

Challenges to Democracy

Session 9: Global Crises

Mirko Wegemann

Universität Münster
Institut für Politikwissenschaft

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Plan for today's session

- feedback
- effect of global crises on democracy
 - Cerkez, N. (2025). *Extreme Weather Events and the Support for Democracy*. <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:7b30c525-f621-46ee-9007-f52521568aca/files/s3f462793f>

Your Feedback

Before starting with the substantive part of the session, we'll do a short feedback session:



Figure: Link to the survey <https://www.menti.com/al9tibw3f6ph>

Crisis governance – A moral dilemma?

We can distinguish political legitimacy in categories like...

- **input** legitimacy: how power is constituted (e.g. elections)
- **output** legitimacy: does governance lead to outcomes that improve conditions of a society

How do crises affect the two sources of legitimacy?

Crisis governance – A moral dilemma?

1. authoritarian ways of governing might be employed
2. i.e., output/foundational legitimacy may be prioritized over contingent legitimacy
3. long-term prospects of crisis may not only lead to repeated authoritarian instances of governance but shift the prospects of what is regarded as legitimate

As Mittiga (2022) puts it “if contemporary conditions were to change, would rights and democracy remain central to legitimacy?” (1001)

Climate change as a state of emergency?

- guaranteeing basic needs is already inhibited by climate change
- climate change serves as a multiplier reinforcing existing threats to basic needs

An authoritarian way of handling climate change?

- restricting life styles contributing to climate change (e.g. flying, nutrition etc.)
- banning misinformation on climate change → weakening of free speech
- establish bureaucracy that agrees with climate change action
- overturn referenda and ignore democratic opinion

Extreme Weather Events and the Support for Democracy

In a way, Cerkez (2025) provide a test of the argument by Mittiga (2022)

- **Research Question:**
- **Main Argument:**
- **Data and Analysis:**
- **Results:**
- **Implications:**

Relevance and Question

Why should one study the relationship between droughts and democracy?

Relevance and Question

As a consequence of climate change

- natural catastrophes will increase
- ...as Mittiga (2022) suggests this may lead to an erosion of democratic support (at least if democracies cannot deliver on climate change action)

RQ: Do citizens exposed to climate change become less committed to democracy?

Main argument

Related to what we learned last week, political norms shape regime stability. But here, there's a reinforcing relationship.

- your day-to-day experiences update your priors on regime support
- if democratic regimes perform well, you are more likely to support them

Main argument

However, if democratic regimes fail to perform well (e.g. in crisis mitigation), people may watch out for alternative ways of governance:

- presence of a foreign power (China and the World Bank)
- in the case of Chinese development aid, people receive a signal of an authoritarian regime performing better in crisis handling than their own democratic regime

Data

Three main types of data, **survey**, **administrative** and **weather** data

- five rounds of **Afrobarometer** ($N=129,002$)
- we know the location of the respondent (geocoded data)
- main question of interest: opinion on regime type
- follow-up question on what democracy means for individuals
- for **mechanism check**: matched with World Bank and geocoded data on Chinese projects

Data

Weather data:

- focus on droughts as a significant example of anthropogenic climate change
- use of **SPEI**-index that classifies whether an area experiences wet or drought-like conditions
- available from 1960 onwards, on a small scale area ($27 \times 27 \text{ km}$)
- 12-months average compared to historical data for analysis

Data

Wording of the question:

“Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion?

A: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government. B: In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable. C: For someone like me, it doesn’t matter what kind of government we have.”

What's your take on this measure?

Data

In terms of modelling, Cerkez (2025) simply regresses the support for democracy on the drought index for each individual i in each enumeration area e in a grid cell g for time t (including some control variables at individual-level)

$$\text{Support for democracy}_{iegt} = \delta_g + \tau_t + \beta \text{ Drought Index}_{gt} + x_{iegt} \gamma + \epsilon_{iegt} \quad (1)$$

Data

On which assumptions does the modelling strategy rest?

Data

1. **randomness of weather** → weather is independent from institutions
2. **homogeneity in treatment** effect across countries (fulfilled; although, there is quite high effect heterogeneity)
3. treatment (droughts) do **not affect survey roll-out** (probably not violated; sample remains balanced; even if countries with high emigration patterns are dropped)

Results

Table 2: Extreme Weather Events and the Support for Democracy

	Respondent supports democracy (1)	Respondent doesn't support		
		(2)	(3)	(4)
Drought index	-0.011** (0.005)	-0.022*** (0.006)	0.001 (0.005)	-0.011* (0.006)
Mean of outcome	0.859	0.741	0.798	0.833
Effect of one drought (2 SDs)	-2.56%	-5.94%	0.25%	-2.64%
Household controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cell fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Month by year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
SEs clustered at cell level	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	63890	76487	75951	75466

Figure: Main results (Cerkez 2025, p. 36)

What does that mean substantially?

