THE RETURN OF HISTORY: A NEW WAVE OF DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING

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Tommie Y. Thompson, A.B.

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Tommie Y. Thompson, A.B.

Thesis Advisor: Andreas Kern, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Contemporary events suggest that stable democracies are "backsliding" into authoritarianism. This doesn't mean they will become authoritarian states, but that their democratic institutions are weakening. However, due to the novelty of the problem, the scholarly literature has yet to rigorously investigate the trend. This paper seeks to establish a research agenda for within-regime democratic backsliding. We examine the existing literature on democratic breakdown, consolidation, and transition in order to identify plausible explanations for the phenomenon, and we quantitatively test these theories to highlight promising directions for future research. We utilize data from the Quality of Government, Global Terrorism Database, AidData, and SIPRI to assess the applicability of the (1) redistribution, (2) demographic, (3) state legitimacy, and (4) international influence models of democratic breakdown. Our results show that an aging population, a weak middle class, terrorism attacks, and high state-level financial liabilities best explain backsliding.

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Introduction

To many observers, the past decade has put unexpected stress on global democracy. Worrying trends include the rise of authoritarian or semi-authoritarian populist parties, the consolidation of strongmen executives like Narendra Modi and Victor Orban, and the rejection of liberal global institutions. These forces are indiscriminate to development level and regime age, and even Western stable democracies - places we thought were "safe" - are showing signs of decay.

The problem is still controversial; while few would reject that something new is happening, not everyone believes we should worry. The optimists argue that, if anything, this is a temporary hiccup in the long-run trend of democratization and democratic consolidation. Others believe the apparent global nature of the "crisis" is illusory, and that either we are falling to confirmation bias or it is coincidental (Pinker & Muggah, 2018). In other words, there is no common structural change that threatens liberalism, and therefore intervention is unnecessary.

It is difficult to assess whether the optimists or the pessimists are correct, due to the problem's novelty; resolution likely requires the insights of hindsight. However, even fleeting concerns deserve attention, so that we are better prepared to address them in the future. As it stands, divisions in the recognition of the problem has stagnated academic interest, such that we know little about what is happening and how to alleviate it. Opinions and speculations are numerous, both from scholars and the public, but rigorous empirical evidence is rare.

The goal of this paper is to establish the research agenda. We refrain from testing any specific theory or summarizing qualitative cases. Rather, we paint broad strokes by reviewing what we know about democracy, what we still don't know, and where we should look for answers. This project holds the normative assumption that democratic backsliding is happening and that it warrants a response.

We proceed by (1) summarizing the historical and sociological development of democracy research, (2) reviewing the theoretical and empirical findings of the extant literature,

(3) identifying plausible predictors for democratic backsliding from said literature, and (4) testing these predictors.

The Problems of Democracy

In his 1989 *National Interest* article, Francis Fukuyama called Western liberal democracy the "end of history." With Communism at its dying breath and consumerism penetrating the Global South, he wrote:

> What we may be witnessing in not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government (Fukuyama, 1989, 4).

Fukuyama's optimism emerges from the historical moment. Even before the Soviet Union officially fell, democracy was in the midst of its greatest run; the 1974 "Carnation Revolution" in Portugal signaled what Samuel Huntington called the "third wave" of democratization, with 60% of the world attaining some kind of functioning democracy by 1995 - a rise from just 39 countries to over 117 (Diamond, 1996; Huntington, 1991). Huntington's work, along with those of prior scholars like Seymour Lipset, led many to conclude that democracy would follow the inevitable expansion of the global economy (Lipset, 1960). These positive developments shifted the way democracy was approached in the scholarship; while early researchers from the mid-century concentrated on the prerequisites for democratic transition, the new optimism moved attention towards consolidation. The current normative agenda focuses on ensuring new democratic gains are sustained, lest we experience a wave of democratic regression.

However, all the attention given to strengthening newly transitioned states has led to the neglect of established Western liberal democracies and a spattering of propitious non-Western

states like Turkey, Indonesia, and India. These oversights follow from three theoretical assumptions. First, the consensus has been that once a country transitions to and achieves a minimum, albeit nebulous, threshold of democracy, then reverting into authoritarianism becomes extremely difficult. Presumably, institutionalized liberalism and comprehensive constitutional checks maintain the democratic equilibrium and protect against endogenous threats, while a robust civil society reinforces itself (Przeworski, 2006). As Fukuyama notes, liberal democracy is not just a product of circumstances, but a universal truth; if democratic institutions allow the public to express their desires, then they are expected to always choose liberalism. Mechanistically, the expected distributional effects of democracy minimizes pressure for regime change from the bottom, and the existence of numerous veto points inhibit authoritarian appropriation from above.

Second, if democracies were at risk, then the threat is assumed to be an exogenous shock that can upend the liberal regime. These forces have typically come as military coups, revolutions, international aggressions, state failures, and top-down political seizures. However, the threat needn't necessarily arrive as an overt force. In many instances, aggressive leaders ascended via existing electoral mechanisms before seizing the state with unjustified, but strictly legal, emergency powers. Historical examples include the fall of the Weimar Republic after the passage of the Enabling Act of 1933, which effectively granted Adolf Hitler unilateral political powers, and Ferdinand Marcos' abuse of martial law in the Philippines. Following this framework, much of the recent literature on democratic consolidation and regression focuses on binary regime transitions between democracy and authoritarianism.

Third, democracy is assumed to be *internationally robust*. By this, we mean that liberal democracies operating in an economically globalized order emit a cultural and ideological contagion on autocracies, but remain resistant to reverse illiberal influences. This has led some policymakers to conclude that globalization is an effective democratization strategy. Similarly, the predominant international system leans liberal, with most international agents like the United Nations and World Bank promoting democracy. However, the empirical re-

sults are mixed. Though it is theoretically intuitive that democratic regimes are better managers of globalized open economies, which creates an incentive to democratize, there remains high-profile states like China and Singapore that embrace globalization *sans* democracy (Eichengreen & Leblang, 2008). Regardless, even if globalization is not as optimistic as we think, at the very least it does not spread authoritarian ideas.

These assumptions prescribe the institutionalization of the liberal "trinity" - free elections, constitutional checks, and an independent judiciary - and trust that, if properly institutionalized, these benchmarks can sufficiently protect democracy without further intervention. This doesn't mean that all democracies are perfect. Rather, as Fukuyama states, the ideological war has ended; the remaining issues in less-than-perfect transitions are technical details, not democratic failures. The threats are terrorism, civil war, and neopatrimonialism, not democracy itself. The new call is to perfect democracy, not justify it.

Enter the 21st century. Countries once held as bastions of liberalism are experiencing an erosion of democratic norms and institutions (Azpuzu, Malone, & Pereze, 2017; Mechkova, Lührmann, & Lindberg, 2017; Sedelmeier, 2016; Diamond, 2008, 2015). The problem differs from that of the past: we are not talking about chaotic new democracies "de-consolidating" to authoritarianism, but the erosion of democracy in states that have maintained stable electoral politics. Salient examples include Hungary, Poland, Indonesia, Russia, Turkey, and to some observers, the United States. With these trends, faith in the consolidation consensus faces skepticism as more political scientists and scholars turn to examine illiberalism in stable democracies (Illing, 2017). Our understanding of the phenomenon remains relatively weak, and the few studies that do examine it rely on questionable case studies, problematic datasets, or theoretical frameworks without empirical evidence (Lust & Waldner, 2015).

New Threats in Late-Stage Democracy

To this researcher, the failure to anticipate and explain the emerging trend comes from a misunderstanding of how democracies can fail. The comparative literature points to complete

democratic reversals as unambiguous failures. However, democracy is now a mainstay of the contemporary world, instead of merely an historical anomaly and curious experiment; as Doh Chull Shin put it, "democracy is no longer treated as a particularly rare and delicate plant that cannot be transplanted in alien soil; it is treated as a product that can be manufactured wherever there is democratic craftsmanship and the proper zeitgeist" (Shin, 1994, 141). In other words, we have a greater understanding of the nuances of democratic institutions, both in what they are capable of and how they can be circumvented. We propose that there may be new characteristics found in "late-stage democracies" that were not present before. First, authoritarians have a better grasp of how to navigate electoral politics to advance their personal goals and pursuit of power. Aziz Huq and Tom Ginsburg find that "hybrid regimes" and "pseudo-democracies" have become more common than autocracies since the 1980s (Huq & Ginsburg, 2017). A salient example is Russia; once on a democratic track, the country's institutions are now only democratic in name. The Russian political elites have learned how to cover authoritarianism with electoral institutions and constitutional checks. Likewise, the recent Turkish constitutional amendment turned the country into a presidential system. While there is nothing inherently illiberal about presidential constitutions, Erdogan's move has been widely seen as an attempt to consolidate his power within a democratic framework.

