

*Research Article***Divisive politics and economic development**Osama SHAIKH¹Research Student, Department of Economics
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osamashaikhs@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0002-9873-8040**Received date:** 28.06.2020 **Accepted date:** 26.10.2020**Suggested citation:** Shaikh, O. (2020). Divisive politics and economic development. *Journal of Politics, Economy and Management* 3(2), 22-30.

Abstract: In this paper, we analyze the rise of divisive politics, falling democracies, and rising populism all around the globe and the threat it poses to economic development. Precisely, we could estimate and analyze the economic cost and consequences of state-sponsored propaganda. We could also negate and refute the Lee Thesis and its unique claim to economic development with naught democracy and espoused the Sen's idea of strong democracy for economic development. Furthermore, we could also critically analyze how the ideologically induced policies are influencing the economic activities and acting as a hindrance to inclusive socio-economic development. Finally, through rigorous evidence and statistics, we could successfully conclude that divisive politics is undermining economic development and governments should eschew themselves from disseminating it.

Keywords: Divisive politics, economic development, democracy, populism, ideology, propagandas, lee thesis, economic growth.

JEL Codes: A13, O10, P16

1. Introduction

It is a cardinal principle of democratic theory that the prerequisite for sustainable economic development is political stability, and when policymakers get diverted from this and look towards the other politically lucrative policies, then that "overlooking" comes at a socio-economic cost associated with it. It has been debated for several years to reach the root cause of economic policy failures and unending income inequality post-globalization. Various experts have stressed the fact that the ideological differences between and among politicians and economists lead to the underachievement of economic policies. The modern-day economists with significant expertise in their respective field have contrasting views and distinct approach on many critical issues, and this makes the politicians think that they can always have an economist who will support their policies and give economic justification for everything they are assigned to, which may or may not be truly necessary but happens to be identified by their certain ideology or agenda. In simpler terms, the one which is politically most attractive (Ahluwalia, 2015). At the macro level, these ideologically induced policies create a divide among policymakers as well as among their followers i.e., ordinary citizens. This disturbs social harmony and leads to political instability, which contradicts the prerequisite factor for sustainable economic development. In an aim to increase political stability and increase the *ease of doing business*- the World Bank has started several projects in the name of the "rule of law" for developing a soothing atmosphere for fast-paced growths all over the world. The World Bank core work focuses on factors like strengthening the Judiciary, law enforcement, property rights, human rights, citizen security, access to justice and legal improvements, and several other such factors, which eases business processes in

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various countries (United Nations). Since in some countries such as India and the USA, there has been a rise in intolerance (Roth, 2017) and suppression of human rights as reported by country reports on Human Rights Practices for 2018, Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and the Labor United States.

Moreover, the democracies are falling- succumbing to divisive politics, pluralism, and polarization- for the 14th year in a row, a major annual report on the health of global democracy warned of its decline (Tharoor, 2020). There has been a substantial fall in *the democracy index* of various countries. In 2019, India slipped to 51st place (Democracy Index, 2019), a steep 10 place fall due to suppression of civil rights of the country's religious and caste minorities, which includes Muslims and Dalits, which together constitute 30% of India's total population (Census India, 2011). Whereas, the United States ranks 25th on The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) ranking of democracy index (Democracy Index, 2019), which is far worse when compared to the Scandinavian countries, which are at the top of the *Democratic Index Chart*. Interestingly, during the same time with a decline in democracy rank, there has been a considerable fall in the economic development of these two countries. According to an International Monetary Fund report the rate of growth of Gross Domestic Product of India is expected to grow at 4.8% instead of the previous prediction of 6.1% for the financial year 2019 (The Economic Times, 2020), while in the United States, growth is expected to moderate from 2.3 percent in 2019 to 2 percent in 2020 and decline further to 1.7 percent in 2021 (World Economic Outlook, 2020). The sharp decline in economic growth in these two countries is evident from the lower level of expected growth rates in the coming years predicted by the IMF and the fall in their democracy level. The inclusive society, the healthy democracy, civil liberty, and a higher level of freedom- measured by the Freedom House is one of the basic principles of sustainable fast-paced economic development for any country (Diamond, 2011).

