

Authoritarian Leadership Politics and Constraints on the Executive

A Mediation Analysis of Ideology, Populism, and Civil Group Balance of Power

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Abstract

Given the recent interest in the twin roles of extremism and populism in democratic backsliding, it is timely to consider the evidence on change in authoritarian societies as well. Why do some regimes slide further into autocracy while other regimes, similar in their formal institutions and economies, move toward democratization? What can explain the erosion of longstanding traditional institutions in autocracy? I contend that the answer lies in the ideology of the dictator with rhetorical style in a secondary role. Specifically, ideological programs of aggressive social change necessarily weaken existing civil society constraints and the reliance of the regime on ideology for legitimacy increases the power of ideological support groups. The combination of ideological agendas hostile to existing social structures with the instrumental use of populist rhetoric to bypass existing constraints is corrosive to both civil society and the institutional constraints it supports. This project will demonstrate using mediation analysis that radical leadership ideology results in the erosion of institutional constraints with changes in civil society as a causal mechanism, and that populism's role is secondary.

Introduction

Why do some authoritarian societies democratize, most remain stable, and some experience autocratic reversion? The majority of human history is the history of autocracy. Yet some countries have developed democratic institutions, including imperfect but clearly democratic institutions developed at a time of much lower economic development before the industrial revolution. In every historical example, democratic governance has emerged out of an existing nondemocratic regime. While many agree that "democracy is the best form of government to which any nation is entitled—whether in Europe, America, Asia, or Africa" (Sen, 1999), there is as much variation in autocracy as in democracy, if not more. This variation is important to the prospects for eventual democratization, but in many cases it is even more important to the citizens of those countries now. How does one autocracy become the Argentina of the Dirty War, Cambodia or Serbia with their ethnic purges, or a brutal theocracy like Afghanistan under the first Taliban regime? How do others develop institutions which create some stability, a degree of protection for the citizen's rights today, and some potential for democratization in the future?

Cox and Weingast challenge the autocracy-democracy dichotomy, suggesting a four way classification (Cox and Weingast, 2018). At the least, it is a continuum, not a simple dichotomy dividing pure democracy from pure autocracy. Democratic backsliding, democratization, autocratic reversion, democratic consolidation, and regime stability are all aspects of the same phenomena at different points on this continuum. The answer to any one piece of this puzzle holds clues to all the others.

Academically, the explanation for democratization has been found in economic development, existing institutions, and political culture. Other scholarship has described all three as the result of some other endogenous variable such as urbanization or some unobserved latent variable. The ongoing academic debate between economic, institutional, and cultural explanations poses complex questions of endogeneity with effects that are conditional, probabilistic, and incomplete. The often vague conditions and latent variables are arguably a case of what Barbara Geddes referred to as "will o' wisps" in "swampy quagmires" of theory (Geddes, 2003).

A major institutional component of democracy is constraints on the executive (Morrow et al., 2008)(Cox and Weingast, 2018). These constraints also exist in nondemocracies but vary widely in type, enforceability and effect. Constraints are important in economic development, as well as being a key characteristic of democratization. Whether the economic chicken hatched from the institutional egg or institutions hatched from the economic egg, other factors play a role in the growth of these constraints on the executive. We can find some of these factors by following Lipset in considering "the relations of the political system to society as a whole" (Lipset, 1959). Based on recent academic literature on democracies, another factor to consider is the political leadership dynamics, specifically leader adoption of extremist ideologies and populist rhetoric. This research will show that radical, socially transformative ideologies, often associated with the use of populist

leadership rhetoric, erode civil society institutions in turn reducing the capacity for self-enforcing political constraints on the executive.

The rest of this article is divided into five parts. The first part discusses the policy implications and relation to current academic discourse of this project. The second one develops a theoretical frame for understanding the effects of ideology and populism on institutional constraints in autocracies. The third part explains the models and proposed research design. The fourth part details the results of the research. The final section is a conclusion recapping the major findings and additional questions raised.

Why study autocratic institutions?

Theoretical importance This research speaks to the debate on democratic backsliding, autocratic reversion and the autocratic backlash against democracy. It also adds to the continuing debate about origins of democratizing institutions by considering potential political factors affecting institutions in modern autocracies. Economic, institutional, and cultural explanations of liberalization are interesting and often persuasive. They are also probabilistic, conditional, mutually endogenous to an almost hopeless degree, and ultimately incomplete. Economic explanations of modernization are conditional on exogenous shocks including economic crises, leadership changes, or battlefield losses (Kennedy, 2010) (Treisman, 2020). Institutional models likewise suggest tendencies and trends that are often the result of good economic policies, necessarily including policies pursued by pre-democratic dictators or proto-democratic regimes of the past (Glaeser, Porta and Shleifer, 2004)(North and Weingast, 1989). The most persuasive cultural explanations are explicitly dependent on growing degrees of physical security, especially emphasizing economic factors that again seem tied to historical constraints on the executive Inglehart (2018).

Aside from the endogeneity debates, there are still important unanswered questions about which political factors make conditions ripe for economic growth, improving institutions, and advancing political culture, and which instead encourage a slide further into autocracy. Understanding these factors may also hold value for explaining all the other variations on the theme of motion along the democratic-autocratic axis. Consolidated democracy is the easy case for institutions, as democratic leaders have relatively attractive options if their policies are defeated including a much easier retirement than the typical autocrat can enjoy. Autocracies, where loss of office often means loss of life or freedom, are the hard case for institutions, where we can often learn the most.

Policy importance If my key hypotheses are correct, this research is important for policy reasons because it can help identify threats to democracy, potential for autocratic reversion, and opportunities for democratization. Regimes sliding further into autocracy are more likely to threaten international peace, commit violence against their own citizens, defect from international agreements, and less likely to engage in cooperative international behaviors. While the division between democracies and nondemocracies is an important tool, there is significant variation in international behavior within nondemocracies (Mattes and Rodríguez, 2014). The institutional

effects of autocratic reversion have been felt most within the hybrid regimes, moving towards fully autocratic (Norris, 2017a)(Puddington and Roylance, 2017). This is a particular concern, as the greatest danger of interstate conflict is not with hybrid regimes, but in fully autocratic-democratic dyads (Beck, Zeng and King, 2000).

Within democracies, populist-authoritarianism, the combination of populist rhetorical styles and authoritarian ideologies, poses one of the greatest threats of democratic backsliding according to Norris (2017a). If that effect of ideology and rhetoric holds for autocratic reversion as well, ideological agendas destructive of societal norms and corrosive to institutions present a growing threat and a lost opportunity. In 2017, Freedom House issued "Populists and Autocrats: The Dual Threat to Global Democracy," which cited the combination of populist rhetoric and extremist ideology working through "a nexus of populism and authoritarianism" in both democracies and nondemocracies as the core threat to democracy today (Puddington and Roylance, 2017). Evidence shows that the combination of populism and extreme leftist ideology is a threat to economic freedom, while mainstream leftist ideology alone is not (Cases, 2017)(de la Torre, 2017). But the threat is not limited to the extreme left, as "ethnopoliticism" led to ethnic cleansing and interstate conflict in the former Yugoslavia and rightist populism resulted in democratic backsliding and de-democratization in Asia (Weerdesteijn, 2015)(Einzenberger and Schaffar, 2018). The Tony Blair Institute for Global Change notes the dangers of leaders who use populist issues "as a means of riling their base and dividing societies," but also notes that because populism is so varied a "clear and systematic understanding" of populism is necessary (Kyle and Gultchin, 2018).

