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Democracy and Extreme Confidence in Government: an Analysis of the Relation between the Quality of Democracy and the Confidence in Governments in 54 States

KEY WORDS:

*Democracy, extreme confidence in government, Robert Putnam,
World Value Survey, attitudinal indicators, political culture*

Introduction and research question

The principal aim of this study is to examine the relation between democracy and extreme confidence in the government. This is a fairly innovative research design that explores questions that have not been formerly addressed with the use of empirical methods. The study concludes that countries whose citizens display a lot of extreme confidence in government tend to be undemocratic or their democracies are seriously flawed. This conclusion is reached after testing correlation between the extreme levels of confidence and democracy on a multinational sample. Individual countries are the units of analysis.

It has been theorized that a “healthy”¹ level of distrust of government is desirable for establishing and maintaining a democratic form of government. The chief aim of my study is to empirically grasp and operationalize this concept using a possibly large sample. Thus, I put forward the following research question:

¹ R. Hardin, *Do We Want Trust in Government?* [in:] M.E. Warren (ed.), *Democracy and Trust*, Cambridge 1999, p. 23.

RQ: Is the extreme confidence in the government negatively correlated with the level of democracy?

The „level of democracy“ is operationalized as a certain score on a continuum where 0 would be a totally undemocratic regime and 10 a full democracy, as on the scale proposed by the *Economist Intelligence Unit Index of Democracy*². This issue will be further discussed in the „methods and sample“ section.

The examination conducted to answer the above research question expands the knowledge about the influence of mass attitudes on democracy. Furthermore, the study proposes a relatively strong attitudinal indicator of democracy that has not been used in the research conducted in this field so far. This indicator can become an effective research tool, which may be utilized to describe the development of democratic states or, after certain modifications, to predict the possibility of regime change.

Naturally, using measures of confidence in government means that the study assumes that every regime, even an undemocratic one, represents³ the beliefs, interests, and values of the citizens in a certain form. This is because no government, which is not supported by a foreign occupational force, can exist without some level of trust on the part of a significant portion of the society. Interestingly, however, historical evidence points to the fact that democracies are established when citizens start displaying a limited confidence in government. The Swiss Confederation started developing after the rebellion against the Habsburgian rule⁴. The British Parliamentary System was established as an act of defiance of the English kings. The Federal Republic of America was formed after a war against the central government in England⁵. Finally, the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe was coupled with, what Jadwiga Staniszkis calls, “the collapse of revolutionary legitimation (based on the myth of the historical mission of the party) in collision with the workers’ rebellion”⁶. One might further argue that the recent

² *The Economist Intelligence Unit’s index of Democracy*, <http://graphics.eiu.com/PDF/Democracy%20Index%202008.pdf>, 26.1.2013.

³ R. Rohrschneider, *Institutional Quality and Perceptions of Representation in Advanced Industrial Democracies*, “Comparative Political Studies” 2005, № 7 (38), p. 851.

⁴ Cf. D. Fahrni, *An Outline History of Switzerland – From the Origins to the Present Day*, Zurich 1994.

⁵ T.H. Colbourn, *The Lamp of Experience: Whig History and the Intellectual Origins of the American Revolution*, Chapel Hill 1965.

⁶ J. Staniszkis, *The Dynamics of Breakthrough in Eastern Europe*, Oxford 1991.

collapse of authoritarian regimes in the Arab world also resulted from the lack of confidence in government. Interestingly, established monarchies in the region have proven much more resilient to revolutions than the post-revolutionary regimes. As Elliott Abrams notes: "The fundamental problem for the big men in those [Arab] fake republics was the paucity of their legitimacy. They lacked any religious, monarchical, or democratic claim to rule"⁷. This study will show that limited trust or lack of extreme confidence in government is not only something that marks the birth of democracies, but also is a feature characteristic of modern democratic regimes.

Literature Review

One of the first researchers to observe that the *World Value Survey Database* suggests a negative correlation between democracy and the confidence in government was Christian Welzel⁸ and Ronald Inglehart⁹. Welzel sees this as an interesting, albeit not a very significant correlation, which in his regression model encounters a significance barrier. Welzel's interpretation of this consists of three sentences: "How about the anti-democratic effect of confidence in institutions? This effect makes sense if confidence in institutions involves a considerable portion of blind confidence... In this case, more widespread confidence indicates a larger proportion of uncritical citizens"¹⁰. He, however, does not specify when exactly societies plunge into „blind confidence“ and does not define this term.