Therefore, the problem of why politically motivated discordant policies bear such huge economic costs has put various socio-political and economic pundits on their toes. As we know most of the countries experiencing extreme social polarization, from the United States to Germany, to France to the UK to India, the public conversations have become highly intolerant, use of politically incorrect words have become prevalent, where unparliamentary remarks are given to opposition parties out loud in open without any check (Banerjee & Duflo, 2019). The rise of extreme ideologies, which defines and solidifies personal identity, ultimately determines the enemy; it tells the ideological adherent whom to fear and whom to hate (Higgs, 2018). The extreme ideological divide in the society is costing these countries dearly in economic terms and their political leaders do not give twopence about their ideologies, it is nothing but opportunism that is the driving force for them. For these politicians, the only concern is voting. But even if divisive politics make efforts more costly, it will still not affect the attractiveness of divisive politics, but it will make its consequences worse for the voters. (Kiss, 2012). Hence the polarization at the cost of the economy goes on.

2. Antithesis- democracies lead to a fall in economies

In the above discussion, there seems to be a strong correlation between the democracy level and the economic development of a particular country with some exception of course for countries like China which is ranked 153 in EUI's democracy ranking and 2nd on the economy, with GDP of \$13.6 Trillion (World Bank, 2018). However, very few countries have seen huge economic development despite suppression and denial of civil rights and liberties from the hands of political institutions, and they believe that this denial and repression of civil rights helps to stimulate growth and economic development. Countries like China have exercised the worst political environment with deprivation of fundamental civil and political rights for their alleged advantage in promoting economic development. It is claimed (in *Lee's Thesis: How bad democracy is for Asian Economies?*) that China being an authoritarian state has majorly helped in its economic development. *Lee's thesis* says that democracy hurts economic growth and development, which contradicts the tenets proposed by the World Bank in the name of "rule of law" i.e. of increasing the political

and social stability and thereby strengthening the democracies. However, more comprehensive inter-country comparisons have not provided any confirmation of Lee's thesis, and there is little evidence that authoritarian politics helps economic growth. Indeed, the empirical evidence very strongly suggests that economic growth is more a matter of a friendlier economic climate than of a harsher political system. (Sen, 1999).

3. Advertisement spending and flow of propagandas

In economic science, everything has got some monetary price, and so does popularity. In an era where every political leader wants to be highly influential in world politics, therefore, their Governments spend huge amounts to spread certain agendas, their particular delusive ideologies, and in public relation, management to create a "superhero" image of the government in general and its political leader in particular. From the annual spending of few governments on advertisements, it is clear that these divisive ideologies do not reach the masses without their economic transportation. The United States ranks first when it comes to advertising, it is estimated that advertisement spending will grow to 725\$ per person in the year 2020 from 570\$ per person in 2015 (Statista, 2016). A developing country like India has seen its advertisement spending grew from 32.5 billion rupees in 2014 to 210 billion rupees in 2020 which is almost a 700% growth rate since Modi became the Prime Minister. He took India to the third spot of the list of countries spending on an advertisement (Statista, 2019). A country which is ranked 62nd in education spending by IMD World Competitiveness Ranking 2019 (IMD, 2019), and as per WHO ranks 184th out of 191 countries in terms of GDP% spending on public health (Financial Express, 2020). Moreover, Modi's political party BJP has its communication handle *BJP IT CELL*, which controls the ruling party's all social media handles and spreads pro-government agendas by manipulating data. For example, The BJP IT cell head claimed that Richard Thaler, the winner of the 2017 Nobel Prize in Economics, praised the infamous 2016 Demonetization, which strengthened Modi's popularity among his supporters for they believe their leader who is already immune to making mistakes and now has the backing of a Nobel Laureate. But in reality, Thaler's statement on demonetization was as follows: "The concept was good as a move to a cashless society to impede corruption, but the rollout was deeply flawed and the introduction of the Rs 2000 note makes the motivation for the entire exercise puzzling." (Choudhary, 2020). This clarification came days after the false claim spread by state-sponsored *BJP IT CELL*, which by that time did its job and achieved its objective. This clearly explains the undeniable hidden economic costs or the opportunity cost of divisive politics. For when the state is busy in garnishing its image in front of its people, thereby facing lesser critics, as the people cannot see the real picture of the governance for they are overfed with sugar-coated facts and statistics through various state types of machinery and propaganda spreading handles, this undermines the capability of government and society as a whole.

