

International Political Science Review

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International Political Science Review 2012 33: 129

DOI: 10.1177/0192512112441152

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33(2) 129–130

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The choices open to political leaders faced with crises in their domestic economies is a perennial topic of interest in political science, and is the subject leading this issue. In ‘Pick your poison: economic crises, International Monetary Fund loans and leader survival’, Laron K. Williams addresses domestic fall-out from the acceptance of a loan and its accompanying austerity conditions. The article develops the theory that both democratic and authoritarian leaders make a decision on whether or not to take an IMF loan based on their likelihood of staying in office. The former are less likely to accept an IMF loan due to the potential electoral costs associated with such an arrangement. A democratic leader is not likely to last long enough in office to reap the benefits of adjustment reforms. Authoritarian leaders, in contrast, are more likely to accept an IMF loan as their hold on power is stronger than that of a democratically-elected counterpart.

The phenomenon of globalisation elicits support and criticism of its effects in almost equal measure. In their article ‘Globalization and human well-being’, Nisha Mukherjee and Jonathan Kriekhaus suggest that on balance, social well-being is enhanced as countries become more globally embedded. The authors discuss how economic, social and political globalization affects human welfare, and point out that analyses of human well-being to date have focused mainly on domestic determinants. Their study analyses data from 132 countries over a 38-year period, operationalizing human well-being with three conventional measures- infant mortality, child mortality and life expectancy, to inform economic, social and political aspects of globalisation. They find that all three aspects of globalization have a positive effect on human welfare, particularly on children’s well-being. They conclude by suggesting that the next stage of research is to understand why globalization has an overall positive effect on human well-being.

Continuing with the international focus, Stephen Knack and Pamela Paxton address attitudes to foreign aid in their article ‘Individual and country level factors affecting support for foreign aid’. Given that one of the millennium development goals is to have donor nations increase development assistance to 0.7 percent of GDP, this analysis contributes to our understanding of why some donor countries are more advanced than others in reaching this target. On an individual level, the authors find that attitudes towards aid are influenced by religiosity, beliefs about the causes of poverty, awareness of international affairs, and trust in people and institutions. Country-level factors supporting positive attitudes towards foreign aid include national wealth and existing development support. They discuss the outlier US case, seeking to explain its low support for foreign aid when expressed as a share of gross national income. The large size and scale of the US, combined with the culture of private philanthropy, and concerns about corruption in aid-recipient countries are some of the explanations they put forward for US exceptionalism in this area.

The next article tackles a very different subject – that of the political influence of modern Shi'i Muslim theologians. In 'Democratic authority, public Islam and Shi'i jurisprudence in Iran and Iraq: Hussain Ali Montazeri and Ali Sistani', Babak Rahimi discusses the development of a new paradigm for Shi'i clerical authority that connects with the democratic values of popular sovereignty and accountability. This school of thought is a counterpoint to the theocratic authoritarianism prevalent in Iran, while in Iraq it provides a theology of citizenship and electoral participation. Montazeri and Sistani have been influential in the development of democratic practices in their respective countries, though Sistani has played a more overtly political role in Iraq than has Montazeri in Iran. Both clerics challenge the authoritarianism of shari'a jurisprudence and point to the possibility of developing an Islamic form of democracy.

Trust in government is a necessary condition for effective and legitimate political rule, and in 'Trust in Uzbekistan', Eric Gleave, Beth Kolko and Blaine Robbins examine levels of trust in this central Asian country to draw conclusions concerning the general determinants of trust. Uzbekistan is a central Asian post-socialist Muslim country presently under authoritarian rule, and can therefore offer new and interesting insights on generalizations regarding trust and political legitimacy that by and large are based on studies of established democracies. The study finds that individual level factors – age, education, and number of children – are important in determining trust levels, but do not work in the same direction as the literature would lead us to expect, while socio-economic status has the predicted positive effects. These effects are over-ridden, however, when individuals are grouped by linguistic, religious and regional/ethnic affiliations and identities. The study underscores the point that minorities are much less trusting of others. The authors conclude that reducing the perceptions of group difference could foster greater levels of heterogeneous trust in Uzbekistan.

A related theme is taken up by Aylin Aydin and Cerem I. Cenk in their article 'Public Confidence in Government: Empirical Implications from a Developing Democracy'. Their focus is on Turkey, and they question whether regime support or government performance is being measured when considering confidence in political institutions. Along with Gleave et al., they point out that knowledge of popular support for political institutions comes from research of established democracies. They find that public confidence in government is of a specific nature and strongly related to the performance of, and support for, the governing party rather than to Turkish citizens' support for the more abstract notion of government as a democratic institution. Conducting a further analysis across 15 developing democracies, they demonstrate that country context significantly matters in making sense of confidence questions in mass surveys.

Yvonne Galligan