Second, we may be witnessing a self-fulfilling prophecy, in which the outcomes of late-stage democracies undermine liberal institutions. In a recent paper, Rodrik argues that populism comes from globalization, and by extension, a liberal democratic order. Specifically, right-wing populism follows immigration shocks and left-wing populism reacts to trade and financial shocks (Rodrik, 2017). While this doesn't specifically address democratic backsliding, Rodrik does liberally tie globalization and it corresponding populism to authoritarianism. Popular writings, though likely alarmist, reflect similar sentiments. Edward Luce, in his book *The Retreat of Western Liberalism*, points to rising inequality and the fall of the middle class as the source of anti-democratic populism (Luce, 2017). Atilla Agh traces Hungary's democratic backsliding to similar sources (Ágh, 2013).

Third, the assumed liberal global order may not be as strong as we thought. In the old Fukuyaman framework, the remaining threats to liberalism come from a place more akin to "nostalgia" than ideological conflict. As such, the populist sources of contemporary illiberalism, with its inconsistent and reactionary logic, does not meet the criteria laid for the return of history. This decidedly makes authoritarianism less internationally threatening; unlike the Cold War, there is no aggressive ideological impetus for authoritarianism, and democracy's agenda is sustained by numerous state and international actors. But where does ideology come from if not "nostalgia," idealism, conflict, and grievances? Even if democratic backsliding is rooted in unorganized sentiments, if these sentiments persist, ideology manifests. We see nascent forms of this in the intellectualization of the American alt-right, the unification of European nationalists around illiberal political parties, and the ascendancy of Russia, China, and Iran into a loose network of global autocrats with an apparent collective agenda that leaders like Viktor Orban have used to justify their anti-democratic policies. "The real question for the future, however, is the degree to which Soviet elites have assimilated the consciousness of the universal homogenous state that is post Hitler Europe," says Fukuyama (Fukuyama, 1989, 17). It increasingly doesn't appear that this has taken place, not just for Russia, but for the Global South and many of post-Hitler Europe's constituents as well.

It is in this context of democratic change and theoretical uncertainty that this paper hopes to contribute. We are concerned with "democratic backsliding," which we define as the corrosion and nuanced weakening of the various "building blocks" of democracy, as opposed to a complete and unambiguous regime regression from democracy to authoritarianism - a process that has been called "democratic regression," "democratic de-consolidation," and "democratic breakdown." Though less obvious, we believe that democratic backsliding is a more substantial threat for consolidated democracies, in which authoritarian forces must contend with a pre-existing democratic tradition in subtle ways.

Rather than testing an explicit theory, we pursue an exploratory analysis. This subfield is

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new, with little theoretical or empirical answers, and there is disagreement on whether this is a serious political phenomenon or a temporary historical wave. Our goal is to identify some threats to and promoters of consolidated democracy by investigating the institutional and macroeconomic differences between countries that face democratic backsliding and countries that exhibit resiliency. Understanding these forces will help us address key theoretical issues and resolve policy questions on how to alleviate anti-democratic pressures. Hopefully these insights will aid future researchers in fleshing out a more comprehensive theory of democratic backsliding, especially in advanced consolidated democracies.

Literature Review

We now proceed to identify some explanatory candidates for democratic backsliding from the extant literature on democratic consolidation, reversion, and transition. The literature is divided into four "schools:" redistribution, social values, state legitimacy, and international influence. Many of these theories overlap with different schools, but we believe our divisions create a useful and more-or-less accurate analytical framework.

Redistribution

In the standard political economy literature, political systems are determined by a change in the calculus for power and the economic incentives to maintain the status quo. The classical works of modernist and Marxian theorists in the 60s and 70s emphasized the relationship between material wealth, social values, and political change, in which a rising industrialized bourgeoisie bolsters participatory preferences. However, while development is strongly correlated with democracy, a plausible and robust causal mechanism remains elusive (Geddes, 2013). As such, contemporary scholars are more skeptical of the causal impact development plays in democratization. For instance, Przeworski and Limongi empirically demonstrate that development doesn't cause democracy, but democracies survive longer in developed states (Przeworski & Limongi, 1997).

A more popular set of explanations for democratization and consolidation are the so-called "redistribution theories" of democracy (Ansell & Samuels, 2015). According to Acemoglu and Robinson, democratization is primarily the result of elite-citizenry conflict. They argue that inequality inhibits democracy by raising the incentives of elites to oppose it. This contrasts with more equal societies, in which political elites have greater confidence that the median voter's preferences will align with theirs (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2001). Rising inequality also increases the risk of revolution, and elites are more likely to make redistributive concessions under existential threat. The implication is that the relationship between democratization and inequality is U-shaped; in equal autocracies, there is no threat of revolution so the cost of repression is low, and in highly unequal autocracies, the elites maintain enough power to suppress redistribution. It is in moderately unequal authoritarian states that democratization is most likely, since shared public grievances surmount the collective action problem and the elites don't have enough power to repress uprisings. The citizenry also builds democratic consolidation into their demands, as they are aware that their political power is fleeting; *de jure* democracy is necessary, since elites will just roll it back if there are no supporting institutions.

Charles Boix theorizes a supply-side explanation of democratization, where lower inequality moves the cost of redistribution below the cost of repression. As such, elites face less redistribution, making them less incentivized to repress democracy. This mechanism is further bolstered when there are low capital controls; the citizenry will fear capital flight during democratization, so they will set a low redistributive tax rate (Pengl, 2013). Unlike Acemoglu and Robinson, Boix's theory neglects collective action problems, in which the public is less likely to band together for democracy when inequality is low.

Redistribution theories also predict that rich and equal states are the most democratically robust, since the larger economic "pie" mitigates elite loss-aversion and the higher equality relieves populist pressure for redistribution. On the other side of the spectrum, democracies that are poor and unequal faces populist demand for redistribution, which prompts elites to

appropriate democratic mechanisms so that the state does not conform to the public (Ansell & Samuels, 2015). Causal observations confirm this, as poor equal states like Costa Rica have strong democracies.

Redistribution arguments are mainly theoretical, while the few empirical studies conducted have found mixed results and suffer from small sample sizes (Pengl, 2013; Houle, 2009). To my knowledge, the only large-N empirical study testing the relationship between redistributive pressure and democratic survival is from Christian Houle. Using a binary outcome that differentiates between authoritarianism and democracy, he finds that greater inequality predicts a higher probability of democratic failure back into *full* authoritarianism but doesn't impact democratization (Houle, 2009). These theories suggest that democratic backsliding may be a response to growing global inequality, especially in developed Western states.

Social Values and Demographic Shifts

Another strand of democratic research looks at micro-level social dynamics. Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris divide this approach into two groups: economic and cultural (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). The former contends that inequality breeds resentment in an underclass facing declining opportunities. Their insecurity ultimately drives them to populism. The latter treats right-wing "authoritarian populism" as a manifestation of cultural backlash. According to Inglehart's "silent revolution" theory, liberal democracy and "left-libertarianism" is principally explained by existential security. Following World War II, global prosperity created an intergenerational values shift. The new cohort possessed a sense of security, which ultimately shifted their values towards post-materialist concerns, like environmentalism, cultural tolerance, and democracy (Inglehart, 2016). As such, contemporary populism is a feature of cultural backlash from older cohorts who feel uneasy with changing and unfamiliar values. Inglehart and Norris find the cultural argument more convincing, as their research does not yield the economic framework's predictions. They

show that older and less educated groups tend to support populists, and contrary to the economic theory, unskilled manual laborers, whose jobs are under the greatest threat from structural changes in the economy, are not strong supporters of populist parties (Inglehart, 2016).

Inglehart and Norris however, do not construct a generalizable theory of authoritarian populism. Rather, like most of the existing backsliding literature, their results are constrained locally to a specific region and period. Put another way, while their findings might be a compelling explanation for 21st century Europe, it doesn't provide an overarching theory. For instance, there is evidence that economic hardship rather than socio-cultural groupings was a much stronger predictor of voter support for the Nazis in the Weimar Republic, which is arguably the most applicable case to modern trends (King, Rosen, Tanner, & Wagner, 2008). Indeed, it appears that on the micro-social level, there are many equally relevant causal mechanisms for democratic backsliding, but if everything and nothing explains a phenomenon, and if these explanations are highly dependent on historical context, then we end up explaining exceptions rather than politics. Hadenius and Teorell directly compare Inglehart's cultural hypothesis with the economic theory of Przeworski using a more substantial time-series dataset with a continuous democracy outcome, and they conclude that the cultural theory has no merit (Hadenius & Teorell, 2005).

