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DEMOCRATIC DECONSOLIDATION IN DEVELOPED DEMOCRACIES, 1995-2018

by:
Roberto Stefan Foa &
Yascha Mounk

About the Series

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About the Authors

Roberto Stefan Foa is Lecturer in Political Science at the University of Melbourne and a Principle Investigator of the World Values Survey. He writes on comparative survey research, political economy and political institutions.

Yascha Mounk is Associate Professor of the Practice of International Affairs at Johns Hopkins University and outgoing Executive Director at the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. He writes on populism, multiculturalism and the future of liberal democracy.

Abstract

Until recently, many political scientists had believed that the stability of democracy is assured once certain threshold conditions – prosperity, democratic legitimacy, the development of a robust civil society – were attained. Democracy would then be consolidated, and remain stable. In this article we show that levels of support for democratic governance are not stable over time, even among high-income democracies, and have declined in recent years. In contrast to theories of democratic consolidation, we suggest that just as democracy can come to be "the only game in town" through processes of democratic deepening and the broad-based acceptance of democratic institutions, so too a process of democratic deconsolidation can take place as citizens sour on democratic institutions, become more open to authoritarian alternatives, and vote for anti-system parties. Public opinion measures of democratic deconsolidation are strongly associated with subsequent declines in the actual extent of democratic governance and predict not only recent democratic backsliding in transitional democracies, such as Venezuela or Russia, but also anticipated the downgrades in Freedom House scores occurring across a range of western democracies since 2016.

Among the most strongly entrenched ideas in the study of democracy is the theory of "democratic consolidation" (Linz and Stepan, 1996). Since its initial formulation by Linz and Stepan (1996) and further elaboration by scholars such as Diamond (1997) and Schedler (1998); Schedler (2001), political scientists have offered a range of criteria by which we can judge democratic institutions to be "consolidated," or secure: the deepening of democratic legitimacy among elite actors such as the army, heads of civil service, or leading politicians (Linz and Stepan, 1996; Przeworkski, 1991; O'Donnell, 1996), the procedural acceptance of democratic rules (Diamond, 1999; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018), or the expanding role of civil society organizations in the political process (Levitsky and Way, 2006; Paxton, 2002), and the diffusion of liberal values throughout society (Inglehart, 1988, 1997). At the root of each of these approaches, however, is the implicit premise that once the relevant conditions are fulfilled, democratic institutions will prove durable – and the subsequent erosion of civil liberties or democratic rights comparatively unlikely.

By contrast, in this article we argue that democratic consolidation may not be a one-way street, and that developed democracies have experienced a form of "deconsolidation" that can be measured across a range of indicators that are predictive of democratic erosion. Just as democracy becomes "the only game in town" when most citizens develop a firm commitment to a democratic form of government, reject authoritarian alternatives, and refuse to vote for anti-system parties, so too it can cease to be so once the legitimacy of democratic governance becomes steadily undermined. Over time, a populace that was passionately attached to democracy can start to feel more indifferent or ambivalent about the virtues of democratic rule, and citizens who once adamantly rejected the idea of military or one-party government can become open to non-democratic regime forms. Taking advantage of new survey data from 2017 that replicates items in the World Values Survey from 1995-2014, we show that a mild form of democratic deconsolidation has already occurred in a significant number of developed democracies – that in a number of cases now has been followed by actual slippages in respect for political rights and civil liberties that are reflected by falling scores on measures of liberal democracy, including in supposedly consolidated democracies such as France, Poland, Italy and the United States (Table 1).

Table 1: DOWNGRADES TO FREEDOM HOUSE SCORES, OECD MEMBER STATES - 2007-2018

Country	Period	Downgrade	Reason
United States	2018-	-1 (Political Rights)	Violation of ethical standards, reduced transparency
Israel	2018-	-1 (Civil Liberties)	Restrictions on NGOs
France	2017-	-1 (Civil Liberties)	State of emergency, civil liberty violations
Poland	2017-	-1 (Civil Liberties)	Govt. attempts to control judiciary, media, civil service
South Korea	2014-	-1 (Political Rights)	Corruption, political interference by intelligence service
Italy	2013	-1 (Political Rights)	Grand corruption
Italy	2009-2011	-1 (Civil Liberties)	Media concentration under Berlusconi govt.
Turkey	2013-	-3 (Civil Liberties) -2 (Political Rights)	Direct appointment of majors, centralization in presidency, Harassment of NGOs and arrests
Hungary	2012-	-2 (Civil Liberties) -1 (Political Rights)	Media restrictions, civil society intimidation, restrictions on opposition
Greece	2012-	-1 (Political Rights)	External influence over economic policy
Latvia	2011-	-1 (Civil Liberties)	Threats to press freedom
Bulgaria	2009-	-1 (Political Rights)	Corruption and organized crime
Mexico	2007-	-1 (Civil Liberties) -1 (Political Rights)	Violence against journalists; breakdown of rule of law

Notes: Data from Freedom House (2007-2018). OECD Member States as of present membership. Over the last decade, no less than 12 OECD member states have experienced a downgrade in Freedom House ratings for political rights and civil liberties. Whereas during the period from 2007 to 2012 these occurred in cases such as Hungary, Turkey, or Greece - which by and large, were not beforehand considered as fully consolidated democracies - in more recent years downgrades have occurred in France (2017), Poland (2017), Israel (2018), and the United States (2018).

Accordingly, the rest of this article proceeds as follows. In the first section, we discuss theories of democratic consolidation, before developing a conceptual account of democratic deconsolidation in the second section. If a country is consolidated when democracy becomes "the only game in town," then it starts to deconsolidate when alternatives to democracy again become thinkable. This needs to be measured along three dimensions: support for democracy as a form of government; openness to illiberal and

non-democratic alternatives; and the extent of support for anti-system parties and candidates. The second section then presents preliminary evidence to show that democratic deconsolidation, thus understood, has in fact occurred in many developed democracies. After decades of rising support for democratic forms of government, views about democracy have started to deteriorate over the past ten years and anti-democratic political actors have become more powerful. In the third section, we show that the process of democratic deconsolidation has historically preceded a decline in the stability of democratic institutions. Time-series models show that, even after holding constant for other important factors like economic growth, a fall in measures of democratic consolidation precedes falls in democracy scores five years later. Democratic decosolidation is strongly associated with future declines in democratic governance – making it all the more concerning that a process of democratic deconsolidation has occurred in democracies which were once considered as fully consolidated, such as France, Italy, or the United States. Finally, in the concluding section we discuss the implication of these results for democratic stability in western democracies, which we suggest implies not a universal or a comprehensive democratic backsliding among developed democracies, but rather, the onset of a period of greater instability and contestation, which may result either in an eventual "re-consolidation" or a negative cycle of deterioration.

