

*The selection committee for the Best Article Award of the Organized Section on Democracy and Autocracy is pleased to grant this year's prize to two articles:*

**Matthew Graham and Milan Svolik. 2020. "Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States," *American Political Science Review*, 114(2): 392-409**

Though democracy in America has long been considered unassailable, the current season of partisan polarization has raised new questions about democracy's durability in the face of near-tribal partisan antipathies. Although Americans routinely offer support for democracy in nationally-representative surveys, they also seem willing to countenance behaviors by their favorite politicians that sit uneasily with their expressed democratic commitments. In this remarkable article, Graham and Svolik investigate whether American voters value co-partisanship and policy congruence over a candidate's normative commitment to democracy. Using a candidate choice experiment, in which survey respondents were presented with hypothetical candidates, some of whom were randomly assigned to hold anti-democratic positions, the authors find voters are surprisingly unwilling to punish deviations from democratic norms. In short, they write, "Americans will not cross party lines to punish a co-partisan for violating democratic principles, especially if the latter proposes appealing policies." Further support for this sobering finding is provided by a natural experiment that took place during a special election for Montana's seat in the United States House of Representatives in 2017. The night before the election, Republican candidate Greg Gianforte assaulted a journalist. The authors compare precinct-level differences in Gianforte's vote-share between absentee ballots cast before the incident and in-person vote cast afterward to explore whether Gianforte suffered any punishment for his violation of democratic norms. They find that in heavily Republican districts, the incident had no effect whatsoever. The overall conclusion is that American democracy may be more fragile than previously assumed. At the very least, in an era of extreme partisan polarization, we cannot rely on mass normative commitments to democracy to act as a check on the anti-democratic designs of a would-be autocrat (as revealed on January 6, 2021—more than two years after the experiment in this article was conducted). A secondary, but equally important, conclusion is that direct survey questions about citizens' commitments to democracy—in the US and around the world—are likely to over-estimate the extent of that commitment. They write, "If only 3.5% of voters realistically punish violations of democratic principles in one of the world's oldest democracies, we should not be surprised by the public's failure to stop aspiring autocrats in new democracies." This article combines breadth of ambition, theoretical sophistication, and excellence in execution to generate a lasting contribution to the study of democratic survival.

**Vilde Lunnan Djuve, Carl Henrik Knutsen, and Tore Wig. 2020. "Patterns of Regime Breakdown Since the French Revolution." *Comparative Political Studies*, 53(6): 923-958.**

Djuve, Knutsen, and Wig make two core contributions to the study of democracy and autocracy. First, they develop the Historical Regimes Dataset (HRD), an impressive data collection effort covering more than 2,000 political regimes in 197 countries from 1789 to 2016. The HRD allows for finer grained analyses of political regime change, including the events surrounding the regime's end. Second, they offer empirical nuance to our understanding of regime breakdown. By establishing that modes of breakdown tend to occur in cyclical rather than monotonic patterns, Djuve, Knutsen, and Wig bring attention to time as an important scope condition when developing theories about regime change. While coups and incumbent-led regime change are the most common forms of regime breakdown in the time series, this is not always the case within certain years or decades. They also find heterogeneity in explanations for different modes of breakdown, with lower income predicting popular uprisings and middling levels of democracy predicting coups and guided regime change. In sum, Djuve, Knutsen, and Wig's article propels forward the study of democracy and autocracy by providing a novel dataset and nuanced empirical findings about the heterogeneity of regime breakdown.

*The committee is also pleased to recognize the following articles for honorable mention:*

**Sharan Grewal. 2020. "From Islamists to Muslim Democrats: The Case of Tunisia's Ennahda." *American Political Science Review*, 114(2), 519-535.**

Throughout the Middle East, democratic openings have brought to power political parties that self-consciously identify as Islamic. Some of these parties are highly conservative, seeking to legislate what they see as God's law, while others wear their religious commitments more lightly, particularly when it comes to issues of gender equality and the rights of religious minorities. The former are often thought to threaten democracy—both by directly undermining it in favor of religious conceptions of political legitimacy, and by awakening fears in their political opponents that create openings for authoritarian resurgences and military coups. Scholarship that explains variation in Islamist party moderation has focused on the actions that authoritarian regimes take toward those parties prior to the emergence of genuine democratic openings, with some arguing that inclusion breeds moderation, while others argued the opposite. In this remarkable paper, Grewal introduces and provides evidence for a driver of Islamist moderation that has been entirely absent from the literature: traffic

with the West. Combining roll call votes in Tunisia's first democratically-elected legislature with biographical information on Tunisian Islamist parliamentarians, Grewal finds that moderates and conservatives (as indicated by their voting records) are distinguished by whether (and where) they went into exile during the country's prior, authoritarian period. Those who were thrown into the prior regime's jails (or who managed to escape to Muslim-majority, Middle Eastern countries) emerged as conservative hardliners, while those who managed to escape to the West became more moderate and liberal. Grewal establishes a causal effect by demonstrating that imprisonment and place of exile were more or less random. For its empirical sophistication and its deep groundedness in the particularities of the Tunisian case, this article is a model of comparative political science. Moreover, by refocusing our attention on the potential role that Western influences play in democratization, and also on the role that individual life experiences play in shaping politicians' commitments to liberty and democracy, the article opens new lines of inquiry for students of political parties and democracy in the Middle East and around the world.

**Robin Harding. 2020. "Who is Democracy Good For? Elections, Rural Bias, and Health and Education Outcomes in Sub-Saharan Africa." *Journal of Politics*, 82(1), 241-254.**

A critical question for democratic theory and comparative politics is whether democratic political institutions, apart from their intrinsic value, actually deliver improved governmental performance. Much literature is skeptical in this regard, often finding that democracies perform no better than autocracies in terms of important human development outcomes. In this outstanding paper, Harding brings new theory and evidence to bear on this question that ought to be heartening to (small d) democrats. With an impressive dataset that links individual-level data on health and education outcomes to macro-level indicators of political regimes over time, Harding finds that in sub-Saharan Africa transitions to democracy have led to large decreases in infant mortality and improvements in schooling – improvements that have accrued primarily to rural as opposed to urban populations. This is an important finding for at least two reasons. First, in contrast to much literature that often focuses on "venal" dimensions of politics in Africa, the paper highlights the tremendously important impact that the spread of robust democratic institutions on the continent in recent decades has had on human wellbeing on the ground. Second, the findings highlight how the benefits of democracy may not be uniform but unevenly distributed across individuals – in this case, helping to make government more responsive to the rural majority as opposed to the city folk who have traditionally wielded disproportionate political influence under urban-biased autocracies.