We can also consider extreme political polarization as a form of anti-democratic social values. If there are wide social cleavages, different factions may be less willing to democratically engage with their opponents. This is because they see their opponent as too disingenuous to cooperate with or perceive their views are so heinous that circumventing democratic processes to stop them is justified (Mickey, Levitisky, & Way, 2017). Milan Svolik offers a compelling theory, in which supported incumbents in a polarized political environment are more likely to circumvent democratic checks (Svolik, 2017). This is because polarization reduces the willingness of voters to punish their preferred candidates, so the cost of corruption is lower.

Fear and State Legitimacy

Similar to the social values arguments, we can treat democratic backsliding as a citizenry response to more substantial fears. The public expects the government to fulfill certain services and functions as part of the social contract, and if the state fails its mandate, the public withdraws support. This process forms the basis of electoral legitimacy, in which voters support and oppose administrations based on their ability to meet preferences. Democratic institutions exist to make this process more efficient, since they provide a forum and mechanism for the citizenry to express their political will and the political establishment to address grievances. However, we can also consider more extreme and sustained violations of the social contract, in which the public loses faith in the establishment altogether. As Fareed Zakaria writes, "Every wave of democracy has been followed by setbacks in which the system was seen as inadequate and new alternatives were sought by ambitious leaders and restless masses" (Zakaria, 1997, 42). While he was referring to newly transitioned states and weak democracies, contemporary events suggest that consolidated states are not immune to a crisis of faith. Using the World Values Survey, Roberto Foa and Yascha Mounk find that global support for democracy has significantly fallen since the early 20th century in the West. For instance, 72% of those born before World War II think it is "essential" to live in a democracy (a score of 10 on a 1-10 Likert-type scale), compared to 30% of Millennials, and the proportion of Americans who support military rule has risen from 6% to 17% over the past few decades (Foa & Mounk, 2017).

Once again, we can look to the experiences of interwar Germany as a model. The rise of the Nazis is widely attributed to the harsh reparations demanded by the Allies after World War I. These repayments crippled the state and created hyperinflation, consequentially breeding discontent in the German people. The Nazis took advantage of these sentiments to generate a support base and seize power. A similar story played out in Venezuela under Maduro, and in Hungary, where the state failed to manifest the promised post-Europeanization middle class and "Hungarian Dream" (Ágh, 2013). Public fears are found

in all aspects of political and economic life, but there are three salient narratives that tend to dominate the discussion: globalization, recessions, and terrorism.

Standard economic models treat globalization as welfare-enhancing, but the gains are often unequally distributed in the short-run. There is a growing awareness that these distributional inequities have political consequences, since it motivates "losers" to fight the establishment. Dani Rodrik has famously outlined the trilemma of international economics: the nation-state, globalization, and democracy cannot co-exist (Rodrik, 2000). Only two features can cooperate. If we choose the nation-state and globalization, then the state must supersede international needs over democratically-chosen domestic preferences. The opposite must occur if we choose the nation-state and democracy, in which we impede globalization in the interest of domestic constituents. In theory, the remaining combination is democracy and globalization, but recent independence movements suggest that the world is not ready for political cosmopolitanism. It appears that the 21st century may have opted for globalization and the nation-state, at the expense of democracy. This interpretation overshadowed Western elections over the past few years, where globalization-induced de-industrialization and immigration featured heavily in far-right and anti-democratic political rhetoric. Empirically, while there is a lot of research examining how globalization promotes or is facilitated by democracy, there isn't much on how and if globalization damages democracy.

Economic and financial recessions also feature prominently in the democratic reversion and backsliding discourse, especially in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis and European Debt Crisis. The logic, as Inglehart and Norris note, is that economic grievances force affected groups to grow discontent with the existing administration and seek scapegoats to explain their misfortunes. This can drive them to populism and encourages political polarization. The mechanism has empirical backing. Riccardo Pelizzo and Salvatore Babonese show that economic crises preceded polarization in the French Fourth Republic, the Italian First Republic, and the Weimar Republic (Pelizzo & Babones, 2007). Funke et al. find that "crises are associated with shrinking government majorities, a strengthening of oppo-

sition and greater political fractionalization" (Funke, Schularick, & Trebesch, 2016, 228). The beneficiaries of these consequences tend to be far-right movements. Gasiorowski more directly looks at how economic crises relate to regime change, and he finds that crises predict democratic breakdown but not democratic transition (Gasiorowski, 1995).

Third, terrorism presents a salient security threat, and these threats can prompt the citizenry to opt for security over freedom. In France for instance, the government had considered revoking the citizenship of dual-citizen terrorists. In contemporary times, these fears often encroach on religious freedoms and cultural identities. Salient examples include the burqa laws in France and the implementation of the Patriot Act in America. The relationship between terrorism and democracy can be conceptualized in three ways. First, the citizenry becomes more receptive to executive power reaches if they believe it will fill a *deficiency* in the state's capacity to protect the public. Second, the citizenry may lose faith in the state altogether, and turn to alternative regimes. Third, a greater national experience with terrorism provides authoritarians with a rhetoric veil to conceal power abuses, in which they brand political opponents as violent actors. Unfortunately, researchers have paid relatively less attention to how terrorism impacts democratic strength and the state, and more attention to how democracies respond to terrorist attacks and whether terrorists prefer attacking democracies (Magen, 2018). From the few empirical investigations that have been performed, the evidence points to an anti-democratic effect. In Israel, terrorism events are related to a short-lived decline in political tolerance among right-wing Israelis (Peffley, Hutchison, & Shamir, 2015). Interestingly, terrorism is positively correlated with political tolerance among left-wing Israelis.

International Influence

While the prevailing assumption is that the liberal global order has "won," there is some recognition that a parallel illiberal order that seeks to rebuke democracy is forming. On the state level, many authoritarian states, such as Russia and Zimbabwe, are evicting West-

ern NGOs (Carothers, 2006). According to Christopher Walker, these states seek to (1) undermine the rules-based institutions of global liberalism, (2) prevent young states from consolidating their democracies, and (3) launch a moral criticism of Western political ideals (Walker, 2015). For instance, China's growing network of Asian regional institutions, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, is seen by Western policymakers as an attempt to challenge liberal Western-led institutions like the World Bank and Asian Development Bank. Thomas Ambrosio even goes as far as to argue that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization actively promotes authoritarianism in Central Asia (Ambrosio, 2008). And let's not forget the ongoing controversies surrounding Russia's intervention in American and European elections.

While it is unlikely that international pressure is the prevailing predictor for democratic backsliding, these authoritarian forces likely contribute. Their diplomatic and cultural tactics, which rely on shaping and transferring ideology, align with the expected process of democratic backsliding. That is, a slow weakening of democratic institutions and norms rather than a coup.

Methodology

Outcome: Liberal Democracy

We turn our attention to address some of the reviewed models. Our principle outcome variable is "liberal democracy," which is distinct from but related to "pure" democracy. The former holistically implies liberal rights and enabling institutions, as opposed to a restricted definition centered around the mere existence of electoral mechanisms. Restricted definitions are problematic, because they cast as democracies states that fail to, as Robert Dahl put it, preserve "the continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals" (Dahl, 1973). To consider such simplistic metrics as sufficient democratic thresholds diminishes the normative weight of democracy that underlies much

of its scholarship. Rather, liberal democracy is abstract, intuitive, and multidimensional - something we know if we see it but difficult to write down - and the researcher's burden is to operationalize what are essentially incommunicable characteristics. For instance, Singapore has "competitive elections," but most of us would not consider it a democracy. However, because of the ambiguity, most of the literature, including the research reviewed in this paper, falls back on dichotomous measures (Lust & Waldner, 2015; Przeworski, 1999). We believe the dominant approach misses informative variation in democratic quality and has led to the erroneous conclusion that advanced democracies are politically stable just because they have not experienced a regime change. It is important to isolate the factors that determine intra-regime democratic backsliding if we seek to preserve not just mechanistic democracy, but democracy rooted in liberal values and civil rights.

