



PROJECT MUSE®

Pluralism, Polarization, and Political Voyeurism

Nicholas Kuipers

Journal of Democracy, Volume 37, Number 2, April 2026, pp. 106-120
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2026.a986023>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/986023>

PLURALISM, POLARIZATION, AND POLITICAL VOYEURISM

Nicholas Kuipers

*Nicholas Kuipers is assistant professor of politics at Princeton University. He is the author of *States Against Nations: Meritocracy, Patronage, and the Challenges of Bureaucratic Selection* (2025).*

On 27 December 2016, Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (known as “Ahok”) delivered a speech to a gathering of constituents in North Jakarta, Indonesia, imploring them not to be deceived by Islamic religious leaders who were using Koranic verse to call for his ouster. With his 2017 reelection campaign underway, Ahok had been dogged by his Christian faith—a fact that made him a religious minority in Indonesia, where nearly 90 percent of the population adheres to Islam. Doctored videos of his speech, made to appear heretical, later circulated online: Ahok was shown criticizing the text of the Koran itself, rather than the religious leaders interpreting it.¹ He was accused of blasphemy. Over the next several months, Jakarta was rocked by a series of massive and violent protests calling for his removal from office. More than a million protesters descended on the city. Ahok would go on to lose the election in a landslide and was later jailed for two years on the charge of blasphemy.²

At the time, activists and academics believed the protests to be a bellwether event heralding a rising tide of illiberalism in the world’s third most populous democracy. These predictions proved accurate. In the decade since, Indonesia has witnessed a steady erosion of its nascent liberal institutions. Former president Joko Widodo (2014–24), known as Jokowi, undertook a series of steps during his second term, which began in 2019, to defang Indonesia’s anticorruption agency, empower his family members, and neutralize political opposition.³ These moves, in part, led to the 2024 presidential-election victory of Jokowi’s former adversary turned hand-picked successor, Prabowo Subianto, a former commander of the Indonesian special forces who has been credibly accused of committing human-rights violations while serving under long-time military ruler Suharto (1967–98).⁴

With commentators more focused on the declining health of Indonesian democracy at the time of the 2016–17 anti-Ahok demonstrations, reports that an overwhelming majority of protesters had come from hundreds of miles away were largely overlooked. Simply put, most were not Ahok's constituents. One protester named Uje, who had traveled from a neighboring province, told local reporters that he was attending because "all of the religious followers are offended."⁵ For Uje and many others like him, the call to action transcended administrative boundaries. A prominent religious figure had even offered to pay for the transport of protesters coming from other provinces, recognizing that the cost could be onerous. "We are simply grateful that members of the Islamic community would be moved to action by their conscience," explained Ustadz Wijayanto, a well-known Islamic preacher.⁶ In anticipation of the massive surge of outsiders, the Indonesian Railway Company reportedly increased capacity on its Jakarta commuter lines.

The actions of the traveling protesters challenge conventional understandings of local governance. Why did they feel the need to involve themselves in the political affairs of a jurisdiction not their own? Since 2005, as part of a suite of decentralization reforms, Indonesian voters have been able to elect their local leaders and representatives. By vesting district governments with greater authority, it was thought that decentralization would neutralize polarization as local policies would better reflect geographic diversity in citizen preferences. One of the chief virtues of decentralization, after all, is that it is thought to diffuse conflict by allowing diverse communities to govern themselves.⁷ When the issues that animate polarized politics are settled locally, the zero-sum stakes of national politics should subside. Decentralization, in this view, transforms political competition from a winner-take-all struggle into a series of local compromises. But it is difficult to situate Ahok's political defenestration within this model of decentralization.

I argue that, under contemporary conditions, the same mechanisms that allow for a patchwork pluralism under decentralized governance may heighten polarization and thereby threaten democratic stability. Decentralized governance can indeed enable communities to enact policies that reflect their values. But those differences are now broadcast nationwide thanks to a centripetal information environment. Take one example: When the Indonesian province of Aceh passed *shari'a*-inspired legislation in 2014, it likely aligned with local preferences.⁸ Yet the move was viewed on social media by audiences in the Christian-majority province of North Sulawesi, on the other side of the country, as an assault on secularism. These dynamics are not unique to Indonesia: In the United States, consider how progressive criminal-justice reforms in San Francisco or Seattle become sources of moral outrage in conservative enclaves in Texas or Florida that are unaffected by the "soft-on-crime" decisions of West Coast liberals.