1 The Theory of Democratic Consolidation

Why have theories of democratic consolidation typically viewed democratic institutions as self-sustaining? While in principle the theory of democratic consolidation allows for movements both towards *and* away from democratic stability, in practice, an underlying premise of the consolidation literature is that, following an initial period of transition, democracy becomes secure due to the endogeneity of democracy and its societal preconditions. Svolik (2013) for example argues new democracies can end up on a positive cycle where rising expectations of government lead to improved delivery and a reinforced faith in democratic performance; while Fuchs-Schündeln and Schündeln (2015) and Neundorf (2010) argue that length of time spent under democracy leads to

rising democratic support. Similarly, a range of theories in the civil society literature argue *both* that experience of democracy leads to the strengthening of civil society networks and participation (Paxton, 2002; Foa and Ekiert, 2017; Bernhard and Karakoç, 2007), *and* that these in turn reinforce democratic performance and legitimacy (Welzel, Inglehart and Deutsch, 2005), again, leading to a positive feedback loop. Finally, a third set of theories argue that it is the combination of democracy and economic conditions which make democracy self-sustaining: Inglehart and Welzel (2005) for example argue that economic development leads to the spread of more liberal values which increase the strength of democratic institutions, which may in turn provide a supportive environment for the spread of such beliefs (Dahlum and Knutsen, 2015) and further economic development (Gerring et al., 2005), while Boix (2003) and Acemoglu and Robinson (2006) argue that the key precondition for democratic stability is income equality, but stable democratic institutions lead to income redistribution, and hence eventual regime stability.

The empirical expectation produced by such theories is that in high-income democracies with a long experience of democratic governance, the practice of and respect for democratic institutions can be considered secure. Until recently this assumption was taken for granted, supported by studies such as Przeworski and Limongi (1997), who showed that by the late 1990s no country with a GDP per capita of over $6,000 that had seen two transitions of power through free and fair elections had ever collapsed. Yet in more recent years, the surge of populist, anti-system parties and candidates, as well as a growing number of episodes of democratic backsliding at higher income thresholds, has led political scientists to consider anew the scope conditions which bound the stability of wealthy, consolidated democracies (Persily, 2017; Galston, 2017; Gilens and Page, 2014; Berman, 2012; Kubik, 2012). Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) for example, highlight the role of informal institutions in maintaining democratic stability, arguing that the postwar stability of western democracies has been the result of "mutual tolerance" among elites and forbearance from undemocratic behaviours, both of which have eroded due to rising partisanship and weakened elite commitment to democratic rules. Fukuyama (2016) and Inglehart (2016) have argued that U.S. democracy in particular has been in a condition of "political decay" due to rising income inequality, decreased democratic responsiveness,

and institutional gridlock. Public opinion scholars have shown that in most of North America and Western Europe, the legitimacy of democratic institutions has been in long-term decline, with political parties, politicians, and even courts and the media less trusted than at any time since opinion polling began (Dalton, 2004; Norris, 1999, 2002; Hetherington, 2005), while even support for democracy itself appears to have weakened (Armingeon and Guthmann, 2014; Foa and Mounk, 2017*a*). Finally, a number of developed democracies have now been downgraded on comparative indexes of democratic governance, such as the civil rights and political liberties measures published annually by Freedom House. While in the early years of the twenty-first century, such episodes of democratic slippage among members of the OECD – a club of high-income democracies – were restricted to relatively new democracies such as Hungary, Mexico, or Greece, in more recent years they have also been observed in "consolidated" democracies such as France, Israel, and the United States (Table 1). This re-opens the question of democratic consolidation among developed democracies, and sets up a new debate: can established democracies also "de-consolidate" (Howe, 2017; Shin, 2017; Moloney and Krislov, 2016)?

2 What is Democratic Deconsolidation?

If democratic consolidation is the process by which democracy becomes the only game in town, democratic deconsolidation is the process by which alternatives to democracy become possible. But what does it mean to be the only game in town? And how might one go about measuring, in any given country, whether or not democracy is in fact deconsolidating?

It might be tempting to think that we already have an empirical answer to this question. After all, an extensive research program has attempted to measure the degree of democracy in countries around the world. Comparative indexes such as those of Freedom House and the Polity Project assess the degree to which countries engage in formal democratic practices like free and fair elections, universal suffrage, and open political campaigning as well as the degree to which they respect broader civil liberties such as the freedom of assembly, speech, and privacy (Freedom House, 1972-2018; Polity

Project, 2015). Democratic deconsolidation, it might be thought, occurs quite simply when a country experiences a drop on such measures.

However, as scholars such as Fishman (2016) have argued, it is a conceptual mistake to conflate democratic consolidation with respect for formal democratic rules (Fishman, 2016; Diamond, 1999). Both conceptually and empirically, it is possible at a given time for a country to follow democratic procedures without being a consolidated democracy. In the 1980s for example Venezuela enjoyed maximum scores on the Freedom House indexes of political rights and civil liberties, and yet its fully democratic practices were not rooted in a similarly strong attachment to democracy, either in the general public or in political and economic elites. This explains why, in 1992, the Venezuelan military attempted a coup against the country's democratically elected administration. A broader assessment of indicators of democratic legitimacy and the internalization of democratic norms would have suggested a far more nuanced assessment of the degree of Venezuela's democratic consolidation (Foa and Mounk, 2017*b*).

It follows that existing comparative indexes of democracy merely show the degree to which democratic rules are followed at present. The degree of democratic consolidation, by contrast, captures how contested the democratic system is, and thereby offers an indication of how likely it is to persist into the future. Two countries might afford their citizens the same, high degree of individual freedom, be governed by the rule of law to the same extent, and afford their citizens the same chance of changing their respective government through the ballot box. And yet, it may be more likely in one than in the other country that these features will one day be undermined, because in one case democratic ideals and norms have acquired widespread legitimacy, whereas in the other case they have not.

If democratic deconsolidation and the quality of democratic government differ conceptually, it follows that we need a different set of empirical measures to gage whether or not democratic deconsolidation is in fact occurring in any given case. Drawing both on some of the dominant definitions of democratic consolidation and on some of the ways in which political scientists have tried to measure this process in the past, we therefore

suggest that we need to look at empirical indicators that are plausibly related to the question of whether or not democracy is "the only game in town." In particular, we look at i) the degree of express commitment to democratic rule among a country's population; ii) the degree to which a country's citizenry rejects alternatives to democracy; and iii) the political power held by anti-system parties aiming to undermine or delegitimate key components of liberal democracy.

i) The degree of express commitment to a democratic form of government

If democracy is to be the only game in town, citizens need to be committed to their democratic institutions. But while western democracies have seen widespread declines in public trust in politicians, parliament, and the press in recent years, this might merely reflect the rise of a citizenry that has higher expectations and is more critically engaged; to the extent that citizens continue to view multiparty democracy as the "least bad" method of governing the country, democratic legitimacy remains high (Dalton, 2004; Pew Research Center, 2017). To measure the true extent of citizens' commitment to democratic institutions, we therefore follow Easton's distinction between "government legitimacy," or support for the group currently running a country's institutions, and "regime legitimacy," or support for those institutions themselves. (Easton, 1965, 1975). Our first indicator of democratic consolidation looks exclusively at indicators of democratic "regime" legitimacy, such as the degree to which the citizens of a country support democratic institutions, or report that it matters to them to live in a democracy.