We define liberal democracy using Ellen Lust and David Waldner's multidimensional model, which includes electoral competition, civil liberties, and accountability (Lust & Waldner, 2015):

$$\text{democracy} = \text{civil liberties} + \text{electoral competition} + \text{checks and balances} \qquad (1)$$

According to Lust and Waldner, these three components capture the core normative qualities that political theorists have embedded into their theories. Moreover, properly specifying democracy along these lines helps us distinguish between democratic backsliding and the policy changes of normal political deliberation. That is, while states may enact policies with "antidemocratic overtones," these changes do not necessarily reflect systemic threats to established democratic institutions. Lust and Waldner's approach allows us to isolate the non-stochastic factors of backsliding, since "accidental" backsliding is less likely to occur in an expansively-defined democratic measure relative to a narrowly-defined mechanism. Moreover, a holistic definition is more likely to capture populist rejections of liberalism, whereas the economic literature assumes the public always prefers democracy. After all, just

because the Nazis were elected doesn't mean their rise was any less autocratic.

While this definition captures what democracy is really "about," there is a trade-off in objectivity. We recognize that many things may look like "backsliding," but will end up benign. Huq and Ginsburg use the New Deal as an example of backsliding - or in their words "constitutional retrogression" - that eventually proved democratically-valid. However, like them, we think the trade-off in capturing a more important element of modern democratic change justifies the theoretical uncertainty (Huq & Ginsburg, 2017). Surely it means something if there are significant relationships between a predictor and "benign" developments. Can they really be said to be benign if they consistently and statistically manifest from relationships that we deem conceptually anti-democratic?

To construct the outcome, we use the *Freedom House-Polity* index (QoG variable name: fh_ipolity2) found in the Quality of Government dataset (QoG). The index is an imputed average of the *Freedom House* and *Polity IV* indicators. It tracked 209 countries from 1972-2017, and codes each on a 0-10 scale, where 10 represents a high level of democracy. The *Polity IV* index measures democracy with a linear combination of (1) political participation, (2) executive openness, (3) executive competition, and (4) institutional constraints on the executive. *Freedom House* uses a combination of (1) civil liberties (fh_cl) and (2) political rights (fh_pr). For missing *Polity IV* cases, values are imputed based on a regression of the *Polity* indicator on average *Freedom House* values.

We believe the *Freedom House-Polity* indicator minimizes some conceptual problems that arise from only using either measures. First, it partially reduces measurement error. Second, it achieves a more nuanced estimate of democracy than either of the measures could alone. The *Polity* index follows a relatively objective coding scheme, while *Freedom House* relies on surveys from expert analysts; the former is more internally consistent, but unlike *Freedom House*, it is unable to capture softer characteristics and unambiguous-but-intuitive aspects of political regimes.

To capture "backsliding" specifically, we transform the *Freedom House-Polity* measure

Table 1: Regional Distribution of Democratic Backsliding

The Region of the Country	Democratic backsliding					
	No		Yes		Total	
	Freq	Col %	Freq	Col %	Freq	Col %
Eastern Europe and Central Asia (n=744)	670	12.3%	74	12.5%	744	12.3%
Latin America (n=1,085)	967	17.7%	118	20.0%	1085	18.0%
North Africa and Middle East (n=666)	587	10.8%	79	13.4%	666	11.0%
Sub-Saharan Africa (n=1,567)	1366	25.0%	201	34.1%	1567	25.9%
Western Europe and North America (n=848)	835	15.3%	13	2.2%	848	14.0%
Asia (n=1,134)	1029	18.9%	105	17.8%	1134	18.8%
Total (n=6,044)	5454	100.0%	590	100.0%	6044	100.0%

Source: QoG

into a binary variable that indicates whether a state experienced a decline in score relative to the previous year. For instance, if Country X had a score of 3 in 1990 and a score of 1 it 1991, it is coded as "1" to indicate backsliding has occurred. A value of "0" indicates that a state's democratic strength remains unchanged or improved compared to the previous year. This coding choice makes two assumptions. First, we lead the outcome by one year under the assumption that it takes time for backsliding to visibly manifest. Second, we assume that the measure is sensitive enough to capture substantial changes in democratic quality, but not so sensitive that it will over-represent borderline-but-benign cases.

We also use disaggregated variables to capture the constitutive parts of democracy, since democratic backsliding as a whole may be too heterogeneous to be predicted by any one variable. If so, this doesn't mean backsliding is purely random - which is intuitively implausible - but that it can arrive in numerous ways and from complex relationships. Given the limited country-level data points that history has generated, high heterogeneity will not be captured in a standard regression analysis. If this is the case, we hypothesize that the relationships may still appear in the individual building blocks of democracy, which allows us to infer predictions about democracy as a whole. We operationalize the "building blocks" of democracy with the *Freedom House* measure for civil liberties, fair elections (fh_ep), and

the rule of law (fh_rol), in which a higher value indicates a more positive outcome. Similar to the *Freedom House-Polity* score, we transform the disaggregated measures into a binary variable indicating backsliding. Note that of these three blocks, only civil liberties is part of the *Freedom House-Polity* aggregate outcome.

Predictors

Predictor variables are selected based on the discussed literature. Some of these variables are taken directly from the literature, while others are selected based on intuitive plausibility given the theoretical arguments. To some extent, we select variables arbitrarily. This paper is intended to be exploratory as a way to generate future hypotheses, and the sheer number of possible explanations for democratic backsliding and the lack of direction in the extant literature limits the number of relationships we can examine. All our variables are found in the Quality of Government dataset, with the exception of the terrorism predictor found in the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), the value of Chinese foreign aid, which is found in AidData's Chinese aid dataset, and the measure of Russia's arms trading activity, which is created using data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). The datasets are merged by year and country. If an event applies to multiple regional countries or a regional organization, we apply the values to all countries in the region. For instance, if China provided aid to five African countries, we code that aid to all African countries under the assumption that there is a regional effect.

For simplicity, we discuss each predictor in the subsequent empirical section of this paper.

Controls

Since we explore the effects of various predictors, some models will use controls not found in others in order to account for omitted variable bias. However, there are a few confounding variables that are constant to all our models.

Economic measures are a common control in empirical democracy models, as the works

of redistribution theorists like Epstein, Lipset, and Przeworski have found a robust relationship between economic development, income levels, and democratic strength. These factors are also likely correlated with each of our four categories of predictors. As Houle notes, economic levels impact inequality and the calculus of elites to suppress democracy. Excessive state revenue, such as through natural resources, also impacts the government's ability to consolidate power (Houle, 2009). Inglehart further argues that economics can affect democracy through social values, since it allows people to focus on post-materialist issues like democracy. This further links economic outcomes to broader state legitimacy concerns. Finally, economic strength impacts the distribution of international power, which affects the capabilities of states to exercise global influence. In all our models, we include GDP per capita (unna_gdppc), GDP growth (constructed using unna_gdp), and oil exports (ross_oil_netexpc).

We also consider the urbanization rate as a universal control. To modernists, democracy can arrive from the development of an urban bourgeoisie and middle class that seeks greater freedoms. These demographic changes are more likely to arrive when there is structural development away from an agrarian economy. This also falls in line with Inglehart's theory, since the urban middle class has the political incentives and the economic freedoms to pressure democratization. As such, we include a measure of the urban population as a percent of the total population (wdi_popurb), and the total national population (wdi_pop). These variables likely impact social values, economic output, state legitimacy, and international influence (via cultural transfers).

Next, we control for regime durability. This follows from research saying that the longer a regime survives, the more robust its institutions are to change (Houle, 2009). We use the *Polity* measure for regime durability (p_durable), which counts the number of years since a regime change. A regime change is defined as a change of three points in the *Polity IV* score within a three year period.

The last control is decade. This is to account for any time-specific effects, such a period

of high global democratic norm diffusion. The various "waves" of democracy exemplify how the zeitgeist of a period can influence political transformations.

Our primary tool is a within-country fixed-effect regression model, which makes it unnecessary to control for time-invariant features. The model can be interpreted as the effect a one unit change in the predictor has on the probability of a country experiencing democratic backsliding, controlling for the included set of X_n and all time-invariant factors. The one exception is for our testing of redistribution and income inequality, which uses a random-effects probit model to best match Houle's approach.

Data Universe

We try to restrict the data to the widest universe possible given the data constraints of the QoG. This consequentially biases the results towards developed countries, where data collection is easier, but it is not problematic given our theoretical interest in established democracies. Our final dataset looks at countries from 1980-2015. The precise number of countries differs depending on the predictors used, since there is inconsistency on missing value counts. Our largest sample has 4,248 observations, and the smallest, which only looks at countries that have received Chinese aid since 2000, has 90 observations.

