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What Can Be Done
About the Problem of
Political Parties?

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What Can Be Done About the Problem of Political Parties?

Patrick Liddiard

This is the final in a series of occasional papers by the Wilson Center's History and Public Policy Program looking at the declining influence of political parties worldwide.

Abstract: In a world of declining political party influence, protest movements and organized labor have increasingly served as vehicles to express grievances and channel political action. However, the limits of protest movements and labor unions' activities—and their frequent turns to electoral politics—point to the essential role that political parties play in holding governments to account. Given the increase in nontraditional political mobilization through protest and civil society organizations, political parties can best harness this energy through increased engagement and substantive internal deliberation. States can play a role in increasing the supply of political parties through subsidies that bolster parties' partner organizations and in boosting the demand for political parties by making voting compulsory, with appropriate accommodations for voters.

In April, Sudan's military ousted President Omar al-Bashir, who had ruled the country for nearly 30 years, in response to months of protests. Demonstrators had first taken to the street in December 2018 to protest cuts in government subsidies that had harmed the quality of life of ordinary Sudanese. The leadership of the Sudanese Professionals Association—an outlawed affiliation of professional trade unions—had seen these initial protests as an opportunity to press their demands for a higher minimum wage, but soon came to appreciate protesters' anger at the regime and joined their calls for al-Bashir's ouster.ⁱ In an authoritarian country in which a dominant ruling party monopolized politics, organized labor had served as a mass organization that could channel nonviolent mass mobilization to effect political change.

In May, France's Alliance Jaune, led by a prominent member of the "Yellow Vest" ("Gilets Jaunes") protest movement, fared the best of any Yellow Vest-affiliated list in the European Parliament election. Still, it only garnered 0.6 percent of the vote. Leaders of Alliance Jaune had sought to bring politics closer to those alienated from mainstream parties by opening positions on the list to all citizens. They also had sought to mobilize nonvoters, whom they described as representing "the majority" of the electorate.ⁱⁱ However, even as voter turnout in France rose 10 percentage points from the 2014

European Parliament election—42 percent of registered voters to 52—more supporters of the Yellow Vest movement voted for the right wing-populist National Rally than Alliance Jaune.ⁱⁱⁱ A protest movement unaffiliated with any mass organization failed to mobilize a constituency alienated from mainstream political parties.

Alliance Jaune’s failure was all the more remarkable because it occurred in an election to the body that had fueled much of the Yellow Vest protesters’ grievances, with regulations and policies imposing de facto and de jure austerity policies that directly affected the protesters’ quality of life without their direct input. Did the contrasting example of Sudan’s protests succeed because they were harnessed by a pre-existing mass organization?

In an age of declining political party influence, to what extent can other alternatives to political parties—like labor unions or nonviolent mass mobilization—hold governments accountable? And if, in fact, political parties best serve as aggregators of voter preferences that can hold governments accountable, how can parties be revitalized to better engage the electorate?

Protest and Mass Mobilization as an Alternative to Political Parties

A growing portion of the global electorate, hostile to political parties and unable or unwilling to engage with the political system, has increasingly taken to the streets to express its grievances. The work of Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan has shown that the 2010s are on track to experience more episodes of nonviolent mass mobilization—movements of at least 1,000 over the course of at least a week—than any decade since World War II. However, without a mass organization to channel discontent and press for political change at the most politically opportune time, these mass movements have also succeeded at the lowest rates since the 1960s—a 30 percent success rate between 2010 and 2015 that was much lower than the 40 to 50 percent success rates of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s.^{iv}

Looking at smaller-scale protests—any event in which 50 people or more demonstrated against the government—since 1990, we can see an increase in democracies and electoral authoritarian regimes in every region of the world. These increases are in not just in the newest democracies of Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East and North Africa, but in countries with longer histories of democracy in Southern Europe, in Brazil, and in South Asia.¹

¹ Please see Appendix A for graphs by region.

In Europe, the Southern European countries of Portugal, Spain, and Greece experienced a significant increase in protests from 2008-2012. It was there that governments, with their policy options severely restricted by EU membership and Eurozone policies,^v implemented a series of deeply unpopular austerity measures in countries still reeling from the effects of the Great Recession and mired in unemployment. Protests in Brazil also increased sharply after 2012 in response to unpopular austerity measures and a perceived lack of government responsiveness in general, such as cuts to public transportation subsidies while funding massive Olympic infrastructure projects, in addition to the widespread corruption uncovered in the “Operation Carwash” investigation.^{vi}

In democracies in South Asia and the Middle East and North Africa, demonstrators protested against a similar lack of responsiveness due to lower state capacity, a condition often exacerbated by collusion among parties to share the spoils of government at the expense of service delivery. In India and Sri Lanka, there were demonstrations against the state’s failure to address violence against women, foreign firms’ seizure of domestic land, and civil servants’ deteriorating working conditions. Protests rose sharply against poor delivery of electricity or sanitation services in Iraq and Lebanon.^{vii}

Protests were also indicators of struggles over the nature of democracy, demonstrating countries’ lack of institutionalized political competition anchored by programmatic political parties. Protesters took to the street to force democratic change in Pakistan and Nepal; protests brought democratization to Indonesia in the wake of the Asia Financial Crisis and to Tunisia in the wake of the Arab Spring. Once democracy had been achieved in some of these countries, protesters took to the streets to defend it, in successful and unsuccessful attempts in Benin, Burundi, and Senegal to prevent presidents from seeking third terms. Protests also accompanied sharply polarized political competition that precipitated democratic breakdown, such as between personalistic leaders in Bangladesh and between opponents and supporters of Thailand’s populist Thaksin.

These protests and mass mobilization efforts have not replaced the need for political parties—in fact, they demonstrate the singular role political parties play in democratic representation and accountability. The recurrence and limited success of protests suggest a lesson similar to those of peasant uprisings that would regularly recur before the age of democratization: that, absent some institutionalized mechanism for popular accountability, governments can always renege on any concessions they might make once protests have passed.^{viii} Among Southern Europe’s anti-austerity protests, some members of Spain’s “Indignados” movement, frustrated by protests’ inability to effect policy change, assessed they would need to change their strategy and move into electoral politics. As a

result, they formed the Podemos party while seeking to maintain the movement's assembly-based participatory structure in an attempt to translate members' preferences into policy.^{ix}

Similarly, the India Against Corruption (IAC) protest movement transitioned from protest movement to political party. The movement, with the charismatic social activist Anna Hazare as its public face, emerged in 2011 after a year full of corruption scandals. IAC protests began when the national government failed to advance a bill to create a strong and independent ombudsman for corruption. Although a series of nationwide protests did lead to legislative passage of the bill by year end, one of IAC's founders, Arvind Kejriwal, split with Hazare and went into electoral politics.^x Kejriwal's Aam Aadmi ("Common Person") Party (AAP) would enter the Delhi State legislature in 2013 as the second largest party and, taking many constituencies previously held by the incumbent Indian National Congress, AAP would go on to form a minority government.

The India Against Corruption movement also highlights the limitations of protest and mass mobilization in addressing the political parties' failures of representation. Because protesters are estranged from a system that is unresponsive to their views and are hostile to political parties, many protest movements profess to be anti-political. However, India Against Corruption itself, while claiming to be above politics and division, was organized by and initially attracted middle class supporters.

It was the middle class that frequently experienced petty corruption in their daily interactions and transactions with the state, rather than the potentially grand corruption and rent-seeking that contributed to the inequality that shaped the lives of the poor. Although IAC and the AAP party would go on to attract broad support, particularly from marginalized groups like youth, Muslims, and "low caste" Dalits,^{xi} their solution to corruption was a legalistic rather than political fix. In this way, IAC and AAP echoed the "there is no alternative" mantra of mainstream parties in other long-standing democracies that have converged on a technocratic approach to economic policy.

Labor Unions as an Alternative to Political Parties

Labor unions have historically served as a mass organization that can channel discontent into political change, particularly in authoritarian regimes in which few other mass member organizations exist. Labor unions played a key role in democratization in the third wave of democratization, instituting bottom-up change through inclusive deliberative structures. More recently, the Tunisian General Trade Union (UGTT) was key to the country's democratization. The UGTT was one of the few independent

organizations with a mass membership that existed under the Ben Ali regime, and the political savvy of UGTT leaders—between activist members and the government—helped make Tunisia the only Arab Spring country to emerge as a democracy.

In authoritarian regimes lacking political parties, labor unions have been incubators of democratic practices and democratization. Solidarity emerged as a part of a strategy of creating parallel civil society organizations within authoritarian Poland. After the authorities acceded to Solidarity's key demand in its 1980 strike and legalized independent trade unions, Solidarity became an organization that practiced bottom-up, direct democracy in factories across Poland.^{xii} In West Africa, trade unions played a key role in democratization, first aiding independence struggles by engaging in strikes that destabilized colonial regimes, and then working in the 1980s and 1990s with civil society groups to protest against the burdens imposed by authoritarian governments' austerity policies.^{xiii}

There were limits to the efficacy of labor action alone in authoritarian regimes. Warsaw would declare martial law in December 1981, forcing Solidarity underground. Nigerian unions in the 2000s, working in conjunction with other civil society groups to demonstrate against austerity, were able to roll back some but not all subsidy cuts and experienced considerable repression in the process.^{xiv} Facing similar constraints to those of protest movements, and often in partnership with protesters and civil society groups, many labor unions have entered the political realm to better effect political change.

