SOCIUM · SFB 1342
WorkingPapers No. 30

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Disentangling democracy: What furthers immigrant social rights?

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Globale
Entwicklungsdynamiken
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SFB 1342

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SOCIUM SFB 1342 WorkingPapers, 30
Bremen: SOCIUM, SFB 1342, 2025

Universität Bremen

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https://www.socialpolicydynamics.de

[DOI https://doi.org/10.26092/elib/3725]

[ISSN (Print) 2629-5733]
[ISSN (Online) 2629-5741]

Gefördert durch die Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG)
Projektnummer 374666841 – SFB 1342

DFG Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft

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Acknowledgements
We would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and the editorial team for their constructive and insightful comments, which helped improve the quality of this article. We are also grateful to colleagues who provided valuable feedback on earlier drafts. In addition, we thank the country experts who contributed their time and knowledge to the data collection process for the Immigrant Social Rights (ImmigSR) dataset.

Abstract

Immigrant rights have been found to be better protected in democracies than in authoritarian regimes, but there is no systematic test of different explanations of why this is the case. In this paper, we attempt to fill this gap by investigating which features of democratic political systems are conducive to a subset of immigrants' rights, namely social rights. Drawing on literatures on human rights, minority rights, and immigrants' rights, we hypothesize that whereas electoral elements are not necessarily conducive to immigrant social rights, liberal democratic institutions and civil society participation are. To test these hypotheses, we analyze data on immigrant social rights that spans the years 1980 to 2018 and covers 38 countries around the world using fixed effects models. The level of democracy and several subcomponents thereof are measured using indices provided by the V-Dem project. Descriptively, democracies indeed grant immigrants more social rights than autocracies. However, the multivariate analyses show that disaggregating democracy indices is important. The most aggregate index of liberal democracy has no significant association with the outcome variable. When disaggregating, we found that also the electoral component has no robust effect on immigrant social rights, but the liberal and the civil society components are drivers of extensions of immigrant social rights.

Keywords: immigrant rights, social rights, democracy, social assistance, welfare state

Zusammenfassung

Bestehende Literatur zeigt, dass die Rechte von Migrant*innen in Demokratien besser geschützt sind als in autoritären Regimen - allerdings fehlt eine systematische Untersuchung der diesem Zusammenhang zugrunde liegenden Mechanismen. Wir schließen diese Lücke, indem wir analysieren, welche Komponenten demokratischer politischer Systeme förderlich für soziale Rechte von Migrant*innen sind. Aufbauend auf Forschung zu Menschenrechten und Minderheitenrechten gehen wir davon aus, dass elektoral-demokratische Elemente keinen positiven Einfluss auf die sozialen Rechte von Migrantinnen haben, während liberale demokratische Institutionen und Möglichkeiten für zivilgesellschaftliche Partizipation diese Rechte stärken. Für die Überprüfung unserer Hypothesen analysieren wir mithilfe von Fixed-Effects-Modellen Daten zu den sozialen Rechten von Migrant*innen, die für 39 Länder weltweit zwischen 1980 und 2018 erhoben wurden. Demokratie und ihre Komponenten messen wir mithilfe der Indizes des V-Dem-Projekts. Deskriptive Ergebnisse zeigen, dass Demokratien Migrant*innen in der Tat mehr soziale Rechte gewähren als Autokratien. Die multivariaten Analysen zeigen jedoch, dass eine differenzierte Betrachtung der einzelnen Komponenten aufschlussreich ist. Im Einklang mit unseren Erwartungen gibt es keinen robusten Zusammenhang zwischen der elektoral-demokratischen Komponente und sozialen Rechten von Migrant*innen. Die liberale und die zivilgesellschaftliche Komponente hingegen haben einen positiven Effekt auf soziale Rechte von Migrant*innen."

Contents

1. Introduction

Ample evidence indicates that immigrant rights are better protected in democracies than in authoritarian regimes (Koopmans & Michalowski, 2017; Ruhs, 2018). Even though they have been shown to be more open to immigration than democracies (Breunig et al., 2012; Mirilovic, 2010), regarding immigrant rights, autocracies are notoriously restrictive. While support for open immigration policies comes both from employers who benefit from foreign low-wage labor[1] and from elites that can siphon off some of the tax revenue created by immigration, in autocracies neither political nor economic elites have an interest in expanding immigrants' rights since granting rights comes with costs (Ruhs, 2013).

Seminal studies, such as those by Marshall (1950) and Pierson (1994, 1996), posit a positive relationship also between democracy and social rights. However, insights from migration research suggest that in the case of social rights of immigrants, majoritarian and electoral principles do not necessarily lead to extensions (Guiraudon 2000, 2002; Joppke 1998). This raises a fundamental puzzle: if democracy is generally associated with the broadening of rights and welfare, which components of democracy are driving immigrant social rights?[2] This study examines this question by unpacking the components of democracy and analyzing their distinct effects on immigrant social rights. In doing so, it advances scholarship on welfare, migration and immigrant social rights while also contributing to research on democracy. Further relevance stems from the fact that social rights serve as an important bulwark against vulnerability and inequality, underlined by the fact that the right to social security is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and is increasingly also promoted by the ILO (ILO, 2012).

We argue that there are two opposing mechanisms at play affecting immigrant rights in democracies. The principle of majority votes jeopardizes the interests of minorities (Bochsler & Hug, 2015; Gamble, 1997; Moore & Ravishankar, 2012). As immigrant access to welfare benefits tends to be highly politicized (Koning, 2017), a negative effect of majority votes can be expected. At the same time, human rights in general, and minority rights in particular are upheld better in countries where legislatures constrain executive action (Bueno De Mesquita et al., 2005; Joshi et al., 2019), where rule of law is strong and courts are independent (Mitchell et al., 2013) and where civil society is allowed to exert influence (Zafarullah & Rahman, 2002).

So far, there is however no systematic test of these potentially conflicting relationships between components of democracies and immigrant social rights specifically. Studies on the relationship between democracy and immigrant rights have so far mostly focused on entry, i.e. immigrant access to the territory (Breunig et al., 2012; Mirilovic, 2010; Natter, 2018; Ruhs, 2018) and citizenship and/or cultural rights (Koopmans & Michalowski, 2017). Existing comparative literature on immigrant social rights is furthermore mostly restricted to OECD countries, where variation in political regime is relatively low (Koning, 2019; Römer, 2017; Sainsbury, 2012; Schmitt & Teney, 2019; a notable exception is Cruz-Martínez, 2020).

We start the paper by reviewing the literature on the relationship between democracy and immigrant rights. We then break down our theoretical expectations regarding different components of democracy. In our empirical analyses, we draw on data on immigrant social rights that span the years 1980-2018 and cover 38 countries from five different world regions, namely Europe, Latin America, North America, Oceania and Southeast Asia. We first present how immigrant social rights differ over time and across the countries in our sample. Using time series cross-sectional methods, we then test how different components of democracy relate to immigrant social rights.

1 While this is the case in democracies as well, authoritarian regimes must fear less or no electoral backlash since they suppress or undermine electoral systems.

2 In the remainder of the paper, the term "immigrant social rights" denotes the rights of non-citizens that fall into one of these five legal categories: permanent resident, temporary labor migrant, asylum seeker, recognized refugee, and family reunification migrant. Thus, the rights of illegalized immigrants, and immigrants falling under regional agreements are not accounted for.

2. Democracy and immigrant social rights: natural progression?

The granting of rights is often seen as inherent to the liberal principles of democracies. As rights-based politics gained prominence in Western democracies, the exclusion of immigrants from these rights became increasingly inconceivable (Hollifield, 1992). Incorporation of immigrants has also been interpreted as a consequence of a global normative shift towards individual human rights (Soysal, 1994). Some even argue that citizenship has lost its significance entirely, replaced by a new model of 'post-national membership,' where access to rights is determined by personhood and residence in the destination country (Soysal, 1994). Similarly, Hammar (1990) posits that most migrants occupy a status that lies between that of a temporary resident and citizenship, called "denizenship".

Democracy is also widely regarded as a driver of social rights, with existing literature emphasizing a mutually reinforcing relationship between democratic institutions and social rights. Marshall's (1950) seminal theory of citizenship conceptualizes rights acquisition as a linear progression: civil rights lay the foundation for political rights, which subsequently facilitate the development of social rights. Furthermore, within democracies, the median voter's preference for redistribution (Meltzer & Richard, 1981) and the political risks associated with retrenching social rights (Pierson, 1996) make it difficult to scale back welfare once institutionalized. These dynamics create a self-reinforcing mechanism, whereby democratic systems are seen as inherently supportive of expanding social rights.

However, in the field of immigrant social rights, the literature also points to tensions, pointing out that the pathway from political inclusion to social inclusion as posited by Marshall (1950) does not apply in this case. Instead, immigrants may gain fragmented social rights without progressing to full political inclusion (Guiraudon, 2000, 2002). Lacking political rights, immigrants are then often overlooked by parties in their redistributive calculations centered on the median voter. In many societies, immigrants are seen as less deserving of accessing welfare benefits than other groups (van Oorschot, 2006). This sentiment, in turn, is taken up and mobilized by political actors. As a result, access to welfare benefits is often subject to restrictive policies shaped by majoritarian pressures and right-wing populist rhetoric (Römer et al., 2023; Chueri, 2021; Schumacher & van Kersbergen, 2016) but also mainstream left and right parties (Harris & Römer, 2023). Therefore, while liberal norms may favor the extension of rights to immigrants, large segments of the public and political parties oppose it – a "liberal paradox" (Hollifield, 1992, 2022).

At the same time specific democratic institutions have been identified as drivers of inclusion. Expansion of immigrants' rights often occur via liberal democratic institutions such as bureaucracies (Guiraudon, 2000, 2002) and courts (Joppke, 2001) that are relatively isolated from public pressures. These institutions function as counter-majoritarian democratic institutions, providing pathways for inclusion and countering the exclusionary tendencies associated with electoral components of democracy.

Given the contradictions in the effects of democracy on immigrants' social rights that previous literature has unearthed, it seems that efforts to extend these rights and pressures to bar immigrants from the welfare state emanate from different features of democracy itself (see also Manatschal & Bernauer, 2016). Furthermore, it is crucial to broaden the analytical lens beyond the "Western liberal democracies"[3] that have dominated scholarship and to engage conceptually with the notion of democracy. Democracy is not a monolithic construct; rather, it encompasses a range of institutional mechanisms that may exert contrasting effects on immigrant social rights (Merkel et al., 2003; Coppedge et al., 2024a).

