

# Challenges to Democracy

## Session 7: Democratic Backsliding

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## Plan for today's session

1. feedback on your podcast project
2. role play on how democracies could die
3. input and discussion on "How Democracies Die" (Bermeo 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018)
4. feedback on the seminar

## Feedback on the Podcast

### Strengths

- clear structure
- intriguing research question(s) connecting to previous conceptual questions
- good motivation with empirical backing
- both empirical input and original audio interviews with broad array of perspectives
- excellent technical realization
- good team work

## Feedback on the Podcast

### What could be improved:

- theoretical embedding on both the function of freedom of expression for democracies and its trade-offs
- coherence of the podcast; better connection between first and second part (second part opens up a lot of new questions)
- more critical evaluation of studies you cite
- interviews work well in the podcast but questions are partly a bit suggestive

Smaller points via Learnweb.

## Last session

Last week,

- we learned more about existing theories of democratization
- we discussed the paper by Baturo and Tolstrup (2024)
- but: we did not discuss the second reading by Hager and Krakowski (2022)

## Role play

How to subvert a democracy? Let's do a small role play.

There are five roles:

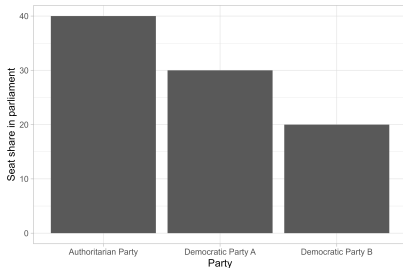
- the people
- democratic parties
- the authoritarian newcomer
- institutional checks and balances
- international actors

## Role play



The people are dissatisfied and raise their concerns.<sup>1</sup>

## Role play



The (shocking) results just came in; the authoritarian party won the election. The democratic parties try to find some common ground for a coalition. How does the new authoritarian party react?



## Role play

One of the democratic parties bowed down and forms a coalition as junior partner with the authoritarian newcomer. What does the newcomer do?

## Role play

The court reacts to the new autocrat. What does it do? How does the newcomer react?

## Role play

Finally, the international partners are unhappy. What's their core message? How does the autocrat react?

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<sup>1</sup>GPT-4o prompt: Could you create an infographic visualizing an economic crisis?

## Towards clarity...

Backsliding is a multifaceted process whose outcomes range from erosion of democratic quality to full-scale destruction of democratic institutions.

In this sense, “[d]emocratic backsliding is the weakening or disassembling of a given set of democratic institutions” (Bermeo 2016, p. 16)

## Different types of backsliding

Bermeo (2016) identifies six different versions of backsliding.

1. **Coups d'état**: illegal attempts by non-legitimate actors to take over executive control
2. **executive coups**: (democratically) elected head of government abolishes democratic constitution
3. **election fraud**: wanna-be autocrats manipulate electoral results on the day of elections
4. **promissory coups**: often justified with emergencies or (ironically) the state of democracy, executives promise to give back power to people but fail to do so

## Different types of backsliding

- 5. executive aggrandizement:** at the expense of checks and balances, executive gradually dissolves checks and balances and weakens other partial regimes of democracy; follows legal frameworks; democracy beaten by its own safeguards
- 6. strategic election manipulation:** weakening of opposition, suppressing media freedom, so that elections lose their fair appeal

## On the way to power

Question by **Luisa**:

*When does democratic backsliding start?*

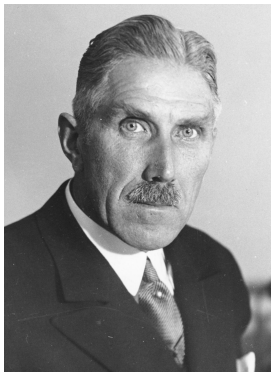
## On the way to power

- authoritarian leaders convince the people and important part of the elite to give them power
- sometimes, this occurs “with the intention of deepening rather than destroying democracy” (Bermeo 2016, p. 16)

Question by **Ann-Sophie**: *How is it even possible to strengthen democracy by weakening it in the first place?*



## On the way to power



## On the way to power

Why do (democratic) elites ally with authoritarians?

- they may not have strong democratic norms
- there's a gridlock (no clear majorities)
- times of crises (e.g. economic crises)

## Challenging democracy

How authoritarians subvert democracy can be exemplified by a soccer game (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, pp. 72–96), in which authoritarians...

1. ...manipulate referees
2. ...tackle key players
3. ...rewrite the rules of the game

## Challenging democracy

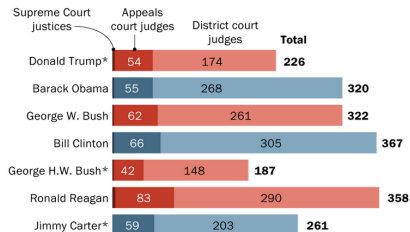
For step 1, **manipulating referees**:

- authoritarians usually try to tackle courts or other independent agencies (like the police)
- e.g., by filling them with loyalists

## Challenging democracy

### Trump appointed nearly as many federal appeals court judges as Obama – in half the time

*Federal judges appointed by each president*



\*Served one term.

