

Does Democracy Require Public Support?

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Abstract

Political scientists widely assume that democracy requires public support to survive. The empirical evidence for this hypothesis is, however, weak with only a handful of tests, all utilizing small cross-sectional samples, and finding contradictory results. Fundamentally, the problem is that survey data on democratic support are fragmented across time, space, and survey item. In response, we implement a Bayesian latent variable model to estimate a smooth country-year panel of democratic support for 120 countries and up to 24 years. The dynamic panel nature of our estimates then permit a rigorous test of the hypothesis that democracy requires public support. We find consistent evidence: democratic support is positively associated with subsequent change in democracy. Moreover, we find – as Lipset hypothesized over 60 years ago – that support helps ensure the survival of democracy but not its emergence in the first place.

Keywords: democracy, democratization, support for democracy, public opinion

Introduction

Democracy is under threat. In country after country, authoritarian and populist leaders are resurgent and strident, while liberal and tolerant voices are defensive and jaded. Whether long-standing or emerging, wealthy or developing, democracies as diverse as the United States, Turkey, the Philippines, and Hungary are seeing the erosion of democratic norms and institutions. Indeed, scholars of democratization have increasingly been raising concerns about the “decline” (Plattner 2015) and “recession” (Diamond 2015) of democracy, its “fading allure” (Plattner 2017), and the “dangers of deconsolidation” (Foa and Mounk 2016; 2017).

These are not new concerns. Political thinkers such as Plato and Machievelli have long worried that democratic systems are prone to usurpation, particularly if a democratic system loses the support of the public. In the modern era, this theory became crystallized in the notion of a democratic political culture: a set of beliefs, held by the citizenry, offering “political legitimacy” (Lipset 1959) or “diffuse support” (Easton 1965) for democracy. With such support and with such legitimacy, this Lipset-Easton theory argues, democracy is stable. Without such support, democracy is insecure and likely to fail should a crisis of some sort arise.

The theory that democracy requires public support has been widely accepted by political scientists (e.g., Booth and Seligson 2009; Bratton, Mattes, and Gyimah-Boadi 2004; Dalton 2004; Diamond 1999; Mattes and Bratton 2007; Norris 1999; 2011; Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer 1998). It has, however, received little rigorous empirical confirmation. The few existing tests (Fails and Pierce 2010; Hadenius and Teorell 2005; Inglehart 2003; Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Qi and Shin 2011; Welzel 2007) come to contradictory conclusions. These studies, moreover, all utilize small datasets of a few dozen countries observed only at one point in time. Without temporal variation it is perhaps impossible to test dynamic theories (Stimson 1985), such as the hypothesis that public support stabilizes democracy and prevents

its future breakdown. The impotence of cross-sectional designs is only compounded when the outcome, democracy, is as likely to influence the explanatory variable, public support, as the reverse (Fuchs-Schündeln and Schündeln 2015; Hadenius and Teorell 2005; Mattes and Bratton 2007). The widespread acceptance of the Lipset-Easton theory of democratic support thus rests on fairly flimsy evidence.

This paper therefore returns to the question of whether democracy requires public support, offering three major advances over existing research. First, while existing studies use a fraction of the available survey data on support for democracy, we use all the data that has been collected by cross-national public opinion projects: 3,014 national opinions about democracy, obtained from 1,165 nationally-representative public opinion surveys, 11 survey projects, 132 countries, and 24 years. Second, because these data are heavily fragmented across time, country, and disparate survey items, we develop and apply a dynamic Bayesian latent variable model to combine the fractured dataset of national opinions into one latent measure of support for democracy. The result is a panel dataset of support for democracy varying smoothly across countries and years. This panel dataset affords us a third advance over existing tests: with variation over country and year, we are able to estimate the effects of support on democratic change and stability while adjusting both for the persistent effects of democracy, as well as the influence of previous levels of democracy on current levels of support.

Using dynamic multilevel models, we find that public support is significantly and positively associated with subsequent change in democracy. We also examine more specific processes by which support and change in democracy are linked. In particular, we find that while support helps to prevent downturns in democracy, it does not appear to facilitate upturns. In addition, support produces democratic change when the regime is already somewhat democratic, but not when it is more autocratic. In other words, as Lipset and Easton hypothesized over 50 years ago, democratic support helps democracy to survive, but not to emerge in the first place.

Theory

Existing Research on Public Support and Democracy

The notion that democracy is rooted somehow in the attitudes and orientations of the public has proved to have an enduring appeal. Political thinkers since Plato have long worried that democracies are prone to failure because the citizenry lacks the foresight or the inclination to hold leaders accountable. Many centuries later, at the dawn of modern political science, Lipset (1959) returned to this topic in a seminal paper. He argued that “political legitimacy” – the “belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate or proper ones for the society” – is one of the principal “requisites” of stable democracy (the other of course being economic development) (Lipset 1959, 83).

This theory was extended and amplified by Easton (1965) in another classic contribution. Easton distinguished between “objects” that citizens might choose to support or not: at the most abstract level, the nation or political community; at the most concrete level, the incumbent authorities; and in-between, the regime.¹ He then also distinguished between two types of support – specific and diffuse – that may be afforded to any of the three objects. Specific support is instrumental, and thus lasts only as long as the political actor or regime produces the desired outputs. Diffuse support, in contrast, is an intrinsic or principled commitment to the regime. As such, it is more durable than specific support, helping to cushion democratic regimes when political or economic crises strike. Easton’s concept of diffuse support for the regime thus closely resembles Lipset’s notion of political legitimacy, but embeds the concept within a broader framework of public support.²

¹Later analyses of public opinion data have largely corroborated this typology (e.g., Dalton 2004; Klingemann 1999).

²Inglehart and Welzel (2005) offer an alternative conceptualization of popular democratic support which emphasizes citizens’ deeper values – such as liberty aspirations, toleration of

This Lipset-Easton theory of support for democracy offers a clear and compelling account of the link between the mass public and the dynamics of the political regime. It argues that diffuse, principled support is necessary for the survival of democracy. With such support, a democracy is legitimate and stable, but without support, democracy is unstable and liable to fail. This theory has been widely accepted by political scientists (e.g., Bratton, Mattes, and Gyimah-Boadi 2004; Booth and Seligson 2009; Dalton 2004; Diamond 1999; Mattes and Bratton 2007; Norris 1999; 2011; Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer 1998). Yet despite the prominence of this theory, it has received very little empirical attention.

The reason is that the data which are required are far harder to obtain than the socio-economic indices (such as GDP per capita) used to measure other requisites of democracy. An empirical test requires national measures of support for democracy, which, in turn, require costly, nationally-representative public opinion surveys for each data point. Indeed, it was not until the groundbreaking inclusion of measures of support for democracy on the third wave of the World Values Survey (WVS) that the relationship between support and democracy could be examined empirically.

