

When Democratic Experience Distorts Democracy: Citizen Reactions to Undemocratic Incumbent Behavior*

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Abstract

Democratically elected incumbents have engaged in subverting democracy without losing popular support in several countries in recent years. It remains a puzzle that this phenomenon has occurred in relatively mature democracies. In this research note, I argue that citizens become less likely to sanction undemocratic behavior as their country gains democratic experience because they lose incentives to form opinions on the basis of threats to democracy. Using macro-level panel data on democratic experience, undemocratic incumbent behavior, and incumbent approval across 43 democracies from 1962 to 2018, I find that undemocratic incumbent behavior decreases incumbent approval when democratic experience is low. As democratic experience increases, however, this effect fades out. These findings question whether we can count on citizens to be the backbone of democratic stability in countries with democratic experience.

Keywords: Undemocratic Behavior, Democratic Experience, Public Support for Incumbents

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Introduction

In recent years, several presidents and prime ministers have attempted to subvert democracy and assume autocracy-like political power without losing popular support. For example, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela, Viktor Orbán and his party, Fidesz, in Hungary, and the Law and Justice party in Poland have initiated subversions of democracy while managing to win elections even before these eventually become unfair (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Svoboda 2019, 21). Unsurprisingly, the occasional popularity of undemocratic incumbents has elicited scholarly interest and research, which argues that lack of competent alternatives to the incumbent, co-partisanship, and polarization between political candidates may prevent citizens from punishing undemocratic behavior (Luo and Przeworski 2019, 18; Graham and Svoboda 2020, 393; Ahlquist et al. 2018, 907; Carey et al. 2020, 2).

Still, the timing of popular support for undemocratic incumbents in countries such as Turkey, Venezuela, Poland, and Hungary poses an unsolved puzzle. When a country gains experience with democratic rule, it remains almost a truism that democratic principles and support for democracy strengthen among its citizens (e.g., Norris 2011, 233; Hernández 2016, 50). While this conventional wisdom may be right, the actual pattern in popular support for undemocratic incumbents does not resonate well with it. Venezuela and Turkey had quite long

democratic histories when Chávez and Erdoğan started subverting democracy without facing popular sanctions (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, 16). It was not until about 25 years after democracy emerged by the end of the Cold War that the citizenries of Hungary and Poland reelected incumbents committed to undermining democratic institutions. Dissonant with conventional wisdom, citizens have (re)elected undemocratic incumbents even when their respective countries had gained decent levels of democratic experience.

In this research note, I offer an explanation for why citizens of relatively mature democracies have allowed undemocratic incumbents to stay in power. I argue that citizens become less likely to sanction undemocratic behavior as their country gains democratic experience (i.e., gains experience with democracy over time) because they lose incentives to form opinions on the basis of threats to democracy. Using a two-way fixed effects estimator on a macro-level dataset of democratic experience, undemocratic incumbent behavior, and incumbent approval across 43 democracies from 1962 to 2018, I find that undemocratic incumbent behavior on average does not reduce public support for the incumbent. When countries have low democratic experience, however, undemocratic behavior actually decreases public support for the incumbent. As countries gain democratic experience, this effect disappears. These findings question whether we can count on citizens to be the backbone of democratic stability once countries have gained democratic experience.

Undemocratic Incumbent Behavior, Public Support for the Incumbent, and Democratic Experience

Scholars of democratization usually do not include other aspects than competitive, free, and fair elections, civil liberties, and the rule of law when assess-

ing whether some action or characteristic is democratic or not (e.g., Møller and Skaaning 2013). Therefore, I define undemocratic behavior as violations of the democratic cornerstones of competitive, free, and fair elections, civil liberties, and/or the rule of law. This definition also allows us to specify exactly which actions make the aforementioned incumbents undemocratic. Viktor Orbán and his party, Fidesz, as well as the Law and Justice Party led by Jarosław Kaczyński have manipulated the arrangement of courts and judges for their own benefit. President Erdoğan has demolished checks on the presidency, purged public officials, and ensured individual harassment of his critics. Chávez and Maduro have restricted the political opposition to increase chances of reelection (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, 4, 96). These incumbents have, therefore, performed violations of the democratic cornerstones of competitive, free, and fair elections (e.g., Chávez), civil liberties (e.g., Erdoğan), and the rule of law (e.g., Fidesz led by Orbán and the Law and Justice party led by Kaczyński).

