

Populism and Autocratization



Donald Trump receives the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in the White House in May 2017. The White House Photo of the Day: 5/17/17

Populism has evolved into a wide-spread and much-discussed global problem. Populist leaders challenge democratic rule with anti-pluralist rhetoric. The global rise of populism is closely related to the currently emerging third wave of autocratization, which affects a multitude of regions worldwide (Figure 1). Two recent working papers (WP 75 and 76) for the Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem) address these two processes and develop new tools to investigate these emerging phenomena. This policy brief presents key findings, as well as further policy implications, building on these new insights.

Two interrelated threats to democracy

Both working papers focus on phenomena whose political manifestation may result in possible threats to their respective democratic systems. However, it is important to know how and when these threats become immediate in order to tailor the appropriate policy responses. The papers advance the scientific study of both populism and autocratization by presenting a new approach to decrypting the phenomena based on V-Dem data.

Self and Hicken (WP 76) argue that institutional hostility explains the varying degrees of electoral success for populist movements around the world. The level of institutional hostility that populist movements face is shaped by a country's political system, as well as inter-party and intra-party factors. First, institutional hostility depends on how difficult the electoral system makes it for new parties to establish themselves. Second, such institutional hostility is determined by the strength of the existing parties, as measured by their degree of institutionalization. Highly institutionalized parties are well organized and leave only small sections of the electorate unaffiliated to any party, making it more diffi-

KEY FINDINGS

- The third wave of autocratization, consisting mainly of a gradual decline in the democratic traits of regimes, is unfolding (WP 75).
- Whether or not an attempted populist uprising is successful is highly influenced by a country's institutional configuration (WP 76).
- New research can help in detecting a gradual decline of democratic regime attributes and define a "window of opportunity" for populists.

cult for populist parties to establish themselves.

Such institutional hostility influences the different strategies pursued by populist parties in order to enter the party system: populist entry, populist targeting and adaptation, and populist capture. Low institutional hostility, in combination with a permissive electoral system and low party institutionalization, enables *populist entry*. *Populist adaptation* occurs when the established parties are relatively institutionalized, which forces the populists to adapt their policies to the public's demands in order to outrun the established parties. Conversely, *populist targeting* happens in relatively permissive electoral systems when the entering party rhetorically targets specific segments of the population with weaker ties to existing parties (WP76: 9). *Populist capture*, however, is common in hostile and non-permissive institutional systems in which the only option for populists is to take over an already established party.

DEFINITIONS

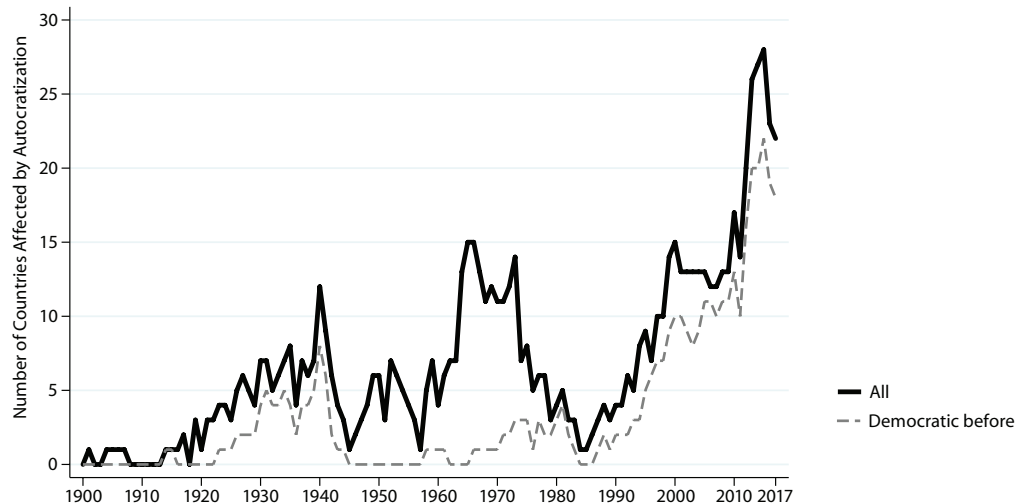
- *Autocratization*: the gradual or sudden decline of democratic regime attributes.
- *Institutional hostility*: the space within national political systems for new populist parties; depends on the degree to which political systems are permissive towards party entry, which in turn depends on party institutionalization and electoral institutions.
- *Populism*: a discursive political style that constructs a dichotomy between the alleged "pure will of the good people" and the "corrupt elite"; and questions pluralism (see: Hawkins, Riding, Mudde 2012; Mudde/Kaltwasser 2017).

Lührmann and Lindberg (WP 75) offer the first comprehensive empirical overview of all autocratization episodes worldwide from 1900 to 2016. Based on V-Dem data, they show that a third wave of autocratization is unfolding (see Figure 1). It mainly affects democracies by gradually and legally undermining democratic institutions. The author’s new metric, “autocratization rate” (WP 75), enables researchers to measure the pace of autocratization. Further, this research contributes to understanding how such adverse change may affect even autocratic regimes.

The authors argue that since the pace at which democratic decline is happening is rather slow, democratic forces may still remain powerful enough to stop processes of autocratization. Further, the research provides surprising insights into which countries are facing autocratization, and shows that these are, for this first time in history, largely democratic countries. Keeping these threats to democracy in mind, the authors stress that the number of democratic countries remains close to an all-time high. This promotes optimism but also illustrates the high stakes associated with the current wave of autocratization.

FIGURE 1. THE THREE WAVES OF AUTOCRATIZATION

Source: *Varieties of Democracy Working Paper No. 75 updated to V-Dem V8.*



POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Raise awareness about how the gradual decline in the democratic traits of regimes challenges democracies, for instance through civic education programs.
- Maintain an optimistic tone: the world has never been as democratic as today despite current challenges.
- Close the window of opportunity for populist forces by increasing institutional hostility towards them – for instance, by supporting the institutionalization of democratic parties through the training of party leaders on how to improve organizational capacity and professionalism.

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ABOUT V-DEM INSTITUTE

V-Dem is a new approach to conceptualization and measurement of democracy. The headquarters – the V-Dem Institute – is based at the University of Gothenburg with 17 staff, and a project team across the world with 6 Principal Investigators, 14 Project Managers, 30 Regional Managers, 170 Country Coordinators, Research Assistants, and 3,000 Country Experts, the V-Dem project is one of the largest ever social science research-oriented data collection programs.



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