

Public Abstract

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Ph.D.

Political Science

Traditional Institutions, Authoritarian Legacies, and Democratic Support in Southern Africa

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Since the early 1990s, the countries of southern Africa have experienced a dramatic shift towards democratic governance. Whether these democracies will survive or not, however, remains unclear. I begin from the assumption that mass support is a critical aspect of democratic legitimacy and the primary determinant of regime survival. In this dissertation, I investigate citizens' support for democracy in southern Africa and examine the factors that explain variations in this support. Borrowing insights from the historical institutionalism literature, I argue that perceptions of the alternative institutional contexts will influence citizens' support for democracy. More specifically, I argue that support for traditional institutions and/or past authoritarian regimes will influence citizens' support for democracy.

To test this argument, I use a mixed research design, comprised of both a statistical analysis of cross-national survey data and a case-study of South Africa based interviews with members of the South African Parliament. The results indicate that support for alternative institutions do influence citizens' support for democracy, but that all institutions do not have the same effect. More specifically, I found that support for past authoritarian regimes had both a strong negative relationship with democratic support, while support for traditional institutions had a weaker, though still negative effect.

This research both improves our academic understanding of democratic support and, by highlighting the factors that increase or decrease support for a democratic regime, has the potential of improving the lives of citizens in southern Africa and in democracies around the world.