



Democratic Erosion: An Empirical Approach

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Executive Summary

As the first of two deliverables for the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) Center of Excellence on Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG), the Bush School of Government & Public Service Master of International Affairs Capstone Team (the Capstone Team) produced a dataset of the *precursors* and *symptoms* of, and *resistance* to, democratic backsliding. Because democratic backsliding, or the incremental erosion of democratic institutions, is a relatively new phenomenon (Bermeo 2016), there is limited systematic empirical data on the phenomenon itself, relative to, say, regime transitions. While there is quite a lot of recent theoretical work on democratic backsliding (see Lust and Waldner 2015), there remains a gap in the evidence base that would allow researchers and practitioners to observe spatial and temporal trends in democratic backsliding and test predictions about when and how it manifests. We aim to contribute to closing this gap with a novel dataset on democratic erosion.

The construction of the dataset takes advantage of a unique opportunity: partnership with a multi-university course on Democratic Erosion. The dataset was constructed by aggregating and coding narrative country case studies authored by about 150 students simultaneously enrolled in a [Democratic Erosion course](#) across nineteen universities during the 2017-18 academic year. Students in this collaborative course were instructed to select their case study topic from a list of 67 countries, identified by the Capstone Team as potential backsliders using one measure of democratic governance from the Varieties of Democracy dataset (Coppedge et al., 2017) between 2007-2016.¹ Each case study details the circumstances through which erosion manifested in a particular country, any precursors that precipitated the erosion, and any resistance and/or recovery in response to the erosion. Students were also asked to provide an assessment of the degree of overall erosion in their case study country on a five-point scale.

To maximize the utility of the dataset, the Capstone Team developed a categorization framework that groups like events together. This allows users to, for example, observe the frequency of the abolition of term limits relative to the frequency of media repression across time and space. To construct this framework, the Capstone Team started by using sample case studies produced by students in the four Democratic Erosion classes taught during the Fall 2017 semester to create an inventory of events, recording each documented erosion-related event (e.g., economic shock), identifying the event type (precursor, symptom or resistance), denoting the year in which it occurred, and expanding on the event in a brief explanatory note. Using the completed inventory, the team identified similar logged events to construct conceptually-distinct groupings and create more reliable variable categories. This categorization scheme was then revised with input from the client (see Table 1 for a full list).

With the variable categories defined, the Team created a [coding instrument](#) in Google Forms to streamline the process of coding all student case studies. The form allowed each teammate to

¹ Methodology used to select potential cases was determined jointly by the Capstone Team and the DRG Center. First, any electoral or liberal democracy that experienced a decline in the Liberal Democracy Index over the study period was identified as a potential backslider. From those 108 cases, we eliminated eight island or micro-states and 33 cases in which the mean amount of backsliding was less than 1%. To the 67 remaining cases, we added about ten additional ones we thought were particularly interesting but did not make the original list because they were electoral autocracies when they backslid (rather than electoral democracies).

quickly input data from new case studies in a uniform fashion that enables comparability and will facilitate future analysis of cross-country data. In addition to coding every event documented in each narrative case study (according to the above categorization scheme), Team members added a short description of each event, the year(s) of the event, and a final ranking on a five-point scale that assesses the severity of backsliding in the country case. After testing the form with 65 randomly chosen case study narratives from a subset of countries to gauge both reliability and comprehensiveness, minor adjustments were made prior to the complete review of case studies produced during the Spring 2018 semester.

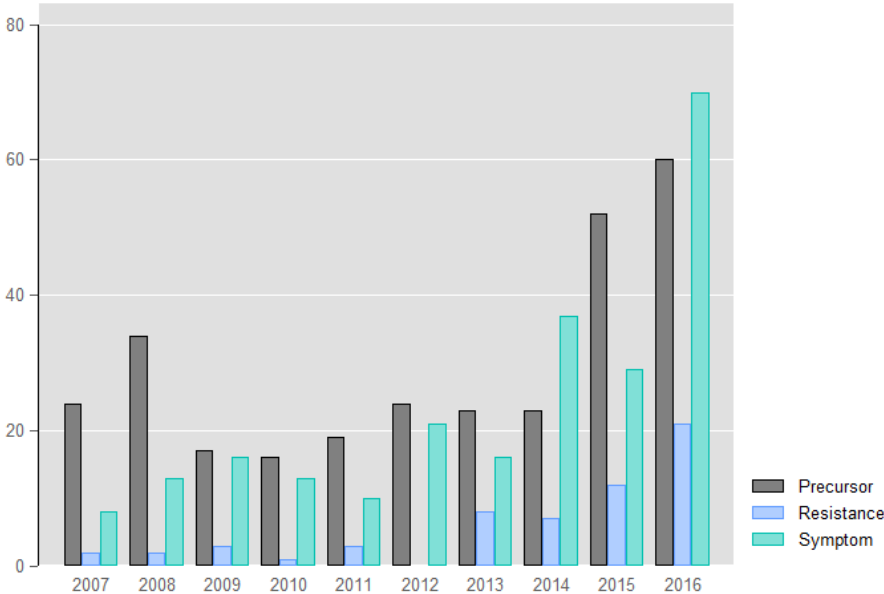
Table 1: Categorization Scheme to Code Events in Narrative Case Studies

Precursor	Symptom	Resistance
<i>Civic</i> Lack of legitimacy Media bias Polarization Increasing control of civil society <i>Economic</i> Corruption Economic inequality Economic shocks <i>Political</i> Cooptation of the opposition Extremist/populist parties Malapportionment Party weakness Electoral fraud <i>Institutional</i> Delegitimizing or weakening judiciary Coup or regime collapse State restructuring Manipulation of civil service Constitutional reforms <i>Violence/security</i> Non-state violence State-sponsored violence or abuse Electoral violence <i>Other</i> Refugee crisis External realignment Prior failed attempts at erosion Other	<i>Reduction in horizontal accountability</i> Suspension of rules/constitution Relaxing of term limits Circumventing the rule of law Reducing judicial independence Reducing legislative oversight Weakening integrity institutions <i>Reduction in vertical accountability</i> Media repression Repression of opposition parties Systemic reduction in electoral freedom/fairness Curtailed civil liberties <i>Changing societal norms</i> Lack of confidence/public disillusionment Threats and intimidation Other	<i>Increase in horizontal accountability</i> Check on central power by subnational government Check on executive by judiciary Check on executive by legislature <i>Increase in vertical accountability</i> Nonviolent protest Violent protest Increase in civic capacity Coalitions or elite pacts <i>Other</i> Pressure from outside actors Exit of people or money State attempts to prevent backsliding Other

The final coding exercise resulted in the tabulation of 158 case studies spanning 67 electoral democracies and 3 electoral autocracies – Venezuela, Zimbabwe and Tunisia – that were added

for their important experiences of institutional erosion (and can be easily excluded from analyses if a focus on electoral democracies is desired). The majority of logged events were categorized as precursors and symptoms (49 and 39 percent, respectively). All three types of erosion-related events were seen to generally trend upwards between 2007 and 2016, the target period of case study narratives assigned to students (see Figure 1). There is uneven distribution of each category of event, with some being extremely common and others quite rare. Corruption (precursor), media repression (symptom), and non-violent protest (resistance) emerged as the three most common events within their variable category.