4. Ideologically induced policies and its economic cost

Brexit driven by anti-migration ideology resulted in the expulsion of the UK from the European Union. The union, which was laid on the very foundation of the pro-migration policies (Malik, 2018) and integration, succumbed to divisive politics. The rise of right-wing populism, which led Britain to leave the European Union, has tremendously affected its economic growth, resulting in lower trade, lower foreign investment, and, thus lower income for the UK citizens (van Reenen, 2016). It has been estimated that in the long run, the United Kingdom will lose around 3% to 10% of its current GDP (Hope, 2019).

India's PM Narendra Modi came with a landslide victory in the 2014 general elections, where his campaign was the most polarizing the country had ever seen since its independence. His political party, Bharatiya Janata Party, or the BJP (translated as *Indian Peoples Party*) won 282 seats out of a total of 543, which gave him the majority to form a strong government. The image of a nationalist, charismatic, highly vocal, and a political leader with a good sense of business and flag bearer of economic nationalism evident

from his schemes such as the *Make in India* campaign- has gained him huge popularity among the youth of the country which constitutes around 65% of the country. Now, as experts say that the populists use populist rhetoric to pitch the masses (Malik, 2018), and therefore, Modi, with a strong government in the center could take any strong decision without any hesitation which the previous governments could not. In a move to eliminate *corruption* and to put a dent in terror financing, the main reasons for which the Indians dethroned the previous Government of Dr. Singh, which had seen huge scams (Sardesai, 2014). Modi on November 8, 2016, demonetized the country's currency of higher denomination i.e. 500 (7.5\$) and 1000(15\$) rupee notes, which constituted 86% of total currency flowing in the economy. A country where 90% workforce works in the *unorganized sector*, which naturally depends on cash, had experienced great troubles in transactions and payments from the next day onwards, which brought the economy to a standstill. It received mixed reactions as the supporters of Modi lauded it and called it a masterstroke against corruption, whereas opposition leaders criticized it and called it an unwanted and authoritarian measure. The government claimed that demonetization will end cross-border terrorism from Pakistan (Modi, 2016) and will *hugely benefit the economy in the long run*. But the former Prime Minister of India and economist Dr. Singh said that demonetization would cost India's economy a loss of approximately 1-2% of the GDP (Agarwala, 2017) and went on to quote J.M. Keynes that "in the long run we all are dead" (Keynes, 1924) while opposing Niti Ayog Chairman A. Panagariya's defensive claim that demonetization will help a country's economy in the long run (Economic Times, 2016). It did fall by 2% two years later, which was found in a US-based study by IMF Chief Gita Gopinath and her colleagues (Chodorow-Reich, Gopinath, Mishra and Narayanan, 2019). The country is still struggling to get back to old rates of GDP growth of over 7% per year, and finally losing the tag of one of the fastest-growing economies of the world in the year 2018 (BBC, 2019). Moreover, this process of wiping the old notes from the system and bringing in the newly printed notes back into the system did cost the economy dearly. In a report by The Indian Express, the total loss to the economy was estimated around 2.40 lakh crore rupees (approx. \$32 Billion) as claimed by the opposition leader and former finance minister P. Chidambaram, after the Reserve Bank of India released its final data two years post the demonetization in August 2018 (The Indian Express, 2019). So, here again seemingly noble action for a good cause but backed by populist rhetoric to please certain sections of society and to create an image of one of "a savior" backfired abruptly. Moreover, "As government grows, pushing into more and more areas of social and economic life and evoking an ideological rationale to justify its action and attract supporters, it simultaneously causes its supporters to identify those who oppose the action as *the other* and even as *the enemy*." (Higgs, 2018). Since N. Modi became the Prime Minister of India, there has been rise of extremism in the political atmosphere, the politicians have become rigid in their certain ideologies and therefore more often gets distracted from rationality while framing various socio-economic policies and they deliberately be overlooking various constructive criticism or suggestions of any kind even from the best brains available, who sometimes happen to be their ideological opponents. Moving on further, the Modi government ordered formulation of "National Register of Citizens" (henceforth NRC) in a north eastern state of India, Assam. The primary goal behind such formulation was to enlist every legit Indians, identify and throw out the targeted illegal Bangladeshi immigrants and prevent future illegal immigration. Around 1.9 million people which include both Muslims and Non-Muslims were left out of NRC when they could not provide proof of their Indian citizenship but this was in opposition to the government's claim of 20 million illegal Bangladeshi immigrants residing in Assam. Therefore in a move to save the citizenship rights of Non-Muslims who lost their citizenship in the process, the government passed Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 or the CAA on 11 December, 2019, where in, it is "Provided that any person who belongs to Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Sikh, Jain, or Parsi community from Afghanistan, Bangladesh or Pakistan, who entered into India on or before the 31st day of December, 2014, shall not be treated as illegal migrant" (The Gazette of India, 2019). It has clearly excluded Muslims and Jews. Moreover, this Act appears to be the infulfilment of the Bhartiya Janata Party's 2014 general election manifesto to grant citizenship to Hindus fleeing persecution in Muslim-majority countries neighboring India (Garg 2016). However, the monetary cost of NRC in Assam- the state which resides 3.55 crore people (Census India, 2011) - that is