To this end, this paper will focus on those features of democracy that are deemed particularly relevant to the inclusion or exclusion of immigrants: electoral components, liberal components, and civil society participation. Each component cap-

3 For a critical stance on the overwhelming focus on "Western" liberal democracies see also (FitzGerald & Cook-Martín (2014) and Natter (2018; 2022; 2024).

tures a distinct aspect of democracy, highlighting different mechanisms through which democratic systems may shape immigrant social rights.

2.1. Driving exclusion: electoral components and immigrant social rights

The presence of elections constitutes the basis of a democracy. Elections embody "the continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals" (Dahl, 1971, p. 1). For elections to be meaningful, it is generally accepted that certain civil liberties such as freedom of association, freedom of expression and freedom of the press also need to be protected – otherwise, the electoral contest could easily be manipulated (Dahl, 1971; Levitsky & Way, 2002). Yet, the main thrust of the electoral dimension of democracy is about the fairness of elections and electoral competition, the general right to vote and to stand for elections, and the accountability of the elected to the population (Coppedge et al., 2024a; Dahl, 1971).

Assuming that elected officials in democracies respond to the median voter's interest, the preferences of minorities are likely to be underrepresented in democracies (Hänni, 2017). This disparity is even more pronounced in the case of immigrants, who in most cases have not yet attained the right to vote. While theoretically in the long run immigrants may also benefit from the electoral mechanisms of democracy when they become citizens (Koopmans & Michalowski, 2017, p. 9), empirically – and contrary to the universal egalitarian norms that are at the heart of democracies – often even long-term residents are not granted voting rights (Blatter et al., 2017). Thus, most immigrants have fewer opportunities to exert influence through classical channels of political participation.

Furthermore, anti-immigrant sentiments in the enfranchised majority population are widespread (Esipova et al., 2017; for an early discussion of reasons see e.g. Hollifield, 1992; Scheepers et al., 2002), including welfare chauvinist attitudes (van Oorschot, 2006) and this may be reflected in elections. Political parties or individual politicians are likely to pander to anti-immigrant attitudes in the public debate which in turn reproduces and reinforces such attitudes. Especially, but not only, Populist Radical Right Parties (PRRP) have been shown to campaign on welfare chauvinist agendas, often successfully so: These parties frequently make welfare policies more exclusive when in office (Chueri, 2021; Römer et al., 2023) or exert pressure on mainstream parties to do so when in opposition (Schumacher & van Kersbergen, 2016). The left, while decisive for welfare state expansion overall, has not been a strong bulwark regarding immigrant social rights, as comparative studies find no positive correlation between left party strength and immigrant social rights (Römer, 2017; Schmitt & Teney, 2019). The tendency of democratic processes to reflect the preferences of enfranchised majorities, often at the expense of minorities, has been aptly described as the "tyranny of the majority" (Coppedge et al., 2024a; Tocqueville, 1994). [4]

We thus formulate our first hypothesis as follows:

H1: Electoral components of democracy are negatively associated with immigrant social rights.

2.2. Driving inclusion: liberal components and immigrant social rights

Conceptions of liberal democracy go beyond the features required of mere electoral democracies. Diamond (1999, pp. 11–12) describes the characteristics of liberal democracies: Firstly, in addition to the requirements of electoral democracy, liberal democracy requires limits to executive power. This is achieved through structures of horizontal accountability whereby the executive branch is controlled by the judiciary and the legislature. Secondly, liberal democracies protect a wider range of individual liberties (beyond the

4 Similar logics extend to features of "direct democracy". We thus develop and test a hypothesis on a sub-sample of countries that feature variation on elements of direct democracy (Appendix H).

ones that were deemed crucial by Dahl, 1971) and minority rights. Thirdly, citizens' equality before the law and the actual implementation of the law (i.e., the rule of law) are ensured.

Rather than reflecting the will of the majority, these institutions are designed to protect rights against both state encroachment and exclusionary political pressures from the electorate. The importance of these liberal elements for minority rights and human rights in general has been shown by a large literature (Cross, 1999; Hill & Jones, 2014; Joshi et al., 2019; Keith et al., 2009; Mitchell et al., 2013; Wilson & Rodríguez Cordero, 2006). Literature on immigrants' rights protection, too, points to the relevance of judiciaries and bureaucracies (Guiraudon, 2000; Joppke, 1998, 2001). Authors in this tradition argue that these institutions favor immigrants' rights as the negotiations in these venues are less politicized than the sphere of electoral competition. For instance, in the 1970s and 1980s, the German Constitutional Court upheld residency rights of foreigners in several cases and limited the government's attempts to restrict family reunification (Joppke, 1998, pp. 284–286). While some have pointed out that courts are not consistently in favor of immigrants' rights and that bureaucratic discretion often plays out to the disadvantage of immigrants (Sainsbury, 2012), others have even warned that in some contexts, courts are overly active in extending immigrant social rights (Blauberger & Schmidt, 2017). In sum, we deem it likely that liberal components of democracy increase immigrant inclusion in systems of social protection.

Thus, our second hypothesis is:

H2: Liberal components of democracy are positively associated with immigrant social rights.

2.3. Driving inclusion: civil society and immigrant social rights

Civil society refers to the public space between individuals and the state, where citizens organize into groups, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), labor unions, religious organizations, and advocacy groups, to pursue collective interests and ideals (Coppedge et al., 2024b). While civil society exists in both democratic and autocratic regimes, its autonomy and vibrancy are defining features of democracy. A stronger, autonomous, and protected civil society is likely to enhance immigrant inclusion by providing institutionalized channels for advocacy, legal mobilization, and political engagement. When free from state interference and able to operate independently, CSOs can act as counterweights to exclusionary political pressures, ensuring that immigrant rights are advanced even when electoral politics do not prioritize them. Their ability to mobilize resources, frame discourses, and build coalitions makes them particularly influential in policy debates, legal challenges, and public campaigns.

Civil society organizations may be pro-immigrant rights because they have been initiated by immigrants themselves (see, e.g., Ireland, 1994), but also non-immigrant civil society organizations in general have been active on behalf of immigrant interests (Giugni & Passy, 2001). For instance, human rights NGOs may take up immigrants' rights as part of their universalistic rights agenda. However, there are also political economy related reasons for why some civil society organizations promote immigrant rights: Trade unions specifically have an interest in doing so since right-less migrants are less costly to employers, thereby representing an unfair competition to native workers (Afonso & Devitt, 2016; Kuhlmann & Vogeler, 2020).

Civil society organizations are often crucial in bringing cases on immigrant rights to courts (Joppke, 2001), litigating in favor of access to social rights (for examples, see Baladrón et al., 2013; Paritätischer Wohlfahrtsverband & Voigt, 2014), thus "making use" of the rule of law for furthering immigrants' rights. Civil society organizations can also resort to lobbying to pressure legislatures, or they put up public campaigns for migrant beneficiaries (see, e.g., Fujiwara, 2005 for a campaign on immigrant social rights in the US). Over time, they can become central actors in immigration policy (Brumat & Torres, 2015). This leads to the final hypothesis:

H3: Civil society participation is positively associated with immigrant social rights.

3. Data and Method

For the empirical analyses, this paper focusses on 38 countries in Europe, North and South America, Asia and Oceania[5]. This sample features substantial variation regarding immigrant social rights as well as political regime, as we will show in the first part of the analysis section.

3.1. Dependent variable

The indicator for the dependent variable, *immigrant social rights*, comes from the "Immigrant Social Rights" (ImmigSR) dataset (Römer et al., 2021, 2024). The dataset assesses whether non-naturalized temporary and permanent migrant workers, asylum seekers and recognized refugees may, *de jure*, access non-contributory social assistance programs and whether migrant workers may access unemployment insurance benefits under the same conditions as citizens[6]. In addition, the dataset captures the consequences of social assistance receipt and unemployment for migrant workers' residence permits as well as measures that tie non-reliance on benefits to migrants' entry into the country through family reunification regulations. Preferential treatment based on bilateral or regional agreements and provisions regarding undocumented migration are not accounted for in the dataset.

Including indicators of both non-contributory and contributory benefits allows a more comprehensive measure of immigrant social rights. When only looking at immigrants' access to unemployment insurance benefits, it would seem as if countries are generally relatively inclusive – contributory benefits tend to be less restricted because they are based on an understanding of reciprocity (Reeskens & van Oorschot, 2012). Also including measures of access to social assistance adds nuance, as non-contributory benefits tend to be the most restrictive and most highly politicized types of benefits.

The ImmigSR dataset measures de jure provisions exclusively, not implementation or policy outcomes. Each of the items in the questionnaire was scored on a scale from 0 (most restrictive) to 1 (least restrictive). The overall index of immigrant social rights is an unweighted average of all items. Taking an unweighted average assumes that all items are of equal weight and can compensate each other. This method was chosen because it is easily understandable and replicable. All items in the dataset and the scoring scheme can be found in the Appendix to this paper (see Appendix B).

Our measure of immigrant social rights has some limitations: Focusing on de jure access to benefits neglects important questions of portability (Avato et al., 2010) and difficulties in accessing benefits related to lack of knowledge about existing programs and rights as well as discrimination at the level of service providers and administrations (Hemker & Rink, 2017; Ratzmann, 2020). Nevertheless, we argue that inclusion or exclusion on the policy level shapes de facto exclusion or inclusion, and thus warrants analyses. Taken together, the ImmigSR data are the only nuanced multidimensional measure of immigrant social rights that covers a variety of political regimes over more than three decades.

3.2. Explanatory variable

We draw on the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project, a comprehensive framework for measuring democracy that provides a wide array of indices and indicators. These indices allow us to test hypotheses on measurable standards while

5 Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Cambodia, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Malaysia, Myanmar, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Paraguay, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Singapore, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand, United Kingdom, United States of America, Uruguay, Venezuela, and Vietnam.

6 In cases where social assistance benefits or comparable benefits did not exist, the respective items were coded as missing. In all countries however, there are policies on at least one of the dimensions captured by the index, which leads to observations for most years.

remaining agnostic to specific democratic characteristics, such as the electoral system.[7]

Firstly, we use the most aggregate index offered in the V-Dem dataset, the V-Dem *Liberal Democracy Index*, to attempt to corroborate earlier research that finds immigrants' rights to be related to overall measures of democracy. It comprises 69 indicators for the freedom of elections, civil liberties, rule of law, independence of the judiciary and checks on executive power. To measure the electoral component of democracy, we use the Electoral *Democracy Index* which captures Robert Dahl's (1971) concept of polyarchy, including both indicators on clean elections and on freedom of expression, association and the press. We also test for the effect of the *Direct Popular Vote Index* on a sub-sample in Appendix H. The *Liberal Component Index*, made up of measures of individual liberties, rule of law, and legislative and judicial constraints on the executive, is used as an indicator for liberal democratic elements. Lastly, we use the *Civil Society Participation Index*, which assesses civil society strength through indicators like engagement with policymakers or public participation in CSO (Coppedge et al., 2024a, 2024b) (for more details on operationalization see Appendix C).

