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# THE SIGNS OF DECONSOLIDATION

*Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk*

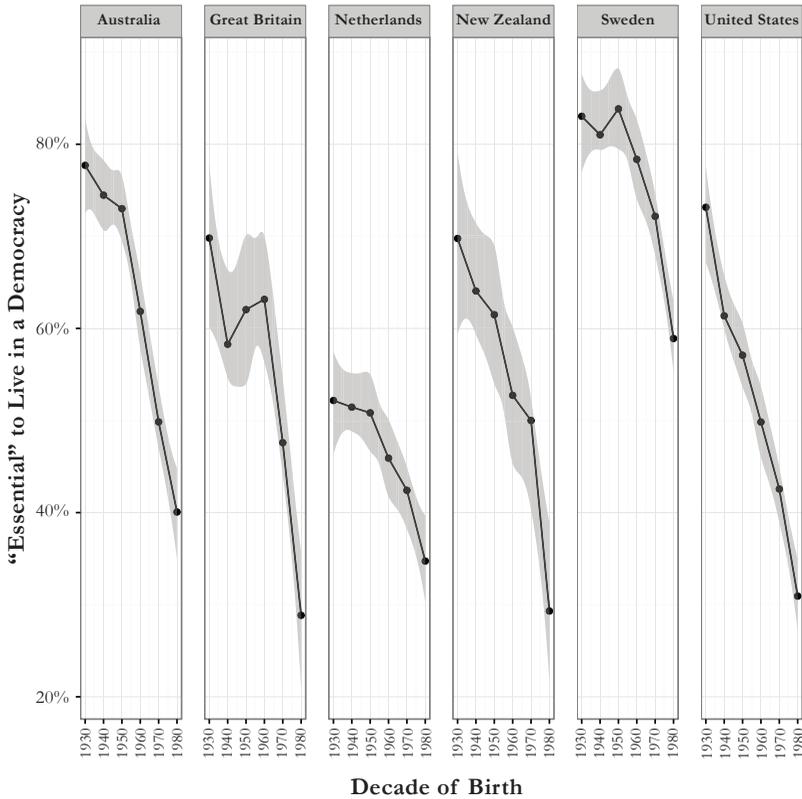
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Americans have long been growing dissatisfied with the state of their political system. As survey researchers have chronicled over recent decades, an overwhelming majority of citizens now believes that the United States is “headed in the wrong direction.” Trust in such major institutions as Congress and the presidency has fallen markedly. Engagement in formal political institutions has ebbed. The media are more mistrusted than ever. Even so, most scholars have given these findings a stubbornly optimistic spin: U.S. citizens, they claim, have simply come to have higher expectations of their government.

As we showed in an essay in the July 2016 *Journal of Democracy*, that interpretation is untenable.<sup>1</sup> American citizens are not just dissatisfied with the performance of particular governments; they are increasingly critical of liberal democracy itself. Among young Americans polled in 2011, for example, a record high of 24 percent stated that democracy is a “bad” or “very bad” way of running the country—a sharp increase both from prior polls and compared to older respondents. Meanwhile, the proportion of Americans expressing approval for “army rule” has risen from 1 in 16 in 1995 to 1 in 6 in the most recent survey.<sup>2</sup>

Americans’ dissatisfaction with the democratic system is part of a much larger global pattern. It is not just that the proportion of Americans who state that it is “essential” to live in a democracy, which stands at 72

