

The Myth of De-consolidation: Rising Liberalism and the Populist Reaction

In two widely read articles, Roberto Foa and Yascha Mounk reach the alarming conclusion that support for democracy is in a rapid generational decline. The remarkable point about this diagnosis is its emphasis on the Millennial generation's fading support for democracy and the claim that democratic support is steeply eroding in even the most mature democracies. The latter contention marks a significant turning point in the debate. Public discourse has taken a pessimistic tone since quite some time, bemoaning the apparently ubiquitous resurgence of authoritarianism outside the Western world. But the mature democracies of the West seemed to constitute an insurmountable firewall against the authoritarian offense. The novelty in Foa and Mounk's analysis is that it questions this very premise, resonating with growing concerns in the face of spreading populism. Indeed, Foa and Mounk imply that the generational erosion of democratic support is responsible for the populist turn throughout the electorates of mature democracies, especially among younger cohorts. In conclusion, Foa and Mounk suggest that democracy itself is in danger, including places where it seemed safest over many generations.

We question their alarmist claims on a number of accounts. To begin with, Foa and Mounk heavily overstate the age differences in democratic support. Second, the obvious age pattern in indicators of political disaffection has little to do with generations; it is instead a lifecycle effect: younger people showed stronger signs of disaffection already in earlier decades, but this age pattern is not linked to a uniform temporal trend towards increasing disaffection in the electorates of mature democracies. Third, and more importantly, Foa and Mounk overlook that support ratings for democracy are largely incomparable across birth cohorts. The reason is that the moral values on which people base their democratic support have turned dramatically more liberal over the generations. As a consequence, support for democracy has changed its *meaning*: while older generations continue to endorse illiberal notions of democracy, younger generations support an unequivocally liberal notion. Fourth, key quality aspects of democracy at the system level depend critically on the *type* of support that prevails. Specifically, the extent of illiberal support for democracy in a country is a first-rate indicator of severe *deficiencies* in democracy, including its outright absence. By contrast, the prevalence of liberal support is tightly linked to high performance levels on literally every major criterion of democracy. Without further qualifications for the values in which it is rooted, support for democracy is hiding more than it reveals. Finally, defining the right-wing populist electorate as those voter segments who combine a pronounced disaffection from representative institutions with illiberal moral values, we demonstrate that this electorate has been visibly shrinking over recent decades, at the same time as its members have become socially more distinct and ideologically more distant from an increasingly liberal mainstream in their societies.