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Unwelcome Change: Coming to Terms with Democratic Backsliding

David Waldner[1] and Ellen Lust[2]

[1]Department of Politics, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia 22904, USA; email: daw4h@virginia.edu

[2]Department of Political Science, University of Gothenberg, Gothenberg 40530, Sweden; email: ellen.lust@gu.se

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Abstract

Scholars have paid increasing attention to democratic backsliding, yet efforts to explain this phenomenon remain inchoate. This article seeks to place the study of democratic backsliding on sturdier conceptual, operational, and theoretical foundations. Conceptually, the challenge of backsliding is to define changes that take place within a political regime. Methodologically, the challenge involves measurement of intraregime changes, as alternative coding schemes change the population of units that have experienced democratic backsliding. Theoretical challenges are dual: First, despite a rich and diverse literature, we lack readily available theories to explain backsliding, and second, the theoretical debates that do exist—centered on the causes of democratic transitions, democratic breakdowns, authoritarian resilience, and democratic consolidation—remain unresolved. We consider how these theories might be called into service to explain backsliding. By doing so, the article aims to set the terms of the debate to create a common focal point around which research can coalesce.

INTRODUCTION

Is global democracy under threat? Diamond (2008) warned of a democratic recession almost a decade ago, and in its 2016 report, Freedom House (2016) documents the tenth consecutive year of decline in global freedom. Countries with net declines in their aggregate score have outnumbered countries with a net increase in their aggregate score, often by a considerable margin. Leading scholars dissent from this pessimism, however. Many note that the Third Wave of democracy has featured few instances of democratic breakdown, and even these tend to be concentrated in the first decade of the Third Wave. Levitsky & Way (2015), for instance, point out that four democracy indices record stable average democracy scores over the past decade, while the number of democracies in the world has moved little in either absolute or relative terms.

Both views may be correct. Related and noteworthy trends suggest that the health of global democracy can no longer be adequately measured by simply counting democracies and autocracies. First, the link between economic prosperity and democracy has been sharply attenuated over the past several decades. The price of admission to the club of democracies, denominated in per capita gross domestic product, has declined. A second trend is that not only the price but also the value of admission to the democracy club has declined. Stretching back to the 1990s, scholars have identified Third Wave democracies using various modifiers, such as "illiberal" or "delegative," that denote some crucial missing element that impairs, perhaps indelibly, democratic governance (Collier & Levitsky 1997). Born in institutional sin, these democracies have not necessarily been swept away by a reverse wave, but neither have they sought institutional redemption. A third trend observed since 1990 has been the overall decline in the incidence of both military coups and outright executive takeovers or *autogolpes* (Bermeo 2016, Svolik 2014). Two previously conventional pathways to democratic breakdown are becoming less conventional, though not yet fully obsolete. Moreover, in recent years, military coups that do occur are likely to give way to elections within five years (Marinov & Goemans 2014).

The convergence of what we call WINDs, or weakly institutionalized new democracies, and the relative decline of the coup-induced military regime provides the grounds for the concept of democratic backsliding (a term used by, e.g., Ahmed 2014, Alemán & Yang 2011, Bermeo 2016, Erdmann 2011, Finkel et al. 2012, Svolik 2014; see also Slater 2013 on democratic careening). Democratic backsliding connotes a process related to yet still distinct from reversion to autocracy. As **Figure 1** shows, scholars have invoked this term with far greater frequency since 1990. But

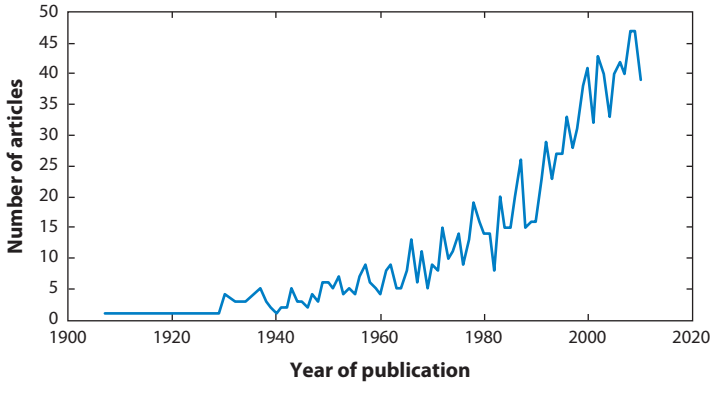

Figure 1

Frequency of usage of the term democratic backsliding in academic articles indexed by JSTOR between 1900 and 2010.

they have not used the term consistently; moreover, they have not measured the phenomenon accurately. Efforts to explain backsliding remain inchoate.

This article seeks to place the study of democratic backsliding on sturdier conceptual, operational, and theoretical foundations. Given the ongoing debates about how to define the core types of political regime, conceptualizing intraregime changes is no easy task. Ongoing measurement debates about democracy, dictatorship, and their subtypes beget similar challenges in measuring intraregime changes such that they satisfy the criteria of reliability and validity; moreover, alternative coding schemes change the population of units that have experienced democratic backsliding. Finally, we lack theories to explain backsliding, though we have long engaged in a perhaps interminable debate about the causes of democratic transitions, democratic breakdowns, authoritarian resilience, and democratic consolidation. We need to consider how, if at all, our existing inventory of theories informs the study of intraregime, incremental change, e.g., backsliding.