**FIGURE 1—ACROSS THE GLOBE,  
THE YOUNG ARE LESS INVESTED IN DEMOCRACY**



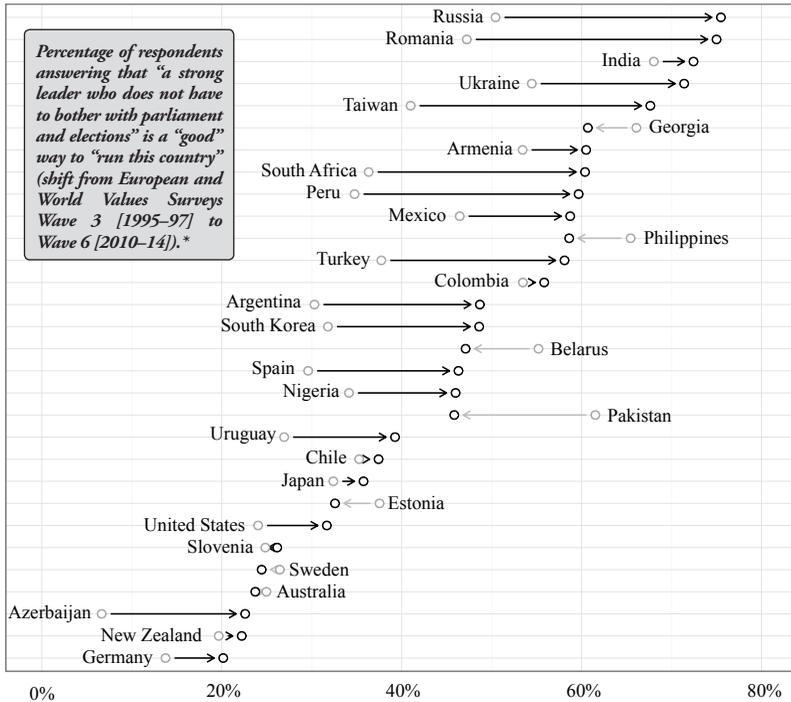
*Source:* European and World Values Surveys, combined data from Waves 5 and 6 (2005–7 and 2010–14). Percentage of respondents rating it “essential” (a rating of 10 on a 10-point scale) to “live in a country that is governed democratically.”

*Note:* Confidence intervals appear in gray.

percent among those born before World War II, has fallen to 30 percent among millennials. It is also that, contrary to Ronald Inglehart’s response to our earlier essay in these pages,<sup>3</sup> a similar cohort pattern is found across all longstanding democracies, including Great Britain, the Netherlands, Sweden, Australia, and New Zealand (see Figure 1). In virtually all cases, the generation gap is striking, with the proportion of younger citizens who believe it is essential to live in a democracy falling to a minority.

What is more, this disaffection with the democratic form of government is accompanied by a wider skepticism toward liberal institutions. Citizens are growing more disaffected with established political parties, representative institutions, and minority rights. Tellingly, they are also increasingly open to authoritarian interpretations of democracy. The share of citizens who approve of “having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament or elections,” for example, has gone up

**FIGURE 2—GLOBAL RISE IN SHARE OF CITIZENS WISHING FOR A STRONG LEADER “WHO DOES NOT HAVE TO BOTHER WITH ELECTIONS”**



Source: European and World Values Surveys.

\*Sample contains all countries included in both Wave 3 (1995–97) and Wave 6 (2010–14) of the surveys, and in which respondents were asked whether “having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections” would be a “fairly good” or “very good” way to “run this country.”

markedly in most of the countries where the World Values Survey asked the question—including such varied places as Germany, the United States, Spain, Turkey, and Russia (see Figure 2).

The stark picture painted by the World Values Survey is echoed in the findings of a large number of national polls conducted in recent months. In a German survey, a large majority endorsed democracy “as an idea,” but only about half approved of “democracy as it works in the Federal Republic of Germany today,” and more than a fifth endorsed the view that “what Germany now needs is a single, strong party that represents the people.”<sup>4</sup> In France, two-fifths of respondents in a 2015 survey believed that the country should be put in the hands of “an authoritarian government” free from democratic constraints, while fully two-thirds were willing to delegate the task of enacting “unpopular but necessary reforms” to “unelected experts.”<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, in the United States, 46 percent of respondents in an October 2016 survey reported that they either “never had” or had “lost” faith in U.S. democracy.<sup>6</sup>

These changes in opinion are worrying in and of themselves. What is all the more striking is that they are increasingly reflected in actual political behavior. In recent years, parties and candidates that blame an allegedly corrupt political establishment for most problems, seek to concentrate power in the executive, and challenge key norms of democratic politics have achieved unprecedented successes in a large number of liberal democracies across the globe: In addition to Donald Trump in the United States, they range from Viktor Orbán in Hungary to Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, and from Marine Le Pen in France to the late Hugo Chávez in Venezuela.