The policy diversity that decentralization fosters thus becomes fuel for national animus.

This dynamic depends on political voyeurism—a concern for other people’s politics that is enabled by instant communication, especially via social media⁹—which has become increasingly common in the digital era as access to information has gotten cheaper. Historically, citizens were attentive primarily to events in their own jurisdictions because it was too expensive to follow news in other places. Digital media has removed the challenges associated with sourcing information from distant locales, dissolving the informational insulation on which decentralization once relied. Citizens are now spectators of distant conflicts, increasingly invested in the politics of places they do not inhabit.

Decentralization in a Digital Era

The explicit purpose of decentralization as a governance reform is to reflect local diversity in public-policy preferences. In practice, much of the attention has gone toward decentralization’s effects on the provision of public goods. Wallace E. Oates, one of the chief architects of the theory of fiscal federalism, argued that efficiency in policymaking required allowing jurisdictions to tailor their “local public goods” to local preferences.¹⁰ This means that different communities may, depending on the weight they collectively place on the provision of, say, education versus public safety, make different decisions about how to direct their budget-constrained resources.

The evidence for this claim is ultimately mixed. Assessing a wave of decentralization reforms in mostly non-OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries in the 1980s and 1990s, made partially at the behest of multinational lenders such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, scholars concluded that the measures had largely fallen short of their promise.¹¹ There are at least several reasons for the lackluster performance of decentralization. For one, the Jeffersonian model of a citizenry more animated by politics practiced in small rather than large geographic units proved mostly untrue—in other words, the theorized gains in accountability rarely materialized. Moreover, by vesting considerable policymaking authority in local units with different levels of capacity, decentralization may have inadvertently exacerbated geographic inequalities. Regions with high capacity to design and execute well-tailored policies in line with local preferences flourished; forgotten regions succumbed to elite capture. After all, it is easier for small groups of elites to capture local governments than national ones. Consider the popular resistance to municipal-zoning reforms aimed at alleviating the housing shortage in the United States; counterintuitively, it has been higher-level government bodies, such as U.S. state legislatures, that have had to intervene to overrule

captured local governments to align policy with popular preferences.¹²

The other major justification for initiating decentralization concerns the need to mitigate conflict and the centrifugal tendencies of diversity in plural societies more broadly.

Digital media has dissolved the informational insulation on which decentralization once relied. Citizens are now spectators of distant conflicts, increasingly invested in the politics of places they do not inhabit.

In diverse societies especially, it can be productive to vest local jurisdictions—which tend to be more homogenous—with policymaking authority. It may be challenging for, say, religious communities to negotiate over the implementation of their preferred social policies at a national level. It is often impossible to “divide the dollar” on doctrine, after all, setting the stage for conflict when one side or the other’s preferred outcome is not achieved. Consider how hard it

would be for Islamists to agree to adopt just three of the five pillars of Islam, for example, or for Christian nationalists to compromise on four of the ten commandments. Much better instead to push the issue down to a lower level, where these groups may find unanimous support for all five pillars or all ten commandments.

While theoretically appealing, the evidence on this proposition is again mixed. A recent review of the literature found that “the positive effects of devolving political power to local institutions are not universal.”¹³ The nature of the relationship between decentralization and conflict is ultimately conditional. Its positive impact depends, for one, on the absence of regional or ethnic parties that may use their heightened stature under decentralization to further their secessionist ambitions.¹⁴ Where decentralization has enabled the redrawing of district boundaries, as it did in Indonesia, it has often exacerbated (rather than relieved) ethnic polarization, in turn inducing greater conflict.¹⁵

Scholarly studies of decentralization have, by and large, failed to consider the dynamics *among local governments* under decentralized governance.¹⁶ Much of the thinking on the logic of decentralization views citizens as informationally siloed and focused narrowly on their local circumstances. But this is plainly erroneous: Humans are both nosy and jealous, such that citizens in one jurisdiction are attuned to the goings-on in the next. This *translocal* curiosity is, in fact, likely a corollary of an entrenched and widespread national identity. Political voyeurism thrives when people believe they will be affected by the actions of members of their “imagined community,” even those who live a thousand miles away. The modern Indonesian who hops on a train to protest in another province after receiving a WhatsApp alert exemplifies this: The reach of social media invites a new form of censoriousness

that fuels moral comparison across space. In this sense, decentralization multiplies citizens' lines of sight and invites them to criticize one another across local boundaries.