We do not pretend to solve any of these problems definitively, let alone the full suite, in a single article. Our hope is to set the terms of the debate and create a common focal point around which debates can coalesce. In the next section, we take up the conceptual challenge, followed by sections covering measurement and then theory. The theory section surveys six broad theory families that were developed to address the classical problem of regime transitions and consolidation. We gauge their suitability, with or without modification, to explain backsliding. A fourth section offers four pathways toward future synthesis, illustrating the potential value of such synthesis through a brief discussion of the potential for backsliding under the Trump administration.

THE CONCEPTUAL CHALLENGE: WHAT IS BACKSLIDING?

Backsliding, as distinct from transitions across regime types, involves relatively fine-grained degrees of change. We begin with the most generic definition that we can imagine captures the idea of incremental within-regime change: Backsliding entails a deterioration of qualities associated with democratic governance, within any regime. In democratic regimes, it is a decline in the quality of democracy; in autocracies, it is a decline in democratic qualities of governance. The focus of this article is on backsliding within democracies.

We take a pragmatic approach to the definition of backsliding. Importantly, we understand backsliding as potentially occurring through a discontinuous series of incremental actions, not a one-time *coup de grâce*. Backsliding makes elections less competitive without entirely undermining the electoral mechanism; it restricts participation without explicitly abolishing norms of universal franchise seen as constitutive of contemporary democracy; and it loosens constraints of accountability by eroding norms of answerability and punishment, where answerability refers to the obligation of officials to publicize and justify their actions, and punishment refers to the capacity of either citizens or alternative governing agencies to impose negative consequences for undesirable actions or violations of sanctioned procedures.

Like other analysts, we worry about setting the bar too low, thus inviting false positives. Not every tussle over district boundaries, voter registration procedures, or executive privilege constitutes backsliding. Because a sufficiently fine-grained, continuous measure is likely to overdetect backsliding, we offer a qualitative rule instead. Coding a case of backsliding requires degradation in at least two of these three dimensions of democratic governance: competition, participation, and accountability. Viewing backsliding as composed of clearly intended efforts to change some combination of competitiveness, participation, and accountability not only provides some defense against false positives but also comports well with the empirical record.

Table 1 Datasets with indicators of regime change

Indicator name	Concept	% toward autocracy
Freedom House, Freedom in the World (any change)	Political rights (contestation and participation) and civil liberties	9.67
Polity IV (any change)	Contestation and participation	3.76
Skaaning et al. 2015	Contestation and participation	2.52
V-Dem: Electoral Democracy	Contestation and participation	2.93
Wahman et al. 2013 (any change)	Combination of Freedom House and Polity IV	11.21

FINDING BACKSLIDING: WHAT ARE THE INDICATORS?

Extant indicators provide a basis for operationalizing backsliding as outlined above, but thus far scholars have not considered carefully the indicators of backsliding. They have given a great deal of attention to measuring regime type but have paid little explicit attention to measuring regime change. In a review of measurements of regime change writ large, Lueders & Lust (2018) conclude that scholars often base their choice of indicators on expediency or methodological considerations (e.g., time span covered by the dataset), rather than the underlying concept of regime change. Yet they find that measures of backsliding are not interchangeable.

Coding backsliding requires data that gauge intraregime change and, thus, rules out a large number of datasets examining regime change. Of 13 datasets on regime type, Lueders & Lust (2018) find that only five provide a basis for measuring backsliding. As summarized in **Table 1**, these are based on different concepts of democratic characteristics and, disconcertingly, yield very different answers to basic empirical questions regarding backsliding. For instance, Skaaning et al. (2015) code backsliding in <3% of the cases recorded, while Wahman et al. (2013) find backsliding in >11% of their cases.

Polychotomous or continuous indicators of regime type are often based on aggregated subcomponents—including measures of competitiveness, participation, and accountability—that would allow us to gauge democratic backsliding along the lines indicated above; however, as currently reported and employed, they fail to provide sufficient information by which we can distinguish different arenas of change. For example, Freedom House's seven-point Political Rights index aggregates information on three dimensions coded on a 40-point scale, and its Civil Liberties index aggregates information on four dimensions coded on a 60-point scale. Given the various aggregation steps, numerous combinations of individual scores can result in the same aggregate rating. There are 9,765,625 (30,517,578,125) logically possible combinations of the subcategory questions that can result in a plausible score on Freedom House's Political Rights (Civil Liberties) scale, and 2,873 (63,869) different logically plausible combinations underlying the Political Rights (Civil Liberties) indices. Over the period 2005–2015 alone (for which the data are public), Lueders & Lust (2018) find more than 25 combinations per 1–7 point score in the Freedom House data. Similar problems exist in the Polity IV data (Marshall et al. 2014), where 84 different combinations can result in a change from anocracy to autocracy (−5 to −6 on the scale).

Extant measures are not only employed in a manner that fails to discern the underlying nature of backsliding, but they also often are used interchangeably. This practice is based on the erroneous assumption that different indicators measure the same phenomena. Although measures of regime type are indeed highly correlated, indicators of regime change are not. The average pairwise correlation among the five indicators of backsliding examined by Lueders & Lust (2018) is only 0.33, compared to between 0.85 and 0.86 for regime type.