Labor unions have historically played a role in the development of political parties, including much of the social democratic parties of Western Europe. For example, democratization in Sweden was the result of bottom-up pressure from organized labor, often working in conjunction with other civil society groups such as temperance movement societies and free churches for organizational skills and meeting places; by 1900, one-third of Swedes were members of unions, temperance societies, or free churches. And union members were essential to the creation of the Sweden Social Democrats, with unionists making up to 97 percent of party members by the end of the 19th Century.^{xv}

In Brazil, workers in the burgeoning auto industry in the 1970s organized from the bottom up to defy the military-backed government's control of trade unions and ban on strikes; unionists, with close connections to activists from the Catholic and Protestant Churches, human rights activists, and leftist intellectuals would form the Workers Party in 1980.^{xvi} Labor unions were also the backbone of opposition parties in Apartheid-era South Africa and post-independence Zimbabwe, forging a collective

consciousness that allowed ordinary citizens to work collectively to better their standards of living, particularly when they worked with a broad array of civil society organizations.^{xvii}

Labor unions' independence has been a key factor in their ability to develop into political vehicles. In autocratic regimes in Southern Africa, opposition parties developed out of labor unions that had been granted autonomy in their internal governance. By the time the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) launched the opposition party Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in 1999, it had gained organizational discipline from its time agitating for reform, including protesting government austerity measures and pressing for constitutional reform with a broad array of civil society organizations. This discipline led its leadership to pursue party building over office seeking—contesting seats in the ruling party's rural strongholds rather than MDC-friendly urban areas—and to screen out potentially hostile infiltrators when recruiting ruling party defectors to run as candidates. At the lowest levels, the ZCTU's preexisting organizational structure allowed trade union district committees recruit to branch members to the MDC.^{xviii}

In the absence of strong political parties, labor unions may be the only preexisting mass organization that can channel discontent. In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), most political parties have historically been elite vehicles for either purely urban or purely rural interests, with weak connections to any nationwide electorate. These weak connections between parties and voters can help explain why voter turnout in MENA has declined the most in any region the world since the end of the Cold War, a 20 percentage point drop from 62 to 42 percent.^{xix} Because of party weakness, labor unions—chiefly in the former French colonies of the Maghreb—were one of the few mass organizations that could channel popular discontent.

Unlike other MENA countries in which politics remained almost exclusively an elite affair, French colonial seizure of local notables' lands in the 19th and 20th Centuries weakened Maghrebi elites, disrupted traditional patron-client networks, and created a class of landless peasants.^{xx} Some of these landless peasants would become workers in the industrializing cities of the region, and—sometimes in partnership with European workers associated with the French Communist Party, sometimes in opposition to European leadership of workers' organizations—would form some of the Maghreb's first labor unions in the 1940s.^{xxi}

As these unions shed more and more of their European membership, they became key organizations in many Maghrebi countries' independence movements, engaging in strikes, boycotts, and demonstrations

to disrupt the French colonial administration. After independence, however, the leaders of many independence movements were able to transform the movements into one-party states, subordinating previously independent organizations like national labor federations and appointing party functionaries to their leadership.^{xxii}

Tunisia's UGTT, similar to the experience of Zimbabwe's ZCTU, had rank-and-file members who were independent from any government-appointed leadership, boosting UGTT's internal autonomy and ability to represent workers. Under Ben Ali's one-party state, the UGTT was a haven for leftist and Arab nationalist activists who lacked the ability to engage in other forms of political activity. It was dissidents like these who went against leadership and supported a 2008 strike in Gafsa, and it was local unionists in Sidi Bouzid who took Muhammad Bouazizi to the hospital and helped his family press his case at the local government office after Bouazizi's self-immolation in December 2010. Local union members would be a key part of a network that spread protests throughout central Tunisia. These local actions compelled national leadership to take on a role in mobilization, ultimately declaring the strike in Tunis that precipitated Ben Ali's ouster in January 2011.^{xxiii}

So: if even protest movements and labor unions are imperfect substitutes for—and frequent precursors to—political parties, what is to be done to revitalize political parties? How can social actors, political parties, and states' policies strengthen the connections between voters and parties?

Elites Practicing Forbearance

Elite opinion can be key to influencing mass opinion; one field experiment found that voters were more likely to support a policy if they were told that their legislator supported it, even if the voter had previously opposed the policy.^{xxiv} To what degree are elites' signals to voters undermining mainstream political parties?

Some contemporary European elites are playing a role in the rise of populist parties to bolster some elites' own privileges and enhance their wealth, whether to reduce their own taxes or to sell their own products. The German billionaire August von Finck since at least the 1990s has funded minor conservative and libertarian parties, often seeking to reduce the taxes paid by his individual businesses. Der Spiegel found evidence that Finck in the 2010s covertly provided financial support to the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) for party organizing and sympathetic campaign literature. AfD's

strong Eurosceptic stance aligns with Finck's interest in the Degussa gold trader, which has promoted gold as an investment of last resort to AfD supporters in case of the euro's collapse.^{xxv}

For Italy's left-wing populist Five Star Movement (M5S), like AfD's promoting Finck's products, the work of the party and the work of the party leaders' business interests are often intertwined. Davide Casaleggio, the son of M5S's late cofounder, operates the party's online platform for internal democracy while simultaneously running an ecommerce consultancy that advises domestic and international clients on the best strategies to boost online sales. One former M5S legislator told the Financial Times that "Casaleggio has only one objective, to become the leader in the world at developing algorithms that determine web behavior and then sell that information to clients." Casaleggio's firm also runs the blog of Beppe Grillo, M5S's other cofounder, which by 2017 generated anywhere from €220,000 to €690,000 annually.^{xxvi}

Elite support for populist parties in Europe frequently combines some businessmen's desire to advance their opportunities for personal profit, their desire to lower their tax burden, and Russian interests. In the UK, official and journalistic investigations suggest that Arron Banks, a British businessman and prominent financier of the populist UK Independence Party, may have served as a middle man for covert Russian funding of the Leave.EU campaign.^{xxvii} Banks on the eve of the referendum also received several business offers from Moscow related to his diamond interests, and a former business partner has claimed Banks illegally smuggled diamonds out of Zimbabwe, with Russian involvement in the scheme.^{xxviii}

The UK's departure from the EU would also be mutually beneficial to business owners like Banks seeking to reduce their tax burden and to Russia in its attempts to expand its influence. Brexit would remove the UK from the EU's mechanisms to cooperate on tax avoidance, and potentially create pressure on the UK to reduce its corporate tax rate to better compete with the low rates of neighboring Ireland.^{xxix} Brexit would also weaken Western multilateral organizations that Moscow believes are meant to contain Russia geopolitically.

Business elites could better moderate political behavior by calling out their fellow business owners who are violating norms of forbearance, pursuing personal profit regardless of the resulting political polarization and erosion of respect for democratic principles. Although many German banks and transportation companies ahead of the European Parliament election in May called on citizens to deny

populists their vote, these same business leaders were silent on their fellow elites, like Finck, who give material support to populist parties.^{xxx}

Parties Can Increase Demand through Greater Deliberation

On the demand side, parties face enduring challenges attracting voters because of changes to the nature of the electorate resulting from deindustrialization, globalization, and rising postmaterialism. Increasing individualism among a largely middle-class electorate in many Western European countries has created a large share of “apartisan” voters who tend to be more reliant on their own individual judgment rather than party cues when determining how to cast their votes; apartisans are also increasingly involved in political activity outside of partisan politics, such as through civil society organizations or demonstrations.^{xxx} In Europe in particular, the growth of postmaterialist values of identity have reduced the salience of left-right economic politics while increasing the salience of cultural issues, creating “tripolar” political competition. Daniel Oesch and Line Rennwald argue that culture has become a third pole off of the left/right economic axis, with voters on the left voting on both economic and cultural concerns, center-right voting on economic concerns over cultural ones, and radical right voting for cultural concerns over economic ones.^{xxxii}

Greater political party outreach, engagement, and deliberation with voters is probably a more promising avenue to re-energize parties precisely because many traditional social cleavages have become less salient to political competition. Greater internal party deliberation could make otherwise apartisan voters into more reliable party supporters by satisfying their increasing demands for political participation.

Numerous studies have shown that citizens’ public deliberation with elected officials can encourage more voters to engage in the political process—especially those most alienated from partisan or interest group politics.^{xxxiii} Similarly, Carlo Invernizzi-Accetti and Fabio Wolkenstien argue that expanded deliberation can also bolster parties by meeting citizens’ increasing demand for just the kind of engagement that they might otherwise only experience in civil society organizations and demonstrations.

Invernizzi-Accetti and Wolkenstien suggest that parties’ increased methods of deliberation have failed to staunch membership losses because these efforts have typically been efforts to aggregate member preferences, in the form of expanding voting rights to members such as in party primaries and

referendums. Such an approach fails to engage members in debate that can sharpen their individual understandings and attachments to particular issues. For that reason, they argue that parties need to better institute more internally deliberative procedures, or discussion and debate among members.

Invernizzi-Accetti and Wolkenstien suggest parties can best increase deliberation by empowering local branches with greater decision-making power. Branch-level representative would then debate these decisions in an executive committee. The representatives would then return to the branches to justify the executive committee's decisions and hear members' concerns, in a continual process of debate and discussion from both the top-down and bottom-up.^{xxxiv}

Broader deliberation can better educate both leadership and the rank-and-file of potential costs and benefits of different positions. Internal party democracy measured solely in terms of internal party assembly voting and referendums are associated with less party manifesto change;^{xxxv} this suggests that, in the absence of substantive internal discussions, greater internal party democracy hinders parties' ability to change their platforms and adjust to a changing electorate.

Parties Can Increase Demand by Revitalizing Partisanship

Beyond increased deliberation, parties need to revitalize partisanship, which can lower alienation from and indifference to parties and reduce party system volatility.^{xxxvi} Historically, politicalized social cleavages such as class, religion, ethnolinguistic group, or urban-rural divides have given rise to parties that were deeply rooted in society.^{xxxvii} Many of these cleavages can be exclusionary, and exclusionary political competition can raise the risk of large-scale political instability, including democratic breakdown.^{xxxviii} However, class and religion are historical political cleavages that are the least exclusionary in societies with expectations of class mobility and in which religious appeals transcend class and ethnicity.