Furthermore, one may ask why we are using developing countries in the dataset, when we are interested in "established" democracies. Methodologically, there are too few instances of backsliding in Western states to be analytically useful. This reality is unlikely to change in the near future. But the implausibility of backsliding in developed states doesn't make the task less important. Our assumption is that "backsliding" represents a distinct mechanism from "regression," and that this process is present in states of all economic levels. By coding the outcome in a way that isolates backsliding, we should be able to distinguish these effects irregardless of development phase.

Empirical Analysis

Is Backsliding and Breakdown the Same Thing?

Before fully testing the redistribution theories, we attempt to distinguish backsliding from breakdown. The conceptual question is whether backsliding is just a special, less extreme case of democratic failure, or if it is a unique process driven by distinct causes. To answer this, we replicate Christian Houle's (2009) model from variables in our dataset, and apply it on our indicator for backsliding. We treat Houle's model as a "standard" democratic transition model, in both controls and predictor. If the model's explanatory power differs between the two outcomes, then it suggests - but doesn't prove - that backsliding is a distinct process from binary regime breakdown. The choice to mimic Houle is not arbitrary; his approach approximates other noteworthy investigations into political regimes and inequality (Epstein, Bates, Goldstone, Kristensen, & O'Halloran, 2006).

Houle's model regresses a binary indicator of democracy on income inequality and income inequality-squared. The expectation is that if the original term is positive and the squared term is negative, then Acemoglu and Robinson's U-shaped inequality model is confirmed. Houle controls for economic growth, oil exports, religious population (lp_catho80, lp_muslim80, and lp_protmg80), ethnic fractionalization (al_ethnic), religious fractionalization (al_religion), british colonial history (col_brit), regime duration (p_durable and bmr_demdur), region (ht_region), decade, new country status, and percent democracy in the world in a probit model. For simplicity, we dispense the last two controls. We also ensure that both models use the same sample.

Our variables do not perfectly emulate Houle's measures, but we try to represent them as closely as possible using the Quality of Government dataset. Our binary regime indicator (bmr_dem) is from Boix, Miller, and Rosato's dataset of political regimes (Boix, Miller, & Rosato, 2013). Although this measure of democracy differs from ours, it is similar enough to capture the same concept. It also allows us to avoid the daunting conceptual task of setting

Table 2: Random-Effects Probit of Democratic Backsliding on Inequality

VARIABLES	(1) Democratic Breakdown	(2) Democratic Breakdown	(3) Democratic Backsliding	(4) Democratic Backsliding
Gini Coeff.	-0.0273	0.108	0.0109	0.0404
	(0.300)	(0.587)	(0.428)	(0.694)
Gini Coeff. Sq.		-0.00143		-0.000315
		(0.492)		(0.772)
log(GDPPC)	0.563**	0.563**	-0.183*	-0.191*
	(0.0162)	(0.0184)	(0.0714)	(0.0701)
GDP % Growth	0.0574**	0.0581*	0.0372**	0.0364*
	(0.0493)	(0.0506)	(0.0434)	(0.0501)
Net Oil Export	-0.00347***	-0.00357***	8.63e-05	8.37e-05
	(1.70e-05)	(1.97e-05)	(0.752)	(0.761)
Catholic (% of Pop.)	-0.000334	-0.000633	0.00610	0.00610
	(0.978)	(0.959)	(0.178)	(0.178)
Muslim (% of Pop.)	-0.0118	-0.0120	0.00228	0.00247
	(0.254)	(0.264)	(0.569)	(0.545)
Protestant (% of Pop.)	0.0127	0.0118	-0.00664	-0.00648
	(0.532)	(0.574)	(0.527)	(0.536)
Ethnic Fractionalization	-1.415	-1.526	1.263***	1.255***
	(0.190)	(0.178)	(0.00336)	(0.00371)
Religious Fractionalization	-1.498	-1.467	-0.0613	-0.0351
	(0.297)	(0.323)	(0.902)	(0.945)
British Colony	0.0914	0.160	0.0625	0.0727
	(0.871)	(0.787)	(0.786)	(0.755)
Durability (Boix)	-0.0516***	-0.0522***		
	(4.23e-07)	(6.05e-07)		
Durability (Polity)			-0.000286	-0.000348
			(0.952)	(0.941)
Constant	-0.667	-3.345	-0.559	-1.114
	(0.765)	(0.459)	(0.566)	(0.604)
Observations	570	570	570	570
Number of country	93	93	93	93

pval in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Not shown: all models control for region and decade

a threshold for "democracy" and "authoritarianism" in the *Freedom House-Polity* measure.

The results of the comparison are found in Table 2. In all the models, inequality - represented by the Gini coefficient (wdi_gini) - is not significant. This is consistent with Houle's democratization model. Looking at the controls however, we find none of the same significant variables. In some cases, the signs differ in the coefficient. It is difficult to extract a distinct pattern, but it looks like democratic regression is correlated with structural features like oil export and regime durability, and backsliding is correlated with social arrangements like ethnic fractionalization. Overall, the comparison is inconclusive and requires a deeper analysis. However, we still maintain the distinction assumption in conjunction with theoretical arguments (Huq & Ginsburg, 2017).

Redistribution

The results from the probit analysis suggests that redistribution is not a compelling framework for understanding democratic backsliding. We conduct an additional test by looking at the income share of the second, third, and fourth income quintiles (wdi_incsh202, wdi_incsh203, and wdi_incsh204). Some scholars have argued that the middle class is an important demographic for sustained democracies (Lipset, 1959). Extended to contemporary events, technological change, labor off-shoring, and rising inequality is "hollowing out" the middle class in developed countries (David, Katz, & Kearney, 2006). We should expect that as income falls for middle class laborers, then their political power and "faith" in the democratic system declines.

Table 3 finds no relationship between middle class income and most of our democracy measures. However, we do find a relationship to civil rights, in which a rise in income for the second and fourth income quintiles correlates to a greater probability for civil rights backsliding. The third income quintile has an opposite effect, in which a higher income share correlates with a lower probability of backsliding. These results offer a more nuanced "hollowing out of the middle class" theory, where only those in the direct middle are safeguards.

We speculate that the middle class only affects civil rights consolidation because these are more salient aspects of democracy and things people are more likely to respond to. We can consider various social movements, where middle class youths fight for post-materialist issues such as minority rights and freedom of speech. Intuitively, it doesn't appear that there are as many social movements after bad elections.

Demographics

We test the backsliding-consequences of demographics and social values by looking at gender, age, and political polarization changes. The first assess the Leftist-Feminist critique that the rise of "hyper-masculine" anti-democratic leaders, usually supported by right-wing populists, is a social backlash against expanding women's rights. The feminist critique has not been explored much in academic circles, buts it's a frequent point of informal discussion in the media. Ian Buruma for instance, argues that "machismo" politics has historically arisen from authoritarian populists like Mussolini, and that it is a response to multicultural-ism and women gaining positions of authority (Buruma, 2018). We examine this hypothesis by looking at the female labor participation rate (wdi_lfpyfilo) and V-Dem's female empower-ment score (vdem_gender). The former model also controls for the male labor participation rate (wdi_lfpymilo) and female population (wdi_popf) The results, found in Table 4 and Table 5 respectively, reject the feminist theory. To the contrary, we find that a greater labor participation rate is correlated with a lower probability of backsliding in the rule of law. This suggests that female participation can improve democracy, but overall it doesn't appear that it has any noteworthy effect on democratic backsliding. We also cannot rule out reverse causality, in which countries with a strong rule of law are better able to enforce gender equality employment laws.

To examine the effects of age, we use the age-dependency ratio (wdi_agedr). This mea-sures the proportion of society that is not of working age (<14 & 64+), and prior research has used it as a proxy for aging (Loayza, Schmidt-Hebbel, Servén, & Loayza, 1999). The

conceptual process is that unfamiliar cultural values, such as from multiculturalism and globalization, has created a backlash from older voters against democratic institutions. As Inglehart and Norris put it, populism is

> largely due to ideological appeals to traditional values which are concentrated among the *older generation*, men, the religious, ethnic majorities, and less educated sectors of society. We believe that these are the groups most likely to feel that they have become strangers from the predominant values in their own country (Inglehart & Norris, 2016, 5).

