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## **India's Democracy at 70**

*Ashutosh Varshney ■ Christophe Jaffrelot ■ Louise Tillin  
Eswaran Sridharan ■ Swati Ramanathan and Ramesh Ramanathan  
Ronojoy Sen ■ Subrata Mitra ■ Sumit Ganguly*

## **The Rise of Referendums**

*Liubomir Topaloff ■ Matt Qvortrup*

## **China's Disaffected Insiders**

*Kevin J. O'Brien*

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*Dan Paget on Tanzania*

*Sergey Radchenko on Turkmenistan*

*Marlene Laruelle on Central Asia's Kleptocrats*

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## **What Europe's History Teaches**

*Sheri Berman ■ Agnes Cornell, Jørgen Møller, and Svend-Erik Skaaning*

# THE REAL LESSONS OF THE INTERWAR YEARS

*Agnes Cornell, Jørgen Møller, and Svend-Erik Skaaning*

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Does history repeat itself? Some scholars and pundits clearly fear that it does. Against a backdrop of growing anxiety over recent political developments in Europe and North America, these commentators have looked to history for evidence that even long-established Western democracies might prove brittle in the face of political crisis. In an article published the day before the U.S. presidential election of 8 November 2016, Harvard political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt opined that Donald Trump's extremist behavior, together with mainstream Republicans' habit of condoning it, uncannily resembled the political dynamics seen in Italy in the 1920s and Germany in the 1930s. Levitsky and Ziblatt issued a stern warning that "we would be foolish, therefore, to ignore the lessons" of these interwar experiences.<sup>1</sup>

In February 2017 George Prochnik, writing in the *New Yorker* about the memoirs of the Austrian playwright and novelist Stefan Zweig (1881–1942), drew parallels between the rise to power of Adolf Hitler and that of Donald Trump. Prochnik wondered "how far along the scale of moral degeneration Zweig would judge America to be in its current state."<sup>2</sup> Harvard economist Dani Rodrik had cautioned in March 2016 that, just as globalization before the First World War had produced a severe political backlash, so might the present wave of globalization.<sup>3</sup> In late August 2016, scholar Aviezer Tucker argued that contemporary populist parties are advocating the kind of policies that led to the Great Depression and two world wars, and he reminded his readers of George Santayana's dictum, "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."<sup>4</sup>

Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman had long anticipated all of this. In an article in the *New York Times* on 11 December 2011, he

pointed to the similarities between the “Great Recession” that began in 2008 and the interwar Great Depression. On this basis, he argued that today’s conditions provide a fertile ground for the kind of antidemocratic populist forces that we associate with interwar Europe, asserting that “nobody familiar with Europe’s history can look at this resurgence of hostility without feeling a shiver.”<sup>5</sup>

These forewarnings rely on what we term “the interwar analogy.” That is, the scholars cited above argue that developments similar to those that took place in the period between the two world wars, particularly in interwar Europe, are underway today. The interwar analogy rests on a particular premise: In the face of crisis, even established democracies might break down or, less dramatic but still alarming, they might suffer a serious decline in the quality of their democratic systems. In the words of Levitsky and Ziblatt, “the experiences of interwar Europe remind us that Western democracies are not immune to collapse.”<sup>6</sup>

In this essay, we challenge this crucial premise of the interwar analogy. The real lesson of the interwar period is a very different one, namely that even crises as devastating as the Great Depression and the political success of totalitarian movements did little to undermine the stability of established democratic systems. Only in new and fragile democracies did the economic, political, and social dislocations of the 1920s and 1930s tear apart the democratic fabric. In other words, we argue that the interwar analogy is based on a superficial reading of interwar political developments. Although even long-established democracies in Western Europe and North America may today be facing a perilous situation, the lessons of interwar political developments do not support this argument.

Before going back in time to examine the interwar analogy’s building blocks, we need to say something about historical regularities, or the ways history might repeat itself. One of the first things students of social science learn is that social or political outcomes are often the product of complex relationships. This means that if history repeats itself, it does not do so in straightforward and easily predictable ways. The effect of any factor—for instance, economic crisis—to which we might turn as an explanation for other developments is likely to depend on the broader context. It follows that historical analogies are, at least implicitly, premised on holding all other factors equal. There is a large graveyard of historical analogies that turned out to be false for the simple reason that something of importance was not in fact equal.