Living in a democracy matters to citizens (Norris 2011, 97), and citizens prefer behavior that complies to democratic principles over undemocratic behavior (e.g., Carey et al. 2020; Graham and Svobik 2020). Some studies do, however, also suggest that sanctioning of undemocratic behavior depends on other factors such as shared partisanship, policy interests, and incumbent competence (Graham and Svobik 2020; Ahlquist et al. 2018; Luo and Przeworski 2019). Related strands of literature on sanctioning of other wrongdoings such as corruption (e.g., Muñoz, Anduiza, and Gallego 2016; Breitenstein 2019; De Vries and Solaz 2017) and electoral malpractices (e.g., Gutiérrez-Romero and LeBas 2020) suggest similar conditional relationships. Nevertheless, these wrongdoings tend to produce at least mild average impacts on the support for the undemocratic, corrupt, or malpracticing actors (e.g., Carey et al. 2020, 7; Graham and Svobik 2020, 399; Breitenstein 2019, 4; Gutiérrez-Romero and LeBas 2020, 85). This means that although we cannot expect undemocratic behavior to impact incumbent support

overwhelmingly, we can expect it to matter to some extent. On this basis, I hypothesize that undemocratic incumbent behavior decreases public support for the incumbent (H1).

I define democratic experience by historical experience with the aforementioned democratic cornerstones of competitive, free, and fair elections, civil liberties, and the rule of law. Following conventional wisdom, we may expect democratic experience to facilitate sanctioning of undemocratic incumbent behavior because macro-level democratic experience increases support for democracy and induces refined understandings of core democratic principles among citizens (e.g., Norris 2011, 164; Hernández 2016, 50). At face value, therefore, undemocratic incumbent behavior is especially incongruent with citizens' democratic norms and ideals in mature democracies. However, support for and refined understandings of democracy do not necessarily imply that citizens defend democracy when confronted with undemocratic behavior. Simply put, considerations about democracy itself may be outweighed by other factors in the minds of citizens (Graham and Svolik 2020, 403).

Democratic experience on the country-level may, paradoxically, lead citizens to give considerations about undemocratic incumbent behavior low priority for three reasons. First, political elites, including political parties, increasingly check undemocratic forces as countries gain democratic experience (Cornell, Møller, and Skaaning 2020, chap. 3). Thus, democratic experience gives citizens a false sense of security as they become increasingly used to this democratic checking (Runciman 2018, 10). Citizens may simply believe that subversion and breakdown "would not happen here" when democracy is threatened by the incumbent in mature democracies. And if subversion and breakdown "would not happen here" anyway, citizens lack incentives to consider whether the incumbent acts undemocratically. Contrarily, the weak and volatile nature of political parties in young democracies makes it uncertain whether an undemocratic

incumbent would hypothetically be checked (Tavits 2005; Cornell, Møller, and Skaaning 2020, chap. 3). Citizens of these countries therefore have stronger incentives to disapprove of undemocratic incumbents because undemocratic behavior may result in subversion and breakdown if citizens do not stand up against the incumbent.

Second, in a given country, democratic experience decreases the share of citizens who have experienced an autocratic past. And even though some people may remember the autocratic past, democratic experience makes this past distant to citizens. This lack of autocratic experience and deterrence further decreases the extent to which democracy is perceived as vulnerable and decreases incentives to disapprove of undemocratic forces (Dahl 1971, 179; Runciman 2018, 44). As autocratic deterrence fades and experience with democracy increases, moreover, diffuse trust in the political regime and a reservoir of goodwill toward political authorities is built (Easton 1975, 444, 446). All its positive consequences aside, this diffuse trust may lead citizens to become more forgiving of specific wrongdoings such as undemocratic incumbent behavior (van der Meer 2017, 6; Mishler and Rose 1997, 419). Contrarily, in young democracies the autocratic past is close and citizens have a sense of deterrence from autocracy that citizens of older democracies do not have. This, in turn, leads citizens of countries with low democratic experience to perceive that democracy is more vulnerable, leads them to be more skeptical of political authorities, and leads them to be less forgiving of undemocratic behavior.

