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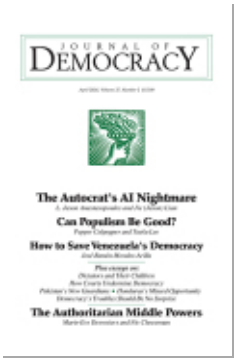

Journal of Democracy, Volume 37, Number 2, April 2026, pp. 49-64 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2026.a986019

WHY ELECTED LEADERS SUBVERT DEMOCRACY

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No longer is the military coup the chief source of democratic instability in the world. In the twenty-first century, it is democratic erosion driven by elected leaders that presents the principal challenge to democracy. In the past quarter-century, presidents and prime ministers in two-dozen countries have risen to office in free and fair elections and then set about undermining their country's public institutions. Such leaders threaten and censor the press, install loyalist judges, fire professional civil servants, weaponize independent agencies into tools of the executive, harass nonprofit organizations, and impose their authority on universities.

Why is this happening? Researchers have offered incisive descriptions of what is known as *democratic erosion* or *democratic backsliding*, and pinpointed factors that encourage it.[1] But they have not fully answered two key questions: Why is the world witnessing an upsurge in democratic erosion at this moment in history? And what factors leave some countries more at risk than others? There are two other crucial questions worth asking: Why do voters tolerate leaders who attack their public institutions? And what can be done to put the brakes on this process?[2]

The roots of democratic backsliding can be traced to economic and political changes that occurred in the late twentieth century. Among today's advanced democracies, these changes that began decades ago created opportunities for new right-wing ethnonationalist parties, which attracted large electorates in many countries. In some countries, these parties entered into governing coalitions and their leaders became presidents or prime ministers. And, once in power, some upended their democracies.

Journal of Democracy Volume 37, Number 2 April 2026

A second ideological type of backsliding leader is the left-populist, whom we have seen gain power in countries of the Global South. The left-populists' targets are the rich rather than the ethnic "other." But like their counterparts in wealthier democracies, left-populist backsliders, too, try to tear down inherited institutions that limit the aggrandizement of executive power.

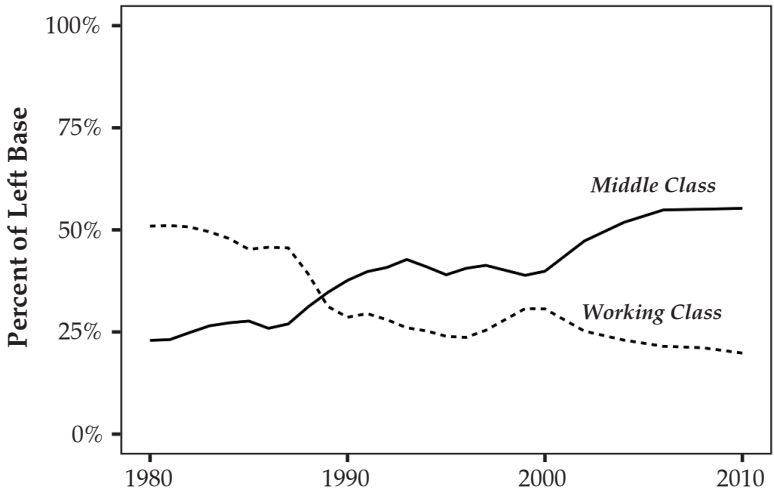
To explain the rise of right-wing ethnonationalists, it is useful to go back to the post-WWII years. In that period, political-party competition revolved around center-left or social-democratic parties on the left and conservative parties on the right—Labour and Tories in the United Kingdom, Democrats and Republicans in the United States, and Social Democrats and Christian Democrats in continental Europe. Parties on the left were closely linked to the industrial working class and labor unions, while those on the right had ties to higher-income voters and business communities.

