

Does Public Opinion on Democracy Influence Democratic Governance Outcomes?

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I. Introduction

In the last four decades, dozens of countries democratized, stemming primarily from the Cold War's conclusion. Nearly all of these transitional democracies faced threats to their democratic institutions from domestic challengers seeking to delegitimize their newfound democratic traditions. As such, many of these countries found themselves sliding back into varying levels of authoritarian governance.

However, what is even more curious are the recent trends away from democratic principles and institutions in established democracies. Anti-establishment and populist parties are gaining political territory in western democracies at an alarming pace. Existing theories of democratic consolidation hold that once established, democratic institutions will “prove durable,” yet the flourishing of anti-establishment parties throws this principle into question (Foa and Mounk, 2018). The popularity of these types of parties, which actively seek to undermine

the traditional liberal institutions, is indicative of larger issues within domestic and international politics.

In established democracies, anti-establishment parties are only given power through the voice of the people. In this way, examining why individual countries' citizens are sufficiently discontent with the status quo to elect such candidates is of great interest. If these candidates openly advocate for the deconsolidation of democracy, then it is critical to understand what drives people to support these policies. Furthermore, analyzing the successes and failures of these candidates' platforms after being elected is imperative.

This thesis seeks to analyze how public opinion data on democracy influenced regime type over the last decade. The central hypothesis of this paper is that if public opinion in established democracies shifts away from supporting democracy, specifically democratic institutions and principles, then democratic deconsolidation will take place, resulting in decreased democratic governance outcomes. As a result, I expect to find that states with lower public opinions of democracy will have worse democratic governance scores. The paper will then propose and test alternate hypotheses that aim to examine the underlying factors leading to the decline in public support for democracy.

II. Literature Review

Section 1: Democratic Consolidation

While existing democratic consolidation theories allow for movement both towards and away from democratic consolidation in practice, an underlying premise is that established democracies are secure due to the “endogeneity of democracy and its societal preconditions” (Foa and Mounk, 2018). This theoretical framework advances the idea that democracy creates a

positive feedback loop, arguing that the experience of democracy leads to a strengthened civil society that in turn reinforces democratic participation and legitimacy (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005).

Another argument forwarded as to why established democracies will not undergo democratic deconsolidation is that democracy is likely to produce the necessary economic conditions for stability. Acemoglu and Robinson argue this point by contending that a “key precondition for democratic stability is income equality” and that stable democratic institutions lead to income redistribution, thus creating an increasingly stable regime (2006). Others argue that economic development leads to the spread of liberal values that directly support their corresponding liberal institutions (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005).

In recent years, however, these assumptions have come under fire from many different scholars. Levitsky and Ziblatt directly contradict the notion that a “strengthened civil service” is responsible for Western democracies’ postwar stability. Instead, they argue that informal governmental institutions and “mutual tolerance” among elites are responsible for upholding democratic stability (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). They further contend that rising partisanship and the distrust of elites erode this system and create tension between democratic institutions and citizens in consolidated democracies (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018).

Inglehart specifically argues that “political decay” in the United States is evidenced by increased income inequality, decreased democratic responsiveness, and frustrations over institutional gridlock (Inglehart, 2016). In light of these recent trends, a re-examination of consolidated democracies’ stability and survivability is necessary and underway.

Section 2: Democratic Deconstruction

In the existing literature, democratic deconsolidation is typically thought of as a fundamentally similar process to democratic backsliding. These processes culminate in the shedding of liberal institutions and are the most significant emerging trend in regimes today. Before proceeding, a definition of democratic backsliding is salient: it is a “systematic course of actions on the part of a democratically elected government aimed at gradually undermining the rules and laws of an existing democracy” (Bakke and Sitter, 2019). Bakke and Sitter further argue that democratic backsliding includes the “concentration of political, social, and economic power” at the hands of the state or a single executive (2019). While never overtly stated nor admitted to by elected officials, this process typically manifests in the following ways: increases in electoral irregularities, interference with judicial proceedings, amending or revamping the constitution, sabotaging state accountability, and avoiding the legislative branch when creating new laws (Corrales, 2020).

As Corrales points out, democratic backsliding presents a fundamental paradox compared to other forms of autocratization, in that it is initiated by the “winners” of democracy, not the losers (Corrales, 2020). Over the past century, democracies were overthrown or drastically reduced by political actors with low chances of winning elected office. By contrast, it is the elected officials that seek to disrupt democratic principles and institutions through the process of democratic backsliding. It is precisely because of this paradox that it is increasingly important to understand the factors leading to the election of candidates that do not support democratic institutions and examine the impacts these candidates have on democratic governance once elected.