The choice of indicators has an enormous impact on empirical findings. Robustness checks of three studies of backsliding, published in leading journals, found that analyses were robust to alternative measures in only 25% of the cases for a study by Burke & Leigh (2010) and less than 75% of the time for studies by Gibler & Randazzo (2011) and Goldstone et al. (2010). This is particularly disconcerting because the bar for success was quite low; findings were considered robust if the coefficient of interest had the expected sign and was significant at the $p < 0.10$ level (see Lueders & Lust 2018 for more detail). The robustness checks highlight the importance of indicator choice on scholarly findings. We must choose indicators carefully and consider how subcomponents within indicators of regime type allow us to examine changes in competitiveness, participation, and accountability.

THEORIZING BACKSLIDING

The history of modern democracy appears to consist of episodes in which democratic transitions cluster together, followed by clusters of democratic breakdowns. Academic priorities follow these trends, and thus we can identify literatures on democratic transitions, democratic breakdowns, democratic consolidation, and authoritarian resilience. Academic interest in incremental forms of backsliding, however, is quite new, and no crystallized, coherent literature evaluates rival hypotheses about a relatively fixed set of cases. The goal of this survey is to evaluate existing theories in terms of their utility for explaining outcomes related to but distinct from the classic debate on transitions to and from democracy. We navigate between theories by examining six theory families that emphasize political agency, political culture, political institutions, political economy, social structure and political coalitions, and international actors.

Agency-Based Theories

Agentic theories place the explanatory burden on contingent decisions made by political actors under relatively unconstrained conditions. In these accounts, the relevant actors could just as easily have made very different decisions with large consequences for democratic transitions. There are various ways to conceptualize the nature of unconstrained choice. It might follow from some durable personal attribute of the agent, such as temperament or intellect, as in Linz's (1978) classic account of democratic breakdowns; or it might follow from strategic decision making, as in Capoccia's (2005) updating of Linz's account; or it might follow from the strategic interaction of groups in the government and in the opposition, as in O'Donnell & Schmitter's (1986) account of Third Wave democratic transitions.

These accounts suffer from well-known handicaps. Claims about the absence of structural constraints are too often unexamined presuppositions and not the conclusion of empirical analysis. These accounts also lack a rigorous theory of agency, settling instead for relatively ad hoc analyses of decision making relying on inductive judgments that defy falsification. More recent work by Mainwaring & Pérez-Liñán (2014) represents the state of the art. They argue that democratic survival in Latin America rests on the moderate policy preferences and normative commitment to democracy of the current generation of political leaders, both variables amenable to systematic measurement. To make the hypothesis relevant to global backsliding, however, will require further work to establish the exogeneity of preferences and normative commitments while further developing an underlying cognitive theory of how norms and preferences change over time.

Still, given the centrality of executive actions in triggering democratic backsliding, returning to agency-based theories appears plausible, and recent contributions are more sensitive to sound methodology. One promising approach claims that power-seeking presidents unconstrained by

powerful institutions or competing centers of political power are left free to initiate backsliding (Fish 2001, Van de Walle 2003). In these superpresidential systems, agents' preference for arrogating limitless amounts of power clashes with Mainwaring & Pérez-Liñán's (2014) contention that these features vary over political leaderships. The superpresidential hypothesis also requires a nonconstraining institutional environment that is taken to be exogenous in Fish's account. That is, agency-based accounts entail simultaneous engagement with cultural and institutional theories.

Theories of Political Culture

Theories of political culture explain political outcomes by way of attitudes, beliefs, norms, practices, and rituals that are widely shared, have deep emotional resonance, and divide appropriate and socially sanctioned from inappropriate behavior. Culture can produce political outcomes either directly, by forming preferences over forms of political practice, or indirectly, by shaping behavior (such as the propensity to trust or cooperate with others) that makes some forms of political practice more likely than others.

Theories of the cultural foundations of democracy are structural theories in three important ways. First, cultures are properties of large groups of people, either entire societies or substantial subgroups in society. Classic theories of political culture made statements about entire collectivities. In his play *The Persians*, the Greek playwright Aeschylus distinguished East and West, associating the former with despotism and the latter with democracy. Two millennia later, Montesquieu divided the political world into monarchies, despotisms, and republics, associating these with Western, Eastern, and ancient Greek civilization, respectively. But cultural theories do not necessarily imply homogeneity within societies; these theories only claim that norms, values, and practices are attributes of a group substantially larger than individuals. Second, cultures are inherited from the past; individuals learn cultural norms from parents and teachers, and from repeated interaction with other members of society. Third, while individuals can shape culture—culture is not static over time, after all—cultural change tends to be relatively slow and not fully under the control of political leaders. From the perspective of the individual agent, cultures can be treated as givens, in the sense that cultural norms, cultural beliefs, and the behavior they induce are relatively stable, routine, and often unquestioned.

These structural features of political culture render these theories a low-probability bet to explain backsliding, for that would require both a democratic status quo that was consistent with underlying cultural values and practices and a subsequent reversal of democratic fortunes that was also consistent with underlying cultural norms. We can discern two pathways by which this might occur. First, democratic institutions may be instantiated by external actors, e.g., during colonial rule or postwar reconstruction efforts, and subsequently fail in the absence of prodemocratic values. Second, heterogeneous cultural orientations may come into conflict, with an initial victory by prodemocratic cultural groups followed by their defeat at the hands of antidemocratic cultural groups. It is not clear to us that such a theory currently exists in testable form, nor why such a theory on its own would predict democratic backsliding and not an authoritarian revival.

