BEACONS OF BACKSLIDING?
THE INTERNATIONAL DIFFUSION OF DEMOCRATIC REGRESSION

Alexander Schmotz and Lisa-Marie Selvik
WZB Berlin Social Science Center

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Abstract. This paper examines the diffusion of democratic regression across national borders. Studies of democratic regression focus overwhelmingly on domestic-level explanations. However, the international diffusion of democratic regression is implied by clusters of democracies in regression, as well as the mutual attention their leaders pay to each other's actions. Scholars studying the international diffusion of political regimes have highlighted the diffusion of democracy and autocracy, but have yet to consider the diffusion of democratic regression. We argue that democratic regression diffuses across borders when domestic actors observe and emulate external precedents of regression abroad. We suggest two different mechanisms at work in processes of diffusion focused on the effects of external precedents of regression, namely the *power of numbers* and the *power of prominence*. Where the power of numbers is at play, the larger the number of countries abroad in democratic regression, the larger the domestic effect. The power of prominence predicts the largest effect when particularly prominent external countries experience backsliding. We examine the effect of global, regional, and neighbouring external precedent on democratic regression using Bayesian spatial lag models and original measures of democratic regression and the diffusion of regression, based on data from the Varieties of Democracy project. Our findings show that democratic regression does indeed diffuse across borders, but that there are important distinctions between neighbourly, regional, and global diffusion, and between diffusion originating from many or few countries – the powers of numbers vs prominence.

Keywords: diffusion; democratic regression; democratic backsliding; external precedents; mechanisms; spatial lag models, Bayesian modelling

Introduction

Democratic regression is spreading like a virus.[1] The latest annual report of the Varieties of Democracy Institute finds an ongoing decline of democratic quality in the world, manifest in countries as diverse as Hungary, India, Brazil, and the United States (Alizada et al. 2022). Two observations imply that cases might not be independent from one another. First, democracies in regression form clusters. Regional clusters are evident in East and East Central Europe (Bakke and Sitter 2022; Plattner and Diamond 2007), Latin America (Pérez-Liñán, Schmidt, and Vairo 2019), Asia (Croissant and Haynes 2021), and elsewhere, but clustering also occurs over time, prompting the formation of global 'waves' of autocratization (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Huntington 1991). Is democratic regression contagious?

Second, leaders of countries in democratic regression seem to look to likeminded anti-democratic leaders for inspiration and best-practice examples. For example, the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbàn has openly expressed his intention to build an 'illiberal state' and look to China, Russia and Turkey as the 'new stars' in the international system (see Orbàn 2014). Examining one common strategy in backsliding processes, Glasius and colleagues (2020) find strong evidence that countries

[1] We use the terms democratic regression and democratic backsliding interchangeably.

adopting restrictions on civil society take inspiration from their regional neighbours in both whether to and what kinds of restrictions to adopt. In processes of democratic regression, do adopters of illiberal policies learn from precedents abroad?

Despite these troubling observations, we know very little about the international dimension of democratic regression, and whether and how regression is spreading across national borders. On the one hand, research on the causes of democratic regression is predominantly concerned with domestic factors – and for good reasons. Democratic regression is carried out by domestic political actors, and a range of domestic factors have been shown to have an impact (Waldner and Lust 2018). However, we argue that while domestic explanations may carry most weight, international factors and diffusion mechanisms are likely to play a contributing role. Scholars have highlighted the role of membership in international organizations (Meyerose 2020) and the use of sovereigntist claims vis-à-vis the international community (Rakner and van de Walle 2022), but not examined the role of cross-border diffusion. On the other hand, diffusion research has examined the diffusion of democracy (Brinks and Coppedge 2006; Gleditsch and Ward 2006) and autocracy (Ambrosio 2010; Weyland 2017), but largely neglected the diffusion of democratic regression as a distinct form of (intra-)regime change (Haggard and Kaufman 2021; Waldner and Lust 2018).

This paper addresses this important research gap by coupling theories of diffusion to the study of democratic regression. We set out to examine whether and how democratic regression is spreading across national borders. In other words: How does democratic regression diffuse internationally? We study diffusion of democratic regression by examining how regression abroad, i.e. external precedents, affect domestic regression. We first hypothesize that the more external precedent of democratic regression in a country's neighbourhood, regional environment, and globally, leads to a higher level of domestic democratic regression. We further explore the different mechanisms through which a country's regression is affected by external precedents abroad, and examine whether external precedents' effect on domestic regression is powered by the number or the prominence of precedents.

We present a new measure of democratic regression (see also Schmotz 2024), based on data from the Varieties of Democracy project (Lindberg et al. 2014), and estimate a series of Bayesian spatial lag models to evaluate the effect of external precedent on domestic democratic regression, conditional on the number of countries the precedent originates from.

Our findings show that external precedent increases domestic regression. Effects vary between global, regional, and neighbourly precedent: while regional and global examples have some influences, largest effects can be seen in neighbour diffusion. Importantly, effects are accentuated when conditioned on the number of precedent countries: Higher levels of precedent regression appear to exert a stronger effect when emanating from fewer countries, particularly if just one country serves as the main example. It appears that more than the power of numbers, the power of prominence is the main driver of the diffusion or democratic regression.

Finally, we discuss the quantitative findings in the light of two illustrative case studies. Both countries have experienced considerable levels of democratic regression, and observed extensive external precedent. I can therefore hope to find mechanisms of diffusion at play. Both countries are also dramatically different in terms of socio-economic factors and democratic histories, allowing for careful generalisation of mechanisms (in addition to effects) from a most-different-cases comparative design.

This study makes the case for diffusion as a hitherto overlooked explanation and mechanism in processes of democratic regression. We contribute to the understanding of democratic regression. Research on democratic regression focuses on domestic causes, and the relatively few studies highlighting international factors have thus far not examined the role of cross-border diffusion. Our study connects the trends observed in the literature on democratic regression to the study of (illiberal) norm diffusion in international relations. Alike recent contributions in this avenue of research (Glasius et. al. 2020), our study suggests that governments look to each other as examples to follow and learn backsliding strategies from previous adopters. While Glasius and colleagues (2020) focused on the adoption of NGO restrictions, which could be one avenue of democratic regression, our disaggregated

study of diffusion of democratic regression provides a more holistic picture of backsliding strategies, examining overall trends of regression with regards to civil liberties, the judiciary, and the electoral opposition. More nuanced studies of this diffusion of strategies are needed. Importantly, while our study of diffusion effects points to international causes/explanations for democratic regression, the theorised mechanisms we propose are domestic, namely how domestic actors are responding to external precedents. We need more research on domestic mechanisms in processes of regression diffusion.

This paper proceeds in five parts. First, it presents a brief overview of the relevant literature and the research gap emerging from it. Second, it outlines the theoretical argument about the mechanisms of the diffusion of regression and propose a set of hypotheses to test. Third, it presents our methodological approach, measurements and case selection. Fourth, it presents the preliminary findings of the quantitative analysis. Fifth, [and lacking in the current paper version,] we discuss these findings in light of two illustrative case studies.

Literature: No Diffusion of Democratic Regression?

Despite the recent surge in research on democratic regression (see Waldner and Lust 2018, 94), we know relatively little about how democratic regression is affected by external influences, particularly non-democratic external influences. We review two strands of literature to present the state-of-the-art and our contribution to it: first, research on causes of democratic regression, and here particularly the smaller subsection of the debate dealing with international influences; and second, the literature on international diffusion, particularly on the international diffusion of authoritarianism and illiberal norms.