ii) The degree to which citizens reject alternatives to democracy

If democracy is to be the only game in town, citizens also need to be uninterested in playing any other games. The degree to which citizens reject authoritarian alternatives, whether in the form of monarchy, one-party rule, military dictatorship or theocracy is therefore a second way to measure democratic consolidation: it is one thing for individuals to grow cynical of the value or performance of democratic institutions, yet quite another when they are willing to consider explicit alternatives to democratic rule. To be sure, not every survey respondent who claims to believe that army rule is a desirable form of government is in fact hoping for a military coup. And yet, a marked rise in the share of a country's citizens who express such sentiments bodes ill for the future of the democratic system. Indeed, army generals in countries with a long history of military

political intervention, like Thailand or Pakistan, have often sought to gage the degree of "tacit consent" for military rule before staging a coup. What's more, even in countries with a long history of peaceful electoral competition, military intervention becomes more likely once disillusionment with democratic institutions becomes widespread, as occurred in Venezuela in 1992. Express support for authoritarian alternatives to democracy is therefore a second useful indicator of democratic deconsolidation.

iii) The political power held by anti-system parties and movements

Finally, if democracy is to be the only game in town, all major political players must be committed to abide by its rules. The degree to which influential political stakeholders, including especially the holders of executive office and the legislators represented in national parliaments, are committed to the norms and institutions of liberal democracy is therefore a third important indicator of democratic consolidation (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004). In some countries, all major political parties once had a deep and explicit commitment to liberal democracy. But subsequently either anti-system parties managed to attract a significant level of support or anti-system politicians managed to capture formerly pro-system parties. Where this is the case, a large number of citizens has not only lost faith in democratic process and is actively considering or supporting an alternative systemic arrangements, but major political actors have either conquered power or have the imminent potential to assume political office and begin undermining democratic rules, norms and procedures. The rise of anti-system parties and movements is therefore a third indicator of democratic deconsolidation, and one especially pertinent to recent democratic backsliding – which, as Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt argue, has occurred largely endogenously through the election of anti-system politicians, rather than exogenously as it had in earlier eras, through international pressure or military coups (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Levitsky and Loxton, 2013).

3 Have Developed Democracies Deconsolidated?

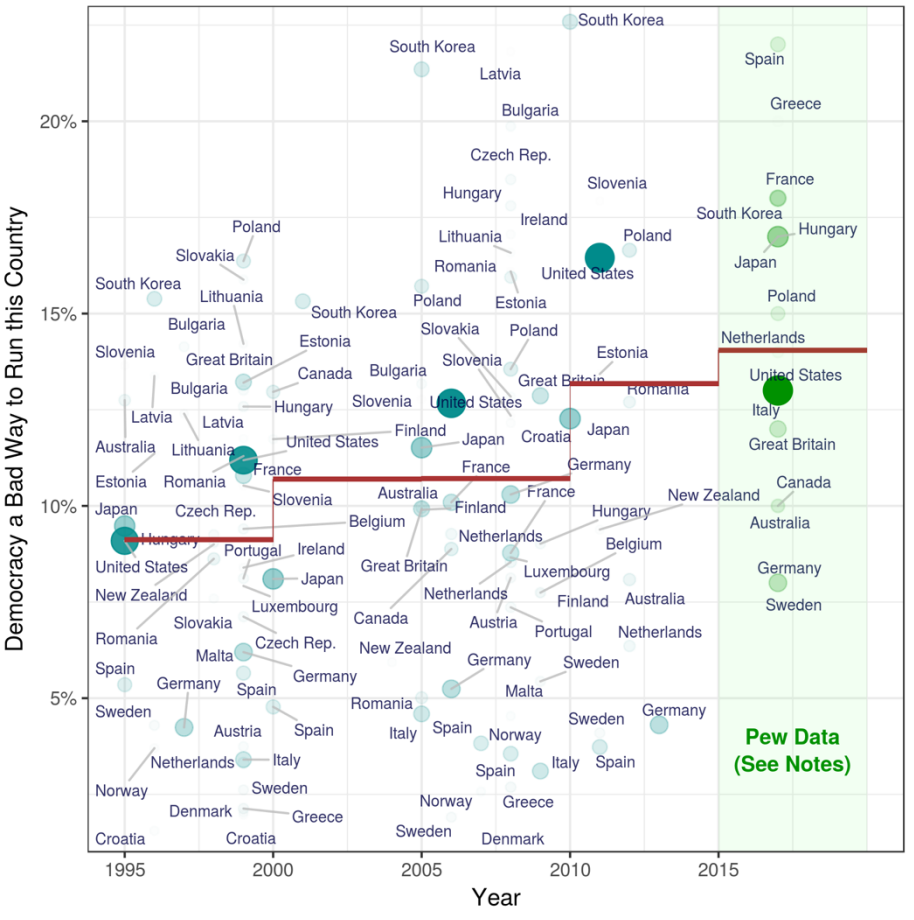
It is one thing to introduce the concept of democratic deconsolidation; it is another to show that democratic deconsolidation has in fact occurred. So is there any evidence to suggest that formerly consolidated democracies were undergoing democratic

deconsolidation during recent decades? A preliminary review of the major indicators of democratic deconsolidation suggests a striking answer to this question: even if we restrict the sample to the "least likely cases" – that is to say, the wealthy, democratic countries in North America, Europe and the Asia Pacific that are thought to be especially stable – a subtle yet steady reversal in democratic consolidation has occurred during recent decades.

Consider, first, the number of citizens who believe the democratic political system is the best form of government (Figure 1). Taking the entire sample of developed democracies that have been included in the European and World Values Surveys consistently from the 1990s to the present, the population-weighted average proportion of respondents expressing a negative view of democratic governance has risen in each wave of surveys, from 8.8 percent in 1995-7 to 13.2 percent in 2010-14, and up to 14.1 percent responding negatively to a modified question formulation that was fielded by the Pew Research Center in 2017. This subtle upward trend masks, however, larger increases in individual cases: with substantial increases in the United States, South Korea, France, Spain and Greece.[1]

1 Within the World Values Survey series, the figure for the number of Americans who believe democracy a "bad" system for running the country has increased steadily since the mid-1990s, from 9.1 percent to 16.5 percent. In South Korea the increase has been from 15.4 percent to 22.6 percent. In France, 18 percent of respondents last year responded that a "system where representatives elected by citizens decide what becomes law" would be a "bad" way of running the country (up from 10.8 percent in 1999 who responded that a "democratic system" would be a fairly bad or very bad way of running the country); in Spain, the figure was 22 percent (up from 5.47 percent in 1995), and in Greece, 20 percent (up from 2.1 percent in 1999).

Figure 1: RISING SHARE OF RESPONDENTS WHO STATE THAT HAVING A DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM IS A "BAD" OR "VERY BAD" WAY TO RUN THIS COUNTRY, 1995-2012.