Figure 1. Number of Logged Events by Year

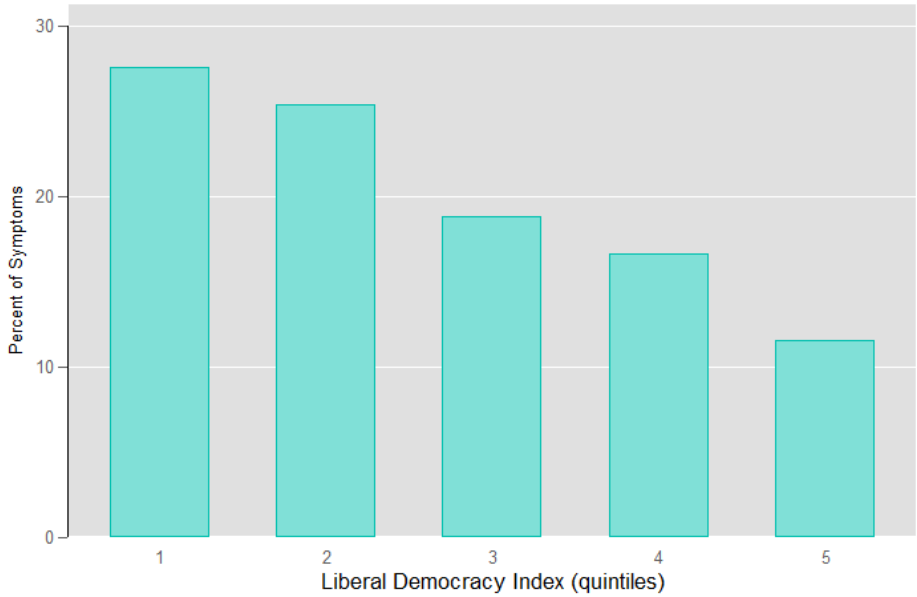


The data also showed distinct regional trends. When considering symptoms, for example, media repression is the most frequent in Latin America whereas reduced judicial independence is the most common in Europe. We hypothesize that this is due to the differential threats posed by the independent media and the judiciary to the executives in these regions, e.g. the judiciary poses a relatively greater threat in the more established democracies of Europe. This question is just one of many that can be asked of our data. With it, we demonstrate how the data might be used to generate insights and develop new testable hypotheses. We also note our data’s utility for predictive analysis. Using a country-year version of the dataset, we analyze how well each category of precursor predicts a symptom of erosion developing in the following year. This analysis finds that the existence of extremist/populist parties, failed attempts at erosion, and state-sponsored violence are most likely risk factors leading to the onset of a symptom of erosion in the following year.

The Capstone Team envisions this project continuing to contribute unique empirical data to the study of democratic erosion. First, the dataset can be merged with existing socio-economic measures, e.g. of inequality or ethnic heterogeneity, to examine how democratic erosion manifests differently across different societies or at different levels of development. Similarly, the project can be paired more broadly with other organizations to expand its reach (e.g., Varieties of

Democracy) and encourage greater collaboration. We have already merged the data with the Liberal Democracy Index from V-Dem and are able to show that erosion events are far more likely to occur in electoral democracies that fall in the lower three quintiles of the Index (see Figure 2). With the continuation of the collaborative course on Democratic Erosion and the student production of additional case narratives, the dataset can also be updated with additional country cases, additional years of data, and more evidence from existing cases to improve data reliability.

Figure 2. Percentage of Symptoms by Quintile of the Liberal Democracy Index



Introduction

The past few years have been one of intense political transformation across the world. Economic shocks and the rise of populist political parties that challenge the status-quo have challenged the old belief that liberal democracy represents the ultimate model of the political organization of mankind. In many countries such as Poland and Hungary governments have systematically reduced democratic institutions to a state of impotence, in other countries such as Venezuela and Turkey, the rule of law has been virtually abolished, giving way to new forms of authoritarianism.

To gauge the impact of these events, we began a partnership with the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) Center of Excellence on Democracy, Human Rights and Governance (DRG). This partnership aimed to provide systematic empirical data on democratic erosion and a systematic analysis of the experimental literature on the various facets of the erosion process. This report addresses the first objective, the aim of which is to generate a broad dataset that will enable users to analyze the process of democratic erosion and eventually forecast where further backsliding will emerge or how existing backsliding will progress.

If we believe that democracy is under threat, we must begin by understanding what democracy is. The debate over the meaning of democracy has been on the agenda of Western thinking since (at least) ancient Greece. The Greek philosopher Aristotle offered one of the first attempts to systematize and organize the different political regimes present in the known world, having, as a rule, the number of those who govern. Thus, the regime where only one governs is monarchy, the regime in which a select group governs is aristocracy, and the regime in which the majority rules is democracy.

There is a substantial range of definitions of what constitutes a democracy. The economist Joseph Schumpeter (1955) prompted the transition between the classic and modern concept of democratic theory. He sought to develop a theoretical-analytical method of empirical democracy. Schumpeter was concerned with how democracy functioned and produced an argument that was most faithful to reality. In other words, Schumpeter's political theory of democracy is backed by the practical facts of the political life of society. With *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, he revised the notions of democratic theory. By democracy, Schumpeter referred to a method of political decision: "the democratic method is an institutional system for political decision-making in which the individual acquires the power to decide through a competitive struggle for the voters' votes." The essence of Schumpeterian democracy lies in its competitive element (i.e. political life is a struggle between rival leaders, organized in parties, running after the votes of the electorate citizens).

In Schumpeterian democracy, the citizen is only a producer of political elites. This constitutes a minimalist conception of the term. Democracy means that the people have the opportunity to accept or refuse those appointed to govern it. The role of the citizen is to choose between alternatives, whichever one suits them best. Schumpeter does not accept the idea of the classical doctrine of democracy, which sees the citizen as a being interested in politics and capable of commanding the political process. When entering the world of politics, the citizen will tend to yield to extra-rational and irrational prejudices and impulses. Moreover, the typical citizen falls to

a lower level of mental performance once he enters the political field (i.e. s/he become an irrational being).

Unlike Schumpeter, Robert Dahl (1989) notes that in addition to choosing their representatives, citizens have another important function in the political process: organizing into interest groups. These groups process the inputs (demands arising from society) and have the objective of aggregating and articulating the different interests of the social actors involved in the production of public policies. Dahl sees the organization of society in interest groups as one of the most critical aspects of the democratization of contemporary societies. He notes that the existence of several organizations contesting power implies, in and of itself, a community where political incorporation is at a more advanced stage. The existence of several groups reveals a society of many characters where power is divided. Citizens in this pluralistic society have the freedom to associate in groups – according to their interests – to choose and formulate their preferences. Thus, in said society, political power is dispersed among the groups that make up the societal structure.

Dahl's characterization of democracy is on the opposite (i.e. maximalist) end of the spectrum. In a democracy, full opportunities should be guaranteed to all citizens, including: (i) formulating their preferences; (ii) expressing, through individual or collective action, their choices to their peers and to the government itself; and, (iii) have their preferences also considered in the conduct of government. Robert Dahl estimates that there are at least eight conditions to guarantee these opportunities: (i) freedom to create and join interest groups; (ii) freedom of expression; (iii) right to vote; (iv) public; (v) the right of political leaders to contest support and votes; (vi) to obtain information in alternative sources; (vii) free and appropriate electoral process; and, (viii) institutions to make government-led policies dependent on elections and other manifestations. Political regimes differ significantly in how they will make these conditions available through institutions. These conditions also make it possible to compare different political systems in opposition.

The erosion of the institutions that form democracy is diametrically linked to the ownership of political power by one of the branches in which the constitution of modern political society is distributed. It is usually the executive who encroaches upon areas under the jurisdiction of other branches. This process of erosion that results in the establishment of an authoritarian form of political practice can occur for the most diverse types or reasons. What we call Democratic Backsliding or Erosion, using the insights of Hannah Arendt (1995), is the often-smooth process of systematically narrowing the field of action of autonomous political subjects in the community life in favor of an organization that assumes for itself the functions of the leviathan representative of the political will. We must emphasize that much of the totalitarian experience no longer applies to the modern realities, but this does not invalidate the fact that the process of degeneration of democratic regimes occurs through similar paths.

Bermeo (2016), for instance, seeks to analyze concrete actions associated with democratic backsliding that cause regime change. How do functional democracies slide towards ambiguous and/or hybrid regimes? How can policymakers work towards sustaining democratic institutions when they are essentially being hijacked? She shows classic examples of coups (military and political) are on the decline, but that leaders now frame government overthrow as a commitment towards restoring democracy. The conspirators will often promise to hold free elections and

improve democratic institutions, all the while stressing the temporary nature of intervention. Constitutional suspension of the executive is on the decline. Executives, however, are now turning toward weakening institutional checks on their own power. Obtaining majorities in the legislature is seen as a clear threat since the executive's party can legally curtail democratic institutions under the guise of a democratic mandate. Bermeo hypothesized that rapid and radical change leads to complete democratic breakdown, while gradual changes lead to more ambiguous and/or hybrid regimes.

Today, democratic erosion is more prevalent than democratic collapse, yet more literature is associated with the latter. With our collection of systematic data on democratic erosion, we aim to help fill this gap. Erosion presents important challenges for political scientists and policymakers alike, including how to contend with political actors who use lawful means to enact illiberal policies or a partial embrace of liberal democracy. In most cases, political leaders maintain intuitions that work in their interests and hinder those that do not.