Our model, found in Table 6, confirms this hypothesis. The age-dependency ratio is positively correlated with a greater probability of a country experiencing democratic and civil rights backsliding in the following year. The effect sizes are small, at 0.3% and 0.189% respectively for every unit increase in the age-dependency ratio. These results however, are inconsistent with the analysis of Foa and Mounk, who find from survey data that older cohorts place greater importance on living in a democracy (Foa & Mounk, 2017). A possible reconciliation is that Foa and Mounk classify those born before World War II as "elderly," and those born after as relatively young, whereas the age-dependency ratio's effects may be capturing more recent years where a larger share of the elderly are born after World War II. In other words, age may be masking the values formed while living under the threat of fascism during World War II. Further analysis, particularly with survey data, is needed to parse out whether the effect is period-based or events-based.

For political polarization, we use the World Bank's measure of government polarization (dp_polariz). This measures the distance the executive is on a right-left ideology spectrum from the three largest government parties and the opposing party. The results in Table 7 only shows a significant relationship at the conventional level for civil rights backsliding. Contrary to theory, higher political polarization reduces the probability of civil rights backsliding by 2% for every unit increase. We propose that political systems with polarizing parties may have greater balances between majority and minority rights. That is, if the opposing parties

disagree with the executive, they are incentivized to appease their voting base. If that base differs widely from the ruling party, then the outcome is more balanced rights for all groups. As an illustrative example, consider how it appears that American political polarization followed the Democrat Party's strategy to represent various identity groups. Of course, this is just speculative, and further work is needed to definitively conclude if polarization impacts democratic backsliding. A more ideal variable of polarization would be something that directly measures public ideology rather than political distance.

State Legitimacy

Our analysis of state legitimacy theories looks at economic globalization (dr_eg), the unemployment rate (wdi_unempne), and terrorism (constructed from the GTD). Economic globalization is defined as trade flows and the terrorism measure counts the number of terrorism attacks in a country. For the economic globalization model, we also control for inequality using the Gini coefficient. The results are found in tables 8, 9, and 10 respectively.

While unemployment does not impact our indicators, greater economic globalization predicts a lower probability of fair elections backsliding. This is inconsistent with what theory expects. Globalization ought to increase the probability of backsliding, since it creates anger among "losers." The observed positive correlation with stronger elections may be because highly globalized states draw more international attention during political campaigns.

Terrorism's effects however, align with expected theory. Our model finds that for every one percent increases in terrorism events within a country, there is an associated 1.97% rise in the probability of democratic backsliding in the next year and a 1.17% rise in the probability of civil rights backsliding in the next year. The civil rights effect is especially noteworthy, since it confirms the theory that terrorism incentivizes the state to encroach on freedoms. However, we cannot rule out reverse causality, in which states with weakening democratic institutions are more susceptible to terrorist attacks.

International

Testing international influence poses a difficult measurement problem, since a successful deliberate anti-democracy strategy on the state-level is likely covert and unobservable. Regardless, we attempt to examine these effects by looking at the international flows of Russia and China. These countries are chosen because there is quantitative and qualitative evidence that their international participation affects domestic regimes and elections (Bader, 2015; Tolstrup, 2015). These states are also rhetorically prominent in the global illiberalism literature. We look at how Chinese foreign aid and the Russian arms trade affects democratic backsliding in recipient countries, under the hypothesis that recipient states will feel pressured to concede to Russian or Chinese political demands in exchange for resources. This hypothesis makes the weak assumption that explicit international agreements with China and Russia contains informal backdoor political conditions.

Our findings for Chinese foreign aid, located in Table 11, show that there is no relationship between aid and democratic backsliding. This model controls for how fragile a state is, using the Fund for Peace's fragile state index (ffp_fsi). Note however, that the dataset sample is small, so it may not be generalizable. Likewise, we find no correlation between Russian arms trading, measured using SIPRI's proprietary indicator of the "military value" of a an arms shipment, and democratic backsliding. This model, which can be found in Table 12, includes additional controls on state fragility and American arms trading, which accounts for any democratic influence that might come from American counter-pressure. Interestingly however, the arms trading model finds that American arms decreases the probability of democratic backsliding. The effect size is fairly small and only significant at a liberal α of 0.1.

Despite the lack of statistical relationships, we would be hard pressed to completely rule out the global illiberalism hypothesis. It is plausible that our measure for influence does not adequately proxy covert espionage efforts. Our results also do not find a relationship for arms trading during the Cold War, which contradicts conventional historical wisdom.

Our final model examines the effects of government debt and financial liabilities. The causal logic fits well in the state legitimacy school, where a high government debt diminishes public services and frustrates voters. However, we include this model in the international section in accordance with Dorothee Bohle's hypothesis. She argues that a "simultaneity dilemma" exists when democracy is imposed together with capitalism, since the losers of market reforms use new democratic institutions to roll back the changes (Bohle, 2010). This story explains the democratic breakdowns of Eastern Europe. However, the success of post-Communist Central Europe led many scholars to reject the simultaneity theory. Bohle thinks the dismissal came to soon. Central Europe was unique because extensive transnational loans from European creditors allowed countries like Hungary and Latvia to install a welfare state. These safety nets insulated the public from the consequences of democratic and capitalist transition, which relieved anti-democratic pressures. However, loose capital only delayed the problem. Today, highly-indebted periphery European states must contend with austerity and populism. The "deep story" - to use a term from Arlie Hochschild - of the public is that foreign creditors are imposing austerity, so they respond by supporting anti-establishment nationalist parties.

To assess this hypothesis, we look at gross government debt as a percent of GDP (imf_gd) and the current account balance as a percent of GDP (imf_ab). We also control for inflation (imf_infl) and unemployment. The results, found in Table 13, show that a higher current account *deficit* is correlated with a higher probability of democratic and rule of law backsliding. A greater public debt-to-GDP ratio is associated with a greater probability of rule of law backsliding, but a lower probability of democratic backsliding. The effect sizes are small, at less than 1% for a 1 percentage point change in any of the predictors. These findings, in conjunction with the underlying theory, proves compelling for future research. Followup studies should further parse out the effects, such as by looking into the specific creditor/debtor networks. The inverse correlation of government debt and backsliding is also a perplexing finding that needs further investigation.

Discussion

It does not appear that most state legitimacy concerns, such as from unemployment and globalization, have much merit, at least by themselves. This is counterintuitive to the media and popular rhetoric, which has emphasized these features. We also find that international pressure from authoritarian states pose little concern for backsliding. However, the results should be read cautiously due to weak data quality and imperfect proxies. There also remains contrasting qualitative evidence that international relations is an important component of democratic backsliding.

It appears that demographic change via an aging population, a weakened middle class, rising terrorism, and growing state-level financial liabilities best correlates with backsliding. Altogether, the results suggest that backsliding comes from popular discontent, rather than elite capture. That is, (1) the public's average values change to be more accepting of authoritarianism due to discontent or fear, (2) the social groups with the strongest incentive to uphold democracy are hollowed out, and (3) the state becomes overburdened and is unable to meet its social contract. This doesn't mean authoritarian leaders don't play a role in democratic decline, but that a disillusioned public makes it easier for them to consolidate their power. Policymakers and activists interested in advancing democratic norms should concentrate efforts on promoting a civil society vested in liberalism. On the state level, it is also important to ensure that groups more likely to lose confidence in liberal values, such as older generations, do not feel neglected by the system. Furthermore, terrorism's effects frame the democratic problem as a joint social and security concern.

Despite some interesting results, we emphasize that these findings cannot be used to draw causal inferences. The research design only allows us to see correlations, and without a randomized-control trial or natural experiment, we should recognize that reverse causality is a possibility. We minimize this concern by leading the outcome variable, so that our models predict backsliding in the *next* year, but there may be latent backsliding effects that precede noticeably changes. It is also likely that backsliding arrives from the complex interaction of

various factors, and it is only now that these factors have converged. This interpretation coincides with the low R^2 of our models, most of which are less than 0.1. Regression techniques are unsuited for examining relationships that cannot be cleanly represented in a linear or low-degree polynomial fashion. Perhaps democratic backsliding is one of the few instances in which black-box machine learning techniques are useful, especially if prediction is a priority. Regardless, these concerns mean policymakers should be wary of targeting singular "silver bullets."

Conclusion

The goal of this paper is to promote a discussion around what we believe is an emerging trend. Informally, we find that many political scientists treat our interest as alarmist and premature. To us, this is a dismal critique. Should we only address problems when they are obvious but resistant? Fortunately, more scholars are recognizing a possible threat. Even Francis Fukuyama has revised his prior optimism to account for contemporary setbacks (Inskeep, 2017). Their fears and analyses have come principally as popular writings, so our intention is to aggregate these loose ideas into a cohesive research agenda. Even if this moment in history proves fleeting in hindsight, backsliding research will surely benefit policymakers in the future. After all, while naysayers might be correct that modern democratic trends are structurally benign, we still ought not to take our liberal institutions for granted lest we risk more substantial threats in the future. Democracy is familiar but young, and history has a nasty habit of returning when we least expect it.