Moreover, historical analogies often fail because people, including decision makers, are acquainted with history and actively seek to prevent it from repeating itself.<sup>7</sup> In other words, they heed Santayana’s warning about the perils of ignoring the past. The fact that social-scientific knowledge can in turn affect human behavior in this way distinguishes analogies in social science from those in natural science.

American sociologist Robert K. Merton once explained this distinction by pointing out that “the prediction of the return of Halley’s comet does not in any way influence the orbit of that comet.”<sup>8</sup> In similar fashion, British sociologist Anthony Giddens dismissed aspirations for social science to match the explanatory rigor and predictive power of natural science: “Those who still wait for a Newton are not only waiting for a train that won’t arrive, they’re in the wrong station altogether.”<sup>9</sup>

Nonetheless, all generalizations by social scientists about causal relationships are premised on history repeating itself in at least a general way.<sup>10</sup> Otherwise it would make no sense to claim, for instance, that if economic crisis has tended to produce democratic breakdowns in the past, it is likely to do so in the future as well. When we make inferences in social science, we use the past (and the present) to predict what lies ahead.

Bearing this in mind, it is unsurprising that the interwar period has garnered so much attention among political scientists and pundits who worry about democratic breakdown or backsliding. This period saw the only significant rollback in the number of democracies in modern times.<sup>11</sup> Democracy was under attack from mass-based totalitarian movements on the right as well as on the left. Moreover, rising autocratic great powers—first the Soviet Union, then Italy, and later Germany and Japan—challenged the democratic great powers. Finally, bouts of severe economic downturn created hyperinflation in some democracies and mass unemployment in all of them.

If scholars can make the case that current developments are similar to what we saw in the interwar period, it is thus plausible that the consequences also could be similar, even if they play out in a somewhat different way. As Mark Twain once put it: “History doesn’t repeat itself but it often rhymes.” Before we can ask whether certain interwar developments could in fact repeat themselves, however, we first need to clearly understand the real nature of these developments.

## **Interwar Patterns of Democratic Breakdown**

As part of a recent research project, we have conducted the first analysis of interwar regime change that includes all interwar democracies. More precisely, we have identified 44 distinct periods (or “spells”) of democracy across the globe in the years 1918–39. This scoring is based on a minimalist, Schumpeterian definition of democracy as competition for political leadership among groups that vie for the electorate’s approval through elections. As we have previously pointed out in these pages, “Schumpeter’s only hard and fast criterion is that the selection of who governs must be based on a competitive vote.”<sup>12</sup> The Schumpeterian definition is thus shorn of consideration about liberal rights such as the freedom of speech and does not require fully free and fair elections, only

**TABLE 1—INTERWAR DEMOCRATIC SPELLS IN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES AND FORMER BRITISH-SETTLER COLONIES, 1918–39**

The Northwest	Years Democratic	The Rest	Years Democratic
Australia	1918–39	Austria	1920–33
Belgium	1918–39	Bulgaria	1919–20, 31–34
Canada	1918–39	Czechoslovakia	1919–38
Denmark	1918–39	Estonia	1919–34
France	1918–39	Finland	1919–39
Ireland	1922–39	Germany	1919–33
Netherlands	1918–39	Greece	1926–35
New Zealand	1918–39	Italy	1919–22
Norway	1918–39	Latvia	1920–34
Sweden	1918–39	Lithuania	1920–26
Switzerland	1918–39	Poland	1919–26
United Kingdom	1918–39	Romania	1919–20, 28–30
United States	1918–39	Spain	1931–36
-	-	Yugoslavia	1920–29

genuinely competitive ones. We have used this definition to sift through a large body of work by historians and identify our 44 democratic spells. The bulk of these episodes (29) occurred in European countries and former British-settler colonies; there were a further 14 in Latin America, and there was one in Japan (1919–32). Democratic rule broke down before 1939 in 27 of these cases, and survived until that year in 17.<sup>13</sup> We have tested a series of different explanatory factors to see which of these contribute to explaining why democracy survived in certain countries and collapsed in others.