Lust and Waldner (2015), in a work sponsored by USAID, go beyond the insights presented by classical authors like Arendt and seek to analyze the structural and more proximate factors leading to a reduction in the quality of democracy. They look to summarize and disaggregate the theories explaining democratic backsliding and connect the literature more broadly to theories of democratic transition, consolidation, and breakdown. The result of this work was the creation of a broad theoretical framework that resulted in a series of hypotheses on the drivers and forces that lead to democratic backsliding. Our work comes to supply a demand created by these authors in the sense that we intend to present a dataset of events in more than sixty countries over a ten-year period.

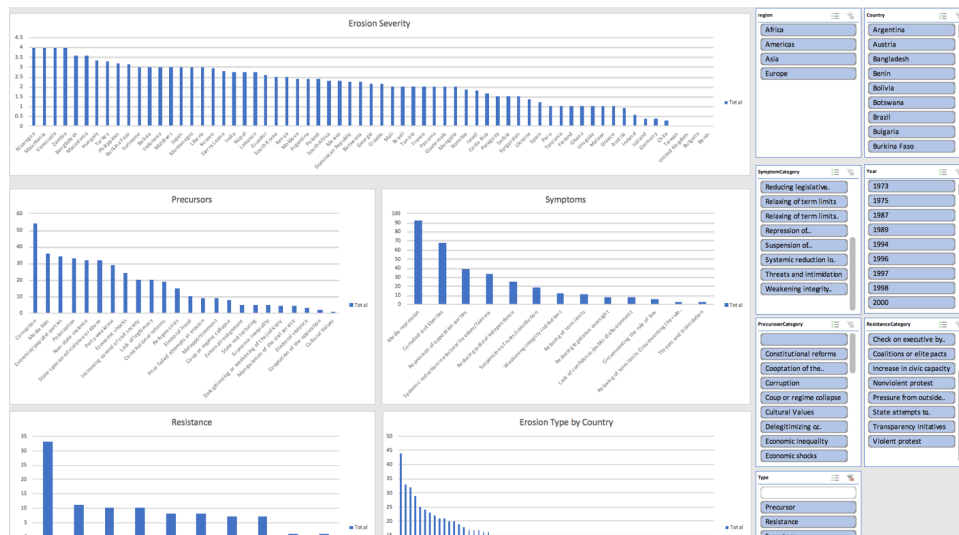
This dataset was built through a partnership with the multi-university collaborative course on Democratic Erosion that provided us with our primary data source: about 150 country case studies written by university students participating in the course. The events that the students reported on in their case studies form the basis of our dataset. In order to better understand the logic behind the erosion process, we divide the events into three categories: Precursor, Symptom, and Resistance. This choice was motivated by our thinking that there is a logical chain of action and reaction, where all the events are connected between them. Therefore, if there is a precursor to a potential backsliding, there are two possible paths to be followed, there may be resistance to this precursor or a process of institutionalization of erosion, in this case called a symptom. Our client was also consulted in the construction of these three groups and their subcategories.

It is worth emphasizing, as was shown in the intellectual debate surrounding the different conceptions about democracy and erosion of democratic institutions, rigid concepts are often counterproductive. This was our motivation in creating an event-based dataset, which is agnostic to different definitions of democracy and democratic erosion and sufficiently flexible to allow researchers with different hypotheses and definitions to effectively use it.

Potential Uses of the Dataset

The dataset was created to be a practical tool for addressing democratic erosion around the world. To that end, the team created a Microsoft Excel dashboard that allows users to manipulate the data and see only the information that is relevant to their area of interest (see Figure 3 below). For example, if a practitioner is interested in Bangladesh, s/he can click on the country and see all of the precursors, symptoms, and resistance events that occurred over the last ten years. S/he will also be able to see trends over time, or if s/he want to learn more about a particular type of event, s/he can see all other countries that have faced similar events as coded by our team.

Figure 3. Democratic Erosion Event Dataset Dashboard Interface



There are three ways in which we foresee the data being used. First, users can look for trends in the data by carrying out descriptive statistics, e.g. the most common symptom of erosion and how it varies across region. We have conducted some such preliminary analyses in this report. Second, users can engage in predictive analyses by evaluating cause and effect over time. One example test that we conducted in this report is examining which category of precursor is most likely to lead to a symptom of erosion. Finally, the data can be easily merged with other country-level or country-year datasets to analyze how erosion events are related to other contextual features. For instance, we show that erosion severity is highly negatively correlated with the quality of democracy by merging our data with V-DEM's democracy indicators. Our event data could additionally be merged with data on inequality or ethno-linguistic fractionalization to better understand whether societies prone to polarization are at greater risk for erosion-related events.

Assessing which precursors and symptoms cause severe democratic erosion or collapse can help practitioners more effectively target their programs towards the most-dire situations around the world. The key to making this research successful will be increasing its accessibility to as many analysts and researchers as possible. To do so, the team hopes to partner with organizations such as V-Dem, USAID, or the World Bank that have extensive experience in managing and distributing large datasets. Data will additionally be made available on the collaborative course website from which updates can be pushed out as needed: <http://democratic-erosion.com/>.

Methodology

Case Selection

To identify the original list of case studies for the meta-analysis on democratic backsliding, we use the Varieties of Democracy dataset (Coppedge et al, 2017).

Censoring the dataset:

First, the country-year dataset is constrained to only include the past decade, e.g. years 2007-2016.

Restricting to electoral democracies:

Then, because we are looking for cases of democratic erosion, we define democratic backsliding as originating in a country-year in which the country is coded as an electoral democracy. To identify countries-years that qualify as minimal electoral democracies, we use the Regimes in the World index (e_v2x_regime) which has already been coded for all years (rather than just election year). In the original iteration, we require a score of 2 or higher for year t=1. In year t=2, the regime can backslide to a score of 1, which is equivalent to having a score of 2 on the multiparty elections variable. The full coding of this variable is as follows:

- 0: Closed autocracy: No de-facto multiparty elections for the chief executive).
- 1: Electoral autocracy: De-facto multiparty elections for the chief executive, but failing to achieve a minimum level of Dahl's institutional prerequisites of polyarchy as measured by V-Dem's Electoral Democracy Index (v2x_polyarchy).
- 2: Electoral democracy: Free and fair multiparty elections and a minimum level of Dahl's institutional prerequisites for polyarchy as measured by VDem's Electoral Democracy Index (v2x_polyarchy), but liberal principles of respect for personal liberties, rule of law, and judicial as well as legislative constraints on the executive not satisfied as measured by VDem's Liberal Component Index (v2x_liberal).
- 3: Liberal democracy: Free and fair multiparty elections and a minimum level of Dahl's institutional prerequisites for polyarchy as measured by VDem's Electoral Democracy Index (v2x_polyarchy), and liberal principles of respect for personal liberties, rule of law, and judicial as well as legislative constraints on the executive satisfied as measured by V-Dem's Liberal Component Index (v2x_liberal).

Coding backsliding:

To code democratic backsliding, we use the liberal democracy index (v2x_libdem). This measure places special weight on constraints on executive power. From the codebook: "The liberal principle of democracy emphasizes the importance of protecting individual and minority rights against the tyranny of the state and the tyranny of the majority. The liberal model takes a 'negative' view of political power insofar as it judges the quality of democracy by the limits placed on

government. This is achieved by constitutionally protected civil liberties, strong rule of law, an independent judiciary, and effective checks and balances that, together, limit the exercise of executive power.”

We code a country-year, t , as backsliding if the country received a lower score on the Liberal Democracy Index in year t than in year $t-1$. In addition, the country had to receive a score of at least 2 on the Regimes in the World index (indicating an electoral democracy) in year $t-1$ and a score of at least 1 in year t .

In addition to coding whether or not backsliding occurred in that country-year, we also code how much backsliding occurred in percentage terms (change in Lib Democracy Index divided by last year’s score).

Excluding cases:

This exercise elicited a list of 108 countries that had at least one year of backsliding in the last decade. To prioritize cases, we constrained the list using several criteria.

- We eliminated island or micro-states (8 total).
- We eliminated cases in which the mean amount of backsliding was less than 1.5% (33 total).