Appendix

Table 3: Fixed-Effects of Democratic Backsliding on Middle Class

VARIABLES	(1) Democracy	(2) Civil Rights	(3) Fair Elections	(4) Rule of Law
2nd Quintile Inc. Shr.	-0.0389	0.0755**	-0.00339	0.0155
	(0.430)	(0.0184)	(0.963)	(0.867)
3rd Quintile Inc. Shr.	0.0278	-0.121***	0.00470	0.0421
	(0.688)	(0.00738)	(0.962)	(0.737)
4th Quintile Inc. Shr.	0.00292	0.0574**	0.0362	-0.0487
	(0.933)	(0.0114)	(0.506)	(0.481)
log(GDPPC)	-0.0122	0.00973	-0.0118	0.0128
	(0.679)	(0.613)	(0.855)	(0.876)
GDP % Growth	0.00446*	-0.00213	0.00525*	0.00445
	(0.0574)	(0.163)	(0.0613)	(0.212)
Net Oil Export	-3.32e-05	-1.60e-05	2.54e-05	-2.03e-05
	(0.450)	(0.573)	(0.605)	(0.746)
Urban Population	-0.00744	-0.00134	0.0178	-0.0110
	(0.130)	(0.676)	(0.163)	(0.496)
log(Population)	-0.0988	-0.145	-0.676	0.236
	(0.509)	(0.135)	(0.104)	(0.655)
Durability	0.00215	-0.000616	0.00852**	0.000717
	(0.184)	(0.558)	(0.0184)	(0.876)
Constant	2.110	2.262	8.919	-2.941
	(0.370)	(0.139)	(0.165)	(0.719)
Observations	1,077	1,077	588	588
Number of country	145	145	136	136

pval in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Not shown: all models control for decade

Table 4: Fixed-Effects of Democratic Backsliding on Female Labor Participation

VARIABLES	(1) Democracy	(2) Civil Rights	(3) Fair Elections	(4) Rule of Law
Female Participation Rate	-0.000926	0.00108	-0.00345	-0.0168**
	(0.619)	(0.440)	(0.563)	(0.0195)
Male Participation Rate	0.00125	-0.00105	0.000437	0.0114*
	(0.485)	(0.434)	(0.933)	(0.0669)
Female Population	-0.00866	-0.0106	-0.00475	0.00658
	(0.393)	(0.162)	(0.833)	(0.845)
log(GDPCC)	-0.00375	0.00234	-0.0242	-0.0241
	(0.813)	(0.844)	(0.569)	(0.645)
GDP % Growth	0.000168	-0.000484	0.00164	0.00188
	(0.812)	(0.361)	(0.201)	(0.219)
Net Oil Export	1.33e-07	-1.40e-06	1.47e-05	-1.18e-05
	(0.984)	(0.773)	(0.274)	(0.461)
Urban Population	-0.00406*	-0.00605***	8.82e-05	-0.00313
	(0.0651)	(0.000238)	(0.992)	(0.763)
Durability	9.54e-05	-5.91e-05	0.00366**	0.00102
	(0.880)	(0.901)	(0.0152)	(0.570)
Constant	0.758	0.919**	0.517	2.601
	(0.169)	(0.0258)	(0.689)	(0.615)
Observations	3,659	3,659	1,333	1,333
Number of country	165	165	164	164

pval in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Not shown: all models control for decade

Table 5: Fixed-Effects of Democratic Backsliding on Female Empowerment

VARIABLES	(1) Democracy	(2) Civil Rights	(3) Fair Elections	(4) Rule of Law
Female Empowerment	-0.0573	-0.111	-0.577	-0.646
	(0.569)	(0.156)	(0.179)	(0.198)
log(GDPCC)	-0.00838	-0.000795	-0.0197	0.0186
	(0.570)	(0.945)	(0.674)	(0.735)
GDP % Growth	-0.000178	-0.000386	0.00176	0.00188
	(0.805)	(0.492)	(0.182)	(0.220)
Net Oil Export	4.73e-06	5.30e-06	1.71e-05	-1.34e-05
	(0.462)	(0.287)	(0.252)	(0.443)
Urban Population	-0.00183	-0.00137	0.00157	-0.00474
	(0.358)	(0.376)	(0.861)	(0.652)
log(Population)	-0.00557	-0.0696	-0.0539	-0.201
	(0.920)	(0.104)	(0.786)	(0.387)
Durability	-1.43e-05	-0.000184	0.00374**	-0.000807
	(0.980)	(0.672)	(0.0316)	(0.691)
Constant	0.385	1.343**	1.332	3.956
	(0.654)	(0.0439)	(0.659)	(0.262)
Observations	3,958	3,958	1,277	1,277
Number of country	161	161	160	160

pval in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1
Not shown: all models control for decade

Table 6: Fixed-Effects of Democratic Backsliding on Age-Dependency Ratio

VARIABLES	(1) Democracy	(2) Civil Rights	(3) Fair Elections	(4) Rule of Law
Age-Dependency Ratio	0.00300***	0.00189**	0.00453	-0.00256
	(0.00212)	(0.0126)	(0.325)	(0.640)
log(GDPCC)	0.00237	0.00626	-0.00472	-0.0167
	(0.869)	(0.576)	(0.917)	(0.757)
GDP % Growth	-0.000125	-0.000445	0.00144	0.00185
	(0.856)	(0.408)	(0.262)	(0.226)
Net Oil Export	1.59e-06	2.27e-06	1.40e-05	-1.12e-05
	(0.789)	(0.625)	(0.288)	(0.477)
Urban Population	-0.00121	-0.00224	0.00197	-0.00350
	(0.530)	(0.137)	(0.819)	(0.734)
log(Population)	0.0564	-0.0115	-0.0211	-0.259
	(0.250)	(0.763)	(0.907)	(0.231)
Durability	-0.000243	-0.000282	0.00359**	0.000734
	(0.634)	(0.478)	(0.0167)	(0.681)
Constant	-0.949	0.205	-0.0391	4.774
	(0.238)	(0.743)	(0.990)	(0.179)
Observations	4,248	4,248	1,333	1,333
Number of country	165	165	164	164

pval in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1
Not shown: all models control for decade

Table 7: Fixed-Effects of Democratic Backsliding on Political Polarization

VARIABLES	(1) Democracy	(2) Civil Rights	(3) Fair Elections	(4) Rule of Law
Political Polarization	-0.00531	-0.0200**	-0.0293	-0.0329
	(0.605)	(0.0144)	(0.174)	(0.221)
log(GDPPC)	-0.00913	0.00294	-0.0276	0.0132
	(0.560)	(0.813)	(0.575)	(0.830)
GDP % Growth	-0.000363	-0.000651	0.00176	0.00194
	(0.627)	(0.272)	(0.205)	(0.264)
Net Oil Export	1.09e-06	1.56e-06	1.38e-05	-9.94e-06
	(0.856)	(0.744)	(0.281)	(0.532)
Urban Population	-0.00317	-0.00397**	0.00949	0.00495
	(0.123)	(0.0153)	(0.299)	(0.663)
log(Population)	0.0219	-0.0186	-0.114	-0.0438
	(0.669)	(0.647)	(0.520)	(0.842)
Durability	-0.000303	-0.000299	0.00268*	0.000711
	(0.582)	(0.494)	(0.0930)	(0.720)
Constant	0.00424	0.579	1.528	0.421
	(0.996)	(0.365)	(0.578)	(0.902)
Observations	3,707	3,707	1,080	1,080
Number of country	161	161	149	149

pval in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1
Not shown: all models control for decade

