

Voter Tolerance of Institutional Erosion: Causal Evidence on Democracy Measurement and Democratization in the United States

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Abstract

This article presents a connection between democracy measurement and causal evidence on voter tolerance of institutional erosion in the United States. It describes how democracy indices can identify changes in electoral competition, judicial independence, civil liberties, media freedom, participation, and administrative neutrality, but cannot independently determine whether voters will punish political leaders for democratic violations. The article mentions survey experiments as a method for testing whether citizens reject preferred candidates after attacks on courts, elections, media, opposition groups, or peaceful protest. It also discusses polarization, party loyalty, elite signals, credible alternatives, and the difference between abstract support for democracy and actual electoral behaviour. National scores may conceal local deterioration, unequal citizenship, or rapid administrative change. The article concludes that responsible measurement should combine indicator-level data, confidence intervals, administrative records, election outcomes, surveys, event datasets, and subnational evidence to reveal both institutional change and the public incentives that may permit or constrain democratic erosion.



But, while the elections indices of democracy can measure institutional deterioration, whether there are electoral costs for abusive behavior by the political actors depends on how voters vote. The measurement and public accountability debate in the U.S. is nicely bifurcated a little over a year from now in July 2025. They belong together. Indicators can help to identify pressure against elections, courts, media, civil liberties, administration; causal research can be used to see if citizens retaliate against specific violations.

The hard part is that general support of democracy, as well as partisan tolerance of the erosion of democratic institutions, is found. Measurement only becomes useful when there is a forward approach of correlates to the incentives of voters and candidates, and any changes in the institutional structure.

When creating a democracy measurement these complex institutions must be reduced to comparable indicators, and each index involves with decisions regarding the concept and the indication of evidence, aggregation and uncertainty. Electoral competition, civil liberties, judicial independence, media freedom, participation, equality and deliberation reflect various aspects. V-Dem aims to respond to this complexity with several indices as well as expert-coded indicators and other projects have their own frameworks. Scores allow comparison amongst scores but can mask local variation or fast turnover of administration. So, the responsible use looks at how indicator-level movement, confidence intervals, coding notes and corroborating evidence, not just a single indicator, are used to provide a diagnosis.

Citizens' demand for abstract concepts of democracy can lose strength when they are asked to make a claim on the partisanship. The idea of polarization developed by Milan Slovik is that voters may rationalize undemocratic behavior they are given by the most preferred side in political conflicts if the latter are experienced as existential. United States experiments on candidate choices have also revealed that partisanship and policy commitment leads to less punishment for violations of democracy. But any such discoveries do not evidence universal apathy.

The authors demonstrate how the mechanisms of accountability are based on competition, information, elite signals and feasible options. The most intensive item does not specifically pose the question of approval of democracy in a general question, but whether citizens refuse a candidate after a certain violation.

Early-warning systems need to monitor behavior which does not constitute a break with the constitution. Signals are partisan replacement of professional election officials, selective investigation, threats against election personnel, interference with peaceful assembly, the use of extraordinary powers in unusual instances, attacks against the normal media and attempts to delegitimize routine certification. There can be a reason for every event that is innocent! These are all aggravated by the shift of several indicators in the same direction, and opened, exclusionary justifications and remediations become increasingly ineffective. Administrative records as well as court papers, legislative process, personnel files, event data sets and surveys can be used to identify trends of clustering prior to dramatic institutional degradation.

Independence, capacities, transparency, coordination are the channels of action of institutional constraints. Access to, and enforcement by, a nominally independent, but inaccessible and ineffective court is weak. An insecure employment status of civil servants makes them liable to loyalty tests. Election administrators must have resources, as well as physical safety and legal clarity and the public's trust.

These cannot be achieved if there is a lack of access to information and of safeguarding against retaliatory investigation. Demonstrable constraints are those that are supported by multiple institutions that are able to detect, expose, delay and repair abuse. Redundancy also helps minimize risk of disablement with the capture of one body destroying accountability.

It is not always a case of continual mass repression; a coalition-management style authoritarian politics can emerge. Selectively loosening constraints, giving rewards to loyal institutions, dividing opponents and maintaining a sufficient type of electoral

competition in order to be legitimate – this is leadership. Backsliding of a democracy could thus happen via legal appointments, changes of procedure, selective application or pressure on information institutions. The voters get confused signals, as each step can be argued as a casual reason of government.

The analysis should be based on the following points: Cumulative advantage, institutional asymmetry. The critical one relates to whether or not governing players are able to break rules, referee, or reward critics at a lower cost than their opponents.