Consider Fish's (2002) claim about the sources of the Muslim democratic deficit. Coding countries as either predominantly Muslim or not, Fish finds that Muslim-majority countries score, on average, about 1.5 points lower on a Freedom House democracy score, or about one-fifth of the total variation on the dependent variable. Fish does not intend to explain backsliding per se; indeed, the analysis is restricted to the 1990s, and Fish explicitly refrains from extrapolating his findings to other time periods. The point we wish to make here, however, is that even if Muslim-majority countries were moderately less democratic, this finding would not explain democratic backsliding. The only possible extrapolation would be for a non-Muslim-majority country to experience rapid

demographic or cultural change, cross the Muslim-majority threshold, and hence suffer a loss of democracy. This scenario is, of course, absurd.

We see similar foundational weaknesses in classic theories of civic and social capital. For Inglehart & Welzel (2005), democracy requires the transition from traditional and survival-oriented values to secular and self-expressive values. These cultural transitions are catalyzed by prior economic transitions, first from agricultural to industrial societies and second from industrial to postindustrial societies. Inglehart & Welzel insist, however, that cultural values are not epiphenomena, that they reflect economic change but exercise autonomous influence on political change.

We share the view of a large literature that expresses deep skepticism about the empirical confirmation of the underlying link between modern culture and political democracy, but our point is that this theorized link would not explain democratic backsliding. This would require that culture explain both a transition to democracy and a subsequent partial reversal of that transition. The former transition would appear to require that society had adopted modern culture, in which case backsliding is mysterious. If, on the other hand, we assume that society has not decisively adopted modern culture, then the original instantiation of democracy is equally mysterious. To explain democratic backsliding would appear to require a delicate balancing act, a Goldilocks solution in which culture is not too traditional to prohibit democracy, but not so modern as to deter a moderate reversal: The cultural porridge must be just right, or in this case, just wrong enough.

We see slightly more merit in hypotheses drawn from theories that claim social capital facilitates collective action (Putnam 1993). We can imagine the scenario in which societies that are imbued with social capital but are not yet democratic mobilize to force recalcitrant elites to democratize, but then, as collective action declines over time, those same elites engineer the undermining of democracy by subterfuge. However, such a theory would require that citizens have democracy-supporting social capital but their political elites do not. Such a pairing of prodemocratic citizens and antidemocratic elites is of course possible, but it is not predicted by existing theories of social capital (Berman 1997). We see little potential for theories of political culture to resolve both the demand side (citizens' cultural orientations and derived behavior) and the supply side (political elites' cultural orientations and derived behavior) in a way that explains first a democratic transition and second democratic backsliding.

Political Institutions

We can think of democratic political institutions as having three broad types of effect. First, different democratic institutions may affect the level of vertical accountability and representativeness, such that governments are more or less responsive to citizens; citizens who view their government as a legitimate source of authority have diminished incentive to support antidemocratic movements. Second, different democratic institutions may affect the level of horizontal accountability, such that distinct government agencies have more or less capacity to impede members of the government from acting in increasingly autocratic ways and subverting democracy from within. Third, different democratic institutions may affect the level of governmental efficaciousness and performance, avoiding political stalemate and crisis that can provide the excuse or the motivation and justification for antidemocratic actions.

We can thus hypothesize that democratic backsliding is more likely under initial institutional configurations that degrade these three features of accountability and efficaciousness, even as we recognize that citizens and government agencies may share the executive's preference for less democratic accountability. In other words, we would ideally look at institutions and partisan

preferences simultaneously, for if citizens, legislatures, judiciaries, independent agencies, or some combination of these actors prefer less democracy to more under the current government, then institutions that empower them will not deter backsliding.

Studies of political institutions face a thorny methodological problem, however. We know that institutions structure political processes and outcomes; for that very reason, powerful political actors have strong incentives to mold institutions to their favor. Institutions are not simply exogenous instruments that exert pressure on political actors; they are also objects of manipulation by strategic actors precisely because they might make favorable outcomes more likely. Methodologically, this is the problem of selection: If the causes of the institution are systematically related to the outcomes we seek to explain, then the institution itself may not exercise any causal influence. More concretely, outcomes might be directly caused by powerful actors who simultaneously influence the nature of political institutions. Recent scholarship suggests that this is often the case in such diverse realms as designing constitutions and designing authoritarian institutions (Negretto 2013, Pepinsky 2013).

Given this concern about endogenous institutions, we are initially skeptical about the validity of two types of institutional arguments: those attributing democratic stability to electoral institutions and those attributing it to parliamentary systems of executive–legislative relations. Lijphart (1977) offers the best-known theory of democratic stability and electoral systems, arguing that in plural societies, consociational institutions—most importantly, grand coalitions that guarantee government office to parties representing all major sociocultural groups—induce elite moderation that facilitates cooperation and democratic survival. More recently, Reynolds (2011) contends that relative to majoritarian political institutions, power-sharing systems based on proportional representation create incentives to accommodate others and thus deter democratic breakdown. Such theories suffer intractable problems of empirical confirmation. Moreover, neither Lijphart nor Reynolds acknowledges or controls for the problem of endogeneity and so cannot dispel the suspicion that the balance of political forces underlying institutional development explains the likelihood of breakdown.

Similar methodological problems beset studies describing the virtues of parliamentary systems. According to Linz (1990), the inherent flaw of presidential systems is that they establish two governmental organs with autonomous legitimacy, creating almost inevitable clashes and stalemates. Mainwaring & Shugart (1997) have criticized this hypothesis for comparing wealthy OECD parliamentary systems to relatively poor Third World presidential systems. Furthermore, one-third of the stable parliamentary democracies in these samples had populations under one million, heightening suspicions that parliamentary systems were being established in contexts that were more propitious for democratic survival.

