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Backsliding and Democratic Resilience: Prevention, Resistance, and Recovery

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Abstract

Global democracy faces escalating threats, both among long-standing and newer "third wave" democratic systems. The extent and causes of democratic backsliding have been subjects of considerable analysis and debate. However, there is still relatively limited discussion of the conditions in which democracy might be resilient to such challenges. This paper addresses this analytical gap by examining four crucial dimensions of democratic resilience: factors that help insulate democracy from backsliding; whether there are ways to respond to illiberal leaders; what factors contribute to democratic resilience if such a leader does gain power; and whether democracies can "bounce back" after authoritarians have been ousted from power.

Keywords: Democracy, democratic backsliding, democratic resilience, authoritarianism, illiberalism

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Over the past two decades, growing threats to the stability and survival of democracies around the world have spurred increased attention to the factors that contribute to their resilience. Analysis of why democracies survive, to be sure, has a long pedigree in political science research, dating back at least to the seminal work of Seymour Martin Lipset (1960). But new challenges in the past 20 years have heightened concerns. One of these has been the apparent recession among the so-called "third wave" of new democracies, beginning in the mid-2000s. Although there is considerable debate about the extent (or even the existence) of this recession, the unprecedented expansion of democracy during the third wave ironically has carried with it the obvious question of whether and how "democracy in hard places" (Bermeo and Yashar 2016) can hold. In at least some of these places, we have seen the incremental erosion of democratic institutions and a reversion to competitive authoritarianism—a process that has come to be known as "backsliding" (Bermeo 2016).

A second—and perhaps even more alarming—source of concern about democratic resilience has been the apparent strains on democracy in the "easy places"—the rich countries of the world. Such concerns have been spurred most directly by the severe decline in American democracy that emerged after the rise of Donald Trump in the mid-2010s, and they have increased substantially since his return to the presidency in 2025. But even if we consider the severity of backsliding in the United States to be an exception among the developed countries of the world, the rise of far-right populist parties in Western Europe indicates that other "consolidated" democracies also face significant risks of backsliding.

The extent and causes of backsliding in both developed and newer democracies have been the subjects of considerable analysis and debate. However, there is still relatively limited discussion of the conditions in which democracy might be resilient to such challenges, even though "resilience" is logically the other side of the analytical coin.[1] In this paper, I address four questions about the capacity of democracies to withstand backsliding pressures or to recover from them. Each focuses on quite different issues of democratic resilience.

- First, what factors might help to insulate democracies from the *onset* of backsliding? Do well-known structural factors, such as high levels of development, still work to deter the emergence of illiberal threats to the system?
- The second question is whether there are ways to respond effectively when illiberal political leaders *do* emerge as significant contenders for power. How can they be stopped short of reaching political office?

[1] Current examples include: Criossant and Lott (2024); Capoccia (2024); Riedl et al (2023); Merkel and Luhrmann, eds. (2021).

- Third, what factors contribute to the resilience of democracy if such leaders actually gain control of the government? More specifically:
  - Under what conditions can would-be autocrats in power be prevented from steps that significantly weaken democratic institutions?
  - And if democratic institutions do erode, under what circumstances can illiberal governments be blocked from consolidating authoritarian control?
- Finally, in the last section of the paper, I address the question of whether democracies can "bounce back" after would-be authoritarians have been ousted from power. I briefly survey the troubling experiences of several "recovering backsliders"—including, of course, the United States, where the Biden administration (2021–25) was followed by Donald Trump's devastating "second round" of assaults on democratic institutions.

What Allows Some Democracies to Avoid Significant Threats to Their Political Institutions?

Much of the current literature on democratic resilience, as noted, hinges on an analysis of the extent and depth of the "democratic recession" of the past two decades. Assessing resilience requires us to identify cases of backsliding and to determine the extent to which well-known structural factors continue to work in limiting the risk. Democracy, to be sure, is undeniably under severe pressure in the United States; and it has collapsed entirely in middle-income countries, such as Hungary, Venezuela, and Turkey, where it was once thought to be secure. Yet despite these failures—and despite severe international turbulence in the international political economy—it is still possible to argue that democracy has shown "surprising resilience," to quote the title of a recent article by Levitsky and Way (2023).

In strictly numerical terms, the demise of democracies in the world has in fact been relatively modest over the last decade. Between 2013 and 2023, according to Freedom House ratings, the number of "free" countries fell from 90 to 84; and between 2016–22, V-Dem's count of liberal and electoral democracies declined from 96 to 90 (as cited in Levitsky and Way 2023: 8). Similarly, Triesman (2023) has observed that, although the proportion of liberal democracies has fallen from 24 to 19 percent since 2010, the "global proportion of democracies in the world is close to an all-time high."[2]

[2] Using a different metric, Boese et al (2020) note as well that "autocratization" is actually relatively rare since 1900, although the pace has accelerated since 1992.

The decline of the number of democracies registered in these studies, to be sure, is far from trivial, and as I will suggest below, their general conclusions do not take into account a much larger number of backsliding episodes that do not end in outright reversions. Still, the studies do show that the outright collapse of democracy in the world is far from catastrophic. On the contrary, given the unfavorable conditions in the international system, most democracies—at least among rich and middle-income countries—appear to have significant reservoirs of strength (Levitsky and Way 2023).

The crucial analytical questions are, what accounts for this strength, and to what extent can we expect it to endure? To a significant extent, the answer to the first of these questions can be found in factors long understood to be crucial to democratic stability, including economic development (Lipset 1960), the growth of a middle class, the dispersion of power resources (Dahl 1971, also, Levitsky and Way 2023), and the expansion of education (Inglehart and Welzel 2010). Such developments enable a wider variety of actors to compete effectively for power and strengthen their incentive to acquiesce to temporary losses (see Przeworski et al 2000; Boix and Stokes 2003).

It has long been recognized that these built-in structural, institutional, and historical shock absorbers remain an important source of stability for the long-standing democracies of Western Europe and its offshoots in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and even the United States. But economic and social development has also provided a foundation for durable democracy in East Asia, and possibly, as Levitsky and Way have argued (2023), in many middle-income Eastern European and Latin American countries as well. Over the past half century, most of these have seen significant increases in gross domestic product (GDP), declines in poverty, the migration of population to cities, and dramatic increases in literacy and public health.

Levitsky and Way are careful to qualify their argument about the resilience of democracy in important ways. It does not apply to very poor countries where states themselves are fragile and both authoritarian and democratic regimes are likely to be unstable. Nor does it apply to rich petrostates, where both wealth and power is highly concentrated. And although democracy is far more likely to be consolidated in developed and middle-income countries, that is by no means a sure thing; even in relatively wealthy countries that are not dependent on mineral wealth, high levels of income inequality are strongly associated with a deterioration of support for democracy (Rau and Stokes 2024). Nevertheless, in these societies, as well as in the older democracies, “capitalist development” has generated “independent sources of economic and social power, dispersing resources away from the state and making it harder for leaders to monopolize political control.” Higher incomes, wealthier private sectors, large middle and working classes and bigger cities generate what might be called *countervailing societal power*, which is critical to both achieving and sustaining democracy” (Levitsky and Way 2023: 13).

This perspective on the resilience of democracy is not wrong, but it is incomplete. In the first place, it should be noted, it generally confines its analysis to the relatively limited number of democracies that revert to authoritarianism outright, rather than focusing on the broader number that have experienced serious episodes of backsliding without falling below the democratic threshold. Even if we expand our lens to include such cases, the number of backsliders is arguably still small relative to the total number of democracies in the world, but it is far from insignificant. A full account of democratic resilience requires an understanding of the extent and nature of these threats.

Table 1 lists 24 democratic backsliders identified by Haggard and Kaufman (2021) and Susan Stokes (2025) and will be used in subsequent analyses. The initial Haggard and Kaufman list (2021) included 16 cases that experienced a statistically significant decline in their peak liberal democracy score between the onset of the third wave and 2019. I update the list through 2024 using the same method and add eight cases as a result; these are highlighted in the table. Stokes, using a different method of identification, focuses on democracies that experienced at least a 10 percent decline in annual V-Dem scores for vertical and horizontal accountability (Laebens 2023). The list of cases identified through her method overlaps closely with Haggard and Kaufman. The only exceptions are her inclusion of South Africa and the omission of Russia and Greece,[3] which are included in Haggard and Kaufman. This convergence increases our confidence that we have identified a similar political process. In the foregoing analysis, we focus on the "convergence" cases, excluding South Africa, Greece, and Russia.