3.3. Control variables

We control for a set of variables that may correlate both with the level of democracy and with the social rights of immigrants. Firstly, GDP per capita correlates positively with democracy (Acemoglu et al., 2019; Barro, 1996) but may also increase government capacity to provide social rights to immigrants (Ruhs, 2013). We therefore control for GDP using data from the Penn World Tables (Feenstra et al., 2015). We use their measure of 'real GDP on the expenditure side' (Feenstra et al., 2015, p. 2) which allows for comparisons of standards of living over time and between countries. We divide it by the population to obtain GDP per capita. Secondly, policymakers may be reluctant to grant access in countries where immigrant stock is high (Soroka et al., 2016). We control for this using data on the number of the foreign-born population from the World Bank (2024a). Since the data is provided in five-year intervals, we use linear interpolation to cover the missing data. We divide migrant stock by mid-year population data provided by the World Bank (2024b). Thirdly, previous research has shown that states that are more generous towards their citizens also tend to be more generous towards non-naturalized immigrants (Römer, 2017). Social spending is also correlated with democratic institutions (Schmidt, 2019). Based on these findings, we include government expenditure on health, education, and social protection as % of GDP (Gethin, 2024) (for an overview on the descriptives of the explanatory and control variables see Appendix A).

3.4. Model

We use an ordinary least squares regression with country fixed effects using a Driscoll-Kraay estimator for heteroscedasticity and autocorrelation consistent standard errors. All independent variables are lagged by one year. As the components of democracy are highly correlated there is a higher risk for multicollinearity, and VIF levels are above critical thresholds for both the electoral and liberal component (Appendix F). In the main models reported in the text, each model therefore includes only the index of interest. We also estimate a model including all indices simultaneously (Appendix G). While there are differences between these two approaches, the overall picture remains robust. We also include robustness checks using a two-way fixed effects model including panel corrected standards errors (see Appendix J), which also confirmed the findings.

7 This means that the conceptualization doesn't differentiate between the various "Patterns of Democracy" (Lijphart, 2012) that scholars of comparative democratic institutions have unearthed. This is desirable when dealing with diverse contexts (Merkel et al., 2003, p. 40) At the same time, it constitutes a limitation, as there is evidence that characteristics of democracies such as parliamentary systems and proportional representation do have an impact on immigration and immigrant policies (Bearce & Hart, 2017)

4. Results

Figure 1 tracks changes in the index of immigrant social rights for the 38 countries for the years 1980 – 2018, with higher values indicating more inclusive social rights for immigrants. As can be seen, the countries in the sample differ widely in their immigrant social rights score. The Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore have low scores over the entire time range. In many of the "Western liberal democracies", immigrant social rights have decreased over time, striking cases being Denmark, Germany, and the USA. In other countries, immigrant social rights have seen substantial increases: Argentina and Spain are notable examples. In 2018, the most generous countries are Brazil, Portugal and Spain. Despite recent decreases, Sweden still takes fourth place in this statistic. Clearly, the social rights of immigrants are subject to intense contestation in many countries: In Belgium, Denmark and Portugal frequent policy changes are evident, whereas the score stays remarkably stable in Japan, Singapore and Switzerland.

Figure 2 shows the bivariate relationship between immigrant social rights and the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index for the year 2018. There is a positive association between democracy and immigrant social rights, with the Western Democracies clustering in the top right corner. Interesting outliers are Brazil, where immigrants have been granted extensive rights since 2004, and Venezuela, where democracy has decreased recently, but immigrant rights are still relatively far reaching. The Philippines are the country in the sample with the lowest score in 2018, but its democracy score is higher than that of six other countries in the sample. Appendix E depicts bivariates for the three sub-components of democracy, all of which are also positively correlated with the immigrant social rights index.

The results of the multivariate models are shown in Table 1 and visualized in Figure 3. The first model includes the Liberal Democracy Index along

Figure 1. Immigrant social rights in 38 countries, 1980–2018.

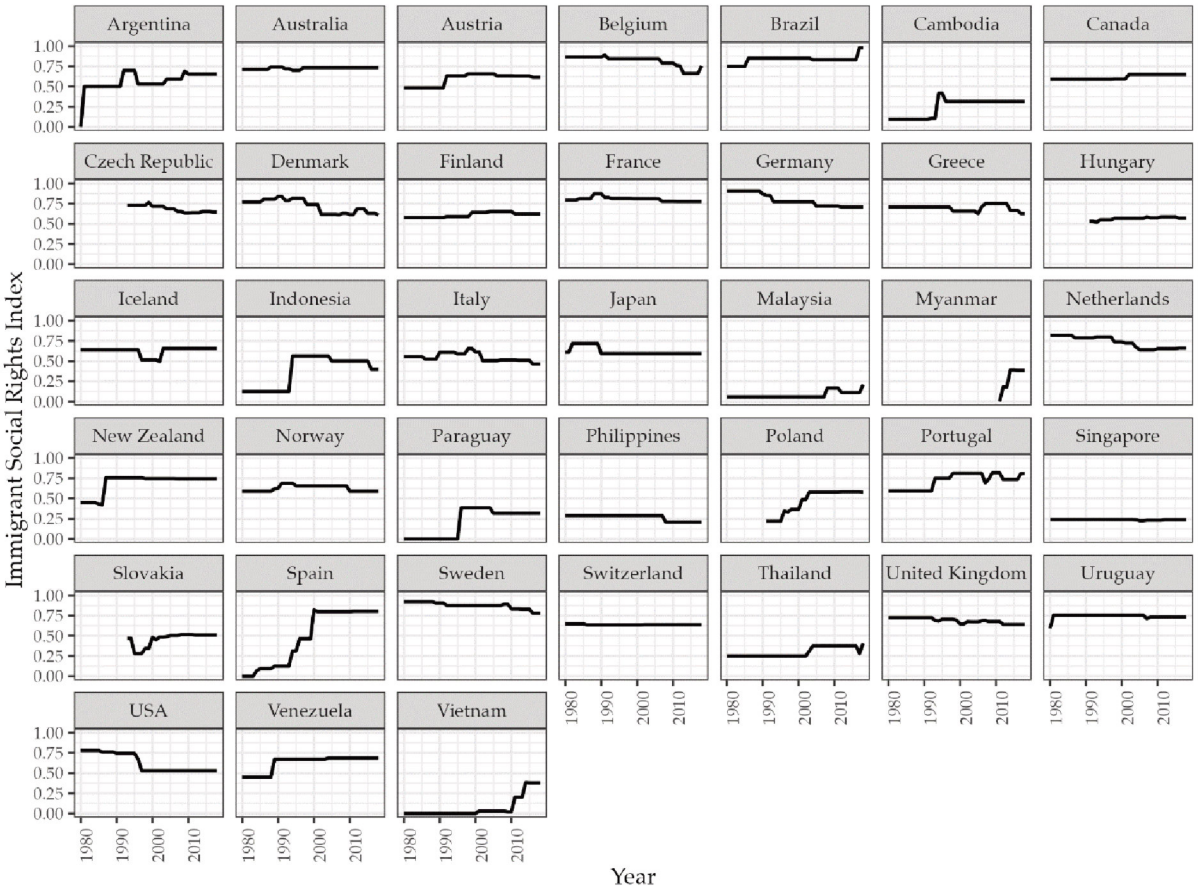
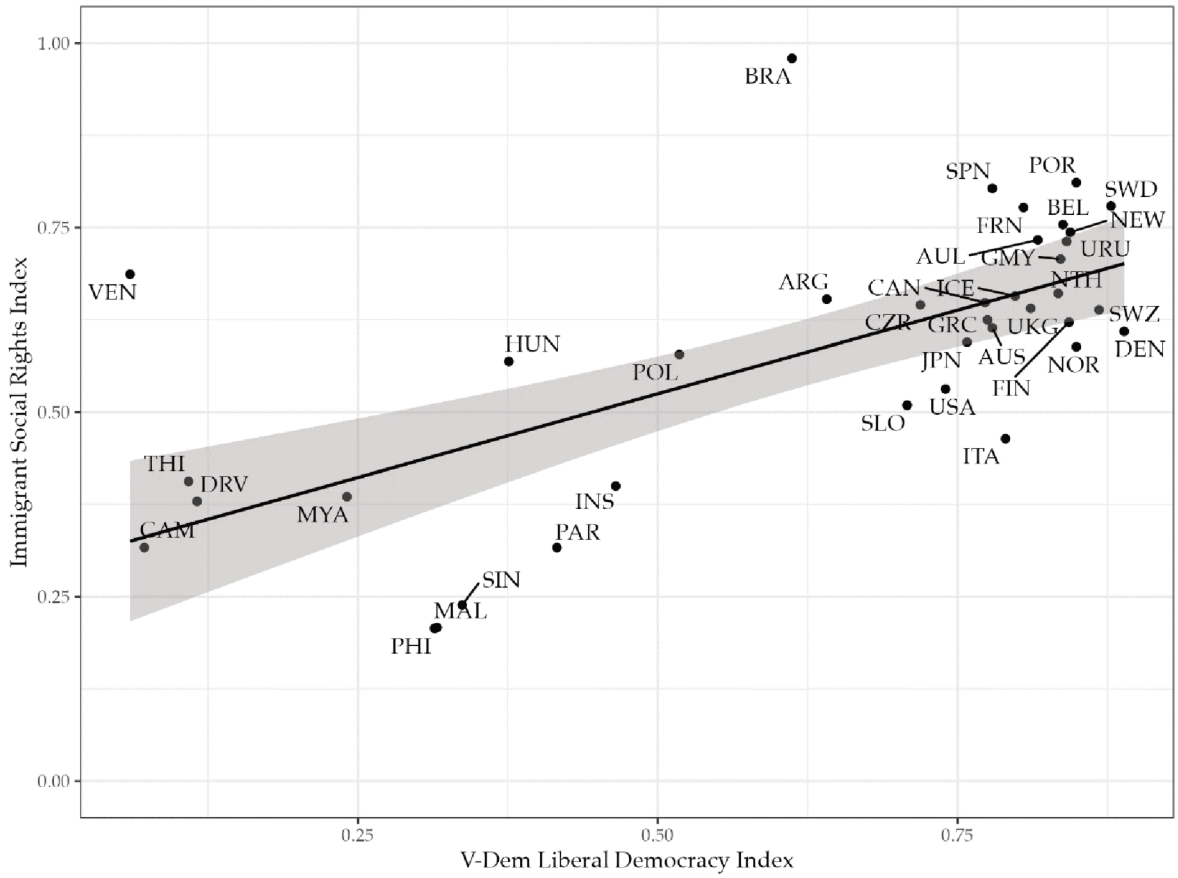


Figure 2. Immigrant social rights and liberal democracy in 2018



with the controls. The coefficient is positive but not significant, which attests to the importance of the control variables as drivers of immigrant social rights. The non-significant aggregate effect of democracy in the multivariate analysis lends support to the initial assumption motivating this paper: democracy overall has no clear effect on immigrant rights, potentially because using an aggregate measure of democracy runs the risk of masking the divergent effects of its components.