Although our statistical analyses and conclusions are based on all democratic spells in the interwar period, in this essay we focus only on European countries and former British-settler colonies. We have made this choice both due to space limitations and because these cases are the most germane, having figured most prominently in the debate on the interwar analogy. In addition, this group contained the only cluster of well-established democracies in the interwar period, and hence is the most relevant for examining the stability of such regimes.<sup>14</sup>

In Table 1, we divide these countries into two groups. One, which we call “the Northwest,” contains the countries of northwestern Europe and the British-settler colonies. The other, which we call “the Rest,” includes the countries of Southern, Central, and Eastern Europe. Democracies in the Northwest survived; democracies in the Rest broke down, with two exceptions to which we will return. In fact, we will show that because of differences in social and historical context, democracies

in the Northwest and those in the Rest faced very different chances of survival at the outset of the interwar period.<sup>15</sup>

### **Democratic Survival in the Northwest**

The Northwest consists of Belgium, Denmark, France, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom, as well as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States. One of our key findings is that these democracies were virtually immune to the repeated crises of the interwar period. This is clearly the case if we focus on democratic survival as a yes-or-no-question (see Table 1). On top of this we find no evidence of more gradual declines in democratic quality among these countries in the crisis-prone 1930s, with partial exceptions in Belgium and France.

Interwar Denmark illustrates the Northwestern trajectory well. Government accountability to the parliament dates back to 1901, when the Danish king relinquished his right to appoint the prime minister. Equal and universal suffrage became the law of the land in 1915. The broader lineage of Danish democracy goes all the way back to 1849, when the king granted the first liberal constitution. Danish democracy was therefore well established at the threshold of the interwar period. The only genuine democratic crisis of the period, the so-called Easter Crisis of March–April 1920, stemmed from decidedly contingent circumstances involving the disposition of formerly Danish territories forfeited in the Second Schleswig War in 1864. King Christian X (encouraged by the right-wing opposition parties) attempted to get the Social Liberal government to press for the return of Central Schleswig, which had voted in a 1920 plebiscite to continue as part of Germany, along with that of North Schleswig, where voters opted for a return to Denmark. The government refused, and the king—spurred by the center-right opposition—dismissed it. Yet this constitutional crisis was resolved within a few weeks, following peaceful demonstrations and agreement among all parties about new elections.<sup>16</sup>

In what remained of the interwar period, Danish democracy was remarkably stable. In the early 1930s, the Great Depression hit the country's small open economy with a vengeance. However, this devastating economic crisis—which struck both industry and the large agricultural sector—produced virtually no political radicalization, either in the streets or in the parliamentary arena. Moreover, in spite of neighboring Germany's towering influence in Danish society and politics, the cascade of antidemocratic developments unleashed by the National Socialists' 1933 takeover in Germany had virtually no impact in Denmark.

Throughout the 1930s, Denmark's four mainstream political parties—the Social Democrats, the Social Liberals, the Liberals, and the Conservative People's Party—cooperated to combat the effects of the

economic crisis. The best-known example of this cooperation is the large-scale political settlement (the so-called *Kanslergadeforlig*) struck by three of the four major parties on 30 January 1933 (the very day Hitler was appointed chancellor in Germany). This settlement signaled to a wide cross-section of the population that democratic channels offered the best hope for addressing their grievances.

Broad cooperation among the established parties and these parties' success in holding on to their voters effectively closed the political spectrum to challengers on both the left and the right. The fortunes of the Danish National Socialist Workers' Party illustrate this well. In 1939 elections, before the German occupation of Denmark, the party received a meager 1.9 percent of the vote. Even in the last election under the German occupation in 1943, the party's support, despite its privileged position, reached only 2.1 percent. Meanwhile, the established parties fought political radicalization within their own ranks. Between 1933 and 1936, for instance, Conservative People's Party leader John Christmas Møller denounced the party's youth branch, which had started to wear uniforms inspired by fascist parties, and succeeded in installing a more moderate youth leadership. Social Democratic prime minister Thorvald Stauning also worked to create a national bulwark against radical movements.

Developments in the other countries in the Northwestern group followed a broadly similar pattern. The Great Depression and the Nazi takeover in Germany actually weakened the already modest support for the Netherlands' fascist party.<sup>17</sup> The United Kingdom experienced several potentially destabilizing situations in the 1920s and 1930s, including the general strike in 1926 and Labour's split in 1931 over the handling of an economic crisis, but these crises were solved peacefully, within the political system. No major extremist party gained a foothold in the British Parliament. On the contrary, the British Conservative party developed into a center-right people's party that shut the door to Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists on the right flank.<sup>18</sup>

The United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand—each with its own version of the British first-past-the-post electoral system—also were able to prevent or at least defuse large-scale political radicalization, even in the face of the Great Depression and the triumphs of the totalitarian powers in the 1930s. Indeed, in none of these former British-settler colonies do we find the kind of extremist political movements that plagued political life in Continental Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. On the contrary, the established parties were able to channel the frustration created by mass unemployment into the political system and to prevent it from being released in the streets.