Table 8: Fixed-Effects of Democratic Backsliding on Economic Globalization

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
VARIABLES	Democracy	Civil Rights	Fair Elections	Rule of Law
Globalization	0.000661	0.000742	-0.00983***	-0.00151
	(0.725)	(0.530)	(0.00475)	(0.734)
Gini Coeff.	0.00280	0.00149	-0.00291	-0.00614
	(0.385)	(0.462)	(0.672)	(0.486)
log(GDPPC)	-0.0177	0.00380	0.0230	0.0190
	(0.582)	(0.851)	(0.727)	(0.823)
GDP % Growth	0.00426*	0.000161	0.00578**	0.00482
	(0.0695)	(0.913)	(0.0385)	(0.178)
Net Oil Export	-3.25e-05	7.57e-06	2.45e-05	-2.26e-05
	(0.463)	(0.785)	(0.616)	(0.719)
Urban Population	-0.00777	-3.59e-05	0.0244*	-0.0114
	(0.124)	(0.991)	(0.0608)	(0.495)
log(Population)	-0.0929	-0.186**	-0.838**	0.212
	(0.536)	(0.0489)	(0.0467)	(0.694)
Durability	0.00234	0.000798	0.00806**	0.000418
	(0.150)	(0.435)	(0.0250)	(0.928)
Constant	2.001	2.976**	12.42*	-2.475
	(0.395)	(0.0444)	(0.0581)	(0.768)
Observations	1,058	1,058	581	581
Number of country	137	137	131	131

pval in parentheses

*** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$

Not shown: all models control for decade

Table 9: Fixed-Effects of Democratic Backsliding on Unemployment

VARIABLES	(1) Democracy	(2) Civil Rights	(3) Fair Elections	(4) Rule of Law
Unemployment Rate	0.000689	-0.000120	0.00505	-0.00640
	(0.715)	(0.931)	(0.220)	(0.200)
log(GDPPC)	0.00872	-0.00543	-0.0461	-0.0876
	(0.645)	(0.697)	(0.401)	(0.189)
GDP % Growth	9.17e-05	-0.00223**	0.00469*	0.000623
	(0.944)	(0.0215)	(0.0578)	(0.835)
Net Oil Export	9.48e-06	5.56e-06	1.80e-05	3.09e-06
	(0.253)	(0.364)	(0.190)	(0.853)
Urban Population	-0.00573**	-0.00299	0.00999	-0.0103
	(0.0201)	(0.101)	(0.324)	(0.401)
log(Population)	-0.0332	-0.0576	-0.0633	-0.122
	(0.666)	(0.309)	(0.783)	(0.662)
Durability	0.00165*	0.000286	0.00462**	-0.00129
	(0.0735)	(0.674)	(0.0136)	(0.570)
Constant	0.873	1.257	0.660	3.640
	(0.474)	(0.162)	(0.857)	(0.414)
Observations	2,429	2,429	879	879
Number of country	153	153	144	144

pval in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1
Not shown: all models control for decade

Table 10: Fixed-Effects of Democratic Backsliding on Terrorism

VARIABLES	(1) Democracy	(2) Civil Rights	(3) Fair Elections	(4) Rule of Law
log(Terrorism Counts)	0.0197***	0.0117**	-0.0153	-0.00165
	(0.00257)	(0.0244)	(0.328)	(0.931)
log(GDPPC)	0.00328	0.00357	-0.0378	-0.0118
	(0.878)	(0.834)	(0.591)	(0.891)
GDP % Growth	-0.000959	-8.58e-05	-0.000294	-0.000288
	(0.350)	(0.916)	(0.883)	(0.906)
Net Oil Export	1.43e-05	-3.22e-06	7.14e-05*	2.51e-05
	(0.259)	(0.750)	(0.0569)	(0.583)
Urban Population	-0.00534*	-0.00515**	-0.0122	0.0104
	(0.0978)	(0.0451)	(0.480)	(0.619)
log(Population)	0.121	-0.0588	-0.150	-1.119**
	(0.137)	(0.365)	(0.725)	(0.0319)
Durability	0.00104	0.000211	0.00406*	0.00322
	(0.219)	(0.755)	(0.0502)	(0.201)
Constant	-1.666	1.288	3.521	18.46**
	(0.205)	(0.219)	(0.609)	(0.0279)
Observations	2,189	2,189	603	603
Number of cname	160	160	131	131

pval in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1
Not shown: all models control for decade

Table 11: Fixed-Effects of Democratic Backsliding on Chinese Aid

VARIABLES	(1) Democracy	(2) Civil Rights	(3) Fair Elections	(4) Rule of Law
Chinese Aid (USD)	-0	-0	-0	0
	(0.313)	(0.844)	(0.521)	(0.687)
log(GDPPC)	0.0658	-0.00207	0.0187	-0.0210
	(0.296)	(0.961)	(0.753)	(0.766)
GDP % Growth	-0.00173	-0.000353	0.000955	0.00113
	(0.458)	(0.820)	(0.665)	(0.666)
Net Oil Export	1.98e-05	-6.78e-07	5.07e-05	-3.59e-05
	(0.587)	(0.978)	(0.140)	(0.379)
log(Population)	-0.205	0.121	-0.283	-0.0770
	(0.573)	(0.617)	(0.411)	(0.851)
p_durable	0.00719***	0.00245*	0.00464**	-0.000880
	(0.000449)	(0.0715)	(0.0162)	(0.700)
Fragile State Index	-0.00723	-0.00192	-0.000720	-0.0152***
	(0.105)	(0.518)	(0.864)	(0.00245)
Constant	3.346	-1.833	4.498	2.742
	(0.554)	(0.626)	(0.400)	(0.665)
Observations	858	858	858	858
Number of country	148	148	148	148

pval in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Not shown: all models control for decade

Table 12: Fixed-Effects of Democratic Backsliding on Russian Arms Trade

VARIABLES	(1) Democracy	(2) Civil Rights	(3) Fair Elections	(4) Rule of Law
Russian Arms Trade	1.44e-05	6.54e-05	-5.71e-05	0.000127
	(0.929)	(0.577)	(0.705)	(0.444)
USA Arms Trade	-0.000470*	-0.000331*	5.84e-05	0.000217
	(0.0726)	(0.0812)	(0.809)	(0.414)
log(GDPPC)	-0.0191	0.0352	-0.0771	-0.135
	(0.942)	(0.852)	(0.751)	(0.612)
GDP % Growth	-0.00154	-0.000207	-0.000800	0.00112
	(0.584)	(0.919)	(0.761)	(0.697)
Net Oil Export	4.67e-05	-1.15e-05	4.46e-05	-1.46e-05
	(0.263)	(0.703)	(0.252)	(0.731)
log(Population)	1.006	0.404	0.407	-0.460
	(0.430)	(0.663)	(0.732)	(0.725)
Durability	-0.00335	-0.00375	0.00471	-0.00124
	(0.645)	(0.478)	(0.488)	(0.868)
Fragile State Index	-0.0103	-0.0139	0.0235	-0.00735
	(0.602)	(0.335)	(0.206)	(0.717)
Constant	-16.21	-6.035	-8.100	9.751
	(0.433)	(0.688)	(0.675)	(0.645)
Observations	133	133	133	133
Number of country	45	45	45	45

pval in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1
Not shown: all models control for decade

Table 13: Fixed-Effects of Decmoratic Backsliding on Trade Deficit

VARIABLES	(1) Democracy	(2) Civil Rights	(3) Fair Elections	(4) Rule of Law
Current Account Balance	-0.00277**	-0.000741	-0.000166	-0.00591**
	(0.0208)	(0.366)	(0.936)	(0.0164)
Public Debt-to-GDP Ratio	-0.00112***	-0.000361	-0.000429	0.00284***
	(0.00163)	(0.136)	(0.614)	(0.00508)
Inflation	-0.000387*	-0.000182	-0.000532	-0.000253
	(0.0691)	(0.213)	(0.212)	(0.617)
Unemployment Rate	0.00315	0.000411	0.00631	-0.00551
	(0.176)	(0.796)	(0.145)	(0.283)
log(GDPPC)	0.0377	-0.00774	-0.00834	-0.0230
	(0.118)	(0.639)	(0.903)	(0.777)
GDP % Growth	-0.000616	-0.00340***	0.00525*	0.00377
	(0.716)	(0.00333)	(0.0563)	(0.247)
Net Oil Export	1.37e-05*	6.84e-06	1.66e-05	9.93e-06
	(0.0860)	(0.211)	(0.226)	(0.541)
Urban Population	-0.00294	0.00121	0.00733	-0.0126
	(0.339)	(0.565)	(0.474)	(0.299)
log(Population)	-0.135	-0.0239	-0.0845	0.0392
	(0.167)	(0.720)	(0.720)	(0.888)
Durability	0.000304	-0.000382	0.00434**	-0.000349
	(0.778)	(0.603)	(0.0266)	(0.880)
Constant	2.164	0.446	0.910	0.421
	(0.166)	(0.676)	(0.812)	(0.926)
Observations	1,805	1,805	826	826
Number of country	143	143	136	136

pval in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Not shown: all models control for decade

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