By the 1980s, the shrinking number of manufacturing workers and the decline of labor movements had encouraged parties on the left to broaden their appeal beyond the working class. They turned their attention to university-educated, socially liberal, urban voters; not incidentally, it was such professionals who would fill parliamentary seats and occupy other party-leadership positions.[3] Although the center-left remained more committed than its conservative competitors to social spending and protections, its pro–working-class image began to blur. In the 1990s, center-left parties converged with conservatives on supporting economic globalization, that is, the reduction of barriers to trade, capital, and peoples across borders. The New Democrats in the United States, New Labour in the United Kingdom, and the Third Way approach of European Social Democrats—all embraced economic globalization.

This shift reconfigured the electoral bases of center-left parties. By 1990, as Figure 1 shows, a larger share of the European left's support came from middle-class voters than from working-class or low-income voters. Conservative parties, meanwhile, retained their historic policy commitments; indeed, in some notable cases, they adopted more aggressively antistate, antiregulatory positions, as captured by Ronald Reagan's famous quote, "the nine most terrifying words in the English language: 'I'm from the government, and I'm here to help.'"[4]

These economic developments and changes in party politics left large numbers of lower-income voters in advanced democracies relatively adrift in their party systems. Thus space opened for political entrepreneurs who would give voice to disappointment with the effects of globalization. New parties would articulate voters' feelings of being left behind in societies where the incomes of the highly educated were soaring while everyone else's stagnated. This was the backdrop for the rise of right-wing ethnonationalist parties and party factions. Their leaders

Figure 1—Percentage of European Left Parties' Support Coming From Working- and Middle-Class Voters, 1980–2010



Source: Jane Gingrich and Silja Häusermann, "The Decline of the Working-Class Vote, the Reconfiguration of the Welfare Support Coalition and Consequences for the Welfare State," *Journal of European Social Policy* 25, no. 1 (2015): 50–75. The data cover 15 countries and draw from the Eurobarometer and European Social Surveys. Retirees and the non-employed are excluded.

Note: The figure reports two-year rolling averages.

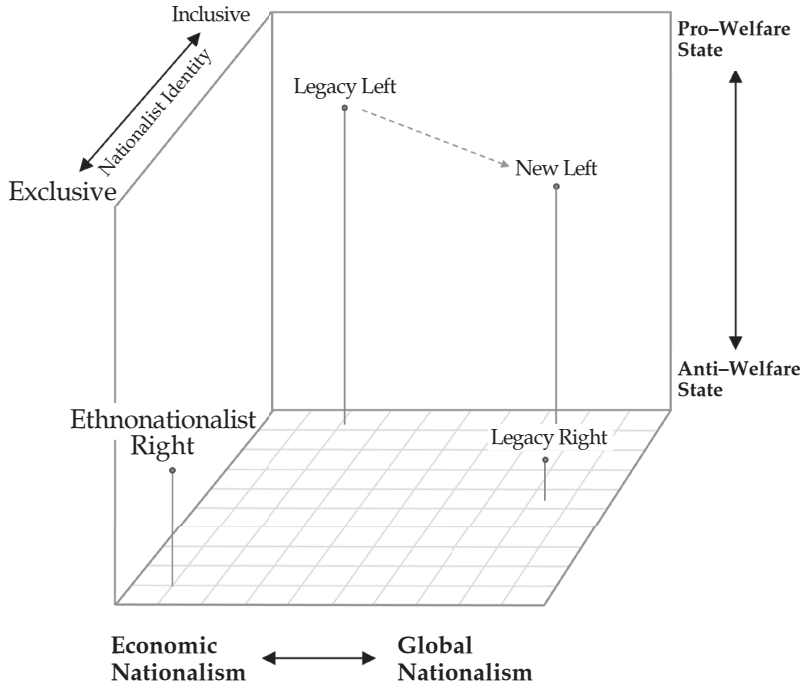
spoke the language of economic grievance and, in many cases, favored more generous social policies than did the legacy right.[5] And in these unequal and globally open economies, the right-wing ethnonationalists staked out a distinctive position on national identity—one that was exclusionary and antipluralist.

Figure 2 illustrates these transitions in three dimensions: parties' positions on the size of the welfare state, on economic openness, and on national identity. Changes in legacy-party positions in the late twentieth century encouraged right-wing ethnonationalists to adopt more pro–social-welfare, economic-nationalist, and exclusionary positions.