Analytic Framework

The first six weeks of the capstone course focused on the theoretical literature on democracy and democratic erosion to enable the team to develop an appropriate framework for the coding of the event data. Through these readings, particular characteristics of democracy and its erosion were identified that could be used for the coding methodology. The entire team then read the same five country case studies and created a joint inventory of events from each of the cases. Using the completed inventory, the team identified similar logged events to construct conceptually-distinct groupings and create more reliable variable categories. Together, the team debated the potential categorization of events into the characteristics from the theoretical literature. It was decided that there was a fundamental difference between events that seemed to be leading to severe erosion, or precursors, and events where erosion had been institutionalized, or symptoms of erosion. The precursors were split into civic, economic, political, institutional, and violent/security events with a final “other” category to capture events that did not fit into the other subcategories. The symptoms were split into a reduction in vertical accountability, horizontal accountability, and a change in societal norms. Lastly, there were a number of events in the case studies in which citizens resisted these forms of erosion. To capture them, the team coded resistance as the antithesis of the symptoms, resistance to horizontal accountability, and resistance to vertical accountability as well as an “other” category. The team also decided to only code dynamic rather than static events. For example, if inequality had been a consistent challenge, it was not coded, but if there was a sudden increase in inequality the event would be coded. Our final event framework is depicted in Table 1 below. Following this, we briefly describe the theoretical background of each of these subcategories.

Table 1: Categorization Scheme to Code Events in Narrative Case Studies

Precursor	Symptom	Resistance
<i>Civic</i> Lack of legitimacy Media bias Polarization Increasing control of civil society <i>Economic</i> Corruption Economic inequality Economic shocks <i>Political</i> Cooptation of the opposition Extremist/populist parties Malapportionment Party weakness Electoral fraud <i>Institutional</i> Delegitimizing or weakening judiciary Coup or regime collapse State restructuring Manipulation of civil service Constitutional reforms <i>Violence/security</i> Non-state violence State-sponsored violence or abuse Electoral violence <i>Other</i> Refugee crisis External realignment Prior failed attempts at erosion Other	<i>Reduction in horizontal accountability</i> Suspension of rules/constitution Relaxing of term limits Circumventing the rule of law Reducing judicial independence Reducing legislative oversight Weakening integrity institutions <i>Reduction in vertical accountability</i> Media repression Repression of opposition parties Systemic reduction in electoral freedom/fairness Curtailed civil liberties <i>Changing societal norms</i> Lack of confidence/public disillusionment Threats and intimidation Other	<i>Increase in horizontal accountability</i> Check on central power by subnational government Check on executive by judiciary Check on executive by legislature <i>Increase in vertical accountability</i> Nonviolent protest Violent protest Increase in civic capacity Coalitions or elite pacts <i>Other</i> Pressure from outside actors Exit of people or money State attempts to prevent backsliding Other

Precursors

Civic

The civic category relates to events in which the citizenry are directly involved, either through associations, nonprofits, the media, or general beliefs about the government.

Lack of legitimacy

Linz and Stepan argue there are three characteristics that a democracy must have in order to rule: legitimacy, efficacy, and effectiveness. Legitimacy is the rulers' right to govern a society, make laws, and enforce them. Efficacy is the ability to make laws that coincide with the will of the

people. Lastly, efficiency is the ability to enact those laws. If a government is incapable of proving they are capable of upholding any one of these characteristics, they will face a higher risk of democratic erosion (Linz and Stepan 1989). One example of lacking legitimacy featured in the dataset is poll results from Ghana revealing that the percentage of Ghanaians with little or no trust in both the electoral commission and judicial system jumped from 32 and 39 percent, respectively, to more than 60 percent following the 2012 elections.

Media Bias

A free press is often cited as a cornerstone of liberal democracy in order to hold those elected accountable to their constituency. Hill and Lupu find that an increase in the restrictions on media lead to less competitive elections and a reduction in the ability to limit the executive. (Hill and Lupu 2017). Numerous examples can also be found in Venezuela and Russia for attacks on the media (Gehlbach 2010). The team made a clear distinction between media bias and media repression. Media bias was the government's attempt to influence either the content the media was producing or the perception of the media itself, while repression entailed greater control over the media apparatus. An example of media bias found in the dataset is the 2010 appointment of Kim Jae-Chul as network president of MBC, South Korea's second-largest television network, which was facilitated through undue government influence and skewed MBC's coverage in favor of the administration.

Polarization

Numerous studies have found people's seemingly inherent desire to group themselves into an "us" versus "them" mentality including Cass Sunstein and Jonathan Haidt, but more importantly the team focused on how this polarization can affect democratic erosion (Sunstein 2009) (Haidt 2012). Svulik argues that polarization increases the stakes of politics. If one group of people believes that another is trying to actively harm it, than they will be more willing to grant power to their political leaders to circumvent the institutional structures to ensure the competitor loses (Svulik 2017).

Increasing Control of Civil Society

Tocqueville was among the first scholars to discuss the importance of civil society on democracy, but many since have contributed to this literature (Tocqueville, et al. 1947). Fung argues that there are six contributions that associations, and thus civil society make to democracy including, "the intrinsic value of associative life, fostering civic virtues and teaching political skills, offering resistance to power and checking government, improving the quality and equality of representation, facilitating public deliberation, and creating opportunities for citizens and groups to participate directly in governance." (Fung 2003). We distinguish control of civil society (e.g., requiring civil society organizations to report foreign funding sources), which hinders civil society organizations' operations but does not degrade the strength of democracy, from repression of civil society (e.g., arresting activists), which is symptomatic of greater erosion.

Economic

Corruption

As mentioned above, Linz and Stepan argue that legitimacy is a key to democratic governance. Corruption degrades that legitimacy by displacing to the citizenry that the rule of law can be circumventing with payments. Many organizations have also used this as a measure of the

functioning of a state including the Fund for Peace, Fragile State Index, Transparency International, and the World Bank.

Economic Inequality

Acemoglu and numerous other scholars argue that inequality allows for power to be centralized to a small group of elites. Those elites are then able to capture greater political power, and thus entrench their supremacy (Acemoglu, et. al 2015). More recent literature has used examples in Venezuela and other populist movements to display how autocrats and future autocrats can use the inequality to justify taking greater power for themselves in order to fight for “the people” (Mudde 2008). For this reason, the team decided to code for changes in economic inequality.

Economic Shocks

Bermeo states that people are more willing to give up power to an autocrat when a major economic shock occurs. It is also possible that these shocks disturb the hold on power of the current elites, but this may also allow for autocrats to take advantage of the crisis. They often argue that in such desperate times, they can provide order and economic improvement. While Bermeo argues that these events occurred more often in the past than today, the team decided it was still worth coding for our dataset (Bermeo 2016).

Political

Cooptation of the Opposition

While in many cases democratic erosion occurs due to a single autocratic leader, it has also been found to occur when one party is able to consolidate power. Schedler discusses this dynamic explaining that many autocratic states exist that are seemingly democratic, except one party always wins a majority and thus stays in power (Schedler 2006). Political competition has been a fundamental aspect of defining democracy for decades, but Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that even if there is seemingly competition, the ruling party can co opt the opposition to ensure their victory (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).

Extremist / Populist Parties

Youcha Mounk defines populism as a leader who legitimizes themselves because they are the embodiment of the will of the people. The leader argues that there are many elites in the country that are trying to take advantage of the common person, but the populist understands what the citizenry wants and is fighting against the corruption to fulfill that need. In return the populist asks for greater power and authority over the other institutional checks in the government (Mounk 2018). Levitsky and Ziblatt make a similar argument that populism is an attempt to circumvent the institutional gatekeepers and increase their authority through the will of the people (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Seeing as this seems to be an increasing trend, the team decided to code for events in which populist and extremist parties were gaining prominence.

Malapportionment

Both Bermeo and Kennedy discuss the troubling consequences of malapportionment in electoral democracies. Not only do people feel as though they are not being represented, but more extreme candidates are able to gain power. Elections become less competitive and therefore more radical candidates are often chosen because the more moderate voters are no longer needed to win a

majority. Both the extremism and decreasing competitiveness of elections increases the possibility of democratic erosion (Bermeo 2016) (Kennedy 2016).

Party Weakness

Levitsky and Ziblatt discuss the importance of gatekeepers. These are institutional checks that restrict certain people from gaining power. In both a presidential and parliamentary electoral system the party plays an active role in deciding who and who cannot gain power in their respective government. If the party becomes weak, outsiders that do not conform to the parties conception of who should gain power have a greater opportunity of creating institutional instability and possibility democratic erosion (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).

Electoral Fraud

Similar to corruption reducing the legitimacy of democratic institutions, electoral fraud has the same effect.

Institutional

Delegitimizing or Weakening the Judiciary

Along with a long history of political scientists, Gibler and Randazzo recently found strong evidence that an independent judiciary is a successful defense against executive aggrandizement. It thus stands to reason that attacks on an independent judiciary are a sign of democratic erosion (Gibler and Randazzo 2011).