We follow colleagues who have defined democratic regression – also referred to as democratic backsliding, erosion, or de-democratization – as the gradual dismantling of the conditions for democratic institutions in democratic regimes carried out by government and state actors (for example Bermeo 2016; Waldner and Lust 2018). We use democratic regression synonymous with these other terms. The definition sets democratic regression apart from democratic breakdown – the abrupt and full-scale abandonment of democracy and introduction of an authoritarian regime. It highlights that the scope of the analysis is restricted to democratic regimes and intra-regime change, until the point where eroding democracies are reversed to autocracies (Haggard and Kaufman 2021). By contrast, related concepts such as Lührmann and Lindberg's (2019) autocratization trace gradual deterioration of democratic features in all regime types, also autocracies. Importantly, it identifies democratically elected governments as the main culprits.

Research on democratic regression focuses mainly on domestic explanations such as socio-economic conditions (Cianetti, Dawson, and Hanley 2018), populism (Bauer and Becker 2020; Vachudova 2020; Weyland 2020; López and Luna 2021; Vachudova 2021), polarization (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018; Svolik 2018; Somer, McCoy, and Luke 2021; Haggard and Kaufman 2021), political values and culture (Kwak et al. 2020; Welzel 2021b, 2021a), institutions (Dresden and Howard 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Gandhi 2019; O'Dwyer and Stenberg 2021; Haggard and Kaufman 2021) or political actors (Dawson and Hanley 2019; Bakke and Sitter 2022).

Fewer studies highlight the international dimension of democratic regression (Hyde 2020). For example, Akyuz and Hess (2018) describe developments in Turkey, including a shift in foreign policy away from EU and the West and towards Russia, China, and other authoritarian partners (see also Yilmaz and Eliküçük Yıldırım 2020). Bozóki and Hegedüs (2018) portray Hungary as an “externally constrained hybrid regime” (Bozóki and Hegedüs 2018, 1173) in which the EU constrains democratic regression tendencies, but also sustains and legitimizes the regime. Rakner and van de Walle (2022) argue that backsliding episodes in Africa can be advanced by the strategic use of sovereignty claims to neutralize and counter (Western) criticism and donor pressure.

While these studies offer important insights into the international dimension of processes of democratic regression, they draw largely descriptive inference. By contrast, some colleagues argue

that democratic regression might in fact be partially caused or facilitated by international level factors. Schlipphak and Treib (2017) argue that EU intervention can strengthen domestic backsliders in member countries because it can be presented and perceived as unwanted outside interference, creating a rally-around-the-flag effect. In an analysis of interwar Europe, Møller, Skaaning, and Tolstrup (2017) argue that democratic regression is brought about by a combination of authoritarian great-power hegemony and pro-authoritarian demonstration effects. Holesch and Kyriazi (2022) show that the close cooperation of Poland and Hungary facilitates their mutual democratic regression projects through learning, support, and legitimation. San and Akca (2021) demonstrate that Turkey's linkages to authoritarian regimes such as Russia and China have undermined the democratizing effects of its strong Western linkage. Meyerrose (2020) argues that membership in international organizations supporting democracy promotion counter-intuitively makes democratic regression more likely, because promotion efforts focus too much on executive and legislative elections. Hyde (2020) argues that in a changing international environment, support for democracy wanes and autocratic forces become stronger.

All of these contributions draw attention to the international dimension of democratic regression. However, the diffusion of democratic regression more specifically – and the effect external precedents of democratic regression can have on countries' democratic trajectory – is curiously absent. The studies are more concerned with the role of external autocratic patrons, mostly Russia or China, or with more systemic processes such as globalisation. In all of these conceptions, democracies in regression remain independent cases, affected by some independent external factor. The possibility of interdependence and contagion is apparently overlooked. In addition, contributions frequently comprise single case or small-n studies; focus on a small number of paradigmatic cases of democratic regression, such as Turkey, Hungary, or Poland; and often conduct mostly descriptive analyses.

We therefore turn to recent scholarly advances on the diffusion of authoritarianism and illiberal norms. Research on authoritarian diffusion (Ambrosio 2010) describes a process by which a more authoritarian environment abroad leads to more authoritarianism at home. Building on the modern classics on democratic diffusion (Starr 1991; Starr and Lindborg 2003; Brinks and Coppedge 2006; Gleditsch and Ward 2006; Elkink 2011), Thomas Ambrosio (2010; 2019) argues that authoritarian diffusion works in similar ways as democratic diffusion. Ambrosio (2019, 2744) defines authoritarian diffusion as "the process by which the institutions, organizations, policies, strategies, rhetorical frames, norms, etc., which establish, protect, or strengthen authoritarian rule, are reproduced from one authoritarian system to another". Importantly, the literature on the international dimension of authoritarian rule explicitly highlights the role of authoritarian diffusion and distinguishes the concept from active autocracy promotion (Soest 2015; Tansey 2016; Weyland 2017; Yakouchyk 2019).

Empirical studies of autocracy diffusion take different approaches as two what aspect of authoritarianism actually diffuses. Colleagues examine the diffusion of autocratic regime *types* (Weyland 2019; Caruso, Pontarollo, and Ricciuti 2020), of specific authoritarian institutions such as particular kinds of legislation (Bader 2014; Lemon and Antonov 2020), or certain authoritarian practices such as the restriction of religious freedoms (Mataic 2018). There are also some notable null-findings – studies that set out to examine authoritarian diffusion, but do not find it (Ambrosio 2012; Miller, Joseph, and Ohl 2018). Bader (2014) studied the diffusion of election laws from Russia in the post-Soviet region, while Golosov (2016) studied the way in which authoritarian regimes have adopted certain democratic electoral institutions for autocratic purposes. Similar to studies of democratic authoritarianism and democratic backsliding, the use of democratic institutions and rules for non-democratic gains and purposes is not a new phenomenon in studies of authoritarian diffusion. However, authoritarian diffusion is essentially studied as diffusion between autocracies.

Recent writings on the diffusion of illiberal norms suggest to broaden the empirical scope for studying diffusion of democratic regression. Actors in democracies too can look to authoritarian examples abroad, especially non-democratic actors prone to pursuing a backsliding agenda. In the above-mentioned study by Glasius and colleagues (2020), descriptive data on the global spread of NGO restrictions show that the diffusion is not only – or even mostly – an autocratic phenomenon. Rivetti (2024) finds that the far-right in Italy adopted discourse from Iran, and Waller (2023) show how

illiberal policies inspired by Russia was also copied in Georgia, an electoral democracy (see also Bader, 2014). However, while important contributions, these studies only in part illuminate the full picture of diffusion of democratic regression. To our knowledge, no study exists that explicitly examines the diffusion of democratic regression. While some studies might imply that authoritarian diffusion entails the diffusion of democratic regression, research designs are often not suited to isolate the diffusion of democratic regression as gradual intra-regime change in democracies. Studies of authoritarian diffusion focus on diffusion between autocratic regimes. However, it is not clear whether democratic regression diffuses between deteriorating democracies, and what mechanisms are at play.

Theory: The Power of Precedents in the International Diffusion of Democratic Regression

In the following, we outline a set of mechanisms at work in processes of diffusion of democratic regression. We first theorize that the more external precedent of democratic regression is observed abroad, the higher the level of democratic regression becomes at home. We further suggest two mechanisms through which the effects of external precedents are working, namely by the *power of numbers* and the *power of prominence*.

