

Democracy under Threat: A Crisis of Legitimacy?

For the past several years a considerable body of literature on democratisation has been devoted to pondering the question of whether political legitimacy of liberal democracy is in decline, with most authors conceding there are legitimacy problems. The book offers a comprehensive review of this literature as its departure point.

The starting assumption holds that legitimacy of democracy is being compromised because in many cases democracy does no longer seem to be the 'only game in town', as per the famous dictum. Instead anti-system leaders, parties, and movements are increasingly attracting voters, even in the consolidated Western democracies. The real question, though, is whether government legitimacy or regime legitimacy is declining. Following Easton (1965) this crucial distinction has been operationalized and measured in the volume as specific or diffuse political support. The aim has been to answer the question: Do voters display discontent with the government of the day, which is a recurrent phenomenon, or do they increasingly reject democracy as an ideal because they no longer believe democracy as a political regime can meet their needs and/or satisfy their preferences.

Distinguishing between objective and subjective legitimacy the volume goes on to explore factors that might explain the apparent regressive dynamic. These factors include economic instability triggered by the 2008 financial crisis; large scale migrations and refugee flows; erosion of political sovereignty by national states as a result of their integration into global networks, the rise of populism; and the threat posed by autocracy.

The book reports on the fourth in a series of research projects conducted by the Transformation Research Unit since 2000, that is, since the height of the Third Wave of democracy. The previous three books examined the consolidation of democracy in South Africa, South Korea, Chile, Poland and Turkey by taking the well-established democracies of Germany and Sweden serving as control cases.

The series as a whole relies on standard measures to compare levels of democratic development between the cases while paying attention to cultural differences, which helps to gain a much deeper understanding of democracy in countries that vary greatly in history and autocratic traditions. The longitudinal character of the studies is making it possible to map both the internal and global dynamics that promote or impede democratic development during periods of transition, transformation and consolidation in the individual countries.

TRU's research is carried out by an international team of academics. Their diverse cultural backgrounds and their insiders' knowledge of each of the cases studied result in well informed analyses and perspectives from both the developed and developing parts of the world. The interdisciplinary team integrates data, techniques and theories from multiple bodies of specialized knowledge and conducts its research within a common theoretical framework that assures a conceptual cohesion of each volume.

The team's current project has expanded the number of cases to answer the question of why some democracies in the same cultural region and subject to similar global influences remain resilient while others backslide.