We thus turn to indices measuring sub-components of democracy. Model 2 tests for the effect of the electoral component. In this model, the liberal component index and the index for civil society are not included. The coefficient of the Electoral Democracy Index is positive, but not significant. There is thus no evidence of a negative effect of electoral democracy on immigrant social rights in this model specification. However, the model including all components of democracy simultaneously (Appendix G) provides tentative evidence corroborating H1. Taken together, it can be concluded that the electoral component is no driver of expansions in immigrant rights, which is in line with studies on the negative role of party politics in shaping immigrant-related policies (Harris & Römer, 2023; Römer et al., 2023).

Model 3 includes the liberal component index. In line with H2, the coefficient of the index is positive and significant, indicating that liberal institutions contribute to the protection and expansion of immigrant social rights. This finding corresponds to the broader literature on courts and the rule of law as safeguards for minority rights, reinforcing the idea that liberal institutions function as counter-majoritarian mechanisms. If the rule of law is understood as a structural check on majoritarian decision-making, this result logically complements the potential negative effect observed for representative elections, where majority preferences can lead to exclusionary policies.

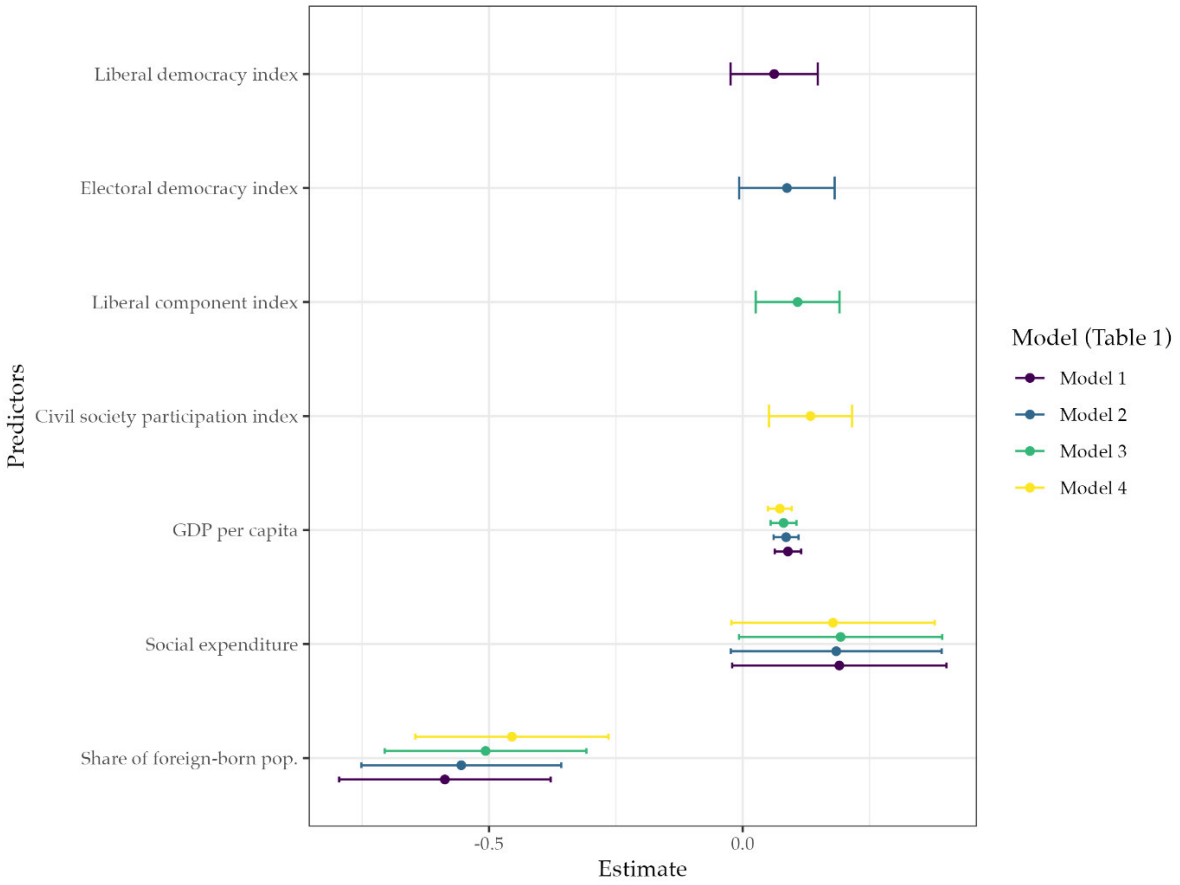
Similarly, the Civil Society Index performs as expected (H3), showing a positive and significant association with immigrant social rights. This

Table 1. Results for the multivariate models

	ImmigSR Index			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Liberal democracy index	0.062			
	(0.042)			
Electoral democracy index		0.087		
		(0.046)		
Liberal component index			0.108*	
			(0.041)	
Civil society participation index				0.134**
				(0.040)
GDP per capita	0.089***	0.085***	0.081***	0.073***
	(0.013)	(0.012)	(0.013)	(0.012)
Social expenditure	0.190	0.184	0.193	0.178
	(0.104)	(0.103)	(0.099)	(0.099)
Share of foreign-born pop.	-0.587***	-0.555***	-0.507***	-0.455***
	(0.103)	(0.097)	(0.098)	(0.094)
Number of observations	1365	1365	1365	1365
Number of countries	38	38	38	38
Adjusted R-squared	0.845	0.845	0.846	0.848
FE: Country	X	X	X	X

* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Figure 3. Results for the multivariate models, visualized



is lending further empirical support to scholarship emphasizing the decisive role civil society plays in immigrant rights advocacy (Junge, *in press*). The positive effect of civil society participation underscores the importance of a strong and autonomous civil society in counteracting exclusionary political pressures and expanding immigrant social rights. However, civil society participation and liberal democracy likely interact, as CSOs rely on legal protections to operate freely and advocate for immigrant inclusion.

5. Conclusion

This paper has tried to shed light on the relationship between different components of democracy and immigrant social rights using newly collected comparative and multidimensional data on immigrants' social rights in 38 countries across the world. Social rights are subject to a large literature, which is however mainly focused on 'Western' democracies. Expanding the horizon beyond this narrow set of countries allowed us to draw attention to an explanatory factor for these rights that is often overlooked because it forms the backdrop of many analyses: The impact of democratic institutions. While existing research broadly suggests that democracies are more positively associated with social rights than autocracies, our findings emphasize the importance of disaggregating democracy into its institutional components.

We differentiated between three institutional components of democracy, namely the electoral component, the liberal component and the strength of civil society. We hypothesized that the electoral component likely has a negative effect on immigrant social rights. For the liberal component and the civil society participation index we expected a positive association.

The results showed that the bivariate relationship between immigrant social rights and democracy is indeed positive – democracies grant immigrants more social rights than autocracies. This relationship was positive in the multivariate analyses as well, but the association was not significant when including our set of control variables. We subsequently tested sub-components of democracy separately. These sub-components are highly correlated, but conceptually distinct. The findings confirm our expectations that they have different effects. The principle of majority vote is not conducive to rights, but liberal institutions and civil society engagement by or on behalf of immigrants can ensure the expansion of rights.

The positive effect of liberal institutions – captured by judicial independence, constitutional protections, and the rule of law – suggests that rights expansion often occurs through legal and institutional mechanisms insulated from electoral politics. This aligns with broader arguments that courts serve as protective venues for immigrant inclusion, as they are shielded from the political pressures of majoritarian decision-making. Civil society engagement appears to complement these institutional safeguards, with CSOs leveraging these institutional frameworks to push for immigrant inclusion through litigation, advocacy, and mobilization.

Our research of course also exhibits several limitations. Policy indices, such as the ImmigSR, are necessarily missing some intricacies of the regulations under study. Moreover, differences between the type of welfare benefits (most notably differences between contributory and non-contributory benefit types) have not been accounted for in the analyses. Similarly, also characteristics of the immigrant population, e.g. regarding skill level, are not considered, and potential differences in the effects of immigrant stock and flow are not tested. Expanding the analyses in this regard will benefit future studies.

Also, beyond these issues, there are several avenues for future research. The strategies of civil society and the extent to which they make use of democratic institutions such as courts need further investigation. Interactions between the democratic components, particularly whether liberal institutions enhance civil society's effectiveness in securing immigrant rights, need to be considered as well. Similarly, interactions between explanatory and control variables, e.g. between immigrant inflows and the electoral component to understand how immigration indirectly shapes social rights through voting behavior, are fruitful field for subsequent investigations.

Beyond its empirical and theoretical contributions, this study has pressing political relevance: Research shows that civil society and courts, the very institutions we identified as advancing immigrant social rights, are often the first to come under attack during periods of democratic backsliding. These developments cast a troubling outlook for immigrant social rights, despite their fundamental role in safeguarding well-being.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Descriptive statistics of explanatory and control variables

	Mean	SD	Min	Median	Max
Liberal democracy index	0.649	0.264	0.020	0.781	0.897
Electoral democracy index	0.733	0.242	0.070	0.860	0.922
Liberal component index	0.804	0.239	0.049	0.917	0.985
Civil society participation index	0.807	0.208	0.053	0.878	0.988
GDP per capita	26107.129	16302.424	378.086	25790.483	89339.024
Social expenditure	0.213	0.102	0.016	0.234	0.415
Share of foreign-born pop.	0.079	0.078	0.000	0.055	0.460

Appendix B: Immigrant Social Rights dataset – Scoring Scheme

Access to tax-funded social assistance benefits

In the years 1980-2018, did permanent migrant workers have a legal claim to tax-funded social assistance benefits?