Notes: Developed Democracies: 1990 OECD Member States, plus Member States of the European Union (EU). Source is the World Values Survey, waves 3 to 6 (1995-2014), and the Pew survey for 2017. The Pew data are indicated in green due to a minor difference in question wording: in the EVS/WVS series, respondents were asked whether having a "democratic system" is a very good, fairly good, fairly bad, or very bad way of running the country. In the Pew data, respondents were asked whether having a "democratic system where representatives elected by citizens decide what becomes law" would be a good or bad way of running the country. In order to ensure comparable country coverage over time, the country sample includes only countries surveyed in both the most recent 2010-14 wave and between 1995-2000. Averages by group and wave of the World Values Survey, weighted by country population, are indicated by horizontal bar lines.

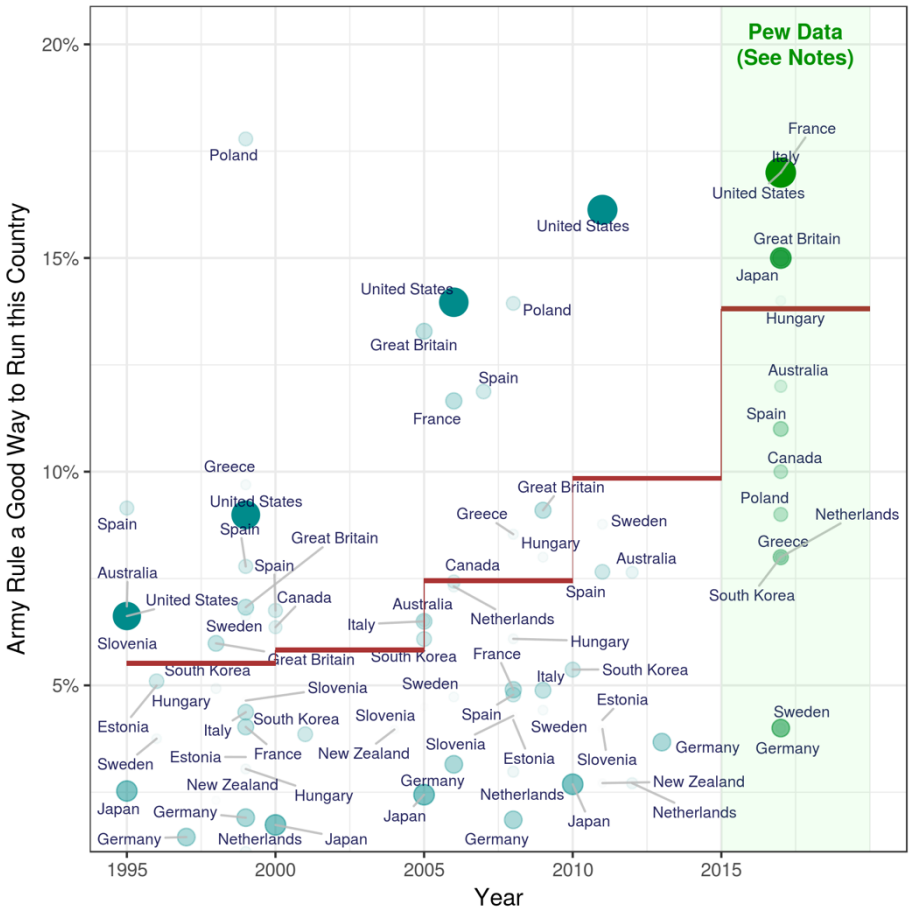
This development is echoed, second, by a somewhat larger fall in the proportion of western citizens who reject straightforwardly authoritarian alternatives to democracy like military rule. Even in countries in which civil-military relations have long been stable, and the prospect of a military coup seems remote, a growing share of voters appears open to seeing the army play a larger political role. This is true both when we compare younger to older citizens, and when we trace the development of sentiment about military rule over time (Figure 2). (Foa and Mounk, 2017*b*, 2017*a*; Howe, 2017). Across developed

democracies as a whole, since the mid-1990s a rising minority of citizens state that it would be a "good" thing for the army to rule: from 6.6 percent to 17 percent in the United States, from 4 percent to 17 percent in France, from 4.4 percent to 17 percent in Italy, from 6 percent to 15 percent in the United Kingdom, from 2.5 percent to 15 percent in Japan, and from 1.5 percent to 4 percent in Germany.[2] Overall, the proportion of citizens among the 8 largest developed democracies – the United States, Japan, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Italy, South Korea, and Spain – expressing positive sentiment towards military rule has increased from 4.9 percent in the mid-1990s to 14.3 percent by 2017. Nor is this increase simply due to the disproportionate size of the United States in the country sample: even with the United States excluded from the sample, the proportion of population among the world's eight largest developed democracies expressing such a viewpoint increases by a similar magnitude.[3]

2 Among other developed democracies, the picture is similar: 5 percent to 8 percent in South Korea, 9 percent to 11 pecent in Spain, 6.4 percent to 10 percent in Canada, 1.1 percent to 8 percent in the Netherlands, 6.8 percent to 12 percent in Australia, and 0.5 percent to 10 percent in Israel. Only in Sweden (3.8 percent to 4 percent) has the level remained approximately stable; and in no major developed democracy has the figure declined (World Values Survey, 1981–2014; Pew Research Center, 2017).

3 From 4 percent in the 1990s to 12.6 percent today, while the proportion of support for army rule increases from 4.3 percent to 11.5 percent.

Figure 2: RISING SHARE OF RESPONDENTS WHO STATE THAT HAVING THE "ARMY RULE" WOULD BE A "GOOD" OR "VERY GOOD" WAY TO RUN THIS COUNTRY, 1995-2012.



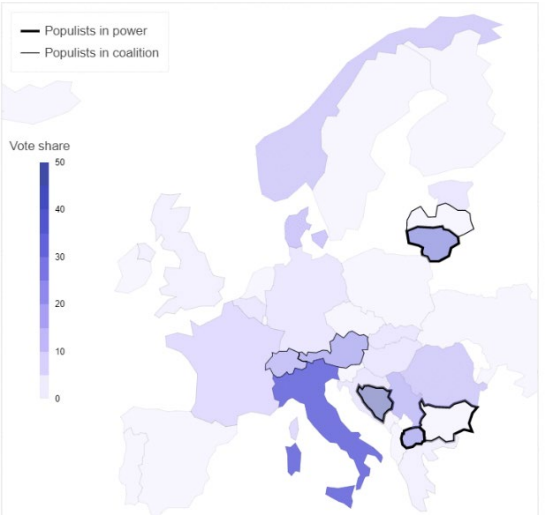
Notes: Source is the combined European and World Values Survey, waves 3 to 6, for the period 1995-2014 and Pew for 2017. In order to ensure comparable country coverage over time, the country sample includes only countries surveyed in both the most recent 2010-14 wave and between 1995-2000. 5-year averages calculated using weighted means by country population. "Developed democracies" refers to 1990 OECD members and current member states of the European Union. Averages by group and wave of the World Values Survey, weighted by country population, are indicated by horizontal lines.