Note: Excludes judges confirmed to certain specialized or territorial courts. Judges confirmed to multiple positions, such as those first appointed to a district court and later elevated to an appeals court, are counted separately for each position, but only once in each president's total.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of Federal Judicial Center data.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure: Number of judges nominated by US presidents (graph by [Pew Research](#))

## Challenging democracy

For step 2, **tackling key players**:

- autocrats try to weaken opponents (like the opposition, critical media or business people)
- weakening their potential to organize
- bribing them
- arresting them by opening legal cases against them

## Challenging democracy

For step 3, **rewriting the rules of the game**:

- critical step to ensure enduring power
- rewriting rules of the game (e.g. constitution, electoral system)

# Challenging democracy

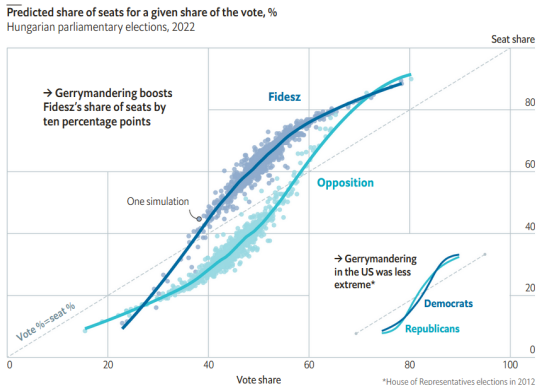


Figure: How Fidesz reformed the electoral system to cater it to their needs ([The Economist](#))



## Challenging democracy

According to Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), which rules give particularly good opportunities for backsliding?

## Challenging democracy

“Constitutional rules are always subject to competing interpretations” (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, p. 99)

- **formal** institutions are often written down in primary or secondary legislation
- **informal** norms are rather conventions (accepted and enforced by society)
- informal norms can prevent exploiting of constitutional powers (e.g. norms of mutual toleration, forbearance and reciprocity)
- among them are the following
  1. presidential decrees
  2. presidential pardon

## Challenging democracy

3. court packing
4. filibuster
5. Senate's advice and consent (e.g. for nominations of cabinet and judges)
6. impeachment

## What to do against it?

Identifying authoritarians in the first place...

- some are overtly anti-democratic
- those who are not could reveal themselves as threats to democracy if they...
  1. reject democratic norms
  2. do not consider their opponents as legitimate
  3. accept undemocratic behaviour
  4. support anti-democratic policies

## What to do against it?

**Political parties** take a crucial role as ‘gatekeepers’ preventing autocrats from gaining prominence.

Question by **Ann-Sophie**: *If political parties are “the gatekeepers of democracy”, as Levitsky and Ziblatt write, why do they often fail to stop authoritarians? What’s the issue here?*

## What to do against it?

- the more selection procedures are closed, the less democratic they are
- the more parties open them, the less control they have over the nomination of upright characters

## What to do against it?

Other strategies to protect democracy include...

- advertising for revival of informal norms
- forming broad coalitions among democrats
- formalizing informal norms

## Why is gradual backsliding so dangerous?

Question by **Max**: *Isn't it somewhat paradoxical that the old mechanisms of democratic backsliding could strike democracies quickly and suddenly, while the newer forms are incremental and prolonged—yet the latter are ultimately much harder for democracies to defend against?*



## Why is gradual backsliding so dangerous?

“There are no tanks in the streets. Constitutions and other nominally democratic institutions remain in place. People still vote. Elected autocrats maintain a veneer of democracy while eviscerating in substance.” (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, p. 5)

## Why is gradual backsliding so dangerous?

Bermeo (2016) identifies several potential reasons why the current form of backsliding might be that dangerous and difficult to stop.

- more difficult to detect; gap in research on reverse trends in transition research
- tougher to challenge by supporters of democracy
- relatedly, mobilization against it is challenging as often supported by majorities (or at least a large number of the population); the same applies to international sanctions

*Could there be something uplifting in it?*

## Why is gradual backsliding so dangerous?

For proponents of the new forms in backsliding, there's always the risk that democracy has a revival.

## Conclusion

What we have learned from today...

- How different processes can lead to the same outcome: democratic backsliding
- What's specific about current forms of backsliding, and what makes it so compelling for autocrats

## To prepare for next week...

- in the next week, we'll move to the demand-side
- (how) does affective polarization erode democratic norms
- **readings:**
  - Graham, M. H., & Svobik, M. W. (2020). Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States. *American Political Science Review*, 114(2), 392–409. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055420000052>
  - Broockman, D. E., Kalla, J. L., & Westwood, S. J. (2023). Does Affective Polarization Undermine Democratic Norms or Accountability? Maybe Not. *American Journal of Political Science*, 67(3), 808–828. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12719>

## To prepare for next week...

- Optional: Cohen, M. J., Smith, A. E., Moseley, M. W., & Layton, M. L. (2023). Winners' Consent? Citizen Commitment to Democracy When Illiberal Candidates Win Elections. *American Journal of Political Science*, 67(2), 261–276.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12690>
- Optional: Badrinathan, S., Chauchard, S., & Siddiqui, N. (2024). Misinformation and Support for Vigilantism: An Experiment in India and Pakistan. *American Political Science Review*, 1–19.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055424000790>

Any further questions?

## Literature

- Badrinathan, S., Chauchard, S., & Siddiqui, N. (2024). Misinformation and Support for Vigilantism: An Experiment in India and Pakistan. *American Political Science Review*, 1–19.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055424000790>
- Baturo, A., & Tolstrup, J. (2024). Strategic Communication in Dictatorships: Performance, Patriotism, and Intimidation. *The Journal of Politics*, 86(2), 582–596.  
<https://doi.org/10.1086/726945>
- Bermeo, N. (2016). On Democratic Backsliding. *Journal of Democracy*, 27(1), 5–19.  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0012>



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<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055420000052>
- Hager, A., & Krakowski, K. (2022). Does State Repression Spark Protests? Evidence from Secret Police Surveillance in Communist Poland. *American Political Science Review*, 116(2), 564–579.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421000770>
- Levitsky, S., & Ziblatt, D. (2018). *How Democracies Die* (1st ed.). Crown.