In many countries, populists are still far from having an outright majority. But their ascent does not appear to have any inbuilt limits: In the United States, a populist has just been elected president, and in Austria and France, populists have come within striking distance of the presidency. In Poland, Hungary, Greece, and Venezuela, populist parties have been in power for some time now. What is more, these latter examples suggest that such parties continue to take their radical message seriously once they are elected. In Hungary, constitutional reform under the Fidesz government has removed checks and balances in various areas, including the judiciary, the supervision of elections, and the media.<sup>7</sup> In Poland, the Law and Justice government has challenged the independence of the country's constitutional tribunal, taken control of the state broadcasting corporation, and undermined civil society organizations that might serve to hold the government accountable.<sup>8</sup> In Greece, Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras has appointed party allies to key positions in tax offices, state enterprises, and private banks; raided the home of the governor of the central bank; and revoked the licenses of eight private-sector television broadcasters.<sup>9</sup>

The success of Donald Trump and his fellow populists, then, is not a temporary or geographic aberration. Nor is it certain to trigger self-correcting mechanisms that will return the political system to the stability of a bygone era. On the contrary, it calls into doubt the confidence that social scientists have for many decades expressed in the stability of supposedly "consolidated" liberal democracies. It is high time to think about the circumstances under which consolidated democracies could fail—and to be on the lookout for the signs which indicate that a major systemic transformation might be under way.

### **An Early-Warning System**

Political scientists have long assumed that what they call "democratic consolidation" is a one-way street: Once democracy in a particular country has been consolidated, the political system is safe, and liberal democracy is here to stay. Historically, this has indeed been the case. So far, democracy has not collapsed in any wealthy country that has ex-

perienced at least two government turnovers as a result of free and fair elections. But a large part of the reason that liberal democracy proved to be so stable in the past was its ability to persuade voters of its ad-

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vantages. Indeed, while political scientists have offered many divergent definitions of democratic consolidation, they mostly agree on this key insight. In the classic formulation of Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, for example, “democratic consolidation” refers to the extent to which democracy is the “only game in town.”<sup>10</sup> Consolidated democracies are stable, Linz and Stepan argue, because their citizens have come to believe that democratic forms of

government possess unique legitimacy and that authoritarian alternatives are unacceptable. This raises a question that might have seemed to be of merely theoretical interest until a few years ago: What happens to the stability of wealthy liberal democracies when many of their citizens no longer believe that their system of government is especially legitimate or even go so far as to express open support for authoritarian regime forms?

To answer this question, we need to conceive of the possibility that democratic consolidation might not be a one-way street after all. Democracy comes to be the only game in town when an overwhelming majority of a country’s citizens embraces democratic values, reject authoritarian alternatives, and support candidates or parties that are committed to upholding the core norms and institutions of liberal democracy. By the same token, it can cease to be the only game in town when, at some later point, a sizable minority of citizens loses its belief in democratic values, becomes attracted to authoritarian alternatives, and starts voting for “antisystem” parties, candidates, or movements that flout or oppose constitutive elements of liberal democracy. Democracy may then be said to be *deconsolidating*.

The phenomenon of democratic deconsolidation is conceptually distinct from assessments of the extent to which a country is governed democratically at a particular moment in time. An important research program in political science has attempted to measure the degree to which a country allows free and fair elections, or affords its citizens such basic rights as freedom of speech; the two most influential efforts at doing this are the Polity and the Freedom House measures. These indices are very good at assessing the current state of democratic rule in a particular country. But the question of democratic consolidation or

deconsolidation is concerned not with the *extent* of democratic rule but rather with the *durability* of democratic rule. When citizens grow disaffected with democracy and antisystem parties gain a significant share of the vote, this may not be enough to undermine the rule of law or to impede free and fair elections in the short run. As a result, such developments, worrying though they might be, would not necessarily register on the Freedom House or Polity indices. Yet they may provide good reason for concern that those same rights and freedoms have become more brittle than they were in the past, and that core aspects of liberal democracy have become less likely to persist into the future. A useful measure of democratic deconsolidation would therefore have to take these factors into account.

### Case Studies in Deconsolidation

Democratic deconsolidation is an unexplored area of the conceptual map, a territory that has long seemed so barren that cartographers have not seen the need to color it in. How urgent is the need to explore this terrain? Is the *terra incognita* that we describe merely of academic interest, something to be registered and catalogued for the sake of scholarly completeness, even though democratic deconsolidation is unlikely to have major effects? Or does it hide a dangerous fault line, requiring an early-warning system that might give some notice of an unprecedented democratic regression that could affect even countries in which democracy is now considered unshakeable?

Preliminary evidence suggests that the latter interpretation is closer to the mark. While the ascent of populist parties and movements is relatively new in North America and Western Europe, other regions show how democratic deconsolidation can signal a real danger for the stability of democratic governance, even in countries that appear to be doing very well according to more traditional measures.