Institutions, Democratization, and Autocratic Reversion

Democratic backsliding and autocratic reversion Democratic backsliding and autocratic reversion are the same phenomenon occurring at different starting points on the democracy-autocracy scale. Better understanding autocratic reversion may yield insights into democratic backsliding, democratization, and democratic consolidation. Likewise, the work already done on democratic backsliding offers insights into its counterpart in nondemocracies. What does the democratic backsliding literature have to tell us? Informal institutions are as important as formal institutions like courts and parliaments in forming and maintaining democracy (Ágh, 2016). The formal institution of elections has been less involved in democratic backsliding than supporting institutions including the rule of law, freedom of speech, and freedom of the press (Lührmann et al., 2018). An exception to this has been Venezuela under the populist-leftist Chavez-Maduro regime, with 117 electoral irregularities in 20 years (Corrales, 2020). On the other hand, the populist-authoritarian AKP in Turkey has used elections instrumentally to seize state power and legitimate electoral authoritarianism (Akkoyunlu and Öktem, 2016) (Jongerden, 2019). Since populism is "hostile to elites [but] also vague and moralistic," it is readily instrumentalized in just this manner by extremist ideologies on the left and the right (Bugarič, 2019).

In Hungary and Poland, a combination of populism and polarizing, extremist ideologies buttressed by generous social programs have led to attacks on formal institutions, informal insti-

tutions, and civil society norms (Halmai, 2019)(Enyedi, 2016)(Grzymala-Busse, 2019). In Hungary specifically, religious ideology has been combined with nationalization, punitive taxation of foreign financial interests, and economic protectionism with a decidedly leftist slant (Bugarič, 2019). Radical right populism poses a threat, but the combination of authoritarian impulse, savagery toward opponents, disregard of "paper institutions" limiting the executive, and support for strong leaders has proven just as dangerous when associated with leftist ideologies (Malka et al., 2020)(Weyland, 2013). Though much is still unclear, the clearest populist threat identified by the existing democratic backsliding literature is the instrumentalization of populism on behalf of extreme ideologies to attack existing institutions, both formal and informal.

Income, Institutions, and Conditionality in Democratization Much literature suggests that economic advancement will secure democratization and guard against autocratic reversion. According to Treisman, sufficient national income combined with the process of leadership change are likely to lead to modernization (Treisman, 2020). A simplistic assessment of this view might make the answer to promoting democracy and avoiding autocratic backlash seem as simple as encouraging income growth. There are problems with this assessment since it ignores institutions. While there are short run instances of command economies achieving impressive industrial growth, income growth is reliant on certain institutional constraints to ensure the security of investments even in autocracy. Second, democratization is dependent on more than just leadership change. At the middle levels of GDP per capita, states can move either direction during a leadership change (Treisman, 2020). Income based theories alone are not sufficient to explain movement along the democracy-autocracy axis.

Institutional constraints in autocracy A variety of scholars have argued that it was constraints on the monarchy, rule of law, and secure property rights which allowed England to move from the Glorious Revolution to the Industrial Revolution (Olson, 1993)(North and Weingast, 1989). Yet institutions alone do not explain income either. Other scholars have looked for common factors that explain both institutions and growth. Abramson and Boix propose that both income growth and institutional constraints are the result of an endogenous process of urbanization over long periods (Abramson and Boix, 2019). According to Clague et al, both economic and institutional conditions are dependent on factors influencing leadership decisions and a simple democratic-autocratic determination is overly simplistic (Clague et al., 1996). Cox and Weingast argue that it is constraints on the executive, in their case measured as legislative accountability, which enable economic stability during leadership turnovers (Cox and Weingast, 2018).

Political democracy is not a prerequisite of strong property rights (Clark, 1996). Autocrats who survive their first year in office have incentives to accept institutions that improve economic growth. Since their main concern is their own retention of power, and not the next leader of the regime, they should prefer better economic conditions which improve their odds of retaining office (Treisman, 2015). The *stationary bandit* model predicts that autocrats with nonzero time horizons will maximize their extraction of rents by adopting policies which encourage investment and growth (Olson, 1993) (De Mesquita and Smith, 2009). Given this, other factors must be at play

when autocrats choose to remove or ignore institutions which promote economic growth. What are those other factors? I argue that ideology is one.

In the context of democracy and pre-democratic development, effective institutions must be self-enforcing, with incentives that make it in the best interest of the leader to respect institutions or focal points to coordinate opposition if the leader defects (North and Weingast, 1989)(Weingast, 1997)(North, Wallis and Weingast, 2006). According to Fearon, self-enforcing democratic institutions actually require a bit of additional enforcement in the form of "organizations in society that can observe and announce a signal of the extent of popular discontent" (Fearon, 2011). According to Boix and Svolik, a balance of power between political forces is also necessary for enforcement of constraints in autocracy (Boix and Svolik, 2013). Vital to this balance of power in most, if not all, cases is a sufficiently strong civil society.

Civil Society and institutional constraints Among the other factors explaining institutional change are political factions and the balance of power between them. Stasavage argues that partisan interests are one important factor in making institutional constraints credible, in the context of the English constitutional monarchy (Stasavage, 2002). Putnam places the credit for solid institutions in the informal, civil society institutions already existing in a region (Putnam, 1993). Weingast notes that many influential studies fail to examine the important matter of how elites interact with the masses (Weingast, 1997). This interaction is especially relevant as the significant source of populist rhetoric. Acemoglu and Robinson take the civil society explanation a step further and examine those interactions between masses and elites in depth. They present a model of the balance of power as a necessary competition between a dynamic civil society, representing the masses, and a high capacity state, representing the elites. According to their model, too strong a state leads to a tyrannical state while too strong a civil society leads to a weak state or even a stateless society at the mercy of civil norms or warlords. Civil society groups provide the focal point for opposition to executive overreach. Only a balance of state capacity and civil society leads to institutions that eventually lead to democratization while an imbalance leads to unconstrained tyranny (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2016)(Acemoglu and Robinson, 2017)(Acemoglu and Robinson, 2019).

Theory

Ideology

What is ideology? Maynard discusses the views of a variety of scholars who present ideology broadly as a worldview, a systematic lens through which the followers view interactions, events, and policy responses (Maynard, 2019). Sanín and Wood more explicitly define ideology to include a set of objectives and a policy program intended to benefit a specifically defined group, the "constituency" (Sanín and Wood, 2014). This paper is concerned specifically with *extremist* or *radical* ideologies, and even more specifically with transformative ideologies whose objectives and policy program are intended to enact sweeping change of society broadly, and not merely policy

reform within government. These programs of social change by design weaken some aspects of current societal arrangements and strengthen others. Because of this, radical ideological programs erode civil society constraints, as this research will demonstrate. Because the successful ideological leader relies for his support on ideological constituencies with social change agendas, traditional constraints on the executive must also be attacked directly when necessary to promote the agenda for change. Constraints on the executive are not eliminated, but traditional constraints are traded for new less formal ones: the demands of the ideological constituency, leading to hypothesis **H1: Radical ideological leadership results in lower levels of institutional constraints on the executive, all else equal.** In addition to the general proposition, the research design will examine 5 specific ideological subtypes of which one, the conservative/restorative, is predicted to have the opposite effect on some constraints.