Cheibub's (2007) findings strongly confirm these suspicions. His analysis of Latin American cases finds that democracies established after military dictatorships have a much higher likelihood of being presidential systems, while democracies that follow civilian dictatorships are far more likely to be parliamentary systems. Moreover, democracies emerging from military dictatorships are less likely to survive than those following civilian dictatorships. That is, presidential systems are being established in contexts that are relatively inhospitable to democratic survival. Once the analysis accounts for this endogenous selection mechanism, there is simply no meaningful causal effect of presidential versus parliamentary system. This analysis fatally undermines the presidential-versus-parliamentary hypothesis. It vividly illustrates the need to account for the selection of institutions prior to determining the consequences of institutions.

Finally, we can mine insights from studies linking political stability to party-system characteristics. The existing literature offers four clues. First, party-system fractionalization, especially in interaction with presidential systems, undermines democratic stability (Mainwaring 1999,

Powell 1982). Second, dominant-party systems may be especially prone to noncompetitiveness that facilitates executive degradation of democracy (LeBas 2011, Riedl 2014). Third, democratic stability may be threatened by unbalanced party systems in which one party has much greater capacity to mobilize electors than its rival has; especially when parties are divided along ideological grounds, the subsequent threat of hegemony may lead actors to undermine democracy (Lust & Waldner 2016). Finally, the short-term collapse of the electoral viability of the traditional party system may be particularly conducive to the subversion of democracy by executive fiat (Seawright 2012).

These four hypotheses lack a large body of confirming cross-national evidence and, with the exception of the party-system collapse hypothesis, are only tangentially relevant to democratic backsliding. We cannot yet say whether dysfunctional properties of party systems are causes of backsliding or symptoms of the vulnerability to backsliding. Relative to electoral systems and the choice of presidential versus parliamentary regimes, however, party-system characteristics are probably less vulnerable to the influence of strategic actors. Hence, it may be easier to establish exogeneity. We believe, however, that party-system variables constitute permissive conditions that make polities more or less vulnerable to backsliding and thus are an important focus of future research.

Theories of Political Economy

Theories linking structural-economic variables to regime outcomes are a central pillar of studies of democratic transitions and breakdowns. These studies have provided the motivation to develop better datasets and more sophisticated statistical models for dealing with time-series, cross-sectional data. Perhaps as a result, there is a fair amount of debate about findings, which can be highly sensitive to case selection and model specification.

The existing literature theorizes four distinct political-economic variables: level of income, distribution of income, source of income, and short-term macroeconomic performance. For each of these four subfamilies of hypotheses, we distinguish, as is now the norm, between endogenous modernization theories that take the probability of a transition to democracy as their dependent variable, and exogenous modernization theories that take the probability of a democratic breakdown as their dependent variable.

Scholarship on the relationship between income levels and democratization finds evidence for both endogenous and exogenous modernization theories. A seminal study by Przeworski & Limongi (1997) argued on behalf of exogenous modernization theory, stating that income levels affected the likelihood of democratic breakdown but not the probability of democratization. Boix & Stokes (2002), and subsequent work by Boix (2003, 2011), countered that rising levels of income are associated with both higher probabilities of transitions to democracy and lower probabilities of democratic failures, while arguing convincingly that Przeworski & Limongi's study suffers from omitted variable bias, sample selection bias, and small sample size that yields higher-than-acknowledged levels of uncertainty in key estimates of probabilities. That said, in important ways, the two sets of authors produce convergent work. While Boix and Stokes convince us that it is necessary to work with a sample that includes nineteenth-century European cases, their revised study also demonstrates temporally heterogeneous effects of endogenous modernization, which appear to be very strong for the nineteenth century, moderate for the interwar period, and barely distinguishable from zero for the postwar period. Consequently, a number of scholars, most recently Bermeo & Yashar (2016), argue that income levels are not predictors of Third Wave democratic transitions: The price of admission to the club of democracies, denominated in gross domestic product, fell steadily over the course of the twentieth century. Multiple studies report that more recent democratic transitions have occurred at relatively high levels of inequality. For example, over the last decades of the twentieth century, the percentage of countries in the poorest

quintile that made a transition to democracy increased from 25% to 37%. We suspect that the result is the transition to low-quality, unconsolidated democracies that are more susceptible to backsliding, but we are aware of no published studies that have addressed this hypothesis.

A parallel body of scholarship, pioneered by Boix (2003) and Acemoglu & Robinson (2006), explores the influence of income inequality on democratic transitions and breakdowns. As income inequality rises, democracy's costs for the wealthy increase, lowering the probability of democratic transitions. Subsequent research and modifications of the underlying theory (Alemán & Yang 2011, Ansell & Samuels 2010, Houle 2009) have created an energetic debate about the endogenous and exogenous effects of income inequality. Some studies identify both effects; others identify only one or the other. Here too we find an important temporal dimension, as subsequent research suggests that any effect of inequality on democratic transitions and breakdowns was more powerful in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries than in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Bermeo 2009, Haggard & Kaufman 2012, Slater et al. 2014).

