

CONCEPTUAL DEBATE ON ELECTION CRISES IN THE CONTEXT OF DISASTERS

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ABSTRACT

This study employs a literature review method to analyze post-disaster election crises—often characterized by incumbent victories and shifts in power—through the lenses of leftist and liberal theory. The findings reveal that the leftist approach (Gramsci, Marx, Arendt) highlights the state's vulnerability, while the liberal approach critiques this perspective. This paper proposes the concept of a “third way” that emphasizes social-democratic cohesion to bridge the theoretical divide. This paper finds that the leftist approach—rooted in the thought of Gramsci, Marx, and Arendt—is highly valuable for understanding the relationship between state power and other scholarly studies. The leftist approach views the election crisis not merely as a neutral exercise of state power serving the people's interests, but as a process that is also vulnerable to resistance against the state. However, this paper acknowledges that the power debate regarding the electoral crisis, as framed through the leftist paradigm, still has weaknesses. The leftist approach has consistently maintained that the state's role as an oppressor is a weak one. Consequently, various criticisms have emerged from liberals, particularly regarding the understanding of the electoral crisis in the context of natural disasters. Beyond the polar divide between left and right in understanding the concept of the electoral crisis in the context of disasters, there is not only a relationship of class power dynamics but also a strong interdependence between society and democracy. Cohesion is the key concept in understanding the electoral crisis in the context of a disaster by juxtaposing the left and right approaches.

Keywords: election crisis; disaster; left-and right-wing approaches.

INTRODUCTION

Electoral crises in the context of disasters highlight the conceptual debate between elections as instruments of democratic legitimacy (Dahl, 1961) and the shattered socio-material reality in the aftermath of a disaster (Arendt, 1967; Marx, 1995). Elections forced to take place during disasters often shift from the ethical-political goal of fulfilling a mandate (Khalidun, 2011) to electoral opportunism manipulated by political elites (Khor, 2005). Electoral crises in such situations reflect a dilemma between the need to maintain the legitimacy of procedural power and the urgent demand to meet basic human needs amid a crisis. Voters' reliance on retrospective voting or their ability to evaluate the actions of elected officials that affect their well-being and to reward or punish them at the time of the election (Heersink et al., 2020).

This analysis highlights three main conceptual debates regarding the dilemma of holding elections amid natural disasters, involving the conflict between procedural

legitimacy and the disruption of social order, as well as the risk of political opportunism capitalizing on humanitarian crises. These debates encompass contradictions in political ethics, in which disasters are often manipulated as electoral commodities, contrary to the true function of power in the public good. Ultimately, the state faces a dialectic between the enforcement of formal law and the interventionist obligation to prioritize the fulfillment of the right to life and the material needs of affected citizens. Disasters are not merely natural phenomena or external “hazards” separate from humans; rather, they are closely linked to social dimensions. The definition of a disaster includes the term “anthropogenic,” which we can understand as human activities—whether intentional or unintentional and carried out continuously—that have adverse effects on society by triggering or accelerating the occurrence of disasters (Gill & Malamud, 2017). Fukumoto & Kikuta (2024) note that the effects of disaster relief on election outcomes can either strengthen or weaken a candidate’s electoral capital.

This analysis highlights the conceptual debate surrounding post-disaster electoral crises, which stems from the clash between democratic procedures and a paralyzed socio-material reality. Disaster situations are often exploited opportunistically by political elites, creating an ethical dilemma of power amid urgent humanitarian needs. Under these conditions, the state is required to prioritize material interventions for citizens’ survival over imposing procedural political agendas, in order to safeguard the highest purpose of the social contract. Visconti (2022) asserts that material damage caused by disasters can increase the likelihood that voters will prefer right-wing candidates associated with their interests.

Research indicates that natural disasters can undermine democratic institutions and elections, transforming them into sociopolitical crises that threaten the stability and legitimacy of leadership. This situation calls for a multidisciplinary approach that integrates sociology and political science to address political-ethical failures and the social impacts of disasters.

Some Basic Ideas and Debates on Election Crises in the Context of Disasters

Democracy is a vital force for peace and for increasing public support for the state. Schumpeter describes democracy as an institutional arrangement for reaching political decisions in which individuals gain the power to make decisions through a competitive struggle to win voters’ support (Schumpeter, 2008). Robert A. Dahl (1961) identifies several institutional safeguards that must be in place to ensure a responsive democracy, including the right to vote, open access to public office, the right of political leaders to compete for support, and free and fair elections. According to Squire (1991), the principle of elections primarily refers to the existence of alternative choices. Furthermore, in filling public offices, elections are held to ensure public support and legitimacy for government decision-makers. Elections serve to confer legitimacy on rulers’ right to govern. Meanwhile, Marx (1995) has identified a simple fact: that what humans seek first and foremost is food and drink, shelter, and clothing. This comes long before they pursue politics, science, art, and religion. This means

that basic necessities are essential for survival, especially in crisis situations following a natural disaster, when basic needs are certainly most urgent (Pals, 2012).