Only in Belgium and France did democratic systems exhibit some fragility. The so-called *Rexist* movement, a fascist-inspired Catholic party, made an impressive showing in the Belgian parliamentary election of 1936.

**TABLE 2—PREWAR DEMOCRATIC LEGACY AND DEMOCRATIC SURVIVAL IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD**

		Democratic Survival in the Interwar Period?	
		Yes	No
Pre-World War I Democratic Legacy of at Least Ten Years?	Yes	Australia Netherlands Belgium New Zealand Canada Norway Denmark Switzerland France United Kingdom Ireland United States	-
	No	Czechoslovakia (to 1938) Finland Sweden	Austria Latvia Bulgaria Lithuania Estonia Poland Germany Romania Greece Spain Italy Yugoslavia

Yet the established parties faced down this threat. In a crucial episode in April 1937, former Belgian prime minister Paul van Zeeland, who had resigned following the 1936 election, took on Rexist leader Léon Degrelle in a Brussels by-election. All the other parties including the Communists, as well as the Catholic Church of Belgium, supported Zeeland. Degrelle's resounding defeat on election day marked the beginning of the end of the Rexist ascent.

Meanwhile, in France, a number of right-wing radical groups harassed their opponents in the streets, and in 1936 the French Communist Party won 72 seats in the 608-seat National Assembly. As in Belgium, however, the established parties ultimately stood their ground, though French democracy did enter World War II in a somewhat sorry state when it came to the vibrancy and popular backing of its political institutions, at least in comparison with the rest of the Northwest.

Based on the scholarly literature on democratic stability, the Northwestern group of interwar democracies are the very countries that one would have predicted to be crisis-proof. Compared with the cases of democratic breakdown discussed below (see also Table 1), they boasted higher levels of socioeconomic modernization, more vibrant civil societies, and a longer legacy of prewar democratic (or at least constitutional) experience. All these deeper historical factors came together in one particular political indicator—the original timing of the breakthrough to democracy. As Table 2 illustrates, among the cases included in Table 1 not a single country with at least a ten-year history of electoral democracy prior to World War I broke down during the interwar period (in the Northwestern group, only Sweden did not have a ten-year prewar spell of democracy).<sup>19</sup>

Generally speaking, the countries whose historical and social legacies gave them favorable odds for democratic survival going into the interwar



period were resistant to the repeated interwar crises. Moreover, in most of these countries, democratic quality remained stable in the face of grave challenges. Indeed, new data from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project indicate that democratic quality actually improved slightly in these countries during the interwar period.<sup>20</sup> These scores suggest that among the political elites there was a widespread acceptance of democratic institutions as the only legitimate means to handle political disputes. The established parties came together to create effective responses to the crisis, and parties that had formerly represented specific classes developed into broader people's parties that held on to their voters and closed the political system to extremist parties on their left and right.

This is a remarkable finding considering the scale of the interwar economic, political, and social dislocations. It is no coincidence that British historian Richard Overly calls his book on the period *The Interwar Crisis*. The era was, from the start, defined by the trauma of the First World War. Millions of young men returned from the trenches in 1918 to try to find their places in economies shattered by four years of all-out warfare. Meanwhile, the early years of the interwar period saw continued fighting across large swaths of Eastern Europe and the Balkans, a near-revolutionary situation in Germany, attempts by the Russian Bolsheviks to incite world revolution, and severe postwar hyperinflation among the countries on the losing side in Central Europe.

Though economic and political conditions improved in the second half of the 1920s, the 1930s were dominated by what Eric Hobsbawm called the “largest global earthquake ever to be measured on the economic historians’ Richter Scale—the Great Inter-War Depression,”<sup>21</sup> as well as by the challenge of totalitarian movements and ideologies. This period saw the rise of uniformed political movements, large-scale street fighting, and anti-Jewish laws in the very heart of Europe. It is remarkable that these developments did so little to weaken democracy in the Northwestern countries.

### Breakdown in the Rest

What kind of evidence, then, do scholars adduce to support the interwar analogy? We have already hinted at this. For the political effects of the interwar crisis were very real outside the Northwestern haven we have just described (see Table 1).