Third, partisanship grows stronger as democratic experience increases (e.g., Ezrow, Tavits, and Homola 2014, 1575; Tavits 2005, 283), and even new voters entering the political systems of mature democracies are socialized into strong partisanship (Roberts and Wibbels 1999, 578). Partisanship may color the extent to which citizens perceive undemocratic behavior to actually be undemocratic or, more generally, good or bad (e.g., Ahlquist et al. 2018; Taber

and Lodge 2006; Kunda 1990). The consequence is that initial supporters of an incumbent that turns out to be undemocratic react differently in countries with low and high democratic experience: Due to stronger partisanship more voters stick to the incumbent in older democracies either because they fail to perceive the co-partisan incumbent's wrongdoings or because they deliberately prioritize their partisan loyalty higher than democracy (Graham and Svobik 2020, 393).

These three reasons for why democratic experience should decrease sanctioning of undemocratic behavior may also reinforce each other. Because political elites increasingly check undemocratic forces as democratic experience increases, they plausibly also send more cues to voters about undemocratic behavior. But due to strong partisanship, only supporters of the opposition plausibly use this information to conclude that the behavior is something bad. Because these citizens already oppose the incumbent, these cues are unlikely to help build opposition against the incumbent. Instead, cues about undemocratic behavior may increase attitude polarization by galvanizing opponents of the incumbent while provoking supporters (Taber and Lodge 2006, 756), at worst driving 'Us versus Them' sentiment among citizens (McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018, 22; Svobik 2019, 23). If anything, partisan lines between citizens therefore only strengthen when the incumbent behaves undemocratically in mature democracies. Meanwhile, the lack of autocratic deterrence and false sense of security provided by democratic experience leave more room for partisanship to matter because citizens lose incentives to consider whether the incumbent behaves undemocratically. Therefore, I hypothesize that democratic experience diminishes the negative effect of undemocratic incumbent behavior on public support for the incumbent (H2).

As a final note, the hierarchical nature of the different aspects of democracy - competitive, free, and fair elections, civil liberties, and rule of law - allows us to distinguish between experience with competitive elections, with free and fair elections, with polyarchy, and with liberal democracy (Møller and Skaaning

2013). Relatedly, Claassen (2020) has shown that these different cornerstones of democracy matter differently for citizens' principled support for democracy. To explore the possibility of such heterogeneity and, most importantly, to get a sense of whether the findings depend on how we conceptualize democracy, I examine all four types of democratic experience here.

Methods

I use a panel macro-level dataset of democratic experience, undemocratic incumbent behavior, and public support for incumbents across 43 democracies from 1962 to 2018¹ in a linear regression model with country- and year-fixed effects and standard errors clustered on the country level. This two-way fixed effects estimator rules out time-invariant, country-specific factors such as stable features of party systems, electoral systems, and culture as well as common year-specific shocks such as 9/11 and the financial crisis (Angrist and Pischke 2015, 200).

I use a dichotomous measure of electoral competition from the LIED dataset as criterion for inclusion in the analysis. Contested elections where incumbents stand some risk of losing define electoral competition in this measure scoring 1 if electoral competition is present and zero if it is not (Skaaning, Gerring, and Bartusevicius 2015).