Parties can boost their electoral fortunes by reemphasizing left/right economic policy differences because economic policy convergence has been a key driver of voter dealignment and party system volatility. In Latin American countries in the 1980s and 1990s, where established parties of both the center-left and center-right in Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela collapsed after converging on economic policy, Argentina's Justicialist Party thrived in the 2000s by turning back to the left and away from the market-friendly policies it had championed in the preceding decade.^{xxxix}

Some center-left European parties may be beginning to re-emphasize redistributive economic policy to distinguish themselves from their competitors. Since the center-left Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) last took the premiership in 1999 on a more centrist platform, its vote share and membership has nearly halved, with self-described party supporters increasingly abstaining from voting or switching their party vote.^{xi} Leaders of the SPD recently disavowed the party's cuts to social welfare policies during that last premiership and are considering putting an end to their role as a junior partners in the grand coalition with the center-right Christian Democratic Union.^{xii}

Revitalizing traditional center-left parties will continue to be a challenge, as they have lost considerable support to both Green parties and right-wing populists. Shari Berman has argued that the center-left in Europe has collapsed because of a dearth of new ideas to adjust to the realities of an ever-changing global economy.^{xiii} Cas Mudde believes that the ideas necessary to revitalize a new, modern class consciousness and the politics of social democracy will first have to come from think tanks and other civil society organizations outside of center-left parties. Mudde would say that social democratic party leadership and voters have become acculturated to centrist politics over the course of the past several decades, with leadership becoming accustomed to being a party in power rather than representing the interests of a social group regardless of electoral consequences, and with voters being more attuned to individualist rather than collectivist values. Embracing redistributive social democracy tenets could prove costly to center-left parties in the medium-term if voters are initially unreceptive to the message and the center-left repeatedly finds itself out of government and in opposition.^{xiii}

Religion can also be a more inclusive identity to mobilize a broad cross-section of support. Europe's Christian democratic parties have historically mobilized voters across class lines by appealing to values rooted in Christianity—integration, reconciliation, accommodation, and social plurality. At the same time, party leaders tend to state these as universal rather than purely Christian values to appeal to members of other faiths and even nonbelievers.^{xiv}

However, European Christian democratic parties, as the original catch-all, centrist parties, would be challenged to increase their partisan appeal. Christian democratic parties since the end of the Cold War have had to adopt new strategies to compete, and successful ones like the Netherlands' Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) have adopted some of right-wing populists' cultural appeals after the CDA's pursuit of more economically liberal and socially conservative policies failed to boost its fortunes.^{xv} Christian democratic parties have fared best in the absence of any right-wing populist challenger and when their leadership has been ideologically flexible, strategically adaptable, and talented organizers.^{xvi}

Christian democratic and other religious parties may have more opportunities to distinguish themselves in an increasingly secular world.^{xlvii} Historically, religious parties have had the most success when they have sought to represent religious interests not represented by other political parties, and when religious groups believed their privileges were under attack.^{xlviii}

Party mergers have historically boosted parties' fortunes, but the increasing personalization of politics in an age of mass media make it more attractive for individual party leaders to have their parties go it alone. After three center-right Dutch Christian democratic parties, each facing declining vote shares, merged to form the CDA in 1980, the party would go on to be in every government for the next 13 years;^{xlix} it has been in government in five of six governments in the 21st Century. In a similarly fashion in the 1960s and 1970s, smaller left- and right-wing parties would merge to form Israel's Labor and Likud parties, respectively—dominant parties that from 1969 to 1996 together controlled between 75 and 95 percent of the seats in the legislature.^l

State Can Increase the Supply of Political Parties by Strengthening Their Partner Organizations

States can play a role in increasing the demand for political parties by supporting partner organizations like labor unions, which tend to have more stable levels of electoral support. Partner organizations, with stable leadership connected both to the grassroots and to political party leaders, can use their deep ties to the community as a channel to communicate ordinary citizens' concerns to party leaders while also reliably turning out the vote.^{li} Revitalizing labor unions can be a key step to staunch the decline of mainstream center-left parties, which have seen their support collapse in many Western European countries.

John Schmitt and Alexandra Mitukiewicz suggest that individual government policies rather than global market forces best explain declining union membership in advanced democracies because of the wide variation in unionization trends in countries experiencing similar economic changes.^{lii} Labor union membership has historically been higher in countries in which membership is required for some kind of social welfare benefit. Union membership is highest in the so-called Ghent System countries of Belgium, Denmark, Finland, and Sweden, in which labor unions administer publicly-subsidized unemployment insurance to members. Israel's labor federation Histadrut, which for decades had provided health care

to its members, lost nearly 90 percent of its membership shortly after the government introduced universal healthcare in 1995.^{liii}

In addition to states' subsidizing union administration of unemployment insurance or healthcare, states could bolster unions by subsidizing unions' job training programs. In Germany, the government develops standard apprenticeship curricula in conjunction with businesses and labor unions, and similar programs that subsidized labor unions' carrying out the training would have the added benefit of removing the costs from businesses.^{liv} Countries could also bolster unions through attaching a benefit to membership would be by subsidizing membership dues.

Similar subsidies could buttress churches and other organizations that have served as the basis for Christian democratic and other religious parties. In Germany, where the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) has had more success than other countries with historically dominant Christian democratic parties, the state funds churches by asking members of the church to pay an additional tax. Because taxpayers who wish to avoid paying the tax must consciously opt out of church membership by leaving their church and forgoing any of their services, this system may play a role in reinforcing their religious identity.^{lv}

States Can Increase the Demand for Political Parties through Compulsory Voting

Given the persistent mobilization issues confronting mainstream center-left and center-right parties, boosting the demand for parties may be a more viable option to strengthen their fortunes. States can most directly bolster the demand for political parties by enacting compulsory voting, which can increase voter turnout and individual attachment to political parties. Compulsory voting can reengage the “apolitical” who have dropped out of voting altogether, and potentially turn them into the type of “habitual partisans” that had previously dominated the electorate. However, the apolitical will only be able to effectively engage in voting if they receive enough information on party platforms to determine which best reflects their individual interests and preferences.

In recent high-profile elections with high party system volatility, voter turnout has been unusually low.² In France's 2017 legislative election, 40 percent of the electorate switched its party vote as turnout plunged to a post-World War II low of 48 percent. In Israel in 2006, 42 percent of the electorate

² Please see Appendix B for graphs of the correlation between voter turnout and party system volatility.

switched its party vote amid a record-low turnout of 63 percent. And in Japanese elections since 2000, voter turnout of 50 to 60 percent has been associated with 20 to 30 percent of the electorate switching its party vote, while turnout approaching 70 percent has seen only eight to 16 percent of the electorate switching its party vote.^{lvi}

Looking more systematically at data across 18 European countries since 1989, turnout was substantially negatively correlated with party system volatility in one third of the cases. In Cyprus, France, Germany, Greece, Sweden, and Switzerland, at least 20 percent of the increase in party system volatility—and as much as 64 percent—can be explained by declining voter turnout.^{lvii} Even as discouraged or alienated voters stay home, vote-switching in these countries has led to the collapse of center-left social democratic parties and the rise of entirely new centrist parties such as La Republique En Marche!, right-wing populists like Alternative for Germany and the Sweden Democrats, and left-wing populists like SYRIZA.

If voters are simultaneously choosing both “voice” and “exit” to express their dissatisfaction with political parties, can compulsory voting really improve voters’ connections to existing mainstream parties and reduce party vote-switching? After all, studies suggest that nonvoters are systematically different from voters, with nonvoters generally expressing preferences for smaller and more extreme parties.^{lviii} At least one study suggests that the causality is reversed: that high electoral system volatility depresses subsequent turnout because voters are discouraged by the rapidly changing information environment, unsure of where newly-formed parties stand.^{lix} Examining cases of adopting or repealing compulsory voting, however, suggests compulsory voting can indeed reinforce party loyalty and reduce party system volatility because low turnout often coincides with high party vote-switching.

Australia adopted compulsory voting in 1924 after relatively low voter turnout of 53 percent in the 1922 election. The 1919 and 1922 elections had seen considerable votes-switching with the emergence of two new parties that by 1922 captured 17 percent of the vote. After the adoption of compulsory voting, voter turnout increased and votes-switching decreased. Comparing the three elections before and after compulsory voting went into effect, the average turnout shot up 20 percentage points—from 62 to 82 percent—and average party system volatility decreased by one quarter, from eight percent of the electorate switching party votes to six.^{lx}

In countries that repealed compulsory voting, the opposite has occurred. Comparing the three elections before and after the Netherlands abandoned compulsory voting in 1970, average turnout dropped 10

percentage points—from 93 to 83 percent—and average party system volatility increased by 60 percent, going from eight percent of the electorate switching party votes to 13. More recently, Chile’s adoption of voluntary voting saw the number of voters drop by a quarter of a million and volatility roughly doubling in elections before and after the change; by 2017, nearly 20 percent of the electorate would switch its party vote between elections, with only 43 percent of the electorate turning out to vote.^{lxi}

Penalizing non-voting is key to compulsory voting’s boost to voter turnout. Countries that impose penalties have 13 percent higher voter turnout than those that do not; penalties that are both severe and enforced are more effective in increasing turnout.^{lxii} These penalties can include small or moderate fines, ineligibility for certain government jobs, the potential loss of the right to run as a candidate, and the potential to lose the right to vote. Countries also provide exemptions to avoid imposing unreasonable burdens on voters, such as for advanced age in Brazil or for “valid and sufficient” reasons in Australia.^{lxiii}

Compulsory voting can also address the biggest source of declining voter turnout: low turnout and party membership among younger voters. Studies have consistently shown that young people turn out to vote at lower rates and, judging from the declining membership of labor unions, tend to be less likely to join mass organizations like political parties.^{lxiv} Compulsory voting tends to bring youth turnout levels closer to those of older voters, and it can make voting a habit; after the Netherlands abolished compulsory voting in 1970, only a third of the youngest voters cast ballots, whereas nearly two-thirds of those over 65—who had been subject to compulsory voting their entire adult lives—did so.^{lxv}

Even if compulsory can increase voter turnout and reduce party vote switching, would requiring voters to choose a party actually improve accountability or merely reinforce the “cartel” aspect of modern political parties by allowing them to capture the votes of the least informed voters? Peter Selb and Romain Lachat’s study of voters in Belgium, who should be highly experienced because the country has had compulsory male voting for more than a century, found that the least knowledgeable 10 percent of voters still thought that the more statist Social Democrats and the more market-oriented Liberal Party were indistinguishable on economic policy. The same study found that the quarter of voters who said they would not vote under voluntary voting tended to cast their ballots for parties whose platforms had very little correspondence with the voters’ expressed preferences.^{lxvi}

Countries implementing compulsory voting would best improve accountability by increasing voter education efforts. Selb and Lachat’s study of Belgian voters found that voters with greater political

knowledge were better at identifying parties that matched their issue preferences. Higher knowledge may also have been associated with higher interest in politics,^{lxvii} suggesting that, under compulsory voting, greater outreach, engagement, and internal deliberation by parties can create a feedback loop that boosts voters' satisfaction with parties.

