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Understanding and Responding to Global Democratic Backsliding

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Summary

Over the past two decades, democratic backsliding has become a defining trend in global politics. However, despite the extensive attention paid to the phenomenon, there is surprisingly little consensus about what is driving it. The most common explanations offered by analysts—ranging from the role of Russia and China and disruptive technologies to the rise of populism, the spread of political polarization, and democracies’ failure to deliver—fall short when tested across a wide range of cases.

A more persuasive account of backsliding focuses on the central role of leader-driven anti-democratic political projects and the variety of mechanisms and motivations they entail. This paper identifies and analyzes three distinct types of backsliding efforts: grievance-fueled illiberalism, opportunistic authoritarianism, and entrenched-interest revanchism. In cases of grievance-fueled illiberalism, a political figure mobilizes a grievance, claims that the grievance is being perpetuated by the existing political system, and argues that it is necessary to dismantle democratic norms and institutions to redress the underlying wrongs. Opportunistic authoritarians, by contrast, come to power via conventional political appeals but later turn against democracy for the sake of personal political survival. In still other backsliding cases, entrenched interest groups—generally the military—that were displaced by a democratic transition use undemocratic means to reassert their claims to power. Although motivations and methods differ across backsliding efforts, a key commonality among them is their relentless focus on undermining countervailing governmental and nongovernmental institutions that are designed to keep them in check.

As international democracy supporters continue to refine their strategies of responding to democratic backsliding, they must better differentiate between facilitating factors and core drivers. Such an approach will point to the need for a stronger focus on the nature of leader-driven antidemocratic projects, identifying ways to create significant disincentives for backsliding leaders, and bolstering crucial countervailing institutions. Moreover, they should deepen their differentiation of strategies to take account of the diverse motivations and methods among the three main patterns of backsliding. Only in this way will they build the needed analytic and practical capacity to meet the formidable challenge that democratic backsliding presents.

Introduction

Democratic backsliding is an overwhelming fact of contemporary global politics. Democracy's retreat across dozens of countries in multiple regions has forced a reckoning with once-favored notions about democracy's inevitable spread, its intuitive appeal, and its inherent value. As the trend line of the global democratic recession has become longer and starker, policymakers and political analysts have debated the phenomenon and sought to come to terms with the harsh new reality of a world where each year brings less rather than more democracy globally.¹

Despite all this attention, the drivers of democratic backsliding remain poorly understood. If one were to ask any reasonably diverse group of policymakers or experts why so many countries have moved backward on democracy recently, one would hear a wide range of answers and little consensus. Some would point the finger at Russia and China, arguing that their support for autocrats and efforts to undermine democratic governments are a decisive factor.² Others would highlight the role of technology, citing the host of ways in which digital developments, from the exponential growth of social media to the rise of enhanced forms of surveillance, may be hurting democracy.³ Still others would underline domestic sources of discontent, emphasizing socioeconomic factors like rising inequality and anemic economic growth.⁴ The rise of populism and intensifying political polarization would also likely receive some blame.⁵

These various factors and issues are all relevant. Yet when tested across the full range of backsliding countries, such dynamics tend to be facilitating conditions more than core drivers. Rather than focusing on overarching structural explanations, a more persuasive account

must focus on the distinct motivations and mechanisms of the leader-driven antidemocratic political projects that lie at the heart of global democratic backsliding. This paper presents such an analysis. It starts by reviewing the landscape of democratic backsliders and then critically examines common explanations of backsliding, highlighting the ways in which they fall short. It then focuses in on leader-driven antidemocratic political projects, identifying and illuminating three major types: grievance-fueled illiberalism, opportunistic authoritarianism, and entrenched-interest revanchism. The paper concludes with some preliminary ideas about how such analytic distinctions can help point democracy practitioners toward improved strategies for countering illiberal actors.

The Landscape of Democratic Backsliding

After the enormous expansion of democracy that started in the 1980s and gained momentum after the end of the Cold War, global levels of democracy have steadily declined since the mid-2000s.⁶ Central to this global democratic recession is democratic backsliding—processes of political change in which countries that enjoy a certain level of democracy become significantly less democratic. The democratic recession also includes two related phenomena: first, the hardening of autocratic rule in countries that have moved from some form of partial or soft authoritarianism to a harder form of authoritarianism (as in Belarus and Cambodia in recent years) and second, democratic tremors, where the rise of illiberal forces in a democracy causes concern about the system's health but does not bring about the systemic changes necessary to seriously erode it (as with the rise of right-wing populist parties in Germany and Sweden). Our focus in this paper is on backsliding, though of course we recognize the importance of autocratic hardening and democratic tremors as additional parts of the overall troubled landscape of global democracy.