Diffusion of democratic regression occurs if precedent of democratic regression abroad leads to (more) democratic regression at home. Our proposed theory of the international diffusion or regression follow influential work in the diffusion literature (Elkins and Simmons 2005; Strang 1991) and recent advances in writings on authoritarian diffusion (Ambrosio 2010; Ambrosio and Tolstrup 2019; Hall and Ambrosio 2017). We see diffusion of democratic regression as a process through which "prior adoption of a trait or practice in a population alters the probability of adoption for remaining non-adopters" (Strang 1991, p. 325). Mechanisms of diffusion are conceptualized as *uncoordinated interdependence* between adopters in different countries, distinct from international cooperation or coercion (Elkins and Simmons 2005, p. 35). By this understanding, governments and other adopters are making decisions independently, on their own, but interdependently in the sense that they factor in the actions and choices of policymakers elsewhere. Crucially, we study diffusion as an *internally-driven process*, as opposed to externally-driven, where the impetus is found in a domestic adopter of an innovation or policy who is looking to an external precedent abroad in order to solve or prevent some perceived problem at home (Ambrosio and Tolstrup 2019, p. 2751).

Our first theoretical expectation is therefore that the more external precedent of democratic regression is observed abroad, the higher the level of democratic regression becomes at home.

> *H1: The more precedent of democratic regression is observed abroad, the higher the level of democratic regression at home.*

Furthermore, beyond the argument that diffusion is happening, we want to examine the mechanisms through which the diffusion occurs. We further zoom in on the effect of the external precedents of democratic regression in processes of diffusion. Mechanisms of diffusion can include a fair number of different causal mechanisms, like learning, imitation, bandwagoning, emulation, and mimicry. Elkins and Simmons (2005) suggested a broad classification of two kinds of diffusion mechanisms, namely when external precedents alter the conditions for adaption and when external precedents provide information about the conditions, including benefits or drawbacks of adopting. By the first, adoption would be a reaction to altered conditions, and by the second, adoption would be the result of learning from examples. Each of these broad classes comprises a set of varied mechanisms. In the below, we leverage on the logic underlying some of them.

We suggest to unpack what 'more' external precedent of democratic regression means and set out to examine two proposed mechanisms at work in diffusion of regression; the *power of numbers* and the *power of prominence*. The occurrence of external precedent of democratic regression in a country's regional and neighboring environment could manifest either as a few cases of drastic democratic regression, i.e. prominent examples, or as many cases of slow and gradual erosion of democratic

institutions, i.e. inconspicuous examples. Does one or two prominent cases of regression abroad have the same effect as many less visible or noticeable examples on domestic regression? This might be the case, but we argue that there are two different diffusion mechanisms at work here, with different logics, which we wish to test for.

The power of numbers logic suggests that actors engaging in democratic regression at home are highly sensitive to the number or proportion of cases of external precedents of democratic regression abroad. The logic rests on the assumption that the benefits of adoption rise as a direct result of the number of others that adopt, and that this therefore alters the conditions for adopting. This is most aligned with what Elkins and Simmons (2005, p. 39) referred to as cultural norms mechanisms, where the value of norms, be they liberal or illiberal, largely stems from their prevalence in a population. This logic can also be seen as a largely reputational one because it confers a degree of legitimacy – or immunity or cover from criticism – to join a growing majority of adopters. This is arguably extra pertinent when pursuing and adopting non-democratic policies in democracies. Focusing on the number of external precedents, we therefore hypothesize that:

> *H1a: The higher the number of precedents of democratic regression is observed abroad, the higher the level of democratic regression at home.*

The power of prominence logic suggests that one or two prominent examples may be just as instructive to a country's democratic regression as many more inconspicuous examples, if not more. This follow the availability mechanism synthesized by Elkins and Simmons (2005) where they posit that "it is likely that the policy of prominent nations will be highly available, and consequently, policymakers will tend to weight those cases disproportionately" (p. 44). This is also akin to what the argument in the policy transfer perspective that policy diffuses from (global) centers of power and influence to the periphery in the international system. Prominent nations in the context of democratic regression would typically be those considered paradigmatic examples of democratic regression, countries which receive a lot of attention either because of the significant rollback of democracy, such as Hungary or Turkey since the 2010s, or because of their significance to the value of democracy, like the United States under Trump. Just like it is likely that the US typically has served as a most available case of presidentialism for many democratizing countries (Elkins and Simmons 2005, 44), it is also likely that the erosion of democratic institutions in the US in later years is a most available case to learn from for non-democratic political elite pursuing backsliding strategies.

> *H1b: The more prominent external precedents of democratic regression is observed abroad, the higher the level of democratic regression at home.*

Data

A Novel Way of Measuring Democratic Regression

We design a new measure of democratic regression that has two crucial main features: First, our indicator distinguishes gradual democratic regression from abrupt democratic breakdown. Second, it isolates regression from both, democratization and stagnation. We therefore operationalize three key elements of the main theoretical concepts of democratic regression (Bermeo 2016; Waldner and Lust 2018): that democratic regression is a downward shift in democratic quality; that it is gradual rather than abrupt, and therefore distinct from democratic breakdown; and that it takes place in democracies.[2]

[2] We exclude a fourth criterion listed by Bermeo (2016, 5): that democratic regression is "state-led". Building into the concept the (state) actors responsible for democratic regression introduces causality that we prefer to exclude at the conceptual level, in order to avoid the risk of tautology when applying the concept to causal analysis. One could also argue that the criterion is redundant in the sense that all regime change must ultimately be executed by regime actors, new or old. Bermeo's key point, however, seems to be that responsible actors are often democratically elected - a point well taken.

We use data from the Varieties of Democracy project to operationalize democratic regression (Lindberg et al. 2014), specifically V-Dem's indicator of electoral democracy. To construct an indicator of democratic regression, we need sufficiently sensitive data that records even small gradual shifts of democratic quality. V-Dem offers a range of democracy indicators constructed using expert evaluations and an elaborate Bayesian Item Response Model (Pemstein et al. 2021). Variables are coded on continuous interval scales, which makes them ideal to capture the gradual changes of democratic quality.

For a given country year, my indicator records annual regression compared to next year, excluding democratic breakdown. Where democracy levels have decreased gradually, the indicator gives the absolute downward shift from the previous year. By contrast, the indicator is coded 0 where there was no shift, an upward shift, or a breakdown. It is coded as a missing value in a country-year that is not democratic. A breakdown is defined as a total drop of at least .07 (two standard deviations below average annual change) between one year and the next, where the current year is democratic and the subsequent year is not.

Figure 1 shows how the indicator separates democratic regression and democratic breakdown, using the example of Turkey. The upper panel of the figure shows the V-Dem indicator of electoral democracy in Turkey since 1900; it also shows the discrete regime types - closed and electoral autocracy, electoral democracy, in grey shading of the line plot - as coded in V-Dem's Regimes of the World variable. The lower panel shows our indicators of democratic regression. It takes positive values where democratic decreases in Turkey - but not where democracy breaks down in 1970 and 1980 (marked by the upside-down triangle). Incidentally, the figure also shows how the indicator is coded only for democratic observations: while Turkey goes through non-democratic periods, the lower panel is blank.