Whereas legacy- and new-left parties remained more pluralistic and accepting of different identities, right-wing ethnonationalists identified an "other," which varied from country to country, whom they could vilify and construe as a threat to the nation: The "other" might comprise non-Christians or non-Hindus, Muslims or Jews, people of African descent, Kurds, or LGBTQ+ people; even fellow citizens who were insufficiently devout (as in Turkey) or "communists" (as labeled by leaders in Brazil and the Philippines) or subhuman criminals (as in El Salvador); and, frequently, migrants.

Not all right-wing ethnonationalists win elections. And even when they do, they do not always unravel their democracies. But their incli-

Figure 2—Three Dimensions of Party Positions in Advanced Democracies



nation to break through an established party system and their disdain for "elitist" institutions predispose them to try.[6] Left-populists, for their part, see the rich as well as international capital as the enemy. In office, many left-populist leaders launch policies to reduce inequality and improve the living conditions of the poor. But they also pursue the backsliders' playbook, rewriting their constitutions in ways that aggrandize executive power, harassing the press, undermining judicial independence, and weakening elections as mechanisms of accountability.

Not all left-wing leaders in Latin America have been populist institution-breakers. In Chile and Brazil, a series of socialist and social-democratic presidents crafted policies to improve the lives and prospects of the poor while leaving institutions intact. But left-populists in Bolivia and Ecuador made constitutional changes that expanded executive powers and weakened courts and legislatures. In Mexico, President Manuel López Obrador (2018–24) increased the minimum wage and enhanced pensions while undermining the independent judiciary and leaving the national election body vulnerable to party influence. Leftist leaders in Venezuela and Nicaragua oversaw the destruction of democracy's basic pillars, including the right of oppositions to

organize and compete in fair elections. Both countries are now fully authoritarian.

Economic Inequality and Backsliding

Notwithstanding the ideological heterogeneity of backsliding leaders, the countries in which they rise to power have one feature in common: They tend to be highly economically unequal. Cross-national statistical analyses that I conducted with Eli Rau reveal inequality to be the most powerful and robust structural feature that increases the risk of democratic erosion.[7] Inequality explains variations in the level of risk more strongly and more robustly than does income per capita, state capacity, or the age of a democracy. A country's level of development—as measured by its income per capita—plays a small, and less consistently measured, part in backsliding. State capacity and the duration of uninterrupted democratic rule play no statistically discernible role.

That big gaps between rich and poor place democracies at higher risk of erosion helps to explain the uptick in democratic backsliding that began in the early twenty-first century. The roots of democratic erosion, as we have seen, go back decades. But globalization in the late twentieth century heightened the tensions that would fuel backsliding in the twenty-first. As Dani Rodrik explains, globalization predictably increased disparities and social tensions.[8] In wealthy countries, it accelerated the outflows of manufacturing jobs and inflows of immigrant labor, thereby deepening an "identity cleavage" and "right-wing populism" (what I am calling right-wing ethnonationalism), the targets of which are foreigners and minorities. In developing countries, globalization produced inflows of foreign-produced goods and investment, which deepened, in Rodrik's words, an "income cleavage" and encouraged left-populism and the targeting of wealthy individuals and large corporations.

Globalization's dislocations have been more easily absorbed in countries where the gaps between the haves and have-nots are relatively small. Where societal conflicts are muted, so is the trend toward democratic backsliding. Indeed, relatively equal countries, such as the Nordic democracies, are at low risk.[9] Sweden exemplifies these dynamics. It saw the rise in the 2010s of a right-wing ethnonationalist party, the Sweden Democrats, whose brand is opposition to immigration. But despite the party's electoral success and influence on policy, Sweden's democracy shows no sign of eroding. In Sweden, no politician questions the integrity of elections or tries to control the press or curb judicial independence.[10]

Statistical models of democratic breakdown, developed in the period when the main threat to democracy was the military coup, failed

to predict democratic decline in the United States, which has been underway for a decade and a half.[11] According to the old models, democracies as wealthy and as venerable as the American one were basically invulnerable.[12] But if we study the causes not of coups but of democratic backsliding, the probability of erosion in the United States in the early twenty-first century rises appreciably.[13] Coups and democratic backsliding have distinct dynamics and are carried out by different actors. Therefore, there are sound theoretical reasons to treat them as distinct outcomes and to treat them, empirically, as distinct dependent variables.