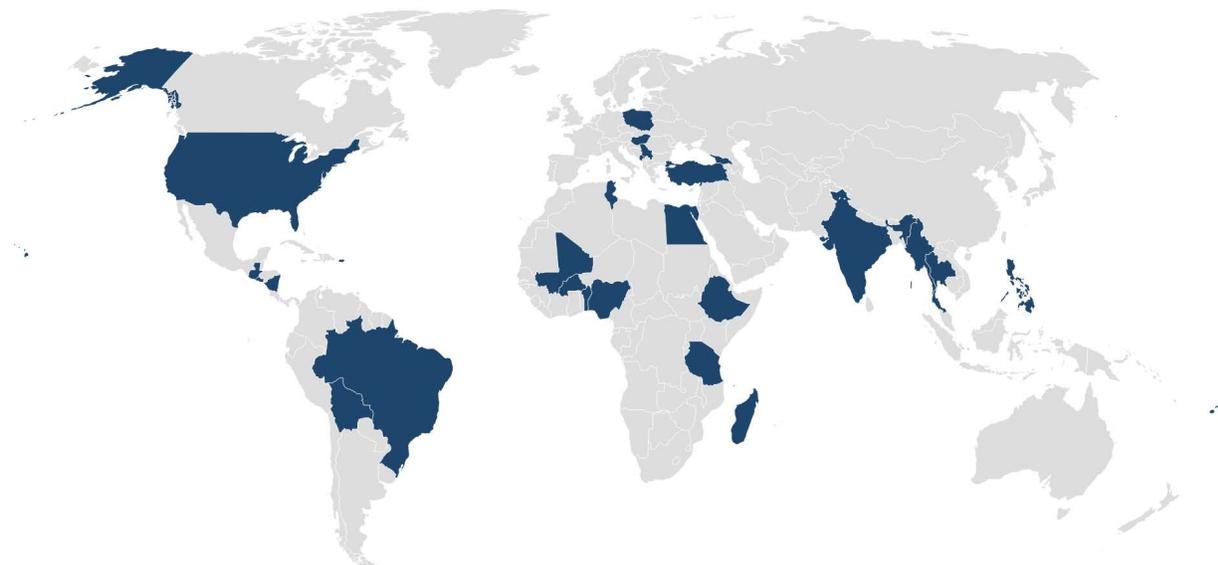
In order to be classified as a democratic backslider, a country needs to meet two conditions: it must have achieved a significant level of democracy and then experienced significant erosion of democratic institutions. Although these two criteria may seem intuitive, both involve inevitably subjective judgment calls about what constitutes a *significant* level of democracy and *significant* erosion.

Regarding the former, we take a relatively inclusive approach, considering a country to have reached a significant level of democracy when at least two major democracy indices described the country as being at least an electoral democracy (or equivalent) at some point since 2005.⁷ This approach does bring in a number of countries where democratic transitions only developed shallow roots, like in Ethiopia and Myanmar, but it corresponds to the generally inclusive way that the international community has perceived the global expansion of democracy.

Our threshold for democratic decline is similarly inclusive and includes countries that underwent a qualitative rating decline or had been highlighted as a backslider by at least two major democracy indices.⁸ We include both countries that have undergone backsliding at the hands of elected governments, as in Brazil and India, and those that have experienced military coups, as in Egypt and Myanmar. We then removed cases that saw a subsequent democratic rebound (that is, an improvement in scores) between their initial decline and the present; a small but significant group of countries, including Ecuador, Moldova, North Macedonia, Slovenia, and Zambia, were able to reverse antidemocratic tides during these years. In so doing, we have sought a middle path. We have not included countries where decline is so far only mild and democracy is still functional; our list therefore excludes countries like Mauritius and Niger. Nor have we chosen a more restrictive view of backsliding, which would require deep institutional degradation and the entrenchment of the incumbent, as that would exclude cases some important backsliding cases like Brazil, Poland, and the United States.

Our approach produces twenty-seven cases of democratic backsliding since the onset of the global democratic recession in 2005, as set out in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Democratic Backsliders Since 2005



- | | | | |
|--------------|------------|-------------|---------------|
| Benin | Ethiopia | Mali | Serbia |
| Bolivia | Fiji | Montenegro | Tanzania |
| Brazil | Georgia | Myanmar | Thailand |
| Burkina Faso | Guatemala | Nicaragua | Tunisia |
| Comoros | Hungary | Nigeria | Turkey |
| El Salvador | India | Philippines | United States |
| Egypt | Madagascar | Poland | |

Looking at this figure, one crucial aspect of the backsliding phenomenon stands out.