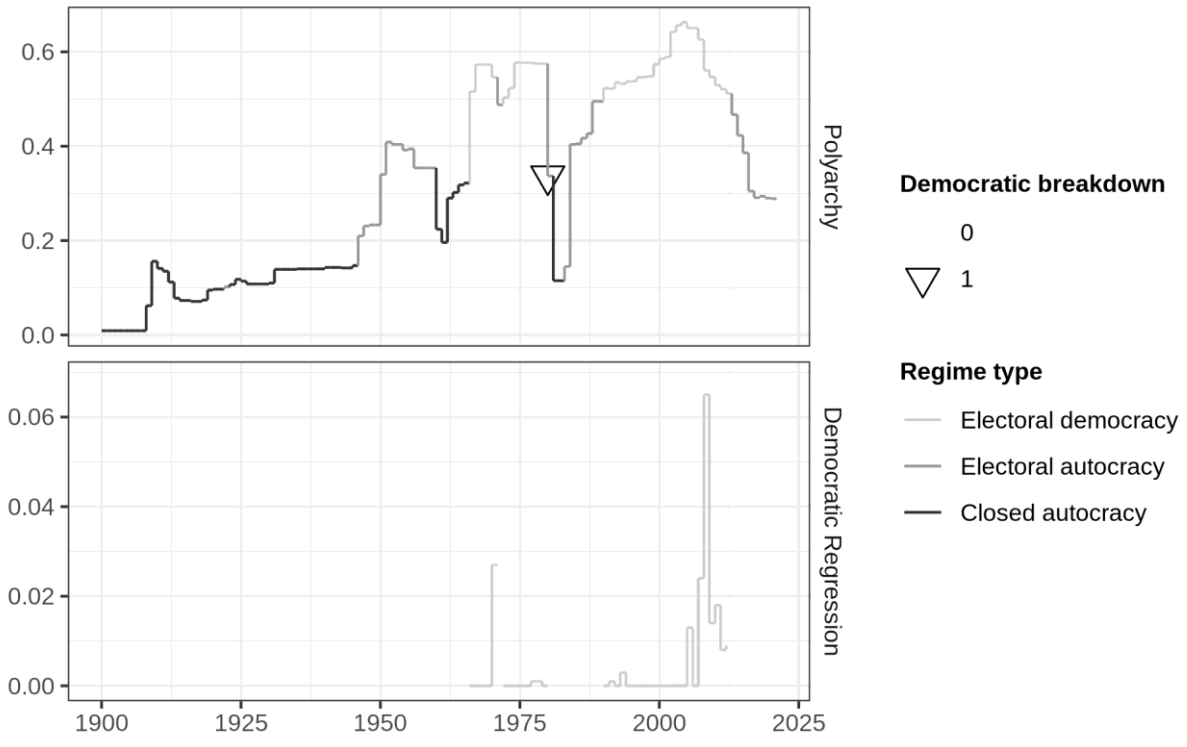

Figure 1: Democratic regression vs breakdown in Turkey

Measuring International Precedent - And Constructing the Spatial Lag

We construct two sets of variables designed to capture the external precedent of democratic regression. The first group of variables counts the *number of external democracies in regression* - according to our measure of democratic regression presented in the previous section. The second group of variables sums up the individual levels of democratic regression across all of these countries into a *cumulative total of external regression precedent*.
Note that our precedent variables do not take into account regression in external non-democratic regimes.[3]

For both sets of variables, we construct versions that record the number of democracies in regression and the overall level of their combined regression in a destination county's direct neighbourhood, its wider geographical region, and globally. Research on the diffusion of democracy has established that it matters *where* precedent takes place. It is assumed that democracy is more likely to diffuse from origin countries that are closer to the destination, rather than further away. This assumption has found solid support in empirical studies, and we therefore include it in our analysis as the state-of-the-art. Operationally, many diffusion studies distinguish whether precedent takes place among neighbours, in the region, or worldwide (Starr 1991; Skrede Gleditsch and Ward 2008; Cederman, Gleditsch, and Wucherpfennig 2017). We follow this approach with the three versions of variables we construct.[4]

Finally, we construct versions of the precedent variables capturing the number of regression countries and their combined external regression from the previous to the current year, and cumulatively for the previous three, five, and ten years.

In sum, by constructing the precedent variables in this fashion, we are effectively constructing a spatial lag. Spatial lag models are a well established tool to model diffusion processes (PLÜMPER and NEUMAYER 2010; Neumayer and Plümper 2012). The variables we constructed entail a spatial element in that they differentiate precedent by distinct spatial categories - neighbourhood, region, or global. All precedent variables are included with a one-year lag in relation to the dependent variable. In addition, we construct the above mentioned versions accumulating precedent over time to achieve an even more comprehensive picture of the time dimension in the diffusion of democratic regression.

Analysis

Method: Bayesian Tobit Model

We use Bayesian panel models to examine the effects of external precedent on democratic regression. Bayesian statistics are becoming more widely used in the social sciences, and often appear the more appropriate model choice for the kind of non-random data we analyze in Comparative Politics and International Relations (Brandt and Freeman 2006; Lynch and Bartlett 2019). More specifically, we use a Bayesian Tobit model to accommodate our zero-inflated indicator of democratic regression

[3] We make a small exception from this rule: if a country experiences democratic regression to the point where it crosses the threshold into autocracy, we continue to include it in the precedent measures for a period of five years, while gradually reducing the weight the respective country has in the indicator, from 1 in the first post-transition year, to 0 after six years. This coding reflects the assumption that a precedent country does not immediately disappear from the radar of any potential destination country once it has turned autocratic, but that it rather slowly fades away as a relevant example over a period of time. While the five-year period and the rate by which we let the precedent fade out is ultimately arbitrary, we think this is a more realistic approach than just dropping a precedent country from the index the moment it stopped being considered democratic by the V-Dem team. For more details on the precise implementation of the fade-out, please consider the commented replication code provided in the supplementary materials.

[4] In addition, we construct a set of variables in which external precedent is weighted by a continuous measure of distance (in km) from the destination. We present the results from a set of models using this indicator in the online appendix.

(Tobin 1958; see also Smithson and Shou 2020). The indicator includes an excessive number of zeroes, due to the way in which we constructed it - remember, all positive annual shifts we set to zero. For an unusual distribution like this, a log transformation that is often applied to approximate a normal distribution of right-skewed data is not effective (see Figure 2): while log-transformation will spread out the distribution of values close to zero and pull higher values closer together, the relative position of exact zeroes in the distribution is not affected. The distribution remains right-skewed.