Democracies in twelve of these cases devolved into Electoral Autocracies, according to the Regimes of the World classification.[4] But another 12 regimes—including the United States—remained above the democratic-threshold electoral democracies, despite a substantial decline in their V-Dem scores. The United States retained its classification as a liberal democracy through the end of 2024, although that is very likely to register much lower going forward. In short, although we can take some comfort in the fact that global democracy is nowhere near a major collapse, backsliding remains a serious threat and resilience presents a major challenge. We distinguish between the broader phenomenon of backsliding and the outright collapse of democracy throughout the remainder of this paper.

Table 1. Backsliding Democracies*

[3] As Haggard and Kaufman elaborate in their appendix to *Backsliding (pp. 12-14)*, Russia and Greece were both highly ambiguous cases. In Russia, this was because there is considerable debate about whether and how long it remained above the democratic threshold. In Greece, it was because the literature was highly divided with respect to whether democracy was actually at risk.

[4] Our World in Data, "Democracy 2024" https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/political-regime

Haggard and Kaufman	Stokes
*Benin (2018–24)***	Benin (2006–22)
Bolivia (2006–17)**	Bolivia (2005–19)
Botswana (2016–24)	Botswana (2006–18)
Brazil (2017—2022)	Brazil (2017–22)
Dominican Rep. (2014–17)	Dominican Rep. (2014–20)
Ecuador (2009–17)	Ecuador (2006–17)
Hungary (2011–17)**	Hungary (2009-2022)
*India (2015–24)***	India (2014–22)
Mexico (2018–24)	Mexico (2016–22)
Moldova (2012–19)	Moldova (2012–19)
Nicaragua (2005–19)**	Nicaragua (2006–22)
North Macedonia (2010-16)**	North Macedonia (2006-16)
*Philippines (2016–24)***	Phil (2002–08/2017–22)
Poland (2016–17)	Poland (2015–22)
Senegal (2020–24)	Senegal (2015–22)
Serbia (2013–17)**	Serbia (2013–22)
	S. Africa (2008–16)
South Korea (2008–16)	*South Korea (2008–16)*
Turkey (2010–17)**	Turkey (2010–22)
Ukraine (2010–17)**	Ukraine (2010–13)
United States (2016–17)	United States (2016–21)
Venezuela (1998–2017)**	Venezuela (1999–2013)
Zambia (2016–17)**	Zambia (2012–21)
Greece (2017)	
Russia (2000–17)	

*Highlighted cases are updated from the list provided in Haggard and Kaufman (2021), using the selection method described in that volume. Except for South Africa, these include all of the cases that also appear in the selection method deployed by Stokes.

**Backsliders that became Electoral Authoritarian regimes: Benin, Bolivia, Hungary, India, North Macedonia, Nicaragua, Philippines, Serbia, Turkey, Ukraine, Venezuela, Zambia, according to Regimes of the World classifications.

The *quality*, as well as the *quantity*, of the backsliding cases is also cause for serious concern. Predictably, in both data sets, much of the backsliding occurs in poorer countries such as Senegal, Benin, or Zambia, where democracy was not firmly implanted to begin with. Even so, although democracies in more modernized societies were more likely to survive, they were far from immune to backsliding or even reversion to authoritarianism. Virtually all accounts of backsliding countries also include democracies in middle-income countries that were once considered reasonably well entrenched. Among others named in at least one of the data sets are Hungary, Poland, Venezuela, Brazil, Turkey, and Mexico. South Korea—a country at an even higher level of development—is also included on this list, as is the United States—among the oldest and richest democracies.

Finally, although backsliding in the United States might so far be a one-off among the most developed democracies of the world, it still remains unclear whether that will remain the case going forward. Like the United States, most of the European Union (EU) countries and the United Kingdom, are polarized around economic, ethnoreligious, and cultural divisions. And as of 2024, far-right parties have been included in, or even led, governing coalitions in Italy, the Netherlands, and Finland—among the wealthiest EU countries. In Germany, a post-fascist party (the Alternative for Germany) has won in important state-level elections, and in France, the far-right remains the principal opposition to the Macron government. Far-right parties have also been included in governments in poorer EU countries, including Croatia, Czechia, and Slovakia—as well as heading governments in Hungary and Poland.

In short, although we can take some comfort in the fact that global democracy is nowhere near a major collapse, the extent to which even developed democracies can withstand the contemporary threats of polarization and antidemocratic movements remains an open question. To assess the conditions in which democracies might remain resilient, we need to examine the resources available for responding to these challenges. In the following sections we examine the next two questions raised in the introduction. When illiberal actors emerge as significant threats, how can they be stopped short of reaching political power? And if they do gain office, under what conditions can they be blocked from weakening democratic institutions or even dismantling them?

Keeping Illiberal Actors Out of Office (or Coopting Them).

The emergence of illiberal actors is closely associated with what has come to be called "pernicious" polarization—a process whereby the normal multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly align along a single dimension and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of "us" versus "them." (McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018). The precise contours of these divisions vary substantially across societies, but almost all reflect cultural and economic strains that have accompanied the expansion of international trade, technological changes, and the rapid spread of misinformation through the Internet. In backsliding democracies, would-be autocrats who have gained office typically seek to concentrate authority with appeals that exploit these strains (Haggard and Kaufman 2021). But social and political polarization can also fuel dangerous attacks on liberal political norms and institutions from outside government—from illiberal political actors on the rise. In such situations, the challenge to democratic actors is to find ways to keep them from gaining power.

A precondition of meeting this challenge is recognition of the threat they pose. And, given the uncertainties surrounding their capabilities and intent, this is not always easy. Illiberal actors might campaign for power with attacks on liberal constitutional norms and institutions, but they do so within the framework of the constitutional system itself; and their initial attacks typically involve incremental challenges with unclear long-term implications.

These ambiguities pose important strategic dilemmas for democratic actors, with tradeoffs between the clarity of the threat and the space available to form effective defensive coalitions. This tradeoff changes over time (Capoccia 2024; Beatty Reidel et al 2024). In situations in which illiberal forces are growing but are not yet on the brink of power, there is a relatively wide array of pro-democratic coalitional opportunities for blocking their rise, or even for reducing their electoral support. At this stage, however, the threat they pose is unclear and competing democratic parties have relatively weak incentives to band together in defense of the system. Cross-national comparisons and/or international signals might be helpful in some cases in alerting democratic actors to the danger, but these are not always apparent or accurate.

On the other hand, as illiberal actors come closer to power, the threat they pose is more apparent but the space for effective opposition narrows. Illiberal actors on the brink of power have more to offer potential coalition partners. At the same time, there are likely to be fewer institutional resources available to the opposition for keeping them out.[5]

Even if the threat is recognized "in time," democratic opponents face other strategic challenges concerning the types of appeals that would be most effective in countering them. A central issue turns on the distinction between "partisan" and "defense of democracy" strategies. Partisan strategies focus on building coalitions of groups that view the rising autocrat as a threat to their economic or cultural interests. A "defense of democracy," conversely, seeks to mobilize an opposition that cuts across partisan divisions. Capoccia (2024) and others have argued that "-defense-of-democracy appeals stand a better chance of success, because they are aimed at broader segments of the population and are more likely to isolate illiberal challengers.

The evidence for this claim, however, is not entirely clear. In earlier work on the *expansion* of suffrage—a democracy-building process—the emphasis was on *partisan* interests in reaching out to new voters (Przeworski 2009). And more recent studies (e.g. Bateman 2025) have shown that militant partisanship sometimes played a crucial role in pushing back against antidemocratic initiatives in the United States during Reconstruction, France during the Algerian crisis, and the United Kingdom during the Irish Home Rule conflicts.

In the United States, arguably, Democrats attempted both "pro-democracy" and "partisan" strategies in their unsuccessful efforts to prevent the return of Donald Trump to power in 2024. The crowning achievements of the Biden administration—the infrastructure and stimulus acts of 2021—aimed directly at the "progressive" interests of blue-collar workers, women, and the alleged environmental concerns of Gen Z. But as the election grew closer, the Biden campaign sought to rally support around the defense of democracy. Notwithstanding important changes in style and messaging, the attempt to build an inclusive defense-of-democracy coalition that extended from core Democrats supporters to moderate Republicans remained the dominant motif of Kamala Harris's shortened campaign as well.