By the 1980s, for example, Venezuela was widely considered a stable two-party democracy with a long record of free and fair elections. "Venezuela's political life after 1959," Richard Haggerty and Howard Blustein wrote in the early 1990s, "was defined by uninterrupted civilian constitutional rule." Successive peaceful turnovers of power testified to "Venezuela's rapidly maturing democracy."<sup>11</sup> What is more, the country was on the verge of counting as a developed democracy, with a per capita income comparable to that of Israel or Ireland. For many students of the region, "Venezuelan democracy became the political model to be imitated in Latin America, comparing favorably with the dictatorships of the left and right that prevailed in those years."<sup>12</sup> In short, according to most scholars the country seemed to have advanced far along the one-way street of democratic consolidation.

Yet Venezuelan democracy has fared very poorly since Hugo

Chávez's surprise election to the presidency in 1998. The rule of law has been hollowed out, the press has been muzzled, critics have been imprisoned, and the opposition suppressed. According to Freedom House, which assigns countries a "Freedom Rating Score" on a 1-to-7 scale (with 1 being the most free and 7 being the least free), Venezuela dropped from being a Free country in the 1980s (1 on political rights and 2 or 3 on civil liberties) to barely being Partly Free today (5 on both measures). What can explain this puzzling transformation?

Survey data show that, well before Chávez's election, a steady process of democratic deconsolidation was already underway: Public skepticism about the value and performance of democracy was rising. Citizens were increasingly open to authoritarian alternatives such as military rule. Antisystem parties and movements celebrated important victories. All of this is reflected in data that were available at the time. When the Latinobarometer surveys first asked Venezuelans in 1995 whether they preferred "democracy" or "authoritarian government," 22.5 percent of respondents said that they would prefer the latter; another 13.9 percent were indifferent. Levels of expressed dissatisfaction with democratic performance were also high: In 1995, 46.3 percent agreed that democracy "does not solve the problems of the country," while an astonishing 81.3 percent said that they would welcome a strongman leader (*mano dura*). Finally, levels of confidence in politicians and political institutions were consistently low throughout this period. In the year Chávez took power, only 20.2 percent of the population expressed confidence in Parliament. Attention to the indicators of democratic deconsolidation might, therefore, have been able to foretell real danger to Venezuela's democratic system long before the standard indicators now used by political scientists registered a decline in democratic governance.

The same goes for many other countries. Poland, for example, has long been touted as the single greatest success story of postcommunist transition to liberal democracy. Since 1990, free and fair elections have led to four changes of government in the country. Polish civil society has long been very robust, with a rich landscape of associations and NGOs, effective independent-media outlets scrutinizing the government, and academics and journalists freely criticizing officeholders.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, Poland enjoyed remarkable economic success; from 1991 to 2014, per capita income increased more than sixfold.<sup>14</sup> All in all, it is little wonder that numerous scholars began calling Poland a "consolidated democracy."<sup>15</sup>

But as in Venezuela, so too in Poland indicators of democratic deconsolidation have been painting a more pessimistic picture all along. As early as 2005, 15.7 percent of Polish respondents, a comparatively high portion of the population, stated that "having a democratic political system" was a "fairly bad" or "very bad" way of running the country. By 2012, this had notched up to 16.6 percent, the second-highest level

ever recorded by a postcommunist member state of the European Union. Meanwhile, support for having the “army rule” was expressed by 22 percent of respondents, compared to a European Union average of 9 percent. As in other countries, this shift in public opinion was quickly reflected in political practice: A changing parade of antisystem parties, from the Self-Defense of the Republic of Poland to the League of Polish Families and the more recent Palikot’s Movement, have long enjoyed a significant foothold in the country’s electoral landscape.

All of this helps to explain Poland’s backsliding from liberal democratic norms over the past year. After Jarosław Kaczyński’s Law and Justice party won both presidential and parliamentary elections in 2015, it quickly moved to muzzle the free media and to undermine the independence of liberal institutions such as the constitutional court. Today, the rights of Polish citizens are in real danger, and it would seem fanciful to call Polish democracy fully consolidated. “The measures Warsaw is taking,” said Guy Verhofstadt, the prime minister of Belgium at the time of Poland’s admission to the European Union in 2004, are “anti-democratic and contrary to the principles of the rule of law signed by Poland upon its EU accession. It is clear that if an accession agreement was to be sought now, it would fail.”<sup>16</sup>

In both Poland and Venezuela, a focus on our core indicators of democratic deconsolidation would have painted a more nuanced picture of the prospects of democracy than the measures to which most political scientists have traditionally devoted their attention. It would therefore have been much better able to predict where those countries were headed. This suggests that close attention to the signs of deconsolidation can indeed function as an early warning system, alerting careful observers to the kind of deep-seated discontent with democratic institutions that is liable to prove deeply destabilizing before long.