Countries implementing compulsory voting could also provide an outlet for dissatisfied or disinterested voters by including an “against all” option on the ballot. Such an option would allow voters in countries with compulsory voting an opportunity to demonstrate their dissatisfaction and send a signal to political parties about a potential constituency to be courted. In Australia in the 21st Century, a sizeable share of the electorate—generally five percent—consistently spoils its ballot rather than vote for a party.^{lxviii} A prominent Australian academic is reconsidering his support for compulsory voting, concerned that it brings to the polls the type of alienated voters who vote for more extremist parties.^{lxix}

Russia's use of the “against all” option suggests that such an option can indeed function as an outlet for dissatisfied voters; Russian “against all” votes have been associated with voter discontent with Russia's adherence to the rule of law.^{lxx} Another study found that voting “none of the above” is associated with elections in which voters have low information about the candidates, such as for nonpartisan races lacking the cue provided by a political party label, suggesting the option can address the needs of disinterested voters who similarly lack information on their choices.^{lxxi}

In the absence of a legal norm of compulsory voting, countries can still boost voter turnout and increase voters' bonds with political parties by enforcing a social norm of voting. Social embarrassment has been an important part of complying with a social norm of compulsory voting in countries like Italy.^{lxxii} One field experiment found that turnout increased by eight percentage points if people's past voting records (in terms of voting or abstaining) were exposed to their neighbors through direct mailings.^{lxxiii} In addition—and unsurprisingly—turnout is 10 percentage points higher in countries that make voting easier through such options as voting by mail, in advance, or by proxy.^{lxxiv}

Public-Private Partnerships Can Produce Broad-Based Economic Growth

In Western Europe's first three decades after World War II, high economic growth produced a period of more harmonious relations between workers and management as mediated by the state. With the end of catch-up economic growth, labor-capital relations broke down, with workers seeking to maintain wages and benefits that increasingly cut into management's narrowing profit margins. To increase firm

profitability, countries began to cut taxes and reduce the welfare state; however, austerity and welfare state reduction has prompted considerable backlash.^{lxxv}

Dani Rodrik and Charles Sabel argue that the increasing scarcity of “good jobs”—stable formal sector employment with labor protections that permits a middle-class existence to regional standards—has been a driver of right-wing populism. They suggest that, in many countries globally, only a portion of the population is able to take part in the knowledge economy, harnessing innovation to facilitate advanced production in largely metropolitan areas, while a sizeable share of the workforce remains engaged in less productive activity detached from advanced production.

Rodrik and Sabel doubt that past policy options such as redistributive policies, workforce protection and development, or Keynesian aggregate demand management are sufficient to address the growing productivity gap. Such schemes, they stress, depend on a more static economic environment and greater information on the size of the externalities the economy is likely to produce, conditions that are currently lacking because the pace of technological change and uncertainty about how innovation will affect unemployment and a scarcity of middle-class jobs in the future.

Borrowing from innovative strategies from disparate ventures that deal with both technological as well as environmental uncertainty, Rodrik and Sabel suggest that governments should work in partnership with firms to establish broad industrial policy goals and a system for evaluating progress; this would require continuous review and deliberation between partners. Partnerships would be voluntary, with firms that opt in enjoying better regulation and coordination while facing penalties for failure to meet goals. Regulations developed during these processes would become standards across their industries. In this way, Rodrik and Sabel argue, regulation can deal with future uncertainty to increase jobs’ skill level and productivity and firms’ competitiveness.^{lxxvi}

Dealing with Populists in the Electoral Arena

Given the trend of declining political party influence and accompanying voter hostility to political parties in multiple global regions, in the absence of efforts to re-energize parties’ connections to voters, the emergence of new populist parties is likely to be a recurring feature of politics. Once populists are in government, domestic and international actors have much more limited options in dealing with populists and checking any threats they might pose to democratic governance, and such efforts can

reinforce populists' messaging that they are battling a cartel of corrupt domestic and international elites.

For domestic actors, the electoral arena may be the most effective way to counter any threats populists pose to democracy. Mainstream parties' colluding to deny populists a chance at governing can reinforce populists supporters' beliefs about the "corrupt elites" and can undemocratically exclude the constituency that populists represent.^{lxxvii} In Poland in 2006-2007, the main center-right opposition party Civic Platform chose to selectively oppose the right-wing populist Law and Justice's (PiS) coalition government on a policy-by-policy basis, and when the government collapsed amid allegations of coalition partners' corruption, Civic Platform won the subsequent early elections.^{lxxviii} In Venezuela, by contrast, the opposition's support of extraconstitutional measures, including an unsuccessful coup attempt, undermined its ability to check left-wing populist Hugo Chavez's abuses of power by contributing to polarization and discrediting the idea that the opposition supported democracy.^{lxxix}

International actors may have the most success bolstering democracies against potential populist threats by supporting independent state institutions such as the judiciary, rather than rejecting populist governments as entirely illegitimate. After the right-wing populist Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) entered the government as a junior partner in 2000, 14 EU members states imposed diplomatic sanctions by minimizing their engagement with the government. This undermined the domestic opposition parties' ability to confront the government too forcefully amidst the resulting nationalist backlash. It was after the EU lifted sanctions and voters began to feel the impact of unpopular FPÖ policies that government support eroded and FPÖ vote share was greatly reduced in early elections.^{lxxx}

In contrast, international actors have had more success limiting potential populist threats to democracy by supporting independent state institutions such as judiciaries. In a review of case studies of populist parties in government, Paul Taggart and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser found that judiciaries that were able to retain their independence—in Austria, Italy, and Poland—have played a key role in curbing populists' most illiberal behavior. In countries where populist governments were able to undertake significant constitutional reform and restrict judicial independence—in Ecuador, Hungary, and Venezuela—respect for democratic principles declined.^{lxxxi}

In Poland in particular, EU bodies have checked some of PiS's recent efforts to stack the judiciary with supporters: the European Court of Justice ordered Warsaw to stop implementing laws reorganizing the judiciary, the EU Commission launched an infringement procedure against Poland, and the Commission

has considered cutting EU subsidies to Poland for violating democratic norms.^{lxxxii} Although this model is not exactly replicable because of the uniqueness of the EU's authority over member states, international actors can use similar tactics on bilateral or multilateral bases.

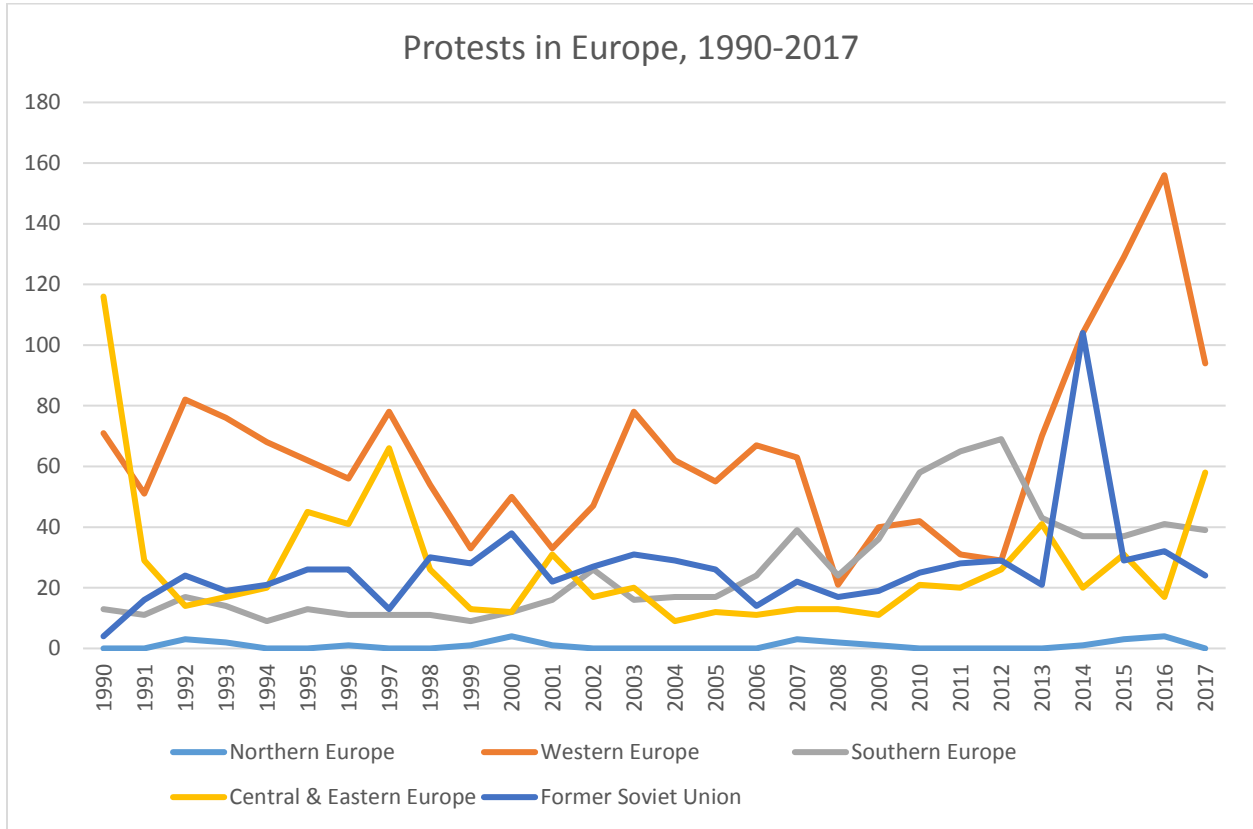
Of course, international actors bolstering judicial independence only addresses immediate concerns about potential democratic backsliding while lending credence to populists' claims that unelected international interests and corrupt domestic elites are working to subvert "the will of the people" as personified by the populist government. A longer-term approach to protecting democracy will require a revitalizing of political parties as key intermediaries between the state and society.