[5] The collapse of the government of Michel Barnier of France in December 2024 is a case in point. The resignation was forced by "no" votes of the far-right and left parties, leaving President Macron politically isolated and increasing the influence of Marine Le Pen.

Post-mortem explanations for Harris's defeat are diverse and sometimes contradictory (eg. Cadelago et al 2024; Galston 2024; Levitz 2024; Olsen 2024) and many ignore the fact that, independent of her campaign strategy, Harris was battling fierce anti-incumbent headwinds. The fact remains, however, that the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election offers no clear lessons about the relative merits of partisan and defense-of-democracy appeals or the conditions in which one or the other might carry the day. Claims about the utility of defense-of-democracy campaigns, however, are weakened by the fact that Harris failed in her attempt to expand her support by appealing across party lines; the Republican share of her voters in 2024 was almost exactly the same as Biden's in 2020.

The growing interest in "constitutional hardball" stands somewhat apart from either of these other strategies for countering illiberal threats (see Bateman 2025). In certain respects, this approach mirrors that of the backsliding politicians themselves, in that it sticks to the law, but bends or breaks the norms of democratic competition. In the contemporary West European context, where "militant democracy" strategies first emerged in reaction to Nazi and fascist threats, the strategy has focused on isolating extremist parties and movements—either through an informal *cordon sanitaire* or through legal bans on antidemocratic ideologies and campaigns

The use of hardball strategies to defend democracy against illiberal threats entails obvious tradeoffs. Norm-shattering behavior can kill democracy as well as cure it, and its success in forestalling the rise of illiberal actors is likely to depend on a variety of situational factors. Capoccia (2024) suggests that *cordon sanitaire* approaches are most likely to be effective when rising illiberal movements are still relatively small and the costs of excluding them are low.

Adjacent mainstream parties face stronger temptations to join forces with illiberal parties as the latter gain strength and the public divides into polarized political camps. In such situations, the advantages of hardball strategies must be weighed against alternative efforts to compete for their voters and/or to "domesticate" the illiberal parties by coopting them into governing coalitions (Berman 2008). As illiberal parties gain strength, more formal strategies of exclusion will also be harder to enforce, and as in the earlier scenario, adjacent parties are likely to be increasingly tempted to enter into alliances. In addition, formal exclusions might increasingly appear undemocratic across the political spectrum.

In Latin America, where party systems are much weaker, hardball tactics have sometimes been deployed against dangerous individuals rather than parties. In Brazil, to cite one important example, Jair Bolsonaro was banned from politics for eight years for attempting to undermine the 2022 presidential elections; and in 2025, he was tried and

sentenced to 27 years in prison for plotting a coup to prevent the winner from taking office. The multiparty coalition that had supported Bolsonaro's rise to power appeared weaker once he was forced off the stage, and the move arguably helped to lower the temperature of Brazilian politics.

Conversely, efforts to hold Donald Trump legally accountable failed in part because prosecutors hewed more closely to the norms of the slow-moving system of justice in the United States. Federal prosecutors, playing "by the book," waited until the second half of 2023 to formally charge Trump with interfering in the 2020 election and misappropriating national security documents. Their cases quickly became entangled with legal appeals—including one that, in July 2024, resulted in the Supreme Court's 6-3 decision on presidential immunity for "official acts." Both federal cases were dismissed prior to the 2024 election. State-level charges for election interference, brought in Georgia in August 2023, were also eventually dropped in December of 2024 when the Fulton County prosecutor was dismissed over questionable accusations about conflict of interest. At the end of the day, the only felony charges to result in a trial and conviction were over the falsification of business records, brought by prosecutors in New York state. Even this action, however, was too little and too late; Trump was not sentenced until after the election and was unconditionally allowed to escape jail time.

The efficacy and advisability of hardball strategies—both against parties and individual politicians—is still uncertain. Ex ante, it might be more feasible to erect exclusionary barriers against political parties on the rise than against rising individual politicians whose ideas and intentions might be more ambiguous. Ex post exclusions, when and if autocrats have been displaced from power, can draw on a clearer historical record; but they are unlikely to have lasting effects if successors cannot address the underlying grievances that brought them to power in the first place. Unlike the other strategies discussed above, however, hardball strategies directed either at extremist parties or individual politicians are relevant mainly in situations where they have not captured the executive, or ones in which they have been ousted from that position. Democratic opponents face different issues when they must block elected autocrats from consolidating control.

Autocrats in Power: Checking Backsliding and Preventing Reversion to Competitive Authoritarianism

The most extensive work on resilience focuses not on keeping would-be autocrats out of office, but on preventing them from doing damage to democratic institutions when they do gain control of government. What constraints might work to keep a would-be autocrat from seeking to undermine democracy "from above?" What factors deter a turn to authoritarianism once backsliding is underway?

In this section, we focus on two institutional factors commonly highlighted in the literature: the potential checks on autocratic behavior provided by overall constitutional design, and the more specific "horizontal" constraints provided by courts and legislatures. A full explanation of resilience would, to be sure, also need to take into account the underlying social and cultural sources of polarization within the system and the international forces with which it interacts—as well as the strategies and tactics of the opposition. At most, the political and institutional factors that we highlight here constitute partial explanations of resilience; arguably, they are most usefully considered intervening variables that mediate the effects of broader influences on the political system. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that the effects of these broader influences do pass through the institutional structures and political forces that we focus on in this section, and that the effects of these factors warrant systematic analysis.

Constitutional Design: The potential role of constitutional design as a factor in backsliding is an issue that has a long pedigree in the literature on democratic survival and collapse. This literature, it should be noted, focuses on democratic *reversion*, rather than on the broader phenomenon of backsliding; but the logic that highlights institutional checks on authoritarian takeovers should also be relevant to the incremental slide in the direction of autocracy.

Opinions about the effects of *specific* constitutional arrangements are, however, quite divided. On the one hand, in his classical work on democratic breakdown, Juan Linz (1990) argued that parliamentary systems were more resilient than presidential regimes because they were less likely to suffer from gridlock or to polarize around the winner-take-all contests for executive power. Moreover, the multiparty politics characteristic of parliamentary systems impedes the monopolization of power by the incumbent government —a point I return to below.

In his recent book on *Democracy's Resilience*, on the other hand, Kurt Weyland (2024) turns this argument on its head. He argues that the constitutional checks and balances built into presidential democracies provide greater protection against backsliders than parliamentary systems which fuse the executive and legislative branches of government.

Like Linz, Weyland acknowledges that the multiparty systems characteristic of parliamentary governments can help to block the consolidation of power. But backsliding in presidential systems, he argues, requires much more extreme "conjunctural opportunities" such as severe economic shocks combined with threats to public safety.

One empirical problem with each of these arguments is that in many constitutional systems, executive authority is divided between directly elected presidents and prime ministers accountable to the legislature. Such "mixed systems" obviously do not separate neatly along the presidential-parliamentary divide. Even taking these complexities into account, however, there are only limited indications that the type of constitution, in itself, makes a difference in halting either backsliding or a full authoritarian reversion.

Table 2 separates the backsliding cases listed in Table 1 above (excluding Russia, Greece, and South Africa) into parliamentary, presidential, and mixed constitutional regimes, drawing on classifications first developed by Shugart and Carey (1992) and later elaborated by Cheibub et al (2010) and others. Using Regimes of the World categories, the table also separates the cases according to their ratings as liberal democracies or electoral democracies, and shows the proportion of backsliders in each constitutional category. Backsliders that devolved to competitive authoritarian regimes are marked with an asterisk (*).

In the first place, it is clear from the table that among liberal democracies—i.e., those with more robust institutional protections—backsliding was actually quite rare. The only cases among the 36 liberal democracies in the sample were the parliamentary system in Hungary, the presidential system in the United States, and the mixed regime in Poland. The uneven distribution of parliamentary systems among liberal democracies, moreover, makes it difficult to assess whether constitutional arrangements themselves had much of a causal effect, relative to other factors favorable to democratic stability. "Pure" parliamentary systems were heavily concentrated within the 27 countries of the EU, as well as in other countries with relatively high levels of economic development such as the United Kingdom, Norway, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

Among electoral democracies (weighted more heavily towards non-European and less developed countries), moreover, the differences across constitutional type are also ambiguous. On the one hand, consistent with expectations derived from Linz, backsliding occurred in 25 percent of the parliamentary systems within electoral democracies, compared to over 40 percent of the presidential regimes. But only 22 percent of the "mixed" systems experienced backsliding.