To study the factors associated with democratic erosion, we need a method that distinguishes it from more conventional muscle-flexing by chief executives. Political scientist Melis Laebens has pioneered a useful method which draws on democratic theories that emphasize accountability as central to democracy[14]—both *horizontal accountability*, which means that presidents and prime ministers are constrained by courts, legislatures, agencies, and watchdogs; and *vertical accountability*, which means leaders are constrained by the electorate (and by the press, which informs the electorate about the actions of the government). When both horizontal and vertical accountability are deemed by country experts to have declined to a significant degree over a short period, Laebens codes them as having eroded.

Rau and I followed Laebens's lead in coding democratically elected presidents and prime ministers according to whether and when they went on to erode their democracies. We then matched years of democratic erosion with annual measures of income and wealth inequality, such as the Gini index, as well as other factors, including income per capita and the age of the democracy. As noted above, income inequality emerged as a robust and significant factor in democratic erosion.

My book *The Backsliders* (2025) explores the connections between income inequality and democratic erosion. Several of these connections are relatively direct. In unequal societies, substantial segments of the population tend to feel aggrieved, having been left behind as their societies grew wealthier. Even if unaware of precisely where they rank among their peers, low-income individuals often suffer in highly unequal systems. When key markets, such as housing, cater to the affluent, the cost of living becomes less affordable for those in lower-income strata. Thus inequality and the sense of grievance it begets induce the poor to embrace illiberal parties. These parties encourage the idea that elite institutions, noncitizens, and others who are culturally different from them are causing the less well-off to fall behind.

The democracy-threatening effects of high income inequality also bear on the rich. Seymour Martin Lipset conjectured more than sixty years ago that the wealthy in income-polarized societies are prone to

view the poorest as subhuman, in part to psychologically justify their fortunes in the face of others' scarcity.[15]

Would-be autocrats benefit when politics is polarized, which incentivizes such leaders to amplify polarization. A polarized electorate is more tolerant of presidents and prime ministers who attack institutions, even if the public favors democracy.

Inequality can also undercut people's confidence in social and political institutions. A 2022 study documented a fifty-year decline in confidence among Americans in institutions ranging from Congress, the president, and (more recently) the Supreme Court, to banks and Wall Street, to public schools, higher education, the press, and religious institutions.[16] This erosion of trust in the United States across multiple institutions, the authors observed, corresponds with "fifty years of mounting inequality."[17]

Beyond grievance and distrust, class-divided societies are prone to partisan polarization,[18] in part because who holds power matters more when group interests are so divergent. Would-be autocrats benefit when politics is polarized, which incentivizes such leaders to amplify polarization. A polarized electorate is more tolerant of presidents and prime ministers who attack institutions, even if the public favors democracy.[19] *I may not love it when he attacks the press or the courts,* a person might reason, *but God forbid that the other side come to power*.

In *Democracy Erodes from the Top* (2023), Larry Bartels shows that democratic erosion in European countries did not occur because public opinion turned against democracy; rather, antidemocratic mindsets were the product of elite political discourse.[20] Similarly, I have studied levels of polarization across all democracies from the late 1990s to 2020, as measured in expert surveys. Here again, the findings suggest that political leaders are driving increased partisanship, especially leaders who have undermined their democracies. In 1995, the average level of affective polarization was not statistically different in democracies that would later experience erosion and those that would not. By 2020, the backsliding countries displayed significantly higher levels of partisan polarization.[21] Inequality, then, creates opportunities for ambitious executives eager to expand their powers—opportunities to exploit voters' feelings of being left behind economically and their loss of confidence in institutions, often framing people's struggles as the fault of migrants or minorities who allegedly "steal" jobs and monopolize welfare benefits.