Backsliding has almost entirely taken place in the Global South and the former Communist countries, including the former Soviet Union, Central and Eastern Europe, and the former Yugoslavia. The vast majority of these countries liberalized during democracy's "third wave" during the 1980s and 1990s. Despite gloomy narratives about democratic backsliding being a worldwide phenomenon, its impact has not been strongly felt in the democracies of Western, Northern, or Southern Europe; North America; East Asia; or Oceania. Although some countries in these regions have experienced various democratic tremors, usually related to the rise of political figures and parties on the populist right, they have not experienced backsliding. The notable exception to this latter point, of course, is the United States, which is an outlier among wealthy established democracies in terms of the level of its democratic erosion, which has been marked by extreme political polarization, the rejection of an election result by an incumbent president, and an attempted insurrection against the legislative branch.⁹

This sharp divide between where backsliding has and has not been occurring is rarely noted in discussions of democracy's global woes. Instead, the picture presented is usually that of a global democratic malaise affecting democracies everywhere.¹⁰ It is of course true that some political phenomena that are associated with democratic troubles, like heightened citizen alienation from established political parties, appear across every region. Yet actual backsliding has not. In short, the phenomenon of backsliding is much more about a failure of new or emerging democracies to consolidate than it is about deconsolidation in long-standing democracies.

Partial Explanations

The rapid spread of democratic backsliding has fueled much discussion about its drivers. Observers and experts have offered a wide range of explanations. Yet when one seeks to apply them across the full spectrum of backsliders, each falls short.

External Drivers

Some of the most common explanations of democratic backsliding emphasize external factors that are disrupting the international system and sociopolitical life across the globe. The appeal of external explanations is their worldwide reach, which provides a potential explanation of why backsliding has emerged in so many places at once. Yet the search for overarching explanations can lead some to overstate the importance of these factors. In

reality, democratic backsliding is profoundly rooted in local contexts while external factors—including the resurgence of autocratic powers like Russia and China and the spread of disruptive technologies—tend to be contributing dynamics in some countries rather than central forces fueling global democratic backsliding.

It's Russia's and China's fault. Some analysts lay the blame for democracy's global woes on the set of powerful authoritarian states—especially Russia and China—that exert antidemocratic influence across borders.¹¹ In this view, democracy and autocracy are locked in a global contest and democracy is losing in the face of Russia's, China's, and other autocracies' determination to undercut democracy. These efforts range from the application of military and paramilitary force to economic inducements and election meddling.

Unquestionably, Russia's and China's growing power and assertiveness are hurting democracy's global fortunes. They are aggressively working to undermine shared understandings of norms and using or threatening force to undermine democratically elected governments, as in Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The antidemocratic impact of their transnational influence is indisputable whether one views these countries' foreign policies in terms of “autocracy promotion” or as hyper-realist efforts to maximize national strength in which negative consequences to democracy are more a side effect than an intentional result. It is crucial that Western democracies take seriously the need to blunt these efforts as part of their defense of their own democracies and those in other regions.¹²

Yet as a sweeping explanation of global democratic backsliding, the Russia and China factors fall short.¹³ In many of the major cases of backsliding, Russian and/or Chinese influence on national political life is simply not a major factor. In India, for example, the democratic decay of recent years has been driven primarily by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).¹⁴ Despite sharing a border with China and long-standing political friendship with Russia, India's democratic deterioration is a domestic story—Russian or Chinese influence plays almost no role. The same centrality of domestic factors is also found in cases such as Benin, Brazil, El Salvador, Poland, Tunisia, and Turkey.

Some illiberal leaders may cultivate friendships with Russia, China, or other autocratic powers in a bid to shore up economic support and diplomatic ties that help make up for declining support from Western democracies. Yet even when such friendships are very important to such leaders, as Russian friendship is to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, they are not determinants of the core antidemocratic drive of the leaders in question.

In the relatively few cases where Chinese or Russian support is a major factor, external influence usually serves to keep an already authoritarian regime in place rather than to propel democratic backsliding. For example, the support that Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro gets from China, Russia, and Cuba has been critical to his political survival. Black knight support from Russia similarly helped Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko cling to power amid mass protests following a 2020 election marred by allegations of widespread

fraud.¹⁵ And China's close ties to Myanmar's military are a significant factor in helping to sustain a deeply repressive regime.¹⁶ Russian and Chinese transnational political influence so far appears to have contributed more to autocratic hardening than democratic backsliding.

It must be all that new technology. Another overarching external explanation that surfaces in discussions of democracy's global woes is the role of new technologies. Social media is usually viewed as the central culprit in this regard, especially the role such networks can play in amplifying the spread of hate speech and misinformation, contributing to political polarization and fragmentation, reducing citizens' approval of their governments, and weakening traditional "gatekeeper" institutions that once controlled information flows.¹⁷ Also attracting negative attention are the new forms of electronic surveillance, like AI-enabled facial recognition and targeted spyware, that are used by governments in a growing number of countries to help harass or repress political opposition and independent civic actors.¹⁸

Certainly, various technological developments are contributing to democratic problems in many countries and merit sustained, deep analysis and a search for effective responses. But as with the role of Russia and China, their role is more as a facilitating factor than a core driver. There does not appear to be a relationship between the degree to which countries adopt and use new communications technologies and the incidence of democratic backsliding. Many stable democracies, such as those in Northern and Western Europe, are among the heaviest users of social media and other new digital technologies, without experiencing backsliding. Conversely, some backsliders, such as Sudan and Benin, have relatively low rates of internet use and social media penetration.¹⁹

Moreover, the political effects of new technologies are mixed with regard to democracy. At the same time as social media and other digital developments are fueling the proliferation of misinformation and hate speech in many places, they are also allowing civic actors to organize more easily to assert demands for governmental accountability, to expose corruption, and to gain access to information in closed contexts. Similarly, social media may boost some illiberal leaders who benefit from being able to step over traditional media gatekeepers and reach their political followers directly, while at the same time allowing genuinely democratic politicians to communicate with their constituents and develop ties with them.