around 1/40th of India's total population, was around 1600 crore rupees (\$210 Million). A divisive policy which appeared to be politically attractive brought with it some economic costs because when the government spent \$210 million to throw out allegedly illegal immigrants particularly Muslims in detention camps from a total of 1.9 million people who could not find their names in NRC in Assam. The per capita spending is estimated to be \$110 per alleged Bangladeshi immigrant (includes Muslims and Non-Muslims both), which is too high for a country like India where 21.2% of population lives with less than 1.90\$ per day. (World Bank, 2011). If such a register of citizens is made for the whole country, the estimated cost goes up to 64000 crore rupees (\$8.4 Billion), again a country which spends around 1% of its GDP on education, that is around 96000 crore rupees or approx. \$12.6 Billion. Thus, the monetary cost of the NRC was around two-thirds of the annual education budget (Jha, 2020).

In October 2017, the Trump administration took action to modify the Affordable Care Act (ACA). It announced that it would end cost-sharing reimbursements (Trump, 2017). Obamacare or the ACA was enacted by the former and the first black president of the United States, Mr. Barack Obama. The ACA provided affordable healthcare services to economically lower sections of society by reducing the Medicare provider rates which improved their health and economic conditions as well. Since, income inequality is correlated with low levels of health (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010) or unhealthy societies have significantly higher levels of income inequality (Lunborg, Nystedt, & Rooth, 2014). It was estimated that through the ACA approximately \$13 billion was redistributed from the top 20 percent of income holders to the bottom 80 percent of income holders, which led to a significant fall in income inequality. This increased disposable income of the low earning people led to a reduction in income inequality in the country (Mindoo, 2016). But due to previously existing ideological differences between democrats and republicans, Obamacare came under threat right after Trump came to power. Therefore, in a move to destroy ACA Trump went onto propagate his white supremacist propaganda. As (Coates, 2017) writes:

“His political career began in advocacy of birtherism, that modern recasting of the old American precept that black people are not fit to be citizens of the country they built. But long before birtherism, Trump had made his worldview clear. It is often said that Trump has no real ideology, which is not true – his ideology is white supremacy, in all its truculent and sanctimonious power. Trump inaugurated his campaign by casting himself as the defender of white maidenhood against Mexican rapists, only to be later alleged by multiple accusers, and by his own proud words, to be a sexual violator himself. White supremacy has always had a sexual tint.”