Coup or Regime Collapse

Bermeo details the difference between democratic cataclysm and democratic backsliding. She states that democratic cataclysm is a single major event in which democracies collapse, often in executive coups or due to economic shocks (Bermeo, 2016). Huq and Ginsberg define this form of erosion as Authoritarian Reversion (Huq and Ginsberg 2017). While the point of the piece is to point out that these events are becoming less common, the team decided to code for this form of rapid democratic decline.

Manipulation of Civil Service

Huq and Ginsberg outline a systematic method of conceptualizing democratic decline and one of the primary methods of what they call “constitutional retrogression” is the centralization and politicization of executive power. A key aspect of this process is decreasing the separation between the executive and the bureaucracy and thus the team has coding for manipulating the civil service (Huq and Ginsberg 2017).

Constitutional Reform

Not all constitutional reform should be seen as a sign of democratic erosion, but anything that increases the power of the executive should be viewed with skepticism. Once again, Huq and Ginsberg discuss the importance of institutional checks on the executive and if the executive is eliminating these checks on their power it is a clear sign of democratic erosion (Huq and Ginsberg 2017).

Violence/Security

Non-state Violence

As Pinker, along with other authors, argues, the most important aspect of a state is its monopoly on the use of violence. Once groups are able to use violence for their own political or other means, the state has lost this legitimacy and is therefore in decline (Pinker 2011).

State-sponsored Violence or Abuse

As has been described above, both executive aggrandizement and the rule of law are deeply important for democratic consolidation. If political entities are using their power to arbitrarily and violently attack others, this is a significant sign of democratic erosion.

Electoral Violence

Similar to the previous two precursors, if citizens use violence rather than the democratic system to influence policies and elections it is clear that democratic erosion has begun either because the state is not capable of ensuring its citizens' safety, or because citizens believe the best method of gaining power is to subvert the democratic structure.

Others

Refugee Crisis

While there is no direct evidence linking the refugee crisis to democratic decline nor significant theoretical literature, the recent refugee crisis has likely caused a sudden change in the informal institutions within the host-countries. It is also often blamed for the rise of populist parties in both European and Latin American countries (Mudde 2017).

External Realignment

While external realignment is understudied as it relates to democratic erosion, the team decided it was likely that outside actors would have some impact on democratic erosion. Hopefully, this dataset will shed light on the connection between outside actors and internal politics.

Prior Failed Attempts at Erosion

There were multiple events as the team was coding where the executive or other political leaders attempted to consolidate their hold on power but failed. The team decided to code these events as they are likely important precursors to democratic erosion in the future.

Symptoms

Reduction in Horizontal Accountability

Suspension of rules/constitution

Huq and Ginsberg discuss in their piece that the suspension or amendment of the constitution should be seen as one of the greatest symptoms of democratic erosion because they are fundamentally changing the power structures within the government (Huq and Ginsberg 2017).

Relaxing of term limits

As described above, executive aggrandizement is one of the primary method for leaders to erode democracy, and relaxing term limits is a clear example of executive aggrandizement.

Circumventing the rule of law

Circumventing the rule of law may take shape in many different forms. Bermeo and Mounk point out that the rule of law may be avoided even with the consent of the people, if they are able to demagogue and polarize issues to such an extent that the citizenry is willing to forgo the checks on their abilities for a seeming victory for “the people” (Bermeo 2016) (Mounk 2017) (Varol 2015).

Reducing judicial independence

The same theories were used to inform the inclusion of this category as the “Delegitimizing or Weakening the Judiciary” precursor. The key difference is that for the event to be considered a symptom, the reduction in judicial independence must have been institutionalized (Varol 2015).

Weakening integrity institutions

Scheppele provides an excellent example of a legislature in Hungary weakening the checks and balances of an institution within the confines of the institution itself (Scheppele 2013). There are certain institutions, such as 3rd party evaluators of elections like the caretaker government in Bangladesh, that act as checks on executive power. As Huq and Ginsberg discuss the executive often tries to gain control of the bureaucracy in order to reduce these checks (Huq and Ginsberg 2017).

Reduction in Vertical Accountability

Media repression

See the above description for “Media Bias” to see the theoretical rationality for its inclusion in democratic erosion. The symptom is simply the institutionalization of this media bias and a greater control over the media by the government.

Repression of opposition parties

Rather than co-opting the opposition, some autocrats will actively repress the opposition either through arrests, limited freedoms, or direct violence. Seeing as competitive elections are among the most important cornerstones of democracy, the direct targeting of this opposition should be coded as a symptom of democratic erosion (Schumpeter 1947).

Systemic reduction in electoral freedom/fairness

The primary difference between this categorization and “Electoral Fraud”, is that the ruling party has creating a systematic way to influence the election.

Curtailed civil liberties

Dahl argues that democracy entails far more than the minimalist approach which only considers fair competitive elections. He argues that the ability to assemble and the freedom of speech are pivotal to the ability for the citizenry to interact with its democratic government (Dahl 1972). The curtailment of these liberties has been coded as a symptom.

Changing Societal Norms

Lack of confidence/public disillusionment

As mentioned above in the “Legitimacy of Democracy” section, the belief that the government should have the ability to make and enforce laws that govern the citizenry is pivotal for a successful democratic regime. The lack of such confidence and changing norms should be considered a

symptom, as Norris argues in his research on people's cultural beliefs towards democratic governance (Norris 2017).

Threats and intimidation

Similar to the violence precursors above, one of the most basic functions of a government is to have a monopoly on the use of violence, but when that violence is turned against its own people it has cleared turned towards democratic erosion.

Resistance

Increase in Horizontal Accountability

Check on central power by subnational government

There have been a number of examples of subnational governments such as provinces or states fighting the attempt of central governments to gather more power (do Vale 2017).

Check on executive by judiciary

Gibbler and Randazzo found evidence that independent judiciaries that have been around for at least 3 years mitigate democratic erosion (Gibbler and Randazzo 2011). This finding, along with others on the importance of an independent judiciary, led the team to create this category of resistance.

Check on Executive by Legislature

While the judiciary plays a strong role in checking the power of the executive, the legislature can as well. As the team read through the case studies, it became clear that the legislature was a strong check on executive aggrandizement. Levitsky and Ziblatt emphasize the importance of the legislative branch as a formal "gatekeeper" on the executive (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2017).

Increase in Vertical Accountability

Nonviolent protest

Nonviolent protests are a very common form of resistance to many government policies, but Stephan and Chenoweth find that nonviolent campaigns work better to produce loyalty shifts, especially where the regime is willing to use force (Stephan and Chenoweth 2008). For these reasons we've coded nonviolent protest into our dataset.

Violent protest

Krastev sees nonviolent protest and elections as a method of reducing the chance of revolution by giving people an outlet outside of violence (Krastev 2014). Violent protest is the progression to more extreme and radical reactions to government overreach.

Increase in civic capacity

As mentioned in previous sections, civil society is a pivotal aspect of democratic participation (Dahl 1972). The increase of civic associations' capacity increases its ability refute attempts at democratic erosion.

Coalitions or elite pacts

There is a significant debate in political science about whether power sharing among elites is more important or the active participation of the citizenry. Scholars such as Douglass North argue that the true brilliance of democracy, was its ability to create a pact among elites in which all of them understood that if they played by the rules they may have the opportunity to win power in the future (North 1990). These pacts may reduce democratic erosion.

Others

Pressure from outside actors

Stephan and Chenoweth, along with their research on violent versus nonviolent protests, study external pressures from foreign actors. They find that foreign countries advantage violent campaigns (Stephan and Chenoweth 2008).

Exit of people or money

When citizens are displeased with their government and want to act, they have multiple choices, either voice their opinion through protests as explained above, or exit the governance structure. Exiting with both the human and physical capital can have a significant impact on the government (Paul 1992).

State attempts to prevent backsliding

In rare cases the government has actually decided to try and reduce backsliding themselves either through programs that reduce polarization or other means.

Coding

This categorization framework is meant to maximize the utility of the dataset by grouping like events together. This allows users to, for example, observe the frequency of the abolition of term limits relative to the frequency of media repression across time and space. Though informed by the literature, the event groupings in our final framework were determined inductively. First, the team used the first batch of case studies produced by students in the four Democratic Erosion classes taught during the Fall 2017 semester to identify events that constituted precursors and symptoms of, and resistance to, erosion. Each documented erosion-related event (e.g., economic shock) was logged with additional information identifying the event type (precursor, symptom or resistance), the year in which it occurred, and a brief explanatory note to expand on the event. After compiling the initial inventory of events, Team members gathered to identify common language to describe similar events and pool related events into groupings. The client previewed the categorization scheme that resulted from this process and offered input on missing event categorizations and alternative grouping schemes to better explain precursors, symptoms, and resistance.