There is a certain irony to the claim that the logic of decentralization has been subverted by information. Canonical theories of decentralization hold that its promise lies partially in voters being better equipped to hold smaller units of government accountable, owing to their ability to source information about local affairs more easily than events unfolding in, say, a national capital. As Erik Wibbels writes,

Given citizens' difficulty in getting good, timely information on everything from the behavior of their politicians to the hours and drug stocks at local health clinics, cell-phone-based ICT [information and communication technology] offers huge potential. . . . Such information is obviously crucial for citizens' capacity to hold local officials accountable for their performance.¹⁷

It is indisputable that the arrival of social media has lowered the cost of information. But it also seems likely that it has reoriented citizens' attention. In Indonesia, the United States, and indeed across the democratic world, politics has become increasingly nationalized. Mayoral and local elections are now simply another canvas on which national debates can unfold, and digital media is in no small part to blame. Platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube eliminate information frictions, meaning that news of events which once would have remained local now circulates widely. In this context, decentralization has not produced quiet laboratories of democracy, but instead has generated highly visible, and nationally charged, experiments that citizens across any given country can monitor and react to in real time.

This new digital environment has altered incentives for both citizens and elites. For citizens inundated with attention-grabbing, rage-inducing online content, distant policies that may seem aberrant given one's own preferences and local context have become more salient than nearby events. It is plausible in today's media environment that residents of North Sulawesi will encounter viral clips of a public caning thousands of miles away in Aceh before hearing about a plan to build a new school or market in their own community. Meanwhile, for elites, the broad reach of social media has created a powerful incentive to spotlight ideological contrasts across jurisdictions. A policy enacted in another province becomes a useful foil: evidence of creeping illiberalism, moral decay, or religious extremism. This logic rewards politicians who amplify rather than manage differences.

Underpinning this logic is the idea that people are often especially attuned to—and aggrieved by—events and episodes that are ideologically at odds with their own preferred policy. This tendency may become more pronounced under decentralized governance. According to the standard

Tiebout model¹⁸ of decentralization, dissatisfied citizens may “vote with their feet” and move to jurisdictions whose policies align with their preferences, creating clusters of likeminded voters. Where citizens are ideologically homogeneous, leaders face little pressure to moderate. Thus, over time, this sorting produces “spiky” distributions of policy. Unlike in centralized systems, where policy theoretically reflects the national median preference, in decentralized systems the preferences of the local median voter are more likely to prevail, creating sharper contrasts across regions.

Call this decentralization’s double movement: Decentralization may lower the stakes of politics but also polarize them. Indonesia illustrates this point vividly. Take the example of Ahok. Ahok, a Christian in a Muslim-majority country, had been Jokowi’s deputy governor in Jakarta. When Jokowi won the presidency in 2014, Ahok assumed the governorship and thus held that position as a result of political processes theoretically accountable to the capital city’s highly educated and thus cosmopolitan and tolerant population. To make matters concrete: A September 2021 survey found that only 23.7 percent of respondents in Jakarta would be “upset” if a member of a religion other than theirs became governor. It is hard to imagine Ahok’s success in electoral politics were he to run for office in Aceh, a province on the northern tip of the island of Sumatra, where the population is highly devout and *shari‘a* is practiced—and where the same survey revealed that 100 percent of respondents would be “upset” if a member of another religion became governor.¹⁹ These locally divergent political outcomes reflect the diversity of geographically concentrated preferences in Indonesia.

Indonesia’s Experiment in Decentralized Democracy

Indonesia’s experiment with decentralization is one of the most ambitious governance reforms undertaken in the developing world in the modern democratic era. Following the fall of Suharto’s authoritarian regime in 1998, decentralization became a central pillar of the country’s democratic-reform agenda known as *reformasi*. Reformers saw local empowerment as a mechanism for satisfying diverse goals. For many, it was a means of deepening the roots of democratization and safeguarding against renewed authoritarianism. A “Big Bang” package of reforms enacted in 2001 transferred extensive administrative, fiscal, and political authority from Jakarta to the districts and municipalities across the archipelago, which now number 514.