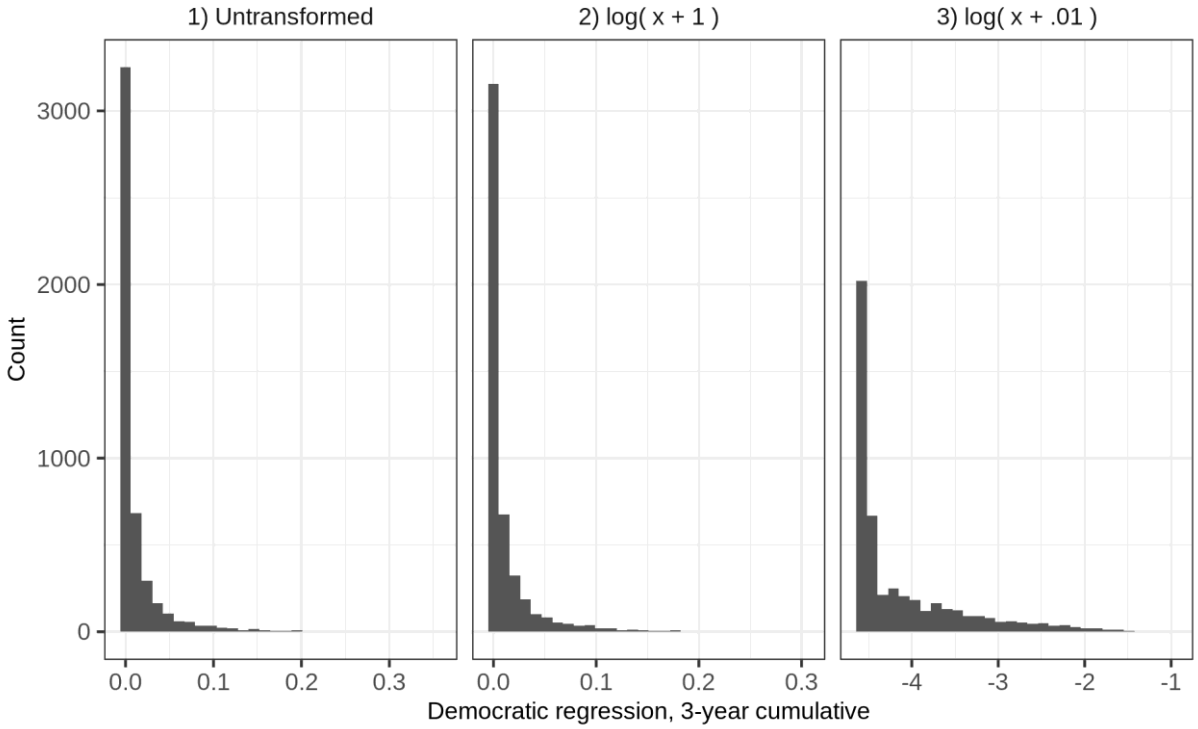

Figure 2: Ineffective log-transformation of zero-inflated indicator of democratic regression

An unusual distribution like this requires a specialized method of analysis: a Tobit model. Developed by James Tobin (he of the Tobin Tax) in the 1950s, the method is designed to model zero-inflated household expenditure data (Tobin 1958). The idea is that there zero-inflated distribution is "censored": there is an underlying normal distribution, but it is capped at the lower end because of the way the data is generated. In the original application of Tobin's household expenditures, censoring occurs because measurement is not fine-grained enough to capture expenditures lower than a certain threshold. When household expenditure figures are collected, people will record if they buy a new dish washer, but not if they buy new bin bags. So the lower expenditure of the bin bags - a veritable household expenditure - will not appear in the figures, leaving the distribution cut off at the lower end. Households that never bought anything more expensive than a bin bag will appear in the data as zeroes, although they actually did have expenditures.

This approach fits very well to the data generation process involved in the construction of our new measure of democratic regression. Here, too, the distribution is capped at the lower end: while the annual difference in democratic levels will observe a normal distribution - there will be positive and negative changes spread more or less symmetrically around a median of zero (no change) - we artificially censor the bell curve by setting observations with positive shifts (i.e. democratization) to zero. As we have explained above, this is a deliberate move to isolate democratic regression form stagnation and democratization.[5]

[5] A similar problem befalls our main independent variables, measuring the precedent of democratic regression abroad. Given that these variables are derived from the zero-inflated indicator of democratic regression, they also show right-skewed distributions. However, since the variables are aggregated across many countries and over

Model Specifications

To test our hypotheses, we run five sets of models: Two additive models in which main independent variables are the the two different precedent variables - the number of democracies in regress, and their sum total level of regression, respectively. These models test our first hypothesis H1 on the general effect of precedent on regression. Next, we run three interactive models with interaction terms of the two precedent variables. We run one model each including interaction terms on neighbourly, regional, and global regression. These models test our second and third hypotheses, H1a and H1b, on whether the power of numbers or the power of prominence is driving the diffusion of democratic regression. The conditional effect implemented by the interaction terms will allow us to evaluate whether the overall level of external backsliding has a stronger or weaker effect when it derives from many (power of numbers) or few external origin countries (power of prominence), respectively.
We constructed three versions of our regression measure as dependent variables: annual regression as described above, and a two and three-year cumulative version of it. The dependent variable in all models we present here is the two-year cumulative regression; and as independent variables the three-year cumulative versions of the precedent variables. We present models using alternative versions of these variables - annual and three-year regression; annual, five and ten-year precedent - in the online appendix. The results of these robustness tests support the main finding presented here.

We adjust all of our models for the panel structure of our data by estimating country-fixed effects and including a one-year lag of the dependent variable (Beck and Katz 1995, 1996; Beck, Katz, and Tucker 1998).[6]

We include a small set of control variables potentially confounding the relation between external precedent and democratic regression. A first important group of controls is the *number of democracies* among neighbours, in the region, and globally in a given year. The two main indicators of regression precedent are conditioned by the number of available democracies: naturally, if there are more democracies around, the number of democracies in regression, and the sum total of backsliding they accumulate, is also potentially higher. Including the variables ensures we are not confounding any effect of precedent we see with the fact that there are simply more democracies to begin with. At the same time, controlling for the number of democracies also standardizes the effect of overall regression precedent across neighbourhoods and regions with more and fewer democracies. We construct variables giving the numbers of democracies based on V-Dem data.

A key challenge for any diffusion model is to isolate actual diffusion effects from mere simultaneous developments due to common causes. Simultaneous cases of democratic regression might create the impression of diffusion. However, if they are driven by a common cause, rather than causing each other to regress, we cannot speak of diffusion. The question is - to quote Brinks and Coppedge (2006) - whether diffusion is an illusion.

One effective way to hold constant common causes is to control for specific time-periods. That way, any global trends that might influence regression are accounted for. Effectively, controlling for time-periods introduces period-fixed effects into the models. While these are often includes as year-fixed effects, we opt to control for more substantively meaningful longer time-periods associated with *historical waves of democratization* (Huntington 1991; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Gunitsky 2018). Borrowing from these authors' work, we construct a variable that distinguishes five democratization waves since WWII (1946-74, 1974-94, 1994-2000, 2000-07, and 2007-23).

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several years, the bias in the distribution is less pronounced. In most cases, taking the logarithm will achieve the desired transformation of the distribution. The exception are the group of indicators capturing external regression among neighbouring countries. In order to alleviate the problem with this group of indicators, we include a set of dummy variables in the models that is coded 1 for any value larger than zero on the respective neighbouring precedent variable, and 0 otherwise.

[6] Given the the debate about the de-facto Beck-Katz standard, we estimate the complete array of models without the lagged dependent variable - with by and large the same results. These models can be inspected in the online appendix.

We can also directly control for a number of prominent common causes. For example, *polarization* is one of the most important domestic factors related to democratic regression in the literature. When polarization is in fact the common cause for democratic regression in many countries at the same time, we might misread the emerging pattern for diffusion. Controlling for polarization alleviates this risk. Therefore we include V-Dem's variable on political polarization in our models.

Populism often acts as a catalyst for democratic backsliding (Weyland 2020; Anna Vachudova 2020). Populist movements typically challenge established democratic norms and institutions by promoting anti-elite and anti-establishment rhetoric, which can erode public trust in traditional democratic processes and institutions. This erosion can lead to increased polarization, institutional weakening, and the concentration of power in populist leaders, all of which are critical factors contributing to democratic regression. Gvein that populism has been on the rise simultaneously in many countries in the past two decades, including it a a control variable bolster our models against mistaking the globla spread of populism for the diffusion or democratic regression.