In short, the temptation of technological determinism for understanding democracy's negative drift may be understandable given the furious pace of digital developments globally in the past twenty years. But only an extremely simplistic technological reductionism would permit a sweeping causal account of the whole range of adverse democratic events and processes making up democratic backsliding.

Internal Drivers

In contrast to these external explanations, other analysts have argued that certain common dynamics are corroding democracy from the inside. These arguments tend to have greater analytical power since they more directly engage with the mechanisms of democratic backsliding and the political strategies undergirding illiberal leadership. Yet three of the most common such explanations—which focus on populism, polarization, and democracy not “delivering”—tend to be applied too generally and with inadequate attention to empirical realities.

It’s all about populism. Countless articles highlighting democracy’s troubled global state zoom in on populism, pointing with alarm to the apparent mushrooming of populist leaders of dubious democratic fidelity and describing populism as the driving antidemocratic virus of our time.²⁰ The United States under former president Donald Trump was of course prominent in such accounts, but the rise to power of President Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Prime Minister Narendra Modi in India, President Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, and President Nayib Bukele in El Salvador are also frequently cited. There is no question that the rise of populist leaders with illiberal outlooks and ambitions is central to democracy’s troubled state in some countries. But there are two major problems in putting populism at the center of any explanatory account of global democratic backsliding.

First, in many places where populist forces or figures have gained ground in recent years, they have not driven democracy significantly backward. Western and Northern Europe have been the heartland of much of the concern over populism’s rise in the past ten years, yet the surge of populists in most of the widely discussed European cases, like Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, has not produced significant democratic deterioration in them. Similarly, many of the populists that have enjoyed time in power in South America in the past two decades, such as former presidents Cristina Kirchner in Argentina, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and Evo Morales in Bolivia, have not crippled democracy.

Second, in many of the cases where democracy *has* regressed significantly in the past fifteen years, populism has very little, if anything, to do with it. For example, while Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega may have employed some populist rhetoric in recent years, he came to power in 2007 by portraying himself as a moderate and has only recently used anti-elite rhetoric as a veneer for his thuggish approach to staying in power. President Patrice Talon’s systematic assault on democracy in Benin has nothing to do with representing “the people” against “the elite”—an elite that he, with a net worth totaling hundreds of millions of dollars, is a prominent member of. And Georgia’s democratic decline is related to a zero-sum competition between elite groups rather than one side adopting illiberal populist strategies.

It's all about polarization. Relatedly, some observers, gripped by the punishing reality of political polarization in the United States and the spread of polarizing rhetoric in many countries, invoke polarization as an explanation of democracy's global woes.²¹ It is true that severe political polarization creates an “us versus them” dynamic that incentivizes sociopolitical actors to undermine democratic institutions for partisan gain and has been on the rise globally in recent years.²² It has also created fertile ground for the emergence of some illiberal figures and incentivized institutional hardball in Brazil, Georgia, and the United States, among other countries.

However, the polarization-as-a-global-driver argument faces two limitations. First, polarization is often an effect of autocratization rather than a cause. Many of the current cases of severe political polarization are places where polarization surged only after a polarizing autocratizer came to office and used divisive language and strategies to entrench themselves and justify undemocratic actions. In Poland, for example, polarization surged after the Law and Justice government took office—not prior—as they pursued a number of illiberal actions that both entrenched their advantage and inflamed sociopolitical divisions. Similarly, severe polarization became a feature of Turkish politics much more as a result of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's illiberal drive than as a causal condition behind it. And secondly, polarization has not been a significant element of some backsliding cases. For example, polarization was not a major factor in Philippine politics before or during Duterte's rule.²³

Democracies are failing to deliver. A related and similarly popular overarching explanation of backsliding focuses on the socioeconomic performance of democracies. In this line of reasoning, democracies are backsliding because they are failing to “deliver,” causing citizens to lose faith in democracy and embrace undemocratic alternatives.²⁴ It is certainly true that poor socioeconomic results and poor governance generally can weaken the legitimacy of any type of political system, democracy included. But there is a significant problem with the “failure to deliver” argument as a broad explanation for democratic backsliding: basic socioeconomic performance is not a good predictor of democratic breakdown.