Revitalizing Political Parties Would Revitalize Democracy

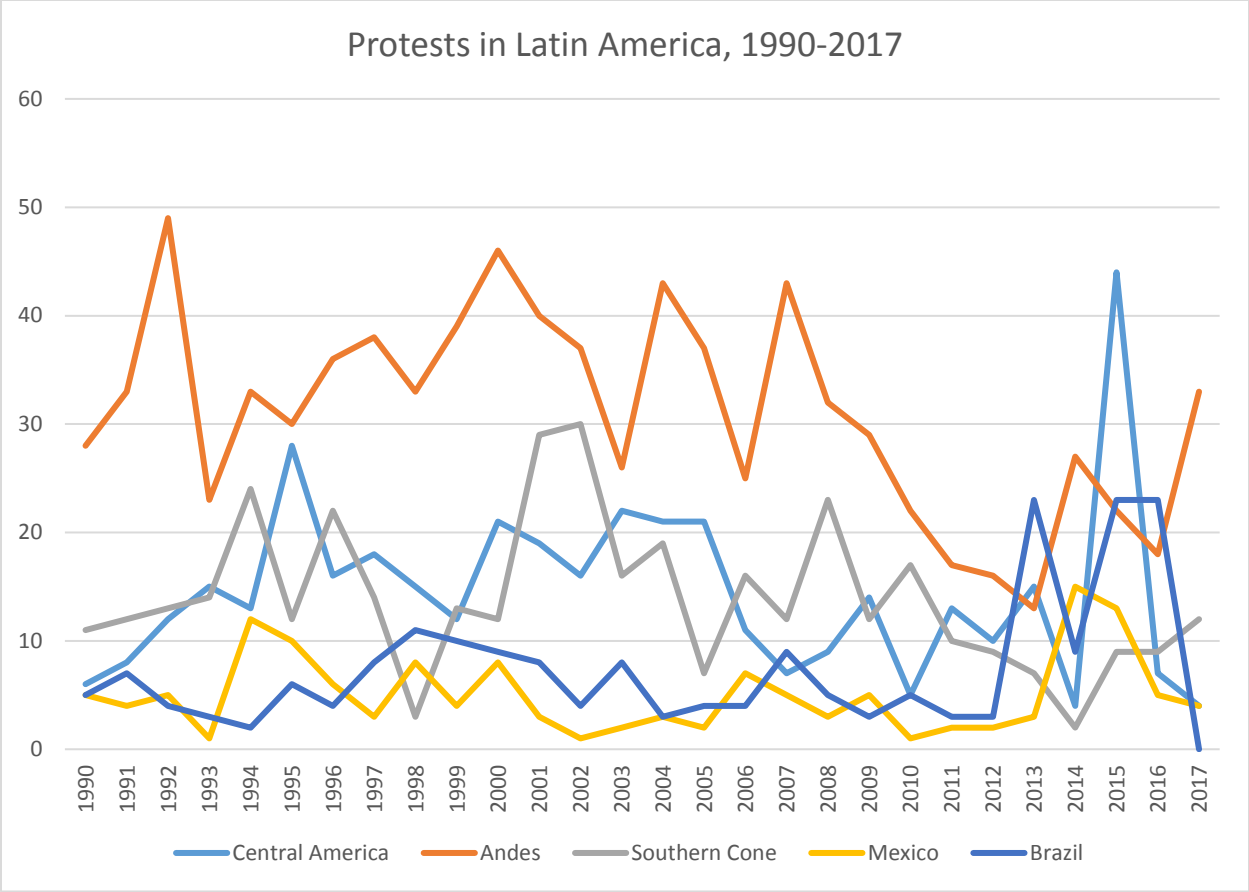
Revitalizing political parties would serve to both improve democratic accountability and democratic resilience. Parties themselves have the biggest opportunity to halt their own decline by more directly engaging members in substantive internal deliberation. States can play a role in increasing the supply of political parties through subsidies that bolster parties' partner organizations and in boosting the demand for political parties by making voting compulsory (with appropriate accommodations for voters). Given present trends, the alternative is a world with a more anti-government protests over a lack of responsiveness, as in France, or over a lack of democracy, as in Sudan—a world in which a growing number of countries is subject to increasing unrest and the rapid rise and fall of personalist parties, with continuing dissatisfaction with democracy, greater risk of democratic breakdown, and continual policy instability in between.

The author is an employee of the United States Government, which is funding his fellowship at the Wilson Center. All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official positions or views of any U.S. Government agency or of the Wilson Center. Nothing in the contents should be construed as asserting or implying U.S. Government authentication of information or endorsement of the author's views. This material has been reviewed to prevent the disclosure of classified information.

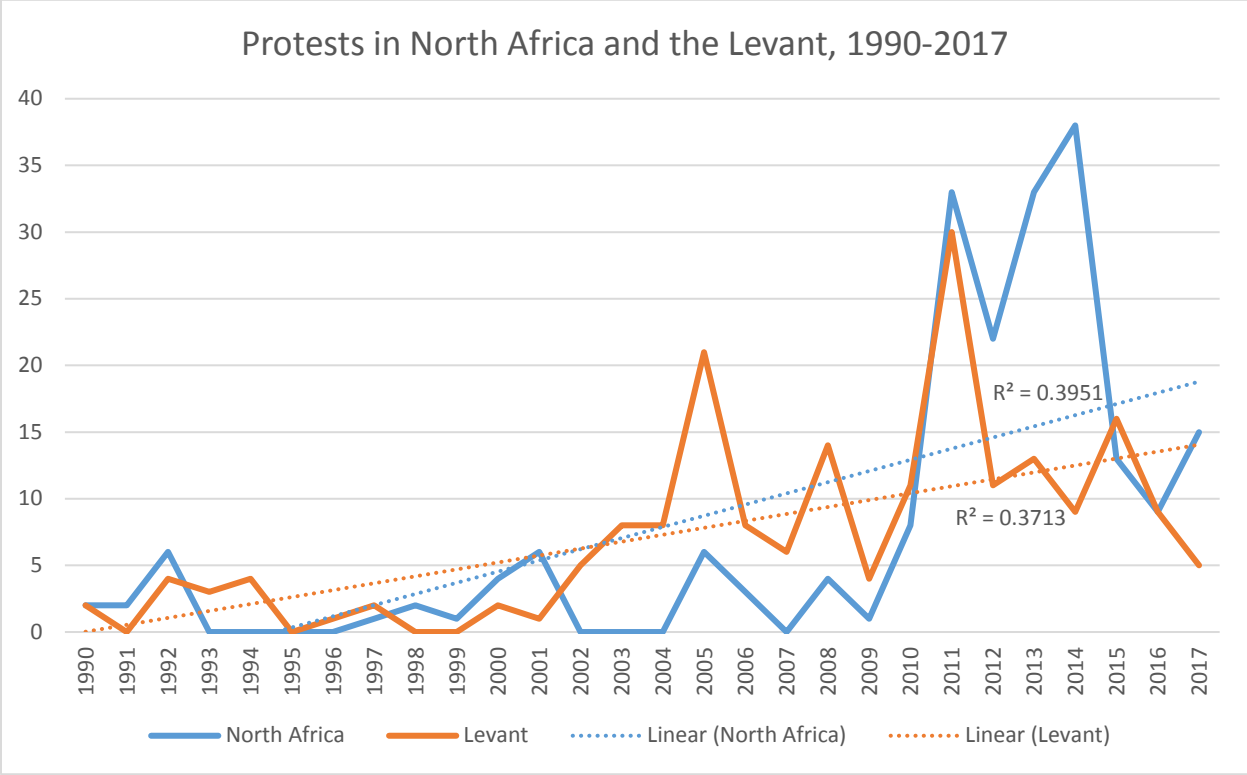
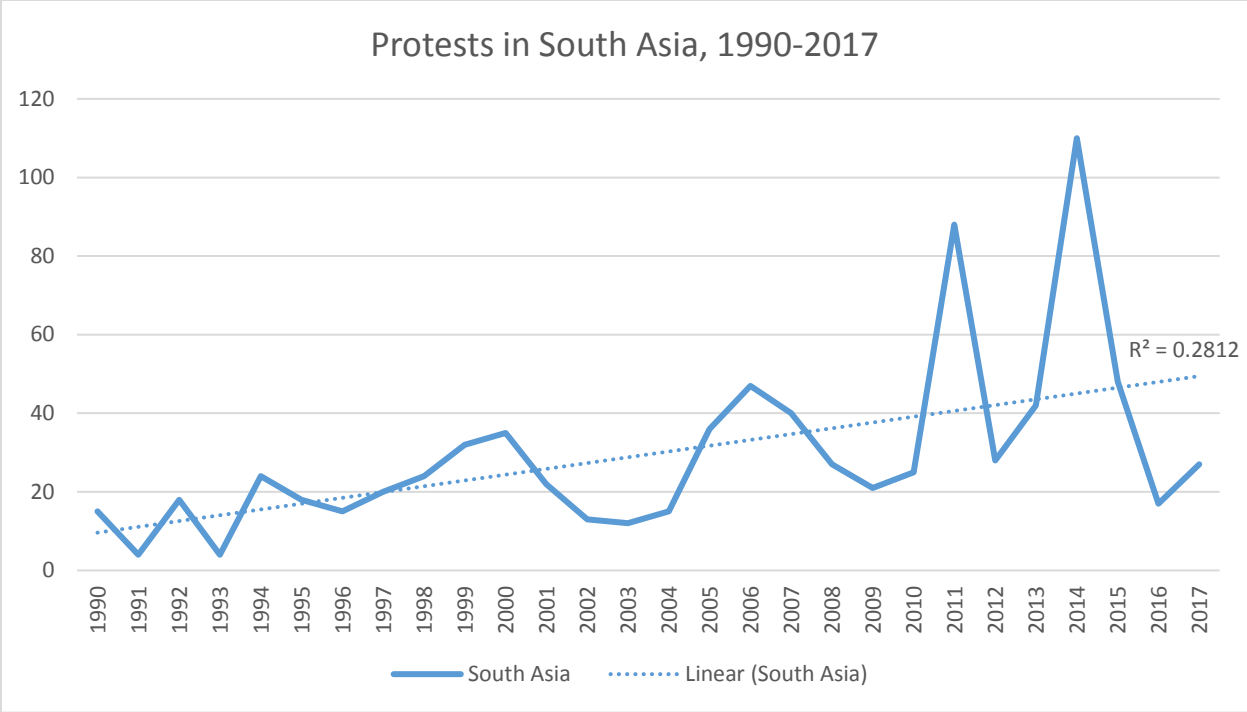
Appendix A: Protests by Region



