Inequality and Group Marginalization in Personalist Regimes

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Abstract: Personalist regimes tend to elevate certain groups over others through clientelism and place the leader as the center of power and influence. Policies reflect the personal preferences of the leader, not the state, and are used to reward individuals and party members for their loyalty. We hypothesize that personalist regimes worsen inequality and group marginalization in a country. We argue that this is especially pronounced in nascent democracies, where rapid democratization has not produced stable institutions capable of guaranteeing individual rights and freedoms. To test these expectations, we use data from 32 third-wave democracies in Latin America and Eastern Europe between 1990 and 2020. The measure of personalism captures the extent to which a ruling party serves as a vehicle for its leader's personal will and priorities. The analysis employs four measures of inequality that reflect different forms of exclusion and their manifestations across social groups. Our findings strongly link the rise of personalism with growing inequality and group marginalization. The results of our empirical analysis contribute to the emerging literature on the effects of personalism on policymaking and the quality of governance.