Reversing Democracy’s Gains: Territorial Threat and Regime Reversals

Johannes Karreth  
Department of Political Science  
University at Albany, SUNY  
jkarreth@albany.edu

Jaroslav Tir  
Department of Political Science  
University of Colorado Boulder  
jtir@colorado.edu

Douglas M. Gibler  
Department of Political Science  
University of Alabama  
dmgibler@bama.ua.edu

July 11, 2014

Abstract

Scholars have identified regional dynamics as a strong predictor of democratic regime reversals. Investigating the reason for such regional dynamics, we develop a regime crisis argument based upon states’ border relations. Territorial threats encourage political centralization of authority in the leader to defend against threats to the homeland, and the territorial nature of conflict facilitates the construction and maintenance of large land armies to fight the rival. Combined, these changes make leaders powerful domestically, weaken democratic institutions, encourage other conditions threatening democratic survival, and overall lead to democratic reversals. Our argument finds strong support in tests examining the relevant population of countries, all democracies with contiguous neighbors, from 1946-2012.