Beyond shoring up Indonesia’s democracy, the auxiliary objectives of the reform were twofold. First, decentralization aimed to improve governance by bringing decisionmaking closer to citizens. In this regard, it built on the premises of the theoretical literature described above. Second, reformers sought to stabilize a multiethnic and religiously diverse country by giving regions a sense of ownership over their political and

economic futures. At the time, Indonesia was coming out of a bloody conflict in East Timor (now Timor-Leste, which gained independence in 2002) and in the throes of managing secessionist conflicts in Aceh, Maluku, Central Sulawesi, and Papua (then Irian Jaya) that had become enflamed at the moment of democratization.²⁰ By allowing communities to tailor policies to local conditions, reformers hoped to reduce the potential for regional grievances to escalate into national conflicts.²¹

In many respects, these reforms succeeded. Indonesia did not disintegrate. Local elections introduced new avenues for political participation, increased accountability, and made it possible for leaders to rise through subnational political systems that were previously closed to everyone but regime insiders. But decentralization also reshaped Indonesia's political landscape in ways that set the stage for the paradox explored here. By dispersing authority, the reforms created hundreds of arenas of political contestation, each with its own moral and cultural identity.²² This fragmentation made Indonesian politics more locally responsive but also more varied, producing striking differences in policy outcomes across regions.²³ Some provinces, such as Aceh after the 2005 peace agreement, used their autonomy to adopt *shari'a*-inspired regulations, reflecting local demands for moral governance. Others, such as Bali and North Sulawesi, embraced pluralism and tourism-friendly liberalism. The result is a patchwork political order where citizens' daily experiences of democracy diverge dramatically depending on geography.

This diversity also generates the conditions for the "double movement." In a centripetal information environment, local variation no longer remains local. Local policy choices that were once insulated within their jurisdictions now travel instantly across the archipelago through digital media, reframed as national moral conflicts often detached from their original context. Indonesia's post-Suharto decentralization thus provides a natural laboratory for understanding how the benefits of local autonomy can, with today's communication technology, contribute to the very polarization it was meant to defuse.

Concern over Other People's Politics

To what extent do these dynamics accurately characterize the politics of decentralized democracies around the world today, and what can they tell us about the trends of deepening polarization and democratic erosion currently wreaking havoc in liberal democracies everywhere? Starting in December 2024, in the aftermath of Indonesia's national and local elections, I began to collect survey evidence on the extent to which Indonesians concerned themselves with other peoples' politics as part of a broader SIKAP initiative that fielded weekly surveys of Indonesian voters between 2023 and 2025.²⁴

We asked respondents how upset they would be if a member of another religion became mayor of a *different district than their own*. This question has several advantages. For one, religion is the most salient cleavage in Indonesian politics, meaning it captures the axis along which grievances are most likely to manifest. But more important, it dovetails nicely with a standard question used to capture a baseline measure of intolerance that was also included in the survey: How upset would you be if someone of a different religion became mayor of *your own town*? Comparing one measure to the other allows me to characterize the extent to which a concern over other people's politics captures behavior above and beyond standard measures of religious intolerance, which is sadly endemic in Indonesia.

To start, I created a measure of partisan polarization by asking respondents to rate on a scale of 1 to 5 how much they liked or disliked supporters of different prominent parties in Indonesia, normalizing those responses by subtracting the median value, and then constructing a measure for each respondent that represents the standardized extreme value (z-score). From this value, I infer the degree of respondents' partisan polarization: If someone strongly likes one party and strongly dislikes the rest, their score will be high. If, by contrast, a respondent is neutral, their score will be low.

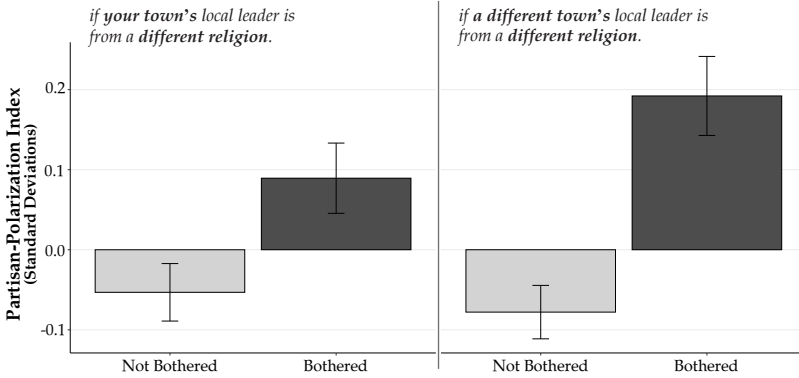
Using this index, Figure 1 plots the level of partisan polarization among 1) individuals who are not bothered by the prospect of having a mayor of a different religion versus those who are bothered, and 2) individuals who are not bothered by the prospect of someone of a different religion becoming mayor of another town versus those who are. If concern about other jurisdictions' politics is indeed deepening polarization, we would expect to see greater partisan polarization among those who are upset by the possibility of an outgroup mayor in a different town than among those who are concerned about the same possibility in their own town. If, by contrast, decentralization and the variation it occasions is a release valve for the centrifugal forces of religious and ethnic diversity, we would expect to see lower levels of polarization among those bothered by outgroup mayors in districts other than their own.