Suseno, in his book, asserts that the state's role in political power is to regulate society (Magnis-Suseno, 2023). The state's regulatory functions are highly diverse, ranging from beneficial to harmful. The power to coerce—which enables the state to protect private property and ensure public safety—also allows it to usurp individual rights and violate citizens' rights. The state's monopoly on legitimate power enables individuals to escape what Hobbes termed the war of every one against every one. In his monumental work *Leviathan*, Hobbes describes humans as beings with a strong inclination toward self-interest. Thus, the task of modern politics is to tame state power, direct its activities toward goals deemed legitimate by the people it serves, and exercise power under the rule of law (Fukuyama, 2005).

One line of development leads to what Friedrich and Brzezinski refer to as a totalitarian state that seeks to eliminate civil society entirely and subordinate atomized individuals to its own political ends (Fukuyama, 2005). Protest movements represent a collective reaction against a vulnerable, lowly position prone to injustice—whether related to social, economic, or political status. In a substantive rule-of-law state, the state's functions—in addition to upholding and enforcing the law—are also required to improve the well-being of its citizens. Such an argument positions the state not merely as a night watchman, but, most importantly, as a servant of society. According to Anthony Giddens, the concept of the state's function is interventionist in nature. This means that the state will always participate in every action and step taken by society with the aim of improving the general welfare.

Conducting elections cannot be done by a single party but requires the involvement of many parties. According to Gerald Zaltman (1972), the process toward a better condition involves various parties, employs various approaches and strategies, and utilizes various resources. Bryson et al. state that the strategic objective of building networks and collaborating is intended to influence the structure of government organizations (Bryson et al., 2006). It is crucial to distinguish between the strategic objectives of networking, policy-making, and the strategies for building networks through the exchange of available resources. In the context of disasters, such as those in Japan, hundreds of volunteers from different disaster-affected areas—including districts, cities, and local governments—coordinate with the central government. According to Schumpeter, as cited by Ilham Yamin (2012), the concept of minimalist democracy can be understood as follows: “Whether debating the conceptualization of minimalist democracy and civil rights or ‘directly obeying the will of the people,’ it is not necessary for a government to be a democracy with proper functions. Democracy is merely a method, and the institutions used within it involve electing a government through competitive elections. Through these elections, representatives are chosen, and the public welfare stems from the vote count (Yamin, 2012).

Map of Arguments for Victory and Defeat in a Disaster

First, by making blind hindsight the foundation of their primary objective, as seen in the research by Paulo Bastos and Sebastian Miller (2013); Giancarlo Visconti (2022); Leonardo Baccini and Lucas Leemann (2020); Jorge Gallego (2012); Amir Horkin et al. (2013); Daniel Aldrich and Yoshikuni Ono (2016); Leigh (2009); Bechtel and Hainmueller (2011); Roberto Ramos dan Carlos Sanz (2018); Oleg Smirnov et al., (2018); Chad Hazlett and Matto Mildemberger (2020). These researchers have established the theoretical foundation for “Blind Retrospection,” finding that there is a correlation between performance during the post-disaster recovery period and voter behavior as a form of resistance against the (incumbent) government.

Second, political contestation in the context of disasters, in terms of winning by using the post-disaster recovery period as a means to gain political support, as examined in studies by Boris Heersink et al. (2020); Achen and Bartels (2002); Gasper and Reeves (2011); Kosta Bovan et al. (2018); Healy and Malhotra (2009); Wolfers (2006); Bechtel and Hainmueller (2011); Roberto Ramos and Carlos Sanz (2018) affirm the Mindful Retrospection theory, which posits a positive correlation between aid spending and voter support for the incumbent party in elections. Voters engage in mindful introspection regarding the incumbent by evaluating the official (incumbent) based on the relief operations carried out after the event. Talbot M. Andrews (2023) asserts that a leader’s response to a crisis situation will garner greater public trust.