Finally, an even more striking picture emerges when we look at the success of anti-system parties in seemingly consolidated democracies. Recent years have seen a quick rise in the success of populist parties, both on the far right and on the far left of the political spectrum. As scholars such as Mudde (2007) and Müller (2016) have argued, many of these movements need to be considered anti-system because they seek to undermine rival power centers like an independent judiciary; they reject basic rights like the freedom of the press; or they seek to discriminate against minorities, for example by restricting the freedom of worship of Muslim immigrants. Recent typologies of these parties, such as Pappas (2017), note how ostensibly "democratic" populist parties, such as Hungary's

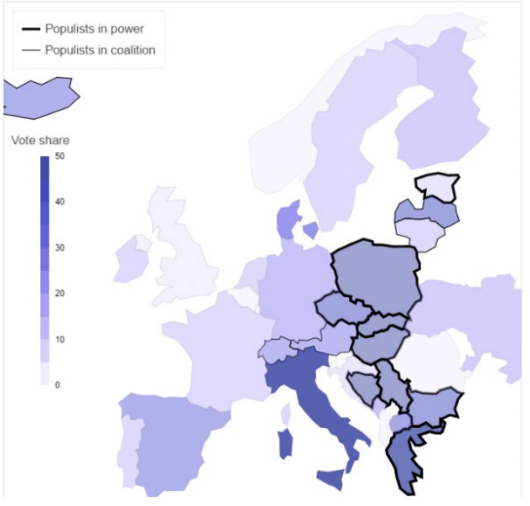
Fidesz or the Polish PiS, have a similar potential to undermine liberal institutions as overtly antidemocratic movements. Of late, political scientists have come to the same conclusion about the far-left movements that have gained in prominence in Southern European countries. As authors such as Stavrakakis and Katsambekis (2014) or Pappas (2014) argue, for example, parties such as the *Movimento Cinque Stelle* or *Syriza* should be considered anti-system because they have a narrow conception of "the people" that is exclusive of a broad class of perceived elites and are willing to undermine independent media, civil society organizations, and parliamentary procedure when these become obstacles to their goals.

A classification of populist, anti-system parties and movements across European democracies based on such analyses is shown in Figure 3, which displays both the rising vote share for such parties and their position within government in 2000 and 2017 compared. Since 2000, the absolute number of populist parties in Europe has almost doubled, from 33 to 63, while their share of the popular vote has risen to 24.1 percent (Eiermann, Mounk and Gultchin, 2017). Consistent with studies of democratic instability in the inter-war years, the countries in Europe most severely affected by this development have been new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe - yet also in Western Europe anti-system parties have increased their share of the vote and, in some cases, their position within government (Cornell, Møller and Skaaning, 2017).

Figure 3: SPREAD OF ANTI-SYSTEM PARTIES ACROSS EUROPE, 2000-2017.



(a) Populist Party Vote Share, 2000



(b) Populist Party Vote Share, 2017

Source: Eiermann et al. (2017). Shading represents the proportion of votes for populist parties in the most recent legislative election, while the political status of populist parties (in a coalition or as the primary party of government) is indicated by the country borderline. Since 2000, the absolute number of populist parties in Europe has almost doubled, from 33 to 63, while their share of the popular vote has risen to 24.1 percent. Anti-system parties now form a part of the government of most Central and Eastern European democracies, as well as several countries in Western Europe.

4 The Effects of Democratic Deconsolidation

The decline in support for democracy presented in Figure 1 and the increase in support for authoritarian alternatives shown in Figures 2 and 3 may appear to be quite modest. It is enough to demonstrate that democratic deconsolidation, as we have defined it, is in fact taking place in these countries. But this leaves open the question of whether or not the degree of this democratic deconsolidation is truly significant. Is a drop in the number of

respondents who approve of having a democratic system from 80 percent to 73 percent a reason to worry about the future stability of democracy, or confirmation of enduring widespread public support for democratic institutions?

A priori, there are theoretical reasons to assume that even a moderate erosion in democratic support may have damaging consequences for regime stability. Many of the citizens who express support for democratic governance may have a weak or even illiberal understanding of democracy, and thus, in fact, prove open to mobilization by anti-system politicians (Moreno, 2001; Shin and Wells, 2005; Shin and Kim, 2016; Schedler and Sarsfield, 2007). And ever since Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan's *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*, political scientists have considered how even relatively minor erosion in democratic legitimacy can open the door to institutional erosion – not because publics opt to replace democratic governance, but rather, because even with a relatively shallow weakening of democratic legitimacy, elite actors become emboldened to violate democratic norms without fear of facing widespread opposition (Linz and Stepan, 1979).

Ultimately, however, the answer to this question must be empirical. How much of an erosion in democratic regime support poses a threat to institutional stability? If a change in the indicators of democratic consolidation of magnitude a at time t has historically been associated with a drop in democratic rule in a particular country at time $t + 1$, then this degree of democratic deconsolidation constitutes an important explanatory variable. We show that this is indeed the case: democratic deconsolidation of the magnitude which a lot of supposedly consolidated democracies in North America, Western Europe and the Pacific have experienced in the last decade have historically predicted an imminent drop in the extent of democratic rule.

In this section, we therefore test whether or not democratic deconsolidation, as measured by our empirical indicators, has a causal effect on the quality of democratic governance. Using time-series regression, we investigate whether the constitutive elements of our concept of democratic deconsolidation predict a deterioration in the extent of democratic governance across both democratic and semi-democratic regimes. Do low support for

democracy and a high openness to authoritarian alternatives predict subsequent moves away from democracy? The answer to all three questions, we find, is a clear yes.

The European and World Values Surveys first fielded a question on whether having a democratic political system is a "good" or a "bad" way to run the country in 1995, since which time, a total of 103 country surveys have been conducted that include this item. Among these cases, the highest levels of skepticism towards democratic governance were registered in Russia in 1995 (where 43 per cent stated that having a democratic system is a "fairly" or "very" bad of running the country) and in Pakistan in 1997 (where 32 per cent stated such an opinion). In both instances, high levels of public skepticism regarding the value and purpose of democracy prefigured democratic backsliding. Within five years of the Russian survey, Vladimir Putin was elected Russia's president; while in Pakistan, Pervez Musharraf assumed power in a military coup that was broadly unopposed within his country (Diamond, 2000). Other societies with widespread and negative views toward democratic governance also experienced democratic backsliding and the election of authoritarian populists: among the other cases in which democratic skepticism was highest over the course of the survey series we can find Belarus surveyed in 1996 – two years following the election of Alexander Lukashenko – as well as Iran in 2000, before the victory of conservative populist Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