Closer inspection reveals that it is the Rest whose political fortunes are normally invoked to underpin the interwar analogy. As illustrated in Table 2, these were all “new” democracies. A few of them, however—including the prominent examples of Germany, Austria, and Italy—had highly developed economies, vibrant civil societies, and relatively long constitutional traditions. It is no coincidence that the pessimistic reading of interwar political developments is very much based on this set of cases. For instance, some commentators have used the Italian, German, and Aus-

trian cases to support the notion that civil society has a “dark side” that enables undemocratic movements to mobilize against democracy.<sup>22</sup>

Let us look more closely at these cases. The Italian democratic breakdown in 1922 was one of the first to occur in the interwar period. Italy held genuinely democratic elections in 1919 and 1921, but political instability, complete with street fighting between fascist and communist groups, took hold in the postwar years. King Victor Emmanuel III handed Benito Mussolini power following the latter’s March on Rome in late October 1922. Mussolini further curtailed the powers of Parliament in 1925, and in the second half of the 1930s he escalated his repression, partly in an attempt to align with the National Socialist regime in Germany.

The advent of the Nazi regime in January 1933 marked the final breakdown of Weimar democracy. It had functioned relatively well in the 1920s, but a negative spiral began following the onset of the Great Depression in late 1929. The extreme left and right clashed in the streets, and in 1930 conservative president Paul von Hindenburg started to appoint chancellors without the backing of a parliamentary majority. In January 1933, he appointed Hitler to head a right-wing coalition government with only two cabinet positions held by National Socialists. But Hitler took advantage of the fire that destroyed the Reichstag (the German legislature) in February 1933 to curb the powers of parliament, and following Hindenburg’s death in 1934 he fused the offices of president and chancellor and emerged as Führer.

The German democratic breakdown had immediate consequences in neighboring Austria. In the 1920s, this small landlocked country had operated a relatively well-structured two-party system in which Social Democrats and the conservative Christian Social Party played the leading roles. After the election of October 1920, the Christian Social Party held national power alone, while the Social Democrats ruled the capital city, “Red Vienna.” The political atmosphere became increasingly charged during this decade, and the Social Democrats and conservative forces each organized their own paramilitary organizations, the Republikanischer Schutzbund and the Heimwehr, respectively. In a violent confrontation in Vienna in 1927, the ministry of justice was torched and almost one-hundred people died when the police, aided by the Heimwehr, clashed with left-wing protestors. It was not until March 1933, however, that right-wing chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss curtailed the power of parliament and—following a military showdown with the Social Democrats and the Republikanischer Schutzbund in 1934—established what has become known as Austrofascism.

We thus have three instances of political instability and radicalization leading to breakdowns in countries that had some of the same preconditions for democracy as their Northwestern counterparts. Yet even though they scored high in terms of socioeconomic moderniza-

tion and civil society, other factors set Austria, Germany, and Italy apart and lowered the odds that democracy in these countries would survive. First, in spite of a constitutional legacy dating well back into the nineteenth century, they were “new” democracies, born out of the First World War. Moreover, Germany and Austria were the big territorial losers of the Versailles and Trianon treaties at the war’s conclusion, and they were both saddled with ruinous war debts. Italy, although among the war’s victors, was seething with frustration over what many saw as a squandered victory in the form of an unfair territorial settlement. Perhaps more important, Germany, Austria, and Italy each contained a strong class of aristocratic landowners, the social group that scholars have highlighted as the most consistent enemy of modern representative democracy.<sup>23</sup>

Seen from this vantage point, it is hardly surprising that democracy did not last in these countries when one crisis after another erupted in the 1920s and 1930s. Our statistical analyses show that civil society generally stabilized democracy in the interwar period.<sup>24</sup> As a rule, then, civil society did not have a “dark side” in this context, although the dense civil society networks in Austria, Germany, and Northern Italy might well have facilitated antidemocratic mobilization in these particular countries.

### **The Czech and Finnish Exceptions**

Moreover, vibrant civil societies help to explain the two cases of democratic survival among the Rest—Finland and Czechoslovakia. These countries were more modernized in socioeconomic terms and had stronger civil societies than the East European cases we describe below, but they had no prewar history of democracy. In addition, Finland saw a bloody civil war between rightist and leftist groups in the aftermath of the First World War, and Czechoslovakia was a new state torn by ethnolinguistic cleavages, with a Western center (Bohemia and Moravia) that was much more developed than its Eastern periphery (Slovakia and Ruthenia). Finally, in the 1930s, both countries found themselves face-to-face with undemocratic great-power neighbors: Finland with the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia with Nazi Germany. These facts make their democratic survival all the more remarkable, though we note that their political systems were not as stable as those of the Northwestern countries.