In the first analysis of this data, Inglehart (2003) finds that an index of support, constructed using four WVS survey items, is modestly and positively correlated with democracy in a cross-sectional sample of 77 countries. Confirming the pioneering nature of the WVS support for democracy items, other studies largely examine the same data. Inglehart and Welzel (2005), for example, use a subsequent measure of democracy and control for years under democracy, but still find that democratic support shows a positive association with

difference, and trust in others – rather than their overt attitudes to democratic versus non-democratic regimes. As such, instead of requiring *explicit* support for democracy, Inglehart and Welzel argue that democracy requires *implicit* support. This implicit conceptualization of support is sufficiently distinct from the explicit that we do not consider it further in this paper.

level of democracy. In contrast, Hadenius and Teorell (2005) and Welzel (2007) find that support has little to no relationship with subsequent democracy once one adjusts for the the initial level of democracy.³ In the most comprehensive test thus far, Fails and Pierce (2010) add data from some of the Global Barometer survey projects to that from the World Values Survey, control for other socio-economic variables, and provide a separate test of whether support is associated with democratization or democratic survival. They find no evidence whatsoever that support is associated with either. Finally, Qi and Shin (2011) compare the effects of the proportion of respondents who support democracy and the proportion who both support democracy but are dissatisfied with its performance, which they call “critical support”. They find the support is not associated with subsequent democracy when controlling for prior democracy and other covariates, although critical support is.

These studies clearly come to markedly different – and contradictory – conclusions regarding the relationship between support and democracy. Moreover, their research designs are limited in a number of ways. First, all rely on cross-sectional designs although, without any temporal variation, it is impossible to test the dynamic effects proposed by Lipset and Easton. Cross-sectional design are also unable to test the causal effects of an independent variable when it is likely caused by the dependent variable in previous time periods, as is almost certainly the case with respect to support and democracy (e.g., Fuchs-Schündeln and Schündeln 2015; Hadenius and Teorell 2005).

Second, these studies use only a fraction of the available opinion data on support for democracy. As we will show later, there are potentially thousands of observations of democratic support across country, year, and survey project, yet existing studies utilize small datasets with between 41 (Hadenius and Teorell 2005) and 86 countries (Fails and Pierce 2010), observed at one point in time. With such low-powered tests, it is little surprise

³They regard this lagged dependent variable as necessary to counteract the possibility that democracy shapes political culture, rather than the reverse. We will pick up, and expand upon, this point later.

that this literature has produced inconsistent results.

Third, survey items may have different meanings in different contexts, known as lack of equivalence (Stegmueller 2011). None of these studies, however, adjust their survey data for heterogenous item effects. Of course, without replicates, over time, of the same items in the same countries these studies are indeed unable to separate latent country estimates of support for democracy from country-specific error. This is particularly a problem for Fails and Pierce (2010), who utilize different items, from different survey project, in different countries, but still affects the other studies, which use the same set of items across countries.

Fourth, these studies use the Freedom House index to measure democracy. Although a fairly standard choice, this index has received a fair amount of criticism for its measurement error, clustering of cases at the extremes of the scale, and methods of scoring and aggregating items (Alexander and Welzel 2011; Munck and Verkuilen 2002; Pemstein, Meserve, and Melton 2010). It is hard to draw firm conclusions when the dependent variable is poorly measured.

Finally, all these existing studies rely on WVS measures of support, most of them exclusively. Yet, as Kurzman (2014) points out, there appear to be a number of serious translation errors in the support for democracy items used in the 3rd and 4th waves of the World Values Survey.⁴ The resulting data for countries such as Vietnam, Albania, and Indonesia may not be usable. Coupled with the small samples that are used, such errors may well be driving (or obscuring) observed results.

In sum, existing studies that test the Lipset-Easton hypothesis come to contradictory conclusions despite essentially analyzing the same data. These studies are moreover hampered by small samples, cross-sectional designs, and other limitations which undermine their ability to provide a dispositive test of the hypothesis that democracy requires public

⁴For example, as Kurzman (2014) describes, the Indonesian survey of 2001 asked respondents their opinion on having military *rules*, rather than military rule. The vast majority of Indonesians unsurprisingly favored having rules.

support. This is the task of this paper. Our hypotheses follow.

Hypotheses

The Lipset-Easton theory is a dynamic one. It posits that the level of public support for democracy shapes the fate of democracy. As such, we build in a dynamic perspective by taking change in democracy as our dependent variable. We then derive a general hypotheses regarding the effects of support on change in democracy, followed by four more specific hypotheses focusing on particular processes linking support to change in democracy.

First, following existing tests of the Lipset-Easton theory (Hadenius and Teorell 2005; Inglehart 2003; Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Qi and Shin 2011; Welzel 2007), we test a general hypothesis that public support for democracy shapes subsequent change in democracy, in either a positive (upturns toward greater democracy) or a negative (downturns toward less democracy) direction. **H1: The level of public support for democracy is positively associated with subsequent change in democracy.**

However, empirical scholars are increasingly recognizing that the factors which allow democracy to emerge may differ from those which help it to be sustained (Boix 2011; Fails and Pierce 2010; Gleditsch and Ward 2006; Przeworski and Limongi 1997; Teorell 2010). This differentiation between democratic emergence and survival is actually anticipated by Lipset (1959), who proposed that support is required for democracy to be sustained, although not (necessarily) for it to emerge. As such, our second set of hypotheses focus on the role played by support in the survival or stabilization of democracy.

The first of these hypotheses, **H2a**, pertains to the effect of support contingent on the existing level of democracy: **the level of public support for democracy in an already-existing democracy is positively associated with subsequent change in democracy.** In other words, support influences the subsequent change in democracy only to the extent that some level of democracy already exists. When it does, change may then occur in either direction, with both increases and decreases in democracy possible. A

similar hypothesis has been proposed and tested by Acemoglu et al. (2009) with respect to development and democracy.

The next hypothesis, **H2b** focuses instead on the direction of change in democracy: **the level of public support for democracy is negatively associated with subsequent decreases in democracy.** To put it another way, regardless of the starting level of democracy, support reduces downturns in democracy, but plays no role in democratic upturns. Similar hypotheses have been proposed by Teorell (2010) and Boix (2011) regarding other determinants of democracy.

Finally, scholars have recently proposed that democratic support may also function as democratic “demand” (Qi and Shin 2011). In this view, public support for democracy helps democracy to emerge in addition to (or instead of) merely helping it to survive. As with the second set of hypotheses, the third also has two versions. **H3a** proposes that support influences upturns and downturns in level of democracy, but only when the regime is autocratic: **the level of public support for democracy in an autocracy is positively associated with subsequent change in democracy.** **H3b** then proposes that support leads to upturns in democracy, regardless of the existing level of democracy: **the level of public support for democracy is positively associated with subsequent increases in democracy.**

Data

Measuring Democracy

With at least ten different measures in existence (Pemstein, Meserve, and Melton 2010), democracy is perhaps the most-measured concept in social science. The frequency with which empirical scholars of democracy have returned to the measurement drawing board indicates, however, that no single measure of democracy has won universal acceptance in the discipline. Indeed, even the three most widely-used measures – the continuous Polity IV

and Freedom House (FH) indices and Przeworski and colleagues' dichotomous Democracy-Dictatorship (DD) indicator – have been subject to trenchant criticisms.

In particular, the minimalist Polity and DD measures have been criticized for several omitting important features of democracy, notably, universal suffrage (Munck and Verkuilen 2002). In addition, although the dichotomous nature of the DD indicator affords a conceptual clarity, it leads to lower validity and reliability (Elkins 2000). Continuous measures suffer from their own problems. The Polity and FH scales have also both been criticized for their high degree of error variance (Pemstein, Meserve, and Melton 2010; Treier and Jackman 2008). Both have also been shown to cluster at extreme values, raising the concern that they are not finely-grained enough to pick up variation in highly democratic, or highly autocratic countries (Alexander and Welzel 2011). Indeed, as Pemstein, Meserve, and Melton (2010) show, the Polity measure exhibits a pronounced nonlinear relationship with a latent measure of democracy. Finally, the use of specific indicators to measure components of democracy has also been criticized. FH assigns scores to indicators in an opaque fashion (Munck and Verkuilen 2002). All scales furthermore use small groups of raters to score indicators for all countries, which results in lower measurement validity than regionally-specific measures scored by regional experts (Pemstein, Meserve, and Melton 2010).