Populist Rhetoric

Populism, as understood here, is neither exclusive to democracies nor is it a traditional left-right ideology (Dai and Shao, 2016). Populism is a form of rhetoric which attempts to persuade by pitting some vision of the virtuous people and their champion against a corrupt elite. It emphasizes the *will of the people* as the legitimate source of power and institutions which stand in the way of the people, or their champion, as corrupt (Norris, 2017b)(Hawkins, 2018). This is also the definition used in the expert survey in the Global Party Survey (Norris, 2019, p.9), used as initial background for this work. This type of rhetoric is as effective in securing the position of authoritarian leaders in existing autocracies as it is in electing demagogues in democracies. In the democratic context, populism has been associated with the leftist governments of Venezuela, the Peronist movement in Argentina also tied to fascism, and the centrist La Republique En Marche in France (de la Torre, 2017) (Chwalisz, 2018)(Gil, 2019). When associated with extreme ideologies in democracies, the result has been democratic backsliding and even complete reversion to autocracy. The populist emphasis on the *will of the people* as more important than existing process and institutions, dovetails nicely with the extreme ideologues' need to remove institutional obstacles to social goals.

In autocracies, it is expected generally that the same combination will lead to further autocratic entrenchment and slowing of any trends toward democratization when associated with extremist ideologies. The general, though weak, hypotheses is **H2: Leadership use of populist rhetoric results in lower levels of institutional constraints, all else equal.** There are two important qualifiers to this. First, while the populist emphasis on *the will of the people* has negative consequences for institutions which limit the power of popular leaders, especially in democracies, the concept is also consistent with democracy's own core ideal of popular rule. Appeals to a broad populace and anti-elite sentiment is also consistent with stronger rather than weaker civil society institutions. In autocracies especially, an absence of appeal to popular will can be as dangerous as an abundance of it. This leads to hypothesis **H2b: Executive constraints are first increasing then decreasing as the level of populist rhetoric rises in nondemocracies, all else equal.** Second, populism as considered here is a rhetorical device, an instrument attached to other policy

agendas but with no transformative agenda of its own. While it is common for populism to be associated with extremist ideologies, populism provides means, while the ideology provides motive for any political bad actions. This leads to hypothesis **H3b: populism's effect is conditional on association with extremism**. However, ideology stands perfectly well on its own two feet: its effect on institutions is not conditional on the use of populist rhetoric. A weak finding for populism could even indicate that populism's association with bad outcomes is merely an artifact of extremist leaders' penchant for flamboyant rhetoric.

Balance of Social Power

The balance of power between regime support groups and civil society groups is an important determinant of constraints on the executive (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2016)(Acemoglu and Robinson, 2017). This is perhaps even more true in autocracies where repression of the organized political opposition is an important part of the leader's maintenance of power (Svolik, 2012). Civil society groups may become alternate cradles of opposition, fulfilling the roles of observer, signal, and enforcer (Weingast, 1997)(Fearon, 2011). The erosion of civil society and the increasing power of ideological support groups leaves the ideological autocrat less dependent on traditional means of legitimation, such as the rule of law or traditional norms. Populist rhetoric, and similar charismatic rhetorical styles, loosen constraints on the leader, further tipping the balance of power between traditional civil society and regime ideological groups. **H3: The effects of leader ideology and rhetoric on institutions are mediated by civil society, specifically by regime repression of civil society.**

Research Design

The empirical analysis will have two parts. In the first part, the relationship between the explanatory variables, leadership ideology and populist rhetoric, and the dependent variable, institutional constraints, will be examined by Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression. Next, the proposed causal mechanism, repression and erosion of civil society, will be explored by mediation analysis.

Data: VDem Project Data for the empirical analysis comes from two sources, the Varieties of Democracy Project (VDem) dataset v. 11.1 and the Varieties of Party Identity and Organization (V-Party) dataset. The VDem Project produces five headline indices on electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian democracy. To do this, the project collects panel data consisting of 26,834 observations of 470+ V-Dem indicators, and 82 indices in the full dataset. Also included are a variety of variables from other datasets and different scales for some of the VDem variables. The data include nations of all regime types covering 202 countries with data from 1789-2017. The data is collected by a team of more than 50 social scientists and over 3,200 country experts. For data coded by the country experts, results from five or more experts are aggregated where ever possible. The data from the V-Dem Project will be used for the ideology variables, the mediating variables, and the dependent variables, as well as control variables.

Data: V-Party V-Party will provide the data for the populism explanatory variable. V-Party provides information on party level data for 1,955 political parties across 1,560 elections in 169 countries across the full range of regime types. The collection method is similar to the V-Dem Project, with which it is affiliated, in aggregating the opinions of multiple experts using a Bayesian Item Response Theory measurement model. In addition to providing the relevant information on the populist rhetoric used by party leaders, the dataset provides information on party strength and organization. For purposes of this research, the Government support (C) (v2pagovsup) variable provides a metric for determining the party of the Head of Government in a country. (Luhmann et al, 2020)

Explanatory Variables

Ideology For the main analysis, the explanatory variable *Ideology* will be measured using the Ideology scale, v2exl_legitideol, from the VDem Project. This variable measures the country experts response to the question, "To what extent does the current government promote a specific ideology or societal model (an officially codified set of beliefs used to justify a particular set of social, political, and economic relations; for example, socialism, nationalism, religious traditionalism, etc.) in order to justify the regime in place?" Ordinal responses from "0: Not at all" to "4: Almost exclusively" are converted to an interval scale by use of a Bayesian item response theory measurement model (Coppedge et al., 2019). VDem provides for the character of the ideology, v2exl_legitideolcr, with 5 possibilities: Nationalist, Socialist or Communist, Restorative or Conservative, Separatist or Autonomist, and Religious.

There is a clear correlation between ideology and these measures. Ideology has a slight overall negative relationship with rule of law in nondemocracies. Ideology has a stronger negative relationship with property rights and with judicial constraints on the executive (See Figure 1).

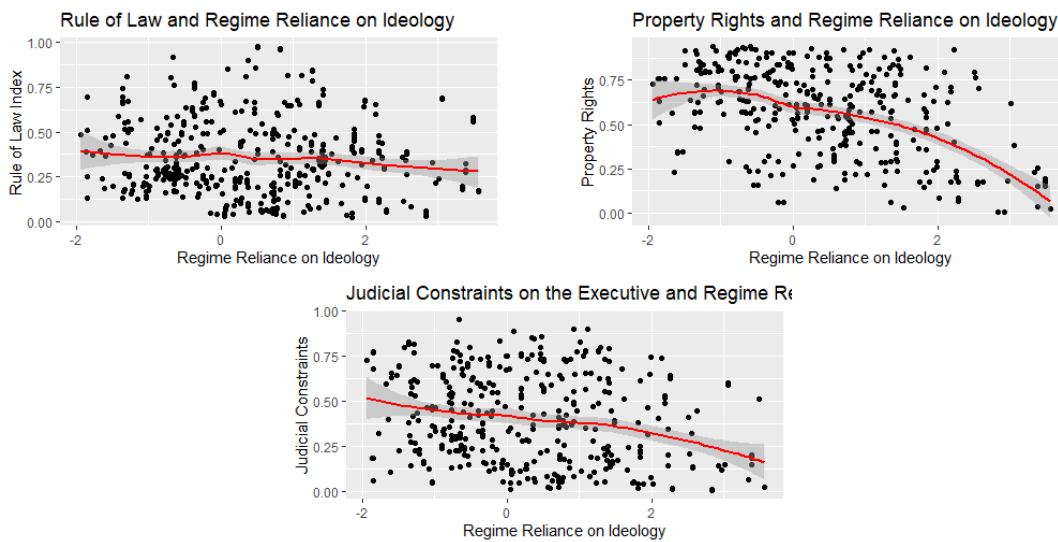


Figure 1: Ideology vs Rule of Law, Property Rights, and Judicial Constraints on the Executive

The research will also address the five ideological character variables individually. Examining the individual ideologies serves two purposes. First, as some ideologies are expected to exert an opposite effect, the overall ideology measure is actually biased against finding an effect. Demonstrating this reinforces the magnitude of the overall effect. Second, it is important to understand which forms of ideology are the most dangerous (Maynard, 2020). In addition to the main hypothesis for ideology, **H1: Radical ideological leaders lead countries to have lower levels of institutional constraints, all else equal.**, each of the ideological categories will be tested. I have strong expectations for only two of the ideologies for these particular institutional constraints:

- **H1b: Radical Socialist or Communist leadership results in lower levels of institutional constraints, all else equal.**
- **H1c: Conservative/Restorationist leadership results in a normal or higher level of institutional constraints, all else equal.** That is, the null hypothesis is expected to hold for these regimes.

