiscitary leaders' possession of power.

The first concern regarding PLD's practice in the modern society is the personalization of power due to the media-based political market. Plebiscitary leaders are in particular dependent on appearance and the cultivation of images to garner public support. In the modern society, with the

proliferation of the mass medias from daily newspapers, radio, television, to the expansion of Internet and satellite transmissions, political leaders have been offered platforms where direct connection with the mass of ordinary citizens can be constructed without the interference of political parties or other governmental institutions. This media-based political marketing has a result that leaders are reasonably endowed with the right to bypass political parties and other branches. In liberal democracies, this implies that political leaders rely increasingly on the mass medias to win leadership than on the specific governmental institutions such as parliament or congress that are designed to hold the leaders accountable [15]. Because as Bernard Manin claimed, the use of the mass media such as television revitalizes the face-to-face character of representation, through which the individuality of leaders can be delivered to the mass saliently and vividly [16]. As a result, this usage of mass media leads to the personalization of power that enables leaders to be independent of other governmental institutions that act to restrict them.

The second concern is the centralization of powers in the hand of plebiscitary leaders. The conduct of PLD in the modern society opens a possibility to the centralization of powers. In a liberal democracy, this implies that the plebiscitary leadership could threaten the balance of powers among different governmental branches. One major value of liberal democracy resides in its emphasis on separation of powers, where political authorities are distributed and balanced among different branches of government to prevent the accumulation of powers in a single branch. In liberal democracy, such as the United States, the political leaders including the president is subject to constitutional limitations and the system of checks and balances. By remaining the president under the executive branch, the president is vested as the leader of the executive branch rather than the leader of the country or the government [17]. However, as aforementioned, the personalization of political power has enabled the leaders to escape the restrictions from other governmental institutions. And further, a plebiscitary leader is elected as a strong charismatic person who hide his legitimacy behind the will of people. In other words, a plebiscitary leader can bypass the conventions and even the constitutional rules when needing to get things done, especially when his action is in the name of people's interest [18].

Last but not least, the personalization and centralization of powers imply that the plebiscitary leaders' capacity to override other governmental institutions, which suggests the third concern that to a large extent a persistent worry looming over the practice of PLD in the modern society - the discretion of power. In liberal democracy, as mentioned above, the power of political leaders are restricted by separation of powers to maintain a balance, which is much an integral part in liberal society. According to Montesquieu, people would lose a sense of safety if powers of different governmental branches are held in one hand, as he claimed, separation of powers meant a tranquility of mind arising from the opinion each person has of his safety [19]. With a balance being disrupted by the strong plebiscitary leadership, a discretionary use of power is more likely to happen on a severe level in PLD. Because as Locke and Montesquieu also claimed, separation of power is essential to avoid usurpation and tyranny by the power holders. To clarify, the discretion of power does not only exist in PLD but also in any representative democracy, what is emphasized here is that, the discretion of power in PLD is not the same type as what is allowed to exist in modern representative states. According to Locke, the executive branch is assigned prerogative rights to determine specific questions that are generally within formal and constitutional laws [20]. Yet, the discretionary power in PLD exceeds this limit. Because plebiscitary leaders overrides any governmental branch, which means such a discretion is no longer within the executive branch but held by the individual leader. Thus, the leaders have their own wills to respond to a wide range of questions including policy-framing, agenda-defining, and decision-making. Then the further concern would be whether or not plebiscitary leaders would choose to use power to achieve their own interests which is an exhibition of usurpation and tyranny as Locke and Montesquieu

mentioned. While the possibility of leaders' tendency to abuse power is not total, it is extremely important. As Przeworski, Stokes, and Manin explained, it is inevitable that plebiscitary leaders take advantage of their office time to undertake and fulfill their own goals, interests and values [21].

4. Discussion

This research showed the major two defects of PLD's adaptability in the modern society - its unrepresentative of people's will and the personalization, centralization and potential discretion of power held by the plebiscitary leaders. This research is set in the context of a rising emergence of plebiscitary leadership across the world and the pejorative use of plebiscitary leader democracy in the modern politics. The contemporary studies on PLD have been mainly focusing on PLD's potential risks on modern democracy based on its electorate institution and strong plebiscitary leadership, such as a decline in checks and balances, a decrease in democratic accountability, potential risk for authoritarianism, a lead to populist leadership and so on. This study analyzed the adaptability of PLD in a modern society and found that PLD's practice in the modern world is a weak one. Because PLD cannot fulfill its claim to adequately and truly represent people's will through a direct democracy in a heterogeneous society, and further, the power held in the hand of plebiscitary leaders can lead to the discretionary use of power due to the personalization of power in a media-based political market and the centralization of power which enables the leader to override other governmental institutions. However, PLD's adaptability in the modern society deserves further attentions. Firstly, the possibility that PLD can adapt well in a modern society that presents more homogeneous traits exists, especially when it comes to the representation of people's will. And secondly, potential measures that can be implemented in a modern democracy to address the problems of personalization, centralization and discretion of powers are not explored in this paper. While these limitations have not impacted the primary outcome of the study, future work could seek to include PLD's adaptability in the modern societies that are more homogeneous. Further, measures to conquer the challenges from the strong power held by plebiscitary leaders are worthy of exploration.

5. Conclusions

As the plebiscitary leaders and similar plebiscitary leadership styles are increasingly emerging in the modern world, it is important to analyze how plebiscitary leader democracy with its emphasis on direct democracy and strong leadership is compatible with the modern world. In order to test PLD's adaptability in the modern society, this paper analyzed PLD's claim to represent people's will via direct democracy and the potential risks that could happen due to the strong power held by the plebiscitary leaders. This paper comes to a conclusion that the adaptability of PLD in the modern society is a weak one mainly because of two things - one is that PLD cannot fulfill its commitment to represent people's will in the modern society, which basically includes its inadequacy to represent people's will and the possibility to misinterpret people's will; the other is that, in the modern society the power held by the plebiscitary leaders can be personalized and centralized, which contribute to open a possibility for the discretionary use of power. This paper, however, did not analyze two things that deserve further studies. One is about PLD's adaptability in a modern society that exhibits more homogeneous features such as Japan, South Korea, Mongolia, Poland, German, Sweden and so on. PLD's adaptability in a society where people have a more shared language, race, religion and so on can differ from that of a heterogeneous one in terms of the implementation of direct democracy. First, members of a homogeneous society have less difficulty perceiving others as superior. And second, electorates' social positions are more likely to be similar. Thus, future research into PLD's adaptability in the modern society can focus on PLD's

compatibility with a more homogeneous society. The other is that this paper does not figure out whether there could be democratic measures to solve the incompatibility between plebiscitary leaders' use of power and the modern democracy. The rising emergence of plebiscitary leadership shows that people nowadays are pursuing charismatic leaders who can relate to them. This is calling any modern democracy not to ignore or deny plebiscitary leadership from the beginning but to navigate a way through which the actual existence of such leadership cannot disturb democratic values to the greatest extent. Therefore, how the contemporary democratic institutions can overcome plebiscitary leaders' personalization, centralization and discretion of power in its practice also deserves more attentions.

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