Such issues of conceptualization and measurement have concerned scholars for some time. Without a clear solution to this impasse, empirical scholars have stuck to using one (or two) of the big three measures. Fortunately we are now in a position to address these criticisms because of a new measure of democracy provided by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project (Lindberg et al. 2014). The advantages of the new V-Dem measure are threefold. First, V-Dem uses a far greater number of indicators of democracy than other projects: over 300 in fact, compared with between four (DD) and 22 (FH). Second, V-Dem obtains at least five independent ratings for all indicators, with thousands of country specialists, rather than a few generalists, providing the ratings. Third, V-Dem combines the indicators into scales in a principled fashion. Sub-scales are measured using item response

theoretic (IRT) modeling of the item ratings. The sub-scales are then combined in a multiplicative or additive fashion, as demanded by the conceptualization of democracy. There are five conceptualizations of democracy, corresponding with five distinct visions of democracy: liberal, participatory, deliberative, egalitarian, and electoral democracy.

Given these advantages in conceptualization and measurement, we derive our measure of democracy from V-Dem. In particular, we use the V-Dem “liberal democracy scale.” This is a combination of an electoral democracy sub-scale, which measures the political institutions “making rulers responsive to citizens through periodic elections,” and a liberalism scale, which captures the factors “protecting individual and minority rights against a potential ‘tyranny of the majority’ and state repression” (Varieties of Democracy 2017, 5). Such a conceptualization of liberal (as opposed to merely electoral) democracy corresponds with the conceptualization of democracy used in the literature on public support and democratization (e.g., Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Norris 2011).

Measuring Democratic Support

We collected all the nationally-aggregated responses to questions on support for democracy that – to the best of our knowledge – were publicly available at the time of research. We required that these survey responses be gathered by cross-national survey projects fielding representative national samples of citizens, and only sought out survey questions that focused on diffuse, principled support for democracy. Relevant items include those asking respondents to evaluate the appropriateness or desirability of democracy, to compare democracy to some undemocratic alternative, or to evaluate one of these undemocratic forms of government.⁵ We did not include data derived from questions that asked for respondents’ evaluations of national political institutions or satisfaction with the performance of democracy because such items have been shown to be empirically and conceptually distinct from

⁵A complete list of included survey items is included in the online supplementary materials.

diffuse support for democracy (Booth and Seligson 2009; Canache, Mondak, and Seligson 2001; Norris 1999). Relevant survey data were available for 11 survey projects, 144 countries, and as far back in time as 1991.⁶

The resulting dataset of support for democracy survey marginals is impressively large, with 3,014 country-level responses obtained from 1,165 separate nationally-representative survey samples. It is, however, fractured over time and space, with gaps in coverage for almost all countries. For example, in South Africa, cross-national survey projects fielded questions on support for democracy in 11 national surveys: the World Values Survey in 1996, 2001, 2006 and 2013, the AfroBarometer project in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2008 and 2012, and Pew Global Attitudes in 2002 and 2013. Despite this fairly regular coverage, measures of South African democratic support are only available for ten of the 18 years between 1996 and 2013 – and this is a case that has above average coverage.

To make matters worse, the data are further fragmented across numerous survey items. Indeed, we found at least 37 different survey items in the dataset, depending on how strictly we distinguished between items.⁷ Such fractured and unruly data are not easily combined into a single set of latent measures. Indeed, analysts' response to this fragmentation has generally been to discard most of the data and focus only on items collected by one

⁶In addition to the World Values Survey, our data are drawn from all the Global Barometers, the Pew Global Attitudes project, the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, and the European Social Survey. We excluded data from the World Values Survey for some countries, items, and years due to translation problems. See Kurzman (2014) for further discussion and the online supplementary materials for details.

⁷We took a conservative route in categorizing survey items by always classing two items as distinct when they were fielded by different project even if their wording appeared to be identical. Doing so allows our item effect parameters to capture variation induced both by question wording and by idiosyncrasies in the methodology of the various survey projects.

survey project at one point in time, thus creating a small cross-national dataset (e.g., Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Qi and Shin 2011; Welzel 2007). Unfortunately, not only does this result in the neglect of interesting and useful temporal variation, it removes the additional information that is provided by other survey projects and items.

Another option would be to attempt to construct a panel of countries and years using a single survey item. The most widely-used type of question on democratic – which asks respondents whether “democracy” is preferable to an “authoritarian government,” or whether it “doesn’t matter” to someone like the respondent – is fielded by most of the Global Barometer projects and by the Pew Global Attitudes project. However the question wording and order of the response sets unhelpfully varies slightly across these projects. This undermines the assumption of measurement invariance. In any case, constructing a panel out of a single item would still require the discarding of countries and years in which the item was not measured, and thus still lead to a fragmented panel. Moreover, the measurement of democratic support using a single survey item would result in considerable measurement error.

Instead, we develop a dynamic Bayesian latent trait model for measuring public opinion for situations such as this, when aggregate opinion data are fragmented across space, time, and measurement approach. This model allows us to use all of the survey data that tap the latent variable of interest. We apply the model to our dataset of support for democracy marginals, thus estimating a smooth country-year panel of democratic support. We provide a brief overview of the model below.⁸

First, we assume that democratic support is an latent quantity that varies both across countries and over time (i.e., within countries). We then model the observed number of survey respondents who offer support for democracy in each relevant question as beta-binomially distributed realizations of this latent variance (McGann 2014). The binomial distribution

⁸A formal expression of the model, along with further discussion, is provided in the online supplementary materials.

models the number of respondents offering support to democracy for each item while the beta prior allows for additional dispersion beyond that due only to sampling error.⁹

Second, due to the wording of questions and response sets, respondents tend to agree more readily with some items than others, regardless of their actual commitment to democracy. We therefore add item bias parameters to adjust for the idiosyncrasies induced by survey items – a standard approach when combining multiple items into one opinion timeseries (Caughey and Warshaw 2015; McGann 2014). These are comparable to intercepts in confirmatory factor analysis, or item difficulty parameters in the item response theoretic (IRT) models.

Third, we also include item-country bias parameters to adjust for the varying effects of items within countries. These allow us to tackle the problem of heterogeneous item functioning across countries, which is unfortunately quite prevalent in cross-national public opinion (Stegmueller 2011). For example, some scholars have criticized measures of democratic support that use the word “democracy” because this word has country-specific meanings that might hamper our ability to make cross-national comparisons. Item-country bias parameters address such concerns by separating the item-country idiosyncrasies from the latent support for democracy. We are able to estimate such item by country parameters in addition to item-specific intercepts and time-varying country latent estimates because our survey items are fielded multiple times in a given country. We thus have “replicates” of item-country combinations (Skrondal and Rabe-Hesketh 2004).