With the event categories finalized, the Team created a coding instrument in Google Forms to streamline the process of coding all student case studies. The form allowed each teammate to quickly input data from new case studies in a uniform fashion. In addition to coding every event documented in each narrative case study (according to the above categorization scheme), Team members added a short description of each event, and the year(s) of the event.

Team members first tested the Google Form by inputting data from 65 randomly-selected case study narratives. This exercise demonstrated the reliability and comprehensiveness of the tool, and the Team revised the form accordingly. Among the adjustments made was the addition of a field for reviewers to code the overall scale of erosion within a country to complement the author rating. This coding was done using the following 5-point scale:

- 0: No backsliding, and weak threat of future backsliding
- 1: There are precursors to backsliding, e.g. the rise of extremist parties, but erosion of democratic institutions has not yet taken place
- 2: There is weak erosion of democratic institutions, perhaps the institutions being eroded are not critical for the functioning of democracy
- 3: There is moderate erosion of democratic institutions
- 4: There is severe erosion of democratic institutions; it is unclear whether democracy will recover

Other revisions included allowing events to transpire over a multiyear period. To account for concerns regarding the validity of information, the Team also developed rules about when to include or exclude information from the case studies in the coding exercise. A field was added to the coding form to allow Team members to note that evidence was unsubstantiated, and coders were encouraged to distinguish between subjective and impressionistic or merely vague descriptors (e.g. being labeled corrupt) versus events with more evidence (e.g. being convicted of corruption).

With the second version of the Google Form complete, Team members undertook the coding of all 158 case studies, including recoding the initial case studies using the new form. Sixty-five different countries were included in the data, with an average of between 2 and 3 case studies per country. The data produced by the final coding exercise was subsequently aggregated and cleaned to ensure that discrete events were not duplicated in the data by the inclusion of different case studies on the same country. The data was then imported into STATA, where the Team began to analyze the data and look for general trends (see Descriptive Statistics and Analyses sections).

Weaknesses to Our Approach

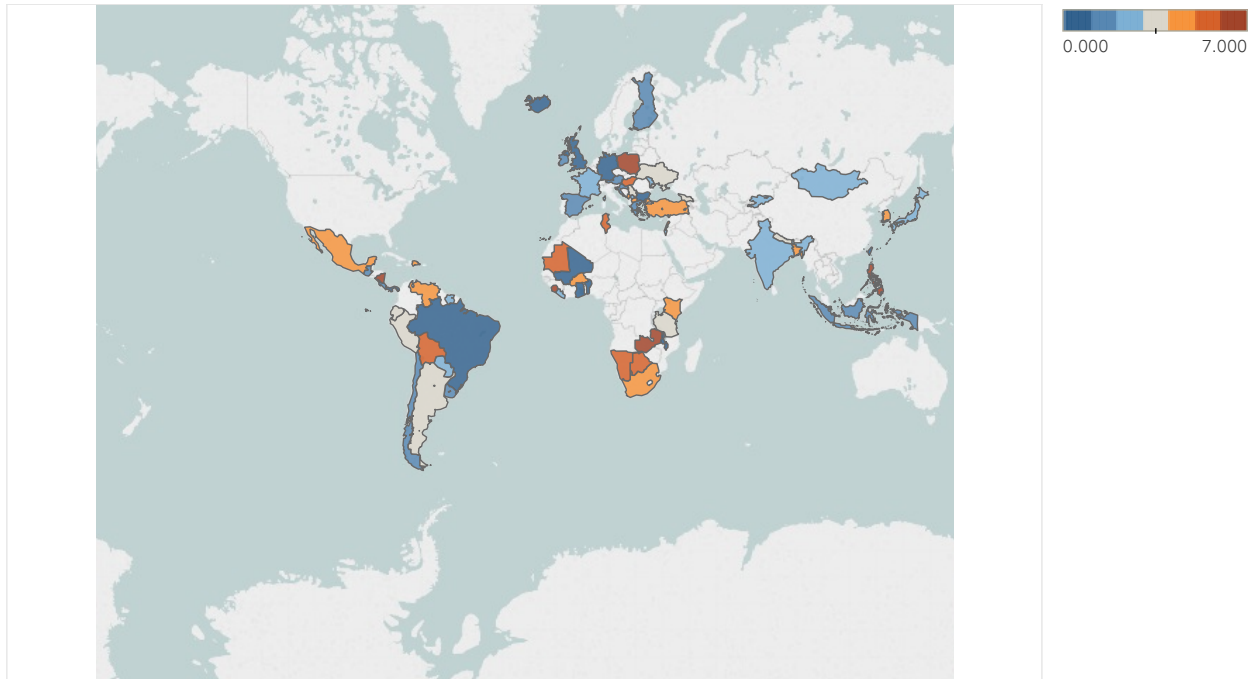
The approach to coding erosion-related events undertaken by the Capstone Team has its limitations. While the case studies authored by students in the Democratic Erosion course often highlighted the precursors and symptoms of, and resistance to, erosion comprehensively, some events may have been missed by the authors. Coders could vet the veracity of information, but the project did not allow for independent searching for additional erosion-related events. This concern can be ameliorated by continuing to grow the pool of case studies and integrating the new information into the dataset.

Focusing exclusively on defined events created another challenge for this project, as informal institutional changes are not captured in the dataset. One potential remedy to this shortcoming is merging data from public opinion surveys like regional barometers (e.g. the Latinobarometer) into a greater dataset capturing both formal and informal changes.

Descriptive Statistics

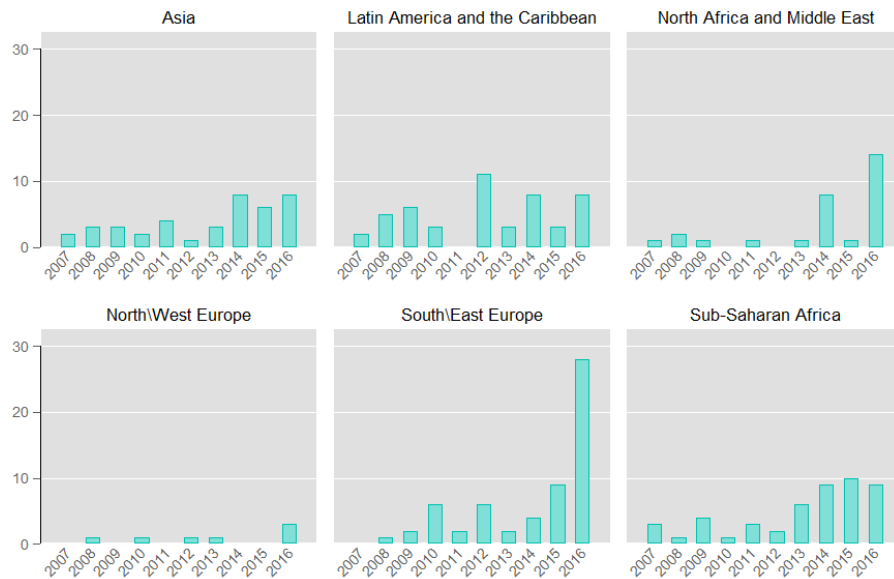
The following is a sample of what can be achieved with our dataset. The map below represents the number of symptoms per country. As the coding color transitions from blue to brown, the greater number of symptoms that occurred in the country during the period of time studied.

