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Comparison of Linkages in Regimes Characterized by a Dense Civil Society and Democratic Stability

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In the twentieth century, many scholars linked a country's ability to maintain democratic stability with the presence of a strong civil society. However, a dense civil society does not have automatic stability. Civil society comprises organizations and groups that exist outside government. These organizations' primary purpose is to represent and advocate for citizens' interests. Civil society also promotes engagement by exposing less politically active individuals to current events, thereby enhancing political leaders' accountability. The public sphere creates spaces for dialogue within a society. The Great Depression affected democracies and heightened polarization. Fragmentation of the political sphere in Weimar left the state vulnerable to extremism. By contrast, Sweden focused on maintaining strong channels of communication between political parties and unions to promote stability. In the UK, market-first reforms also loosened these channels, allowing Leave leaders to mobilize them. In light of these previous cases, density does not guarantee stability. Democratic stability depends less on the density of civil society and more on the degree to which the public sphere is integrated.

Linkage between civil society and leadership is essential for mobilization and bargaining in the context of reforms. There is a common perception that the civic sphere naturally shapes political culture. Instead, the linkage between these spheres and different organizations has proven to be the leading mobilizer. Having channels of communication between the public and state actors allows for grievances to be heard effectively. Linkage also plays a vital role in enabling society to serve as a gatekeeper against extremist actors. When civic networks are closely linked, fewer loosely organized groups can manipulate civic society. Overall, the density of linkage is the primary driver of democratic stability by preventing the emergence of channels of extremism.¹

Sweden illustrates how a dense society and the linkage between culture and policy were factors in maintaining democratic stability. In the early 1930s, Sweden faced a crisis. When exports of timber, pulp, and steel collapsed, global shocks increased unemployment. Sweden left the gold standard in 1931, allowing its currency to depreciate to recover. The 1938 Saltsjöbaden deal set a foundational agreement between the Swedish Trade Union Confederation and the Swedish Employers Association to regulate industry. It also prevented strikes by promoting cooperation and collective bargaining. Workers kept wage demands moderate and, in return, received broad social insurance and job security. Equal pay was set across firms so companies could not outbid each other to poach workers. The payoff was strong market protections, such as unemployment insurance and social insurance, that reduce risk and narrow wage gaps. Crisis bargains built trust and capacity that later powered universal insurance and compressed wages. This administration was closely linked to party, union, and employer education networks. This created overlapping channels for mobiliza-

1 Berman, Sheri. "Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic." *World Politics*, vol. 49, no. 3, Apr. 1997, pp. 401–429. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/25054008

tion. These linkages were effective mechanisms for communicating grievances, which could be translated into policy. Alongside the administration, civil society was able to bargain for what policies they wanted promoted in the country. Sweden exemplifies a dense civil society led by the government and a method for integrating dense society into mobilization channels.

The dense civil society in Weimar Germany was ineffective at stabilizing democracy because its networks were not organized. The aftermath of World War I had significant implications for German society. Under hyperinflation and the Depression, the lack of overlapping channels of linkage destroyed coordination and prevented parties from translating grievances into policy. The Great Depression further polarized Germany's party system. During the interwar period, Germans engaged more actively in clubs and organizations as a response to their frustration with the government's failures (Berman 402). In Weimar Germany, clubs were less effective at bringing people together because leisure activities became increasingly political. This was due to conflicts between national groups and the Weimar government, which tried to use these clubs to promote its social and cultural policies (Nathus 29). Without such political institutions, societies will lack trust and the capacity to define and realize their goals (Berman). Spheres were segmented by class, religion, and race, which limited party linkages. Ultimately, the lack of channels facilitated extremists' entry into these spaces and their re-framing of public views. Anti-system actors repurposed these networks, and participation became radical mobilization. As in the example of Weimar, once public authorities began steering these organizations, they lost their neutrality in the public sphere. Weimar is an example of how dense civil society does not always equal democratic stability.



Weimar City Hall.

Contemporary Britain reflects fragmented civil spheres that can feed anti-system mobilization. In the UK, Brexit was an anti-system reaction. By the 2000s, UK linkages had thinned, and civic life was increasingly fragmented. In this fragmented civil sphere, discussion and resentment circulated through local channels. There were few integrated organizations that were capable of turning grievances into reforms. This helps explain why supporters of the “left-behind” view believe that a failed policy agreement, rising inequality, and a decline in the quality of political representation drove the Leave vote. The economy became detached from social life, a shift that led not only to economic uncertainty but also to social and cultural distress. Actors were able to reframe a conflict over sovereignty and migration. A preference for cultural homogeneity and traditional values was correlated with lower levels of education and greater exposure to the sharp end of labour-market competition with migrants. The Brexit vote thus reflects a protest not only against the social, economic, and cultural impacts of long-term marketisation, but also against a party system that no longer governs civic spheres. In this sense, Britain shows how fragmented civil spheres and eroded linkage can turn dense participation into a vehicle for anti-system mobilization rather than democratic stabilization.

2

Interest groups are usually the engines of mobilization and everyday political participation, but the actions of civic spheres depend on their linkage. Weak party civil society linkages allow for radical anti-system actors to radicalize these channels, explaining why Weimar's civic density did not uphold democratic stability. As public authorities began to manage certain clubs and leisure associations in the Weimar Republic, these organizations lost their neutral social role. This prior neutrality had helped reduce divisions within

2 Olsen, Gregg M. “Re-Modeling Sweden: The Rise and Demise of the Compromise in a Global Economy.” *Social Problems*, vol. 43, no. 1, Feb. 1996, pp. 1–20. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3096891.

society and made it easier to engage with political issues. Additionally, weak ties between political parties and civil society enabled extremist actors to take over their networks. The UK's lack of strong connections stems more from external influences than from internal growth. In this case, ethnic ties indicate that, even when organizations are strong, fragmented connections can limit inclusive outcomes and even fuel identity-based conflicts. The strength of linkages among different groups determines Sweden's outcomes. Reflecting that strong channels of communication linked to state actors promote policies in alignment with society's grievances. These examples show that democracy works better when spheres are woven into accountable linkages that channel everyday mobilization into outcomes.

3

In conclusion, democratic stability cannot be measured solely by the presence of dense civil society, but rather by the linkages between different spheres of society. Sweden shows that high density can stabilize democracy when unions, parties, and advocacy groups are woven together through encompassing linkages. Sweden, for example, illustrates how linkages among these spheres translate local demands into universal welfare. Weimar Germany, by contrast, demonstrates that when dense networks are fragmented, it becomes inherently easier for extremist actors to be mobilized against democratic institutions. Brexit further suggests that when market-first reforms erode party–union linkages, civic networks become vulnerable to economic nationalism. This focus on linkage explains past variations in democratic stability through the connected channels within dense society.

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3 Berman, Sheri. "Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic." *World Politics*, vol. 49, no. 3, Apr. 1997, pp. 401–429. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/25054008.

4 Nathaus, Klaus. "Leisure Clubs and the Decline of the Weimar Republic: A Reassessment." *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 45, no. 1, Jan. 2010, pp. 27–50. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40542904.

5 Hopkin, Jonathan. "When Polanyi Met Farage: Market Fundamentalism, Economic Nationalism, and Britain's Exit from the European Union." *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2017, pp. 465–478.

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