

Old democracies cope better with severe crisis than newer ones

May 6 2020



Credit: University of Gothenburg

In established democracies with a long experience of democracy, the risk of democratic breakdown, in the face of a crisis like the current corona-crisis, is low. The outlook is very different for new democracies,

especially those with weak civil society and weak political parties, according to research from the University of Gothenburg.

The interwar period, 1918-1939, was a period of recurrent severe economic crises. Many European and Latin American democracies broke down, while anti-democratic and totalitarian ideologies grew strong.

In the last 10 to 15 years it has become popular, both among researchers and pundits, to draw parallels between the interwar years and contemporary politics. The argument is that if crises undermined democracies in the former period, they would also do so in the present.

"It is not very likely that established democracies would break down. While it may make sense to draw parallels between the two periods, the most remarkable trend during the interwar period is not that many new and fragile democracies broke down, but rather that so many democracies did in fact survive," says Associate Professor Agnes Cornell.

In the new book "Democratic Stability in an Age of Crisis" (Oxford University Press), together with Jørgen Møller and Svend-Erik Skaaning, both professors at Aarhus University, they examine why so many democracies actually survived the interwar period. They combine statistical analyses on all countries that were democratic at any point during the interwar years with case studies of Denmark, England, France and Uruguay.

Democratic legacy vital for stability

Their study identifies two interconnected factors that were vital for democratic stability during the interwar period. One was democratic legacy, that is, having experience with meaningful competition for

government power via elections prior to the interwar years.

"In countries with democratic legacy, democratic modes of political competition were the norm among both ordinary citizens and elites. Ordinary people as well as the elite in older democracies were used to [democracy](#). When a crisis hit, they did not call for a strong man or other anti-democratic solutions to solve problems. Instead, challenges were handled with democratic means, and, when necessary, the opposition and the ruling party cooperated to defend the democratic system."

Link between ordinary citizens and the political elite

The second factor important for democratic stability was the combination of robust and well-organized political parties, as well as a strong and vibrant civil society. This phenomenon, which the authors term a strong associational landscape, provided an important link between ordinary citizens and the political elite. This allowed for both the channeling and dampening of people's frustration during crises.

"It is far too early to draw any conclusions about how the corona pandemic will impact today's democracies, but, if the trend during the interwar period sheds any light on the current situation, we could conclude the following: The risk of democratic breakdown is very low in established democracies with a long experience of competitive elections and a strong associational landscape. In contrast, the risk of breakdown is much higher in democracies without a long experience of democratic rule and weaker parties and civil society," says Agnes Cornell.

More information: Democratic Stability in an Age of Crisis:
global.oup.com/academic/product/9780190905219?cc=se

Provided by University of Gothenburg

Citation: Old democracies cope better with severe crisis than newer ones (2020, May 6) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-05-democracies-cope-severe-crisis.html>

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