The aim to wipe out Obamacare was to kill Obama's ideas- even their beneficial works, at the cost of the economic and social welfare of Americans and declare victory for white supremacy (Stein & Allcorn, 2018). The fact that these policies are ideology induced and Sutter says “Ideology (meaning general attitudes toward the role of the state in society) complements economic interests as an important element of political economy” (Sutter, 2016).

5. Ideology and exclusive governance

The reluctance in consulting from politicians and economists of different ideologies can be because of the rise in inferiority complex among ruling politicians who want to monopolize the image of a supreme leader. Therefore, they do not want to look less powerful or less intelligent in front of their voters. Hence, they never associate or identify themselves with anything similar to their opponents, who they identify as others. The creation of "the other" or "the enemy" leads to an increase in socio-political divisiveness in the society which creates distrust among various parties and they began to spread their propaganda in the society which increases distrustfulness in the society, where people en masse stop trusting each other on various socio-economic issues, resulting in slowing of economic processes. Since, Arrow (1972) stated that an economy runs on trust and confidence among people and it is, for this reason, it can be plausibly argued that much of the economic backwardness in the world can be explained by the lack of confidence (cited by Aghion & Durlauf, 2006).

The economist and the Katherine Dusak Miller Distinguished Service professor R.G. Rajan of Finance at the University of Chicago at Booth School of Business, (the institute by any means is not famous for its anti-capitalist approach) has worked as the governor of the Reserve Bank of India for three years until September 2016 after he resigned completing his allotted tenure of tenures and not continuing further citing personal reasons. Rajan had been very vocal against the loan defaulters and the growing NPA and corruption in India. When asked if he would have supported the idea of demonetization to clean up the system from the corruption, the reply was a big "No" and went on to say in an interview to Bloomberg TV, that unfortunately, the current government after a massive election win has "focused more on fulfilling its political and social agenda rather than paying attention to the economic growth" (Deccan Herald, 2020). As Romer said in 2008, "that the poor countries sometimes do not grow faster than the rich countries mainly because of the badly implemented policies in the poor countries" which poses a hindrance to the popular economic belief that lesser developed countries grow faster than the developed countries. For example, the rate of growth of GDP of LIC Bangladesh in 2019 was 7.9% while that of HIC France was 1.3% (IMF, 2019). The bad implementation of policies often comes from the ideological differences between and among policymakers. Therefore, when popular governments want to sell their agendas rather than inclusive ideas, they often overlook its inevitable economic impacts.

6. Conclusion

Thus, with rigid ideologues in their cabinet or the bureaucracy which feeds on hate-mongering and divided society for hoarding votes in elections, it becomes difficult for ordinary citizens to expect that policymakers would come up with bonafide policies, for the policies they enact typically identifies with the party identity of politicians or the government, which happen to be divisive ideology in our case. In simple terms, the personal, the ideological, the religious bias merged together and inspired political. The rise in divisive politics all across the worlds' leading countries is severely affecting their economies. Populism, which grows on divisive politics, has created the social divide in society. In this paper, I have briefly tried to explain how the various populist governments' policies reflect their delusive ideologies and their effects on the economy. The selling of government agendas disrupts political stability and creates a social divide, thereby leading to lower levels of economic integration in the society. The rise in advertisement spending in various countries by their governments is damaging the economy rather than building their image or increasing their popularity. Also, divisive politics is leading to exclusive governance, which is leading to the under-utilization of human resources. Thus, I could successfully oppose Lee's Thesis, which endorses a non-democratic form of government for a higher level of economic development and could correlate democracy, political stability, and inclusive governance with economic development. In simpler terms, the world needs to strengthen democratic institutions to strengthen the rule of law and follow democratic principles strictly and avoid divisive politics to have sustainable economic development.

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