Moreover, against Linz and consistent with Weyland, backsliders in the pure parliamentary systems seemed more vulnerable to authoritarian regressions. As the asterisks in Table 2 show, four of the five parliamentary backsliders slipped into autocracy (including Hungary's formerly liberal democracy, as well as India, Turkey, and Serbia), whereas this was the case in only about half (54.5 percent) of the presidential systems (Benin, Bolivia, Nicaragua, the Philippines, Venezuela, and Zambia), and only 18 percent of the countries with mixed constitutions (North Macedonia and Ukraine). The total number of cases is very small, however, and the differences in outcomes are too modest to allow any strong conclusions.

Table 2. Backsliding cases by constitutional regime and level of democracy.

Level of Democracy	**Parliamentary Backsliders**	**Presidential Backsliders**	**Mixed Backsliders**
Electoral Democracy	Botswana, India*, Serbia*, Turkey*	Benin*, Bolivia*, Brazil, Dom Rep, Ecuador, S. Korea, Mexico, Nicaragua*, Phil,* Venezuela*, Zambia*	North Macedonia,* Moldova, Senegal, Ukraine*
Backsliders as a percent of each constitutional regime	25.0% Backsliders as a percent of all ED parliamentary regimes, N=16	40.7% Backsliders as a percent of all ED presidential regimes, N=27)	22.2% Backsliders as a percent of all ED mixed regimes, N=18.
Liberal Democracy	Hungary*	United States	Poland
Backsliders as a percent of each constitutional regime	3.6% Backsliders as a percent of all LD parliamentary regimes, N=27	33% Backsliders as a percent of all LD presidential regimes, N= 3	16.6% Backsliders as a percent of all LD mixed regimes, N= 6

*Devolved into electoral authoritarian regime

An additional feature of many presidential constitutions—one that is not specified in the table—are restrictions on the number of terms a president can hold office. In some systems—especially ones that are weakly institutionalized—these restrictions placed a brake on attempted authoritarian consolidations by providing a focal point for an effective political opposition. Conflicts over attempts to evade term limits, for example, proved pivotal in ousting would-be autocratic presidents in Bolivia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, and Zambia.[6] Term limits, however, are far from fool-proof protections. Autocrats in power have frequently been able to set them aside in order to remain in office extend their subversion of democracy, as was the case for example under Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, and they generally did not prove effective in the absence of robust opposition and widespread political mobilization. At best, such provisions provide only a blunt instrument for explaining why some backsliding autocrats are checked and others are not.

Courts and legislatures. An examination of the role of courts and legislatures as potential checks on executive power provides a more promising avenue for explaining democratic resilience (or the lack of it). Regression analysis presented by Boese et al (2020: 19) provides evidence about the capacity of independent courts to constrain would-be autocrats. They show that V-Dem indicators of judicial autonomy predict the survival of democratic regimes undergoing episodes of backsliding, even after controlling for economic development, the age of democracy, and the presence of democratic neighbors.

Haggard and Kaufman (2021), on the other hand, provide case study evidence that legislatures are also key institutional battlegrounds for competing autocratic and democratic political forces. Where ruling parties and their coalition partners were able to exercise unilateral control, the legislature provided the legal avenue through which elected autocrats could subvert the autonomy of the courts, as well as other independent agencies within the executive branch. This was the outcome in 14 of the 16 cases they examine[7]—all except Brazil and the United States during the first Trump term, where independent parties maintained significant legislative footholds and provided substantial impediments to the extension of autocratic power throughout the rest of the political system.

[6] Term limits in Mexico, similarly, impelled the populist Andrés Manuel López Obrador to leave the presidency of Mexico in 2024, although the long-term implications of that transition are still unfolding.

[7] Bolivia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Greece, Hungary, Macedonia, Nicaragua, Poland, Russia, Serbia, Turkey, Ukraine, Venezuela, and Zambia.

In the following analysis, we focus on the more up-to-date list of authoritarian and democratic backsliders presented in Table 1, and we add a new category consisting of *potential* backsliders in which democratic systems were endangered by the election of populists with questionable commitments to constitutional constraints. These are specified in Weyland's (2024) analysis.

Table 3 focuses exclusively on countries that experienced backsliding. It divides the backsliding countries into those that resulted in authoritarian rule and those that remained democratic (as specified in Regimes of the World)[8]; and it shows both the decline in V-Dem measure of judicial independence and the highest percentage of seats achieved by the dominant party during each backsliding episode. Scores on judicial independence range from high levels of independence (scores of 3–4), to partial independence (2–3), to little or no autonomy (0–2). In countries where the governing party ran in successive elections, we show the results for the election in which it won the largest proportion of seats. The final row in the table provides the average scores in judicial decline and party dominance for both the "authoritarian" and "democratic" backsliders.

Table 4 shows similar data on judicial decline and ruling party dominance in Weyland's list of *potential* backsliders—cases in which "illiberal" political actors gained control of executive office but were impeded entirely from subverting their constitutional systems and were eventually voted out of office. As in Table 3, it shows the changes in V-Dem measure of judicial independence in the periods in which "illiberal" executives controlled the government and the largest share of seats acquired by the ruling party during their tenure in office. Average scores are presented separately for the Eastern European and Latin American cases.

[8] See Table 2.

Table 3. Judicial Independence and Dominant Parties in Backsliders.

	Became authoritarian			**Remained democratic**	
Country	*Judiciary t-1 to end of episode or 2024*	*Maximum Parliamentary Seats held by governing party (in percent)*	*Country*	*Judiciary t-1 to end of episode or 2024*	*Maximum Parliamentary Seats held by governing party (in percent)*
Benin 2007–22	2.30 – 1.26	56.6 (2019)	Botswana 2006–16	3.14 – 2.44	78.9 (2009)
Bolivia 2005–19	1.80 – 0.52	67.7 ((2009)	Brazil 2018–22	3.30 – 2.98	10.1 (2018)
El Salvador 2021–22	2.46 –0.13	66.6 (2021)	Dom Rep 2009–22	1.07 – 1.00	61.8 (2016)
Hungary 2010-–22	3.10 – 0.87	68.0 (2010)	Ecuador 2007–17	1.96 – 0.59	73.0 (2013)
Nicaragua 2007–22	0.40 – 0.04	76.1 (2016)	India 2014–23	3.07 – 2.51	55.5 (2019)
Macedonia 2010–16	2.26 – 0.45	53.3 (2008)	Mexico 2018–23	2.62 – 1.75	76.6 (2018)
Philippines 2010–17	2.59 – 1.94	84.8 (2016)	Moldova 2002–9	2.05 – 1.49	55.4 (2005)**
Serbia 2014–22	2.0 – 1.52	63.2 (2014)	Poland 2015–23	3.65 – 0.99	51.1 (2015/19)
Ukraine 2010–13	1.82 – 0.79	41.1 (2012)	S. Korea 2008–16	1.36 – 0.76	51.2 ((2008)
Turkey 2010–22	1.86 – 0.14	62.0 (2002)	USA 2017–21	3.65- 3.46	55.4 (2017)
Venezuela 1998–13	2.33 – 0.13	100.0 (2005)*			
Zambia 2012–21	2.31 – 1.43	53.3 (2011)			
Average	**2.1 – .07**	**66.1**		**2.6 – 1.8**	**56.9**

*Opposition abstained from ballot.

**The ruling PCRM briefly won 59.4 percent of the seats in April 2009, but quickly fell to 47.5 percent two months later, after the parliament deadlocked over the selection of a new president.