Finally, the latent estimates are allowed to evolve over time by modeling them as a dynamic, random walk process – again, a standard approach in smoothing opinion timeseries (e.g., Caughey and Warshaw 2015; Jackman 2005). In other words, latent support

⁹This beta-binomial specification thus acknowledges that real survey data include numerous sources of error, including that due to respondent selection, population coverage, questionnaire design, translation, and interview style, in addition to simple sampling error (see, e.g. Weisberg 2005).

for democracy in a particular country and year is thus treated as a function of the support estimated in the previous year plus some random noise. This dynamic component smoothes latent opinion over time, which allows the model to estimate a particular country’s democratic support even in years for which no survey data are available.

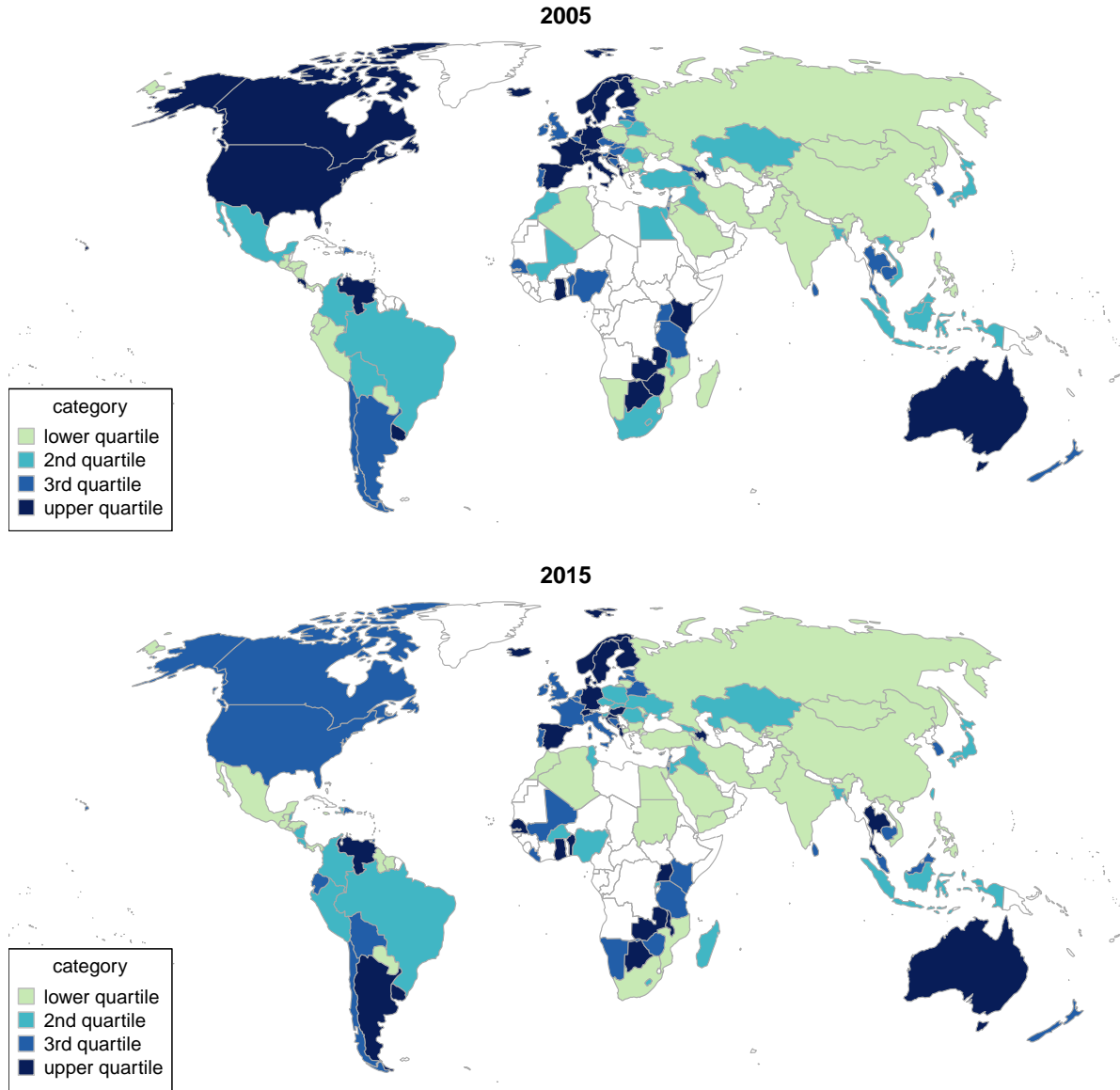
This model allows us to estimate a full country by year panel of democratic support.¹⁰ Although data are available for 145 countries and 24 years, we limit the coverage of this panel as follows. First, we only estimate support for the 132 countries in which survey data were available for at least two separate years. Second, for each country, we drop any estimates obtained for years preceding the first survey that measured support for democracy. In other words, each country’s time-series commences the year the first public opinion survey measuring support for democracy was fielded. Third, we drop countries where the resulting opinion time-series are shorter than five years in length.¹¹ Finally, because V-Dem data are not yet available for smaller countries, we also drop Belize and Bahrain from our dataset. The result is a panel dataset of 2,023 opinion estimates, drawn from 120 countries, each with time-series ranging from five to 24 years. This dataset will be the focus of the remainder of the paper.

In the online supplementary materials, we report a validation test of this method. This demonstrates that the model provides substantially more accurate predictions on a held-out, validation portion of the survey dataset than alternatives methods, including simple country averages but also Caughey and Warshaw’s (2015) DGIRT model. However, to further bolster confidence in our estimates of support for democracy, we also display them using a

¹⁰The model parameters are estimated using Bayesian Markov-Chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) simulation, implemented in Stan software (Carpenter et al. 2017). Full details in online supplementary materials.

¹¹We replicate all results using the estimates for all available countries. Results are similar and are available in the online supplementary materials.

Figure 1. Mapping Support for Democracy in 2005 and 2015



Democratic support for in 2005 (top) and 2015 (bottom). Data are trimmed as described in the section “Measuring Democratic Support.” Quantiles are measured across all estimates, for all years for which we have data.

choropleth map (Figure 1). We plot estimates from two years in particular, 2005 and 2015, with countries having higher levels of democratic support shaded in a darker hue (countries for which estimates are not available are shown in white). These choropleth maps support three conclusions.

First, support is higher where democracy has a long history – Western Europe, the USA, Canada, and Australia – and is lower in Asia and North Africa, where the heritage is authoritarian. This geographic pattern of support is largely consistent with existing research (e.g., Fuchs-Schündeln and Schündeln 2015; Klingemann 1999; Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer 1998; Norris 2011), which demonstrates the validity of our estimates. The fact that support is related to experience with democracy also confirms the suspicions of Hadenius and Teorell (2005) and Welzel (2007) that we need to consider the effect of democracy on support before one can estimate the effect of support on democracy.

Second, a comparison of the 2015 and 2005 maps shows that support has softened in some Western bastions of democracy, including the USA, Canada, France, and the Netherlands. This trend is also consistent with other recent analyses (Foa and Mounk 2016; 2017). Since “signs of deconsolidation” (Foa and Mounk 2017) do seem to be appearing in these countries, it is all the more urgent to test whether democracy does in fact require public support.

Third, we observe quite the opposite trend in Africa, particularly in the South and East: high, and rising, levels of democratic support. This pattern is yet another that echoes the findings of existing research (e.g., Bratton and Houessou 2014). In addition, it raises the question of whether higher African levels of democratic support could be a sign of democratic consolidation. These questions, of the consequences of support for the stabilization of democracy, are where we turn our attention next.