Researchers agree that partisan polarization feeds democratic backsliding.[22] As noted earlier, because backsliders flourish in polarized settings, they try to deepen polarization, directing hate-filled accusations

at their political competitors. Brazil's former president, Jair Bolsonaro (2019–23), for example, frequently referred to his Workers' Party opponents as "communists" and once lamented that

> Elections won't change anything in this country. Unfortunately, it will only change on the day that we break out in civil war here and do the job that the military regime didn't do: killing 30,000. If some innocent people die, that's fine. In every war, innocent people die. I will even be happy if I die as long as 30,000 others go with me.[23]

Polarization and Democratic Trash-Talk

Yet the polarization strategy is not risk-free. While supporters of a president who calls the main opposition party and its voters "monsters" may take those words to heart and become even more disdainful of the other side, how will the rest of the country feel, especially those labeled monsters? One can imagine that they, too, might be mobilized by the president's words—mobilized, that is, to oppose him. Whereas they may otherwise have abstained from voting, now these opposition supporters have strong motivation to head to the polls and vote against the president and his party. Even some opposition-leaning independents might be mobilized against the backsliding leader.

To sidestep the risk of a backlash against polarizing words and actions, would-be autocrats have another tool in their kit. They can attempt to persuade voters that their country's institutions are hollow, corrupt, and ineffective, so that little is lost if the leader undermines them. I call this strategy *trash-talking democracy*, by which I mean not the disparaging of democracy as a system of government but the disparaging of particular institutions that the backslider has in his sights. Recall that polarizing speech in effect says: *Don't worry about my attacks on institutions, the real threat is the other side winning*. Trash-talk, in contrast, says: *Don't worry about my attacks on institutions—they are corrupt and ineffective and not worth defending*; or even, *We're better off if we tear these institutions down and rebuild them*—a rebuilding that will leave them more under the control of the executive.

Advances in the quantitative analysis of texts has facilitated the study of politicians' discourse, allowing us to identify both kinds of speech patterns in large bodies of text and, crucially, to discern the mood of such statements—distinguishing, for instance, disparaging from laudatory statements a president has made about the press or the election bodies. A 2025 study deployed these techniques and found that, during his presidency, Manuel López Obrador spent more time trash-talking institutions than he did criticizing opposition parties.[24] In *The Backsliders*, I extend this analysis to Hugo Chávez, the democracy-destroying president of Venezuela (1999 to 2013). Unlike the dour López Obrador, Chávez was a happy warrior; but when his discourse turned dark, insti-

tutions were the targets more often than opposition leaders or parties.

When leaders disparage their country's institutions, do their words influence citizens' views? I found evidence from Latin America, Turkey, and the United States that trash talk indeed degrades public confidence in institutions, and that it has this effect, as I predicted, without sparking a backlash among opposition voters.

It is worth emphasizing that democratic trash talk is not "mere" rhetoric. As an example, López Obrador spent hours every weekday of his presidency in press conferences, a mammoth oratorical effort that prepared the Mexican public for his assaults on the country's institutions. When the Mexican Supreme Court blocked the president's efforts to politicize the National Electoral Institute (INE), which oversees the county's elections, he turned his rhetorical salvos against the Court, repeatedly charging that decisions were made by "unelected judges."

Ultimately, López Obrador and current president Claudia Sheinbaum changed the way the entire federal judiciary is selected: As of 2025, all federal judges are popularly elected, including the nine justices who sit on Mexico's Supreme Court. The first judicial elections, held in June that year, featured huge lists of candidates vying for 881 federal judgeships and, in some states, local judges as well; the flood of unknown contenders probably contributed to the extremely low turnout (13 percent). The ruling party distributed "cheat sheets" indicating their affiliated candidates, who ended up winning the vast majority of judgeships. The experience has led to widespread concern over judicial subservience to the executive branch.

Why Do People Believe Backsliding Leaders?