Table 4. Judicial Independence and Largest Party

Countries and Heads of Government	Average Change in Judiciary	Largest Governing Party/Coalition
Country Heads of Government	**Eastern Europe**	
Slovakia Mečiar 1990–98; Fico 2006–10; 2012–18; Matovič 2020–21	3.20 - 3.26	55.30 (2012)
Czechia Babiš 2017–21	3.14 - 2.89	39.00 (2017)
Slovenia Janša (three terms): 2004–08; 2012–13; 2020–22	3.18 - 3.29	46.70 (2020)
Romania Băsecu (three terms): 2004–07; 2007–12; 2012–14	2.49 - 3.20	34.00 (2004)
Bulgaria Borissov (three terms): 2009–13; 2014–17; 2017–21 Saxe-Coburg-Gotha 2001–05	2.72–2.57	50.00 (2001)
AVERAGE FOR EASTERN EUROPE	**3.00 - 3.07**	**45.00**
Country Heads of Government	**Latin America**	
Argentina Menem 1989–99; Kirchner 2003–07; Fernández 2007–15	2.60 - 2.00	44.82 (1989)
Colombia Uribe 2002–10	3.56 - 3.47	40.70 (2006)
Brazil Collor 1990–92	2.13 - 2.13	21.50 (1990)
Ecuador Bucaram 1996–97; Gutierrez 2003–05	1.80 - 2.10	33.00 (1996)
Guatemala Serrano 1991–93; Morales 2015–19	2.80 - 2.90	27.80 (2015)
Peru García 1985–90; Toledo 2001–06; García 2006–11; Hamala 2011–16; Castillo 2021–22	2.80 - 3.00	52.40 (1985)
Honduras Zelaya 2006–09	1.81 - 2.87	48.40 (2006)
Paraguay Lugo 2008–12	2.38 - 2.87	10.00 (2008)
AVERAGE FOR LATIN AMERICA	**2.32 - 2.67**	**34.82**

As a comparison of Table 3 and 4 indicates, the countries that avoided backsliding, despite the threats of illiberal heads of government, generally faced considerably more substantial "horizontal" constraints than either the "democratic" or autocratic" backsliders. This is clearest with respect to the data on political parties. Among the 22 backsliders shown in Table 3, only the governments in Brazil and Ukraine failed to capture absolute legislative majorities, as compared to 10 of the 13 "non-backsliders." The contrasts are not quite as sharp with respect to the V-Dem estimates of judicial independence, due to the relatively low initial scores (average 2.3) among the non-backsliders in Latin America. But whereas the scores for judicial independence in democratic and autocratic backsliders fell to 1.8 and 0.07 respectively, they improved to 2.7 among the Latin American cases—a reflection, as noted above, of at least "partial" independence. Possibly due to pressure from the EU, moreover, the average score of the European countries that resisted backsliding stayed above 3.0 (high levels of independence), despite the threats of would-be autocrats.

Arguably, as Weyland has claimed, the non-backsliders also encountered less severe social and economic shocks than the backsliders, and therefore more limited opportunities to concentrate power. However, V-Dem estimates of social polarization show little difference between backsliders and non-backsliders.[9] In Eastern Europe (Figure 1), levels of social polarization were almost as severe in Bulgaria, Romania, Slovenia, and Slovakia as they were in Hungary and Poland, the two backsliders in that region. Only Czechia remained at moderate levels of polarization. In Latin America (Figure 2), polarization in Peru, one of the non-backsliders, was also relatively moderate overall, but did escalate sharply in 2022. In Argentina and Honduras—two other countries that avoided backsliding—polarization reached about the same level of intensity as in Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, and Nicaragua. But even if, as Weyland suggests, the social strains were less severe in the non-backsliders, strong courts and independent legislatures remained important focal points of resistance to the autocratic impulses of populist rulers.

[9] Scores range from 0 (severe polarization) to 4 (no polarization). Severe polarization reflects "serious differences in society on almost all key political issues, which result in major clashes of views."

Figure 1. Polarization of Society in Eastern Europe

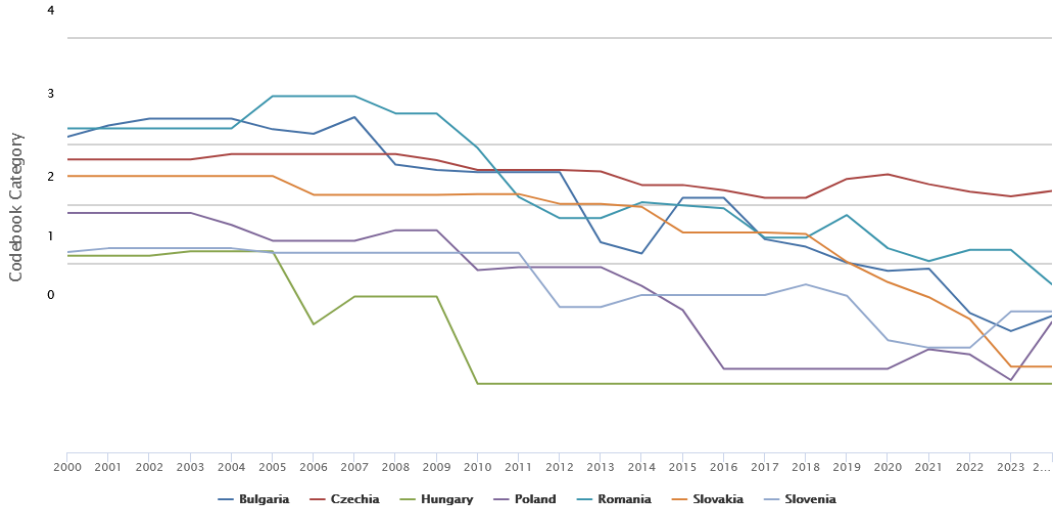
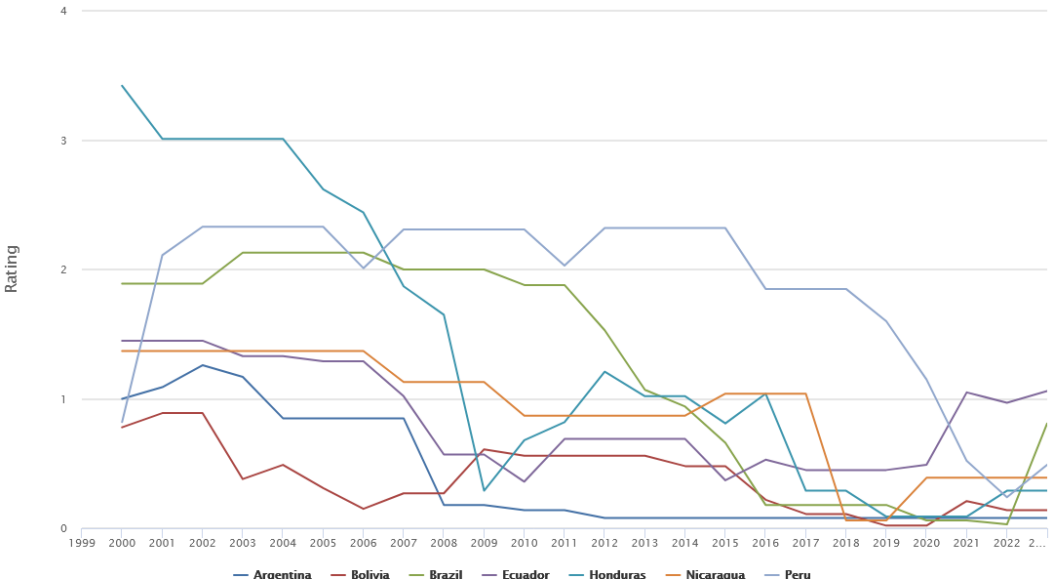


Figure 2. Polarization in Latin America



Turning first to the courts: as we have seen above, the judiciaries in the non-backsliders of Eastern Europe and Latin America were generally able to withstand attacks on their autonomy by illiberal heads of government, whereas in most of the backsliders (both authoritarian and democratic) the judiciary was weak to begin with and declined even further under political pressure. The principal exceptions were the United States and Brazil, where the high courts blocked attempts by illiberal incumbents to overturn electoral defeats.

Unlike the non-backsliders, moreover, even relatively robust high courts often suffered sharp declines in their independence once the backsliding process got under way. Table

3 shows especially notable declines in Hungary, Poland, and India; but there were also substantial declines (although from a lower starting points) in Benin, El Salvador, North Macedonia, the Philippines, Turkey, and Venezuela. Such erosion, arguably, was attributable either to a defensive response to outside political pressure, or to changes imposed by dominant parties in the legislature in the personnel and/or structure of the judicial system itself.

The contrasts between backsliders and non-backsliders show up even more clearly in the balance of political power within their respective legislatures. In almost all of the backsliders, dominant legislative parties—either majorities or supermajorities—were directly deployed to initiate or ratify executive assaults on democratic institutions—including, but not limited to, the judicial system. As noted, Haggard and Kaufman document this process in 14 of the 16 backsliding cases they examine, but we see similar takeovers in more recent cases. In Mexico, for example, constitutional amendments passed by the ruling party's expanded political control over the National Election Council and the Supreme Court, two major bulwarks of democracy erected in the aftermath of Mexico's democratic transition in 2000. Legislatures under unilateral control of the executive also played pivotal roles in backsliding in India, Benin, Senegal, and Moldova—either to initiate institutional changes pursued by the leader or to ratify and reinforce them after the fact.