Empirical Strategy

With data in hand, we are now in a position to explicate and develop our modeling strategy. We begin with some simple linear models of democracy and support. These illustrate two fundamental concerns that one might have with drawing causal inferences from observational panel data and also allow us to demonstrate our responses to these concerns. The first concern is related to the dynamics of democracy and support. In particular, while support

may affect democracy, democracy may also affect support. The second concern relates to unobserved features of our cross-sectional units, countries. In particular, there may be other factors that confound any observed relationship between support and democracy. In this section, we discuss each of these concerns, and our responses, in turn.

Dynamic Specification

Table 1. Basic Models of Support and Democracy

	Level of democracy (d_t)		Change in democracy ($d_t - d_{t-1}$)
	(1.1)	(1.2)	(1.3)
Support for democracy (s_{t-1})	13.409*** (.589)	.213* (.083)	.213* (.083)
First lag of democracy (d_{t-1})		1.260*** (.021)	.260*** (.021)
Second lag of democracy (d_{t-2})		-.273*** (.021)	-.273*** (.021)
Intercept	51.903*** (.496)	.722*** (.158)	.722*** (.158)
N observations	2023	2023	2023
N countries	120	120	120
Adjusted R^2	.204	.085	.987
Residual standard deviation	22.284	2.803	2.803

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$. Linear models with standard errors in parentheses. Democracy is measured using the V-Dem Liberal Democracy index and is scaled from 0 to 100.

As Model 1.1 (Table 1) shows, there is a strong, positive relationship between lagged democratic support and subsequent democracy when the data are pooled across country and year. However, the interpretation of this relationship is not clear. One explanation is offered by theory we are testing: support influences the prospects for democratization and democratic survival. However, the opposite effect, from democracy to support, is both plausible, and consistent with other research (Fuchs-Schündeln and Schündeln 2015; Mattes

and Bratton 2007). In other words, the association we observe in Model 1.1 may simply reflect the influence of prior democracy on current levels of support. One of our tasks is to untangle the effect of support on democracy from the effect of democracy on support. Only then can we test our hypothesis that democracy requires support.

With panel data, analysts can control for the effects of prior levels of the dependent variable on the independent variables by including lags of these prior levels. Including lags also helps to reduce and even eliminate serial correlation in the dependent variable, which could otherwise lead to spurious correlations between the dependent and independent variables (Beck and Katz 1996). Using Breusch-Godfrey/Wooldridge tests of serial correlation, we find that two lags are sufficient to remove serial correlation.¹²

A model including two lags of democracy is shown in Model 1.2, Table 1. The magnitude of the coefficient of support is much reduced, suggesting that a large part of the correlation reported in Model 1.1 was due to some combination of the reverse effects of previous democracy on current support and serial correlation in both support and democracy. Yet the relationship between support and subsequent democracy remains positive and significant.

However, we prefer using change in democracy, instead of the level of democracy, as our dependent variable. This preference is largely due to the interpretive ease afforded by the change specification, especially when we later consider models of upturns and downturns in democracy. When two lags of the dependent variable are included, the two models are essentially identical (Beck and Katz 2011; De Boef and Keele 2008), as the results of the results of the change in democracy model (Model 1.3) confirm. We thus proceed using the change in democracy specification, with the knowledge that our results would be identical under the level specification.

¹²One lag: $\chi^2 = 130.48$, $df = 5$, $p < .001$; two lags: $\chi^2 = 9.74$, $df = 5$, $p = .083$.

Unit Effects

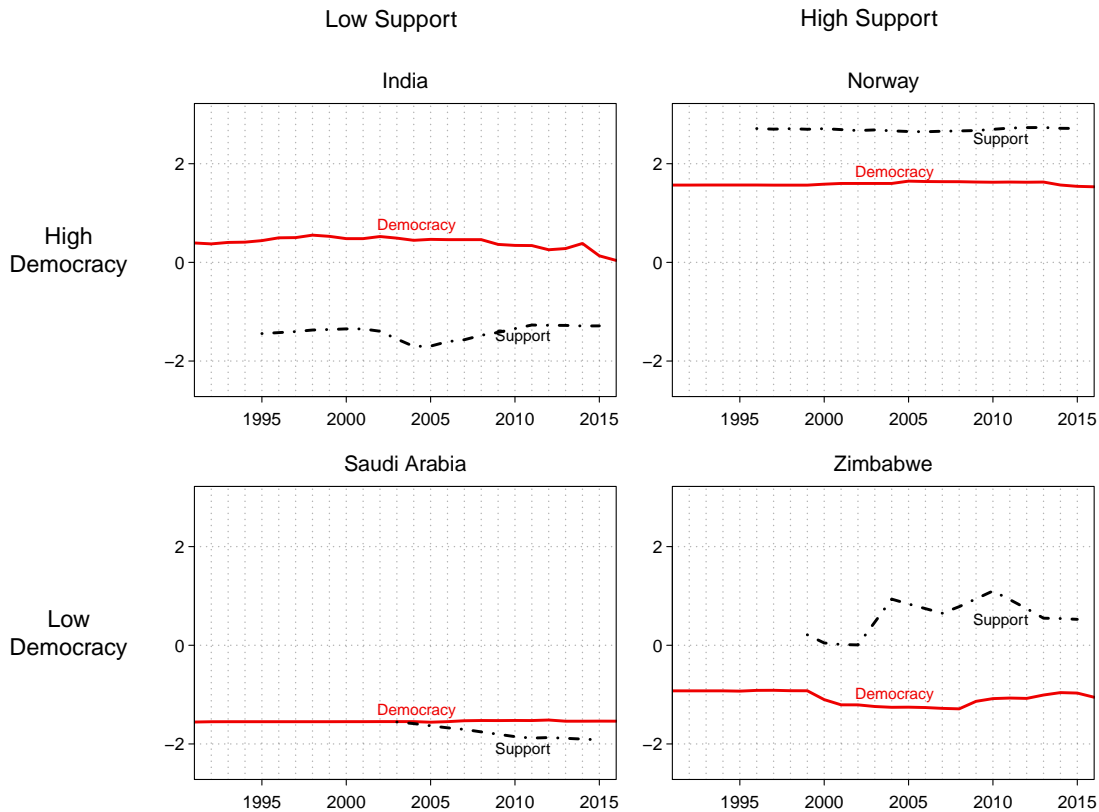
Including lagged dependent variables controls for the effects of previous levels of democracy on support. We should also, however, consider other factors that might confound the relationship between support and democracy, thus producing a correlation where no direct causal effect exists. A popular specification for panel data analysis is the fixed effects model (e.g., Acemoglu et al. 2008; Boix 2011; Haber and Menaldo 2011), which controls for unobserved country-specific confounds by discarding the between-country variance in the variables of interest. Because it focuses only on the within-country, over-time variance in the variables, we may also refer to the fixed effects specification as a within-country research design.

Although a rigorous method of testing causal hypotheses using observational data, a within-country design may not be appropriate for the hypotheses we are interested in testing. The fixed effects estimator removes all cross-national variance in levels of support and democracy. As such, a within-country design tests the hypothesis that change in democracy is driven by *change* in support for democracy, or, alternatively, countries with stable levels of support should see no future change in democracy. Such an hypothesis, however, is not consistent with the Lipset-Easton theory of support for democracy, which posits that the *level* of support matters for democratic survival (Lipset 1959). In other words, stable democracy requires high, but not necessarily increasing support, while low, but not necessarily falling support threatens the stability of democracy.¹³

To crystallize this point, consider Figure 2, where we display levels of democracy and support for four countries. Norway and Saudi Arabia clearly count as cases that are consistent with the Lipset-Easton theory because their levels of support and democracy are

¹³In addition, if the variables of interest are fairly static over time, the fixed effects specification discards most of their observed variance. With slowly-changing variables such as democracy, development, and political culture being central in the study of democratization, a fixed effects specification renders null results very likely.

