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Economic Origins of Democratic Breakdown?

Perspectives on Politics 12:2, June 2014

65 Pages

Posted: 26 Feb 2014

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Date Written: June 6, 2012

Abstract

From Aristotle to Acemoglu and Robinson, scholars have argued that democracy possesses powerful redistributive impulses, and imperils itself accordingly. This article challenges the validity of the redistributive model of democratic breakdown in the postcolonial world – the only cases where democracies have collapsed since World War II – because its assumptions regarding state power are questionable or even inapplicable in postcolonial settings. Our correlative analysis of cross-sectional time series data from 139 countries between 1972 and 2007 indicates that, contrary to the expectations of the redistributive model, redistributive taxation is negatively associated with the incidence of military coups and the likelihood of democratic breakdown. Furthermore, authoritarian takeovers do not appear systematically to result in reduced redistribution from the rich. More fine-grained historical evidence from Southeast Asia – a region where the redistributive model should be especially likely to hold true – further affirms that authoritarian seizures of power are neither inspired by successful redistributive policies nor followed by their reversal. Taken together, these quantitative and qualitative data offer significant support for our central theoretical claim: contemporary democratic breakdowns have political origins in weak states, not economic origins in class conflict.

Keywords: regime change, democratic breakdown, redistributive model[Suggested Citation](#) >[Show Contact Information](#) >[Download This Paper \(Delivery.cfm/SSRN_ID2079177_code798000.pdf?abstractid=2079177&mirid=1\)](#)[Open PDF in Browser \(Delivery.cfm/SSRN_ID2079177_code798000.pdf?abstractid=2079177&mirid=1&type=2\)](#)

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