Results

	Respondent supports democracy	Democracy index	Trust in government	Trust in institutions
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Drought index	-0.012** (0.005)	-0.040** (0.016)	-0.067*** (0.013)	-0.071*** (0.012)
Drought index x country is autocratic	0.009 (0.013)	0.061* (0.037)	0.113** (0.045)	0.042 (0.036)
Coefficient of index + interaction	-0.003 p-value: Coefficient of index + interaction	0.021 [0.532]	0.046 [0.274]	-0.029 [0.383]
Mean of outcome		0.859		
Effect of one drought (2 SDs) (no interaction)	-2.79%	-9.31%	-15.60%	-16.53%
Effect of one drought (2 SDs) (interaction)	-0.70%	4.89%	10.7%	-6.75%

Figure: Effect of droughts in democracies vs. autocracies Cerkez (2025, p. 37)

→ Why are these effects only valid for consolidated democracies?

“individuals deliberately give up some freedom in exchange for a less democratic country if, for example, they believe that “less democracy” is better at dealing with climate change.” (Cerkez 2025, p. 14)

Results

	Respondent supports democracy					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Drought index	-0.002 (0.005)	0.000 (0.005)	-0.001 (0.006)	0.000 (0.006)	0.000 (0.006)	-0.001 (0.007)
Drought index x Chinese project (50km)		-0.022*** (0.007)				
Drought index x Chinese project (100km)			-0.022*** (0.007)			
Drought index x World Bank project (50km)				-0.007 (0.007)		
Drought index x World Bank project (100km)					-0.008 (0.007)	
Drought index x World Bank project (50km)						-0.004 (0.007)
Drought index x World Bank project (100km)						0.003 (0.008)
Coefficient of exposure to project	-0.024 [0.002]	-0.022 [0.001]	-0.009 [0.113]	-0.008 [0.112]	-0.004 [0.563]	0.003 [0.675]
p-value: Coefficient of exposure to project						

Results

...and only for individuals who were exposed to development projects by China or the World Bank [even if they do not benefit economically from it]. + development aid even reduces potential for riots and willingness to demonstrate

Everything said?

The effect of droughts on support for democracy is only present if individuals were exposed to international power.

- How can we explain the assumed long-term effect of exposure to development aid on individuals support for democracy?
[once exposed to development aid, individuals remain treated]
- Would the argument also work in reverse – e.g. by looking at development aid by the US or EU?

Everything said?

Some methodological choices could benefit from more clarification:

- Are there any intrinsic reasons to focus on sub-Saharan Africa only?
- Why only focusing on droughts if one has data on floods as well?
- Why are respondents who conceive political regimes as irrelevant for themselves not treated as a separate category?
...despite this being quite a popular choice.
- 12-months rolling average of SPEI-index may be too close to disaster if mechanism is about government's handling of crisis
- Do people associate development aid with regime type?
Cerkez (2025) cannot test that

Summary

- **Gap, relevance and RQ:** Does the experience of natural disasters affect the support for democracy?
- **Main Argument:** People base their support for a regime on individual experiences with it
- **Data and Analysis:** mainly geo-localized survey data from sub-Saharan Africa (Afrobarometer); matched data on development aid by China
- **Results:** Droughts negatively affect trust in government and institutions; effect mediated by presence of international actor
- **Implications:** Crises mitigate support for democratic idea

Conclusion

What we have learned from today...

- continuing episodes of crises might undermine democratic legitimacy (Mittiga 2022)
- individuals tend to support anti-democratic principles if they are affected by climate crises (Cerkez 2025)
- international authoritarian actors might (successfully) promote their ideas in times of crises

To prepare for next week...

- in the last week before the Christmas break, we will listen to your podcast projects!
- ...and will start with the third block of our seminar: **solutions** for the challenges of democracy (performance and resilience)
- **main reading:**
 - Magalhães, P. C. (2014). Government effectiveness and support for democracy. *European Journal of Political Research*, 53(1), 77–97. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12024>
- **complementary reading**
 - Rovny, J. (2023). Antidote to Backsliding: Ethnic Politics and Democratic Resilience. *American Political Science Review*, 117(4), 1410–1428.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S000305542200140X>

Any further questions?

Literature

- Cerkez, N. (2025). *Extreme Weather Events and the Support for Democracy*. <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:7b30c525-f621-46ee-9007-f52521568aca/files/s3f462793f>
- Magalhães, P. C. (2014). Government effectiveness and support for democracy. *European Journal of Political Research*, 53(1), 77–97. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12024>
- Mittiga, R. (2022). Political Legitimacy, Authoritarianism, and Climate Change. *American Political Science Review*, 116(3), 998–1011.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421001301>
- Rovny, J. (2023). Antidote to Backsliding: Ethnic Politics and Democratic Resilience. *American Political Science Review*, 117(4), 1410–1428.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S000305542200140X>