Figure 2. Support and Democracy in Four Countries



Democratic support (black, dashed line) and democracy (red solid line) for four selected countries between 1992 and 2016: India, with low support but high democracy; Zimbabwe, with high support but low democracy; Norway, with high support and democracy; and Saudi Arabia, with low support and democracy.

both high (Norway) or both low (Saudi Arabia). India and Zimbabwe are then cases that challenge the theory: India has fairly high levels of democracy yet very low support, while Zimbabwe has fairly low levels of democracy despite high support. However, since none of these four cases show much change in either support or democracy, they would essentially provide no evidence – either for or against the theory – using a within-country research design. By subtracting the between-country variance in independent and dependent variables, we might say that the fixed effects model “throws the baby out with the bathwater” (Beck and Katz 2001).¹⁴

¹⁴Indeed, most theories of democratization are similarly concerned with the levels of some

As such, rather than a fixed effects specification, we use a multilevel (or random effects) model. This offers a middle ground between, on the one hand, ignoring country effects completely and using a fully-pooled design, and, on the other hand, removing all between-country variation and using a within-country design. Such models are increasingly popular in studies of democratization (e.g., Jensen and Wantchekon 2004; Wiens, Poast, and Clark 2014; Wright 2009), and have also been proposed for the analysis of panel data more generally (e.g., Beck and Katz 2007; Shor et al. 2007).

Control Variables

Given that our specification does not fully account for other country-level factors that might confound the relationship between support and democratic change – and does not account at all for time-varying factors that might do the same – we include several other variables to control for factors that have previously linked with the emergence and survival of democracy. First, following a large literature (e.g., Acemoglu et al. 2008; 2009; Boix 2011; Lipset 1959; Przeworski and Limongi 1997), we use the *log of GDP per capita* to measure economic development, with data drawn from the World Bank World Development Indicators. Missing values (e.g. for Taiwan) were imputed using linear models applied to GDP per capita data from the IMF and Penn World Tables. We also calculate annual *growth in GDP per capita* using the unlogged versions of these same data. Second, *dependence on natural resource revenues* (Haber and Menaldo 2011; Jensen and Wantchekon 2004; Wiens, Poast, and Clark 2014) is measured using an indicator for whether a country received greater than \$1,000 per capita in revenue from oil and gas production in a given year. The raw data were drawn mainly from the World Bank World Development Indicators, supplemented with data from

requisite (e.g. resource dependence, development), not only the changes within country. Thus it is little surprise that studies examining only within-country variation fail to find evidence that factors such as economic development (Acemoglu et al. 2008) and natural resource dependence (Haber and Menaldo 2011) matter for democracy.

Haber and Menaldo (2011).¹⁵ Third, some scholars have argued that democracy struggles in countries with an Islamic tradition (Fish 2002; Teorell 2010). As such, we gather data on the *proportion of a country identifying as Muslim* in 1990 from the Pew Research Centre. Finally, to capture the regional diffusion of democracy (Gleditsch and Ward 2006), we measure the *average level of regional democracy* and *change in regional democracy* for each year (we again use V-Dem Liberal Democracy index data with regions defined as United Nations subregions).

We are now in a position to describe our models more formally. First, to test H1, we model change in democracy ($\Delta d_{it} = d_{it} - d_{it-1}$), for country i and year t , as a function of level of democratic support s and our set of control variables x :

$$\Delta d_{it} = \alpha + \phi_1 d_{it-1} + \phi_2 d_{it-2} + \gamma s_{it-1} + \sum_{k=1}^K \beta_k x_{kit-1} + \delta_i + \epsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

Here, the ϕ parameters capture the effects of the first two lags of democracy, β_k are the coefficient estimates for the K covariates, δ_i are $N(0, \sigma^\delta)$ distributed country random effects, and ϵ_{it} are $N(0, \sigma^d)$ distributed residuals. The parameter of primary interest here is γ , the short run effect of democratic support on change in democracy.

Hypotheses 2a, 2b, 3a, and 3b relate to the emergence and survival of democracy, rather than general change in democracy. Most scholars have modeled the emergence and survival of democracy using dichotomous measures of democracy (e.g., Przeworski and Limongi 1997; Gleditsch and Ward 2006). It is straightforward to do so because when democracy is high, for example, the regime can either survive, and thus not change at all, or fail, and show a decrease in democracy. It cannot show a further increase in democracy. The initial level of democracy and the direction of change are thus orthogonal (Teorell 2010). Using

¹⁵A dichotomous indicator is used for two reasons. First, to impute missing values within each country's time series. Second, the revenue data are zero-inflated and skewed, contraindicating a continuous measure.

a continuous measure of democracy, however, both the initial level and direction of change may vary: a country that is democratic at time t may become even more so at $t + 1$, or, instead, it may move toward autocracy. And *vice versa* for an autocratic country.

As such, we have to be a little more ingenious in testing questions of the emergence and survival of democracy when using continuous measures of democracy. To test H2a and H3a, we use a model proposed by Acemoglu et al. (2009) for continuous measures of democracy. They define an indicator J_{it} for regime type, which takes a value of one if the country is regarded as a democracy at time t and zero otherwise.¹⁶ The model is then adjusted as follows:

$$\Delta d_{it} = \alpha + \phi_1 d_{it-1} + \phi_2 d_{it-2} + \gamma^{dem}(J_{it-1})s_{it-1} + \gamma^{aut}(1 - J_{it-1})s_{it-1} + \sum_{k=1}^K \beta_k x_{kit-1} + \delta_i + \epsilon_{it} \quad (2)$$

The indicator J thus effectively produce two versions of the explanatory variable, democratic support. The first where support varies only if the regime is democratic at time t , otherwise taking a value of zero; the second where support varies only if the regime is autocratic at time t , otherwise taking a value of zero. There are consequently two parameters capturing the effects of level of support on democratic change. The first γ^{dem} gives the effect of support when the starting point is a democracy; this parameter allows us to test H2a. The second γ^{aut} gives the effect of support when the starting point is an autocracy; this allows us to test H3a.