Finally, we include the level inflation. Economic instability, particularly if it manifests through high inflation, can undermine public confidence in democratic institutions. Inflation erodes purchasing power and can lead to widespread economic hardship, fostering social discontent and increasing the appeal of authoritarian solutions that promise stability and control . If inflation happens simultaneously in many countries, as it often does in time of global economic difficulty, we might mistake for the the diffusion of democratic backsliding what is in fact a common consequence of economic crisis.

Findings: Additive Models

The first additive model assesses the *effect of the number of external democracies in regression* in the immediate neighbourhood and region of a country, as well as globally, in the past three years on the two-year cumulative level of regression in the subsequent two years in the destination democracy. Figure 3 gives the posterior distributions for the effects of the three variables counting cases of external democratic regression in the neighbourhood, region, and globally. (See the regression table in the appendix.)

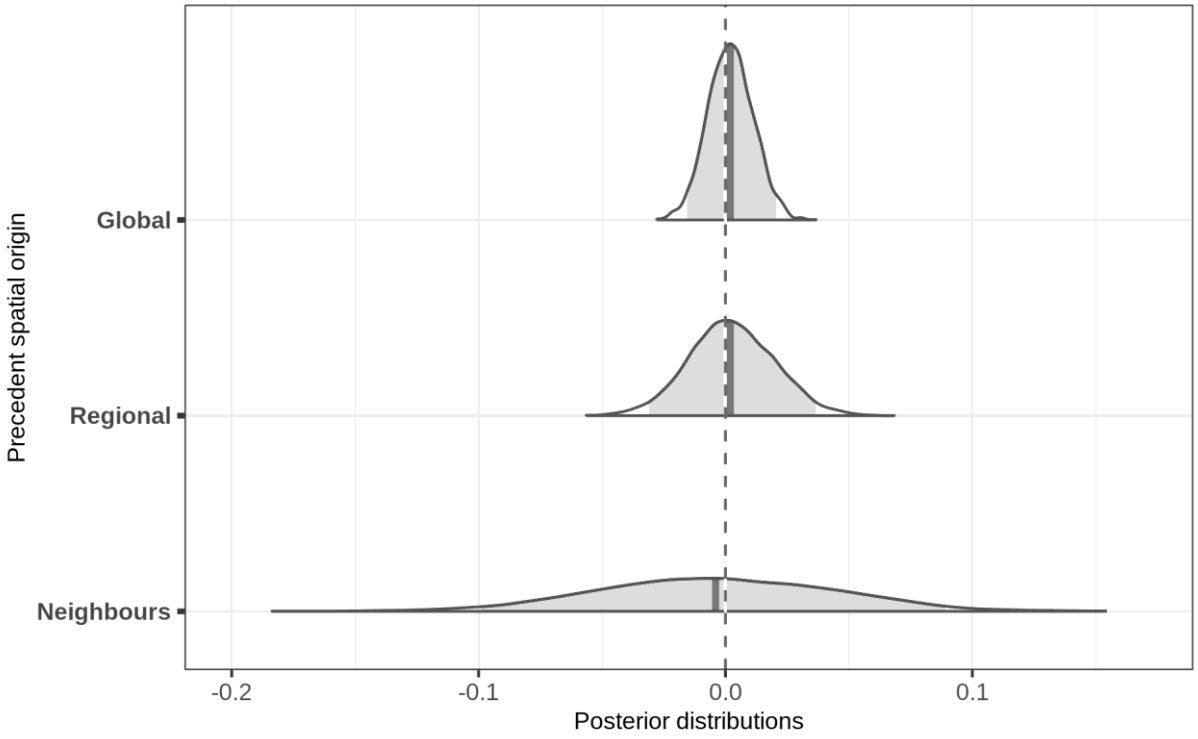

Figure 3: Bayesian Tobit regression coefficient posterior distributions

Focusing on the three key variables related to the diffusion of democratic regression, the model shows that the number of neighboring countries experiencing democratic backsliding (pol.n.ngh.3) has a negligible impact on a country's likelihood to experience similar regression, with an estimate of -0.00 and a 95% credible interval (CI) from -0.10 to 0.09. Similarly, the number of countries within the broader region experiencing democratic regression (pol.n.rgn.3) shows minimal effect, with an estimate of 0.00 and a 95% CI from -0.03 to 0.04. Lastly, the number of countries globally experiencing democratic backsliding (pol.n.glb.3) also has a negligible influence, with an estimate of 0.00 and a 95% CI from -0.02 to 0.02. These findings suggest that the sheer number of external countries undergoing democratic regression, whether neighboring, regional, or global, does not significantly impact an individual country's democratic stability, highlighting the greater importance of internal factors and historical political trajectories.

The second additive model assesses the *effect of the combined overall level of regression among external democracies* in the immediate neighbourhood and region of a country, as well as globally, in the past three years on the two-year cumulative level of regression in the subsequent two years in the destination democracy. Figure ?? gives the posterior distributions for the effects of the three sum precedent variables on democratic regression. The updated model highlights the influence of precedent variables on democratic regression by examining the sum total of democratic backsliding among neighboring, regional, and global countries in the past three years.