Populism Populism will be measured using one variables from the V-Party dataset: *Populism* (*v2xpa_popul*) . Populist rhetoric in principle measures the expert coding of the party leaders' answer to the question, "To what extent do representatives of the party use populist rhetoric (narrowly defined)?" In practice, the variable is compiled from two components, *Anti-elitism* (*v2paanteli*) and *People-centrism* (*v2papeople*). Experts rate the party's rhetoric from a low of 0 to a high of 4. Anti-elitism is the response to the question, "How important is anti-elite rhetoric for this party?" People-centrism is the response to the question, "Do leaders of this party glorify the ordinary people and identify themselves as part of them?" The ordinal responses are converted to a continuous scale variable which will be used for this research. Populist Saliency measures the importance of populist rhetoric for the party with 0 as "No importance" and 10 as "Great importance." The survey, like this research, defines populism as a form of rhetoric placing the source of power in the people and pitting the people against some corrupt elite (Norris, 2019). To associate regime action with parties, I use a subset of data for parties associated with the head of government. Consideration of partial effects, from parties in government as junior partners or supporters, and opposition parties, is beyond the scope of this research.

The case for populism is more complicated than the case for ideology. The correlation is smaller than ideology. There is clearly not a simple linear relationship or even a relationship subject to a simple linear transformation (See Figure 2), though the theory suggests a quadratic transformation.

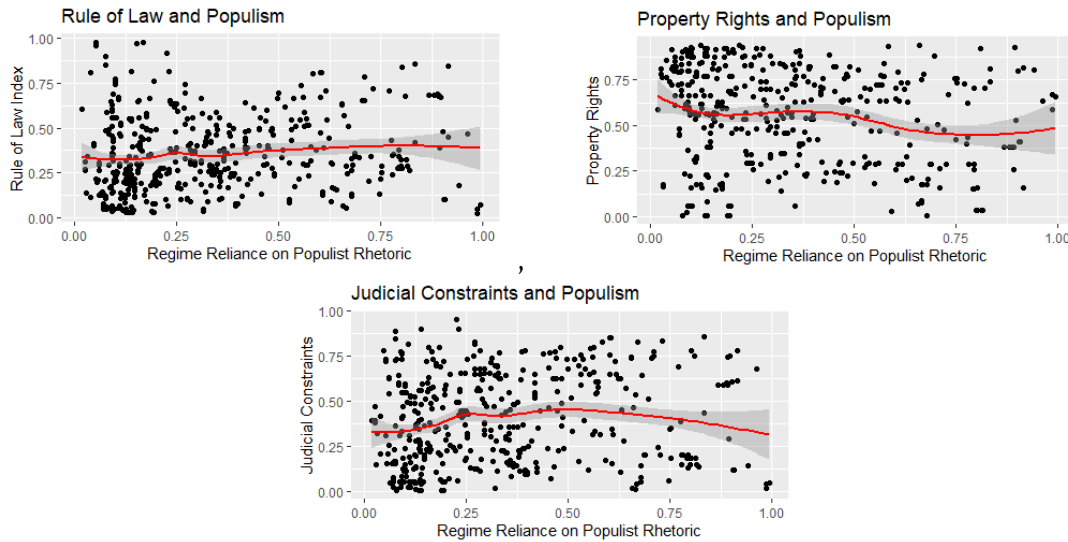


Figure 2: Populist Rhetoric vs Rule of Law, Property Rights, and Judicial Constraints on the Executive

Dependent Variables

Judicial constraints on the executive For purposes of this study, institutional constraints will be primarily measured using the *Judicial Constraints on the Executive* (v2x_jcon) variable from the VDem dataset. I will also examine results based on two secondary measures: the Rule of Law Index (v2ex_rule) and the Property Rights indicator (v2xcl_prpty) from the VDem data. Judicial constraints on the executive index (D) (v2x_jucon) answers the question, "To what extent does the executive respect the constitution and comply with court rulings, and to what extent is the judiciary able to act in an independent fashion?" The Rule of Law Index (v2x_rule) answers the question, "To what extent are laws transparently, independently, predictably, impartially, and equally enforced, and to what extent do the actions of government officials comply with the law?" by aggregating the country experts questions to a set of 14 variables. The judicial constraints index components are also components of the Rule of Law Index. The rule of law index also includes measures of executive corruption and transparency. So, the judicial constraints measure is a narrower measure of formal institutions and excludes some elements which are not strictly institutional constraints. Both variables are converted to continuous variables by the aggregation process.

Property rights present a measure of institutional constraints which is less a matter of formal institutions than judicial constraints, but narrower than the Rule of Law index. The Property Rights Index aggregates the experts answers to the question "Do citizens enjoy the right to private property? Private property includes the right to acquire, possess, inherit, and sell private property, including land. Limits on property rights may come from the state which may legally limit rights or fail to enforce them; customary laws and practices; or religious or social norms. This question concerns the right to private property, not actual ownership of property." This variable is converted to a 0 to 1 interval scale.

The reasons for measuring institutional constraints in this way is twofold. First, my goal was to avoid formal institutions which are defining elements of democracy such as specific features of constitutions, elections, or judicial arrangements. Second, these general institutions more than any specific configuration of formal bodies bear more directly on rights of citizens, potential for economic development, and potential for political liberalization. The Rule of Law measure provides a measure of formal institutions, but is also heavily influenced by measures of executive behavior. The Property Rights measure avoids the influence of executive behavior, but includes customary practices and norms. Arguably, this could even introduce some endogeneity in the relationship to civil society participation. The Judicial Constraint measure is the best measure as is it narrowly limited to formal institutions which constrain the executive and avoids overlap with both executive behavior and civil society constraints.

Mediating Variable

Civil Society According to the theory presented, the effects of populism and ideology are mediated by the level of civil society, as a functioning civil society is necessary to enforce institutional constraints. I argue that radical ideologues attack civil society as a consequence of their social change agendas, that to change society they necessarily weaken its existing structure. To measure this, I turn to variables measuring *Core Civil Society* (v2xcs_ccsi), *Civil Society Participation* (v2x_cspart), and, most importantly, *Civil Society Repression* (v2csreprss) from the VDem data. There is a negative relationship between regime reliance on ideology and civil society participation (See Figure 3) as well as a clear positive relationship between ideology and civil society repression. As was the case with the dependent variables, the picture is weaker and more complicated with populism (See Figure 4). There is also a clear positive relationship between civil society participation and many institutional constraint variables, including judicial constraints, property rights, and rule of law (See Figure 5) and a negative relationship with civil society repression.