To be sure, economic crises opened the door for illiberal actors to win power in several democracies, as evidenced by the rises of Bolsonaro, Orbán, and Erdoğan. Yet if one looks at economic growth rates across backsliding countries, a striking reality is that in many cases growth was stable, and in some cases even increasing, in the run-up to backsliding. In India, for example, GDP growth rates between 2000 and 2012 averaged over 6.3 percent per year.²⁵ What's more, urbanization and the rise of a sizable middle class in India have created an electorate more supportive of Hindu nationalism and Modi's party. Similarly, Tanzania showed high GDP growth rates in the years before its backsliding under president John Magufuli.²⁶ Poland also enjoyed a long run of strong growth—the best in Central

Europe—in the years before its democracy began regressing.²⁷ And in the Philippines, where economic growth was particularly robust immediately prior to Duterte’s election, over three-quarters of Filipinos claimed to be satisfied with how democracy was performing.²⁸

A variation of the democracy-not-delivering argument views democracy’s ability to deliver through the lens of economic equality; rising or persistently high inequality may corrode democracy by damaging social cohesion and elevating popular frustration with the system. This is an intuitively appealing idea, yet it is not clear that the inequality argument holds widely throughout the backsliding cases. In Brazil, for example, inequality fell substantially during the decade before Bolsonaro’s election in 2018.²⁹ Inequality declined in Serbia before its backsliding period, as it did in Hungary prior to Fidesz’s surge in 2010.³⁰ Moreover, Hungary, Poland, and Serbia were all in the bottom quarter of global inequality rankings prior to backsliding.³¹ And even where inequality was rising prior to backsliding, it is not clear that it was the key driver of the backsliding process. In the United States, commonplace narratives about inequality fueling the rise of Trumpism run up against the fact that the average Trump voter was wealthier than the average Hillary Clinton voter.³² As many of the analyses of Trump’s victory have highlighted, sociocultural factors seem to have been as significant or more significant in voters’ choices than economic factors.³³

As discussed in the next section, some leaders do use citizen unhappiness as a justification for their antidemocratic actions, but the types of dissatisfaction they take advantage of and how they use it are more complicated than the simple notion of citizens not getting “the goods” and therefore embracing autocrats. And many cases of backsliding do not seem to be related to citizen unhappiness with democracy’s performance at all.

Breaking Down Backsliding

The strengths and weaknesses of the various common explanations of democratic backsliding discussed above highlight two key points: backsliding is best understood through a primary focus on the domestic political actors driving backsliding, and there are significant variations among backsliding cases. While the term “democratic backsliding” can be usefully understood as the dismantling of democratic norms and institutions by purposeful elite actors, it contains within it a wide range of mechanisms and motivations that must be disaggregated in order to be effectively analyzed.³⁴ The variations among such efforts can be synthesized into three main categories: grievance-fueled illiberalism, opportunistic authoritarianism, and entrenched-interest revanchism.

Grievance-Fueled Illiberalism

Some backsliding leaders employ a grievance-centered strategy: they mobilize a widely held sense of frustration to justify dismantling the existing set of democratic norms and institutions, which they blame for having created the conditions that gave rise to the grievance. The grievances they embrace are diverse—ranging well beyond core economic conditions to include racial, religious, and ethnic marginalization and public frustration over corruption, crime, or general governance fecklessness.

A grievance-fueled illiberal drive typically begins with a political figure articulating and politicizing a grievance. In some cases, this grievance is widely and openly shared, especially in cases where corruption or misgovernance has disillusioned many with the existing political system and inspires a search for political alternatives. In Hungary, for example, Orbán and his Fidesz party came to power in 2010 by appealing to the widely held frustration among Hungarians with the previous Socialist government and its perceived mishandling of the economy and its inability to address the devastation of the 2007–2008 global financial crisis. Similarly, in Brazil, Bolsonaro exploited widespread citizen outrage at the Brazilian political class for its pervasive corruption, which had been put on vivid display during the mid-2010s by a series of prominent scandals and investigations.

In other cases, entrepreneurial illiberal political actors articulate grievances that have festered below the political surface for some time. Advancing such grievances may, at first, seem taboo. But as they tap into that grievance, they normalize it and thus reframe what is politically possible. In Turkey, for example, Erdoğan found electoral success in the early 2000s by making appeals to conservative religious values, in a break from long-standing norms of the staunchly secular Turkish Republic. As he appealed to the latent sense among many Turkish citizens that religion had been unduly displaced from public life, he normalized increasingly explicit calls to revisit the principles underlying liberal democracy, including strict separation of religion and public life, respect for religious minority groups, and an equal playing field for opposition. Similarly, in India under the BJP, Modi has articulated a novel vision of Hindu nationalism and directly confronted the country's liberal founding ideas by arguing that a single religious group should hold a special place in sociopolitical life. And in the United States, Trump appealed to racial and social class grievances that had long simmered below the surface of the country's politics, normalizing discriminatory speech and stoking anti-minority sentiments as well as anti-elite anger. In still other cases, political leaders politicize frustrations that had not previously been salient. In the Philippines, for example, Duterte played up the threat of drug use and trafficking, which until his campaign had not registered among voters' major concerns.³⁵

The next phase of the grievance-fueled illiberal drive entails linking the grievance with democratic norms and institutions. In many cases where the grievance is explicitly directed at the governing class—as in Brazil or Hungary—this process is relatively straightforward.