Backsliders' trash talk usually contains some elements of truth. But the goal of these leaders to polarize the populace and destroy confidence in institutions also drives them to spin tales of pure fantasy, conspiracy theories that many of their followers believe. Thus in 2018, Narendra Modi warned Indian voters that a Congress Party government would divert most social spending to Muslims.[25] In 2020 in the United States, a presidential advisor alleged, "our votes are counted in Germany and in Spain by a company owned by affiliates of Chávez and Maduro."[26] And in 2024, Nicolás Maduro claimed that elections which the opposition candidate had won by a landslide had in fact favored him.

People believe politicians' wild claims for a variety of reasons, often psychological or emotional. Many politicians are deft lay psychoanalysts with an intuitive sense for how to trigger negative feelings. According to cognitive appraisal theory, framing a bad state of affairs as the result of purposeful human action meant to harm specific individuals or people like them will rouse feelings of anger and moral outrage.[27] These are "approach emotions"—emotions that make people want to

go out into the world, be around others, and act—and they are useful to politicians. Finally, skillful politicians establish emotional bonds with their supporters. People may admire, even love, their leaders, and may therefore be prone to believe whatever they say.

None of this means that people are stuck in a world of propaganda and conspiracies with no way out. Critical thinking and education can inoculate people against extravagantly misleading claims.

What Can Be Done?

The first quarter of the twenty-first century has drawn to a close, and the drama of democratic backsliding is still unfolding. We should therefore be circumspect about the lessons we can draw from these experiences so far—whether about how to slow erosion while backsliding leaders are in power, how these leaders might be replaced in office by prodemocracy forces, or how to reverse the effects of democratic erosion once backsliding leaders are out of office.

As we consider options, we should keep in mind the ambiguous nature of backsliding democracies—though part autocracy, they are still part democracy as well. To the extent that some institutions which normally check executive power remain at least partially effective, prodemocracy forces can make use of them to impede backsliders. In national legislatures, prodemocratic minority parties can slow, if not entirely stop, governments' efforts to weaken or destroy institutions. Minority-party leaders in state and local governments can act within their jurisdictions to block autocratic directives. Courts can still decide against the government, reasserting the rule of law and protecting other institutions from executive encroachment. Even in systems where judicial independence has been severely curtailed, the courts can still decide against the executive and help to shield prodemocracy politicians and activists against executive attacks. And civil society can mount protests, inform the public, and take legal actions against the executive while media outlets continue to report on governmental misbehavior.

Backsliding democracies still hold elections, and some backsliding leaders have, despite their incumbent advantages, been voted out of office (Zambia in 2021, Brazil in 2022, and Poland in 2023). Others have bowed out in deference to term limits (Ecuador in 2017 and Mexico in 2024). And some were removed by their own parties (South Africa in 2018). More rarely, backsliding presidents have been ousted via popular revolt (Ukraine in 2014). Therefore, the voting public—either directly at reelection or indirectly through party pressure—plays a crucial role.

Would-be autocrats aspire to appear unstoppable, but in fact they have some predictable vulnerabilities. Their project is one of breaking the institutional structures around them and shaking up "politics as usual." Such leaders therefore tend to surround themselves with people who are

more loyal than competent. Describing Bolsonaro, for example, a team of Brazilian political scientists wrote that "he hand-picked individuals who had never held political positions or been elected to office, without any experience in public administration or policy matters," producing "a government of right-wing extremist amateurs."[28] Inexperienced loyalists are unlikely to try to dissuade a president from bad decisions. But prodemocracy individuals and groups—elites, civil society, and everyday citizens—can do more than wait for a backsliding leader to misfire.

Elite political strategists. This group includes leaders of prodemocracy political parties, their campaign strategists and communications experts, and associated policy experts. Whether in the Global South or in wealthy countries, income inequality increases the chances of a democracy fraying. Prodemocracy parties and policymakers need to reconnect with low-income and working-class voters and embrace pro-poor and pro-worker policy positions that speak to their needs and aspirations—affordability of healthcare, education, housing, and a host of other needs that slip out of reach for people excluded under contemporary economic models. In addition, political parties that wish to recapture left-behind voters must also change who they are and what they look like. They should send not just lawyers, doctors, and business leaders to parliament, but also union members, restaurant servers, and teachers.