Score	Specification
1	Same as citizens (other than residency requirements)
0.9	Residency requirement up to one year (incl.)
0.8	Residency requirement of 2-3 years (incl.)
0.7	Residency requirement of 4-5 years (incl.)
0.6	Residency requirement of 6-7 years (incl.)
0.5	Residency requirement of 8-9 years (incl.)
0.4	Residency requirement of 10 years (incl.) and higher
0.3	Discretion | indefinite permit | benefits running out
0	No access

In the years 1980-2018, did temporary migrant workers have a legal claim to tax-funded social assistance benefits?

Score	Specification
1	Same as citizens (other than residency requirements)
0.5	Any condition; lower benefits; limited duration; administrative discretion
0	No access OR no temporary labour migration

In the years 1980-2018, did recognized refugees have a legal claim to tax-funded social assistance benefits?

Score	Specification
1	Same as citizens (other than residency requirements)
0.5	Any condition; lower benefits; limited duration
0	No access

In the years 1980-2018, did asylum seekers have a legal claim to tax-funded social assistance benefits?

Score	Specification
1	Same as citizens (other than residency requirements)
0.5	Any condition; lower benefits; limited duration
0	No access

Type of benefits

In the years 1980-2018, in what form did asylum seekers receive benefits (cash payment or payment in kind)?

Score	Specification
1	Yes, cash and no in kind
0.75	Yes, cash and yes, in kind
0.5	No cash and yes, in kind
0	No asylum policy OR neither cash nor in kind

Consequences for Dependence on Social Assistance

In the years 1980-2018, did being dependent on social assistance have consequences (e.g., withdrawal of residence permit) for permanent migrant workers?

Score	Specification
1	No consequences
0.5	Withdrawal after some time; other consequences; non-renewal
0	Immediate withdrawal OR no permanent labour migration

In the years 1980-2018, did being dependent on social assistance have consequences (e.g., withdrawal of residence permit) for temporary migrant workers?

Score	Specification
1	No consequences
0.5	Withdrawal after some time; other consequences; non-renewal
0	Immediate withdrawal OR no permanent labour migration

Family Reunification

The following questions are about the eligibility requirements for persons to become sponsors for family reunification.

In the years 1980-2018, were sponsors who were third-country nationals required not to rely on social welfare?

Score	Specification
1	No
0.5	Yes
0	No family reunification

In the years 1980-2018, were sponsors who were citizens required not to rely on social welfare?

Score	Specification
1	No
0.5	Yes
0	No family reunification

In the years 1980-2018, were sponsors who were third-country nationals required to have a specific income per month or fulfil an income criterion?

Score	Specification
1	No Requirements
0.9	Specific Funds
0.8	Income equal to social assistance
0.7	Income higher than social assistance
0.6	Income equal to minimum wage
0.5	Income higher than minimum wage
0.4	Unspecified funds or assistance
0	No family reunification

In the years 1980-2018, were sponsors who were citizens required to have a specific income per month or fulfil an income criterion?

Score	Specification
1	No Requirements
0.9	Specific Funds
0.8	Income equal to social assistance
0.7	Income higher than social assistance
0.6	Income equal to minimum wage
0.5	Income higher than minimum wage
0.4	Unspecified funds or assistance
0	No family reunification

Consequences of Loss of Employment

In the years 1980-2018, did loss of employment result in the withdrawal of a migrant worker's residence permit? (various permanent permits)

Score	Specification
1	No consequences
0.5	Withdrawal after some time | other consequences | non-renewal
0	Immediate withdrawal

In the years 1980-2018, did loss of employment result in the withdrawal of a migrant worker's residence permit? (various temporary permits)

Score	Specification
1	No consequences
0.5	Withdrawal after some time | other consequences | non-renewal
0	Immediate withdrawal

Contributions-based Unemployment Insurance Benefits

In the years 1980-2018, did permanent migrant workers have a legal claim to contribution-based unemployment insurance benefits?

Score	Specification
1	Yes, with the same contribution period as citizens
0.5	Yes, but with a longer contribution period or additional requirements
0	No access

In the years 1980-2018, did temporary migrant workers have a legal claim to contribution-based unemployment insurance benefits?

Score	Specification
1	Yes, with the same contribution period as citizens
0.5	Yes, but with a longer contribution period or additional requirements
0	No access

Length of Unemployment Insurance Benefits

In the years 1980-2018, for how long permanent migrant workers received unemployment insurance benefits before they were downgraded to unemployment assistance benefits or social assistance benefits?

Score	Specification
1	Same as citizens
0.5	Same duration but worse downgrade; Shorter duration
0	No access to unemployment benefits

In the years 1980-2018, for how long temporary migrant workers received unemployment insurance benefits before they were downgraded to unemployment assistance benefits or social assistance benefits?

Score	Specification
1	Same as citizens
0.5	Same duration but worse downgrade; Shorter duration
0	No access to unemployment benefits

Appendix C: V-Dem Indices Operationalization

Below, we list the indicators for the indices used in our analysis. V-Dem employs multiple aggregation and weighting mechanisms. Each indicator is measured using assessments from multiple country experts, alongside desk research. For detailed information on data collection, scoring procedures, and aggregation methods, we refer the reader to the V-Dem Codebook, the V-Dem Methodology, and the Structure of Aggregation.

Liberal Democracy Index

The liberal democracy index is the sum of all indicators of the electoral democracy index and liberal component index which are detailed below.

Electoral Democracy Index

The electoral democracy index is made up of the following sub-components

- Freedom of expression and alternative sources of information index
  - Freedom of academic and cultural expression
  - Freedom of discussion for men
  - Freedom of discussion for women
  - Media bias
  - Government censorship effort - Media
  - Print/broadcast media critical
  - Harassment of journalists
  - Print/broadcast media perspectives
  - Media self-censorship
- Freedom of association index
  - CSO entry and exit
  - CSO repression
  - Elections multiparty
  - Barriers to parties
  - Opposition parties autonomy
  - Party ban
- Share of population with suffrage
  - Percent of population with suffrage
- Clean elections index
  - EMB autonomy
  - EMB capacity
  - Election free and fair
  - Election government intimidation
  - Election other voting irregularities
  - Election other electoral violence
  - Election voter registry
  - Election vote buying
- Elected officials index
  - HOG selection by legislature in practice
  - HOS selection by legislature in practice
  - Chief executive appointment by upper chamber
  - Chief executive appointment by upper chamber implicit approval
  - HOS appoints cabinet in practice
  - HOS dismisses ministers in practice

- HOG dismisses ministers in practice
- HOG appoints cabinet in practice
- HOS = HOG?
- HOS appointment in practice
- HOG appointment in practice
- Relative power of the HOS
- Legislature bicameral
- Upper chamber elected
- Lower chamber elected
- Percentage of indirectly elected legislators lower chamber
- Percentage of indirectly elected legislators upper chamber

Liberal Component Index

The liberal component index is up of the following sub-components:

- Equality before the law and individual liberty index
  - Access to justice for men
  - Access to justice for women
  - Freedom of foreign movement
  - Freedom from political killings
  - Property rights for men
  - Property rights for women
  - Freedom of religion
  - Freedom from forced labor for men
  - Freedom from forced labor for women
  - Freedom of domestic movement for men
  - Freedom of domestic movement for women
  - Rigorous and impartial public administration
  - Freedom from torture
  - Transparent laws with predictable enforcement
- Judicial constraints on the executive index
  - Executive respects constitution
  - Compliance with judiciary
  - Compliance with high court
  - High court independence
  - Lower court independence
- Legislative constraints on the executive index
  - Legislature investigates in practice
  - Legislature opposition parties
  - Executive oversight
  - Legislature questions officials in practice

Civil Society Participation Index

The civil society participation index is made up of the following sub-components:

- CSO consultation
- CSO women's participation
- CSO participatory environment
- Candidate selection, National/local

Direct Popular Vote Index

The direct popular vote index is made up of the following sub-components:

- Initiatives administrative threshold
- Referendums administrative threshold
- Initiatives approval threshold
- Referendums approval threshold
- Initiatives permitted
- Referendums permitted
- Initiatives signature-gathering period
- Referendums signature-gathering period
- Initiatives signature-gathering time limit
- Initiatives signatures %
- Referendums signatures %
- Initiatives participation threshold
- Referendums participation threshold
- Initiatives super majority
- Referendums super majority
- Popular initiative credible threat
- Occurrence of citizen-initiative this year
- Obligatory referendum administrative threshold
- Plebiscite administrative threshold
- Obligatory referendum approval threshold
- Plebiscite approval threshold
- Constitutional changes popular vote
- Plebiscite permitted
- Obligatory referendum participation threshold
- Plebiscite participation threshold
- Obligatory referendum super majority
- Plebiscite super majority
- Obligatory referendum credible threat
- Plebiscite credible threat
- Popular referendum credible threat
- Occurrence of obligatory referendum this year
- Occurrence of plebiscite this year
- Occurrence of referendum this year