The main hypothesis of this study assumes that the uncritical attitude Welzel mentions is tied to extreme level of confidence in government within the society. The concept of "extreme level" is operationalized by examining the percentage of citizens that in a given country are willing to display the highest levels of confidence in their government on a four point scale. Such an approach provides a much stronger predictor of democracy with higher levels of significance than Welzel's initial study.

⁷ E. Abrams, *Dictators Go, Monarchs Stay*, "Commentary" 2012, № 3 (134), p. 27.

⁸ C. Welzel, *Are Levels of Democracy Affected by Mass Attitudes? Testing Attainment and Sustainment Effects on Democracy*, "International Political Science Review" 2007, № 4 (28), p. 397–424.

⁹ R.F. Inglehart, C. Welzel, *Emancipative Values, and Democracy*, "Studies in Comparative International Development" 2006, № 2(41), p. 341–380.

¹⁰ C. Welzel, *Are Levels of Democracy...*, p. 407.

Moreover, unlike Welzel's research, this study does not try to predict the emancipative attitudes that will lead to an increase in democracy. This study tries to show a more general relation across the available sample. Kenneth Newton¹¹ has also reported findings similar to Wenzel's. However, his research was based on a different sample and a set of different theoretical premises.

Welzel, Inglehart, and Newton all employ the attitudinal approach. This means that they hypothesize that the democracy and its quality is to a large extent dependent on social attitudes. Nevertheless, as Welzel himself admits, the number of empirical studies that test attitudinal influence on democracy is limited. This is in part because of the difficulty with finding reliable data, especially, gathered in undemocratic countries. Operationalizing the key concepts is another major problem. The key attitudinal researches on democracy are works by Inglehart,¹² Muller,¹³ and Seligson¹⁴. Theoretically, these studies are supported by the earlier publications of Almond and Verba¹⁵ as well as Eckstein¹⁶.

A contending group of hypotheses is based on the economic approach. Researchers who use the economic approach try to find empirical evidence that the development of democracy can be explained by economic development. Karp, Banducci, and Bowler,¹⁷ for instance, attribute the confidence in government and satisfaction with democracy in European Union to concrete financial costs and benefits. The classical economic approach was also applied by Seymour Lipset in his *Political Man*. Lipset, actually, argues that the rise of certain political systems was a result of the domination of specific socioeconomic classes. For instance, he coined the term "working class authoritarianism"¹⁸. Such authoritarian governments, according to Lipset, are characterized by genuinely high approval ratings because they rule over citizens who are

¹¹ K. Newton, *Trust, Social Capital, Civil Society, and Democracy*, "International Political Science Review" 2001, Nr 2 (22), p. 201–214.

¹² R.F. Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic, and Political Change in 43 Societies*, Princeton 1997.

¹³ E.N. Muller, M. Seligson, *Civic Culture and Democracy. The Question of Causal Relationship*, "American Political Science Review" 1994, № 4 (22), p. 635–652.

¹⁴ M. Seligson, *The Renaissance of Political Culture or the Renaissance of Ecological Fallacy?*, "Comparative Politics" 2002, № 4 (34), p. 273–292.

¹⁵ G. Almond, S. Verba, *The Civic Culture*, Princeton 1963, p. 337–375.

¹⁶ H. Eckstein, *A Theory of Stable Democracy*, Princeton 1966, p. 6–30.

¹⁷ J.A. Karp, S.A. Banducci, S. Bowler, *To Know it is to Love it? Satisfaction with Democracy in the European Union*, "Comparative Political Studies" 2003, № 4 (36), p. 271–292.

¹⁸ S. Lipset, *Political Man*, New York 1963, p. 93.

less interested in political activity and support a strong non-deliberative government. Let me add that the political attitudes in this model seem to be shaped by the level of education and material status. Surprisingly, one of the actual creators of a working class authoritarianism seemed to share Lipset's convictions. Lenin, with a striking sincerity, admitted that his revolutionary plans would have fallen through if the prime minister Stolypin had succeeded in reforming Russia and creating a strong affluent middle class¹⁹.

