

Developing Index of Democratic Institutions' Vulnerability

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Abstract : Last year vividly demonstrated, that populism and political instability can endanger democratic institutions in countries regarded as democratic transition champions (Poland) or cornerstones of liberal order (UK, US). So called 'illiberal democracy' is winning hearts and minds of voters, keen to believe that rule of strongman is a viable alternative to perceived decay of western values and institutions. These developments pose a serious threat to the democratic institutions (including rule of law), proven critical for both personal freedom and economic development. Although scholars proposed some structural explanations of the illiberal wave (notably focusing on inequality, stagnant incomes and drawbacks of globalization), they seem to have little predictive value. Indeed, events like Trump's victory, Brexit or Polish shift towards populist nationalism always came as a surprise. Intriguingly, in the case of US election, simple rules like 'Bread and Peace model' gauged prospects of Trump's victory better than pundits and pollsters. This paper attempts to compile set of indicators, in order to gauge various democracies' vulnerability to populism, instability and pursuance of 'illiberal' projects. Among them, it identifies the gap between consensus assessment of institutional performance (as measured by WGI indicators) and citizens' subjective assessment (survey based confidence in institutions). Plotting these variables against each other, reveals three clusters of countries - 'predictable' (good institutions and high confidence, poor institutions and low confidence), 'blind' (poor institutions, high confidence e.g. Uzbekistan or Azerbaijan) and 'disillusioned' (good institutions, low confidence e.g. Spain, Chile, Poland and US). It seems that this clustering - carried out separately for various institutions (like legislature, executive and courts) and blended with economic indicators like inequality and living standards (using PCA) - offers reasonably good watchlist of countries, that should 'expect the unexpected'.

Keywords : illiberal democracy, populism, political instability, political risk measurement

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