The Core Civil Society Index (v2xcs_ccsi) aggregates the answers to the question, "How robust is civil society?" to a 0 to 1 scale, using answers to questions about civil society repression, civil society participation, and civil society entry and exit. The Civil Society Repression (v2csreprss) scale measures answers to the question "Does the government attempt to repress civil society organizations (CSOs)?" on a scale from 0 (Severely) to 4 (No). The Civil Society Participation (v2csprtcpt) variable measures the levels of participation, state sponsorship, and voluntary nature of civil society organizations. The main dependent variable in the mediation analysis is Civil Society Repression (1 - v2csreprss), because it represents a measurable action of the regime, eliminating some of the potential endogeneity involved with broader measures of civil society robustness and participation. Put differently, the regime's actions to repress civil society are the direct causal mechanism for ideologies effect on institutions. For clarity of presentation, I inverted the direction of the scale, so that an increasing number represented an increase in repression.

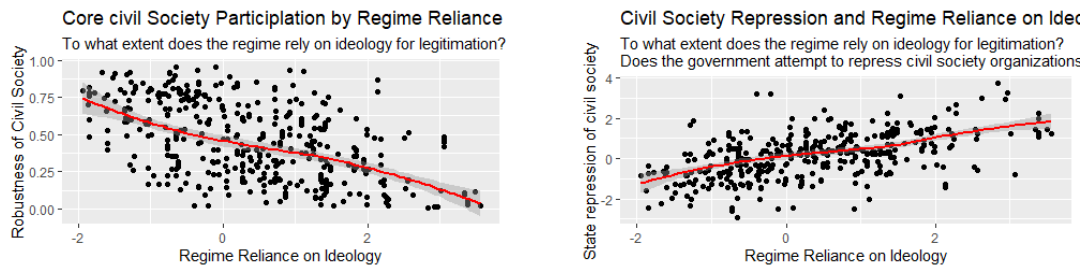


Figure 3: Ideology vs Civil Society Participation and Civil Society Repression

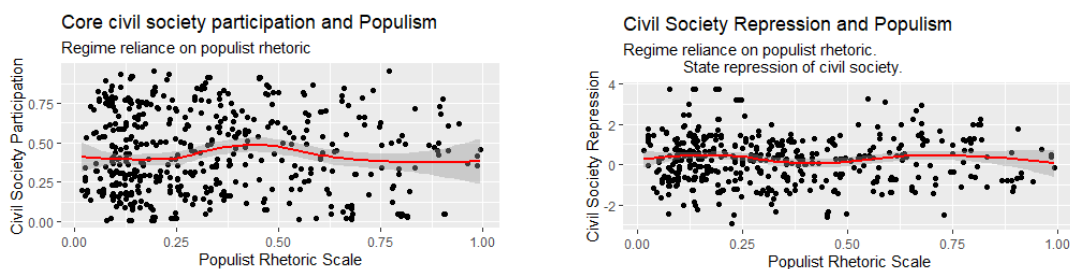


Figure 4: Populist Rhetoric vs Civil Society Participation and Civil Society Repression

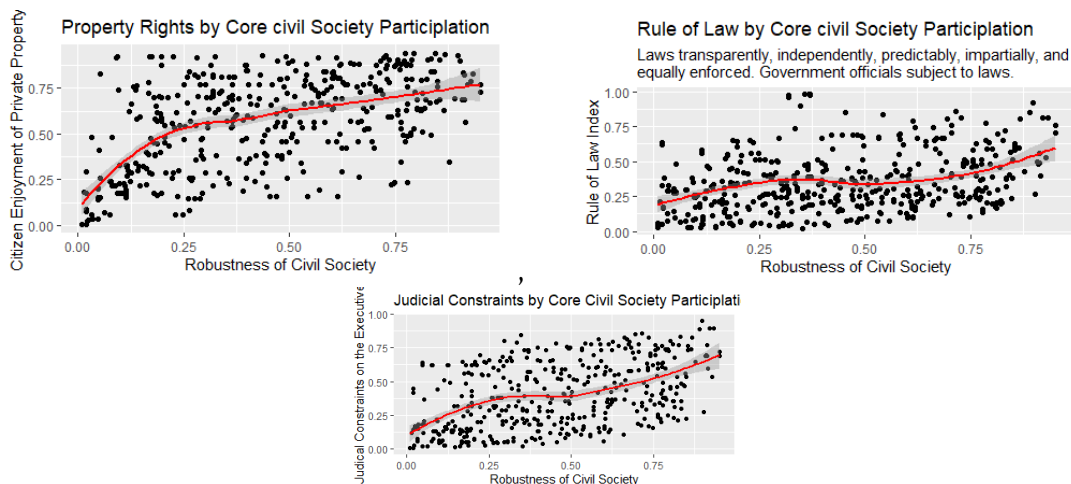


Figure 5: Civil Society Participation vs Property Rights, Rule of Law, and Judicial Constraints

A few notes are important for the preliminary descriptive statistics on populism. First, the existing literature predicts that populism's effect will be conditional on association with extremist ideology, so it should not be linear. Second, though there is no overall relationship, the pattern appears to show that to a certain level increasing populism has a beneficial effect on civil society participation. This is consistent with the theoretical understanding that populism's rhetoric parallels with core democratic values (people-centrism) and with vigorous civil society (anti-elitism)

in a way that seems especially likely to have a positive effect in non-democracies. The difference in effect on civil society correlates strongly with the difference in institutions at specific levels of populist rhetoric. This lends credence to the causal mechanism but the non-linear relationship is more complex to examine. A nonlinear mediation analysis could address this in the future, but is beyond the scope of the current paper. Additionally, the inflection points of the populism relationship provide potential interesting cases for future fine grained, qualitative review.

Control Variables

Given the existing concern about endogeneity of economic factors and institutions, GDP per capita will be used as a control variable. The well established correlation between GDP per capita and many other potential control variables, such as urbanization or cultural factors, makes this the major control variable for the research at this stage. I also check for robustness to various model specifications including region and time fixed effects. It's worth briefly noting that country fixed effects are not useful as they are highly correlated to the explanatory variables and the dependent variable. As noted by Acemoglu, Robinson and Yared (2008), in cases such as this where omitted variables are highly correlated to both the dependent and explanatory variables, the use of country fixed effects increases errors rather than improving the situation. Relatedly, depending on the dependent variable, the coefficient of determination for country fixed effects ranges from approximately .63 to .8. This parallels the issue described by Beck, Zeng and King (2000), where many cases of a relatively rare event are already well explained, or in this case at least statistically related to fixed effects, and the existing explanation swamps a small but causally important explanatory variable accounting for remaining cases.

Methods: Mediation Analysis

The initial analysis will consist of a set of Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regressions. The unit of observation will be the country-year.

1. $Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 * Ideology + \epsilon$

- This model, where Y is Judicial Constraints, is the basic regression to determine the relationship and significance of the independent and dependent variables. This is the total effect of the explanatory variables on Y.

2. $M = \beta_0 + \beta_1 * Ideology + \epsilon$

- This model, where M is Civil Society Repression, establishes the relationship of independent variables to the mediating variable.

3. $Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 * Ideology + \beta_2 * M + \epsilon$

- This model, where Y is Judicial Constraints and M is Civil Society Repression, establishes the multivariate relationship including both explanatory and mediating variables.

The second stage will involve a mediation analysis with Civil Society Repression (1 - v2csreprss) as mediating variable. The mediation model uses a bootstrapping algorithm with multiple simulations (typically 1000) to remove the mediation effect, the indirect effect of X through M on Y, from the direct effect of X on Y. The specific technique used uses models 2 and 3 above as inputs (Tingley et al., 2014). If the effect of X without mediation disappears completely, the effect of X on Y is said to be fully mediated by M. In this case, it would mean that the effect of Ideology on Judicial Constraints is fully mediated by Civil Society Repression as the causal mechanism. If part of the direct effect disappears, but the direct effect of X on Y remains in part, the mediator partially mediates the effect of X on Y.