Huntington²⁰ also adheres to the socioeconomic paradigm, despite using a notion of modernization rather than class struggle. According to Huntington's analysis as an authoritarian, as country develops economically and its citizens become more affluent and educated, the probability of democratization or a regime change increases. In short, Huntington argues that modernization almost always leads to increased democratic expectations within the society. Similar concepts can be also found in the writings of Robert Dahl²¹.

Without a doubt, economic development measured by GDP per capita is one of the strongest predictor of democracy. Nevertheless, some researchers argue that other variables, which are not mediated by economic development, are equally important. Furthermore, the causative direction in the relation between democracy and economic development is still vehemently disputed. Is it the democracy that fosters economic freedom and development or does the relation run in the opposite direction?

One can point to many outliers that combine robust economies with lack of democracy. China, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, or modern Russia are much too prominent examples to be neglected. Thus, in his later writings Seymour Lipset, when discussing the "American Exceptionalism,"²² starts to lean towards a more cultural interpretation of democratic development. Huntington, on the other hand, points to religious aspects of politics and democratization²³. Whereas, Emanuel Todd in a well-known critique of the American political regime²⁴ describes family models as the key cultural factors explaining the differences among political regimes.

¹⁹ L.T. Lih, *Lenin*, London 2011, p. 99.

²⁰ S.P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Society*, Yale 1977.

²¹ R.A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*, New Haven 1973.

²² S. Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double Edged Sword*, London 1997.

²³ S.P. Huntington, *The Clash of the Civilizations*, New York 1996.

²⁴ E. Todd, *After the empire: The breakdown of the American order*, New York 2003.

The attitudinal versus economic approach to studies on attaining and sustaining democracy are a source of continuous debate in political science. However, many problems with establishing the direction of possible causation and measuring the weight of economic and uneconomic factors are resolved, up to certain point, by Inglehart and Welzel²⁵. They maintain that democracy is influenced by three main types of factors: the purely attitudinal, the modernizational, and a shared part of correlation. In consequence, Christian Welzel concludes his study by saying: "Controlling for modernization, emancipative mass attitudes explains 16 percent of variation in subsequent democracy while, controlling for emancipative attitudes, modernization explains another 15 percent of the variance. But the overlap connecting both factors explains still another 42 percent of the variance in subsequent democracy"²⁶. The results presented in this study are very similar when the GDP per capita is controlled for. Nevertheless, the problem clearly requires more research.

One more issue needs to be addressed in this section – it is the Putnam's social capital argument²⁷ that seems to contradict the findings of this study. In fact, it would seem that Putnam suggests that confidence in government is positively correlated with democracy. In *Bowling Alone*, he explicitly asks the question: "Is there a... link between declining social capital and declining trust in government? Is there a connection between our democratic discontent and civic disengagement"²⁸. And he proposes an answer: "In effect, in a community rich in social capital, government is 'we,' not 'they'. In this way social capital reinforces government legitimacy: I pay my taxes because I believe that most other people do, and I see the tax system as basically working as it should"²⁹.

Without a doubt, Putnam undermines the pro-democratic effect of limited trust in government, but this does not mean that this study advocates a complete rejection of Putnam's basic findings. A reformulation of Putnam's original hypothesis is, for instance, performed by Tavits,³⁰ whose study shows that social capital, actually, makes people more assertive and politically active in voicing their interests and demands. Such a civic assertiveness involves a certain amount of criticism towards the

²⁵ R.F. Inglehart, and C. Welzel, *Emancipative Values and Democracy...*

²⁶ C. Welzel, *Are Levels of Democracy...*, p. 420.

²⁷ R. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, New York 1995.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 247.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ M. Tavits, *Making Democracy Work More? Exploring the Linkage between Social Capital and Government Performance*, "Political Research Quarterly" 2006, № 2 (59), p. 211–225.

government. Furthermore, Newton³¹ discovers a lack of significant correlation between social capital and political trust. Finally, Putnam himself sees a certain dark side of the overgrown social capital and he tries to show that there is a fine line between confidence and blind trust. Additionally, Putnam's social hypothesis seems to yield more robust results at the local levels.

This study, however, uses the data from *World Value Survey Database*³² and the respondents polled for this database were asked about their confidence in "the government", which, if accurately translated from English to other languages, clearly suggests the central government. Whereas, based on Putnam's taxation example one can assume that the social capital hypothesis is more true with reference to local government and less true with reference to the central government. In other words, one can expect that in democracies citizens trust their local authorities more than their central government which is regarded with a significant level of suspicion. Conversely, in undemocratic regimes the autocratic or oligarchic rulers consciously play the part of the benevolent parental figures who are the people's champions and often punish the corrupt local governors in accordance with the "good tsar and bad nobleman" scheme.