Section 3: What Occurs After/During Democratic Backsliding?

Very few states, if any at all, make the jump directly from consolidated democracy to closed authoritarian government. Instead, after democratic institutions and principles are whittled away but the facade of democracy persists, competitive authoritarianism emerges. At a macro level, the presence of elections appears to indicate that a country is democratic. However, a wealth of existing literature argues that elections can, in fact, be “authoritarian in nature” (Schedler, 2015). Authoritarian regimes now wield elections as tools to further solidify their grip on power. By design, these elections are “asymmetric and ambiguous,” utilizing practices such as banning opposition parties and consolidating media control under the state (Schedler, 2015). The presence of elections is a crucial characteristic in distinguishing between “closed autocracies” and “electoral autocracies,” as closed autocracies hold no multiparty elections to higher office (Schedler, 2015). In this way, closed autocracies are what are traditionally thought of as authoritarian regimes. These traditional forms of authoritarian governance are being replaced with electoral authoritarianism as it gained footing and continues to spread throughout Africa, Asia, Latin America, and parts of Europe.

In the post-Cold War era, regimes of this nature began appearing in far greater numbers than previously in the 20th century. Between 1990 and 1995, 35 electoral authoritarian regimes existed globally (Levitsky and Way, 2010). Of the 35 electoral authoritarian regimes present in this period, 15 democratized and stayed democratic, 4 became closed authoritarian, and 16 remained continuously electoral authoritarian (Levitsky and Way, 2020). As of 2019, 32 countries practice electoral authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way, 2020).

Many differing theories surround exactly why these electoral authoritarian regimes continue to persist well into the 21st century. A leading view is the waning of Western liberal hegemony that existed for a roughly 15 year stretch following the collapse of the Soviet

Union (Levitsky and Way, 2020). Levitsky and Way contend that the United States and Europe's domination over the international community in this period created strong incentives for ruling elites and regimes to adopt liberal political institutions. As the strength of this hegemony waned and the incentives became less attractive, many regimes shifted away from their adopted Westernized liberal institutions.

Examining democratic backsliding is especially pertinent today because of the trends away from liberal democratic institutions and the increasing prevalence of electoral authoritarianism. There are 32 countries currently practicing electoral authoritarianism, yet only 16 of the original 35 countries Levitsky and Way marked as electoral authoritarian remain so as of 2019. This figure means that 16 countries have either transitioned from electoral democracies or closed autocracies into electoral authoritarian regimes. Many of these 16 countries come from the former category, and it is well worth examining exactly how and why these formerly democratic countries transitioned into electoral authoritarianism.

Several of these cases of democratic backsliding come from Europe, which has long been considered a bastion of democratic traditions. Bakke and Sitter delve into democratic backsliding among member states of the European Union, focusing specifically on Hungary, Poland, and Romania (2019). They contend that while fear of reprisal from the European Union did hinder the extent to which the regimes could consolidate power in the executive and dismantle liberal institutions, the European Union did not implement any severe consequences for their actions (Bakke and Sitter, 2019).

As mentioned above, Hungary is a particularly salient case of democratic backsliding in the 21st century. In 2011, Hungary passed a new constitution following a string of moves by the executive branch to consolidate power (Halmai, 2020). This consolidation of power, which

included weakening parliamentary powers, “packing” the judicial system, and removing veto powers and independent monitoring abilities, was devastatingly effective at shifting the country away from liberal democracy. Furthermore, the country declared a “state of danger” regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, granting the executive the ability to fight the pandemic using “any measure ... for an indefinite period of time” (Halmai, 2020). There are credible fears among international observers and opponents of the regime that these powers will become permanently enshrined into law, further sliding the country away from liberal democracy.

As I have argued, shifts in public opinions on democracy are not isolated to emerging regions; they are increasingly found in North America and Western Europe. These regions are the most closely aligned with the concept of consolidated democracy, yet are not immune to the effects of democratic backsliding. Recent data shows that the legitimacy of democratic institutions has been in long-term decline in North America and Western Europe, with political parties, politicians, and even courts and media less trusted than at any point since such polling began (Foa and Mounk, 2018).

Furthermore, several OECD members saw their Freedom House scores on civil rights and political liberties drop since the onset of the 21st century. While this phenomenon was initially limited to relatively new democracies, such as Hungary, Mexico, and Greece, consolidated democracies, such as France, Israel, and the United States have experienced similar drops in recent years. Such instances provide further evidence that democratic deconsolidation is actively occurring in what are considered consolidated democracies because of declining support for democratic institutions and traditions.