Measures

Measures of undemocratic incumbent behavior must fulfil two demanding criteria to be valid. They must capture violations of democratic cornerstones and it must be clear that these violations are performed by the incumbent. Three measures from the V-Dem project tapping into incumbent repression of civil society organisations (CSOs), disrespect of the freedom of expression, and disrespect of

¹Some countries are included for shorter periods.

constitutional rules meet these criteria (Coppedge et al. 2019).² I summed the measures to an index capturing how undemocratically the incumbent behaves and scaled it from 0 to 1 where high values signal undemocratic behavior (avg = 0.22; sd = 0.16).³

I provide four measures of democratic experience reflecting experience with competitive elections, with free and fair elections, with polyarchy, and with liberal democracy. I computed the measures using the aforementioned binary indicator of electoral competition from the LIED dataset and the electoral component, polyarchy, and liberal democracy scales from V-Dem. Specifically, I summed up each of these measures in each country from year 1800 onwards and applied depreciation rates of five percent. The depreciation rate ensures that recent democratic experience is weighted higher than distant democratic experience while the marginal impact of additional experience is highest in times of inexperience. The rate also accounts for democratic disruptions so that democratic experience decreases, but not necessarily disappears, during autocratic spells (Persson and Tabellini 2009, 102; Gerring et al. 2016; Grundholm and Thorsen 2019). I rescaled the democratic experience measures to 0-1 so that low values signal inexperience and high values signal experience (avg = 0.57-0.75; sd = 0.25-0.28).

I measure public support for the incumbent as approval using the Executive Approval Project covering all regions of the world except Africa (Carlin et al. 2016). The measure captures aggregated shares of positive survey-answers toward national incumbents (avg = 0.52; sd = 0.14). Descriptive statis-

²The exact question wordings of these measures (v2csrepress, v2x_freexp_altinf, and v2exrescon) are "Does the government attempt to repress civil society organizations (CSOs)?", "To what extent does government respect press and media freedom, the freedom of ordinary people to discuss political matters at home and in the public sphere, as well as the freedom of academic and cultural expression?", and "Do members of the executive (the head of state, the head of government, and cabinet ministers) respect the constitution?". All three measures are coded by country experts who typically are scholars. In coding the specific countries, 60 percent of the experts are residents or nationals.

³The three individual measures are strongly correlated ($r = 0.65-0.85$).

tics on within-country variation in undemocratic behavior, incumbent approval, and democratic experience are available in Appendix A.

To control for relevant time-variant factors, I include economic growth, GDP per capita, regime and executive corruption, physical violence, population size, and level of democracy as polyarchy from V-Dem.

Model specifications

I set up five models to test the hypotheses. Model I introduces the average effect of undemocratic incumbent behavior on incumbent approval. I lag undemocratic behavior and the control variables by one year to allow the effects to set in. Model I is formalized in equation 1:

$$Approval_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 UB_{(it-1)} + \delta X_{(it-1)} + c_i + y_t + e_{it} \quad (1)$$

The term $\delta X_{(it-1)}$ is a vector of control variables. c_i and y_t , respectively, represent time-invariant, country-specific factors and common year-specific factors that are eliminated by design. e_{it} represents unobserved explanatory factors that vary over time *and* across countries. H1 enjoys support if β_1 is negative and statistically significant. This would suggest that undemocratic behavior decreases public support for the incumbent.

Models II-V introduce the effect of undemocratic behavior conditioned by the different measures of democratic experience.⁴ I also interact undemocratic behavior with GDP, population size, and level of democracy to account for the possibility that the conditioning effect of democratic experience is confounded by

⁴I also lag democratic experience by one year.

these variables. Models II-V are formalized in equation 2:

$$\begin{aligned}
 Approval_{it} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 UB_{(it-1)} + \beta_2 DE_{(it-1)} + \delta X_{(it-1)} + \\
 & \beta_3 UB_{(it-1)} * DE_{(it-1)} + \delta UB_{(it-1)} * \delta X_{(it-1)} + c_i + y_t + e_{it}
 \end{aligned}
 \tag{2}$$

$\delta UB_{(it-1)} * \delta X_{(it-1)}$ is a vector of the interaction terms between undemocratic behavior and the three control variables mentioned above. H2 receives support if the interaction terms between undemocratic behavior and the different measures of democratic experience (β_3) are significantly positive, suggesting that democratic experience diminishes the negative effect of undemocratic incumbent behavior on approval.