The third pillar of political economy theories examines the rentier state. Once again, we find temporal heterogeneity; Ross (2012) maintains that oil rents hinder democracy in the last decades of the twentieth century, especially in poor economies outside of Latin America with publicly owned petroleum sectors, while Haber & Menaldo (2011), taking the longer view, find that if anything oil has a small prodemocratic effect. We approach this material very cautiously; it appears clear to us that any effect of oil is highly conditional on a host of contextual features (Dunning 2008). Moreover, we find that studies of the rentier state have been relatively slow to adopt the distinction between effects of oil rents on democratic transition and effects of oil rents on democratic breakdown; most work continues to emphasize how oil hinders transitions and we know much less about how it might catalyze the deterioration of an existing democracy (Waldner & Smith 2015). In this respect, we think it important to highlight recent work by Mazzuca (2013) on oil and democratic backsliding. Mazzuca finds that in Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela, rising oil rents helped generate a leftist rentier populism in which informal economic sectors were induced to support new plebiscitary mechanisms that diminished horizontal accountability.

Finally, we turn to studies of short-term macroeconomic performance and political regimes. There is substantial statistical support for the family of hypotheses linking democratic transitions and democratic survival to macroeconomic conditions, especially if the economy is rapidly expanding or contracting (Bernhard et al. 2003, Burke & Leigh 2010). A recent study of new democracies finds that high rates of growth are associated with lower risks of authoritarian reversion, while high rates of inflation substantially increase the risks of democratic breakdown (Kapstein & Converse 2008). But in general, the findings in these studies are highly conditional on such a wide range of mediating variables that it is difficult to derive general lessons. It remains an open question whether macroeconomic performance on its own can trigger democratic backsliding.

Our survey of this theory family suggests the following summary judgments, which should inform our study of backsliding. First, the effect of rising income on democratic transitions appears to be temporally and geographically heterogeneous; the effect is strong prior to 1925 in Europe and Latin America but largely disappears afterward. In the late twentieth century, in contrast, it was the dismal economic performance of most dictatorships that led to democratic transitions (Haggard & Kaufman 1995). Second, democratic transitions have taken place amid high levels of income inequality. The most likely reason is that international market forces have largely constrained avowedly leftist governments from embarking on massive redistributive projects (Bermeo 2009, Fishman 2014, Weyland et al. 2010). Third, access to oil rents favors incumbents and exacerbates problems of vertical and horizontal accountability. This may be true even though the relationship between oil revenues and democracy is not decisively antidemocratic. Finally, these studies have not solved the problem of reverse causality, or endogeneity. The hypothesis states that the causal

relationship runs from economic conditions to democracy, but it is plausible that democracies and autocracies produce different levels of development.

Given these summary judgments, we recommend caution before attributing backsliding directly to political-economic variables. We believe that low levels of development or high levels of inequality, or both, are associated with weakly instituted democracies that are vulnerable to backsliding, but given the caveats raised, we advocate a broader canvas of relevant explanatory variables.

Theories of Social Structure and Political Coalitions

In contrast to the first four theory families, which treat citizens as a relatively homogeneous group, the fifth theory family focuses on social heterogeneity and explicitly conceptualizes the formation of groups of citizens, the potential for conflict among these groups, and the political implications of group formation and intergroup conflict. There are two major axes of division: economic structure and sociocultural structure. The first axis combines elements of class analysis and sectoral analysis. Alongside divisions by structure of production, pitting owners against workers, are divisions by factor endowment, such as town versus country. These are interest-based divisions: Owners of different types of resource endowments may be in conflict because they favor different economic or political policies. The second heterogeneous axis can fall along religious, linguistic, racial, or other descent-based attributes. These are identity-based divisions. Interest- and identity-based divisions may overlap to varied degrees.

Several caveats deserve emphasis. First, claims about socioeconomic divisions vastly simplify reality. For any individual, there are many possible sources of identity, and each individual can combine them in different ways at different times and in different contexts. Second, these divisions do not spontaneously occur but rather take place through complex social processes that we do not always fully understand. Third, it is not accurate to claim that social divisions are first formed and then influence political processes and structures; political structures and processes also influence group identity formation. Political entrepreneurs, for example, might deliberately facilitate certain forms of group formation and impede others.

A key point of intersection between socioeconomic divisions and political processes is the formation of political coalitions. Even a ruthless dictator needs the support and loyalty of, at minimum, members of the security forces and key government officials. In almost all cases, membership in this winning coalition extends beyond members of the state apparatus to embrace citizens as well. These citizens provide a range of valuable resources, from financial support to votes. Political entrepreneurs form these coalitions by negotiating the exchange of government-controlled resources in the form of public goods (general policies) or private goods (individual payoffs) for political and economic support (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003).

Coalition formation can influence political processes and structures in three ways. Most directly, key elements of the political process may be subjects of direct negotiation during coalition formation, as targeted members of the winning coalition demand political changes in return for their support. Second, the breadth and composition of the winning political coalition may influence the stability of the government and its capacity to preempt or survive crisis. Third, the public and private goods used to construct the winning coalition may have feedback effects that influence political processes and structures by way of political-economic factors. For example, excessive reliance on private goods may breed corruption, undermine the rule of law, and hence pose an obstacle to investment and long-term growth; or highly expansionary public policies may generate rapid inflation that destabilizes the government.

With these general comments in mind, we review four key theories. The first three highlight the causal significance of a particular social class: the bourgeoisie, the urban working class, and

peasants, respectively. The fourth hypothesis examines ethnic demography as a source of regime change.