The results are stark. Figure 1 shows, predictably, that people unbothered by a mayor of a different religion in either their own town or elsewhere are equivalently depolarized. But, among those who are bothered by such a prospect, partisan polarization is nearly twice as high among those bothered by an outgroup mayor in a different town than those bothered by one in their own. It is worth dwelling on this finding for a moment. The express purpose of decentralization is to enable local communities' peculiar characteristics to manifest in policy and politics; yet, for a subset of Indonesians, this diversity is objectionable.

This difference operates on what economists might call the "intensive margin": Among those who are bothered by an outgroup mayor,

FIGURE 1—PARTISAN POLARIZATION AMONG INDONESIAN VOTERS

by reaction to a person of a different religion becoming mayor of one's own town or a different town:



Source: Data are from Nicholas Kuipers and Nathanael Gratias Sumaktoyo, “Introducing SIKAP: A Harmonized Dataset of 58 Weekly Surveys of Indonesian Voters,” *Journal of East Asian Studies*, published online 26 February 2026, 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1017/jea.2025.10022>.

Note: Partisan-polarization index captures the extremity of sentiment toward supporters of different prominent political parties in Indonesia.

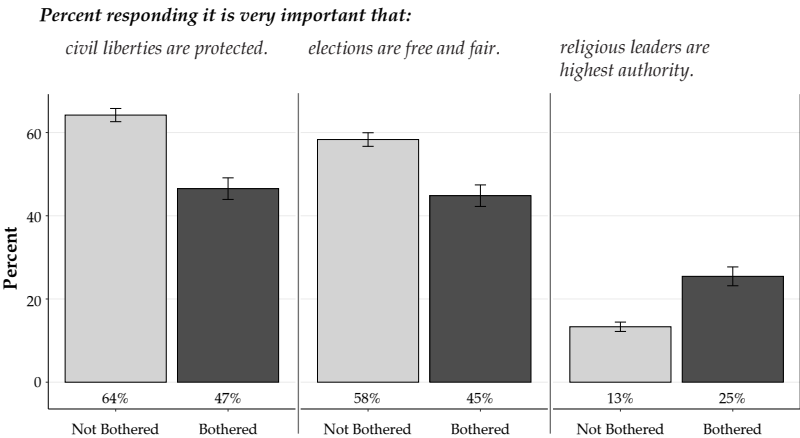
the degree of their polarization varies depending on whether the mayor is local or in another town. This finding makes sense. A citizen who cares about what is happening elsewhere may be unusually animated by politics and thus polarized. But skeptics may wonder if this subset of individuals is exceptionally small, such that champions of decentralization may credibly dismiss the concern as small in magnitude. And indeed, the share of political voyeurs among the respondents was smaller than the share of those who were more concerned about religious outgroups holding elected office in their own town—28.8 percent versus 35.5 percent.

A natural next question is the extent to which the political voyeurs harbor attitudes corrosive to democratic stability more broadly. To find the answer, we asked survey respondents to indicate how important for democracy they believed it was for 1) civil liberties to be protected, 2) elections to be free and fair, and 3) religious leaders to be the highest authority on matters of policy. Here again, I correlate the responses to these questions according to the extent to which respondents were bothered by someone of a different religion becoming mayor of a different town.

As Figure 2 shows, the results paint a clear and systematic portrait: Political voyeurs hold significantly more illiberal attitudes than those of their more locally attuned peers. Among the bothered, 47 percent and 45 percent, respectively, said that civil liberties protections and free and fair elections were “very important” for democracy—substantially less than the 64 percent and 58 percent of the unbothered who considered

FIGURE 2—IMPORTANCE OF DIFFERENT FACTORS IN THE UNDERSTANDING OF DEMOCRACY

...by reaction if a person of a different religion were to become mayor of a different town



Source: Data are from Nicholas Kuipers and Nathanael Gratias Sumaktoyo, “Introducing SIKAP: A Harmonized Dataset of 58 Weekly Surveys of Indonesian Voters,” *Journal of East Asian Studies*, published online 26 February 2026, 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1017/jea.2025.10022>.

the same institutions to be “very important.” Meanwhile, nearly twice as many political voyeurs as their more locally focused counterparts said that religious leaders ought to be the highest authority on policy matters.

