

# Democratic Decay Resource (DEM-DEC): Global Research Update-March 2019

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## Eighth Global Research Update since DEM-DEC was launched

This eighth monthly update was issued on 7 March 2019 and is [now available on DEM-DEC](#). Sincere thanks to [DEM-DEC Research Editor Kuan-Wei Chen](#), who assisted in production of this Update.

Additions in the March Update include:

- New research worldwide from February 2019
- A significant list of additions suggested by DEM-DEC Users
- A growing list of forthcoming research
- A list of resources recently added to the DEM-DEC [Links](#) section
- And – in honour of International Women’s Day on 8 March – a list of recommended reads on the far right and populism by female scholars, compiled by Cas Mudde and originally published by the [LSE Review of Books](#).

## Identifying Themes

Each monthly Bibliography Update includes a section identifying themes from the update. The aim is simply to provide ‘added value’ by helping users to navigate the update, and to provide some limited commentary, especially on very recent research. Although it is impossible to capture every dimension of the issues covered in this Update, six key themes can be picked out.

### 1 Elections, Elections, Elections

A number of pieces in this Update make for essential reading as candidates begin to declare themselves for the [2020 US presidential race](#), states such as India and Poland face crucial general elections (in April/May and by November, respectively), and we brace ourselves for the upcoming European Parliament elections in May 2019 – with [President Macron’s 5 March open-letter](#) appeal to Europe’s citizens highlighting the high stakes: Barrie Sander’s ground-breaking analysis setting out a [typology of different cyber election meddling techniques](#) and examining three paradigms of international law that can frame State responses to cyber influence operations; Duncan McDonnell and Luis Cabrera’s discussion of the [‘right-wing populism’ of India’s governing BJP Party](#); and a special issue on [radical-right populist politics in Eastern Europe](#) edited by Ov Cristian Norocel and Gabriella Szabó concentrating on ‘soft’ factors, including the role of media, radicalization of public

discourse, and the communication repertoires of radical-right forces across the region.

(Note: Check out Barrie Sanders' cutting-edge Course Syllabus, ['Digital Threats to Democracy'](#) in the DEM-DEC Teaching Section).

## 2 Is Democratic Decay an Emerging Research Field?

Self-promotion alert: On 19 February the *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law* – which has become a leading global forum for analysis of the deterioration of democracy – published a new article of mine, on ['Democratic Decay: Conceptualising an Emerging Research Field'](#). The article maps democratic decay as a quasi-research field that spans multiple academic disciplines and fields. It was written as a useful explainer for scholars and policy actors, as well as a stock-taking exercise for experts in the field aimed at prompting reflection on ensuring that research remains practically useful to those who need to understand democratic decay. An [accessible summary of the article](#) was published by Democratic Audit UK on 4 March 2019 as 'Democratic Decay: The Threat with a Thousand Names'.

(Note: The article develops the work and analysis contained in the [Concept Index](#) on DEM-DEC).

## 3 Or is Democratic Decay Just a 'Cottage Industry'?

A policy piece caught my eye in early February. In a [column for \*The American Interest\*](#) (highlighted in the ever-useful [NED Democracy Digest](#)) the analyst Josef Joffe – speaking to a book he published in 2014 on [The Myth of America's Decline](#) – offers that bemoaning the “collapse” or “end” of the Liberal International Order (his words) has grown into a ‘cottage industry’ of pundits and professors. Joffe argues that the threat is quite overblown, suggesting that today’s nationalism is less dangerous as it is insular rather than imperial; authoritarianism has long been a feature of China, Russia and the Arab world; Turkey was never really a ‘solid democracy’; that the number of democracies worldwide, if counted according to the minimal criterion of genuinely contested elections, has grown to 122 states, “the largest number of all time”; and that “nowhere has an established democracy collapsed, not even in Poland or Hungary”. He goes, on but you get the picture.

What struck me about this piece is that it encapsulates a certain type of critique I have been hearing for years. It is both right and utterly wrong at the same time. It is right because everything Joffe says is true, as regards the states he name-checks, the rise of a form of ‘panic literature’ that claims the end of democracy and liberalism (as well as the West and Europe), and the undeniable fact that in academia certain ‘hot topics’ invariably attract bandwagon-jumpers. And yet, his analysis misses four vital points: (i) the overall research and policy consensus is that slower, subtler undermining of democratic rule has superseded *coups d'état* and outright breakdown as would-be autocrats' preferred method of consolidating power (discussed below); (ii) analysis of the *trajectory* of democratic governance, both in individual states and globally, is even more important than static analysis; (iii) defining democracy

by minimal criteria is neither sufficient nor rigorous; and (iv) looking at traditional indicators for democratic health can lead to the assertion that there is no problem.

Harking back to historical examples, as Joffe does, tends to elide the patterns of democratic decay today. While alarmism is certainly to be avoided, complacency is also unwarranted: Joffe's analysis chimes with thinkers like Steven Pinker whose contrarian 'Polyanna' analysis is ultimately based on caricaturing democracy, threats to democracy, and those raising the alarm. For instance, [Pinker has been strongly criticised](#) for claiming, in his 2018 book [Enlightenment Now!](#), that two-thirds of the world's population now lives in "free or relatively free societies" based on a data source "that gives Hungary and Poland perfect scores and counts Russia as more democratic than not."