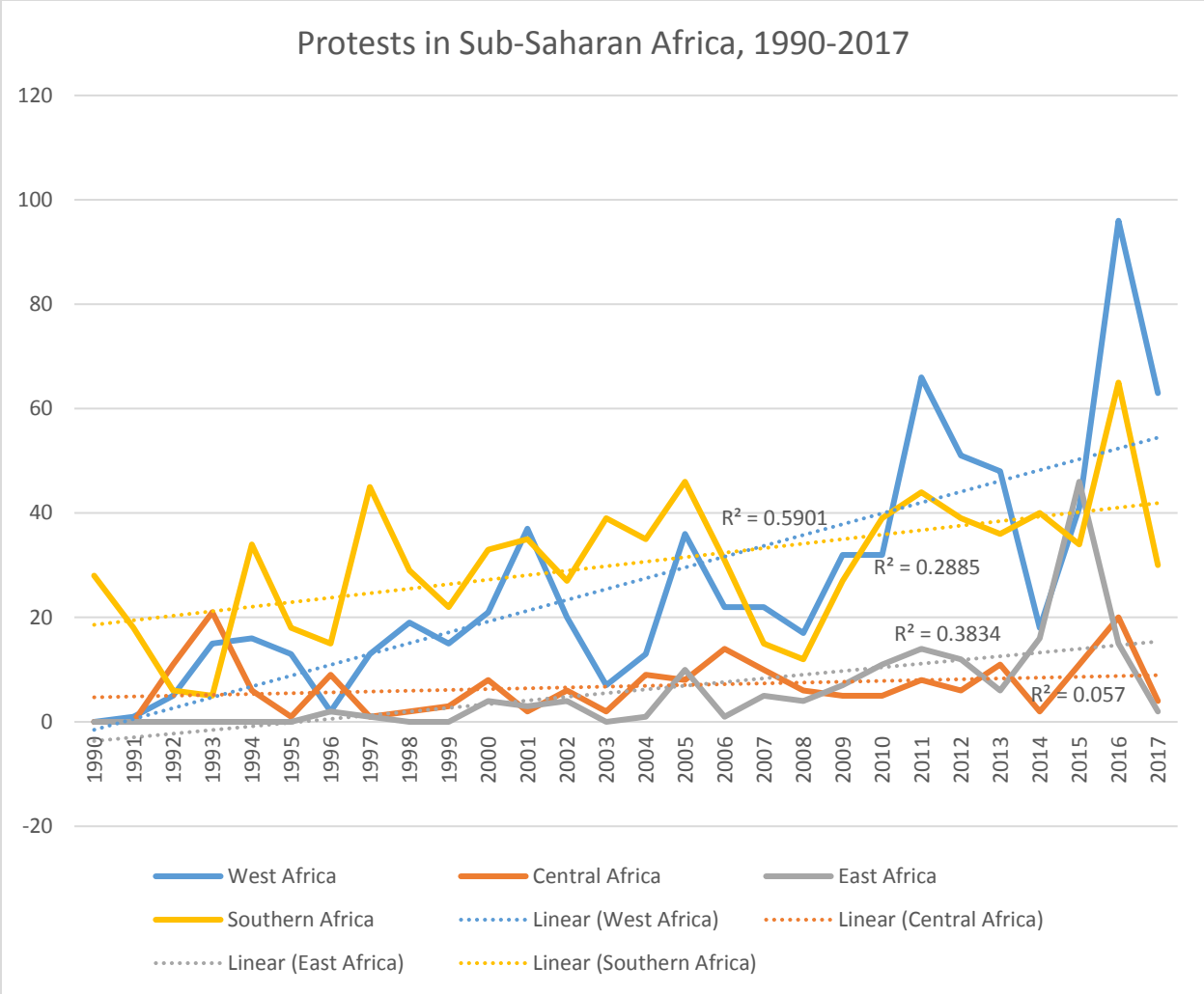
Note: The trendline for Southern Europe shows the most significant increase since 1990, with an R^2 of 0.69; all other trendlines have R^2 between 0.01 (Northern Europe) and 0.13 (Former Soviet Union).



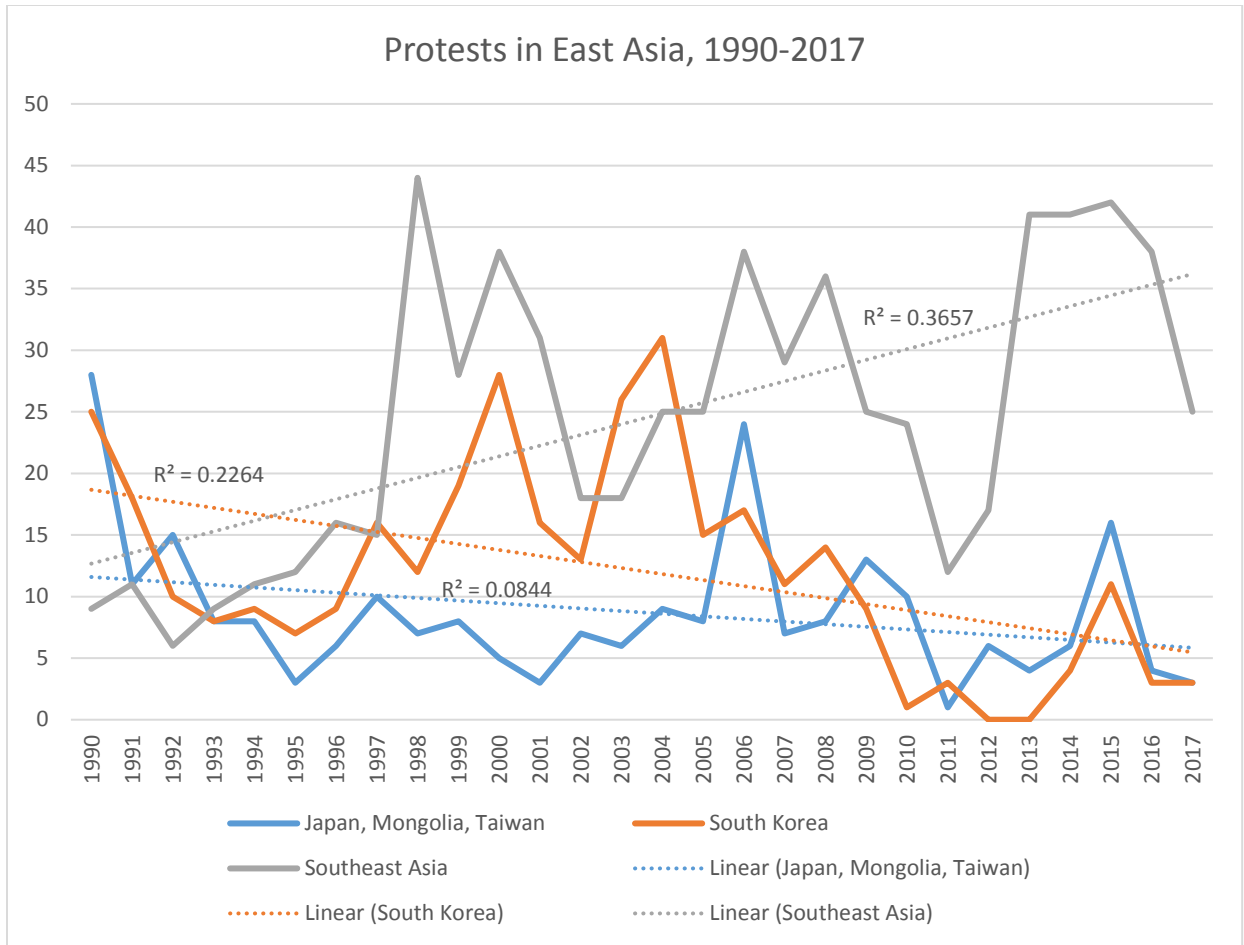
Note: Brazil's trendline shows the most significant increase, with an R^2 of 0.13; the Andes shows a significant decrease, with an R^2 of 0.25.



Note: both graphs only include countries with a minimum of political party competition in the regions.



Note: Kenya is excluded because of the unusually high count of protests (189) recorded in 2015; its inclusion would reduce the East Africa trendline's R² to 0.24.

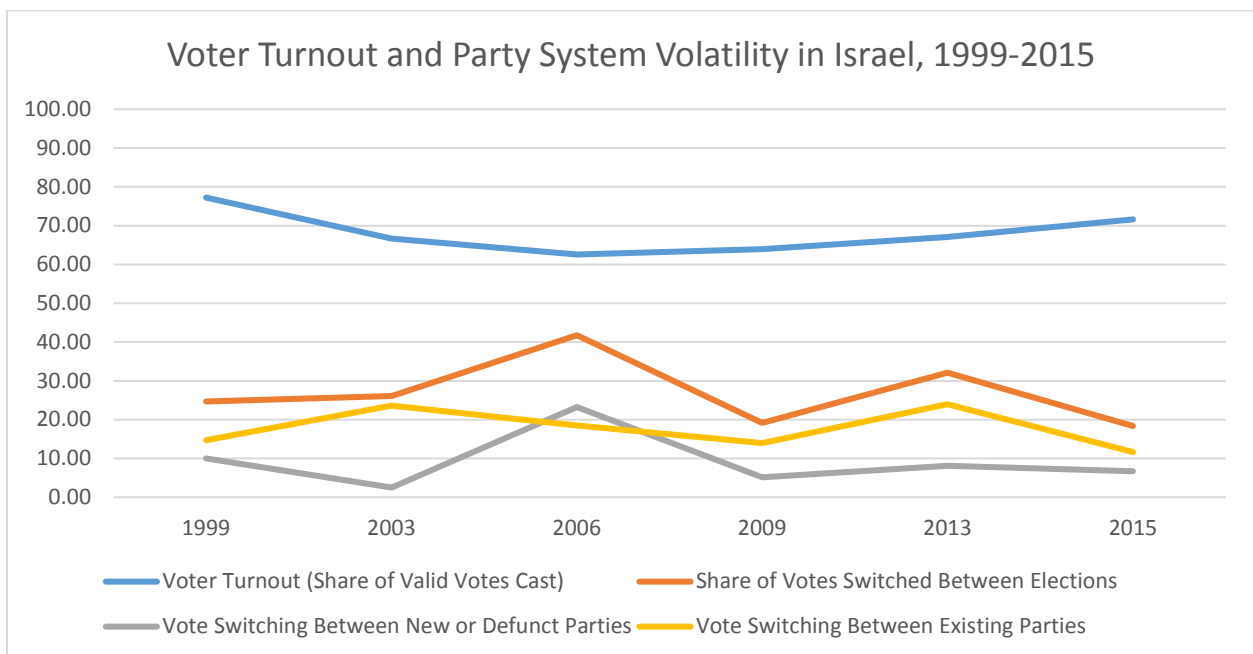
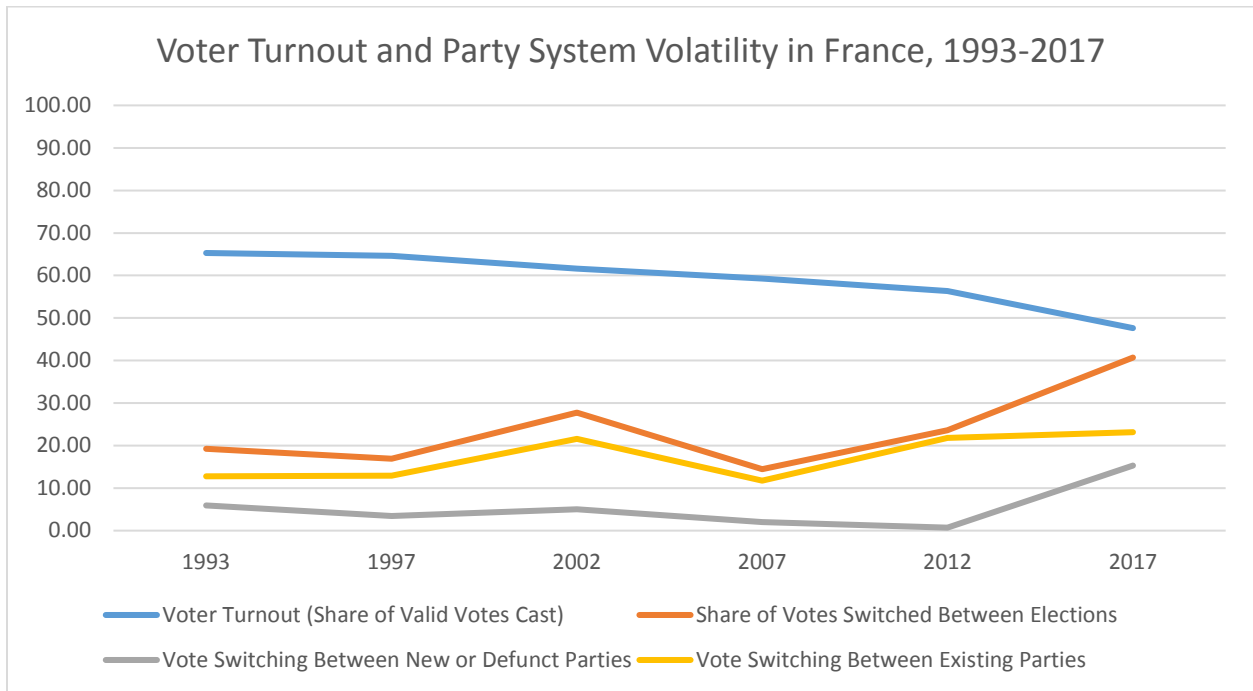