METHOD

The research in this article employs a literature review method using materials available online. The study began by defining the problem focus—namely, electoral crises during natural disasters—with the primary objective of mapping conceptual debates across various social perspectives. Data collection was conducted through a comprehensive literature search across various data sources, both online (scientific journals, e-books, and regulatory documents) and offline (textbooks, printed documents, and other literature). The next stage involved selecting and screening data by identifying concepts, theories, and findings from previous studies that are strongly relevant to the theme of electoral crises and disasters. The conceptual data that passed the selection process were then analyzed using a descriptive-critical approach. At this stage, perspectives from various paradigms (such as sociology, political science, leftist approaches, and liberalism) are juxtaposed to identify common ground, points of contention, and theoretical syntheses. The final stage involves formulating conclusions that produce a comprehensive mapping of the dialectics of electoral crises in the context of disasters, as well as offering a conceptual innovation (the idea of a third way) as a scholarly contribution to the study of political sociology.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Electoral Crisis in Disaster Situations

Electoral crises in disaster situations trigger a dialectic between the urgent need for humanitarian recovery and efforts to defend the legitimacy of power, which are often marked by a crisis of authority (Gramsci, 1976) and the emergence of authoritarian innovations by incumbents. Elections in this context have the potential to become a venue for political manipulation rather than the fulfillment of the people's will, where a debate arises between demands for the fulfillment of basic needs and the imposition of Fukuyama's democratic procedures—which disregard Pye's crisis of legitimacy and encourage voter abstention. A democratic leader in a crisis situation will reap political rewards if they demonstrate competence during a disaster; as a token of gratitude, voters will turn that goodwill into political support by voting for them during elections (Bechtel & Hainmueller, 2011).

From Pye's perspective, an analysis of the crisis of legitimacy in the context of an electoral crisis can be broken down into four main dimensions of conceptual debate: first, the principle of authority shifts to another principle of authority. This means that the principle of authority used until now is no longer recognized by the public, and the public has identified a superior principle of authority; consequently, a government based on the old principle of authority will lose support. Second, there is intense and unhealthy competition among government leaders that is not channeled through proper procedures, leading to divisions within the government. Third, the government is unable to fulfill its promises, causing disappointment and unrest that lead to waning support for it. Fourth, public perceptions of authority have shifted. This shift involves not only a rational-critical approach to authority but also increased political participation (Lucian Pye in Binder & Palombara, 2015). The performance of regional leaders during emergencies is strongly correlated with their chances of re-election.

An analysis of the conceptual debate regarding the existence, function, and nature of state power in a democratic climate can be broken down into three main schools of thought: From the perspective of the Communist Manifesto, elections and political crises cannot be separated from the long history of class struggle between the bourgeoisie (capitalists/elite) and the proletariat (working people). From this perspective, state institutions or elections are not neutral entities standing above all social groups. The state often serves as a tool for the ruling class to perpetuate its economic dominance; thus, crises that arise during elections reflect the hidden tensions stemming from the clash of interests between these classes.

In contrast to Marx's view, Rousseau's ideas position the government in a purely sociological role as the executor of the general will. The government is positioned merely as an instrument serving the people. Since the legitimacy of power derives purely from the mandate of the people who elected them, the people hold full sovereignty and have the right to dissolve the government at any time if the direction of policy no longer aligns with public aspirations and the common good. Francis Fukuyama bridges this debate by highlighting the dual nature of the state, which can mutate from the very good to the very bad. Positive Side (Hobbesian): The state monopolizes legitimate power to establish public security and protect

property rights, thereby saving humanity from extreme chaos or the war of all against all. Negative Side (Totalitarian): This monopoly of power is prone to abuse, leading to violations of citizens' rights. Citing Friedrich and Brzezinski (1961), such deviations can lead to a "totalitarian" state that disregards civil society in order to subordinate individuals to the rulers' political objectives. The Task of Modern Politics: This dialectic leads to the conclusion that the essence of modern politics lies in taming this vast state power. This is achieved by subjecting all its instruments to the rule of law so that its actions remain legitimate in the eyes of the people.

A similar view is expressed by Lansberger, who argues that protest movements are collective reactions against a vulnerable, low social standing that is susceptible to injustice—whether related to social, economic, or political status. David Moon (1991) cites explanations of voting behavior by Ashenfelter & Keller Jr., (1975), noting that there are two approaches to explaining voter turnout or the absence of non-voting voters in an election. First, psychological factors. These emphasize social characteristics, voter psychology, and the institutional characteristics of the electoral system. Second, they emphasize voters' expectations about the benefits and costs of voting or not voting. There are four factors that influence a person's decision not to vote: (1) psychological factors, (2) the political system, (3) political trust, and (4) socioeconomic background. The greater the damage caused by a disaster, the more frequently politicians and the government reach out to a wide network of connections that benefit them (Aldrich & Ono, 2016).