Results

Part 1: OLS Results

This part analyzes the direct effects of ideology, populism, and their interaction on formal and informal institutional constraints on the executive. The formal institutional constraints are measured by the VDem Judicial Constraints variable. The VDem Property Rights variable offers a less formal measure, overlapping somewhat with social and cultural norms. For transparency and future research implications, I also include the results for the Rule of Law Index. This measure includes measures of executive behavior, especially behaviors involving corruption and transparency, mixed with pure measures of institutional constraints.

Effects of ideology on institutional constraints This section tests the hypothesis **H1: Radical ideological leadership results in lower levels of institutional constraints on the executive, all else equal**. When measured by Judicial Constraints, there is a clear and significant relationship between ideological leadership and formal institutional constraints on the executive in the predicted direction (see Figure 6). For each unit increase in Regime Reliance on Ideology, the Judicial Constraints measure decreases by 0.043 and the result is significant at the .01 level (Table 1, model 3). The null hypothesis is rejected. When measured by the informal institution Property Rights measure, there is also a clear and significant relationship in the predicted direction. For each unit of increase in Regime Reliance on Ideology, there is a 0.104 decrease in Property Rights and the result is significant at the .01 level [Table 1, model 2]. The null is rejected based on the Property Rights measure as the dependent variable. The broader VDem Rule of Law Index measure is affected in the expected direction, but the result is not significant (Table 1, model 1). This has implications for the use of this index to measure the "rule of law" as an institution, and future research implications as well.

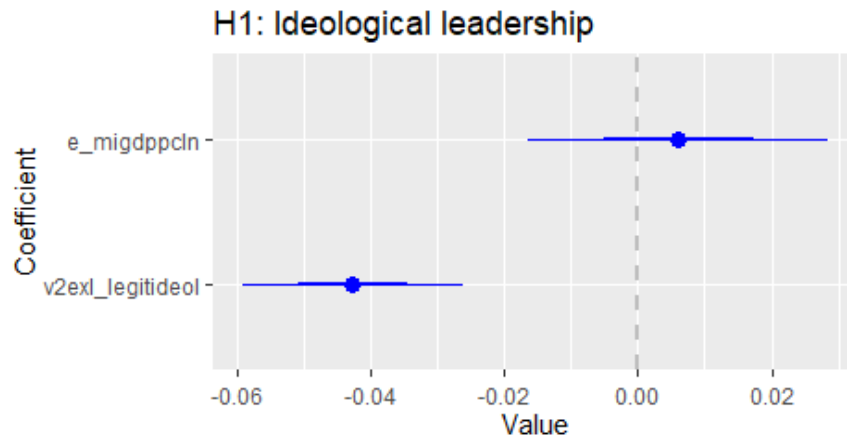


Figure 6: Ideological leadership and Judicial Constraints

Table 1

| | <i>Dependent variable:</i> | | |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| | Rule of Law Index | Property Rights Index | Judicial Constraints Index |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) |
| Reliance on Ideology | -0.010 (0.008) | -0.104*** (0.007) | -0.043*** (0.008) |
| GDP per capita (logged) | 0.024** (0.010) | 0.093*** (0.010) | 0.006 (0.011) |
| Constant | 0.156* (0.085) | -0.160* (0.082) | 0.360*** (0.093) |
| Observations | 513 | 513 | 513 |
| R ² | 0.013 | 0.346 | 0.050 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.009 | 0.344 | 0.047 |
| Residual Std. Error (df = 510) | 0.217 | 0.210 | 0.238 |
| F Statistic (df = 2; 510) | 3.414** | 135.030*** | 13.507*** |

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

The Regime Ideology variable is actually a composite of results for 5 individual ideology types: Nationalist, Socialist/Communist, Conservative/Restorationist, Separatist/Autonomist, and Religious. Because the predicted outcomes vary by ideology, the effect in the broader index is muted by the presence of individual ideologies working in the opposite direction (see Table 1). Additionally, specific ideologies place different emphasis on formal institutions, property rights, and the broader

issue of corruption captured in the rule of law measure (see Table 3). Finally, a regime is measured on all five, so it is possible for a regime to score high or low on one, two, or all five, so even in a specific instance there can be two or more ideologies working at cross purposes.

I did not have a theoretical basis for strong predictions on all specific ideologies. I expected the Conservative/Restorative ideologies to reinforce institutional constraints, especially Property Rights (hypothesis H1c). I expected the Socialist/Communist ideologies to have a negative effect, especially with regard to Property Rights (hypothesis H1b). When measured by Judicial Constraints, the Socialist/Communist ideologies had a negative effect on institutional constraints as predicted, which was significant at the .05 level (see Table 2, model 2). For each unit increase in regime reliance on Socialist/Communist ideology for legitimation, Judicial Constraints fell by 0.078. The null hypothesis is rejected for the Socialist/Communist ideology.

For the Conservative/Restorationist ideology, no effect was expected, the null hypothesis was expected to hold. When measured by Judicial Constraints, the effect of Conservative/Restorationist ideology was positive but not significant, as predicted (Table 2, model 3). The null was not rejected.

The only other ideology to offer an interesting result was Nationalist. I had no theoretical basis, based on the civil society causal mechanism posited in this research, for an expectation on Nationalist ideology. Nationalist ideology has a positive relationship with institutional constraints, as measured by Judicial Constraints that is significant at the .01 level, with each unit increase in Nationalist ideology associated with a 0.151 increase in Judicial Constraints (Table 2, model 1).

Table 2

| | <i>Dependent variable:</i> | | | | |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| | Judicial Constraints Index | | | | |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) |
| Nationalist Ideology | 0.151*** (0.040) | | | | |
| Socialist/Communist Ideology | | −0.078** (0.032) | | | |
| Conservative/Restorationist Ideology | | | 0.057 (0.044) | | |
| Autonomist/Separatist Ideology | | | | 0.099 (0.103) | |
| Religious Ideology | | | | | 0.005 (0.065) |
| GPD per capita (logged) | −0.006 (0.011) | −0.004 (0.012) | −0.001 (0.011) | −0.0004 (0.011) | −0.0005 (0.011) |
| Constant | 0.351*** (0.095) | 0.443*** (0.097) | 0.377*** (0.096) | 0.385*** (0.096) | 0.390*** (0.096) |
| Observations | 513 | 513 | 513 | 513 | 513 |
| R ² | 0.028 | 0.011 | 0.003 | 0.002 | 0.00002 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.024 | 0.008 | −0.001 | −0.002 | −0.004 |
| Residual Std. Error (df = 510) | 0.241 | 0.243 | 0.244 | 0.244 | 0.245 |
| F Statistic (df = 2; 510) | 7.254*** | 2.937* | 0.835 | 0.459 | 0.004 |

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

An interesting, counterintuitive result in the specific ideologies, which matched the result for ideologies in general, was that the Rule of Law and Judicial Constraints effects were opposite. Conservative/Restorationist ideology had a positive, though not significant, relationship with Judicial Constraints, but a negative, significant relationship with Rule of Law (Table 3, models 2 and 1). Socialism/Communism had the opposite result, with a positive, non-significant relationship to Rule of Law and a negative, significant relationship to Judicial Constraints (Table 3, models 3 and 4). This seems contrary to the idea that a strong judicial system should reduce corruption and

encourage executive compliance. That the effect varies with ideology may indicate a component involving ideological approaches to corruption, transparency, and judicial behavior.