The relationship between public loss of faith in democratic institutions and reversals in democratic transition can be demonstrated in a more systematic way by using time-series models that estimate the association between public dissatisfaction with democratic governance and subsequent changes in ratings of democratic institutions. As a measure of faith in democracy we use two items from the World Values Survey that have been asked consistently since their introduction in 1995, namely i) whether respondents believe "having a democratic political system" is a "fairly bad" or "very bad" way to run their country, and ii) whether it would be preferable to "have the army rule" (World Values Survey, 1981–2014). For the second item on preference for "army rule," we only include democracies in the sample, defined as countries which score more than 7 on the combined Freedom House scores. As a measure of democratic institutions we use the combined

Freedom House score for Political Rights and Civil Liberties (Freedom House, 1972-2018). Time-series models are modeled using the lagged dependent variable, in the form:

$$D_{ij} \sim D_{ij\text{-}5} + P_{ij} + X_{ij\text{-}5}$$

Where D is the level of democracy in country i in year j, is the level of democracy in country i five years prior (the lagged dependent variable), P is the level of public support for (or opposition to) democracy five years prior, and X is a vector of control variables that includes the level of economic development (lagged GDP per capita), measures of economic crisis (the lag rate of inflation and the rate of GDP growth in the previous 5 years), resource dependence (measured by the five year lagged proportion of GDP accounted for by natural resource rents), and a period effect (the year of the survey).

The first set of results are displayed in Table 2, which shows a variety of model configurations to test the robustness of the association between democratic disillusionment and the actual maintenance of democratic institutions. In each of the models (1-6), the proportion of the public stating that democracy is a "fairly bad" or "very bad" way to run the country is significantly associated with less democratic outcomes five years later: this is true both in the minimal configuration which excludes controls, and in fully saturated specifications that simultaneously control for recent economic shocks, natural resource dependency, and the period effect. The estimated effects imply that for each additional 10 percent of the population that considers democracy a "bad" way to govern the country, the combined Freedom House country score is reduced by an estimated 0.4 to 0.6 points on a 12-point scale. While a negative period effect is found for the period as a whole, the effect of public skepticism regarding democracy as a system of government remains robust to its inclusion (Models 2-6).

Table 2: TIME-SERIES MODELS OF DEMOCRATIC DECONSOLIDATION

Deconsolidation Measure: Public Support for Democracy as a "Way to Run this Country"
Dependent Variable: Combined Freedom House Scores.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Combined Freedom House Scores, Lag 5 Years	0.869*** (0.037)	0.875*** (0.036)	0.872*** (0.05)	0.907*** (0.042)	0.876*** (0.039)	0.88*** (0.05)
Democratic System "Bad" Way to Run this Country, Lag 5 Years	-4.135* (1.986)	-5.214** (1.994)	-5.823** (2.057)	-6.365** (2.1)	-5.35* (2.086)	-6.088*** (2.163)
Period Effect (Year of Survey)	-	-0.072* (0.028)	-0.092** (0.03)	-0.1** (0.031)	-0.074* (0.03)	-0.099** (0.032)
GDP per Capita, Lag 5 Years	-	-	0.009 (0.011)	-	-	0.012 (0.011)
Natural Resource Rents as % GDP, Lag 5 Years	-	-	0.02† (0.011)	0.023* (0.011)	-	0.022* (0.011)
Rate of Inflation, Lag 5 Years	-	-	-	-	-	0.001 (0.002)
GDP Growth Rate, Past 5 Years	-	-	-	0.805 (0.925)	0.207 (0.903)	1.095 (0.973)
Intercept	1.841*** (0.38)	145.683* (56.595)	186.64** (59.418)	201.578** (61.966)	150.739* (60.745)	198.632** (63.311)
N	142	142	136	134	138	133
Adj.	0.80	0.81	0.81	0.81	0.80	0.81

Notes: *** significant at the 0.001 level; ** significant at the 0.01 level; significant at the 0.05 level; † significant at the 0.1 level. All indicators are from the World Development Indicators, with exception of Freedom House Scores (Freedom House 1972-2018) and survey indicators (World Values Survey 2014).

What about openness to authoritarian alternatives to democracy? Table 3 shows the same set of models as presented in Table 2, but using support for "army rule" instead of negative attitudes to democracy as a predictor of less democratic outcomes five years later. We find that openness towards authoritarian alternatives is even more strongly associated with actual reductions in ratings of democratic performance five years later, both in a minimal configuration excluding controls, and in a fully saturated specification that simultaneously controls for recent economic shocks, natural resource dependency, and the period effect. The estimated effects indicated by the coefficients imply that for each additional 10 percent of the population that considers "army rule" a "good" way to govern the country, the combined Freedom House country score is reduced by 1.5 to 2.5 points on a 12-point scale. Meanwhile, other variables are not robust to the inclusion of

the variable for the proportion of the public voicing support for "army rule." In fact, openness to authoritarian alternatives to democracy is the only significant precursor to democratic breakdown when included with any combination of GDP growth, income per capita, inflation, natural resource rents, or the period effect.

Table 3: TIME-SERIES MODELS OF DEMOCRATIC DECONSOLIDATION

Deconsolidation Measure: "Army Rule" as a "Good" Way to "Run this Country" Dependent Variable: Combined Freedom House Scores.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Combined Freedom House Scores, Lag 5 Years	0.756*** (0.072)	0.797*** (0.075)	0.766*** (0.094)	0.844*** (0.082)	0.839*** (0.079)	0.781*** (0.101)
Army Rule a "Good" Way to Run this Country, Lag 5 Years	-2.462*** (0.651)	-2.127** (0.676)	-1.625* (0.724)	-1.884** (0.701)	-2.009** (0.686)	-1.419† (0.781)
Period Effect (Year of Survey)	-	-0.032 (0.02)	-0.031 (0.021)	-0.027 (0.022)	-0.026 (0.021)	-0.031 (0.024)
GDP per Capita, Lag 5 Years	-	-	0.01 (0.008)	-	-	0.016† (0.009)
Natural Resource Rents as % GDP, Lag 5 Years	-	-	-0.009 (0.011)	-0.007 (0.011)	-	-0.008 (0.011)
Rate of Inflation, Lag 5 Years	-	-	-	-	-	0.032 (0.085)
GDP Growth Rate in Past 5 Years	-	-	-	0.426 (0.797)	0.457 (0.764)	1.351 (0.979)
Intercept	3.008*** (0.817)	67.445† (39.549)	64.195 (40.992)	55.718 (44.036)	53.816 (42.611)	62.551 (47.404)
N	87	87	83	81	83	75
Adj.	0.701	0.707	0.719	0.721	0.722	0.726

Notes: *** significant at the 0.001 level; ** significant at the 0.01 level; significant at the 0.05 level; † significant at the 0.1 level. All indicators are from the World Development Indicators, with exception of Freedom House Scores (Freedom House 1972-2018) and survey indicators (World Values Survey 2014).