Analysis

Results

Table 1 presents the results of models I-V. Model I shows that the average effect of undemocratic behavior is clearly insignificant. Thus, on average, undemocratic incumbent behavior does not decrease approval, and H1 is rejected. We do, however, see strong heterogeneity across democratic experience. The four interaction terms between undemocratic behavior and democratic experience (UB x DE) are strongly significant and positive in models II-V. Figure 1 plots these interaction effects and shows that undemocratic behavior decreases incumbent approval significantly when democratic experience is low. As democratic experience increases, this effect disappears. Thus, democratic experience diminishes the negative effect of undemocratic incumbent behavior on public support for the incumbent, and H2 is supported. This finding holds regardless of whether we measure democratic experience as experience with competitive elections, free and fair elections, polyarchy, or liberal democracy.

Figure 1 also shows that the negative effect of undemocratic behavior is

Table 1: Effects of undemocratic incumbent behavior on incumbent approval across democratic experience.

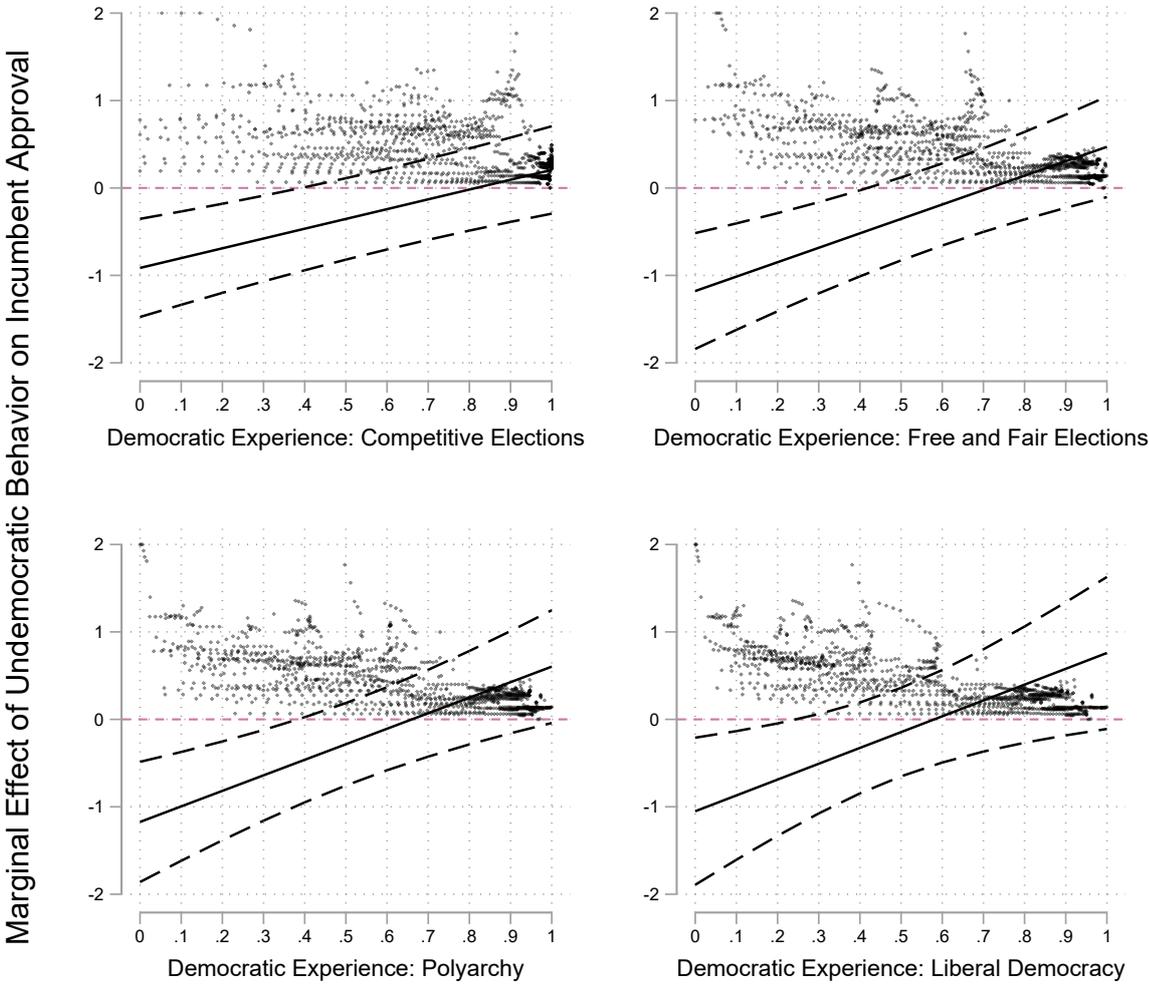
	I	II	III	IV	V
Undemocratic Behavior (t-1)	-0.01 (0.23)	-0.24 (0.24)	-0.18 (0.26)	-0.06 (0.25)	-0.01 (0.28)
Democratic Experience: Competitive (t-1)		-0.26** (0.10)			
UB x DE: Competitive (t-1)		1.12*** (0.26)			
Democratic Experience: Free and Fair (t-1)			-0.36** (0.13)		
UB x DE: Free and Fair (t-1)			1.65*** (0.41)		
Democratic Experience: Polyarchy (t-1)				-0.38** (0.13)	
UB x DE: Polyarchy (t-1)				1.78*** (0.48)	
Democratic Experience: Liberal Dem. (t-1)					-0.42** (0.15)
UB x DE: Liberal Dem. (t-1)					1.81* (0.70)
Constant	0.85*** (0.21)	1.01*** (0.20)	1.06*** (0.21)	1.00*** (0.21)	0.97*** (0.22)
Country Fixed Effects	+	+	+	+	+
Year Fixed Effects	+	+	+	+	+
Controls	+	+	+	+	+
Adjusted R^2	0.10	0.15	0.15	0.15	0.13
n	1296	1296	1296	1296	1296