Appendix D: V-Dem Indices Descriptives

Figure AD.1 Liberal Democracy Index

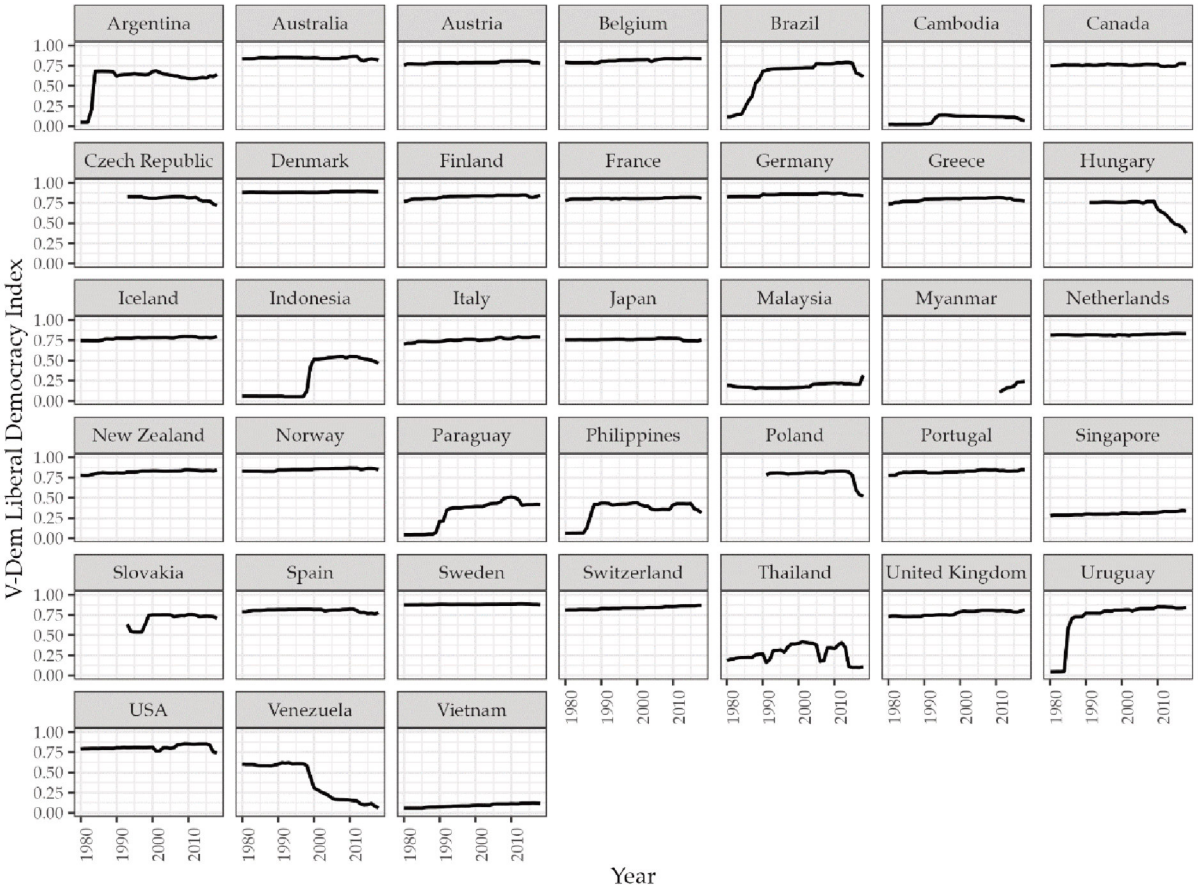


Figure AD.2 Electoral Democracy Index

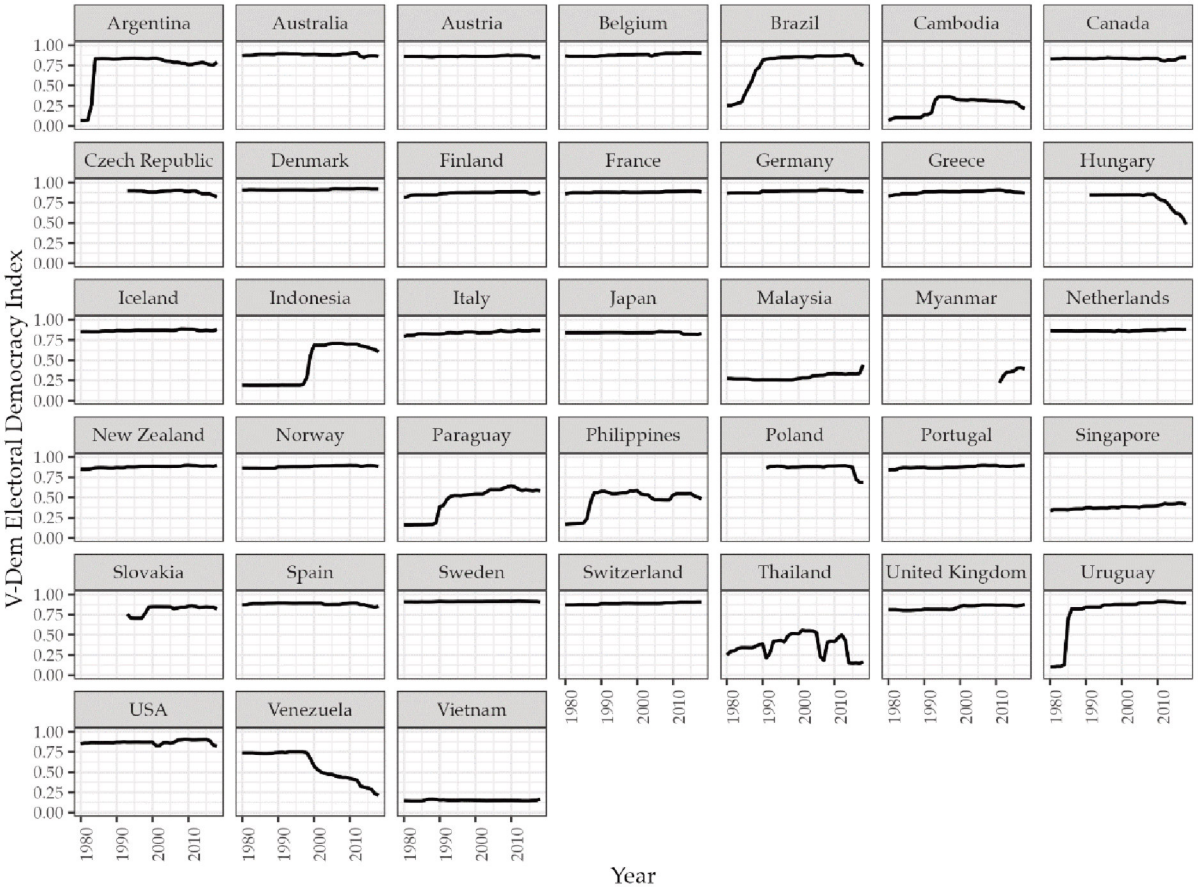


Figure AD.3 Liberal Component Index

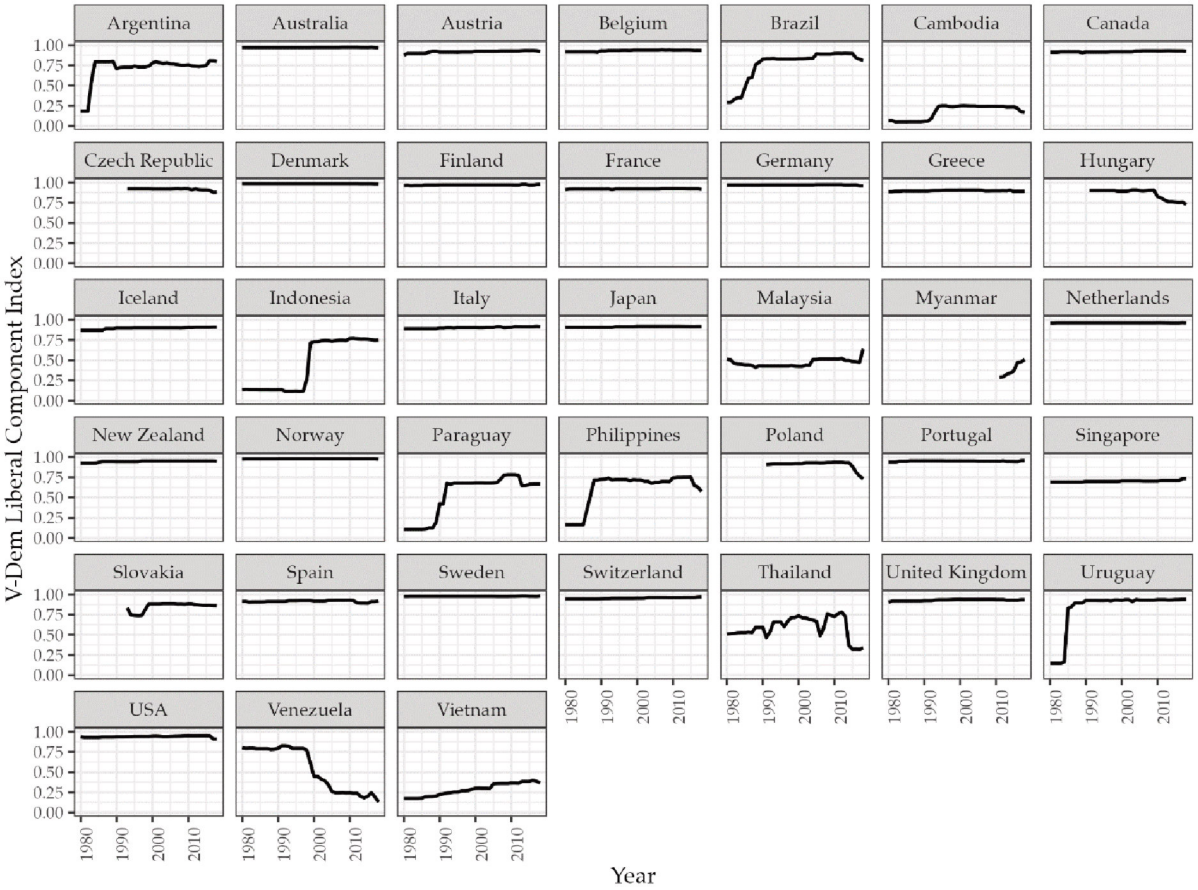
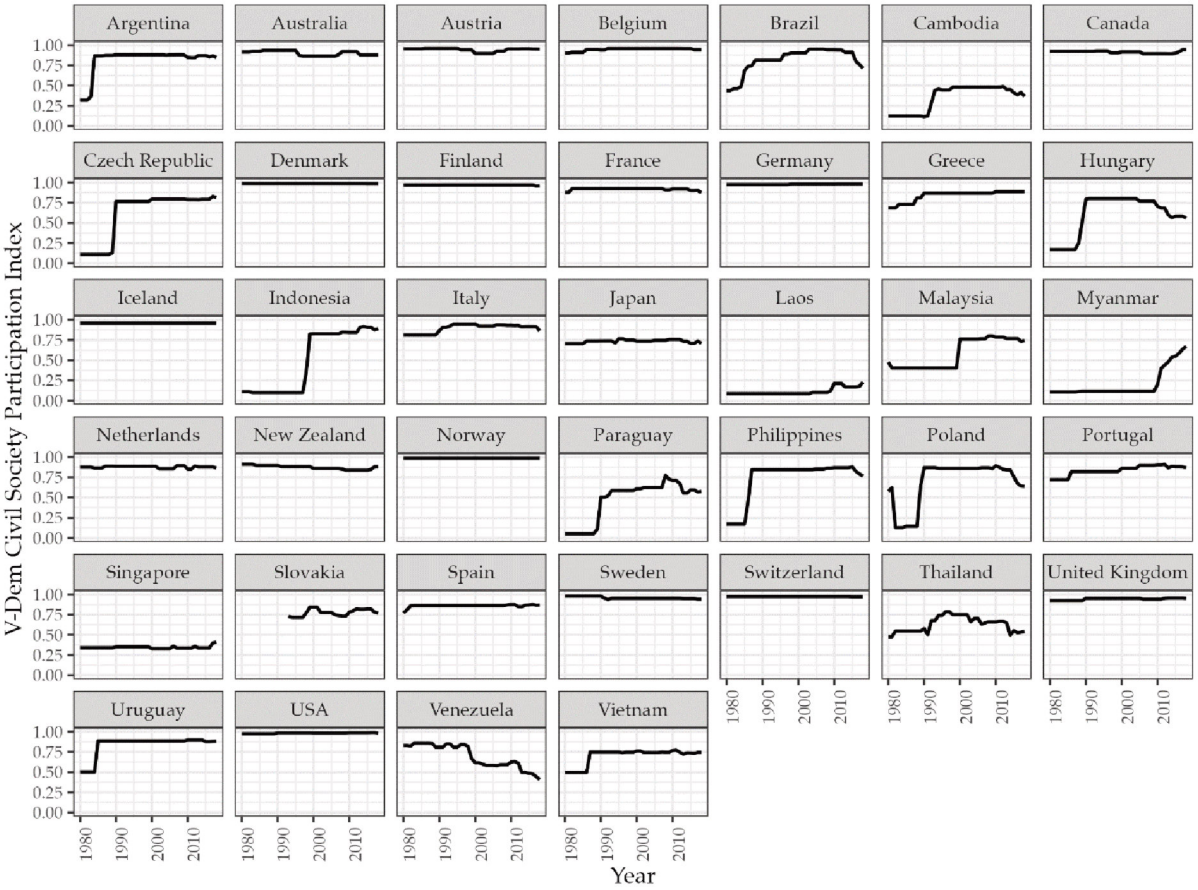
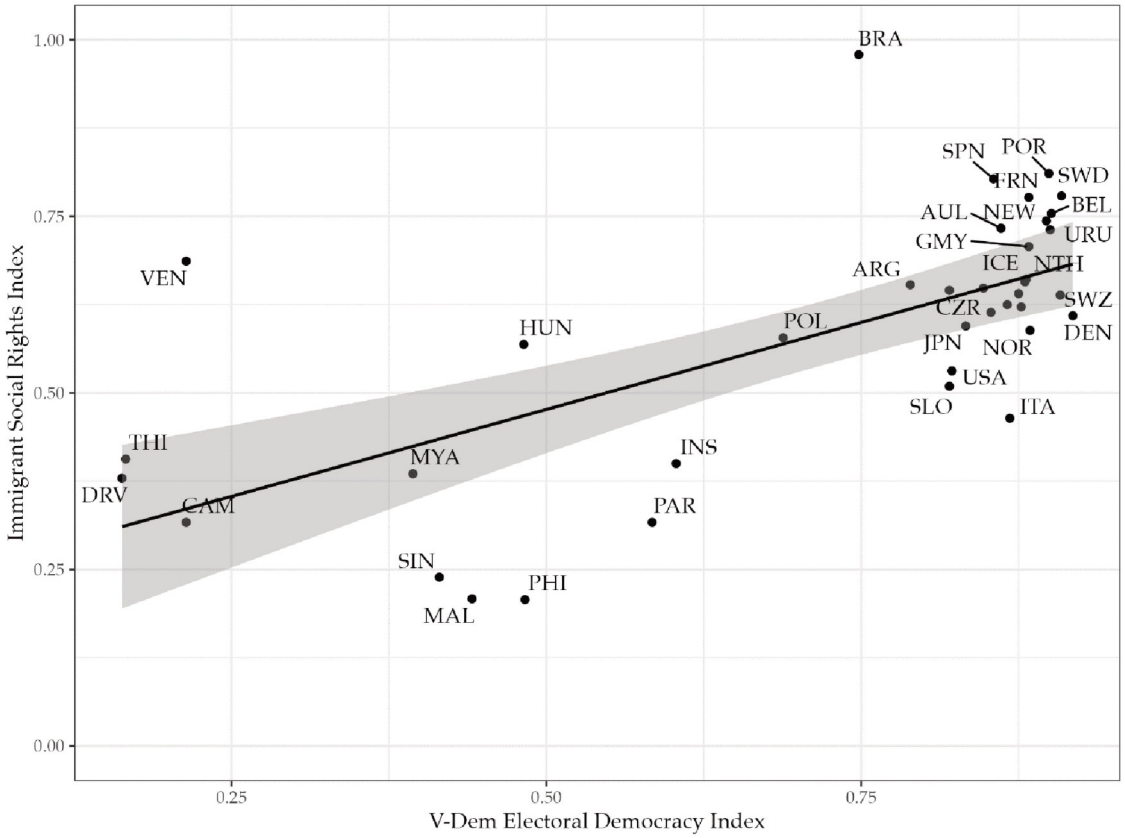