Theory and hypothesis

This study assumes an attitudinal theoretical framework. This implies a key premise which states that mass attitudes influence the likelihood of developing and maintaining a democratic form of government. Although the economic development remains an important factor, this work argues that prediction of a subsequent democracy using variables such as GDP per capita can be greatly improved when attitudinal variables are added. Confidence in government is one such variable, and basing on empirical studies conducted so far, one may hypothesize that this variable is generally negatively correlated with the level of democracy. Using Welzel's notion of "blind" confidence, this study further hypothesizes that such a negative correlation is even stronger when examining just the extreme level of confidence in government. Finally, Inglehart's and Welzel's theory states that this correlation is not fully mediated by

³¹ K. Newton, *Trust, Social Capital...*, p. 209.

³² *World Value Survey Database (On-line Analysis)*, <http://www.wvsevsdb.com/wvs/WVSanalyze.jsp>, 25.01.2013.

economic development. Therefore, the correlation should remain robust when controlling for the GDP per capita. Thus, we arrive at the following hypotheses:

H1: There is a negative relation between extreme confidence in government and democracy

H0: The relation is positive or there is no relation

Methods and sample

The dependent variable in this study is the democracy. Extreme confidence in government is the independent variable and the 54 states are the units of analysis. Democracy is measured with the *Economist Intelligence Unit's Index of Democracy*. The extreme confidence of government is measured according to the *World Value Data Surveys*. The table below provides a summary of key operationalizations.

Table 1.

TERM:	OPERATIONALIZED AS:
units of analysis	countries (in one test they are grouped into four regime categories)
democracy/level of democracy (dependent variable)	a country's score on the <i>Economist Intelligence Unit's Index of Democracy</i>
extreme confidence in government (independent variable)	the percentage of citizens in a given country who, when asked what is their level of confidence in government, chose the highest score on a four point scale (i.e. "I have a great deal of confidence".)
economic development (control variable)	GDP per capita

There is no single perfect indicator to measure the democracy. However, the *Economist Intelligence Unit's Index of Democracy* was chosen for certain methodological reasons. Firstly, it combines a number of approaches: procedural, functional, social, cultural, and liberal. Secondly, it is very similar to the popular and widely used *Freedom House Index*³³ in its findings. However, the *Economist Intelligence Unit's Index of Democracy* is more effective in clearly organizing the data, presenting them, and logically dividing the units of analysis (countries) into groups or

³³ *Freedom House Index*, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=25&year=2010,11.10.2011>.

regime categories. In the EIUID the countries are rated with regard to “electoral process and pluralism,” “functioning of government,” “political participation,” “political culture,” and “civil liberties.” The overall score is an arithmetic mean of the category scores and its maximum value is 10. Based on the overall results, the countries are divided into four regime categories: full democracies (overall scores 9.88 – 7.96), flawed democracies (overall scores 7.91 – 6.06), hybrid regimes (overall scores 5.91 – 4.00) and authoritarian regimes (overall scores 4.00 – 0.86).

The sample of this study contains 18 full democracies, 21 flawed democracies, 9 hybrid regimes, and 6 authoritarian regimes. According to the *Economist Intelligence Unit's Index of Democracy*, among the 167 countries in the index there are 30 full democracies (inhabited by 14.4% of population), 50 flawed democracies (inhabited by 35% of population), 36 hybrid regimes (inhabited by 15.2% of population), and 51 authoritarian regimes (inhabited by 34% of population).

To assess the level of confidence in government, this study uses the *World Value Survey Database*. It has to be noted that what is meant by „extreme level of confidence“ is only the percentage of respondents that answer „a great deal“ when asked how much confidence in government they have. This answer is the highest possible score on a four point scale. A question that respondents were asked was: „I am going to name a number of organizations. For each one, could you tell me how much confidence you have in them: is it a great deal of confidence, quite a lot of confidence, not very much confidence or none at all?“ (*World Value Survey*). „The government“ was, of course, one of the listed organizations. The answers were rated on the following scale: “4 – a great deal; 3 – quite a lot; 2 – not very much; 1 – none at all.“

The control variable in this study is measured with the most widely used indicator of economic development – the gross domestic product per capita. The data for this variable are measured in thousands of dollars per year and entered into my analysis as they appear in the *CIA World Factbook*,³⁴ which contains the largest comparative set of GDP per capita. It contains 229 states and independent territories from all around the globe.