Unstandardized regression coefficients.

Country clustered standard errors in parentheses (43 clusters in total).

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Figure 1: Marginal effect of undemocratic incumbent behavior across democratic experience on the basis of models II-V.



Note: The dots represent an underlying scatterplot of the variation in undemocratic behavior - rescaled from 0-1 to 0-2 in this underlying plot only - across democratic experience. Thus, elevated dots mark severe undemocratic behavior while the closeness of the dots marks the density of observations across democratic experience.

substantially large in countries with low democratic experience. Specifically, the effects are around -1 when democratic experience is lowest. I multiply these effects with observed within-country shifts in undemocratic behavior to give more realistic estimates of real-world effects (Mummolo and Peterson 2018, 6). The largest shifts over few years range from 0.2 to 0.4 and happened during the 1990s in El Salvador (decrease), the 2010s in Turkey (increase), and the late 2010s in Poland (increase). According to models II-V, developments of this magnitude result in a substantial 20 to 40 percentage points change in incumbent approval when democratic experience is low but yield no change in approval when democratic experience is high.

Actual election outcomes in the three cases mentioned above are also consistent with these findings. The citizens of El Salvador, which during the 1990s was a young democracy with low experience levels of approximately 0.15, reelected presidents from the Nationalist Republican Alliance throughout the 1990s after facing a decrease in undemocratic incumbent behavior and the end of the civil war. The citizens of Turkey and Poland, whose countries during the 2010s had matured to relatively high experience levels of approximately 0.65 and 0.7, have reelected Prime Minister/President Erdoğan and the government formed by the Law and Justice party despite of the increases in undemocratic behavior.

Looking at figure 1, it is important to note that we do not see severe instances of undemocratic behavior in the utmost mature democracies such as Canada, Australia, Denmark, and France (see also figure A1 in the appendix). The empirical story here is, therefore, mostly about how citizens stop punishing undemocratic behavior when countries grow from very young to quite mature democracies just like the puzzling cases of Turkey, Venezuela, Poland, and Hungary.

