New data set redefines how we understand democratic transitions

By looking at episodes of regime transformation, a new data set from the EU-funded FASDEM project allows scholars to address democratisation and autocratisation as related but obverse processes.

Why do some dictatorships transition to democracy, whereas others resist pressures to liberalise? And why do some democracies exhibit resilience, when others experience backsliding or break down altogether?

While such questions are at the heart of understanding regime change, the existing quantitative approaches used by political scientists require improbable assumptions and rely on debatable units of analysis. They also pursue questions about democratic breakdown and democratic transition as separate research agendas, which hinders a joint and coherent study of regime change.

Thanks to a new data set on regime transformation developed by researchers at the Varieties of Democracy Institute, scholars can now address democratisation and autocratisation as related but obverse processes.

The data set, which was created with the support of the FASDEM project, captures 680 episodes of regime transformation (ERTs), spanning 1900 to 2019. It also differentiates between broad types of regime transformation: liberalisation in autocracies, democratic deepening in democracies, and autocratisation in both democracies and autocracies. The FASDEM project was funded by the European Commission.
The ERT database distinguishes 10 patterns with distinct outcomes, including democratic transition or breakdown. Using the data set, researchers concluded that only some ERTs have the potential for regime transition, and that there is no guarantee that such a transition will occur. In fact, only about 40% of autocracies that liberalise actually transition into a democracy. By contrast, 77% of democracies experiencing autocratisation break down by the end of the episode.

Three key advantages

According to an article published in the 'Journal of Peace Research', by providing novel insights into regime change over the past 120 years, the ERT data set offers three main advantages over other approaches.

First, it avoids problematic assumptions of unit homogeneity and constant as well as symmetric effects. Second, it integrates key insights from qualitative studies by treating regime change as a gradual and uncertain process. Finally, the data set allows scholars to study democratisation and autocratisation within the same systematic framework.

To illustrate these advantages, researchers compared ERT data for Türkiye with data provided by other sources. While the other sources either overstated the level of democracy or captured transitions and breakdowns, only the ERT data set accurately described Türkiye’s long-term development.

Impacting conflict research

The ERT data set provides unique benefits to both quantitative and qualitative researchers. As such, researchers are confident the data set will find broad application in conflict research. This includes informing ongoing debates about whether autocratising countries are more belligerent, if democratisation in ethnically heterogeneous societies leads to a higher risk of civil conflict, and what impact military intervention has on a democracy.

Keywords

FASDEM, democracy, autocracies, liberalisation, transition, regime, democratisation, transformation

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