Curato San Diego Fossati, analysis of the Indonesian case discusses three strategies as forms of authoritarian innovation in the context of the erosion of democracy. The first is a series of innovations. Policies designed to curb electoral competition and increase the costs of electoral participation; second, the rise of identity politics driven by the opposition to mobilize its voters and advance a non-liberal political agenda; third, the government's increasing abuse of state structures and its close ties with the media to silence dissent (Curato & Fossati, 2020). Ansell et al. note that during a crisis, people expect their leaders to provide authoritative explanations of what is happening, why it is happening, and what is being done to avoid negative effects. Thus, crisis management consists of "actual" response policies and is intertwined with the construction of the crisis's meaning through rhetoric (Master & 't Hart, 2012).

Ahlquist states that crises emphasize the need to frame and manage them, but crises can also present opportunities for political gain. They can disrupt "business as usual" to directly influence what voters need and want—namely, their interests, livelihoods, and primary concerns (Ahlquist et al., 2020). Meanwhile, Canovan (1999) views crisis communication and the necessary rhetorical strategic choices as the backbone of overall crisis management. When a crisis occurs during an election campaign, the incumbent's rhetorical strategy plays a central role in balancing crisis response with the management of electoral expectations. Finally, following a rationalist approach, we understand populism as a type of discourse in which certain ideas—particularly anti-elitism—are combined with a transgressive, restorative style.

Elections in disaster situations prioritize humanitarian needs over political ones. Marx identified a simple fact: the first things humans seek are food and drink, shelter, and clothing. This comes long before they pursue politics, science, art, and religion (Pals, 2012). According to Schumpeter,, the growth of capitalism and democracy are interrelated. The free market and free elections are viewed as mutually reinforcing processes (Petras & Veltmeyer, 2002). Conducting elections in a disaster situation certainly requires all parties to work together to create conducive conditions, as Zaltman (1972) states: “The process toward better conditions involves various parties, using various approaches and strategies, and utilizing various resources.”

According to Haddow & Haddow (2008, 2014), the various factors causing the complex dynamics and crises surrounding elections in disaster-affected areas divide disaster communication management into four stages. Each stage requires a communication strategy that provides information periodically and accurately. These four stages are: (1) mitigation—promoting and implementing strategies, technologies, and actions expected to reduce loss of life and damage in the event of a disaster; (2) preparedness—communicating messages that support and educate the public in anticipating disasters; (3) response—providing notifications to the public, warnings, evacuation instructions, and updates on the situation during a disaster; (4) recovery—assisting individuals and communities affected by a disaster in the aftermath. The effectiveness of disaster communication strategies rests on five key assumptions: customer focus, leadership commitment, inclusion of communication in planning, situational awareness, and media partnerships (2014). Budi HH (2012) explains that communication is one aspect that frequently poses challenges in disaster management. Other factors that pose challenges besides communication include information, coordination, and cooperation. Purwo Nugroho & Sulistyorini note that studies on disaster communication generally focus only on specific issues, such as how to convey disaster information, how to manage the mass media as an element of disaster response, and how to coordinate communication among groups, humanitarian workers, and disaster management agencies to create a multi-source system where everyone can act as a message sender, recipient, content creator, and curator (Nugroho & Sulistyorini, 2018).

Key Ideas of Antonio Gramsci, Karl Marx, and Francis Fukuyama on Electoral Crises in the Context of Disasters

Electoral crises during natural disasters are not merely technical administrative issues but manifestations of structural economic inequalities (the base) that influence the political superstructure. Elite Opportunism: The left views disaster situations as vulnerable to exploitation by political elites to perpetuate their power. Threat of a Hegemonic Crisis: When the state is perceived as failing and biased, this economic injustice fuels mass dissatisfaction and despair (Horton & Hunt, 2007). Social Destruction: If this frustration is left unchecked, the state’s legitimacy will collapse into a “Crisis of Authority/Hegemony” (Gramsci, 1976), triggering illegal acts, uncontrolled violence (De Soto, 2002), and ultimately the collapse of the social order due to individual selfishness (Durkheim, 1984).

Marx & Engels (1998) theories have provided many fundamental insights into social analysis that serve as the foundation for understanding social phenomena. Marx's theory of economic structure and social class offers us a picture of the social stratification and inequality commonly found in society. Marx himself argued that the mode of production—which is intertwined with social relations and the economic structure of society—constitutes the real basis of the legal and political superstructure. Thus, Marx posits that the economy determines social, political, and intellectual life—the arena in which human relationships are formed. According to Marx, the realization of what he termed “true democracy” entails overcoming the alienation between the individual and political society by dissolving the dichotomy between the egoistic interests of individuals within civil society and the social nature of political life (Giddens, 1988). Reinforcing Marx's view, Durkheim in *The Division of Labor* (1984) argues that a society—and every individual within it—that pursues only its own self-interest will collapse in a short time (Giddens, 1988). These two approaches—those of Marx and Gramsci—effectively affirm that economic injustice can give rise to a socio-political order within society. Similarly, in the context of a post-disaster crisis, leaders who are responsive to needs during such crises will gain public support and trust (Andrews et al., 2023).

