

When do Illiberal Parties Emerge? A Test of Competing Models

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ABSTRACT

When do illiberal parties emerge? Illiberal parties endorse limiting the rights of political minorities, restrictions of the free press, or limits to the authority of high courts, while also supporting elections. Despite growing concerns over the viability of liberal democracies, there is a surprising dearth of systematic empirical evidence about the willingness of parties, especially those at the right-cultural fringe, to curtail liberal-democratic rights. Based on a 2019 expert survey we conducted in Europe, along with V-dem data, an initial goal of the paper is to describe the stances of nearly 200 European parties—East and West—on civil liberties. We then test two prominent theories in the literature concerning the conditions that give rise to illiberal parties. First, we assess whether a representation deficit underlies the emergence of illiberal parties. Second, we examine whether the illiberal affinity of mass publics—i.e., their predispositions to be more or less open to illiberal appeals—is related to the presence of illiberal parties. Our results indicate that the much-discussed representation deficit is not associated with the presence of illiberal parties. Instead, their rise seems primarily driven by the illiberal affinities of mass publics.