

A Cycle of Forgetting: How Generational Memory Loss acts as an Indicator of Democratic Decay

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Abstract

Starting from 2024, online searches for the phrase "World War 3" have increased by almost nine times compared to the historical average, indicating a fear that contemporary peacekeeping systems might be deteriorating. The following project seeks to test whether the 80-year window of communicative memory, proposed by Jan Assmann as a period during which experiences of disaster influence politics, could serve as a predictor of growing democratic backsliding. The research design includes both a quantitative approach, comparing democracy scores calculated using the V-Dem and Freedom House indices, and qualitative case studies of Hungary and Russia. The questions posed are: are there any differences in the prevalence of democratic decay among states that lie beyond and within the 80-year memory window defined by Assmann? Data obtained from Google Trends will provide a new indicator of the salience of collective memory among national populations.

Introduction

A generation who's never seen war scrolls through their fifth TikTok video about WW3: "POV: me when I get drafted into the third world war." It sounds like mockery but it isn't funny. Every day there is a new narrative emerging. Every day, another cycle of violence threatens to destabilize everything we've put in place to stop it. The frog in the boiling water laughs. And that's the fundamental distinction between frogs and citizens, between which democracy will suffer in the end.

The level of anxiety related to a possible global conflict since the beginning of the 2024-2025 time frame has increased by approximately 10 times the average level observed throughout history with 900% above what scientists might consider the "background anxiety level." Searches containing "world war" spiked further by 76% during the high-tension months at the beginning of 2026 from already high levels in 2025. This is not just trivia. This is a clear signal sent by a worried populace.

This study attempts to explore the following problem: Peace systems that are built in the aftermath of massive conflict seem to deteriorate within a generation's time frame. When memories of the warfare dwindle into distant recollections, political pressure to uphold international organizations fades away and conditions for dictatorship resurface once again. This pattern of development, from catastrophe, through recovery to crisis has occurred several times before in human history, from the Roman Republic to the Weimar Republic era. However, there has never been a study conducted that explores the correlation between the communicative memory time frame by Assmann and a quantitative decrease in democracy.

Literature Review

The relationship between generationally transmitted memory and democratic erosion is explored through separate veins of research that have not yet been linked in their analysis. With regards to memory studies, the work of Jan Assmann provides a critical framework that describes the difference between communicative memory, a living memory of events that occurred within about three generations or 60 to 80 years, and cultural memory, which is institutionalized and further removed from the time frame (Assmann, 1995). Meanwhile, Maurice Halbwachs' earlier work established the idea that memories are necessarily collective, and therefore once the group of individuals who experience an event passes away, the nature of those memories changes significantly (Halbwachs, 1992). This means that

political actions based on intergenerational trauma will likely change dramatically when that trauma passes out of the communicative window.

With regards to democratic erosion, *How Democracies Die* (2018) explores how modern-day autocrats slowly erode democracy not with overt coups, but through institutional manipulation by capturing courts, tampering with elections, and marginalizing the opposition. Similarly, the book *What Is Populism?* (2016) shows that populist leaders build a dictatorship through claiming to be the only legitimate representation of the people against a corrupt elite. In *The Age of the Strongman* (2022), Rachman notes that Putin, Orbán, and company constitute a new kind of personalist leadership which corrodes rather than breaks norms.

Empirical evidence by the V-Dem Institute (2024) reveals that global autocratization has become increasingly common over the last couple of decades. Has anybody tested the hypothesis that national distance in time from the last occurrence of armed conflict affects the rate of autocratization? This is precisely what this proposal aims to find out.

Research Question

Is there a measurable difference in the pace of democratic backsliding between those nations beyond the scope of Assmann's communicative memory window of 80 years, where the last instance of mass violence took place over 80 years ago, and those nations inside his window? This leads to another inquiry: Does salient collective memory, in which individuals demonstrate an increased search interest for topics related to violent incidents, impact this relationship in some way?

Methodology

This study uses a mixed-methods design. For the quantitative component, V-Dem and Freedom House democracy scores will serve as the dependent variable, measured against each country's temporal distance from its last large-scale armed conflict (per UCDP/PRIO data), categorized as within or outside Assmann's 80-year window. Google Trends search interest in conflict-related terms will function as a proxy for collective memory salience. Regression analysis across a sample of 30–40 countries will test whether window position predicts democratic decline from 2000–2025, controlling for GDP, region, and prior democratic consolidation. For the qualitative component, Hungary and Russia will serve as primary case studies of erosion outside the window, with Germany examined as a countercase of institutionalized memory. All data sources are publicly available. The study is designed for completion within one academic year.

Conclusion

The current study establishes a hypothesis to test the relationship between cultural memory theory and democracy retreat, which argues that when Assmann's period of communicative memory predicts democratic erosion, then the forgetting curve will be seen as a political risk factor rather than as an existential question. A society that is able to position itself on the forgetting curve will be able to develop strategies such as civic education, memorialization, and re-investment in global frameworks. The main drawback of this approach is the exclusion of economic and institutional variables from the causation of forgetting.

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