Finland introduced anticommunist laws in 1930 and violently suppressed the radical right-wing Lapua Movement in the early 1930s. In Czechoslovakia, substantial antidemocratic mobilization took place in the German-speaking Sudetenland and in Slovakia in the 1930s. Moreover, although Czechoslovak democracy survived until Hitler’s march into the Sudetenland in October 1938, it broke down soon after, as the

Czechoslovak government increased repression and partly curbed political rights—measures taken before the Germans occupied Prague in March 1939.<sup>25</sup> Overall, we can situate Finland and Czechoslovakia somewhere between our two categories, the Northwest and the Rest.

### **Doomed to Dictatorship?**

The remaining countries of the Rest, a group of democracies concentrated in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, had the lowest odds of survival when the interwar period began. These countries were relatively undeveloped in socioeconomic terms and had much shorter and less intensive prewar histories of constitutional rule. Many of them were riven by ethnolinguistic cleavages, and many also had a powerful stratum of noble landowners. Some scholars essentially claim that these countries were doomed to fall back into dictatorship in the interwar period.<sup>26</sup> Without going that far, we can say that these new democracies—created in the aftermath of the “democratic victory” in the First World War—were very fragile. We know from a more general body of research that new democracies often break down, especially when favorable structural factors such as high levels of modernization are not present, and that they are especially fragile in the initial phase of their existence.<sup>27</sup>

A series of short-lived democratic episodes in the wake of World War I, here illustrated by Romania and Bulgaria, corroborate these conclusions. In November 1919, a democratic election was held in Romania. A coalition government led by the Transylvanian politician Alexandru Vaida-Voevod took office, but King Ferdinand I dismissed this government a mere four months later, starting a period when the king rather than elections decided who would hold political power. Ferdinand regularly dismissed governments and appointed new prime ministers, who then proceeded to arrange elections that their parties won handily.

Some of these electoral landslides were almost comical. General Alexandru Averescu had been appointed prime minister before the election in May 1920, and his People’s Party went on to win 209 seats, whereas the National Liberal Party that had been dominant before the war ended up with only 17 seats. Ferdinand soon fired Averescu and instead appointed National Liberal leader Ion I.C. Brătianu, who arranged the March 1922 election. The results reflected the change in royal favor: Brătianu’s National Liberals now increased their tally from 17 to 260, whereas Averescu’s party fell from 209 to 11. New elections in 1926 and 1927 created similar swings in political fortunes. Ferdinand died in 1927, and the election that was held in December 1928 was, according to historians, free and fair. Peasant leader Iuliu Maniu governed for two years based on this result. This second democratic spell ended in 1930, when the new king Carol II dismissed Ma-

niu and revived Ferdinand's model of appointments, which prevailed for the remainder of the interwar period.

Neighboring Bulgaria followed a similar trajectory. The Bulgarian Agrarian National Union led by Aleksandar Stamboliyski won a democratic election in 1919. Stamboliyski also prevailed in the elections of 1920 and 1923, but conservative forces, tacitly supported by the monarch, Boris III, cut short the Agrarians' winning streak with a coup on 9 June 1923. In reality, democracy had broken down much earlier, as Stamboliyski had manipulated the elections in 1920 and 1923. Like Romania, Bulgaria experienced a second democratic episode, which began in 1931 with another Agrarian election victory. A coup by undemocratic forces ended this episode in 1934.

Romania and Bulgaria thus exhibited short and interrupted spells of democracy. A different trajectory played out in Poland. Despite several democratic elections in the period 1919–26, political instability set the stage for Polish war hero Marshal Józef Piłsudski's May 1926 coup d'état. Piłsudski installed what one might today term an "electoral authoritarian" regime. While he did not disband the Polish parliament, electoral manipulations yielded majority support for successive technocratic governments. Neighboring Lithuania went down much the same road later in 1926.

What we find in Eastern Europe and the Balkans are brittle democracies that in many cases collapsed long before the onset of the Great Depression and the changes in the international order that followed the Hitlerite takeover in Germany. This does not mean that the political systems in these countries were unaffected by those events. In much of Eastern Europe, political radicalization increased in the 1930s, as did government repression. Beginning in the late 1920s a number of fascist-inspired parties became influential in this region. Such parties included the Iron Guard in Romania, the Iron Wolf movement in Lithuania, the Arrow Cross in Hungary, the Estonian Freedom Fighters, and the Latvian Thunder Cross. In both Estonia and Lithuania, preemptive coups staged by right-wing governments seeking to counter challengers further to the right effectively led to democratic breakdowns in 1934.

