



“Successful liberal democracy as self-reinforcing condition” by Carl Henrik Knutsen.

A Review

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Review of “Successful liberal democracy as self-reinforcing condition” by Carl Henrik Knutsen in *Journal of European Public Policy* Special Issue on “Victims of their own success? How successful liberal orders can become self-undermining”. Guest Editors: Christoph Knill, Andreas Kruck, Berthold Rittberger, Laura Seelkopf, Bernhard Zangl (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13501763.2026.2657997>).

With the world currently experiencing what many globally recognised indices describe as a two-decades long democratic recession (see for example [the Varieties of Democracy 2026 Report](#), aptly titled “Unravelling the Democratic Era?”), significant academic attention has been devoted to understanding why democracies are declining, [even as some scholars argue that claims of democratic decline are overstated](#). This article by Carl Henrik Knutsen contributes to this debate by taking a longitudinal approach to the question of how resilient and durable liberal democracy has been over the last two centuries. He defines liberal democracy as “regimes with relatively high scores on the two (electoral and liberal) dimensions of liberal democracy ... which, when scores on these dimensions are aggregated, have a degree of liberal democracy that passes a minimum threshold value”. On this basis, the article concludes that “liberal democracies are very durable regimes and resilient to democratic decline”, and that “this resilience is partly attributable to relatively strong economic growth performances”.

The article’s framing enables the author to make two important contributions. First, Knutsen revisits the long-standing notion that democracy constitutes a “self-reinforcing equilibrium” (or a system where internal dynamics actively support and reproduce the conditions that created them), exploring what it is about liberal democratic institutions that make this type of regime particularly resilient over time. Second, the author intervenes in a more specific debate at the centre of the special issue in which the article appears: whether liberal democracies can become “victims of their own success” and therefore gradually become self-undermining. To do so, the author tests a series of hypotheses linking the “success” of liberal democratic polities to the probability of regime change, or, to put it differently, to democratic breakdown.

The discussion of why liberal democracies should be resilient rests on the established argument that the institutions underpinning liberal democracy, alongside the policies and outcomes they generate, are mutually reinforcing and therefore generate regime stability. The article usefully distinguishes between the liberal and electoral dimensions of democracy to show how each contributes differently to durability. Among the key mechanisms that Knutsen identifies are limits on the capacity of individual actors to concentrate power, greater space for negotiation and political bargaining among a broader range of actors, the tendency of liberal democratic systems to produce fewer “spoilers”, and the disciplining effect of future elections, which temper political actors from acting on their “worst impulses”. The article also highlights how “the occasional alternation in power through competitive can also reduce risks of self-coups” by limiting the duration of incumbency, and how these combined features help generate fewer popular grievances overall.

Importantly, Knutsen further argues that the liberal and electoral dimensions of democracy reinforce one another through positive interactions. To these institutional mechanisms, he adds a final source of durability: the capacity of liberal democracies to generate positive economic outcomes, which in turn incentivise both political actors and citizens to continue supporting liberal democratic processes.

The article's second contribution lies in challenging the idea that liberal democracies have weakened in recent decades precisely because of their historical success. Knutsen identifies two mechanisms through which this could have occurred. First, the rapid spread of liberal democracy during the so-called [third wave of democratisation](#) may have extended liberal democratic institutions to contexts lacking the [preconditions necessary for these institutions to function](#) effectively and durably. Liberal democracy may have been adopted "too excessively", and hence not durably. Second, liberal democracy may generate vulnerabilities because it accommodates a wide range of political actors and agendas, including illiberal and anti-democratic ones. Put differently, liberal democratic systems may enable and protect actors capable of undermining democratic institutions and processes from within, [something observed in several recent cases](#), including among others Hungary under Viktor Orban.

Drawing on an extensive cross-country dataset, Knutsen ultimately concludes that liberal democracies remain highly resilient, largely because of the economic benefits they generate. He also argues that this resilience has persisted even after 2000, contrary to scholarship suggesting that recent decades have witnessed a broader decline in democratic resilience. To account for the current democratic decline, Knutsen instead points to what he terms a possible "reversion-to-the-mean effect", as well as to the diffusion of liberal democracy into political contexts where "any regime [whether it is a democracy or not] would have a hard time enduring", rather than the weakening of liberal democracy itself.

Overall, Knutsen offers a valuable contribution to several debates that have animated recent scholarship in the field of comparative regime studies, ranging from normative arguments about why democracy remains worth defending and promoting, to broader attempts to explain the contemporary democratic recession. At the same time, the quantitative nature of the article leaves the question of what "success" concretely looks like underdeveloped, as well as how, precisely, it contributes either to sustaining or undermining democratic resilience. In practice, many of the institutional pathways through which resilience is theorised to emerge cannot be individually tested, which places significant analytical weight on economic performance, an explanation already extensively explored in the [existing literature](#).

More importantly, much of the empirical validation that the article rests on regime change and democratic breakdown, which sets a high threshold for democratic decline. Yet a significant share of contemporary scholarship on autocratisation has increasingly focused not on outright regime collapse, but on more [gradual forms of democratic erosion](#) occurring within formally democratic systems. This includes processes such as executive aggrandisement, weakening horizontal accountability, erosion of democratic norms, and declining liberal democratic quality. From this perspective, the central concern is not only whether liberal democracies survive in institutional form, but, even if they do, whether they continue to function with a degree of liberalism and democratic

vibrancy. The article would therefore have benefitted from engaging more explicitly with recent scholarship on democratic erosion and autocratisation. Doing so would allow the author to sharpen the distinction between regime durability and democratic quality. Liberal democracies may well continue to outperform authoritarian regimes in terms of resilience, political stability, and economic outcomes, while still experiencing declining trust in institutions, growing polarisation, weakened party systems, and/or increasing concentrations of executive power.

Knutsen is obviously aware of these patterns, and he discusses them in his literature review. Addressing these dimensions when he discusses the results would not have undermined the article's central argument regarding the comparative durability of liberal democracy. Rather, it would have helped provide a more nuanced account of what contemporary democratic decline actually entails.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice.

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