But in others, some political maneuvering and artfulness are required to make this link. In India, for example, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a Hindu nationalist organization, and the BJP, its political wing, spent years arguing that the country's Hindu majority was being unfairly oppressed by the country's long-standing liberal, secular political order and that correcting this wrong would require a wholesale reform of norms and institutions. And in the Philippines, Duterte argued during his campaign that drug use was enabled by political elites who didn't do enough to punish them. He ran on a campaign of rooting out corruption and circumventing democratic norms and institutions that would stop him from solving the problem—namely by killing criminals.

If and when such drives yield an electoral victory, the government then sets about confronting the norms and institutions that have putatively perpetuated the grievance. In Hungary, the Fidesz supermajority elected in 2010 quickly set about adopting a new “political, economic, and social system built on new rules in every area of life.”³⁶ In order to end the endless political infighting and dysfunction, Orbán argued, a new constitution was needed; in keeping with this, a much more Fidesz-friendly governing document was pushed through the parliament in 2011, allowing the government to more easily repress media, bar opposition, gerrymander electoral districts, and politicize the bureaucracy. In Turkey, Erdoğan set about weakening the bastions of Kemalist secularism that had aggressively fought previous efforts to infuse religion into politics—including the state bureaucracy, the military, and the courts—and replace them with individuals more friendly to his political aspirations. When various opposition parties and mass citizen mobilizations, including in Gezi Park, confronted his growing authoritarianism, he portrayed them as tools of foreign forces that needed to be crushed, including through police action against protests, the takeover or closure of unfriendly media, and repression of civil society. And in the Philippines, Duterte systematically went after any individuals or institutions who were undermining his efforts to address drug crime, especially by sanctioning extrajudicial killings but also by arresting opposition senators, stacking the courts, and prosecuting journalists.

These sorts of grievance-fueled backsliding projects—what might be thought of as *illiberalism with a cause*—are often able to generate significant and sustained popular support, though it is important to understand that the leaders rather than the unhappy citizens are the drivers of the antidemocratic slide. Some citizens prove willing to put up with the destruction or debilitation of democratic institutions and processes for the sake of redressing their grievances, but they have rarely voted for antidemocracy per se—it comes along as a later part of the grievance agenda. Erdoğan, Modi, and Orbán are all examples in this regard. Of course, the restrictions on media and other illiberal methods of controlling the political and informational spaces also contribute to the ability of such leaders to maintain popularity. Yet grievance-fueled illiberal drives can sometimes face significant popular opposition once they are launched, as shown by the electoral defeats of Trump and three-time Slovenian prime minister Janez Janša.

Opportunistic Authoritarianism

The second type of illiberal drive comes from politicians who do not campaign on a promise to transform the system or base their leadership projects around a sense of grievance but nevertheless seriously undercut mechanisms of democratic accountability to entrench themselves and their allies.

These opportunistic authoritarians tend to make more politically conventional appeals as opposed to their grievance-bearing counterparts. Rather than leveraging a grievance to openly justify illiberal actions, they usually campaign on more routine policy issues and or even on explicitly prodemocratic platforms. In Benin, for example, Talon was elected president in 2016 on a platform of free-market liberalism, economic growth, and term-limiting presidents. In Georgia, the Georgian Dream party of Bidzina Ivanishvili came to power by pledging that it would increase welfare spending and counter the perceived authoritarianism of the government of then-president Mikheil Saakashvili. And in Tanzania, Magufuli ran on his reputation as “the ethical one” who would root out corruption from the country’s government.

However, once in power, these types of leaders turn against democracy. Some appear to be moved by perceived existential threats. In Nicaragua, for example, Ortega’s loss of popular support after the widespread protests in 2018 directly threatened his family’s vast business interests and wealth—much of which was obtained through apparent corruption.³⁷ In the view of some analysts, this was a key reason for why he violently cracked down on protests and arrested all candidates who might challenge him in the 2021 presidential election.³⁸ For Benin’s Talon, the looming threat of prosecution, expropriation, and exile if he were to lose power—a threat that had been made real to him during his period of exile from 2012 to 2015—would jeopardize his vast wealth, justifying his bid to stay in power and stave off losses of liberty or property. In response to that threat, Talon has aggressively prosecuted opponents, imposed nearly insurmountable barriers for the opposition to be elected to parliament, and packed the courts with friendly judges. Similarly, undemocratic efforts by the Georgian Dream party have been widely attributed to the party’s de facto leader, Ivanishvili, a billionaire who has reason to fear exile, asset forfeiture, and imprisonment (a fate which has recently befallen Saakashvili, the ex-president and opposition leader) should the opposition come to power.