Whither Decentralization in the Digital Era?

Political scientists have grown accustomed to championing greater access to information, and the supposed transparency that comes with it, as a matter of absolute normative preference. These arguments seem especially attractive in an age of increasing authoritarianism. Secrecy, obscurantism, and lies are the hallmarks of autocratic regimes to which transparency would appear to be the antidote.

But the philosopher C. Thi Nguyen has provocatively and persuasively argued that “transparency is surveillance.”²⁵ Nguyen is building on the prior work of British philosopher and politician Onora O’Neill, who argued in 2002 that “transparency can encourage people to be less honest.”²⁶ When policymakers know that their justifications for highly technical actions will be heavily scrutinized by a nonexpert public, they concoct simplistic explanations that amount to deception. Nguyen pushes the idea further, suggesting that transparency may distort not only public statements but also political action: “Transparency asks us to operate according to principles and policies that we can make explicit to the public. But real expertise involves going beyond such explicit

principles.”²⁷ Take, for one example, scientists’ obscuring evidence that supported the “lab leak” theory about covid-19, fearing it would fuel anti-Chinese sentiment.²⁸

It is worth asking whether more information—in this case, especially about *other people’s politics*—is always good for democratic resilience. Economists frequently like to point out that the optimal amount of a good thing typically falls short of its total achievement; in the context of opportunity costs and trade-offs, it may be profitable to moderate the attainment of some desiderata. In other words, local governance may hold the potential to save democracies from themselves, and its health surely depends on citizens possessing some level of information—although that level may not be absolute. Citizens and elites alike may need to train themselves in the unnatural exercise of sometimes looking away.

But how, then, are scholars and policymakers to go about achieving this goal? The problem plainly arises from a media environment in which the spectacle of gawking at other people’s affairs draws clicks and thus revenue. Much of the attention on solutions, predictably, has focused on the *supply* of information. Prominent activists and policymakers have called for regulation of the social-media algorithms that fuel the outrage and animosity that both corrode politics and drive Silicon Valley’s increasingly absurd profits. This seems sensible, but the political appetite in most countries for such policy seems low in the context of populations addicted to these platforms. Better to focus our attention on solutions whose horizons seem brighter.

Another solution on the supply-side of information would be to invest in the hollowed-out landscape of local media outlets. Over the past thirty years, the number of local newspapers and radio stations in Indonesia and elsewhere has dropped precipitously. Research conducted by Lembaga Survei Indonesia found that, in March 2003, about 35 percent of Indonesians read a newspaper at least weekly, most of which were local; by October 2024, that figure had fallen to less than 3 percent. This trend mirrors an analogous drop in the United States, and indeed across the world.²⁹ Government subsidies could certainly defray the countervailing costs that undermine the economies of scale that work against the profitability of local news outlets covering small geographic areas. But this fails to grapple with the fact that local news has declined not because of some corporate conspiracy against it but because consumers turned their attention elsewhere. Preferences are sovereign, and demand for local news simply collapsed.

This last observation nicely frames the root of the problem outlined in this essay as one concerning the *demand for information*. Sometime in the last thirty years, large numbers of citizens across the world shifted their political frames of reference—the stage on which they believe the daily dramas of civic life to be unfolding—from the local to the na-

tional or even the international. This has, of course, induced greater demand for national or international news and called upon local leaders to

It is worth asking whether more information—in this case, especially about other people’s politics—is always good for democratic resilience.

stake out positions far beyond their remit. Think, for a moment, about the strange spectacle of asking New York City mayoral candidates to articulate a position on the justness of Israel’s war in Gaza when their most pressing policy portfolio would be, quite literally, garbage collection. This same dynamic has also turned citizens’ gazes to their neighbors and the faraway corners of the increasingly expansive political unit they believe to be their own. It is a great irony of the timing of the recent experiments in decentraliza-

tion that at the precise moment when governance underwent a centripetal transformation, our collective information environment underwent a centrifugal one.

