

“Walking the Talk: How Illiberal Parties Erode Democracy”

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The recent increase of democratic declines around the world -- what Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) have dubbed “third wave of autocratization” -- has sparked a new generation of studies on the topic. Scholars agree that these days the main threat to democracy arises from democratically elected rulers, who gradually erode democratic norms once in power. Is it possible to identify future autocratizers before they win power in elections? Linz (1978) and Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) argue that a lacking commitment to democratic norms reveals would-be autocrats before they reach office. Such illiberal and anti-pluralist traits include demonizing rhetoric, the encouragement of political violence, disrespect for minority rights, and lacking commitment to the democratic process. Comparative political science researchers have not systematically collected and tested these potential early-warning indicators. This paper makes use of a new expert-coded data set on virtually all relevant political parties worldwide from 1970 to today (V-Party) to provide the first systematic empirical test of this argument.