Some opportunistic authoritarians appear to believe their rule is indispensable to the stability or security of the nation, though it is hard to determine whether such views represent genuine beliefs on their parts or just a convenient justification for their determination to hold onto power at all costs for its own sake. In Tanzania, Magufuli modeled his political approach on that of the country’s founding father, Julius Nyerere, and shared Nyerere’s view that the preeminence of the Chama Cha Mapinduzi (Party of the Revolution) is integral to Tanzania’s development and nation-building projects. Following in Nyerere’s footsteps, Magufuli led a sweeping autocratizing effort to insulate the party from a growing electoral threat from the opposition, including by condoning violence against opposition leaders,

repressing civil society, and banning media outlets. Serbia's President Aleksandr Vučić similarly argues that his Serbian Progressive Party is the only one that can achieve the most potent aspirations in Serbian political life—for EU accession and for the prosperity of the Serbian nation—but that political stability is necessary for such goals. To that end, he maintains the dominance of his party by using state resources to promote it, by politicizing judicial processes, and by using clientelist networks to influence media.

While the objectives and methods of opportunistic authoritarians vary, their playbook remains similar. They come to power by a traditional electoral pathway, appealing to the major issues of political life and playing by the rules of the democratic game. But once in power, they view the stakes and risks of democratic politics—and the concomitant risk of being voted out of power—as too high. At that point, they close off pathways of democratic accountability by undermining the courts, politicizing state administration, raising barriers to opposition, and reducing civic space. This opportunistic authoritarianism can be thought of as *illiberalism without a cause*, at least no cause beyond the direct interests of the leader or patronage network in question. Building corruption networks is often central to their political methodology, especially given the lack of any overarching political *raison d'être* to mobilize core followers.

As compared to grievance-fueled illiberalism, opportunistic authoritarianism appears to be more common in countries with very weak institutions and very little tradition of democracy. In such countries, incumbent governments may be able to overcome institutional guardrails, even without a powerful, grievance-backed mandate.

Entrenched-Interest Revanchism

In a final group of backsliding cases, an entrenched interest group displaced by a country's democratic transition uses undemocratic means to reassert its claims.

The most common variant of entrenched-interest revanchism involves the military turning against democratic institutions to restore their primacy in a country's politics. Across waves of liberalization, democratic transitions invariably emphasized the importance of soldiers returning to the barracks—a phenomenon that has displaced militaries from lucrative economic engagements and powerful political positions. Although many militaries may have nominally stepped away from politics, they often retained significant informal power, economic clout, and, importantly, a self-assuredness about the military's patriotism, ties to the nation, and ability to efficiently get things done. If militaries retain such power and come to feel that the nation is under a threat that democratically elected authorities cannot address, they may take undemocratic measures to restore their central role.

These dynamics have played out in a number of countries, many of which had experienced periods of military rule before. In Myanmar, where the military had ruled for decades prior to a partial democratic transition in 2010, the generals violently took power in February

2021 in order to halt the seating of a parliament that could have overruled the military's representatives. In Egypt, the country's short-lived democratic opening of the early 2010s was closed after the military general Abdel Fattah el-Sisi engineered a coup to depose then president Mohamed Morsi, whom he viewed as being unable to govern and hostile to the interests of the Egyptian military. As one in a set of recent military-led reversals of democracy in Africa, in Sudan, the military seized power in 2021 before it was required to transfer authority to a civilian government under a transition agreement it had signed a few years earlier. In some of these places, the democratic transition was only very fragile in the first place, such that the backsliding does not represent the deconsolidation of a settled democratic regime. But they were nonetheless cases where considerable hopes and expectations for democracy, both domestic and international, were dashed.

Countervailing Institutions

A natural complementary element to the focus on elected leaders or revanchist actors driving antidemocratic projects is the issue of weak countervailing institutions. The ability of such projects to steamroll institutions that are supposed to constrain political actors is a critical part of the overall backsliding story. Countervailing institutions include both state and non-state institutions. On the state side, they may include an independent electoral commission, an independent judiciary, a parliament with some power to check the executive, or a democratic constitution. On the nonstate side, they may include media, civil society, universities, or a business sector that has at least some autonomy from the state.

Inherent in democratic backsliding is the undermining or complete crushing of countervailing institutions that might constrain a would-be autocrat. Undemocratic figures take advantage of the many weaknesses that such institutions tend to have in developing democracies, weaknesses that include financial vulnerability, legal vulnerability, normative vulnerability, and the general lack of deep roots and habituation in the country's political life. Backsliding does not necessarily mean the complete elimination of such institutions—some parts of them survive in all but the most extreme cases of backsliding. But it does mean substantial damage to most or all of them.