So what, then, should concerned policymakers do? My impulses are those of an academic, and thus mostly impractical. Curtailing some of the sunshine laws that provide informational grist to the voyeurism mill might be one avenue, and I suspect politicians would be more than happy to oblige this proposal. But the costs in terms of enabling further corruption in a country such as Indonesia, where corruption is endemic, would be jaw dropping. Another possibility would be to massively ratchet up the stakes of local politics in a bid to divert citizens’ attention away from distant locales and toward what is right in front of them. In Indonesia, approximately 40 percent of total government spending takes place at the local level, meaning that there is still room to capture further budget share. Even policy issues such as education, whose costs or benefits accrue to specific localities, are managed at the provincial level in Indonesia, suggesting some scope for the further devolution of authority. But the politics of this pitch are obviously tricky: Calling for the deepening of a policy as a means of saving it from its own failures may not be persuasive to skeptical voters and policymakers.

To solve the problems of decentralization and polarization, we must recognize that at their core is a discursive and informational crisis for which an effective response is not likely to be found in the modern cookbook of technical policy. The good news is this: There is precedent for a path forward. One interpretation of the rise of liberalism in the seventeenth century is that its emergence was a reaction to the disruptive spread of information made possible by the printing press, which had fostered a new culture of individualism, as the media theorist Marshall McLuhan argued.³⁰ This informational revolution, in turn, ushered in the Protestant Reformation as parishioners discovered they could access

the word of God directly should they desire—a transformation that disrupted the monopoly on religious doctrine held by the Catholic Church. Predictably, rulers whose mandate depended on divine right sought to enforce religious uniformity, but these actions were met with conflict and resistance. Early liberal thinkers responded by arguing that the state must relinquish its authority over individual conscience and instead secure a framework of toleration in which diverse religious communities could coexist.

On the presidential campaign trail in 2014, Jokowi called for a *revolusi mental*—a mental revolution—to deal with corruption in Indonesia. My sense is that the locution was typically received with a collective eyeroll: Why should Indonesians undertake the hard work of a mental revolution when the price of a kilogram of rice had doubled? But I wonder if there is not a logic in calling for such a mental revolution in the face of citizens' perverse demand for the sort of information that corrodes rather than sustains local democracy. And what were the seeds of liberalism in the seventeenth century in the first place if not a mental revolution? Like then, our contemporary challenges have also been conjured by changes in the structure and flow of information. These challenges thus similarly call upon us to imagine a new mental framework to manage not only vertical encroachment by state power into private lives (the problems to which liberalism responded have not disappeared, after all), but also a method for reckoning with a new horizontal movement in which distinct and decentralized public spheres crash into one another.

NOTES

1. In the actual event, at a campaign stop in Kepulauan Seribu, Ahok was addressing supporters telling them not to be “deceived by religious leaders using Al Maidah 51 [a passage from the Koran].” See Herianto Batubara, “Ini Video Utuh Ahok Pidato Singgung Surat Al Maidah 51 yang Jadi Polemik,” *detikNews*, 7 October 2016, <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-3315258/ini-video-utuh-ahok-pidato-singgung-surat-al-maidah-51-yang-jadi-polemik>.

2. For a discussion of these and other events characterizing Indonesia's democratic decline, see Edward Aspinall and Marcus Mietzner, “Southeast Asia's Troubling Elections: Nondemocratic Pluralism in Indonesia,” *Journal of Democracy* 30 (October 2019): 104–18.

3. See, *inter alia*, Thomas P. Power, “Jokowi's Authoritarian Turn and Indonesia's Democratic Decline,” *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* 54, no. 3 (2018): 307–38. For a review of the past decade, see Sana Jaffrey, and Eve Warburton, *The Jokowi Presidency: Indonesia's Decade of Authoritarian Revival*, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2025.

4. Dan Slater, “Indonesia's High-Stakes Handover,” *Journal of Democracy* 35 (April 2024): 40–51.

5. Yenni Kwok, “Thousands of Hard-Line Muslims Rally Against Jakarta's Governor for Alleged Blasphemy,” *Time*, 4 November 2016, <https://time.com/4558113/jakarta-blasphemy-protest-basukil>.

6. Vania Aldida, "Ustadz Wijayanto Appreciates 212 Peace Action Participants" (in Indonesian), *Okezone News*, 2 December 2016, <https://celebrity.okezone.com/read/2016/12/02/33/1557439/ustadz-wijayanto-apresiasi-peserta-aksi-damai-212>.

7. Jan H. Pierskalla and Audrey Sacks, "Unpacking the Effect of Decentralized Governance on Routine Violence: Lessons from Indonesia," *World Development* 90 (February 2017): 213–28.