The core intuition is that coming out of a feudal Europe, liberal democracy would be imperiled either by a hegemonic crown or by a weak crown hemmed in by an unchecked aristocracy. By default, the only class actor capable of breaking some form of the crown–nobility hegemonic alliance was the emergent bourgeoisie, basically merchants with autonomous control of economic resources and hence with the incentive and the capacity to gain distance from the dominant ruling class. As Moore (1966) famously argued, in the absence of a strong bourgeoisie, feudalism could only have been succeeded by either fascism, as the state undertook conservative modernization that could not be spearheaded by a weak bourgeoisie, or communism, when peasants were mobilized on behalf of revolutionary change. The hypothesis fundamentally rests on a tacit balance-of-power assumption: Democracy is possible only if there exists a social force with the incentives and the capacity to impose democracy over the objections of social forces with antidemocratic preferences.

In a related analytic exercise, Rueschemeyer et al. (1992) argue that because Moore's middle classes would battle antidemocratic agrarian elites to seek enfranchisement for themselves but not for lower classes, the full development of liberal democracy required the emergence of an organized industrial class. This development, in turn, required the development of industrial capitalism, which would shift the balance of class power away from antidemocratic landed interests and toward reliably prodemocratic urban interests. Economic development thus produces democracy because it transforms the class structure and makes new political coalitions possible to support democracy.

A third approach places peasants at center stage. According to Huntington (1968), in developing nations, political participation generally outstrips political institutionalization; political disorder results. The most important mechanism of achieving political order is to create a coalition with the countryside, a process Huntington referred to as the Green Uprising. Governments with widespread rural support can then deal more effectively with the urban political challenges, especially leftist movements. Control of the countryside also preempts the peasant-based communist movements that became prevalent in the 1960s.

Finally, an alternative approach to group formation and intergroup conflict looks at politically salient ethnic cleavages as a source of democratic instability (Bates 1974, Rabushka & Shepsle 1972). The basic idea is that in plural societies, ethnic identities have overwhelming political salience, such that loyalty is to the communal group rather than the nation, and communal preferences are intense. These loyalties in turn pressure ambitious politicians to appeal directly to members of their own community, a process known as outbidding, which undermines multiethnic coalitions. The anticipated outcomes are increased ethnic chauvinism, ethnic polarization, the breakdown of democratic institutions, and possibly interethnic political violence.

The four members of this theory family are among the most prominent theories of democratic transitions and breakdowns. Yet we think no single member of this family has survived serious challenges to its internal and external validity. For example, few contemporary social scientists would accept the simple claim "no bourgeoisie, no democracy," both because Moore (1966) does not fully sustain the claim and because it is not consistent with Third Wave democratic transitions. An equally large body of scholarship contests Huntington's theoretical framework. Most of the classic theories of social structure, political coalitions, and democracy rest heavily on informal theory and undisciplined case-study narratives. They do not satisfy contemporary standards of theory development, the derivation of hypotheses, case selection, or even qualitative causal analysis. Furthermore, a key weakness of these case studies is the inability to generalize findings beyond the small number of cases included in a study. Yet we believe that scholars have not fully mined the insights these theories promise, a theme we return to in the concluding section, where we further

explore the potential relevance of coalitional theories, especially their emphasis on the balance of power between social groups and classes.

International Factors

We treat international influence as primarily working through the channels described by the five prior theory families. What distinguishes hypotheses in this theory family is that the primary agent of the causal intervention is an actor in the international system, not a domestic actor. But the instruments of change are efforts to catalyze cultural, institutional, or economic change, as well as diplomatic efforts to persuade local political leaders to alter their behavior.

Consider the most extreme form of an international intervention, occupation-based nation building. From Germany and Japan through Iraq, nation building has included efforts to alter the cultural, institutional, and political-economic landscape. For example, the American military occupation of Japan after World War II, effective through April 1952, involved changes to the Japanese constitution, short-term economic policies to encourage stabilization and growth, policies aimed at restructuring the Japanese economy (e.g., dismantling economic conglomerates, land reform) and even education reforms that, among other features, sought to inculcate liberal and civic cultural values. Thus, theories centered on international influence are not necessarily distinct from the theory families already reviewed; they simply imply an external actor as the agent of change. Given this caveat, we review theories of international linkage and leverage, diffusion, international organizations, foreign aid, and international election monitoring.

Levitsky & Way (2006, 2010) have studied the mechanisms by which interactions with the liberal-democratic West might democratize competitive-authoritarian regimes, focusing on leverage and linkage. Western leverage refers to the authoritarian regime's vulnerability to external democratizing pressure; high leverage thus raises the costs of sustaining authoritarianism. The extent of leverage depends on the size of the state and economy; the existence of competing Western interests that can be played off one another; and the presence of countervailing powers that support autocrats. Linkage is an important mediating variable that determines the efficacy of Western pressure. It refers to the density of economic, political, diplomatic, and social ties, along with cross-border flows of capital, information, goods, services, and people. Linkage works by shaping domestic preferences for reform, shaping the domestic distribution of resources, strengthening democrats and weakening autocrats, and heightening the international reverberations of autocratic abuse. When leverage and linkage are high, there is strong and consistent pressure for democratization; when both are low, there is weak external pressure; and when they are mixed (high/low or low/high), there is weaker and more intermittent pressure.