Where backsliding has been led by left-populists, prodemocracy forces must convince voters that stronger social protections and fair opportunities can be secured in democratic systems. There need not be a trade-off between democracy and social justice and an inclusive economy. In fact, democracies generally experience faster economic growth and produce populations that are healthier, more educated, and—nearly by definition—better protected by basic rights including those of speech, assembly, and protection from arbitrary searches, detentions, and extrajudicial harm by the state.[29]

Beyond programmatic and strategic actions, how can prodemocracy political elites fight or slow backsliding? One option is to use available institutional avenues. In Colombia in the early 2000s, for example, opposition legislators used parliamentary procedures to impede the passage of antidemocratic reforms introduced by President Álvaro Uribe's government, successfully slowing the president's backsliding agenda even if the measures themselves eventually passed. The opposition's braking action gave time for the courts and civil society organizations to react.[30] Opposition-controlled subnational governments can put a brake on national backsliding, as occurred, for instance, under the Bolsonaro administration in Brazil and under both administrations of President Donald Trump in the United States.

Once prodemocracy forces are in power themselves, they face a tactical dilemma: whether, and to what extent, they should mimic the norm-

and rule-breaking behavior of the backsliders who preceded them. For example, if would-be autocrats changed the composition of high courts, should prodemocracy leaders do the same when they have a chance? Even when, strictly speaking, no rule-breaking is involved, should prodemocracy actors move aggressively to claw back lost powers in order to hold backsliders to account?

On the "no" side of this debate is the argument that norm-abiding behavior will never again take hold if each side takes advantage of its periods in office to escalate the conflict and further debase institutions. Furthermore, if backsliders flourish when the people view institutions as corrupt and inevitably partisan, aggressive tactics can simply reinforce these beliefs.

On the "yes" side, it may be that without aggressive tactics, democracy will be lost. Courts may come irreversibly under the thumb of the executive or the executive's party; elections undermined so that they fail for the foreseeable future to be institutions by which voters' opinions are accurately translated into results. In this view, prodemocracy actors should not forgo institutional "hardball" or unilaterally "disarm," but instead must fight fire with fire.[31]

There is no single right or wrong answer to this dilemma. Either approach entails trade-offs that must be carefully weighed. There is little to be gained by eschewing hardball if democracy will be lost. But if democracy itself is not at risk, employing hardball tactics could backfire, justifying the backslider's argument that "elite" institutions and outmoded rules are simply there to help one side dominate the other.

Civil society. This group includes nongovernmental organizations, professional associations, private businesses, media outlets, and universities, among others. Despite their status as nonpolitical entities, civil society groups—because they can interfere with would-be autocrats' objectives—are very much in the sights of such leaders. Independent media, for example, report on official corruption, law breaking, and incompetence; civil society organizations likewise monitor government behavior and also mobilize demonstrators; and university-based scholars teach students to think critically and produce research and analysis that sometimes counter government narratives.

Thus backsliding governments will often take harsh steps to muzzle groups deemed to pose a threat: stripping media organizations of resources—from newsprint to broadcasting licenses to access to government officials on whose actions they need to report—and even targeting journalists with violence; declaring civil society organizations illegal and shutting them down; and putting government insiders in control of university leadership, reducing university budgets, and restricting or denying scholars' access to research funds. And yet, despite this catalog of punishments, civil society still puts up resistance.

Democratic erosion never goes unchallenged; it always unleashes outrage in civil society. Journalists urge the owners of their outlets to resist censorship. Professors and students press university administrations to defend academic freedom. Civil society organizes and educates citizens to stand up for democracy. And attorneys censure colleagues in government who violate professional ethics in service of antidemocratic agendas.