The strong association between democratic discontent and subsequent slides in democratic governance raises an important question about the causes of democratic deconsolidation. Survey measures of public skepticism regarding the merits of democratic governance may be considered a general indicator of unobserved

heterogeneity, indicating a diffuse problem in perceived democratic performance. To understand the origins of these deficiencies, scholars will need to go beyond a range of explanations that are widely regarded as plausible, yet seemingly contradicted by our findings. Models 1-6 in Table 2 and 3 include controls for economic shocks (inflation and economic growth), the period effect, levels of income per capita, as well as levels of resource dependency. Since the effect of democratic skepticism upon declines in measures of democratic institutions remains robust in all specifications, this implies that dissatisfaction with democratic performance cannot straightforwardly be explained as a function of "pocketbook" considerations based on a country's economic performance. Nor can the recent rise in democratic disillusionment be seen as a simple period effect brought about by important one-time events like the 2008 financial crisis. While public dissatisfaction with democratic institutions may be the most proximate determinant of rising systemic instability, our analysis is therefore a starting point and a broader invitation for scholars of comparative politics to consider, in the coming years, the deeper causes of democratic deconsolidation. To do so will require a substantial research program, and goes well beyond the scope of this paper. Yet at the present time a burgeoning academic research agenda is already at work to investigate the relative contribution of such varied factors as economic inequality, party polarization, and rising security concerns upon the extent and breadth of public support for liberal democratic governance (Uslaner, 2016; Han and Chang, 2016; Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; Merolla and Zechmeister, 2009).

5 Discussion

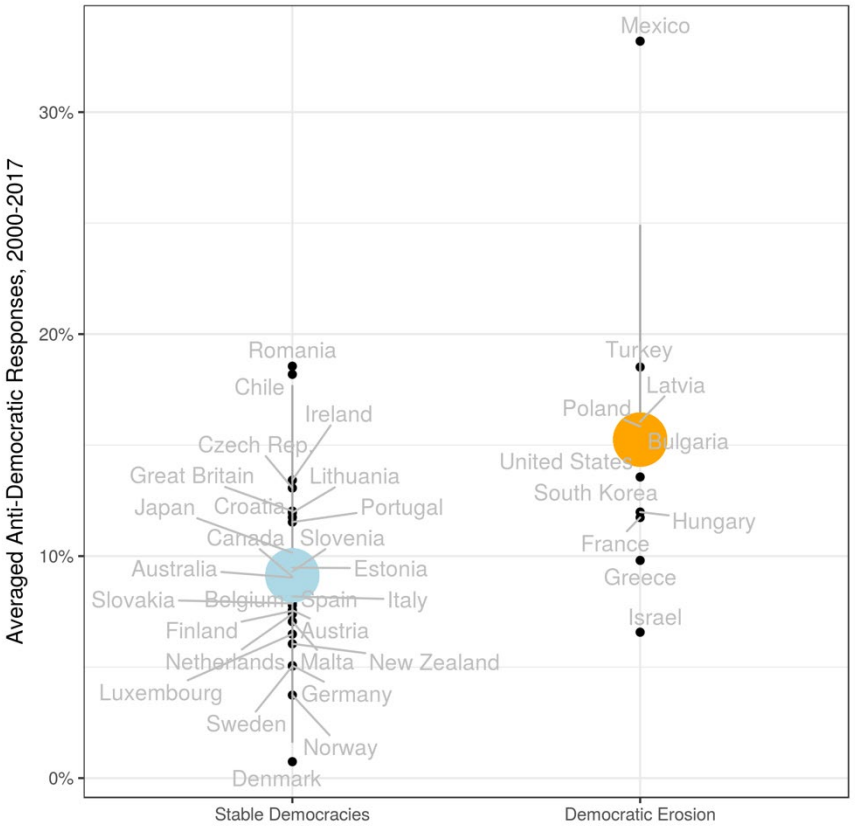
What are the implications of these results for democratic stability in western countries? The -2.462 coefficient in Table 3 (Model 1) for the effect of authoritarian attitudes implies that, across 26 developed democracies which together have an average 10 percentage point increase in the proportion of respondents expressing a favorable view towards having the "army rule," there would be a 0.2 point drop in average combined Freedom House scores. This is consistent with observing 1 in 5 developed democracies subsequently experience a moderate (1-point) erosion in civil liberties, or, several

countries witnessing a larger drop. Similarly, the -6.088 coefficient in Table 2 (Model 6) for the effect of rising skepticism of the value of a democratic system, implies that the average 3.2 percentage point rise in the proportion of respondents in western societies with such a viewpoint would be associated with a future 0.19-point drop in average Freedom House scores. This, again, would be associated with a similar outcome: a 1-point drop in Freedom House scores affecting 1 in 5 western democracies, or, a larger fall among fewer cases.

Are such declines possible? The strongest evidence that such declines are conceivable in western democracies is the fact that they have, in fact, already occurred in a wide variety of cases, consistent with the model predictions. In total, as Table 1 has shown, 12 OECD member countries have witnessed downgrades in Freedom House scores for political rights and civil liberties since 2007. Of these, five downgrades have occurred since 2014 – including in such "consolidated" democracies as France, Israel, South Korea, and the United States. The 2018 Freedom in the World report includes 1-point reductions for the United States and Israel, while France and Poland were downgraded the previous year. These followed on the heels of several earlier downgrades among western democracies. In Italy under the populist administration of Silvio Berlusconi, for example, a 1-point fall in the Freedom House score for civil liberties occurred from 2009-11, due to the concentration of media outlets and harassment of independent journalists, as well as a temporary downgrade for 2013. In Greece, a 1-point fall in the score for political rights occurred in 2012 due to the installation of a technocratic government, a score that has remained to the present due to the continuing influence over economic policy of international policy actors. In South Korea, a 1-point drop in political rights has occurred since 2014, following evidence of political interference by the security services. Finally, following their accession to the European Union – an event that was meant to herald the consolidation of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe – several new member states have witnessed falling Freedom House scores, including not only Poland, but also Hungary (a -2 point drop on the civil liberties measure since 2012, and -1 point drop on political rights), Bulgaria (-1 point on political rights since 2009), and Latvia (-1 point on civil liberties since 2011).

What is perhaps notable is that, though our data is based on an observation period from 1981 to 2014, these are precisely the countries in which our model would have predicted rising democratic instability. Among OECD member states, the highest levels of surveyed skepticism of democratic government – as measured by disapproval of "having a democratic political system" or approval for having the "army rule" – are those registered in recent years in the United States, Mexico, Poland, and South Korea. Poland, for example, has long been among the OECD countries with the highest proportion of the respondents stating that it would be "good" for the army to rule – 17.8 percent in 1999, 20.9 per cent in 2005 and 22 per cent in 2012. Among countries in Western Europe, France was the earliest to show signs of democratic deconsolidation, with more than 1 in 10 respondents expressing support for "having the army rule" as early as 2006, a level that has risen to 17 percent in 2017. In South Korea, the proportion of respondents stating that democracy is a "fairly bad" or "very bad" to run the country was already 15.4 per cent in 1996: yet has risen steadily since that time, reaching 22.6 per cent in 2010. And in the United States, the proportion of respondents stating that it would be "good" for the army to rule has risen from 6.6 per cent of respondents in the mid-1990s, to 17 per cent, in the most recent survey conducted by the Pew Research Center. Among the 9 developed democracies within the OECD in which the largest share of the public has expressed "anti-democratic" viewpoints in surveys conducted since 2000, all but two have also experienced a lasting decline in Freedom House scores in the past decade (Figure 4). This may provide a provisional answer to our earlier question, concerning the degree of erosion in democratic support that signifies potential trouble for democratic stability: that once more than 10 per cent of respondents endorse anti-democratic viewpoints, fully consolidated democratic institutions can no longer be taken for granted.