Conversely, unlike the backsliders, ruling party majorities were extremely rare among the non-backsliders. Of the twelve non-backsliders, shown in Table 2, only three governing parties (Fico in Slovakia (2012), García in Peru (1985), and Saxe-Coburg-Gotha in Bulgaria (2001) received more than 50 percent of the seats; and only four (Argentina, Honduras, Slovenia, and Colombia) captured as many as 40 percent.[10] The weakness of these governing parties—and the corresponding strength of the opposition—was a major impediment to the consolidation of autocratic power.

A brief glance at these cases illustrates the importance of the legislative checks. In Latin America, Colombia is often cited as an example of successful opposition to backsliding during the presidency of Álvaro Uribe (Gamboa 2022). But much of this opposition passed through the legislature, where Uribe's support peaked at only about 40 percent of the seats. Uribe did launch a constitutional initiative aimed at a major expansion of presidential power, but congressional opposition forced him to backtrack significantly and eventually to abandon his attempt to run for a third term in 2010 (Gamboa 2022: 87). In Ecuador, Lucio Gutiérrez (2003–05) sought to overcome legislative stalemates by forging an alliance with the supporters of Abdalá Bucaram, who was facing serious

[10] These legislative constraints are shown even more clearly in Table A.xxx, which provides full data on legislative support, rather than just the peak support shown in Table 3. Under virtually all of the other non-backsliders, the governing party directly controlled only 20–30 percent of the legislative seats.

corruption charges and had fled the country. But when Gutiérrez tried to impose compliant judges who would lift the charges, the opposition parties in the legislature forced him to resign. In Argentina, both Néstor Kirchner (2003–07) and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007–15), lacking legislative majorities, wisely avoided challenges to their constitutional systems, as did a succession of populist presidents in Peru (Garcia 1985-90; Toledo 2001-06; Garcia 2006-11; Hamala 2011-16; Castillo 2021-22). In Guatemala and Honduras, presidents Serrano (1991–93) and Zelaya (2006–09) were ousted from office after attempts to bypass congress, although in these cases, democracy was seriously compromised in the process.

We see similar legislative checks at work against illiberal rulers in Eastern Europe. In Czechia from 2017–21, where Andrej Babiš governed with a minority coalition, the parliament defeated a government initiative to abolish the Senate and to establish a first-past-the-post electoral system aimed at increasing Babiš's chance to win a majority. In Slovenia, a no-confidence vote in response to a corruption scandal forced Janez Janša to resign in 2013, and an attack on journalists and other abuses of power led to another no-confidence vote in 2021 and an election defeat the following year. In Romania, the incumbent president Traian Băsecu was impeached and deposed in 2014). In Slovakia, Prime Minister Robert Fico—like the Kirchners in Argentina—generally refrained from attacking democratic institutions, although the assassination of an investigative journalist in 2018 led to his defeat in the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2019 and 2020. As Weyland notes,

> *"Internal coalitional squabbles reduced the chief executives' clout and hindered their pursuit of self-aggrandizement. Without a firm support base, assaults on democracy are unpromising. In fact, every few years, alliances headed by populists collapsed, leading to their ouster." (2024: 187)."*

Do differences in horizontal constraints also help explain whether or not backsliders themselves stop short of autocracy? One problem in answering this question is that differences between "democratic" and "authoritarian" outcomes is often a rather subtle matter of degree; many of the "democratic" backsliders—India, Poland, and Mexico, for example—also engaged in abuses of power that bordered on autocracy.[11]

Moreover, although Table 3 does show average differences in both judicial independence and legislative accountability, we should be very cautious about interpreting their role in constraining the decline into authoritarianism. Although scores for high court independence remained high during the backsliding episodes in Brazil and

[11] As we discuss below, disciplined Republican majorities in the United States Congress also acquiesced to Trump's attempts to concentrate power during his second term, bring the political system much closer to the line that distinguishes competitive authoritarianism from low-level democracy (Levitsky, Way, and Ziblatt 2025).

the United States, the overall average score for democratic backsliders fell to only 1.8, indicating a tendency to conform to executive decisions "regardless of its sincere view of the legal record."[12] Similarly, although (on average) the ruling parties in democratic backsliders controlled fewer legislative seats than their authoritarian counterparts, the difference narrows considerably (from 8.8 to 4.0 percent) if Brazil—an extreme outlier—is omitted from the sample.

Yet even taking these ambiguities into account, horizontal constraints imposed by both the courts and the legislature did appear to make a difference in most of the cases. While the checks imposed by judiciaries weakened over time in most democratic backsliders, they were lower to begin with in almost all of the countries that slipped into authoritarianism, and they had virtually disappeared by the end of the episode. In nine of the 12 authoritarian backsliders, scores for high court independence fell below 1.0, indicating (according to V-Dem coding) that they almost "always" adopted the government's position "regardless of its sincere view of the record." The scores of the three exceptions—Serbia (1.52), Zambia (1.53), and Benin (1.26)—were only slightly higher (and still lower than the average for the democratic backsliders).

In at least five of the democratic backsliders, conversely, the judiciary proved substantially more resilient. This was most evident, as we have seen, in Brazil and the United States, where Bolsonaro and Trump each encountered significant checks on their attempts to remain in office. But these were not the only countries where courts retained a degree of independence from the government in power. V-Dem scores also remained relatively high in Botswana (2.44) and India (2.51), indicating high courts that issued independent decisions a little more than half the time. Even in some of the countries with far lower scores, moreover, the judiciary played a significant role in blocking incumbents' attempts to remain in power. In the Dominican Republic, the constitutional court, which was controlled by opposition factions of the ruling party, ruled against Danilo Medina's attempt to waive limits on a third presidential term, despite a V-Dem score of only 1.0. A constitutional amendment aimed at overturning the ruling was then defeated by a coalition of opposition legislators and intraparty rivals. In South Korea, the constitutional court (which received a V-Dem score of only 0.76) upheld the prior impeachment and conviction of President Park Geun-hye in 2016 by opposition legislators and ruling party defectors.

Legislative constraints—as just implied—were equally, if not more important in accounting for the differences between authoritarian and democratic backsliders. Eight of the 12 authoritarian backsliders achieved legislative majorities of 60 percent or

[12] V-Dem, https://www.v-dem.net/data_analysis/CountryGraph/.

more,[13] and these were frequently deployed to engineer legal changes that reined in other institutional and civil checks on executive power. In Hungary, Venezuela, and Turkey, supermajorities forged fundamental reconstructions of the constitutional system. As might be expected, the rulers in these societies also came to acquire greater control over the military and police (Geddes 2025) and to rely more heavily than their democratic counterparts on coercive responses to civil society protest and international pressures to remain in power. But the consolidation of authoritarian regimes also depended heavily on the rulers' control of the constitutional levers of power. And typically, this was made possible by the election of disciplined legislative majorities or supermajorities that enabled them to change the constitution, subordinate the courts, and assume control over the instruments of state coercion.

Although ruling legislative majorities in the democratic backsliders were considerably more robust than in the internally divided multiparty coalitions of the non-backsliders, they were typically more fragile than in the authoritarian cases. Only four of the 10 democratic backsliders achieved majorities of over 60 percent. In two of these, Botswana and Mexico, ruling parties did engineer substantial restrictions in democratic politics. But in the two others, the Dominican Republic and Ecuador, the ruling parties experienced crippling internal divisions that seriously impeded bids to concentrate executive power. As discussed above, the ruling Dominican Liberation Party in the Dominican Republic failed to unite around the proposal to eliminate term limits, ratifying the high court ruling against the president's bid to extend his mandate. In Ecuador, a split within the ruling PAIS party's supermajority prevented Rafael Correa from returning to the presidency in 2017, after he had consented—in the face of popular protest—to what was initially perceived to be a temporary transfer of power to his vice president, Lenín Moreno. In both countries, these events were marked by substantial upswings in the liberal democracy scores.