A difficult question faces democracies that seemed to be on a backsliding path but then rebounded. Were they able to do so because the countervailing institutions were strong enough to stop the illiberal actors? Or were those actors simply not determined or skillful enough to go all the way down the path? In Zambia, the government of president Edgar Lungu, who was in power between 2015 and 2021, appeared to be on an illiberal path, but then it submitted to elections and eventually accepted the result when it lost, bringing to power a more democratically oriented leader. Among established democracies, the United States is another such example; analysts still debate whether Trump did not succeed in fully undoing U.S. democracy because the countervailing institutions were strong enough to stop him or because he lacked the skill to effectively do so.

Very striking is the fact that even when they seem to be relatively strong, some countervailing institutions in developing democracies have been seriously undercut by purposeful illiberal leaders. India is one important example. Despite a tradition of an independent judiciary, Modi has been able to largely subdue India's Supreme Court. Thus, attempting to assess the strengths that countervailing institutions in a particular country may have can be useful as part of an attempt to predict the outcome of the backsliding drive. Yet it is equally if not more essential to incisively assess the specific ambitions, determination, skills, and resources that the illiberal leader or the revanchist political actors have.

Conclusions

The most common explanations of global democratic backsliding tend to focus either on external dynamics—like assertive authoritarian powers and disruptive new technologies—that are at most facilitating factors or on domestic economic and political dynamics—like sluggish growth or rising inequality—that apply very unevenly across the cases. This focus on structural factors has led analysts to downplay the fact that the greatest threats to democracy are coming from the leaders of democracies themselves, several dozen of whom have substantially dismantled or attempted to dismantle their democratic political systems over the past fifteen years.

The motivations and methods of these leader-driven, antidemocratic projects vary widely. But across the landscape of backsliding, three different patterns stand out. Democracy falls in some countries at the hands of grievance-fueled illiberal leaders who mobilize around a widely held citizen grievance and insist that democratic institutions and norms must be violated and dismantled in order to address it properly. In others, opportunistic authoritarians are the agents of democracy's demise. These are leaders elected on conventional political platforms who turn against democracy for no higher reason than their own desire for political survival and protection and the simple fact that they can get away with it. In still other countries, powerful actors who were pushed to the political margins in a democratic transition—usually military officers—strike against democracy when they feel it threatening some of their core prerogatives or when they become convinced that they can do better at ruling the country than struggling civilian actors can. In short, while the overarching concept of democratic backsliding is a useful analytic construct, it comprises several relatively distinct political patterns.

As international democracy supporters continue to refine their strategies of responding to democratic backsliding, they should certainly continue to address facilitating factors like the antidemocratic role of authoritarian powers and the democratically disruptive effects of some new technologies. But they must better differentiate between facilitating factors and central

causes. Doing so will point to the need for a central focus on of leader-driven antidemocratic projects. In particular, democracy supporters should bolster diplomatic and economic disincentives for leaders who start to turn against democracy and prioritize efforts to strengthen critical state and nonstate countervailing institutions as early and effectively as possible.

It is striking that in multiple cases of leader-driven democratic backsliding, Western democracies were slow to realize what was happening and to take steps to oppose it firmly. For example, the U.S. government was still lauding Erdoğan's Turkey as a beacon of democracy in a Muslim-majority country well after the signs of serious democratic deterioration were apparent.³⁹ Only twelve years after Orbán began dismantling Hungarian democracy has the European Union started to take potentially serious measures to oppose his autocratic project. And since Tunisian President Kais Saied carried out a presidential self-coup in July 2021, U.S. policymakers have been slow to come to terms with the full extent of his antidemocratic intentions.⁴⁰

Moreover, international democracy supporters should deepen their differentiation of strategies to take account of the variation of motivations and methods among the three main patterns of backsliding. In contexts of grievance-fueled illiberalism, helping civic and political actors learn from comparative experiences on how to broadcast alternative messages, form effective alliances, and implement effective campaign techniques that work against illiberal causes is of special importance. Given the negative spiral of toxic polarization that often develops in such contexts, paying particular attention to the growing body of research on depolarization will also be of great importance.⁴¹ In contexts where opportunistic authoritarians are pressing for absolute power, other priorities may be more important. The widespread use of corruption as a political consolidation tactic by such leaders may make anticorruption assistance, for example, especially potent. And in entrenched-interest cases, trying to head off threatened military coups or countering them once they have occurred entail still other priorities, like marshaling regional response mechanisms, designing quick-acting and well-targeted sanctions, and making the most of public diplomacy to call out coup leaders.⁴²

As democratic backsliding has become a defining feature of global politics, it is well past time for explanatory accounts to catch up to the diversity of the phenomenon and the complex mix of core drivers and facilitating factors that animate it. It is equally crucial that international democracy supporters sharpen the differentiation and focus of their strategies to counter backsliding and, in so doing, demonstrate an effective capacity to meet the formidable challenge it presents.

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