Section 4: The Role of Public Opinion

Public opinion undoubtedly plays an important role in politics and, realistically, in any topical event. However, in existing literature that studies the role and impact of public opinion, there is no universal consensus on a formal definition for the term. One definition that I find to be particularly useful is that public opinion in democracies “should be the final element in political life which gives significance to the activity of the state and the fact of membership in it” (Wilson, 1933). While this definition is nearly a century old, I find that the central message still holds true; public opinion should be what policymakers and other government officials strive to work towards and uphold. Another definition that helped me conceptualize what public opinion entails is that public opinion is supposed to be “the great engine of democracy, determining what governments do” (Page, et al., 1987). This definition furthers the idea that in an ideal world, democratic governments strive to put policy into place that serves the will of their citizens. Taken in tandem, these definitions of public opinion portray public opinion as a force that seeks to determine the course of action that their elected representatives take.

Many studies in the field of Political Science have used public opinion data to examine how responsive governments are to the will of the people. A pertinent example is a study conducted in 1998 that examined the extent to which policy decisions of the U.S. federal government were consistent with the preferences of the public (Monroe, 1998). This study found that 55% of the 500 policies they examined between 1980 and 1993 represented the preference of the majority of citizens, which was interestingly down from the 63% of cases during the period between 1960 and 1979. In this way, the use of public opinion data in political science studies is useful to understand whether or not democratically elected leaders reflect the will of the people in their legislation and policy initiatives. Identifying the downward trend in this data enables future research to examine what caused this shift and identify potential solutions to

ensure public opinions are turned into matching policies. In this paper, I strive to use public opinion data for this very purpose, as increased support for democracy among the citizenry of a particular country should, according to the existing theories on public opinion, increase their observed democratic governance indicators. Understanding the role that public opinion plays in changing democratic governance indicators is a crucial step to future research focused on what underlying factors cause public opinions on democracy to shift.

III. Research Design

My research design employs an observational study focused on analyzing public opinion trends on democracy and the resulting democratic governance outcomes. This analysis involves running multivariate regressions conducted on a cross-national time series dataset.

The dependent variables in my research design are democratic governance indicators. These are available for the vast majority of countries, and this data collection spans decades. The main dependent variable that is utilized in my research design is from the V-Dem, or Varieties of Democracy, dataset. This dataset is widely used among political science researchers and is updated with 2019 data. I chose to use their “Electoral Democracy Index,” coded as “v2x_polyarchy”, as the central dependent variable because it examines to “what extent is the ideal of electoral democracy” achieved. I find this to be a solid measurement because it encompasses a vast range of democratic governance indicators. These include, but are not limited to, electoral competition, the responsiveness of rulers to the needs of their citizens, civil and political organizations ability to freely operate, and to what extent are elections free and fair. This index runs from 0 to 1 and rounds to the nearest thousandth, leaving itself readily turned into a percentage for easy analysis.

The independent variables for my research design are public opinion surveys on democracy. The World Values Surveys Series datasets¹ contain public opinion surveys dealing with democracy and democratic institutions for countries across the globe. I am using the World Values Survey's Series 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 for the specific questions surrounding support for democracy. While the question is coded as a different variable for each series, the question is asked verbatim in each questionnaire. This is a crucial aspect to this study, as these surveys allow for continuous answers to the same question over a 25 year span.² In its entirety, the question asks the respondent to rank how they feel about "having a democratic political system." Responses to this question are in the form of a feeling thermometer scale, ranging from 1, meaning very good, to 4, meaning very bad. In order to accurately estimate an entire country's response to this question in a given year, I then calculated the mean of the responses.

With this information in mind, let us now turn towards my hypotheses:

H_1 : If public opinion in established democracies shifts away from supporting democracy, specifically electoral democratic institutions and principles, then reduced democratic governance outcomes will be observed.

The causal mechanism being tested in this hypothesis is how shifting public opinions on democracy impacts regimes' democratic trajectories. This hypothesis will be tested by running a simple bivariate linear regression of my independent and dependent variables in order to test for statistical significance. In order for the model to account for changes in public opinion over multiple years, the independent variable will be lagged by two years. This lagged variable will

¹ [WVS Database](#)

² Survey Series 3 began in 1995, and Survey Series 7 concluded in 2020.

be referred to as “Public Opinion Data on Democracy, -2,” which represents the time series of WVS survey responses lagged by a factor of two years. As a result, the survey responses in my independent variable are measured against the governance indicators observed two years after the study. This change allows for better measurement of exactly how much public opinions influenced the democratic system, theoretically by making their voices heard or running for office themselves.