In a crisis situation, the state must be able to position itself as a balancer of public interests. The view that the state is fundamentally neutral is held by the liberal school of thought, whereas the view that it is not neutral is held by the radical school of thought. According to Budiman, there are three reasons why the state takes sides. First, the state is merely a tool of other, more powerful groups (Classical Marxist Theory). From this perspective, the state is not autonomous and cannot make decisions on its own; it depends on greater powers outside itself. Second, the state is an autonomous institution that makes decisions based on what it deems to be right; it is not a tool of any particular group (Organic State Theory). Even if the state's policies turn out to be partisan, this is done based on its own awareness and calculations. This partisanship may stem from a psychological affinity among state officials who have their own mission to create an ideal society (Hegel's Theory, Organic State Theory, and Marxist Theory of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat). Third, the state is fundamentally autonomous, but it is bound by an economic-political system (or structural conditions) that limits its autonomy. If the state makes decisions outside the boundaries of the existing system or structure, it will face significant difficulties; its very existence may even be threatened (Budiman, 1996).

For Fukuyama, acts of terrorism, the spread of disease, persistent poverty, and the prevalence of civil wars are not isolated phenomena. These events are political symptoms indicating that the state—as the most important institution in society—has failed to fulfill its role (Fukuyama, 2005). In response to the state's failure, Fukuyama argues that it is time to strengthen the state's role, beginning with a clear understanding of its place in society. While the pro-market views of the 1980s may have been somewhat simplistic—with liberals proposing alternatives such as deregulation, debureaucratization, privatization, and the like—Such alternatives became the driving force behind economic change, namely by scaling back

the state's role in the economy to a minimal level. In some respects, these alternatives yielded encouraging results: economic growth, poverty reduction, and market integration (Fukuyama, 2005). However, in other respects, they actually created new problems: the reduced role of the state in the economy was also linked to a decline in the state's capacity to perform its functions.

The problem of electoral crises in the context of disasters can be resolved if the state shifts its democratic paradigm from a purely procedural one (merely voting) to a substantive democracy. This can be achieved by prioritizing economic justice for affected communities as the primary foundation (base), before building a legitimate and peaceful political consensus at the state governance level (superstructure).

CONCLUSION

The ideas of Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci provide a comprehensive critical framework for analyzing power relations amid electoral crises in the context of disasters. Through the lens of this leftist approach, it becomes clear that power, in practice, is never distributed fairly. When natural disasters disrupt a region, political contestation often shifts from fulfilling public rights to becoming an arena for the consolidation of elite dominance. This inequality in the distribution of power can be validated through social exchange theory, which demonstrates how emergency aid commodities and political legitimacy are prone to being traded asymmetrically between those in power and communities in vulnerable positions. Consequently, the electoral crisis in disaster-stricken areas is no longer merely a matter of technical, operational, or logistical issues, but rather a manifestation of a crisis of hegemony and deep-seated structural tensions.

Nevertheless, the limitations of both left-wing and right-wing thought in capturing the complexity of sociological reality demand a reorientation toward a more inclusive paradigm. The post-disaster recovery process and the resolution of the electoral crisis must not be placed solely on the shoulders of the authorities; rather, they must involve the collective awareness of all segments of society. From the perspective of rational choice theory, a deep understanding of this crisis is essential for providing objective assessments and identifying the best options among the political choices available to affected citizens. Ultimately, the effort to recover from post-disaster devastation is not as simple as theoretical formulations on paper; communities possess agency, understanding, and their own definitions in interpreting the electoral crisis they face. Therefore, paying close attention to electoral crises in the context of disasters is crucial for generating alternative solutions that are adaptive, democratic, and grounded in human safety.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For practitioners, understanding the concept of electoral crises in disaster situations is expected to provide alternatives to the policies and decisions to be made in such situations, taking into account humanitarian and other social considerations; in other words, the state must be able to position itself as a balancer of public interests in crisis situations.

For academics, given the scarcity of conceptual research on elections in disaster situations, this literature review is expected to make a positive contribution to the body of literature on electoral processes in such contexts.

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