Table 3

| | <i>Dependent variable:</i> | | | |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| | Rule of Law | Judicial Constraints | Rule of Law | Judicial Constraints |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
| Conservative/Restorationist Ideology | -0.110*** (0.039) | 0.057 (0.044) | | |
| Socialist/Communist Ideology | | | 0.025 (0.029) | -0.078** (0.032) |
| GDP per capita (logged) | 0.024** (0.010) | -0.001 (0.011) | 0.024** (0.010) | -0.004 (0.012) |
| Constant | 0.189** (0.085) | 0.377*** (0.096) | 0.147* (0.087) | 0.443*** (0.097) |
| Observations | 513 | 513 | 513 | 513 |
| R ² | 0.025 | 0.003 | 0.011 | 0.011 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.021 | -0.001 | 0.007 | 0.008 |
| Residual Std. Error (df = 510) | 0.216 | 0.244 | 0.218 | 0.243 |
| F Statistic (df = 2; 510) | 6.472*** | 0.835 | 2.824* | 2.937* |

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Populism and interaction with ideology

With regard to populism, three basic hypotheses were tested. First, as populist rhetoric provides an instrumental method for leaders to accumulate power, it was predicted that it would negatively impact institutional constraints. Second, as populist rhetoric focuses on increasing the power of the people at the expense of the elite, the effect was expected to be nonlinear. Moderate amounts of populism were expected to improve constraints on the executive, with both an absence and an excess reducing constraints. Finally, as populism does not hold its own transformative agenda, the effect was expected to be conditional on association with extremist ideology.

With regard to Judicial Constraints on the executive, populist rhetoric had a positive overall effect on constraints, the opposite of the prediction (See Figure 7 - Populism (Simple)). The result was complicated by the nonlinear effect, which was as expected (Figure 7 - Populism(Quadratic)). Finally, though the effect was not significant, the interaction term between populism and ideology was negative (Figure 7 - Populism(interaction)). More importantly, even with the interaction term

included, the effect of ideology was still negative and significant. Ideology's negative effect stands on its own, with or without populism or the interaction included in the model.

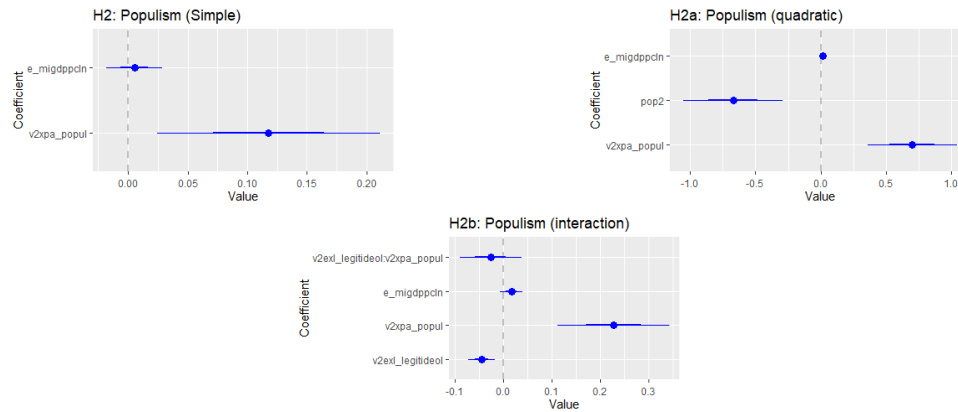


Figure 7: Populism and Judicial Constraints

With the informal measure of Property Rights, the results are different (See Table 4). For hypothesis H2, the result was the opposite of the prediction for the formal institution (model 4), but for the informal Property Rights constraint (model 1), the result was significant at the .01 level and as predicted. For each unit increase in Populist Rhetoric, the Property Rights measure decreased by 0.157 while Judicial Constraints increased by 0.118. The nonlinear transformation was not significant for the Property Rights measure (model 2). The results for the interaction term were not significant for either measure (models 3 and 6), but in both cases the negative role of legitimating ideology was significant at the .01 level with the interaction term included. The key finding is that populism is, at most, an instrumental effect conditional on some other factor, while ideology stands on its own.

Table 4

| | <i>Dependent variable:</i> | | | | | |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
| | Property Rights Index | | | Judicial Constraints Index | | |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) |
| Legitimizing Ideology | | | -0.114*** (0.012) | | | -0.044*** (0.014) |
| Populist Rhetoric | -0.157*** (0.047) | 0.123 (0.176) | -0.022 (0.051) | 0.118** (0.047) | 0.703*** (0.172) | 0.228*** (0.057) |
| <i>Populist Rhetoric</i> ² | | -0.322* (0.194) | | | -0.671*** (0.190) | |
| GDP per capita (logged) | 0.070*** (0.012) | 0.074*** (0.012) | 0.094*** (0.010) | 0.005 (0.012) | 0.014 (0.012) | 0.017 (0.011) |
| Ideology*Populism (interaction) | | | 0.028 (0.029) | | | -0.026 (0.032) |
| Constant | 0.028 (0.102) | -0.044 (0.111) | -0.162* (0.088) | 0.305*** (0.101) | 0.155 (0.108) | 0.203** (0.099) |
| Observations | 513 | 513 | 513 | 513 | 513 | 513 |
| R ² | 0.099 | 0.104 | 0.347 | 0.012 | 0.036 | 0.084 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.096 | 0.099 | 0.342 | 0.008 | 0.030 | 0.077 |
| Residual Std. Error | 0.246 (df = 510) | 0.246 (df = 509) | 0.210 (df = 508) | 0.243 (df = 510) | 0.240 (df = 509) | 0.235 (df = 508) |
| F Statistic | 28.120*** (df = 2; 510) | 19.726*** (df = 3; 509) | 67.625*** (df = 4; 508) | 3.185** (df = 2; 510) | 6.330*** (df = 3; 509) | 11.718*** (df = 4; 508) |

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Mediation Analysis: Civil Society Repression as causal mechanism

This section tests the causal mechanism of regime ideology's effect on institutional constraints. In this analysis, I examined the effect of ideology generally on the formal institution of judicial constraints on the executive. As described in the research design section, the goal of mediation analysis is to separate the effects of the causal mechanism, the mediating variable, from the effect of the explanatory variable. Regimes which rely on ideology for legitimation engage in civil society repression at a rate significantly higher than other regimes with a .01 level of confidence (Figure 8 - Top left). Civil society repression in turn is significantly associated with a lower level of judicial constraints, again at a .01 level of confidence (Figure 8 - Top right). When civil society repression is included in the OLS regression, the effect of ideology become marginally positive and not statistically significant (Figure 8 - bottom). Formally stated, the effect of ideology is fully mediated by the regime's acts of civil society repression (Figure 9).