To test H2b and H3b, which pertain to the effects of support on a particular direction of change in democracy, we use a method developed by Teorell (2010) and Boix (2011). They recode the dependent variable, change of democracy, such that it either captures only increases or *upturns* in democracy, or, alternatively, decreases or *downturns*. Upturns (Δd_{it}^+)

¹⁶We use the regime type indicator provided by V-Dem, which utilizes the same basic items as the liberal democracy scale but combines them in a slightly different fashion.

and downturns (Δd_{it}^-) are measured as follows:

$$\Delta d_{it}^+ = \begin{cases} \Delta d_{it}, & \text{if } \Delta d_{it} \geq 0 \\ 0, & \text{if } \Delta d_{it} < 0 \end{cases}, \quad \Delta d_{it}^- = \begin{cases} 0, & \text{if } \Delta d_{it} > 0 \\ |\Delta d_{it}|, & \text{if } \Delta d_{it} \leq 0 \end{cases}$$

To put it simply, the measure of upturns varies only with increases in democracy. All decreases are set to zero, along with instances of no change in democracy. The measure of downturns similarly varies only with decreases in democracy, with all increases set to zero.¹⁷

With two versions of the dependent variable, the approach of Teorell (2010) and Boix (2011) requires two separate models:

$$\Delta d_{it}^+ = \alpha + \phi_1 d_{it-1} + \phi_2 d_{it-2} + \gamma^+ s_{it-1} + \sum_{k=1}^K \beta_k x_{kit-1} + \delta_i + \epsilon_{it} \quad (3)$$

$$\Delta d_{it}^- = \alpha + \phi_1 d_{it-1} + \phi_2 d_{it-2} + \gamma^- s_{it-1} + \sum_{k=1}^K \beta_k x_{kit-1} + \delta_i + \epsilon_{it} \quad (4)$$

Model 3 tests the effects of support on increases in democracy, thus allowing us to test H3b. Model 4 then isolates the effect of support (and indeed, all independent variables) on decreases in democracy, and thus allows us to test H2b.

Results

General Effects of Support on Change in Democracy

We begin by testing the general hypothesis that level of support is positively associated with subsequent change (H1). As Model 1 in Table 2, shows, support remains positively and significantly related to subsequent change in democracy. The magnitude of the effect

¹⁷The formula for downturns uses the absolute value of Δd_{it} to ensure that the resulting measure of “downturns” increases in a positive, rather than negative direction. As such, higher values of “downturns” reflect larger downturns.

is very similar to that reported in Table 1, Model 1.3, although country random effects and covariates have now been added. Indeed, as we report in the online supplementary materials, the results are very similar if we (1) use OLS with panel-corrected standard errors rather than multilevel models; (2) include all countries and years for which we have any support for democracy estimates (i.e., do not “trim” the time-series); (3) use the combined Freedom House index to measure democracy; (4) include additional covariates with some missing data – the Gini index of income inequality and ethnolinguistic fractionalization – in the model.

The coefficient of support in Model 1, 0.22, is the estimated short-run effect of a one standard deviation increase in support on change in democracy the subsequent year. Since democracy has a theoretical scale that ranges from 0 to 100, the magnitude of the effect of support is thus fairly small in the short term. However, dynamic panel models allow the analyst to estimate both short and long-run effects (De Boef and Keele 2008). In the long run, increases in explanatory variables can have much larger effects when the dependent variable is persistent over time, as democracy clearly is. According to Model 2.1, a permanent one-standard-deviation increase in democratic support is expected to lead to an increase in democracy of 9.72 units (S.E. = 4.12) in the long run.¹⁸

In sum, we find evidence that support for democracy is positively associated with subsequent change in democracy. As such, this finding resonates with Inglehart (2003) and Inglehart and Welzel (2005) – who show that support is linked with the level of democracy – but stands in contrast to the null findings of Hadenius and Teorell (2005) and Welzel (2007). However, our analysis goes substantially further than these studies since our evidence is drawn from a much larger sample of countries and years. This allows us to adjust for the persistent effects of democracy over time, which eliminates the most obvious source of spurious correlations between democracy and support.

¹⁸The formula for the long run effect is $-\gamma/(\phi_1 + \phi_2)$. The standard error is estimated by bootstrapping.

Table 2. Multilevel Models of Support and Democratic Change

	Change in democracy		Upturns in democracy	Downturns in democracy
	(Mod. 1)	(Mod. 2)	(Mod. 3)	(Mod. 4)
Democratic support, all countries	.218** (.085)		.092 (.069)	-.184** (.065)
Democratic support, democracies only		.236* (.097)		
Democratic support, autocracies only		.174 (.158)		
First lag of democracy	.261*** (.023)	.261*** (.023)	.148*** (.016)	-.092*** (.014)
Second lag of democracy	-.284*** (.022)	-.284*** (.022)	-.170*** (.016)	.100*** (.014)
Log GDP per capita	.050 (.084)	.047 (.085)	.049 (.067)	-.003 (.063)
Regional average democracy	.009 (.005)	.009 (.005)	.007 (.004)	-.006 (.004)
Change in regional democracy	-.075 (.056)	-.075 (.056)	-.050 (.041)	.017 (.035)
GDP per capita growth	.007 (.012)	.007 (.012)	-.022* (.009)	-.028*** (.008)
Proportion Muslim	-.074 (.247)	-.092 (.253)	-.274 (.203)	-.120 (.197)
Dependence on fuel income	-.667** (.251)	-.672** (.253)	-.735*** (.206)	-.016 (.199)
Intercept	.333 (.658)	.369 (.667)	1.264* (.526)	.726 (.496)
<i>N</i> observations	2023	2023	2023	2023
<i>N</i> countries	120	120	120	120
Akaike information criterion	9966	9969	8679	8053
Country standard deviation	.115	.137	.294	.375
Residual standard deviation	2.795	2.795	2.015	1.711

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$. Multilevel linear models with standard errors in parentheses. Democracy is measured using the V-Dem Liberal Democracy index and is scaled from 0 to 100. All explanatory variables are lagged one year, unless otherwise indicated.

However, although Model 1 demonstrates that support is positively associated with future change in democracy, it lacks detail regarding the specific process by which this occurs. Is support linked with democracy by aiding the emergence of democracy or – as Lipset and Easton suggested – its survival? To examine these more specific processes, we turn to our tests of the remaining hypotheses.

Differential Effects of Support on Emergence and Survival of Democracy

Models 2 in Table 2 follows Acemoglu et al. (2008) in separately estimating the effects of support within democratic and autocratic regimes. The results show that, within democracies, the effect of support on subsequent democratic change is positive and significant. This finding is consistent with H2a. In contrast, the effect of support is not significant when the regime is autocratic. There is thus no evidence for H3a. The coefficient of support is, additionally, slightly weaker in autocratic regimes (0.17) than democratic (0.24), although this difference is not statistically significant.

The third and fourth models in Table 2 then follow Teorell (2010) and Boix (2011) in creating separate measures of democratic upturns (Model 3) and democratic downturns (Model 4). The results of Model 3 provide little evidence for hypothesis 2b, which posits that support acts as democratic “demand” and spurs democratization. Indeed, the coefficient of support in Model 3 is small (0.09) and insignificant. In contrast, there is evidence for hypothesis 3b, which that support helps to sustain existing democratic institutions and practices: the coefficient of support in Model 4 (-0.18) is significant. The effect is negative because downturns in democracy increase as the extent of negative change in democracy increases. In other words, the results from Model 4 show that support helps prevent democratic decay.

Thus, in sum, the evidence from models 2 through 4 is consistent with hypotheses 3a and 3b, which propose that support helps democracy to endure, but not hypotheses 2a or 2b, which posit that support helps democracy to emerge.¹⁹ As such, our findings suggest

¹⁹In the online supplementary materials, we show that these endurance versus emergence

that democracy does in fact require public support, as Lipset (1959) and Easton (1965) hypothesized decades ago.