#### **4 Diagnosing Decay: Detective Work v Data-Crunching**

Today's threats to democracy tend to manifest in a far more incremental, subtle and diffuse manner – but their cumulative effect can be to severely degrade the democratic system (as [Wojciech Sadurski noted](#) in the DEM-DEC Launch Podcast, and Kim Scheppele is a master of explaining). It is simply not enough to point to crude criteria and dismiss accounts of serious democratic decay in a wide variety of states worldwide. Partly, the visibility problem for this challenge is that understanding the reality of today's threats requires marshalling a wide array of evidence, a lot of which can seem the preserve of legal-technical elites and extreme policy wonks. This is now the bread-and-butter of today's democracy defenders – at least, those dealing with the subtler forms of democratic decay and erosion (not the most brazen attacks on democratic rule, which still occur). A number of pieces in this Update are relevant to this observation: one finds references to judicial independence hidden in the European Commission's latest country reports from [European Commission reports](#); and a policy brief by Marcin Matczak sifting the [evidence for Poland's democratic crisis](#).

This does not mean we will find democratic decay because we *expect* to find democratic decay – confirmation bias is to be avoided at all costs. And highly data-driven analysis is important: in a new article, [Anna Lührmann and Staffan Lindberg](#) (research leaders at [V-Dem](#), DEM-DEC's newest partner) confirm that a 'third wave of autocratization' is here and tends to affect democracies with "gradual setbacks under a legal façade". However, on a wide-ranging survey of data, they suggest that it involves relatively mild declines and that the global share of democratic countries remains close to its all-time high. They conclude that: "As it was premature to announce the "end of history" in 1992, it is premature to proclaim the "end of democracy" now." The tension arises in that highly qualitative, close, fine-grained of various states often suggests a somewhat darker picture. As I offered in an [ICONnect column](#) (written in Poland in July 2017) on 'diagnosing democratic decay',

[A]ny diagnostic technique must be as clear, rigorous and objective as possible, while still making room for educated guesswork and subjective assessment based on the overall picture. While we cannot attempt to be prophets or psychics, neither should that mean that we give up or take refuge in platitudes ("it's complicated and context-specific!"). We cannot tell where a democratic system will be in ten years'

time, or even two years' time. We often cannot tell whether, at the outset at least, reforms are aimed at a 'bad faith' hollowing out of democratic rule, or a 'good faith' rebalancing or transformation of the system. What we can do is find better ways of amassing our evidence, analysing it, and building our repository of 'past patients' when looking for similar patterns. Diagnostic techniques for degenerative diseases may prove an interesting model to emulate.

## 5 Is More Citizen Participation Really the Answer?

February brought the establishment of the [world's first permanent Citizen Council](#), by the Parliament of the German-speaking community in Belgium. With citizens' assemblies increasingly touted as an antidote to democratic decay, a number of pieces in this Update are key reading. In a new book, [Too Dumb For Democracy](#), David Moscrop makes the case that making good decisions is not impossible for individuals but that "the psychological and political odds are sometimes stacked against us". The US authors of a 2002 book on '[Stealth Democracy](#)' – suggested for addition by DEM-DEC user – offer that most individuals do not actually want to have great involvement in government: "Peoples' wish for the political system is that decision makers be ... non-self-interested, not that they be responsive and accountable to the people's largely nonexistent policy preferences or, even worse, that the people be obligated to participate directly in decision making." In the latest issue of *Democratization*, Frank Hendriks discusses '[democratic innovation](#)', arguing that we need "a practice and theory of democratic innovation reflecting the reality of democratic hybridization", encompassing (quasi-)referenda, collaborative governance through coordinated action, and pragmatic activism . At the risk of making a terrible play on the notion of citizen participation, the jury's still out on this issue(!).

## 6 Returning to the work of C.B. MacPherson on Liberal Democracy

While there are a raft of books on liberalism to be published in 2019 (see e.g. the new addition to the 'Forthcoming Books' section; a [sweeping history of liberalism](#) by James Traub), it remains important to rediscover thinkers from the past who have much to offer contemporary reflections on liberalism. Many thanks to Zoran Oklopcic for recommending, [on Twitter](#) (27 February), the overlooked but highly thought-provoking work on liberal democracy by the influential Canadian political scientist C.B. MacPherson (1911–1987). Two key books are listed overleaf. Zoran in his tweet describes MacPherson's critique of liberal democracy as

A gentlemanly, constructive critique, but ultimately far more subversive than most recent attempts to (re-)weaponize Schmitt, Marx, Laclau or whoever against liberal constitutionalism.

(Note: For more discussion of concepts, see the [Concept Index](#) on DEM-DEC).

### The DEM-DEC Bibliography

The [DEM-DEC Main Bibliography](#) (finalised on 24 June 2018) presents a global range of research on democratic decay. It has a strong focus on research by public

lawyers – spanning constitutional, international and transnational law – but also includes key research from other disciplines, as well as policy texts. Updates to the Bibliography are issued during the first week of every month, based on new publications and suggestions from users of DEM-DEC. All updates should be read in conjunction with the main bibliography on DEM-DEC.

### **Suggest Additions and Subscribe to the Mailing List**

You can suggest additions for the next Update by filling out the [form on DEM-DEC](#), or by emailing items directly at [democraticdecay@gmail.com](mailto:democraticdecay@gmail.com).

You can also Subscribe to the DEM-DEC mailing list to receive updates of all new additions to the Resource by using the Subscription button on the [DEM-DEC homepage](#) or by e-mailing [democraticdecay@gmail.com](mailto:democraticdecay@gmail.com).

### **Become a DEM-DEC Editor**

Interested in helping with production of the Research Update? Email [democraticdecay@gmail.com](mailto:democraticdecay@gmail.com) with a CV/resumé or use the form at the bottom of the [Get Involved](#) section. All positions are on a volunteer basis at present.

### **DEM-DEC Launch Podcast**

Have you listened to the DEM-DEC Launch Podcast yet? The panel discussion to formally launch DEM-DEC on 22 October was broadcast by ABC Radio National's 'Big ideas' programme on 27 and 28 November and is [now available as a podcast](#). The [launch programme and details](#) are on DEM-DEC.