## **The Consequences of Deconsolidation**

Donald Trump’s election to the presidency of the United States has given renewed urgency to questions about the stability of supposedly consolidated liberal democracies. Should the growing disenchantment of citizens in the United States be seen as a warning sign that democracy may begin to founder even in countries where historically it has been extraordinarily stable? And does the electoral success of parties and candidates that attack key democratic norms during their campaigns suggest that their supporters will remain loyal to them even if they start to undermine the rule of law?

It is not yet possible to answer these questions in full. For one, a more systematic analysis is needed to test whether past instances of deconsolidation have reliably predicted subsequent deteriorations in the quality of elections and the rule of law. For another, democratic deconsolidation in countries such as the United States and France remains at an incipient

stage; it would be premature to exclude the possibility that, in countries where it is deeply entrenched, democracy can weather a much larger degree of civic withdrawal and discontent. Perhaps longstanding democracies have sufficient systemic resources to turn the growing anger of their citizens into a force for democratic reform, as occurred in France

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under Charles de Gaulle or in the United States during the Progressive Era. Or perhaps their vigorous civil societies will manage to resist any attacks on the rule of law, reawakening a long-lost enthusiasm for the core principles of liberal democracy.

But despite all the uncertainty involved in analyzing developments that have no clear historical precedent, there are strong indicators that the consequences of democratic de-

consolidation may turn out to be just as serious in the heartland of liberal democracy as they have been in its periphery. As Jan-Werner Müller has cautioned, populists define the “real people” whom they seek to represent very narrowly.<sup>17</sup> Embracing only those who share the origins and values of the majority, populists exclude minority ethnic and religious groups.<sup>18</sup>

The core of the populist appeal thus sets populists in opposition to a pluralist vision of democracy in which groups holding disparate views and opinions must resolve their differences through channels of democratic dialogue and compromise. Instead, populism fosters an illiberal politics that uses the power of the majority to confront perceived or actual elites in the media, courts, and the civil service; disregards the rights of unpopular minorities; and attacks institutional roadblocks such as independent courts as illegitimate impediments to the popular will. When a populist movement takes on an antisystem hue—as it now does not only in countries such as Poland or Hungary but also in much of Western Europe and North America—it is poised to do real damage to the integrity of liberal-democratic institutions.

In countries where populists have not yet taken power, radical reforms are needed to counteract the social and economic drivers of democratic deconsolidation. Establishment politicians with a real commitment to liberal democracy may be more likely to undertake these reforms—and to disregard the protestations of interest groups that oppose them—when they are afraid that antisystem parties are about to take power. In that sense, the dangerous age of populism may harbor an opportunity for righting the ship of state after all. Yet when politicians finally muster the will to enact far-reaching reforms, they need to know what it is that they should do. So far, however, there is no consensus on what the drivers of populism are, or on how pub-

lic policy might effectively combat them. That makes it all the more urgent for political scientists to study both the origins of democratic deconsolidation and the public policies that may potentially provide an antidote to it.

In countries where populists are already in power, by contrast, those citizens who retain a deep commitment to the core values of liberal democracy must recognize that their countries' past stability is no reason for complacency. The power now wielded by antisystem parties and movements is unprecedented. So is the deep disenchantment with democracy they exploit so shrewdly. As a result, the survival of liberal democracy may now depend on the will of citizens to defend it effectively against attacks. That makes it all the more urgent for political scientists to recollect the insights that they have gleaned from studying how democracies have broken down in the past—and to turn these insights into clear lessons on how to monitor and resist attacks on the integrity of democratic institutions.

The process of deconsolidation now taking place across most liberal democracies is a very serious warning sign. But neither fate nor destiny decrees that democracy will falter. For now, the window for political agency remains open. Whether democratic deconsolidation will one day be seen as the beginning of the end for liberal democracy depends in good part on the ability of democracy's defenders to heed the warning and to mount a coherent response.

## NOTES

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