Predictably, almost all of the six democratic backsliders with smaller ruling majorities were also characterized by internal division and/or defeat at the polls. The single exception was in India, where Narendra Modi's increasingly autocratic government rested on the support of a disciplined majority of 55 percent. In contrast, in Brazil's highly fragmented party system, Bolsonaro faced a recalcitrant legislature during his first two years in office; and although he cobbled together a supportive coalition in 2021 and 2022, he lacked the legislative backing for major institutional changes. In the United States, the Democratic opposition recaptured control of the House of Representatives in 2019, subjecting Trump to an onslaught of investigations and impeachments, and confirming his defeat in the 2020 presidential election. And ruling parties in Korea (as we have seen) and in Moldova suffered defections and defeat at the polls.

[13] These large majorities held through successive elections in Bolivia, Hungary, Nicaragua, Turkey, and Venezuela (see Appendix Table X).

In Poland, a highly cohesive majority coalition led by Law and Justice (PiS) did hold on for eight years, doing major damage to democracy in that country. But with only a simple legislative majority in the Chamber of Deputies and a minority in the Senate, it was unable to consolidate the degree of constitutional restructuring engineered by Viktor Orbán's supersized majority in Hungary and was forced to accept the electoral victory of an opposition coalition in 2023. As we elaborate in more detail below, the long tenure of the PiS government had a lasting impact on the staffing of the judiciary and the state bureaucracy, seriously limiting the power of the incoming cabinet. Unlike in Hungary, however, the outgoing ruling party was unable to close the door on a democratic turnover in government.

Differences in the outcome of these backsliding episodes, as previously suggested, can be attributed to a variety of factors. Civil society protests and external pressures also raised the cost of abuses of power by would-be autocrats, and typically constituted important impediments to the consolidation of their power. Opposition strategies aimed at dividing authoritarian coalitions by avoiding extra-institutional attacks such as riots or boycotts might also have made a difference, as Laura Gamboa (2022) has argued. And in at least some backsliding cases, following Croissant and Lott (2024), we can attribute the survival of democracy in backsliding countries in part to higher levels of "democratic stock," which provided a greater capacity to resist authoritarian pressures.[14]

Each of these possibilities warrant further comparative research. But in the cases we have examined above, the effects of these factors also depended heavily on the capacity of the courts and the legislative opposition to hold the line against the rulers' efforts to extend and consolidate their control over the system.

Backsliding and Democratic Recovery

In the preceding pages, we have focused on the factors that prevent elected autocrats from coming to power, or that contain them when they do. In this section, we explore a further question that has so far received less attention in the literature. To what extent can backsliding countries *recover* or *improve on* previous levels of democracy, once autocrats or would-be autocrats are removed from power?

[14] Four of the eleven countries that avoided reversion (Botswana, Poland, South Korea, and the United States until 2024) were previously classified by Regimes of the World as "liberal democracies" with more robust institutional checks and balances and strong civil societies. But the countries that reverted also included two liberal democracies (Hungary and Serbia) as well as three other electoral democracies that had lasted for a half century or more (Venezuela, Zambia, and India).

Table 5 provides a rather sobering picture of the outcomes in all of the backsliding cases in which illiberal rulers have been deposed, whether through elections or extra-constitutional means. It compares the score on the Liberal Democracy Index in the year prior to the onset of the backsliding episode; the last year the leader was in power; and 2024—the most recent year in which the liberal democracy score is available. As of 2024, only four of the 13 "recovering" backsliders had reached or exceeded scores that they had reached prior to the backsliding episodes, and in two of these (the Dominican Republic and Ecuador) those scores remained relatively low. Moldova, the third "improver" had been up and down since its initial backsliding episode from 2001 to 2009; its score increased to 0.56 in 2011, then dropped to 0.39 in 2018. And Brazil, though recovering to previous levels after the defeat of Jair Bolsonaro, continued to struggle with high levels of polarization and policy stalemate that left the system vulnerable to recapture by antidemocratic forces.

Table 5. Liberal Democracy scores at the beginning and end of backsliding episodes and in 2024

	LD t-1	LD year of ouster	LD 2024	Change in LD: t-1 to 2024
Botswana ED	(2005) 0.62	(2016) 0.59	0.48	Minus 0.14 ED
Bolivia	(2006) 0.47	(2019) 0.25	0.31	Minus 0.16
Brazil ED	(2014) 0.71	(2022) 0.54	0.71	Even
DR	(2013) 0.32	(2017) 0.29	0.45	Plus 0.13
Ecuador	(2008) 0.35	(2017) 0.27	0.45	Plus 0.10
N. Macedonia	(2009) 0.38	(2016) 0.28	0.37	Minus 0.01
Moldova*	(2001) 0.44	(2009) 0.36	0.52	Plus 0.08
Poland LD	(2014) 0.82	(2023) 0.44	0.62	Minus 0.20 ED
S. Korea LD	(2007) 0.79	(2017) 0.63	0.63	Minus 0.14 ED
Ukraine**	(2009) 0.40	(2018) 0.24	0.23	Minus 0.17
Philippines***	(2017) 0.35	(2022) 0.28	0.31	Minus 0.04
USA LD	(2015) 0.85	(2021) 0.76	0.75	Minus 0.10 LD

*Moldova Increased to 0.56 in 2011, declined again to 0.39 in 2018

**Ukraine increased to 0.32 between 2019-2021

***Philippines had previous backsliding under Marcos from 2002–09. LD score went from 0.41 in 2001 to 0.35 in 2009. Increased to 0.43 between 2011 and 2015 before falling back.

Rankings from: https://ourworldindata.org/regimes-of-the-world-data

At least four of the nine democracies that failed to improve were quite weak to begin with: Bolivia, North Macedonia, Ukraine, and the Philippines each had initial LD scores below 0.50 prior to the onset of their backsliding episodes, and Botswana's initial score of 0.2 failed to reach a level generally associated with liberal democracy.

But democracies with more robust initial scores also failed to bounce back entirely. Poland and South Korea, and—most importantly, the United States—all had LD scores between 0.79 and 0.85 prior to the onset of their backsliding episodes. Yet even though democratic governments regained power in all of these cases, V-Dem scores remained substantially below their initial levels as of 2024. And the 2024 ratings, of course, do not include the devastating effect that Donald Trump has had on American democracy since returning to the presidency in 2025.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to review the unique experiences of each of the recovering backsliders. Nevertheless, it is useful to comment briefly on the pressures encountered by the once relatively strong democracies in Poland and Korea, and on the failure of the Biden administration in the United States to prevent the return of Trump. At least in the short-run, the post-backsliding experiences in these countries do not provide much room for optimism.

The most common feature of all three cases—as shown in Figure 3—is that the extensive polarization that sustained backsliding regimes in power did not disappear once they were deposed. Social divisions remained almost as deep under Biden as they were during the first Trump administration. Poland also remained highly polarized, notwithstanding a slight uptick in V-Dem scores after the defeat of the PiS in 2023. In South Korea, the V-Dem estimates did improve after the ouster of Park Geun-hye in 2017; but they never recovered to scores registered in the early 2000s, and they deteriorated sharply again after the return of the conservative People Power Party to the presidency culminated in an attempted coup d'etat in 2024. In all three cases, the enduring polarization of society allowed the defeated authoritarian parties to remain major opposition forces, undermined efforts to frame and sustain coherent social and economic policies, and weakened the capacity of the state to implement the rule of law.

Figure 3. Polarization of Society in Poland, South Korea, and the United States

The enduring damage to state institutions was perhaps most immediately evident in Poland, where the right-wing PiS had dominated the system between 2014–23. In 2023, the PiS government was finally defeated by a reform coalition led by Donald Tusk. By this time, however, PiS' long tenure in office had allowed it to embed its loyalists in the major centers of state power. Even after the change of government, PiS appointees in the Constitutional Tribunal and the National Council of the Judiciary were able to block the new government's attempts to reverse previous restrictions on civil liberties or to enforce the rulings of the EU courts. The PiS also continued to control the National Broadcasting Council, the Office of the Prosecutor General, and the Supreme Audit Office. And although Tusk's liberal coalition controlled the government, the PiS continued to be the largest single party in the parliament, with 44 percent of the seats—enough to block attempts by the new government to reverse changes it had previously made in the Polish constitution.

Tusk's reform coalition suffered a further blow in the presidential election of 2025, when its candidate (Rafał Trzaskowski) was narrowly defeated by Karol Nawrocki, backed by PiS, by 51 to 49 percent of the popular vote. Although the presidency is primarily a ceremonial position, Nawrocki will have veto powers that can delay or even block government initiatives. More important, his victory underscores depth of the continuing divisions that continue to undermine the effectiveness and legitimacy of Polish democracy.

