

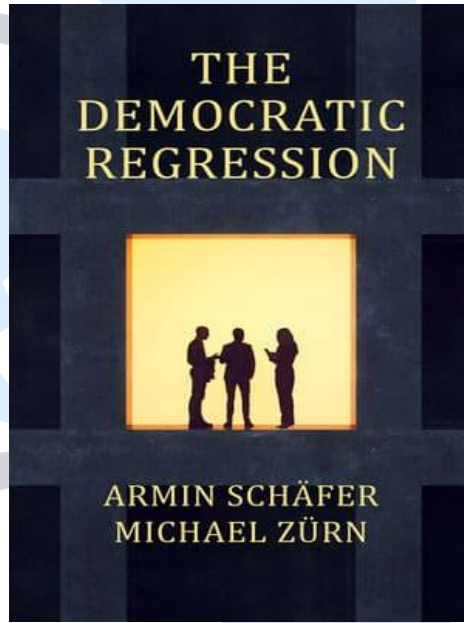


The Democratic Regression: The Political Causes of Authoritarian Populism

Armin Schäfer and Michael Zürn, London: Polity, 2023, ISBN: 978-1-509-55878-0 225

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Book Cover



Book Review

This timely and thought-provoking book written by Armin Schäfer and Michael Zürn examines the causes and consequences of democratic regression and the global rise of authoritarian populism. The authors highlight the vulnerabilities of democracy and the conditions underpinning populism. In this regard, they do not approach democratic regression as a temporary disruption but as a deeper structural problem.

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The first chapter of the book opens by tracing changes in global income distribution over time. After demonstrating growing income inequality, the authors argue that this development poses a threat to democracy, particularly because some autocracies, such as China and Singapore, have shown stronger economic growth. Moreover, they argue that increasing income inequality has led to a decline in democracy in the West. Why is democracy losing its desirability and credibility? The authors identify two reasons, which they conceptualize as “double alienation”. First, there is a widening gap between democratic ideals and democratic practice in terms of representation. Second, citizens are losing trust in democratic institutions because of systemic failures such as economic inequality and problems of representation. This useful formulation shows that democratic dissatisfaction has both institutional and normative dimensions.

In Chapter 2, the authors examine democracy’s historical advances and setbacks, noting democracy’s significant expansion since 1900 as well as its regression over the past two decades. They also challenge the assumption that democracy is inevitable, stressing that its post-1945 success resulted from favorable historical conditions and the support of institutions such as the United Nations, the World Bank, the IMF and NATO. However, with changing global dynamics, they observe a resurgence of autocracy, even in consolidated democracies in the West. In this respect, this chapter effectively reminds the reader that democracy’s global expansion and its historical success should not be regarded as irreversible. In other words, democratic progress should not be assumed to follow a linear path.

In Chapter 3, against this historical background, the authors argue that populism is rising not only in Latin America and Eastern Europe but also in countries such as Sweden, Great Britain, the Netherlands and France. They explain this regression by pointing to a problem of representation within liberal institutions, which often make important decisions without consulting the people most affected by them. This weakness in representation (the first alienation) and the loss of faith in democratic institutions (the second alienation), which together constitute double alienation, have led to the rise of populism. In this way, the authors emphasize that populism is not simply an isolated ideology or a political style, but rather a political response to the accumulated failures of democracy.

Building on this point, they further argue that the rise of populism reflects a growing cleavage between “globalists” and “populists.” After explaining the social conflicts that produced different cleavages in European history, such as church versus state and labor versus capital, they claim that the new divide is driven by globalization. How has globalization contributed to this divide? According to the authors, globalization has created winners (wealthy elites) and losers (disadvantaged groups), thereby fueling populist rhetoric that pits “ordinary people” against a “corrupt elite”. Seen from this perspective, this discussion is particularly important because it seeks the origins of political polarization in the material and social inequalities generated by globalization.

In Chapter 4, the authors use empirical data to demonstrate public distrust in the political system. They argue that this distrust stems from the fact that parliaments respond selectively to the demands of upper social classes. They further suggest that lower-income groups experience “coincidental representation” only when their preferences happen to align with those of the upper classes. The authors also criticize international organizations for their perceived cosmopolitan bias, claiming that this further undermines public trust.

In the following chapter, the discussion moves to the crises that have undermined democracy over the last two decades, including the 2008 financial crisis, the refugee crisis, and the Covid-19 pandemic. They argue that these cross-border challenges exposed the vulnerabilities of democracy, while democracies nevertheless proved better at managing them.

In Chapter 6, the authors discuss the democratic potential of populism. In their view, because populism exposes the weaknesses of democracy, it may contribute to democratic renewal. However, this possibility exists only when populists remain in opposition. By contrast, a populist party in power appears potentially lethal to democracy. Once in power, populist parties are portrayed as detrimental to democracy, as they tend to alter democratic rules for the sake of self-preservation.

Taken together, these chapters offer a comprehensive perspective on democracy's trajectory and provide valuable insights into the causes of authoritarian populism, its ideological foundations, its practical manifestations, and possible solutions. In particular, one of the book's strongest contributions is its discussion of selective responsiveness and coincidental representation. The authors persuasively argue that democratic institutions are more responsive to the preferences of upper social classes, while lower-income groups experience representation only when their preferences happen to coincide with those of the upper classes. The book is also highly relevant to contemporary politics, as developments such as Trump's rise in the United States, Brexit, and democratic backsliding in some countries such as Poland and Hungary demonstrate the continuing relevance of its arguments.

At the same time, however, the book is not without important limitations. In my view, the book's main weakness is that, although it claims that the crises discussed such as the refugee crisis or the COVID-19 pandemic are not caused by democracy and that democracies are better at managing them, it does not provide any comparative evidence to substantiate this argument. A related point of criticism is that the book portrays populist parties as inherently dangerous. The book argues that autocratic populist parties change laws to benefit themselves, thereby making changes in government more difficult. However, this argument overlooks the fact that Donald Trump, whom the book identifies as a populist, was defeated by Joe Biden in 2020. Put differently, this example alone suggests that populist actors can both gain and lose power depending on political conditions.

Another limitation of the book is that it addresses the problem of representation primarily through class while paying insufficient attention to the effects of culture, race, and religion, all of which can also play a significant role in fueling populism. A broader engagement with these dimensions could have provided a more multidimensional and comprehensive analysis.

A final critique worth considering concerns the practical applicability of the recommendations offered at the end of the book to protect democratic values. For instance, the authors recommend that international institutions consult the public in decision-making processes, but they do not explain how this could be implemented in practice. Still, one of the closest examples might be the European Parliament (EP). European citizens elect their representatives to the EP, but the competition is still among the political parties. For this reason, it seems difficult to provide ordinary citizens with direct representation in international organizations.

Despite these shortcomings, the book comprehensively explains the rise of authoritarian populism and its relationship with democracy. Therefore, it can be recommended as a useful starting point for undergraduate students and researchers interested in the study of populism and the fragility of democracy.

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Schäfer, A. and Zürn, M. (2023). *The Democratic Regression: The Political Causes of Authoritarian Populism*, London: Polity.

Katkı Oranları ve Çıkar Çatışması / Contribution Rates and Conflicts of Interest

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Üretken Yapay Zeka Kullanımı	Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde üretken yapay zeka araçları kullanılmamıştır.	Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence	No generative artificial intelligence tools were used during the preparation of this study.
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