Figure 4: OECD COUNTRIES DOWNGRADED BY FREEDOM HOUSE (2007-18), AND AVERAGE ANTI-DEMOCRATIC SURVEY RESPONSES (2000-2017)



Notes: Highlighted are countries that have experienced a lasting downgrade in Freedom House scores in the last decade. "Anti-Democratic" responses refer to a) the view that it would be "fairly good"/"very good" to have army rule, or b) expressing the view that democracy is a "fairly bad"/"very bad" way to run the country. Averaged responses in all surveys since 2000; current OECD member states only.

However, because liberal democratic institutions are no longer fully secure at their maximal extent, this should not be taken to imply the inevitability of either a lasting or a systemic change in democratic institutions. Both the estimates of our models, and a comparison with the recent experience of democracies around the world, would suggest not a universal or a comprehensive democratic backsliding among developed democracies – but rather, the onset of a period of greater instability and contestation, that in the context of transitional democracies, has been described as "democratic careening" (Slater, 2013). In many emerging democracies, periods of democratic erosion or backsliding – such as occurred in Peru under Alberto Fujimori from 1992-2000, India under Indira Gandhi from 1975-77, or Greece during the junta of 1967-74 – were followed by a return to liberal democracy, and the process of democratic deconsolidation

that has occurred in many western societies does not imply that anti-system parties and candidates, once in office, will lead to a systemic change that is not capable of later reversal. Just as Italy's temporary downgrade under the last adminstration of Silvio Berlusconi was followed, several years later, by a return to full Freedom House scores, a similar reversal is possible in other western democracies, such as Poland or the United States, that have experienced slippage on indexes of political rights and civil liberties. The conclusion we should draw is one of democratic contingency: simply that the teleological narrative of "democratic consolidation" - with its implication of a final, fixed, and irreversible end-point - fails to describe the future, or indeed the present political situation of western democracies.

6 Conclusion

In recent decades, political scientists have demonstrated that a large number of the supposed certainties of the postwar era were overly optimistic. There can be no guarantee that all, or even most, countries are on a sure path towards full democracy. Modernity has turned out to be surprisingly modular: countries can develop economically without moving closer to a democratic form of government or a more secular society. It is not just the case that different countries seem to be traveling along very different paths; their destinations, too, may be at a surprisingly great distance from each other.

The one exception to this process of questioning the teleological assumptions of an earlier age has been the fate of supposedly stable, consolidated democracies. While scholars have diverged in their prognoses regarding the likely future of countries such as Saudi Arabia, Singapore, or Iran, political scientists have assumed a high degree of certainty regarding the future of developed democracies such as the United States, Italy, or France. These countries were very wealthy and their democratic systems appeared to be firmly consolidated. Barring some truly exceptional circumstance – an unprecedented economic collapse, an apocalyptic environmental catastrophe, or an extreme military defeat–they would continue to be ruled in a democratic manner. In a world that appeared less and less

deterministic, the stability of wealthy, established democracies was the last certainty standing.

In this article, we have suggested that this last certainty, too, may be built on brittle ground. If democratic consolidation is the process by which democracy becomes the only game in town, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the converse process has been taking place in a large number of countries over the past two decades. Citizens in western democracies such as the United States or France are more skeptical of democracy, more open to authoritarian alternatives, and more willing to vote for anti-system parties and movements today than they were a number of decades ago. With a process of democratic deconsolidation underway across the world, it is no longer clear that democracy, in its liberal form, remains the only game in town.

Nonetheless, our research also engenders a degree of equanimity, and an open mind regarding liberal democracy's future. Even if levels of democratic support in many western democracies have eroded in recent years, nonetheless, the degree of democratic disillusionment in countries such as France or the United States have yet to reach the level of discontentment that is more typical of transitional democracies at risk of democratic breakdown. If more than 15 percent of respondents in many western countries now express the sentiment that it would be "good" to have the military rule, nonetheless levels in transitional democracies prior to major episodes of democratic backsliding typically have ranged somewhat higher: in Venezuela, for example, this level had ranged between 22 percent and 26 percent since the mid-1990s, while in Russia it has ranged from 21 percent in the mid-1990s, to 16 percent during the first two terms of President Putin, back to a peak of 24 percent in the most recent survey (World Values Survey, 1981–2014). The level of democratic disenchantment in major western democracies does, however, imply a period of democratic instability, comparable to that which is typical of transitional democracies and which may echo earlier periods in the history of western democracies, such as the recovery from the Great Depression in the 1930s or – more proximally – the period following the oil shock of the 1970s. From today's perspective, it is an open question whether this period will ultimately culminate in an existential challenge to

democracy – or be followed by its re-consolidation, if and when conditions for democratic stability are restored.

Furthermore, our analysis has provided strong initial evidence for fearing that democratic deconsolidation is a precursor to democratic backsliding; either because undemocratic attitudes lead to anti-system mobilisation, or because these are symptomatic of deeper failings in the democratic system. In countries like Poland or Venezuela, democratic deconsolidation preceded a serious turn towards authoritarian forms of government. Even when looking at the universe of democratic and semi-democratic countries as a whole, a decline in key measures like express support for a democratic form of government appears a precursor to democratic backsliding within a decade. It is certainly possible that the same does not hold true for very wealthy, highly consolidated democracies like the United States; the empirical evidence to answer this question definitively simply does not yet exist. But by the same token, it is also possible – and perhaps more plausible – to think that these countries are not quite so unique. In that case, the fact that they have experienced a significant degree of democratic deconsolidation over the past years constitutes a strong reason to fear that they too will be vulnerable to forms of democratic backsliding in the years to come.

Finally, the idea of democratic deconsolidation is an important conceptual innovation which has the potential to become both a significant explanatory variable for regime change. But to fully understand the worrying developments that are currently transforming supposedly consolidated liberal democracies across the world, further progress is needed. Our research opens an urgent field of further investigation for scholars of comparative politics, both to understand the causes of eroding democratic support, and to further understand the mechanisms linking changing public attitudes and the behaviors of policy actors that challenge established democratic norms. Unchallenged assumptions about the stability of supposedly consolidated democracies have blinded us to some of the most important transformations of the past decade. Only by taking seriously the possibility of democratic deconsolidation can we overcome the current complacency about the likely future of liberal democracy – and avoid repeating the same mistakes in future decades.

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