Number of Symptoms



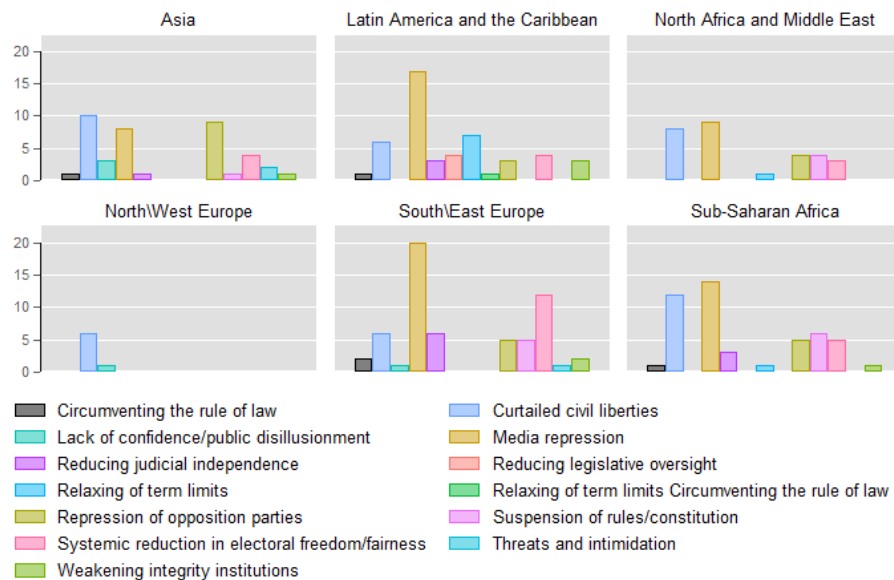
The next graph represents the frequency of symptoms per year and per region. It is important to note that frequency has been increasing over time in five of the six regions, but the year at which this growth occurred is distinct. We hypothesize that this is due to the fact that regions are not only geographical identities but also social-cultural universes with different historical backgrounds that influence the pattern of events.

Figure 4. Number of Symptoms by Year and Region



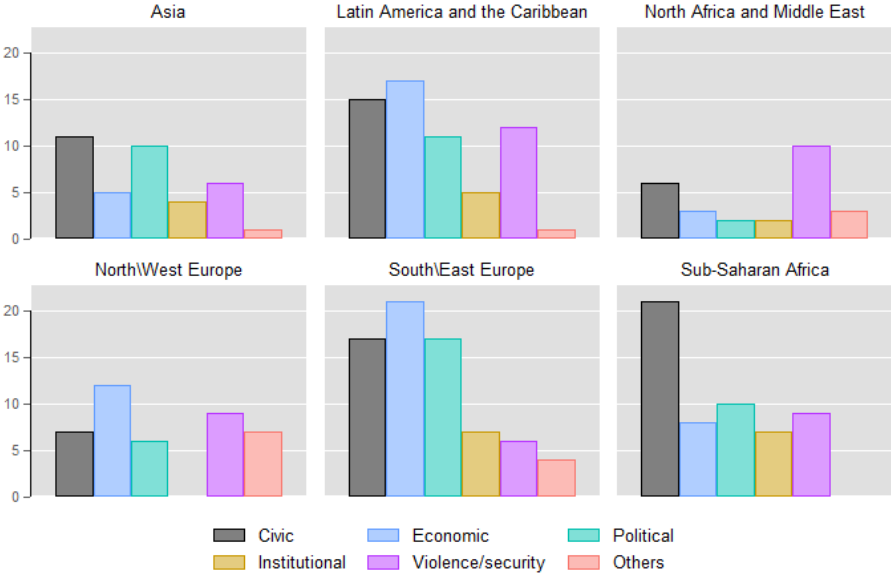
The following bar chart represents the types of symptoms per region. We can see that the frequency of types is also distinct across regions. Media repression is the dominant symptom of democratic erosion in Latin America and Eastern Europe. However, in Asia and Africa, the curtailment of civil liberties is as or more common a symptom as media repression. Interestingly, more institutional attacks such as reduction in electoral freedoms and judicial independence is more common in the relatively more developed states in Europe.

Figure 5. Type of Symptoms by Region



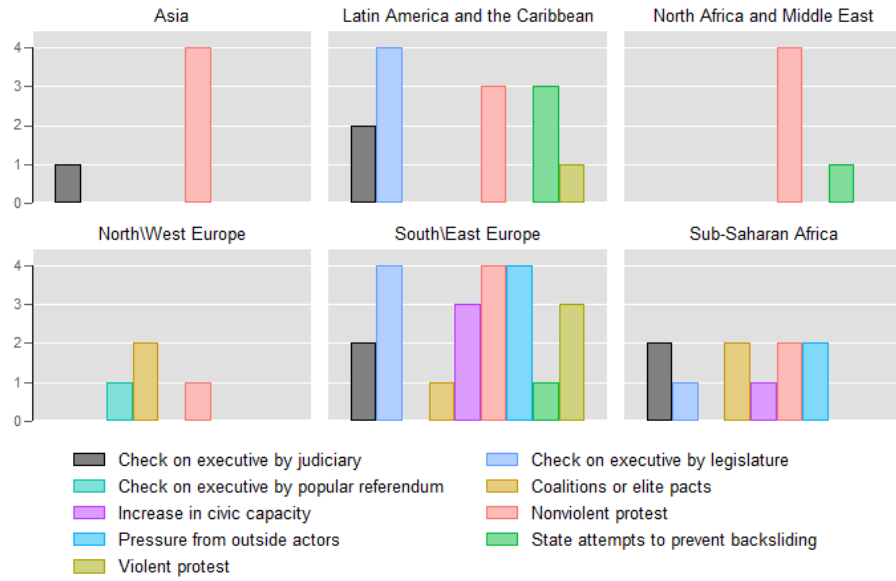
The next chart represents the type of precursor by region. Looking at both European regions, we note that economic precursors are relatively more frequent. This may be due to the adoption of austerity policies shortly after the Great Recession of 2008, which triggered waves of protest and raised social anxiety. Echoing the distribution of symptom types, civic precursors are most common in the least developed regions of Asia, and Africa. Such trends suggest interesting hypotheses that could be tested by joining our events dataset with complementary data on economic development and state capacity.

Figure 6. Type of Precursor by Region



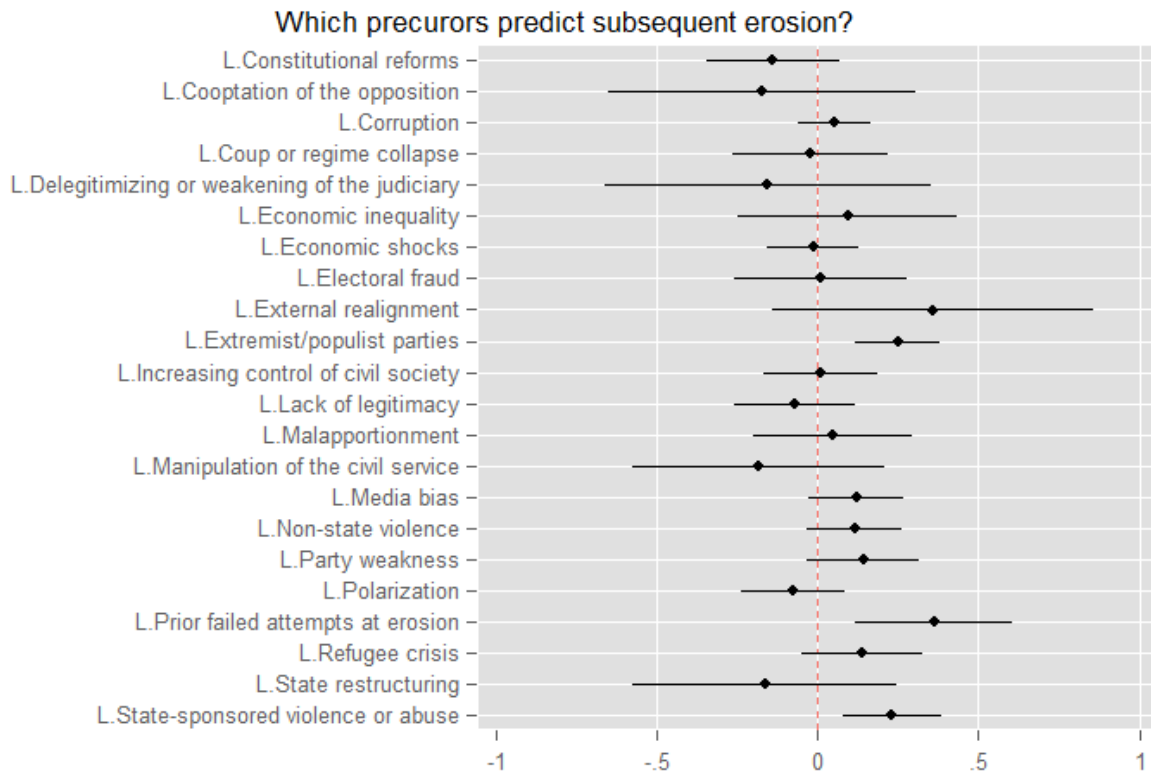
The following chart represents resistance events by region. Nonviolent protests comprise the dominant form of resistance in both Asia and North Africa and the Middle East. The types of resistance that manifested in Latin America and the Caribbean, South/East Europe, and Sub-Saharan Africa were both more diverse and evenly-distributed with checks on the legislative/judiciary, pressure from outside actors, state attempts to prevent backsliding, and elite pacts being as or more common as non-violent protest.