H₂: If media sources in a state show explicit bias towards the governing party, then citizens will exhibit lower support for democracy, and decreased democratic governance indicators will be observed.

This hypothesis attempts to control for the confounding variable of substantial media bias, often most overtly abused by state-run media sources. I believe that independent news sources and journalism are essential factors in resisting the forces pushing democratic deconsolidation and that when they are no longer present, the forces are unchecked. This theory would aid in explaining why significant portions of populations are either unaware or inadvertently supportive of democratic deconsolidation proceedings. Furthermore, this take-over of independent media sources could effectively silence opposition members' voices, thereby fragmenting and weakening the resistance fighting this process.

The variable I will use to test this hypothesis is also from the V-Dem dataset. The variable is coded as “v2mebias,” and in the results section, this variable will be referred to as “Media Bias.” This variable is a particularly useful metric for assessing this

hypothesis as it assigns a score from 0 to 4 regarding how biased a state's media is against opposition parties or candidates. On this scale, 0 represents a “fully biased media,” in which print and broadcast media only cover the official party or in situations where there are no opposition parties or candidates. On the other hand, a 4 on this scale means that “all newsworthy parties and candidates more or less” receive impartial coverage and air time. Through the use of this variable, I hope to control for the extraneous impacts that a substantially biased media have on public opinion and, therefore, democratic governance indicators.

H₃: If the executive branch of government is systematically corrupt, then public opinion would shift away from supporting democracy, leading to decreased democratic governance indicators.

This hypothesis holds that systematic corruption in the highest levels of government, democratic or otherwise, causes deep distrust among the citizenry. High levels of corruption “generates a culture of distrust” in regards to any government, agency, business, or any other organization (Melgar, Rossi, Smith 2010). As such, I believe that it is imperative to control for executive corruption in order to better assess the impacts that public opinion has on democracy.

The measure of executive corruption I will be utilizing for this hypothesis is also found in the V-Dem dataset. The coded name for the variable is “v2exbribe,” and it will be referred to as “Executive Corruption” in the results section of this paper. The variable is measured on a scale from 0 to 4, with a coding of 0 meaning that the executive branch

of government “routinely and expectedly accepts bribes, kickbacks, or other material inducements.” A coding of 4, however, means that this “never, or hardly ever, happens.” In this way, I seek to understand the impacts that high levels of executive corruption have on public opinion and overall democratic governance indicators.

IV. Results

The regression that tested the initial hypothesis, which tested only the main independent and dependent variables, returned the following:

Figure 1. Hypothesis #1 Test

| Dependent variable: | |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Electoral Democracy Index | |
| Public Opinion Data on Democracy, -2 | 0.022 (0.072) |
| Constant | 0.575*** (0.120) |
| Observations | 233 |
| R2 | 0.0004 |
| Adjusted R2 | -0.004 |
| Residual Std. Error | 0.247 (df = 231) |
| F Statistic | 0.097 (df = 1; 231) |

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

From these results, it is clear that a one-to-one relationship between these two variables is non-existent in this dataset. The results are wildly statistically insignificant for a myriad of reasons, and it is impossible to draw substantive conclusions from this regression. As a result, it would be appropriate to deem the first hypothesis incorrect on the basis of lack of statistical significance. For these reasons, further testing and, critically, the inclusion of control variables, is necessary.

Figure 2. Hypothesis #2 Test

| Dependent variable: | |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Electoral Democracy Index | |
| Public Opinion Data on Democracy, -2 | 0.065 (0.043) |
| Media Bias | 0.174*** (0.009) |
| Constant | 0.302*** (0.073) |
| Observations | 233 |
| R2 | 0.646 |
| Adjusted R2 | 0.643 |
| Residual Std. Error | 0.147 (df = 230) |
| F Statistic | 209.839*** (df = 2; 230) |

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

The results from the second regression, which included the possible confounding variable of media bias, show that the data on changing public opinions remains statistically insignificant. However, this regression showed that the inclusion of media bias on top of the public opinion data is, in fact, statistically significant enough to explain roughly 65% of the change in the dependent variable. Furthermore, an increase in one unit of “Media Bias,” which corresponds to an increasingly open and less biased media presence, is responsible for a 17% increase in democratic governance indicators.