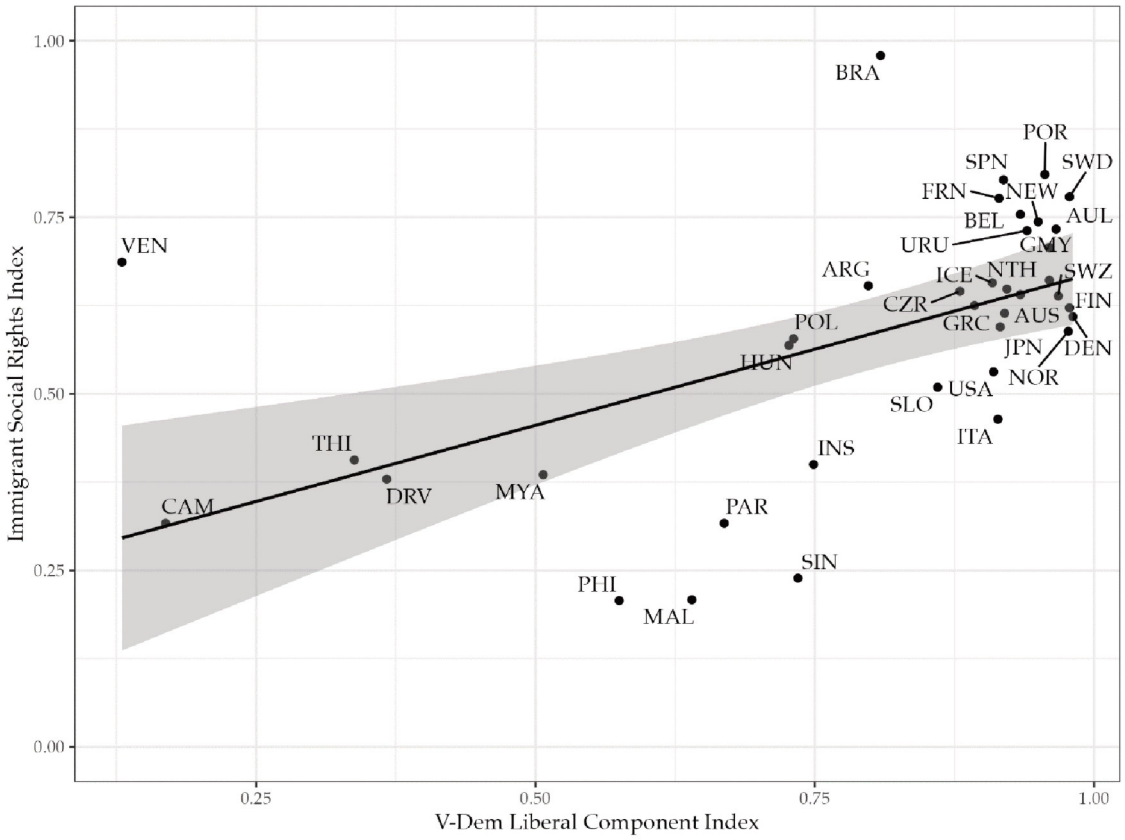


Figure AD.4 Civil Society Participation Index




Immigrant Social Rights Index
V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index
1.00
0.75
0.50
0.25
0.00
0.25
0.50
0.75
BRA
SPN
POR
FRN
SWD
AUL
NEW
BEL
GMY
URU
ICE
NTH
ARG
CZR
SWZ
VEN
HUN
POL
DEN
JPN
NOR
USA
SLO
ITA
THI
MYA
INS
DRV
CAM
PAR
SIN
PHI
MAL