Geographically-Varying Effects of Support

Our final set of analyses evaluate the extent to which the effect of support varies across geographic region. Doing so may help bolster confidence in our results. In particular, a number of scholars have argued that countries reach critical junctures at certain points in their histories, with their subsequent paths of development playing a large role in their prospects for future democratization. For example, Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens (1992) argue that development led to democratization only to the extent that it grew and strengthened the working class. One could similarly conjecture that historical events shaped both the emergence of democracy and the emergence of democratic support. If we were able to extend our measures of support sufficiently far back in time – as Acemoglu et al. (2008) and Boix (2011) have done with respect to measures of development – we could perhaps tackle this confounding directly. Instead, we attempt a different method of gaining purchase on the problem. By allowing the coefficient of support to vary by region, we evaluate whether our observed results are driven by those countries which both developed and democratized earliest – notably, Western countries. If instead we find that support maintains an effect on democratic change across our sample of regions, then this critical juncture argument poses less of a concern for our results.

results are substantively similar when using OLS with panel-corrected standard errors, including all support for democracy data, and including additional covariates. When using the Freedom House index, however, support is significantly related to the emergence of democracy, but not its endurance.

Table 3. Varying Effects of Democratic Support by Region

Region	<i>N</i> countries	Change in democracy, all regimes	Change in democracy, democ. only	Upturns in democracy, all regimes
		(Mod. 1)	(Mod. 2)	(Mod. 4)
Global effect	120	.218 (.085)	.236 (.097)	-.146 (.068)
Eastern Europe & Central Asia	27	.232 (.116)	.296 (.133)	-.144 (.090)
Latin America	18	.212 (.123)	.238 (.134)	-.145 (.098)
Middle East & North Africa	13	.211 (.124)	.205 (.118)	-.146 (.095)
Sub-Saharan Africa	22	.196 (.125)	.125 (.142)	-.146 (.093)
The West	20	.204 (.110)	.171 (.122)	-.147 (.092)
East Asia	4	.209 (.109)	.184 (.134)	-.146 (.095)
South-East Asia	7	.216 (.120)	.262 (.133)	-.145 (.100)
South Asia	4	.211 (.118)	.219 (.141)	-.145 (.101)
Caribbean	5	.208 (.104)	.191 (.125)	-.146 (.089)

All estimates obtained using multilevel linear models. The global effect represents the effect of support when regional intercepts (using Teorell’s (2010) “politico-geographic” definition of region) are included in the model but support is not permitted to vary by region. Standard errors are in parentheses (estimated using bootstrapping). Other cell entries are coefficients of democratic support when allowed to vary across regions. Democracy is measured using the V-Dem Liberal Democracy index and is scaled from 0 to 100.

Our multilevel modeling approach makes it straightforward to allow the effects of support to vary by region.²⁰ We estimate three models with regionally-varying effects of democratic support, corresponding to Model 1, 3, and 4: a model of overall change, a model of change among already-existing democracies and a model of upturns. Starting with Model 1, the “global effect” in Table 3 show that the coefficient of support remains as reported in Table 2, although regional intercepts have now been included. When allowed to vary across regions, support then shows limited variation, ranging from 0.20 in sub-Saharan Africa to 0.23 in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.²¹ Notably, regions such as the West (i.e., Western

²⁰We use Teorell’s (2010) “politico-geographic” definition of region.

²¹Note that many of the regionally-specific effects shown in Table 3 are not statistically

Europe, the USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand) and Latin America, which began to democratize well before the first years covered by our panel dataset, do not show particularly strong effects. Our results thus do not hinge on cases where democratization, and perhaps the emergence of democratic values, occurred in the distant past.

We then allow the effects of support to vary by region using the specification of Model 2, which produces differential effects in democratic and autocratic regimes. Model 2 in Table 3 shows the variation of this effect within democratic regimes only. Greater regional variation is observable in comparison with Model 1. The coefficients of support range from a low of 0.13 in sub-Saharan Africa to a high of 0.30 in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Once again, these regionally-specific effects are not particularly high among the longer-established democracies of the West and Latin America.

Finally, we test the regional variation in effects of support on upturns in democracy (Model 4). There is very little variation across regions. The global effect, however, is somewhat diminished from that reported in Table 2 when regional intercepts are included (-0.15 versus -0.18).

In sum, our analysis of regional variation has demonstrated that the effects of support vary modestly across geographic regions. More importantly, our results are clearly not driven by long-established democracies, as neither Western nor Latin American countries show particularly strong effects. Instead, support appears to have an effect on change in democracy in regions such as Eastern Europe and Central Asia, where democracy only began to arise at around the time our public opinion time series commence. As such, we can be more confident that our findings are not confounded by the emergence of democracy, in certain regions of the world, decades before our panel data commences.

significant. This is to be expected given the additional uncertainty induced by focusing on a small part of the dataset. The focus of this table is however the limited variation across regions.

Conclusion

From Latin America to Western Europe, Africa to North America, democracy is being undermined by authoritarian and populist leaders. The findings described in this paper are consistent with Lipset (1959) and Easton's (1965) classic theory for how this might occur – the support afforded to democracy by the public. As scholars such as Diamond (1999) and Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer (1998) have long argued, if support remains low, emerging democracies risk failing to consolidate, and might even descend into autocracy. Moreover, although Western democracies were thought to have “consolidated,” and thus escaped this purgatory, our evidence bolsters recent warnings that declining Western support for democracy might lead to even established democracies becoming “deconsolidated” (Foa and Mounk 2016; 2017).

However, our evidence is not consistent for another hypothesis regarding public support for democracy: that it functions also as “demand for democracy,” spurring further democratization (Qi and Shin 2011). Thus, although public support may help bolster and defend already-existing democratic rights and institutions, it does not appear to push elites to establish or expand these rights and institutions. This is perhaps not terribly surprising. While political competition makes democracies at least somewhat responsive to public opinion – including opinion about whether the regime should be democratic or not – autocratic elites are arguably less pressured by popular sentiments. They also are more willing and able to suppress popular demands if need be.

In order to test the effects of support on democracy we gathered a vast trove of over 3,000 nationally-aggregated opinions, and estimated a smooth country-by-year panel with over 2,000 observations. We were thus able to increase the amount of available data on democratic support by an order of magnitude, with variation now over time as well as space. Yet by the standards of, for example, the literature on development and democracy, our data are still quite limited in geographic and temporal range. In particular, survey measurements

of support for democracy only began after the third wave of democracy crested in 1991. As a consequence, we cannot be sure that our findings pertain to previous periods of democratic decline, such as the “reverse wave” seen in the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, the literature on development and democracy has shown that the effect of the former on the latter has varied considerably over time (e.g., Boix 2011; Acemoglu et al. 2009).

We have also focused here on one variant of public support for democracy: explicit support. Other scholars have argued instead that a more heterogenous and deeply-rooted cluster of cultural values provide implicit support for democracy (Inglehart and Welzel 2005). It would be a fruitful avenue for further research to investigate whether such “self-expression” values do indeed help sustain democracy, or perhaps even help it to emerge.

Our paper has also been silent on the mechanisms by which support bolsters democracy and lack of support undermines it. Perhaps low support allows populist and undemocratic leaders to emerge (Foa and Mounk 2016; 2017; Plattner 2017); in contrast, when such leaders attempt to undermine democratic procedures, perhaps high support triggers collective action by an outraged public (Booth and Seligson 2009). Given the current challenges to democracy, these are crucial question for scholars to investigate.

Finally, this paper reinforces the notion that democrats should be concerned about nurturing public support for democracy wherever democracy has already begun to take root. These attitudes appear able to help sustain any existing democratic institutions and processes. In less democratic contexts, concern should instead be directed at other drivers of democratization. Support for democracy may not matter in such regimes.

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