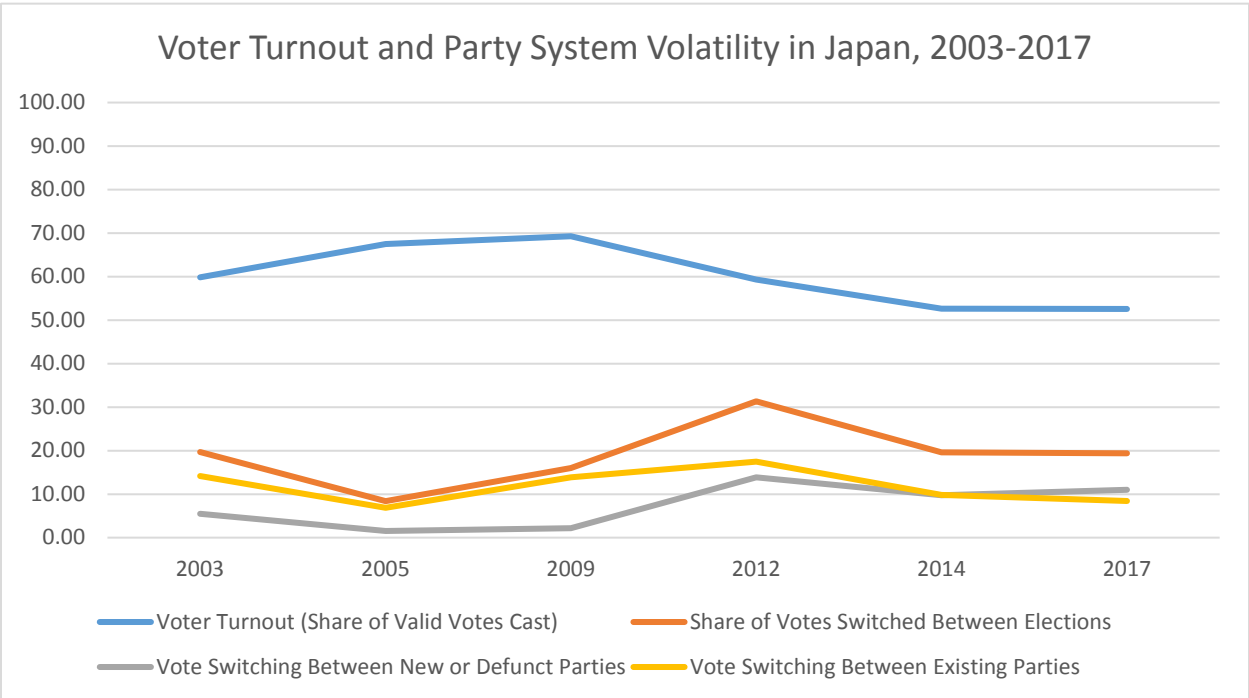
Source:

Protest counts from Binghamton University’s Mass Mobilization Project 7 Feb 2019 data release
<https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/MMdata>

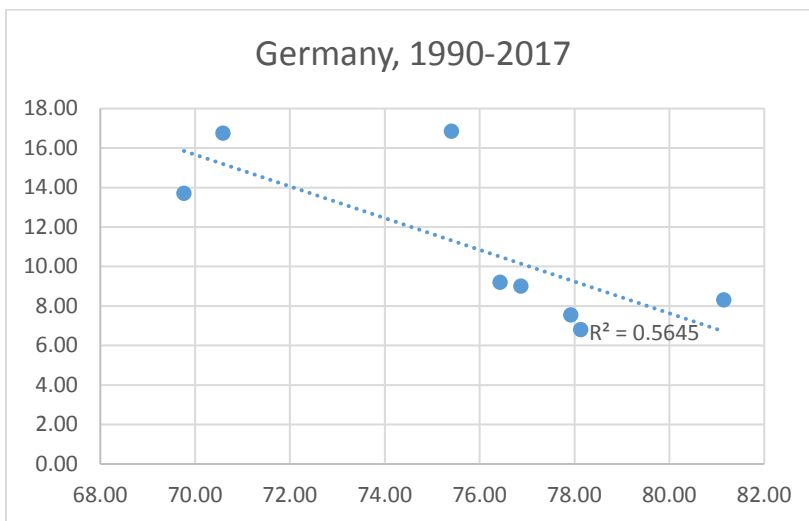
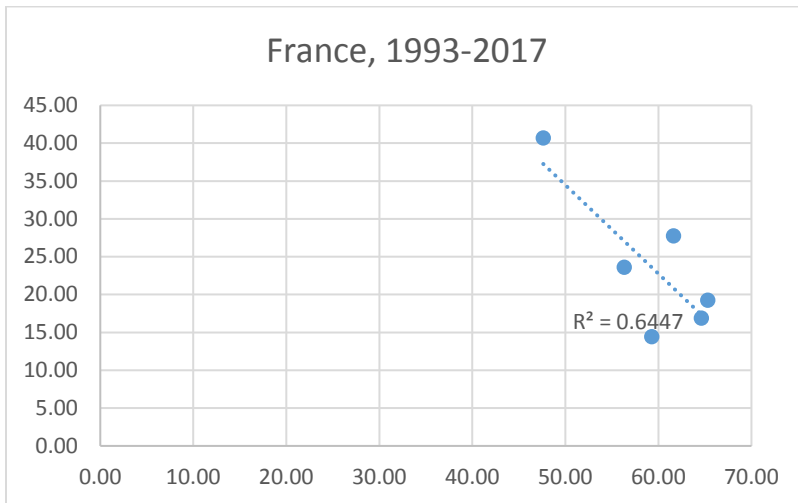
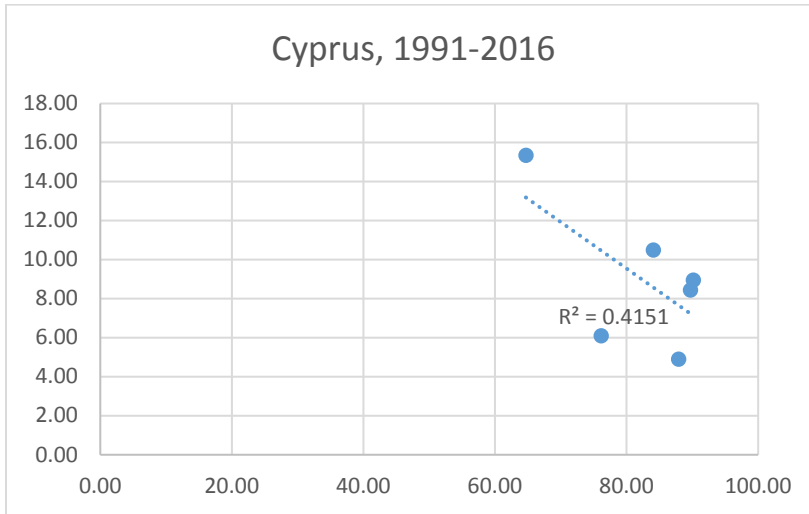
Appendix B: Voter turnout and Party System Volatility

Voter Turnout and Party System Volatility in Recent High-Profile Elections with High Volatility

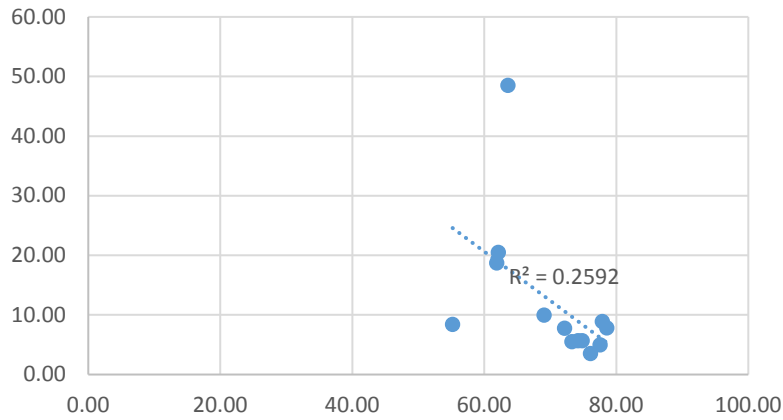




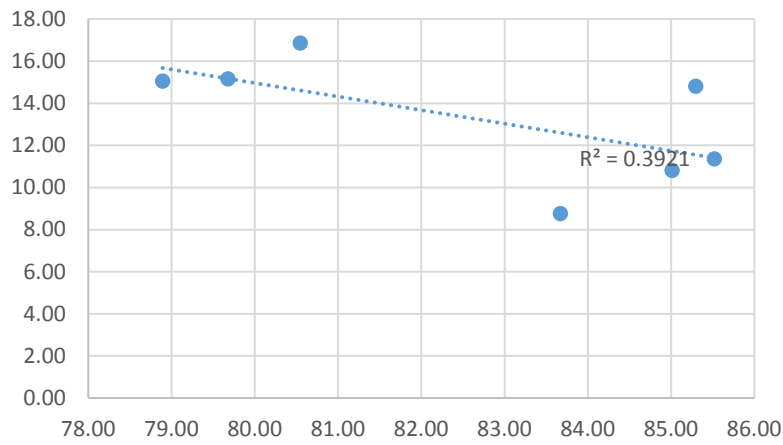
Correlation Between Voter Turnout (x-axis) and Total Party System Volatility (y-axis) in Six Post-Cold War European Countries