In this way, the second hypothesis was correct in assuming that media bias plays a substantial role in shifting the observed democratic governance indicators, yet does not produce statistically significant results for the public opinion data. As a result, we can confirm that media bias is playing a substantial role in influencing the democratic governance indicators, even if public opinions on democracy continue to prove ineffective measures at explaining these very changes.

Figure 3. Hypothesis #3 Test

| Dependent variable: | |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Electoral Democracy Index | |
| Public Opinion Data on Democracy, -2 | 0.100* (0.053) |
| Executive Corruption | 0.113*** (0.008) |
| Constant | 0.432*** (0.088) |
| Observations | 233 |
| R2 | 0.467 |
| Adjusted R2 | 0.462 |
| Residual Std. Error | 0.181 (df = 230) |
| F Statistic | 100.741*** (df = 2; 230) |

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

The third regression, however, shows that both the public opinion survey results and the variable relating to the prevalence of corruption in the executive branch are statistically significant, though to varying degrees. Due to the way “Executive Corruption” is coded, it is important to note that a one unit increase in “Executive Corruption” actually decreases the amount of corruption present in the executive branch. In this way, this regression shows us that decreased levels of bribery in the executive branch causes an 11% increase in expected democratic governance outcomes.

Although this regression shows that nearly 47% of the change in the dependent variable is attributable to the combination of the independent variables, it would be a stretch to call this result fully conclusive. Similarly to the second hypothesis, the confounding variable was once

again proven to impact the dependent variable, and although the public opinion data was increasingly statistically significant, the inclusion of further confounding variables salient.

Figure 4. Inclusion of both Confounding Variables

| Dependent variable: | |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Electoral Democracy Index | |
| Public Opinion Data on Democracy, -2 | 0.097*** (0.036) |
| Media Bias | 0.134*** (0.008) |
| Executive Corruption | 0.061*** (0.006) |
| Constant | 0.289*** (0.062) |
| Observations | 233 |
| R2 | 0.747 |
| Adjusted R2 | 0.744 |
| Residual Std. Error | 0.125 (df = 229) |
| F Statistic | 225.912*** (df = 3; 229) |

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

However, when both confounding variables are included in the regression, all three independent variables are returned with high levels of statistical significance. Furthermore, the combination of all three variables is responsible for explaining nearly 75% of the variance found in the dependent variable. One unit shifts in levels of media bias and executive corruption

produce slightly less variation in the dependent variable than in the previous two regressions, but still substantively impact the results.

The public opinion data on democracy in this regression is not only statistically significant, but shifts the dependent variable substantially. A one unit increase in the survey data, which corresponds to a decline in support for democracy, is responsible for a roughly 10% decrease in the observed democratic governance indicators.

V. Conclusion

The results of the statistical analysis of my hypotheses show that alone, shifting public opinions on democracy are insufficient to explain substantive changes in the democratic governance indicators. As such, it is reasonable to conclude that the first hypothesis was incorrect, as the shifting in public opinion did not prove statistically significant. However, when individually combined with measures of media bias or executive corruption, the public opinion data remained not statistically significant, while both confounding variables were. As such, while the causal mechanisms behind the second and third hypotheses proved to have merit, the analysis did not prove that changing public opinion was behind the differences in observed governance indicators.

However, when measured in combination with both confounding variables simultaneously, all three independent variables were statistically significant and responsible for sizable differences in the dependent variable. This indicates that shifts in public opinion does play a role in changing the democratic governance outcomes, yet may not be causally prior to levels of media bias or executive corruption.

While the three explanatory variables are found to explain much of the change in the observed shifts in the electoral democratic index, these findings merit substantial follow up questions. Increasing the sample size of the public opinion data is a simple way to strengthen this study. It was surprisingly difficult to find consecutive studies examining public opinions on democracy that used the same question verbatim over the years. Additionally, measuring the substantive significance, and not only the statistical significance, of each regression would provide a clearer image of how the explanatory variables impact the dependent variable. Furthermore, while none of the explanatory variables are present in the dependent variable's index, it would be salient to further examine whether or not there are any issues with multicollinearity in the explanatory variables. Much could also be gained by re-examining the data after lagging each independent variable individually, in order to better understand which of the variables is causally prior.

Even with these issues in mind, this study still produced several interesting insights as to how shifting public opinions on democracy impact future democratic governance indicators. Understanding the mechanisms of how public opinions on democracy can shift the observed democracy levels within a country is, and will continue to be, a crucial task for political and other social scientists as we move forward in the 21st century. As we move away from the legacy of the Cold War and strive for a more democratic and peaceful world, ensuring that democracy remains an ideal to be worked towards is vital.

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