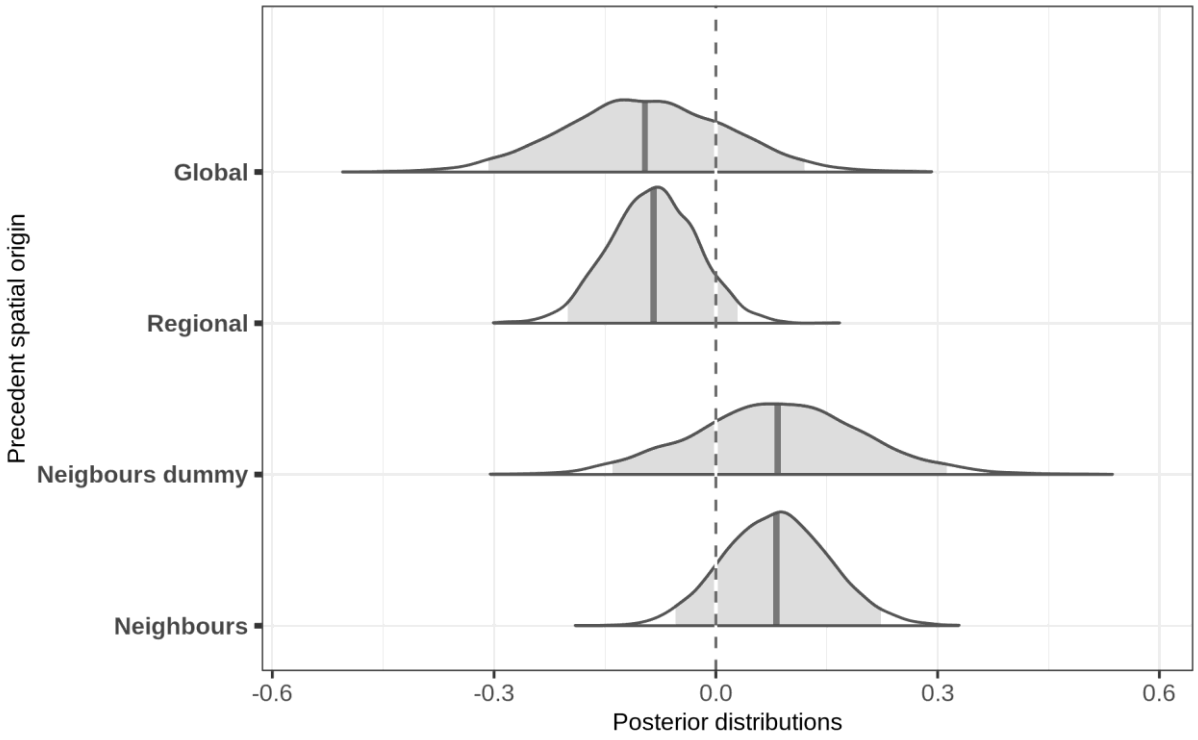

Figure 4: Bayesian Tobit regression coefficient posterior distributions

The logarithmic transformation of the total amount of democratic regression among neighboring countries (log(pol.prc.ngh.3 * 100 + 1)) has a positive estimate of 0.08, with a 95% credible interval (CI) from -0.06 to 0.22, indicating that higher cumulative backsliding in neighboring countries may slightly increase the likelihood of democratic regression within a country. Conversely, the total amount of regional democratic backsliding (log(pol.prc.rgn.3 * 100 + 1)) shows a negative estimate of -0.09 with a CI from -0.20 to 0.03, suggesting that increased regional backsliding might slightly reduce the likelihood of similar trends, although this effect is not strongly pronounced. Similarly, the global precedent variable (log(pol.prc.glb.3 * 100 + 1)) also has a negative estimate of -0.09 with a CI from -0.31 to 0.12, indicating that global democratic backsliding does not significantly influence a country's democratic stability. These findings underscore that while neighboring countries'

democratic regression can have a slight positive impact on a country's likelihood of backsliding, regional and global trends in democratic backsliding do not significantly affect individual countries.

Note that in addition to the indicator of the level of neighbour regression, we also include a dummy variable that is coded 1 if there is any regression at all among neighbours, and 0 otherwise. We include this variable to accommodate the zero-inflated distribution of the neighbour precedent levels variable which - similar to the dependent variable - cannot be adjusted by logarithmic transformation. Similarly to the neighbour regression levels indicators, the dummy has a slightly positive but relatively uncertain effect.

In sum, we find only modest support for our general hypothesis H1: there is some evidence that democratic regression in the immediate neighbourhood increases the level of domestic regression, but regional and global regression levels doe not appear to have an effect, and the mere numbers of external democracies in regression has no effect at all. We now turn to test our (more differentiated) hypotheses H1a and H1b, which address the mechanisms of the power of numbers and the power of prominence behind the diffusion of regression more generally.

Findings: Interactive Models

We estimate three interactive models that contain one interaction term each. The first model interacts the number of regressing democracies with their combined levels of regression in a country's immediate neighbourhood; the second models does the same for regression precedent in a countries region; the third model assesses global interaction. The conditional effects evaluated by the three models are illustrated in the three Figures 5, 6, and 7. We show marginal predicted effects (y-axis) of the level of external regression (x-axis) for three meaningful exemplary numbers of external cases: a single external case; an intermediate number (the median from the distribution); and a high number (the 75th percentile, or for the neighbours, the maximum number).

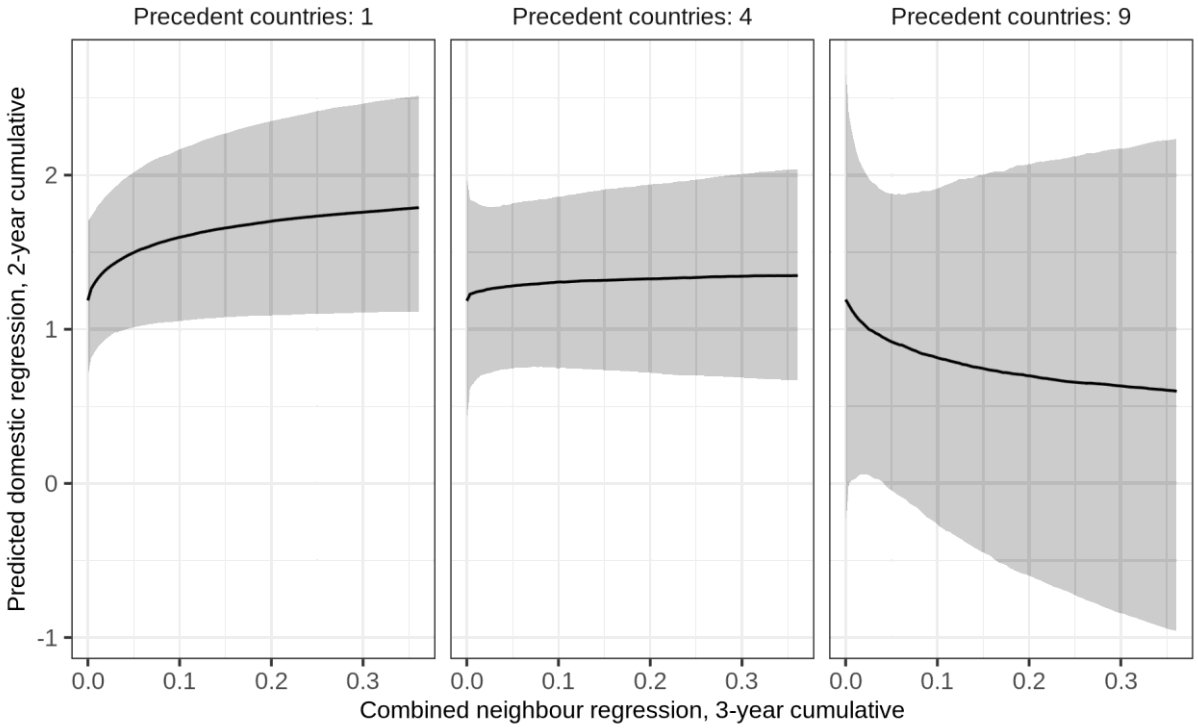

Figure 5: Interaction: combined neighbour regression x number neighbour precedent countries