Resisting an aggrandizing executive's antidemocratic interference can be costly; given the government's leverage and resources for retaliation, the stakes are high. Media organizations may lose resources—from newsprint to broadcasting licenses to access to the government officials on whose actions they must report. Journalists are sometimes the targets of violence. Civil society organizations may be declared illegal and shut down by the government; university leadership may be taken over by government insiders and see their budgets and access to research monies reduced. But even though the stakes are high, segments of civil society resist. Journalists report accurately, lawyers refuse to engage in lawfare on the government's behalf, and activists find ways to continue to organize. This pressure from citizens can sometimes lead backsliders to slow or reverse course.

When democracy comes under assault, the rule of law is always a casualty. Thus attorneys, judges, and bar associations are often drawn into the battle—sometimes as government foot soldiers, but more often playing crucial roles in slowing and even stopping the erosion of their democracies. Even in heavily eroded democracies, courts can slow the predations of aggrandizing executives. Take Turkey, now considered either an electoral autocracy or full autocracy. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party greatly diminished the independence of the judicial branch. The president had help from the courts in imprisoning opposition political leaders and civil society activists. After a group of academics signed a letter calling for a peaceful resolution to the Kurdish conflict, Erdoğan initiated a campaign to bring universities under his control. Turkish courts, however, denied him the right to name university presidents and fire professors, providing at least some relief to academics.[32]

Finally, professional associations, such as press clubs and bar associations, have sometimes disciplined members who violated their ethical obligations and professional standards in the service of enabling executive power-grabs. Such measures can be effective in creating incentives for professionals to avoid actions that undermine their democracies, though in highly polarized settings, the bar associations themselves can come under attack by the government. This happened in Turkey in 2025, for instance, when the AKP government ordered the removal of the entire board of the Istanbul bar association in a dispute over the deaths of two journalists.[33]

Voters and protesters. Under what conditions does the popularity of a backsliding government and its leader decline? Citizens may turn against backsliders when they appear too corrupt or self-serving and when the costs of losing the rule of law and the freedoms of expression and assembly appear too high. When this happens, voters start casting ballots for the opposition and joining demonstrations, whether massive or modest, to register their disapproval of the would-be autocrat, thereby encouraging political elites to act boldly in defense of democracy.

Even if the value of democratic rights and institutions is abstract to many voters, they may still turn against backsliding leaders for standard reasons, such as a poor economy with stagnant wages and high inflation. This kind of political behavior, known as retrospective economic voting, can sink backsliders and committed democrats alike. But again, there are predictable weaknesses in the decisionmaking processes of autocratic leaders that induce them to make mistakes that depress public support.

In 2022, when Brazilian voters rejected Bolsonaro, he launched a series of sometimes violent efforts to stay in power. Yet the system survived. Brazil's military establishment did not go along with Bolsonaro's plan to overturn his defeat, and the seventy-year-old disgraced former president was subsequently convicted of orchestrating a coup attempt. He is now serving a 27-year prison sentence. Such outcomes signal a resurgence of democracy.

Democratic backsliding is not unstoppable. Elites, civil society, and everyday citizens all have some means to push back. Opposition legislators, the media, professors, lawyers, and judges, voters and protesters—all can slow or block the drift toward autocracy. Finding the right strategy and the courage to stand up, even as the space for exercising democratic rights closes, can be challenging. But exercise them we must—because, like muscles, with disuse these rights will waste away.

NOTES

1. Nancy Bermeo, "On Democratic Backsliding," *Journal of Democracy* 27 (January 2016): 5–19; Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown Books, 2018); Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufman, *Backsliding: Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

2. My recent book offers answers to these questions. See, *The Backsliders: Why Leaders Undermine Their Own Democracies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2025).

3. Nicholas Carnes and Noam Lupu, "The White Working Class and the 2016 Election," *Perspectives on Politics* 19, no. 1 (2021): 55–72.

4. Ronald Reagan, "Presidential News Conference," Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum (1986).

5. Russell J. Dalton and Carl C. Berning, "Ideological Polarization and Far-Right Par-

ties in Europe," in *Rechtspopulismus in Deutschland*, ed. Heinz Ulrich Brinkmann and Karl-Heinz Reuband (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2022), 13–35.

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