

Predictors of support for strong leaders in different political systems

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Background

Recently, elected leaders such as Viktor Orban in Hungary and Recep Erdogan in Turkey have instituted measures to eliminate checks on their power, and attempted to censor and arrest political opponents (Chong & Gradstein, 2018). At the same time, authoritarian regimes such as China and the oil-rich countries have managed to develop and modernize while maintaining popular support (Dukalskis & Gerschewski, 2017). We wanted to understand the predictors of support for such strong non-democratic leaders, and examine whether they differed between democracies and non-democracies. Based on previous research and relative deprivation theory we hypothesized that while support for strong leaders (SSL) in democracies was often driven by economic dysfunction (e.g., low national wealth, low individual income, high inequality; Miller, 2017) and low social trust, continued support for strong leaders in authoritarian regimes was driven by economic success (e.g., high national wealth, high income, low inequality) and social cohesion (Robteutscher, 2010). Furthermore, we hypothesized that group relative deprivation (GRD) mediated the effect of national wealth on SSL.

Methods

We conducted two studies to test these hypotheses. For Study 1, data was retrieved from the fifth and sixth waves of the World Values Survey (WVS). The sample consisted of 170,973 participants from 78 countries in 116 country-years. Using the Economist Intelligence Unit's (2019) classification, we classified 71 country-years as democracies and 45 as non-democracies. We used multilevel ordinal logistic models to test our hypotheses in democracies and non-democracies. In Study 2, we modeled SSL in an international survey of 5,497 university students from democratic countries.

Results

Study 1 supported some of our hypotheses. In democracies, income equality ($b = -0.187$), national wealth ($b = -0.465$), and social trust ($b = -0.057$) reduced SSL. In contrast, national wealth ($b = 0.324$), social trust ($b = 0.057$) and individual income ($b = 0.058$) enhanced SSL in non-democracies (all p 's $< .01$). However, we did not find evidence that individual income had an effect on SSL in democracies nor that income inequality was a factor in non-democracies. Study 2 replicated the results of Study 1 in democratic countries and extended them by showing that individual relative deprivation ($b = 0.105$, $p = .03$) predicted SSL and that GRD explained the effect of national wealth on SSL.

Conclusion

We conclude that economic problems and a lack of social trust enhance support for alternative political systems through relative deprivation. In democracies, these factors enhance SSL and in non-democracies, these factors reduce SSL. This research implies that strong leaders' popular support is situational, but can also be enhanced by overt efforts to elicit feelings of deprivation. Future work should test these relations experimentally.