The main factor setting Eastern Europe and the Balkans apart from Austria and Germany (and for that matter, Finland and Czechoslovakia) is the fact that the democratic spells in the former group tended to be comparatively short and instability-ridden. Based on what we know about the conditions favorable to democratic stability, this is unsurprising. Many of these countries were new states, with low levels of socioeconomic modernization, politically divisive ethnolinguistic cleavages, and limited experience with democracy. A closer look reveals that the fragility of their democratic systems made them vulnerable to a variety of factors that caused democratic breakdown in the interwar period.

This conclusion is supported by our statistical analyses, which indicate that economic crisis in itself—all else being equal—was *not* an

important determinant of democratic breakdown in the interwar period. We take this to reflect two key facts about this period. First, the political systems in the Northwestern countries were able to channel the frustration created by the Great Depression within a democratic framework. Second, the weak political systems in the Rest broke down for many different reasons, economic crises being merely one of them.

### Stability amid Crisis

Scholars have resorted to the interwar analogy for decades. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the ghost of the interwar period makes an appearance whenever the possibility of democratic backsliding is mentioned.

Based on what we know about the causes of democratic stability, the many democratic breakdowns during the interwar period are unsurprising. The genuinely surprising trend is the democratic stability of the Northwest. This was a period when democracy was on the defensive, in people's hearts and minds as well as on the international scene, with a cascade of antidemocratic demonstration effects from dictatorships of both leftist and rightist hues. It was also a period with millions of jobless, battle-hardened veterans in the streets. Nonetheless, in most of the "old" democracies in the Northwest, we find little in the way of political radicalization, and we actually find some evidence that democratic quality increased even in the crisis-prone 1930s.

The lesson we draw is that scholars and commentators have read interwar patterns of regime change in an overly pessimistic way. There is room for a more optimistic interpretation that emphasizes the stability of the established democratic regimes in the face of multiple crises. A systematic analysis of patterns of interwar regime change shows that once democracy has taken root, it tends to be remarkably stable, even in very difficult circumstances.

This does not necessarily mean that today's democracies are safe, or that we should be complacent about the challenges they face. History does not repeat itself in simple ways, and new threats might well render established democracies more fragile than they proved to be in the 1920s and 1930s. Many of the commentators quoted in the opening pages of this article suggest that what we are seeing at present is a deep legitimacy crisis for democracy, one which is not solely the product of exogenous developments but is in many ways internal to the political systems of established democracies.

Political developments in countries such as Hungary, Greece, and Poland—where populists have won landslide victories and (especially in Poland and Hungary) have attempted to curtail the independence of courts, the media, and most recently universities—have garnered much attention. The strong showing of populist parties and candidates in much of Western Europe has further fed pessimism. Some viewed the 2016

Brexit vote as evidence that even stable democracies such as the United Kingdom face seething opposition to political and economic elites seen as self-interested. Finally, Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 U.S. presidential election opened a floodgate of dire warnings.

It remains to be seen whether these developments are mere ripples on the surface, or whether they may be early signs of a new reverse wave of democracy or of a milder but still troubling decline in democratic quality in advanced democracies. In any case, the interwar experience does not lend support to these gloomier predictions. Instead, it reminds us of the remarkable vigor of established democracies in the face of crisis.

## NOTES

1. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, "Democracy's Fate May Hang in the Balance Even If Donald Trump Loses," *Vox*, 7 November 2016, [www.vox.com/polyarchy/2016/11/7/13547642/democracy-fate-trump-loss](http://www.vox.com/polyarchy/2016/11/7/13547642/democracy-fate-trump-loss).

2. George Prochnik, "When It's Too Late to Stop Fascism, According to Stefan Zweig," *New Yorker*, 6 February 2017, <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/when-its-too-late-to-stop-fascism-according-to-stefan-zweig>.

3. Dani Rodrik, "The Politics of Anger," *Social Europe*, 11 March 2016, [www.social-europe.eu/2016/03/the-politics-of-anger](http://www.social-europe.eu/2016/03/the-politics-of-anger).

4. Aviezer Tucker, "Condemned to Populism," *American Interest*, 29 August 2016, [www.the-american-interest.com/2016/08/29/condemned-to-populism](http://www.the-american-interest.com/2016/08/29/condemned-to-populism).

5. Paul Krugman, "Depression and Democracy," *New York Times*, 11 December 2011, [www.nytimes.com/2011/12/12/opinion/krugman-depression-and-democracy.html?mcubz=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/12/opinion/krugman-depression-and-democracy.html?mcubz=0).