Robustness Checks

I conduct a series of robustness checks in the appendix. The results generally seem most robust when using the measures of democratic experience based on electoral democracy and least robust when using the measure based on liberal democracy.

First, I show that the results are robust to using the three measures of undemocratic behavior individually, to using alternative measures of undemocratic behavior, and to varying the depreciation rates in the four measures of democratic experience. I also show that the results are robust to removal of the lags, to adjusting the lag on the level of democracy as control variable, to removing the fixed effects, to excluding control variables, and to including additional control variables - polarization, party institutionalization, and populist rhetoric - that arguably but not necessarily induce post-treatment bias.

To probe the identifying assumption in the two-way fixed effects model and accommodate concerns of endogeneity, I show that the results are robust to allowing for past incumbent approval to affect undemocratic behavior and democratic experience, to allowing for past undemocratic behavior and experience to affect approval (Imai and Kim 2019, 473), and somewhat robust to allowing for individual time trends in each country (Angrist and Pischke 2015, 197). Moreover, a placebo test shows that forwarded undemocratic behavior is not correlated with approval at any level of experience.

I also show that including a general time trend in democratic experience and an interaction term between undemocratic behavior and time-invariant, country-specific factors do not change the results substantially. Finally, following the instructions in Hainmueller, Mummolo, and Xu (2019), I show that the linearity and common support assumptions imposed by the interactions between undemocratic behavior and democratic experience are valid. Thus, although we should be careful in concluding on how citizens of the utmost mature democra-

cies react to severe undemocratic behavior, the limited variation in these countries does not bias the results.

Conclusion

When and how citizens react to undemocratic incumbent behavior are fundamental questions for democratic sustainability. Using data across 43 democracies from 1962 to 2018, I have shown that undemocratic behavior on average does not decrease public support for the incumbent. However, this is a consequence of stark heterogeneity between countries with low and high democratic experience. In young democracies, undemocratic behavior decreases incumbent approval substantially. As countries gain democratic experience, this effect fades out. Thus, macro-level democratic experience transforms how citizens react to undemocratic behavior. I have argued that this transformation unfolds because citizens lose incentives to form opinions on the basis of threats to democracy. Investigating whether such a loss of incentives is actually the individual-level mechanism is beyond the scope of this research note but may be a fruitful venue for future research.

Another possible venue for future research is moving beyond public support for incumbents to studying election outcomes. Prior studies suggest that dynamics of incumbent approval are similar across young and old democracies and that approval quite accurately predicts election outcomes (e.g., Carlin et al. 2018; Lewis-Beck and Rice 1982). Thus, it is likely that democratic experience also influences whether undemocratic incumbent behavior yields electoral losses although the literature would benefit from research on this matter.

This research note, therefore, provides part of the explanation why incumbents such as Erdoğan, Chávez, Maduro, Fidesz led by Orbán, and the Law and Justice party have maintained public support even though their respective countries had gained decent levels of democratic experience at the point in time

where democratic subversion was initiated. Citizens increasingly seem to tolerate undemocratic behavior as countries gain democratic experience. Does this mean that all mature democracies are in danger of breaking down tomorrow if the incumbent starts behaving undemocratically? Most likely not. We know that the institutional structures and democratic norms among political elites in the vast majority of countries with high democratic experience are too strong for this to happen (Cornell, Møller, and Skaaning 2020). But it does mean that we cannot blindly count on citizens to be the backbone of democratic stability in countries with democratic experience. Contrarily, citizens seem to be *the* backbone of democratic stability in young democracies although this backbone may be weaker than the resilience that institutions and political elites provide in older democracies. And unfortunately, democratic norms among political elites can erode slowly over time. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) argue that such an erosion is unfolding, and has been unfolding for quite some time, in the United States. In these mature democracies, the worst case scenario is that such an erosion coincides with citizens that, cf. the findings of this research note, do not punish initiatives to subvert democracy.

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