Figure 7. Type of Resistance by Region

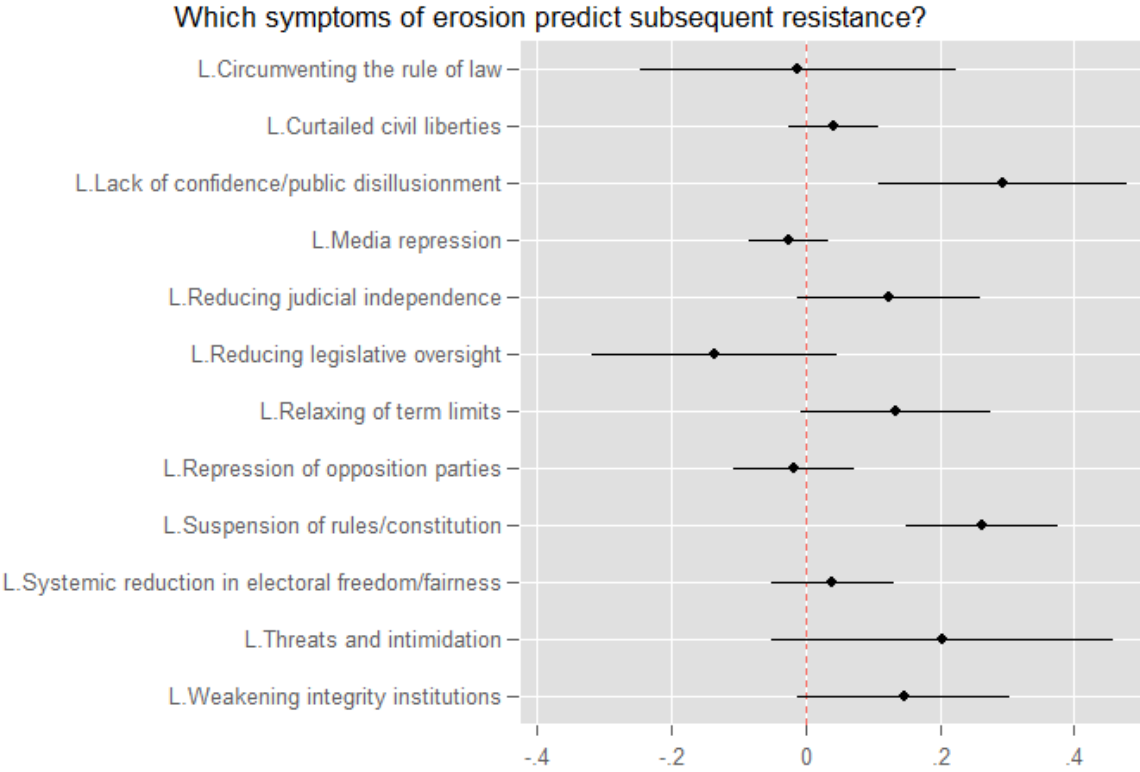


Analyses

Using a country-year dataset with a fixed-effects regression model, we can explore the predictive potential of our dataset. The coefficient plot below represents the effect of lagged precursor types on any symptom of erosion. In the first, we see that extremist / populist parties, failed attempts at erosion, and state-sponsored violence are the only statistically significant predictors of symptoms in the following year. Changing the number of lagged years could produce a different set of findings. Whereas this analysis groups all symptoms together, it would additionally be interesting to observe whether certain types of precursors are predictive of certain types of symptoms.



The second coefficient plot reports results of an analysis of the effect of lagged symptoms on resistance events. In this one, we see that public disillusionment and the suspension of the constitution are most predictive of resistance in the following year.



Next Steps

For the dataset to remain useful, we suggest that it continue to be updated with new years and countries. It may also be made more reliable with additional input for the existing cases and years. Such expansion of the dataset is possible through continued collaboration with the *Democratic Erosion* course. Students at the 20 partner universities will continue to develop country case narratives, generating new raw data. Discussions are also underway for how to institutionalize the annual or biannual coding of these new narrative case studies. We estimated that coding a single case study takes 20 minutes on average, so if 150 case studies continue to be produced annually, that would only require 50 hours of research assistance per year.

In addition, Christopher Hill will serve as program assistant during the post-capstone phase in summer 2018 during which he will focus on three activities. First, he will stand up a website to host the existing data and reports and make it as interactive as possible for future users. Second, he will continue data cleaning procedures (removing duplicates, delineating evidence-based versus unconfirmed claims, etc.). And third, he will help institutionalize future work so that progress can continue to be made after the summer.

One of our capstone team's more intermediate-term goals flows from the need to generate use of the dataset. Sustainability is more likely to be achieved if evidence of its usage by the intended audience demonstrates the value in the dataset. The incorporation of the existing dataset into much larger collaborations serves this purpose by making our dataset readily available to a greater network of academics and practitioners. The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) index presents a unique opportunity for the future distribution of the dataset as a complement to the V-Dem Institute's ongoing initiative towards conceptualizing and measuring democracy. In addition to V-Dem, our capstone team is looking at working further with USAID in terms of applying the dataset to the production of country reports. These reports will help development workers better conceptualize the risk factors (precursors) and manifestations (symptoms) of democratic erosion, with the intent of tailoring various programmatic interventions to better suit the decline in quality of specific aspects of democracy.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. How to Guide for Pivot Table

The dashboard was created to help development practitioners easily find trends in democratic erosion around the world as well as search for similar cases to their own work. To use the Democratic Erosion dashboard, simply click the different options in the slicers to the right of the graphs to alter the graphs based on country, region, type of event, or year of the event. The region, country, and year slicers will impact all of the graphs on the dashboard simultaneously. The precursors, symptoms, and resistance slicers will only impact the bottom right graph. To toggle between clicking a single option within a slicer and selecting multiple options at once, click the button with three check marks in the top right corner of the slicer. To clear your selections, click the button with a red x in the top right of the slicer. The original pivot tables that are on the dashboard are currently hidden, but they can be unhidden by going to the sheets in the bottom left corner of the screen, right clicking a sheet, and clicking "unhide". The source data for the graphs is found in the "Data" sheet. To update our dataset, you can simply add it to the bottom of the sheet. The graphs will automatically update with the new data after you've closed the document and opened it again. For further questions, please contact Dr. Jessica Gottlieb at jgottlieb@tamu.edu.

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Wyeth Taylor (Kenya)

University of Memphis (Shelby Grossman)

Anonymous (Paraguay)
Ebenezer Akomolafe (Namibia)
Jordan Aulfinger (Iceland)
Chelsea Bartley (Ukraine)
Grant Beatty (Macedonia)
Wesley Brock (Mongolia)
LaDaisha Claybrook (Mauritania)
Ali Raza Galani (Mali)
Erica Garcia (Mexico)
Alexander Gephart (Turkey)
Dania Helou (Israel)
Hunter Irons (India)
Bradly Allen Knox (Burkina Faso)
Jake Kolar (Israel)
Quanshe Moore (Bolivia)
Shemaiah Moss (Spain)
Victoria Potts (Bulgaria)
R. Harrison Schaming (Costa Rica)

Cayna Sharp (Bangladesh)
Hannah Shelton (Kosovo)
John Blake Stayton (Venezuela)
Ethan Watson (Nepal)
Willie Wells (Panama)
Molly Winders (Mali)

[University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill \(Cameron Ballard-Rosa\)](#)

Yonel Admasu (Kenya)
Francesca Alvarez (Spain)
Carolyn Barker (Malawi)
Tara Boldrin (Lebanon)
Sarah Gilmour (Bangladesh)
Melanie Langness (Guatemala)
Austin McCall (Botswana)
Mason McConnell (Nicaragua)
Insaaf Mohamed (Mexico)
Blaine Pugh (Chile)
Zachary Simon (Kosovo)

[University of Pennsylvania \(Guy Grossman\)](#)

Shravan Balaji (Turkey)
Oluwabomi Fagbemi (Burkina Faso)
Matt Graff (Poland)
Rachel Pomerantz (Serbia)
Lindsey Powell (Austria)