Genuine effort, capacity, activity and results should be measured separately. Commitment is spelling out on Treaty Ratification and capacity is spelling out on Budgets and Staffing. Administrative decisions and enforcement practices show performance and safety, access and equality, as well as remedy. By adding all four types, the false optimism is not introduced.

A country can have better documentation despite the on-going abuse, or better documentation can be affected by some other economic change. Find out about mechanisms, with the support of longitudinal evidence, matched comparisons, interviews with affected communities, a case tracing process. Data quality also has an impact, as official reports of violations may be inaccurate if they are under-reported, civil-society documents may tend to focus on the most visible or blatant violations while legal documents may not report violations under informal settlement or in the face of intimidation.

Just taking part isn't enough! Some strategies that can enhance voices without altering agenda setting, information control, and ultimate decisions are consultations, hearings, citizen panels, and advisory boards. Evaluation should enquire as to who comes in, and whose voice gets heard, who is heard when the evidence is presented, which of the recommendations leads to changes in the policy, and who gets to participate in an appeal procedure if they are excluded. Participation can be symbolic if it involves officially chosen or discussed participants or if it involves "inviting" participants to comment on the main decisions that have already been taken. Good design provides participants with timely information, independent facilitation, clear requirements for participation in deliberation and the connection between deliberation and final decision-making is clear.

The resilience of fundamental rights is when their protection is maintained, even in times of uncertainty, fear and political asymmetry. The most difficult ones are with unpopular groups, with some speech that people disagree with, with migrants, prisoners and protesters and communities that are called 'security risks. If protection is equal in the lull,

it offers a modest number of clues as to the robustness of the constitution. Resilience is evident when there is good due process, good assessment that is individualized, good legal counsel, good review and good reasons when under pressure.

It is important to continue to do distributional analysis as a formally neutral rule can still exert concentrated burdens based on geography, disability, language, income, immigration status or based on access to digital systems. A form of rights protection is needed, but not only by way of doctrinal examination, but also by an empirical focus on its implementation.

Experiments in which trade-offs are replicated are the best at providing causal evidence on democratic commitment. Characteristics of candidates addressed in candidate profiles, as well as the type of information treatment. Successive surveys can be used to check for durability other than an instant response. Abstention, certainty and perceived legitimacy should also be measured by the researchers in addition to the candidate selection.

Ethical design doesn't try to rig actual elections and transparently expresses the uncertainty. These studies uncover the situations where polls can have a democratic effect on choice, and the situations where polarization can crowd out institutional concern for choice.

There are some elements of democratic change that can be seen in subnational analysis that do not appear in the national trend. The administration of local elections, the practices of public record laws, prosecutors, protest police, judges and civil-service protection vary widely across the jurisdictions in the United States. Similar indicators can highlight areas of resilience and of deterioration and help with natural experiments of policy change. The use of local evidence also helps to limit the use of a national rhetoric to "explain" every outcome.

County offices and boards, schools, courts, police and other state agencies are all means by which to experience democracy. There is thus a need for measurement which links the national constitutional structure to where rights are put into practice, that is, in the administrative locations.

This appreciation of differences between voter ignorance, partisan rationalization, and real difference over what constitutes a violation of democracy would logically inform the question of how rational individuals should be. Survey experiments may include different candidates, positions on policies, actions to be taken in an issue, or "elite" endorsements. One can then look at the administrative and the election returns data to see if stated

preferences and behaviors match. These designs delineate the areas of democratic deficit and what information can do to return the democratic legitimacy.

National indices must be locally validated as well. Several aspects of election administration, the control of protests, access to public records, and the independence of prosecutors differ from state to state in the United States. Aggregation at a higher level of a hierarchy for example the country can mask deterioration at a lower level of the hierarchy, for example the subnational level. It also can show resilience of the professional officials if they lay standards despite national polarization.

Democracy measurement can be important when it relates to numbers and provides insights into mechanisms, and not as a substitute for judgement. There should be a check that score, survey and event data, administrative records and case evidence show that there are power wins and there are protection losses and it should show if there is still a possibility of correction. Voters stay within the institutional framework because this can make for lower costs of executive overreach and make it easier to tolerate the opposition party. There is therefore a need for recovery, both structural and in terms of people being held to account in public.

A resilient democracy can ensure that competitive elections, impartial bureaucracy, rights and effective democracy remain alive as soon as the short-term political advantages look like. The resilience of a democracy can ensure that competitive elections, impartial bureaucracy, rights and effective democracy remain alive as soon as the short-term political advantages look like. At times, switching movements in the indicator-level scores can be more indicative than the score on a composite national score. Democratic values become a reality if public sanctions apply to partisan. Every effort must be made to protect the future opponents in recovery, as much as present opponents, if applicable.