8. Amnesty International, "Urgent Action: Shari'a Bylaw Passed by the Aceh Parliament," UA 238/14, Index: ASA 21/029/2014, 3 October 2014, <https://www.amnesty.org/fr/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/asa210292014en-1.pdf>.

9. See Nicholas Kuipers and Tyler Simko, "Political Voyeurism," unpubl. ms., 29 January 2026, <https://osf.io/zp7sb/files/trh4s>.

10. Wallace E. Oates, "An Essay on Fiscal Federalism," *Journal of Economic Literature* 37, no. 3 (1999): 1120–49.

11. Daniel Treisman, *The Architecture of Government: Rethinking Political Decentralization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

12. The California state legislature's passage of SB79 overruling local regulation in housing is one example. See also Alexander Sahn, "Public Comment and Public Policy," *American Journal of Political Science* (April 2025): 685–700.

13. Fotini Christia, "Decentralisation in Post-Conflict Settings," in Jonathan Rodden and Erik Wibbels, eds., *Decentralized Governance and Accountability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 205–28.

14. Dawn Brancati, *Peace by Design: Managing Intrastate Conflict Through Decentralization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

15. Samuel Bazzi and Matthew Gudgeon, "The Political Boundaries of Ethnic Divisions," *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 13 (January 2021): 235–66.

16. One exception in the context of distributive politics comes from Thad Dunning, who points out that "devolving governance to homogenous local entities could also exacerbate distributive conflicts *between* communities in an otherwise heterogeneous society"; Dunning, "Decentralization and Ethnic Diversity," in Rodden and Wibbels, eds., *Decentralized Governance and Accountability*, 248–72.

17. Erik Wibbels, "The Social Underpinnings of Decentralized Governance," in Rodden and Wibbels, eds., *Decentralized Governance and Accountability*, 297–324.

18. See Charles M. Tiebout, "A Pure Theory of Local Expenditures," *Journal of Political Economy* 64 (October 1956): 416–24.

19. Saiful Mujani Research and Consulting (SMRC), "Survey on Public Perceptions of President Joko Widodo's Leadership and Economic Crisis Response in Indonesia," 15–21 September 2021, <https://saifulmujani.com/evaluasi-publik-nasional-2-tahun-kinerja-presiden-jokowi/>.

20. For a scholarly reference on these conflicts, see Gerry Van Klinken, *Communal Violence and Democratization in Indonesia: Small Town Wars* (London: Routledge, 2007). Sydney Jones and the team at the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict have frequent on-the-ground reporting from this time, as well.

21. Michael Buehler, "Decentralisation and Local Democracy in Indonesia: The Marginalisation of the Public Sphere," in Edward Aspinall and Marcus Mietzner, eds., *Prob-*

lems of Democratisation in Indonesia: Elections, Institutions and Society (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010), 268–69.

22. Marcus Mietzner, “Local Elections and Autonomy in Papua and Aceh: Mitigating or Fueling Secessionism?” *Indonesia* 84 (October 2007): 1–39.

23. See, especially, on this point: Michael Buehler and Dani Muhtada, “Democratization and the Diffusion of *Shari’a* Law: Comparative Insights from Indonesia,” *South East Asia Research* 24, no. 2 (2016): 261–82.

24. See Nicholas Kuipers and Nathanael Sumaktoyo, “Introducing SIKAP: 58 Weekly Harmonized Surveys of Indonesian Voters,” *Journal of East Asian Studies*, forthcoming.

25. C. Thi Nguyen, “Transparency Is Surveillance,” *Philosophical and Phenomenological Research* 105 (September 2022): 331–61.

26. C. Thi Nguyen, “On ‘Transparency Is Surveillance,’” *New Work in Philosophy* (Substack blog), 12 June 2023, <https://newworkinphilosophy.substack.com/p/c-thi-nguyen-university-of-utah-transparency>.

27. Nguyen, “On ‘Transparency Is Surveillance.’”

28. See Zeynep Tufekci, “We Were Badly Misled About Covid,” *New York Times*, 16 March 2025.

29. See Daniel J. Hopkins, *The Increasingly United States: How and Why American Political Behavior Nationalized* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); Daniel J. Moskowitz, “Local News, Information, and the Nationalization of U.S. Elections,” *American Political Science Review* 115, no. 1 (2021): 114–29.

30. Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962).