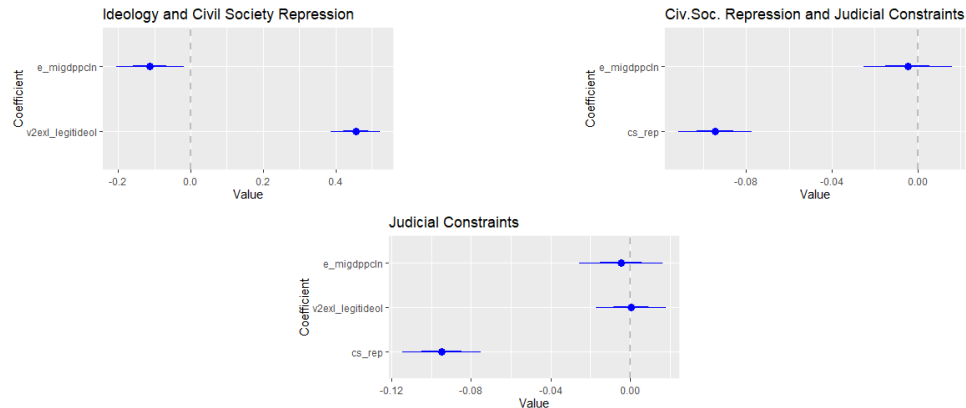


Figure 8: Mediation stages

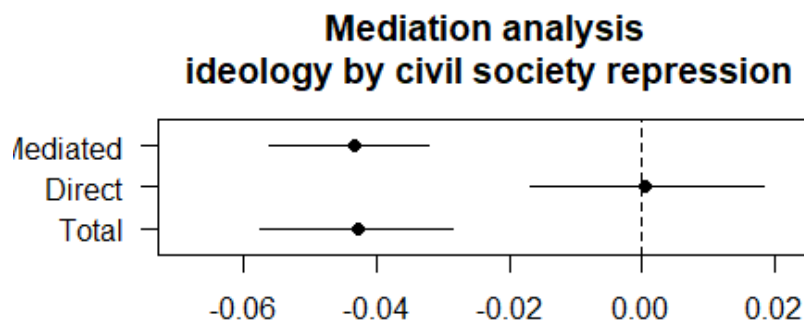


Figure 9

Table 5 provides a more detailed analysis. The Total Effect on Judicial Constraints is estimates at -0.043274, while the effect of the causal mediator, Civil Society Repression, is -0.042758. The Direct Effect is 0.000516 with a p-value of 0.98, so statistically zero. The proportion mediated is 101.2%, indicating that the effect of ideology is fully mediated by Civil Society Repression. The mediation effects are significant above the 99% confidence level. The null hypothesis is rejected.

Table 5

| Causal Mediation Analysis | | | | | |
|---|---|--------------|---------------------|---------------------|-----|
| Nonparametric Bootstrap Confidence Intervals with the Percentile Method | | | | | |
| | Estimate | CI Lower 95% | CI Upper 95% | p-value | |
| Average Causal Mediation Effects | -0.043274 | -0.054605 | -0.03 | <0.0000000000000002 | *** |
| Average Direct Effects | 0.000516 | -0.017397 | 0.02 | 0.98 | |
| Total Effect | -0.042758 | -0.057322 | -0.03 | <0.0000000000000002 | *** |
| Proportion Mediated | 1.012056 | 0.673268 | 1.60 | <0.0000000000000002 | *** |
| <i>Note:</i> | Signif. codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1 | | | | |
| <i>Sample Size Used:</i> | 513 | | <i>Simulations:</i> | 1000 | |

Conclusion

For the last two decades a multitude of studies in academic and policy circles have examined the threat to democracy from the twin specters of populism and extremism, echoed regularly in the popular press after nearly every election of consequence. Notable cases of democratic erosion, from Venezuela to Turkey to the United States, and cases of authoritarian resurgence in former Communist countries, and authoritarian deepening in others, have been attributed to these causes. Often the blame has lain primarily at the feet of populism, as it seems to be the common factor while the ideologies of would be autocrats seem widely varied. This research showed that, in the case of authoritarian deepening in nondemocracies, it is ideological extremism which is the unifying factor explaining institutional erosion, with populism playing at most a secondary role. Further, it demonstrated that the pattern of attacks on civil society by ideologically driven regimes is the causal mechanism for institutional erosion. So, while the specific brand of extremism may vary, there is an underlying common thread in the commitment to wholesale social transformation and the weakening of civil society associated with social transformation.

Ideology's relationship is clear and substantial. There is significant evidence that the theoretical relationship between ideology and institutional erosion holds. The evidence from the mediation analysis shows that ideology's substantial relationship with institutional erosion is fully accounted for by regime efforts to undermine civil society. Given the existing scholarship establishing the effect of civil society on institutions and the specific measurement of civil society repression associated with ideological regimes, this lends still more credence to the idea that it is extremism which drives institutional erosion, and not vice versa.

As expected, the role of populism is secondary and instrumental. It is substantially and weaker than might be expected given the academic, policy, and popular press attention paid to the topic. The weakness of populism's relationship combined with the strength of the ideological effect, suggest that populism's association is not merely secondary, but coincidental. It suggests that the association of populism with institutional erosion is a mere artifact of the preference for flamboyant rhetoric generally employed by ideologues.

The research raised a number of interesting questions for future research including further clarifying endogeneity concerns, use of a nonlinear mediation model to examine populism, further examining differences between specific ideologies, and differentiating between regime types.

The issue of endogeneity, especially the complicated direction of causation between weak institutions and extremism, calls for further research. The result for regime repression of civil society strongly indicates that the core thesis is correct, that ideological regime attacks on civil society are more important than endogenous factors. Still, further clarifying this issue is an important direction for additional research on the question and one which may be best answered by individual case analysis.

As expected, the results for populism were complicated; in fact, too complicated for the measures and methods used. The evidence suggests that a method more robust than a simple linear transformation, such as a Generalized Additive Model, would be useful. Additionally, looking at the people-centric and anti-elitist components of populist rhetoric separately as well as examining any balancing pluralist rhetoric has potential to clarify the effects.

One question was raised by an accident of phrasing. Much of the literature on institutions refers to the *rule of law* as a prime example of an informal institution. As such, I initially intended to use the VDem Rule of Law Index as my main dependent variable. Yet the Index measures a mix of institutions and behaviors, not institutions alone. Five of the 14 component variables measure corruption and transparency, while several measure other executive behaviors. These behaviors may be related to the institutions, but even that isn't clear. For both ideology generally and the two ideology types examined in detail, Conservative/Restorationist and Socialist/Communist, there was an interesting result that demonstrates this. In all three cases, the effect on the broader Rule of Law measure was the opposite of the effect for Judicial Constraints. This raises the question whether behaviors, such as corruption, should be a stand in for measurements of institutions. It also raises questions about the seeming lack of effect of a strong judiciary on corruption, and how this is related to the specific ideologies.

Finally, while one of my major assumptions was that regime type is a continuum, not a democratic-autocratic dichotomy, the descriptive statistics tell a different story as far as the effects of populism. Populism's core components, *people-centrism* and *anti-elitism* are consistent with democratic ideals as well. But in liberal democracies they potentially clash with *pluralist values* and the institutions that protect minorities. So, populism can easily threaten the survival of liberal

democracy. But in nondemocracies, it is populism's consistency with democratic values which dominates, so that populist rhetoric is associated with positive institutional effects far more often than in democracies.

The key findings of this research are that ideology generally has a role in eroding formal and informal institutional constraints on the executive in nondemocracies, that populism plays at most a secondary role in this and sometimes has a positive effect on institutions, and that the causal mechanism involved is the use of civil society repression by ideological regimes. The findings that ideology has a strong relationship to both the mediating and dependent variables, while populism's relationship to both is ambiguous tell an important tale. They indicate quite strongly that populism is not even a particularly effective tool, but that its association with institutional decay is an accident of the penchant of extremists to use populist rhetoric. This has implications for future research and for policy. When facing a hungry tiger, it's not the growl that we need to fear, but the teeth and the claws. Populism is the growl, ideology the hunger motivating the beast, attacks on civil society the claws, conflict the teeth. The growl should grab our attention of course, but the more interesting and useful questions revolve around the hunger, the claws, and the teeth.

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