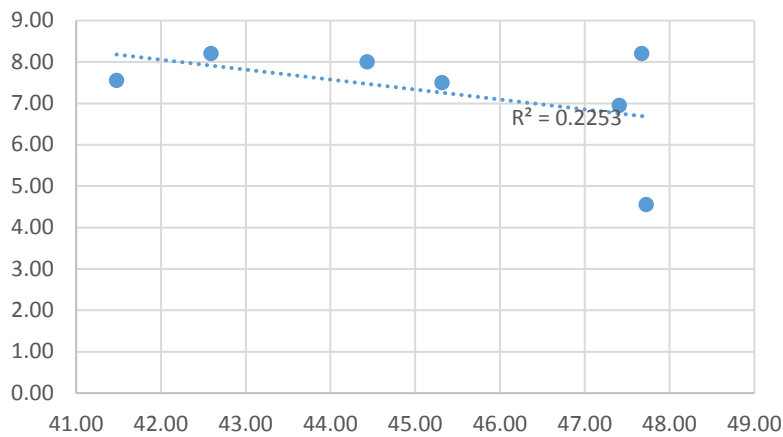
Greece, 1989-2015



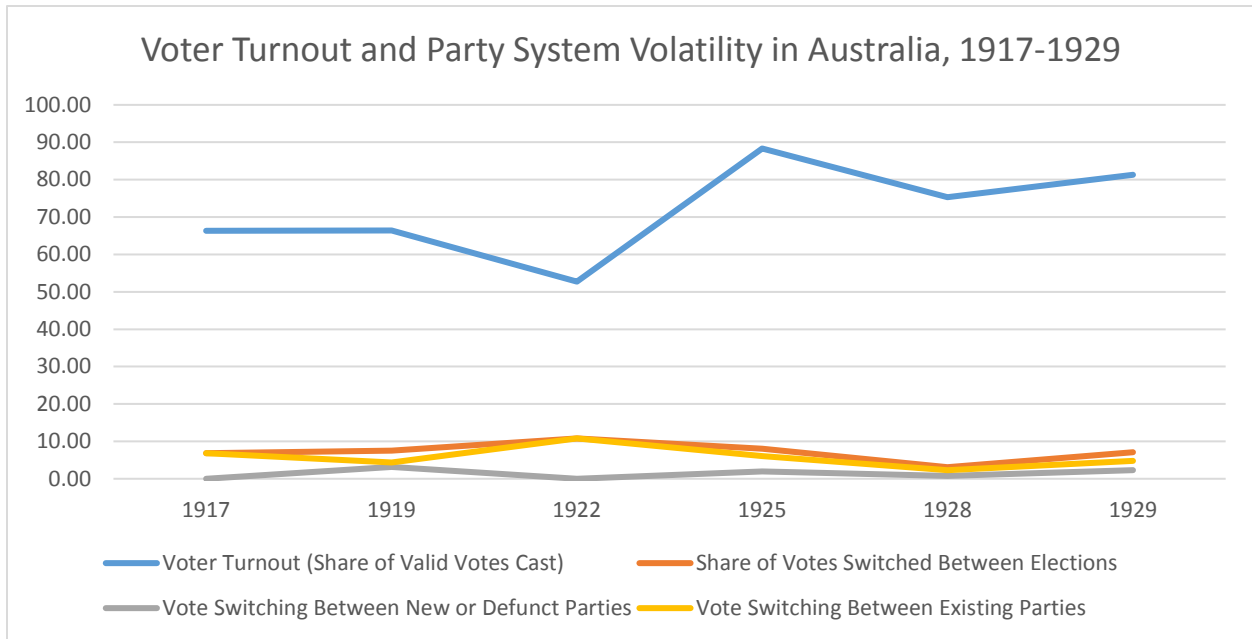
Sweden: 1991-2014



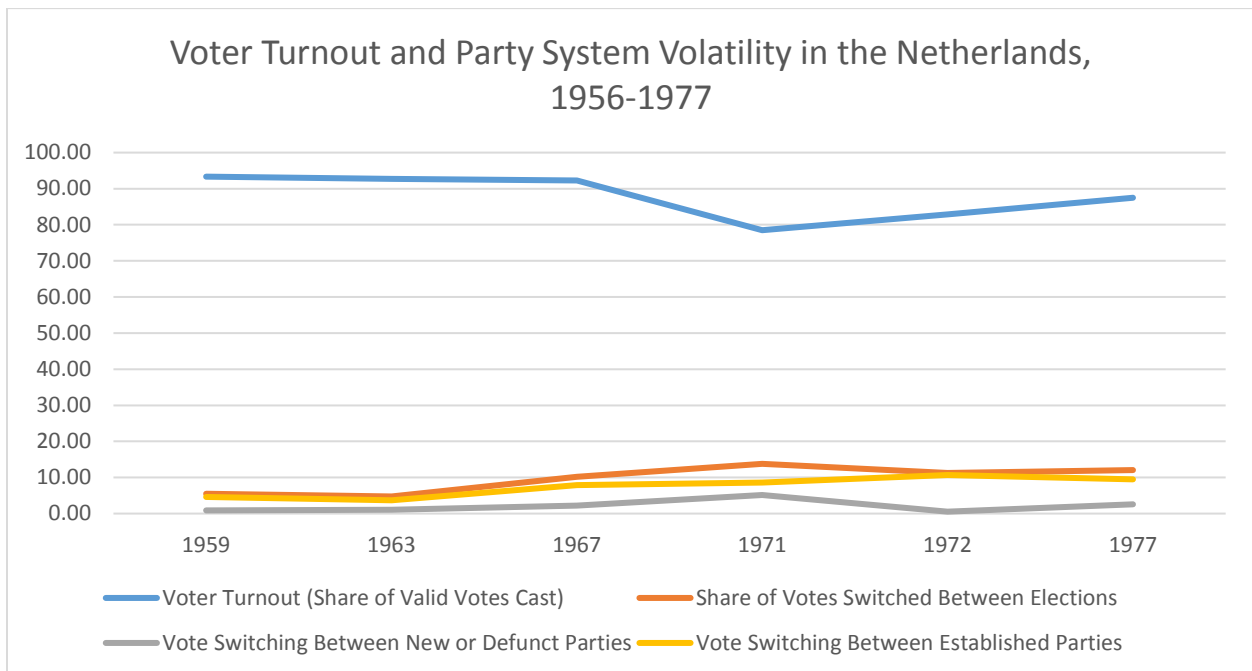
Switzerland, 1991-2015



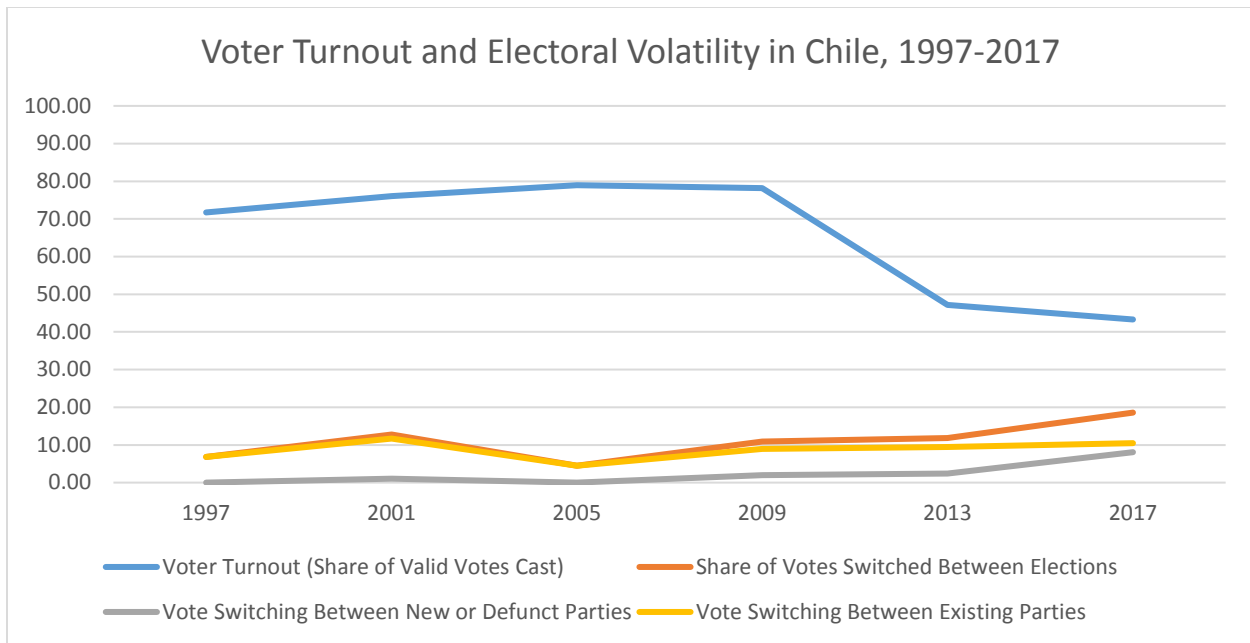
Voter Turnout and Party System Volatility in Countries Adopting or Abandoning Compulsory Voting



Note: Australia adopted compulsory voting in 1924.



Note: The Netherlands abandoned compulsory voting in 1970.



Note: Chile abandoned compulsory voting (while adopting automatic voter registration) in 2012; vote totals dropped from 6,474,551 in 2009 to 6,210,120 in 2013 while rebounding to 6,212,448 in 2017 as the electorate grew.

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