³⁴ *CIA World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html>, 9.11. 2011.

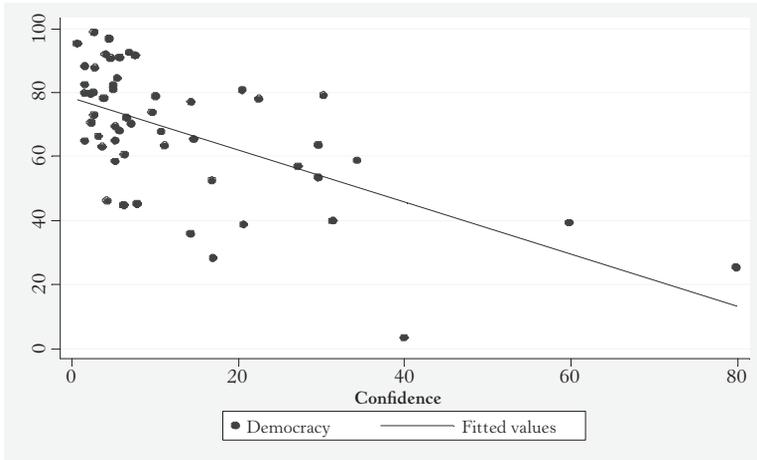
As in most international research designs in which countries are the unit of analysis, this study uses a non-probability sampling³⁵. The sampling is based on the design used by the *World Value Survey*. The sample is a purposive sample as it includes all the major states, i.e. those inhabited by the vast majority of the human race. My sample consists of the following countries: France, Great Britain, Netherlands, Italy, Trinidad and Tobago, Spain, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Switzerland, Germany, Malaysia, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Mali, Zambia, New Zealand, Morocco, Iran, Jordan, Cyprus, Iraq, Guatemala, Hong Kong, Ghana, Moldova, Georgia, Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, Colombia, Serbia, China, Taiwan, Turkey, Ukraine, Russian Federation, Peru, Uruguay, Poland, Brazil, Chile, India, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania, Mexico, South Africa, Australia, Argentina, South Korea, USA, Canada, Japan. Testing the hypothesis involves using quantitative statistical methods, namely a comparison of mean values of extreme confidence in government for the four regime categories, OLS regression analysis, and calculating the beta coefficient for the dependent and independent variable.

Testing and interpretation

To show the validity of extreme confidence in government as a tool for classifying states as specific types of regimes, first I compare the mean extreme confidence for the four categories of regimes. The mean percentage of respondents expressing extreme confidence in government in full democracies is 4.75%. The mean percentage of respondents expressing extreme confidence in government in flawed democracies is 13.36%. The mean percentage of respondents expressing extreme confidence in government in hybrid regimes is 18.14%. Finally, the mean percentage of respondents expressing extreme confidence in government in authoritarian regimes is 38.6%. The mean percentage of respondents expressing extreme confidence in government in the whole sample is 12.74%. The regression analysis for all 54 states can be displayed on the following graph:

³⁵ Cf. G. King, R.O. Keohane, S. Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*, Princeton 1994, p. 139.

Figure 1.



The correlation between the extreme confidence in government and levels of democracy for the whole sample is -0.6 and the R-squared is 0.36 . This means that the null hypothesis in this study is rejected and I conclude that 36% of the variation in democracy can be explained by the difference in the levels of extreme confidence in government. The regression coefficient is -0.83 . Both the extreme confidence in government and democracy index have been displayed on a scale from 1 to 100. This means that a 1% decrease in extreme confidence leads to 0.83% increase in the democracy score.

In the next step, the control variable (GDP per capita) is added. This increases the overall R-squared score to 0.6 . Therefore, both variables (extreme confidence and GDP per capita) explain 60% of variation in democracy. It is a result greater than the R-squared only for GDP (0.52) and only for confidence (0.36). Clearly, controlling for GDP adds to the analysis of democracy and increases the predictive power of the whole regression.