In South Korea, the liberal Moon Jae-in government was elected in 2017 after the previous president, Park Geun-hye on charges of corruption and abuse of power. Notwithstanding the abuses of its predecessor, the liberals inherited state institutions that were less politicized than those in Poland, but it also ultimately failed to stabilize

the democratic system. In part, this failure can be attributed to forces beyond the new government's control. South Korea, even more than Poland, faced profoundly hostile international neighbors, and its efforts to improve relations with North Korea ultimately proved unsuccessful. Moreover, Moon's government was hit by the disruption of COVID during his last two years in office.

But support for the government was also undermined both by internal misconduct and online-fueled polarization that impeded its efforts to deliver on its promises to rein in the powerful *chaebol* conglomerates, improve labor rights, and attack public corruption. Accusations of ethics violations within the government itself discredited its pledge to clean up corruption; justice minister Cho Kuk, one of Moon's closest allies, became personally embroiled by allegations of corruption and nepotism within his own family. Exposure of multiple homes owned by allies of the government became a major liability as well, as escalating real estate prices became a major issue for younger voters and a source of political protest.

As noted—and as also was the case under Biden in the United States—online communications played a pivotal role in fomenting polarization. South Korea's rate of Internet penetration was one of the highest in the world, and underlying conflicts were amplified through YouTube channels, online communities, and social platforms. Although the left and right both engaged in online attacks, the deep social divisions left the government with little room for error. Conservative memes, satire, and rumors helped to shift opinion against the government, and contributed to the very narrow victory (by a margin of less than 0.7 percent) of the conservative Yoon Suk-yeol in the 2022 election.

In 2024, Yoon declared martial law and summoned troops to close parliament in a brief, but shocking, attempt to seize autocratic power. Civil society and parliamentary resistance led to the defeat of the coup in a matter of hours, and Yoon was forced from office; democracy held, as it had after the previous impeachment of Park Guen-hye. But the crisis had a profoundly unsettling effect on the political system—as reflected in a decline in the country's liberal democracy index from a high of 0.80 after the ouster of Yoon to only 0.61 in 2024.

The failure of the Biden administration to stabilize democracy in the United States reflects a similar path, leading in 2025 to the return to power of Donald Trump. As in Korea and Poland, the incoming Biden administration faced a highly polarized society, as well as daunting problems that had emerged under his predecessor. Most significant were the devastating dislocations of COVID at the end of Trump's first term. Among other things, this led to the disruption of trade pipelines and soaring inflation in 2021, Biden's first year in office. Moreover, although the Biden administration logged some significant achievements in the management of the economy, environmental

protection, and infrastructure investment, unforced errors also contributed to the defeat of the incumbent party—most notably, Biden's failure to withdraw earlier from the 2024 election.

Post-mortem analyses of this defeat can be traced both to bad luck and bad decisions, as noted in the second section of this paper. But underlying the debate over why the Democrats lost is the fact that—as in South Korea and Poland—the deep divisions in American society left very little margin for error. Trump's popular vote margin over Kamala Harris (1.5 percent) was more decisive than expected, but it was still very narrow. This, in turn, reflected the precarious state of the United States' polarized political system. Given the existential stakes at play in the election, the cost of defeat affected not only the incumbent party, but American democracy itself.

With the second coming of Donald Trump, prospects of democratic recovery worsened exponentially. Within the first year of his term, the incoming administration weakened national security with attacks on long-standing geopolitical alliances, and shook the economy with erratic policies on tariffs, fiscal policy, and regulations. Perhaps most importantly, the attacks on the federal bureaucracy through mass firings and job uncertainty have severely undermined the state's capacity to deliver critical services, health and education, and public safety. The lost institutional memory and expertise that go into the provision of such public goods will be difficult, if not impossible, to replace in the coming years. These crippling deficits in state capacity, in turn, will leave Trump's successors with only a limited ability to respond effectively to popular expectations and demands.

Can such challenges be decisively overcome? The United States political history has been marked in the past by major political realignments that followed periods of crisis or stalemate. For example, Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal coalition—though initially built on compromises with racist Southern Democrats—laid the foundations for the establishment of America's modern welfare state—and, eventually, for responses to demands for social justice for Blacks and other excluded minorities.

But the prospects for overcoming the current stalemate are not encouraging. A major realignment in the 21st century, if it is possible at all, would look very different from those experienced in the past. Most assuredly, an attempt to resurrect the industrial and union-based foundations of the past would founder in the face of revolutionary changes in production and communications technology, global integration, and artificial intelligence. A new coalition would require a project that combined the social and political interests that have emerged out of these changes with effective strategies to respond to the massive insecurities and inequalities that these changes have

produced.[15] And it is unlikely to succeed in the absence of a devastating crisis that reduces Trump's support to its hardcore minority.

The more immediate—and more likely—prospect is for continuing polarization and a continuing weakening of democratic institutions. It is entirely possible that Trump 2.0 will be followed in 2029 by a successor committed to the restoration and strengthening of democracy. But in the context of deep social and political divisions and the damage they have already caused, an incoming administration would face even fiercer headwinds than those encountered by Biden, and the system as a whole would risk ongoing political stalemate.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have focused on four sets of issues: a) what factors discourage the *emergence* of political actors that threaten the stability of democratic regimes? b) what strategies are available to block their access to power? c) how can democratic regimes limit the impact of governments headed by would-be autocrats? and d) what are the prospects for a *recovery* of democratic institutions when and if democratic actors return to power? In addressing these questions, we are, of course, interested in whether democratic systems can survive the threats to their stability. More broadly, however, we are concerned about how they might respond to the threat of democratic "backsliding"—a process of institutional erosion that can damage democracy without necessarily killing it.

What factors discourage the emergence of anti-democratic actors? Well-known features of socioeconomic development—including large middle classes, high rates of literacy, and diversified economies—are bulwarks of democracy that remain important at any level of threat; but they are perhaps especially important in blocking the emergence of antidemocratic movements or reducing the threats that they pose. The United States and South Korea—two wealthy countries—have experienced severe backsliding episodes, and in the United States, there are currently serious threats to the survival of democracy itself. But these are the exceptions among the 22 cases we have examined in this paper. All of the rest of the countries that have experienced backsliding or outright reversion have been middle-income or relatively poor societies that lack the social and economic defenses of more developed countries.

What factors keep anti-democratic forces from gaining office? Many other democracies—including ones that have reached high levels of socioeconomic development—have been threatened by the emergence of antidemocratic electoral

[15] For example, Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson (2025).

forces that can potentially undermine their constitutional institutions. In such situations, the capacity to deter backsliding (or outright collapse) can depend on the strategic responses of the political actors seeking to defend the system. In the second section of this paper, I review the issues raised in the strategic debates among these democratic actors: over the kinds of appeals that might be most effective in countering challenges from antidemocratic actors, and tradeoffs between attempts to either isolate or co-opt them. The effectiveness of such choices is likely to be conditional on the specific circumstances of each case, but the strategic questions themselves are relevant in a very broad range of democratic societies.

What are the defenses against elected autocrats? The challenges of defending democracy escalate dramatically when would-be autocrats are actually elected as heads of government. In these circumstances, I argue, resilience pivots critically on whether democratic oppositions remain able to retain leverage in institutions of "horizontal accountability"—most notably, the courts and legislature—that are intended to check executive abuses of power. Of course, the literature on responses to elected autocrats addresses many other economic, cultural, and political factors as well. But we show above that horizontal checks played critically important roles in preventing the *onset* of backsliding in many countries where potential autocrats had risen to power, and in resisting attacks on democratic institutions in the twenty-two backsliding cases we examine.

Can democracies recover from backsliding episodes? We know the least, finally, about how or whether democracies that have experienced severe episodes of backsliding can bounce back after democratic leaders return to power. In part, this is both because the number of "recovering backsliders" remains relatively limited, and because only a few have succeeded in returning to the level of democratic quality achieved prior to the backsliding episode. Improving on that level—a goal that is often seen as essential to preventing further backsliding episodes—is an even steeper hill to climb. The challenge for most of these systems—and clearly for the imperiled democracy in the United States—is that a full recovery must not only address the flaws in democratic regimes that existed *prior* to the onset of backsliding, but also repair the damage done to democratic norms and institutions *during* the backsliding process itself. The political forces that are most likely to facilitate this form of democratic resilience have yet to be determined.

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