Immigrant Social Rights Index
V-Dem Liberal Component Index
1.00
0.75
0.50
0.25
0.00
0.25
0.50
0.75
1.00
BRA
POR
SPN
SWD
FRN
NEW
BEL
AUL
VEN
URU
GMY
ARG
ICE
NTH
SWZ
CZR
FIN
POL
GRC
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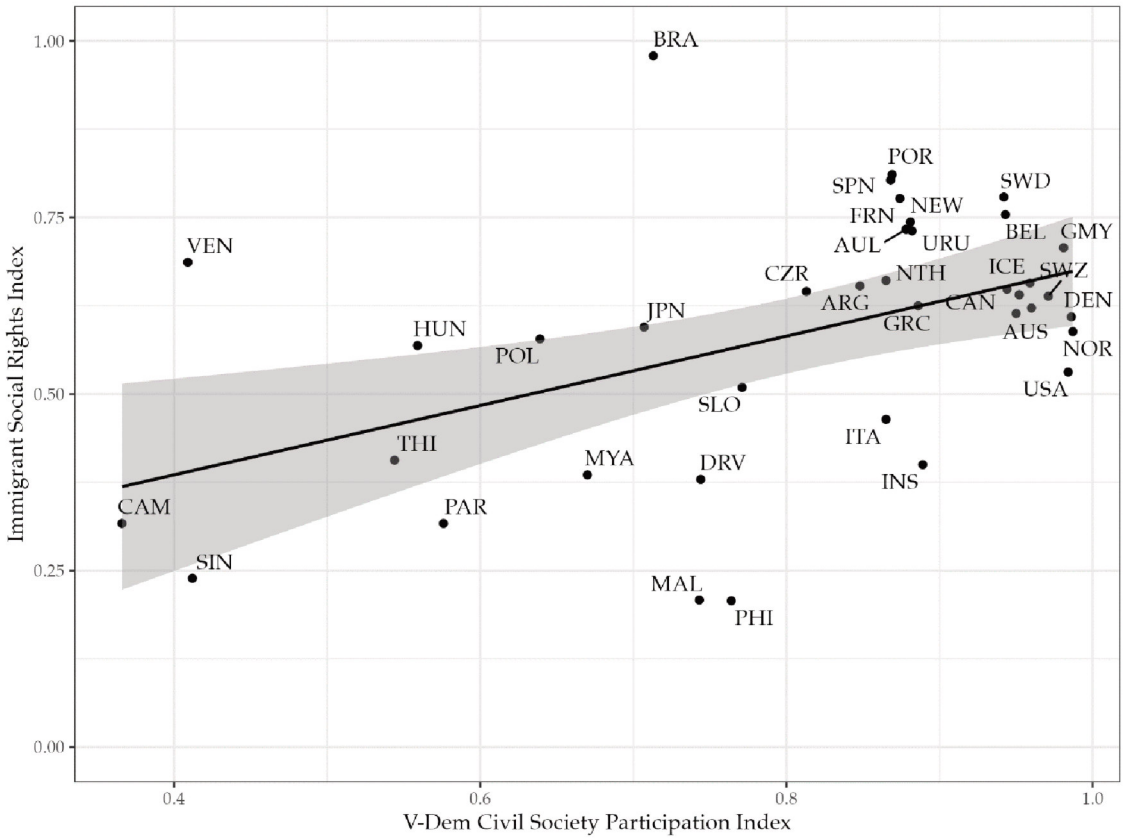
Immigrant Social Rights Index
V-Dem Civil Society Participation Index
1.00
0.75
0.50
0.25
0.00
0.4
0.6
0.8
1.0
BRA
POR
SPN
SWD
NEW
FRN
AUL
URU
BEL
GMY
VEN
CZR
NTH
ICE
SWZ
ARG
CAN
DEN
JPN
GRC
AUS
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Appendix F: Tests for Multicollinearity

Table AF.1 Correlations between the independent variables

	Liberal democracy index	Electoral democracy index	Liberal component index	Civil society participation index	GDP per capita	Social expenditure	Share of foreign-born pop.
Liberal democracy index	1	.	.	.	.	.	.
Electoral democracy index	.99	1	.	.	.	.	.
Liberal component index	.96	.95	1	.	.	.	.
Civil society participation index	.84	.84	.83	1	.	.	.
GDP per capita	.61	.57	.62	.47	1	.	.
Social expenditure	.81	.77	.75	.67	.61	1	.
Share of foreign-born pop.	.26	.21	.32	.12	.70	.21	1

Table AF.2 Variance inflation factors

Term	VIF
Electoral democracy index	12.18
Liberal component index	14.07
Civil society participation index	3.74
GDP per capita	5.21
Social expenditure	3.06
Share of foreign-born pop.	1.98

Variance inflation factors (VIFs) based on an OLS model containing all the above-mentioned covariates without lags and without country fixed effects.

Appendix G: All components included in the same model

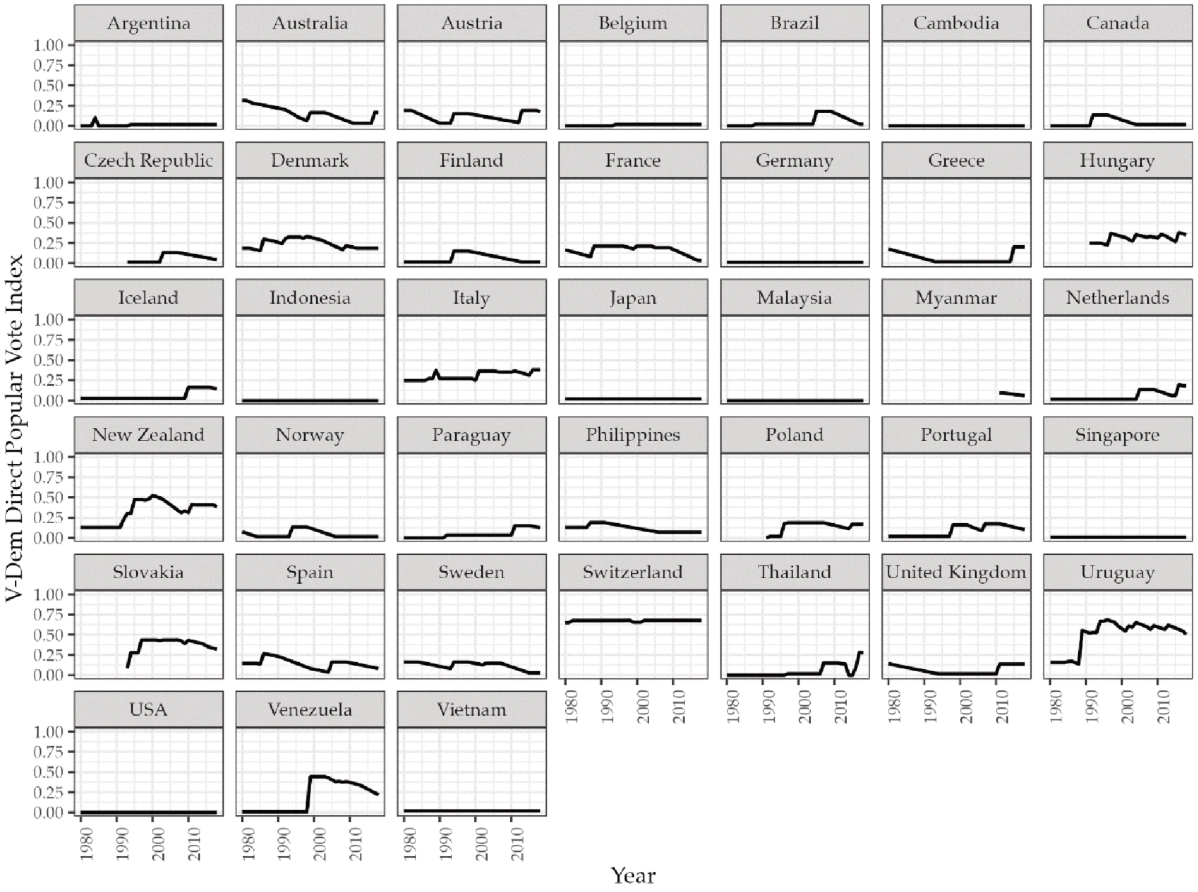
	ImmigSR Index
	(1)
Electoral democracy index	-0.251*
	(0.108)
Liberal component index	0.179
	(0.093)
Civil society participation index	0.162**
	(0.053)
GDP per capita	0.073***
	(0.012)
Social expenditure	0.225*
	(0.098)
Share of foreign-born pop.	-0.442***
	(0.100)
Number of observations	1365
Number of countries	38
Adjusted R-squared	0.849
FE: Country	X

* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Appendix H: Sub-sample direct popular vote index

Below, we have added analyses on the direct popular votes index measuring direct democracy. Direct democracy refers to a governance mechanism in which citizens directly participate in policymaking through institutionalized processes such as referenda, plebiscites, and initiatives, bypassing intermediary institutions like parliaments or elected representatives (as the electoral dimension captures). Direct democratic mechanisms are not a necessary condition for a system to qualify as democratic, and as Figure AH1 illustrates, some countries do not feature any direct democratic components at the national level.

Figure AH.1 Descriptives Direct Democracy Index



As in the case of the electoral component, direct democracy tends to represent majority preferences. Therefore, direct democratic votes can jeopardize minority interests (Bochsler & Hug, 2015; Gamble, 1997; Haider-Markel et al., 2007). In line with the logic outlined in H1 we therefore hypothesized a negative effect.

Results of the multivariate analyses are reported in Table AH.1 below. As direct democracy is not highly correlated with other measures of democracy, we estimated three specifications, including the index of direct democracy alongside the electoral component index (model 1), the liberal component index (model 2) and the civil society index (model 3). In none of the three models we find a significant effect of direct democracy, lending further support to the assumption that majority logics are not conducive of expansions.

Table AH.1 Multivariate analyses direct democracy

	ImmigSR Index		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Electoral democracy index	0.014		
	(0.038)		
Liberal component index		0.046	
		(0.035)	
Civil society participation index			0.059
			(0.038)
Direct popular vote index	0.065	0.069	0.071
	(0.044)	(0.038)	(0.040)
GDP per capita	0.071**	0.067**	0.066**
	(0.024)	(0.024)	(0.024)
Social expenditure	0.367**	0.357**	0.341**
	(0.106)	(0.102)	(0.105)
Share of foreign-born pop.	-0.012	0.035	0.046
	(0.176)	(0.175)	(0.183)
Number of observations	951	951	951
Number of countries	27	27	27
Adjusted R-squared	0.773	0.773	0.773
FE: Country	X	X	X

* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Appendix I: Robustness check GDP squared

	ImmigSR Index			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Liberal democracy index	0.053			
	(0.039)			
Electoral democracy index		0.077		
		(0.043)		
Liberal component index			0.093*	
			(0.040)	
Civil society participation index				0.116**
				(0.042)
GDP per capita	0.471*	0.461*	0.427	0.399
	(0.222)	(0.220)	(0.218)	(0.209)
GDP per capita, squared	-0.022	-0.021	-0.020	-0.018
	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.011)	(0.011)
Social expenditure	0.246*	0.239*	0.243*	0.227*
	(0.108)	(0.107)	(0.104)	(0.102)
Share of foreign-born pop.	-0.063	-0.042	-0.044	-0.028
	(0.217)	(0.217)	(0.207)	(0.208)
Number of observations	1365	1365	1365	1365
Number of countries	38	38	38	38
Adjusted R-squared	0.847	0.848	0.848	0.849
FE: Country	X	X	X	X

* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Appendix J: Robustness check Beck Katz two-way fixed effects

	ImmigSR Index		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Electoral democracy index	0.038		
	(1.580)		
Liberal component index		0.039+	
		(1.813)	
Civil society participation index			0.045*
			(2.152)
GDP per capita	-0.000*	-0.000*	-0.000*
	(-2.269)	(-2.182)	(-2.174)
Social expenditure	-0.021	-0.015	-0.017
	(-0.277)	(-0.199)	(-0.229)
Share of foreign-born pop.	-0.498**	-0.494**	-0.485**
	(-2.703)	(-2.674)	(-2.644)
Number of observations	1365	1365	1365
Number of countries	38	38	38
Adjusted R-squared	0.848	0.848	0.849
Two-way FE	X	X	X

* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001