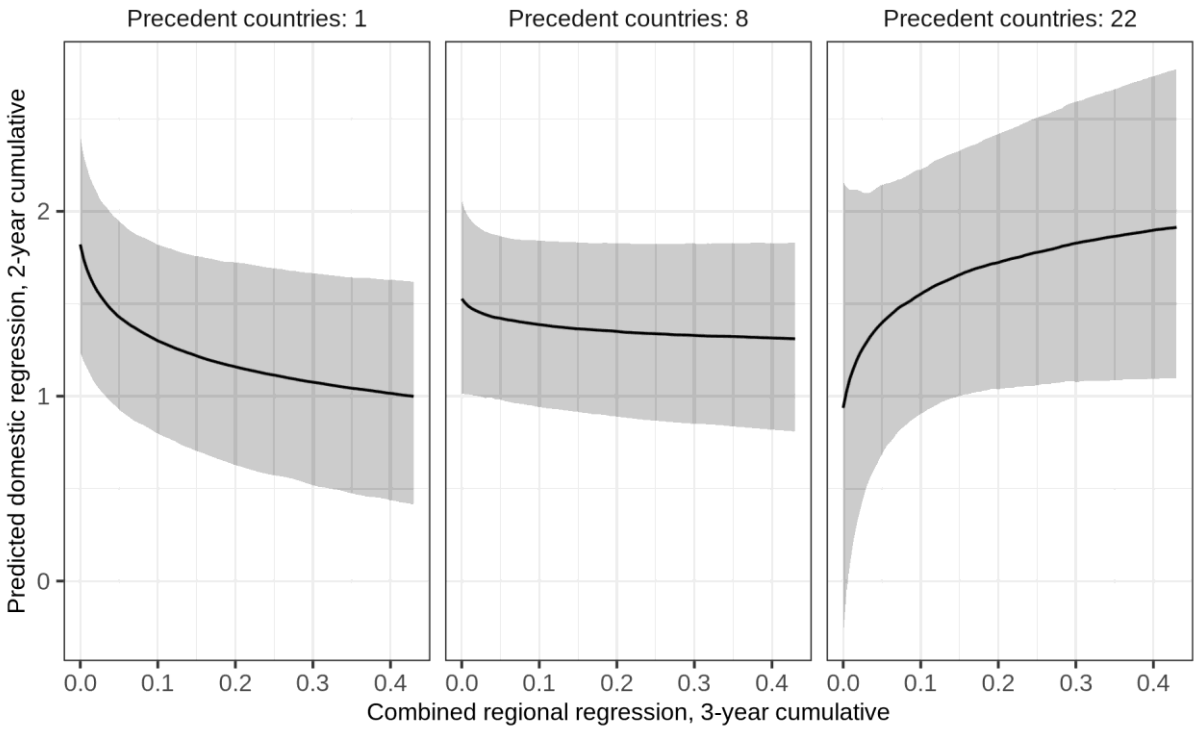

Figure 6: Interaction: combined regional regression x number regional precedent countries

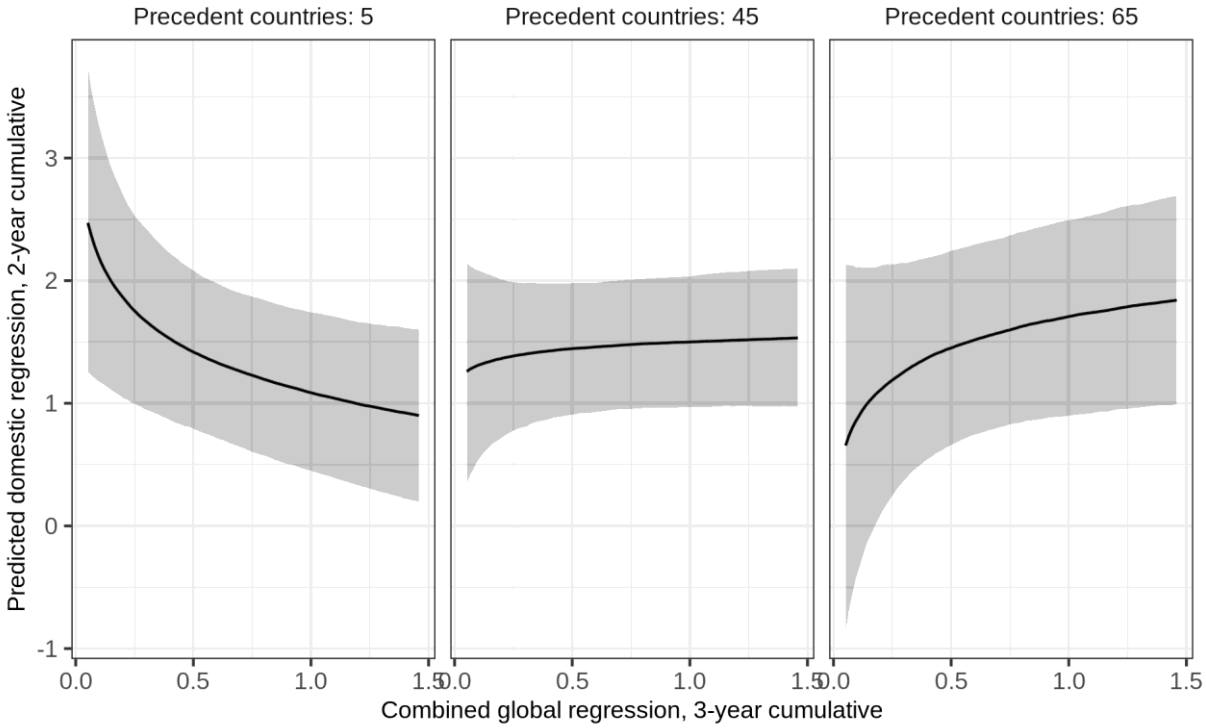

Figure 7: Interaction: combined global regression x number global precedent countries

Our findings show that the effect of the level of external regression is indeed conditional on the number of countries this precedent originates from. What is more, the conditional effect is different for diffusion among neighbour, regional democracies, and across the globe.

Among neighbours, we see a positive effect for precedent emanating from a single external precedent democracy (in the left-most panel in Figure 5): as that democracy's level of regression increases, so does the level of regression in the destination country. By contrast, when more neighbour democracies experience regression, the effect becomes smaller, and ultimately negative (the center and right-most panels), albeit with a lot of uncertainty (i.e., a wide credibility interval). This findings lends support for hypothesis H1b on the power of prominence in neighbour diffusion.

Note that the operationalization of the power of prominence via a small number of precedent cases does not take into account the size, power, or importance of these countries - their actual prominence. We believe that the demonstrated effect is a good approximation, and that it is likely that an effect from few countries in fact derives from few prominent ones. However, a more direct test of the power of prominence might involve weighting precedent cases by their population size or GDP, or other indicators of their actual prominence. We plan to pursue this research avenue in future versions of the paper.

By contrast, regarding regional and global precedent, we observe the opposite pattern: where there are more example countries, their combined level of regression has a positive effect (see the right-most panels in figures 6 and 7). The fewer external countries provide precedent, the less pronounce this effect becomes (until it reverses for very few or only one example country). This finding provide support for the power of numbers in regional and global diffusion of democratic regression.

Tentative Conclusion and Outlook

This paper presented preliminary findings from a project in progress. Our findings highlight the importance of international factors, particularly diffusion, in the explanation of democratic regression. We could demonstrate that democratic regression diffuses across borders, and provided initial evidence that diffusion processes are driven by the power of numbers and the power of prominence, depending on where it take place – among neighbours, or in a wider regional or global context.

The next step for this project is to include two illustrative case studies. Claims of diffusion are claims about causal processes. Proposed diffusion mechanisms must therefore be subject to rigorous empirical testing. Ambrosio and Tolstrup (2019) provide an excellent methodological critique of the recent (qualitative) literature on authoritarian diffusion. They call for a more rigorous methodological approach to the study of autocracy diffusion, particularly in qualitative studies, and emphasise the importance of more careful case selection, analysis of causal mechanisms, and attention alternative explanations. In order to justify a diffusion claim, researchers need to demonstrate the process through which the later adoptions or practices in one setting were caused by the fact that the item or innovation in question, like a policy or political strategy, was found earlier in another setting (Ambrosio et al. 2019, p. 2744). Process-tracing is a deductive methodology and well suited to validate a causal relationship and to explicitly test hypotheses in single case studies (Beach et al. 2013; Collier 2011). Due to space constraints, this paper will provide two short illustrative case examples of our proposed diffusion mechanisms. The strength of these brief case illustrations lies in our case selection.

We (will) select case countries which have experienced considerable levels of democratic regression and observed extensive external precedent. To examine the suggested mechanisms of 'power by numbers' or 'power by prominence', the cases are selected based on the number and prominence of external precedents in their regional environment.

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