6. Levitsky and Ziblatt, "Democracy's Fate." See also German historian Andreas Wirsching's warning that Western democracies are in danger of breakdown ("Westliche Demokratien sind bedroht," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 13 August 2016, [www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/extremismus-die-westlichen-demokratien-duerfen-sich-nicht-zu-sicher-fuehlen-1.3111325](http://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/extremismus-die-westlichen-demokratien-duerfen-sich-nicht-zu-sicher-fuehlen-1.3111325)).

7. The opposite possibility—that is, the self-fulfilling prophecy—likewise makes life difficult for social scientists seeking to make predictions.

8. Robert K. Merton, "The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action," *American Sociological Review* 1 (December 1936): 894–904.

9. Anthony Giddens, *New Rules of Sociological Method* (London: Heinemann, 1976), 13.

10. Ruth Berins Collier and Sebastián Mazzuca, "Does History Repeat?," in Robert E. Goodin and Charles Tilly, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 482–3.

11. Jørgen Møller and Svend-Erik Skaaning, *Democracy and Democratization in Comparative Perspective: Conceptions, Conjunctures, Causes, and Consequences* (London: Routledge, 2013), ch. 5. In this chapter we show—expanding on earlier work by Renske Doorenspleet—that there was *no* decrease in the number of democracies during Huntington's "second reverse wave" (1958–75). Huntington's conclusion was based on the decreasing global share of democracies, but this was merely an artifact of the many newly independent countries in this period (most of which were not democratic in the first place).

12. Jørgen Møller and Svend-Erik Skaaning, "Regime Types and Democratic Sequencing," *Journal of Democracy* 24 (January 2013): 145.

13. Chile and Uruguay suffered earlier interwar democratic breakdowns but redemocratized in the 1930s.

14. We are currently finishing the first draft of a book on interwar democratic stability that also devotes great attention to the situation in Latin America.

15. See also Michael Mann, *Fascists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), ch. 2.

16. See Alfred Stepan, Juan J. Linz, and Juli F. Minoves, "Democratic Parliamentary Monarchies," *Journal of Democracy* 25 (April 2014): 39–40.

17. Frank H. Aarebrot, "The Netherlands: Early Compromise and Democratic Stability," in Dirk Berg-Schlosser and Jeremy Mitchell, eds., *Conditions of Democracy in Europe, 1919–39: Systematic Case Studies* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 321–34.

18. Thomas Ertman, "The Great Reform Act of 1832 and British Democratization," *Comparative Political Studies* 43 (August 2010): 1000–22.

19. To code democratic legacy, we used the same Schumpeterian criteria for minimalist democracy that we used to identify democratic spells in the interwar period. Note that we code Ireland as having shared the prewar democratic experience of the United Kingdom. Prewar Ireland was a constituent unit of the British political system and Irish representatives took their place in Westminster among representatives from England, Scotland, and Wales.

20. Michael Coppedge et al., "V-Dem Dataset v6.2 [Country-Year/Country-Date]," Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project, 2016, [www.v-dem.net/en/data/data-version-6-2](http://www.v-dem.net/en/data/data-version-6-2). We use the Polyarchy index from the V-Dem data set to measure democratic quality.

21. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994), 86.

22. Sheri Berman, "Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic," *World Politics* 49 (April 1997): 401–29; Dylan Riley, *The Civic Foundations of Fascism in Europe: Italy, Spain, and Romania, 1870–1945* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

23. Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon, 1966); John D. Stephens, "Democratic Transition and Breakdown in Western Europe, 1870–1939: A Test of the Moore Thesis," *American Journal of Sociology* 94 (March 1989): 1019–77.

24. We employ data from the V-Dem project to measure civil society strength in the interwar period.

25. Peter Bugge, "Czech Democracy 1918–1938—Paragon or Parody?" *Bohemia* 47 no. 1 (2007): 3–28.

26. See for instance Gregory M. Luebbert, *Liberalism, Fascism, or Social Democracy: Social Classes and the Political Origins of Regimes in Interwar Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

27. Milan Svobik, "Authoritarian Reversals and Democratic Consolidation," *American Political Science Review* 102 (May 2008): 153–168; Michael Bernhard, Christopher Reenock, and Timothy Nordstrom, "Economic Performance and Survival in New Democracies: Is There a Honeymoon Effect?" *Comparative Political Studies* 36 (May 2003): 404–431.