The regression coefficient score for the extreme confidence when controlling for GDP per capita is -0.47 and the score for GDP per capita when controlling for extreme confidence is 0.47 . This means that controlling for GDP's 1% increase in extreme confidence in government lowers the democracy score by 0.47%. And a 1000\$ increase in yearly GDP per capita leads to a 0.76% higher score on the democracy index.

Controlling for GDP per capita decreases the beta coefficient for extreme confidence in government because there is a negative correlation between those two variables (-0.47). Thus, the study concludes that the

relation between the extreme confidence and democracy can be partly mediated by GDP per capita. Still, even after adding the control variable, the relation between extreme confidence in government and democracy is statistically significant. All the major findings are displayed in the summary table.

Table 2.

SUMMARY TABLE OF RESULTS			
1. Comparison of means			
Group	Mean for extreme confidence in government		
full democracies	4.75%		
flawed democracies	13.37%		
hybrid regimes	18.14%		
authoritarian regimes	38.62%		
total mean	12.74%		
2. Regression			
Variable	Reg-coefficient	R-squared	Probability of type I error
Total	X	0.36	>0.0001
Democracy	X	X	>0.0001
Extreme Confidence	-0.83	X	>0.0001
3. Regression controlling for GDP per capital			
Variable	Reg-coefficient	R-squared	Probability of type I error
Total	X	0.60	>0.0001
Democracy	X	X	>0.0001
Extreme Confidence	-0.47	X	0.001
GDP	0.76	X	>0.0001
4. Correlations between variables			
X	Democracy	Extreme Confidence	GDP
Democracy	1.00	-0.6	0.72
Extreme Confidence	-0.60	1.00	-0.47
GDP	0.72	-0.47	1.00

Conclusions

Empirical studies conducted on the factors that are correlated with the existence or development of democracy can be divided into two main groups: those that focus on mass attitudes and those that focus on economy. It is still fairly difficult to establish a firm causation in this field

of research and this study also does not succeed in doing so. It provides, however, some support to the moderately attitudinal approach by showing that democracy is explained partly by economic development, partly by social attitudes, and partly by the shared covariance of those two variables. Further research needs to be conducted to clarify the nature of this shared influence and to propose a causal hypothesis. This particular study focuses on only one attitudinal aspect – the extreme level of confidence in government. A very strong negative correlation between this variable and the score on the democracy index was observed. In short, countries in which large numbers of citizens claim that they have „a great deal“ of confidence in government seem to be less democratic. Statistically, when the percentage of such persons is above 4.75%, the possibility that a given country is a „full democracy“ decreases dramatically. This provides a strong support of the hypothesis that a certain level of civic criticism and distrust of the government is necessary for sustaining democracy. Conversely, undemocratic regimes would seem to function most efficiently if the citizens are obedient and somewhat blindly supportive of their government.

This study also concludes that Putnam’s original social capital hypothesis requires significant modification in order to account for the new empirical studies. Indeed, It would seem that social capital and political capital are two different concepts.

ABSTRACTS

This study examines the correlation between democracy and extreme confidence in governments in 54 states. The aim of the study is to test the hypothesis that the greater the number of citizens who display extreme confidence in government, the worse the quality of democracy. This finding argues against some of the propositions of Robert Putnam. The OLS regression analysis confirms the negative correlation between the variables, which indicates that the extreme levels of support for government do not correlate with the development of democracy.

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DEMOKRACJA I SKRAJNE ZAUFANIE DO RZĄDU: ANALIZA RELACJI POMIĘDZY JAKOŚCIĄ DEMOKRACJI A ZAUFANIEM DO RZĄDU W 54 PAŃSTWACH

Badanie analizuje związek między demokracją a skrajnym zaufaniem do rządu w 54 państwach. Hipoteza jaka jest testowana mówi, że im większa liczba obywateli, którzy mają skrajne zaufanie do rządu w danym państwie, tym mniej to państwo jest demokratyczne; tym samym podważa ona pewne propozycje Roberta Putnama. Analiza regresji OLS potwierdza widoczną korelację ujemną sugerując, że, istotnie, skrajnie wysokie poziomy zaufania do rządu nie są skorelowane z rozwojem demokracji.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: *Demokracja, skrajne zaufanie do rządu, Robert Putnam, World Value Survey, indykatory nastrojów społecznych, kultura polityczna*

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