Complementary analyses seek clues into democratic transitions by focusing on regional diffusion effects and membership in international organizations (Levitz & Pop-Eleches 2010). Gleditsch & Ward (2006), for example, observe that democracies are spatially clustered. Diffuse channels of international influence may thus affect the likelihood of democratic transitions and durability. For example, a successful prodemocratic movement in one country may persuade citizens of neighboring countries that their prodemocratic movement could be successful as well. Membership in international organizations may also help to consolidate democratic reforms; membership in the European Union, for example, generates Western leverage and linkage. This hypothesis, then, is a special instance of Levitsky & Way's more general hypotheses about leverage and linkage.

A third mechanism by which international actors may induce further democratization is international electoral monitoring. A study by Hyde (2007) is the strongest demonstration that international monitoring of elections can deter electoral fraud, thus influencing democratization.

By studying the 2003 Armenian presidential elections, she determines that incumbent advantage (and likely fraud) was greater in unmonitored than in monitored precincts. Beaulieu & Hyde (2009), however, find indirect evidence that as electoral monitoring has become more prevalent, pre-electoral manipulation by incumbents has increased.

Subsequent research expands on the idea that incumbents and international monitors are engaged in a complex strategic game with uncertain results. Kelley (2009) demonstrates that international election monitors respond to complex incentives, with concerns for their credibility and for democracy promotion sometimes jostling with concerns for the interests of their member states, the desire to prevent election-related violence, and even organizational preferences. Therefore, election monitors sometimes endorse flawed elections. In subsequent work, Kelley (2012) expands on these threats to credible election monitoring, observing that the growth of a shadow market of more lenient monitoring organizations allows countries to choose their monitors strategically.

Finally, there is ongoing research on the democratizing consequences of foreign aid. Djankov et al. (2008) find that foreign aid is analogous to oil rents: It stimulates rent-seeking behavior and curtails the capacity of citizens to hold rulers accountable. High levels of foreign aid are thus associated with measures of backsliding: Large-scale aid reduces a ten-point democracy index by as much as one point. There is mixed support for this hypothesis, with findings very sensitive to how the statistical model is constructed. While Knack (2004) finds no statistically significant relationship between aid and democracy scores, Wright (2009) finds that the relationship between aid and democratization is conditional on the size of the dictator's coalition.

We draw two conclusions about international factors. First, there can be little doubt that international factors matter. But second, it is equally evident that international factors work overwhelmingly by their influence on the domestic factors covered in the first five theory families. Thus, there has to date been limited progress in developing generalizable hypotheses about international factors. There are two sources of heterogeneity. First, the mechanisms by which international factors exercise influence may differ from country to country. Second, the susceptibility to international influences may differ from country to country. Thus, our summary judgment must be very tentative: While international intervention may be highly influential at times, our best prospects for developing our theoretical intuitions about the sources of backsliding should focus on domestic-level determinants.

TOWARD SYNTHESIS?

The study of backsliding is an important new research frontier. The increased incidence of democratic backsliding has been met with a similar increase in scholarly interest, but much is to be done to develop a coherent theoretical understanding of this phenomenon. As we look at the emerging literature on backsliding, much of which describes particular pathways of backsliding, we see a great deal of theoretical modesty, a virtue that may, if it impedes progress, become a vice. Moreover, our review of the broader literature on regime change reveals that although it provides more grand, theoretical frameworks, it falls short in important ways. There is no readily available set of theories that we as a community can uncontroversially adopt, adapt, and apply to the problem of backsliding.

We identify four obstacles to extracting a theoretical framework for studying democratic backsliding from the existing literature on democratic transitions and breakdowns. First, the contrast space of the required explanations is not necessarily equivalent. This is most clear when trying to extract theoretical wisdom from studies that use a binary indicator of democracy; we cannot immediately assume that a factor considered to be influential in raising or lowering the probability of a democratic transition is simultaneously influential for incremental and multidimensional

regressive change within a democratic political regime. Even continuous measures of democracy may carry unnecessary conceptual baggage and may thus present measurement challenges, as the measurement section above indicated.

Second, particular hypotheses within each theory family often lack desirable features that we associate with scientific progress. As we have noted, for example, approaches to political agency seldom present concrete, testable hypotheses, and theories of political culture often lack the combination of a demand side and a supply side that would be needed to logically predict the outcome in question. Even when concrete hypotheses exist, many studies still suffer from the persistence of unexamined endogeneity, a problem we see as particularly troubling in many studies of political institutions.

Third, across the theory families we see evidence of causal heterogeneity, both spatial and longitudinal. Most strikingly, the effects of economic growth on democratic transitions appear to have been relatively strong in Europe and parts of the Western Hemisphere in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, much less pronounced in the interwar period, and quite modest in the postwar period; indeed, that effect might even be negligible in the Third Wave of democratization.

Fourth, we find ongoing inter- and intratheoretical debates, methodological controversies, and significant reasons to question both the internal and external validity of many or most of the hypotheses we have covered.

What is to be done? We could of course throw up our hands, seek refuge in the claim that the world is infinitely complex, and give up on finding lessons that generalize across time or space or both. But while there may be some truth to this position, we would prefer that it be the conclusion of a long period of intellectual introspection and reflection than a starting point that, if accepted, would automatically deter discovering generalizations. We offer four suggestions for how to move forward.

First, we must treat contrast spaces with care. The causes of vulnerability to backsliding may be distinct from the proximate causes of particular instantiations of backsliding. A political actor in a polity that is vulnerable to backsliding may initiate a low-level assault on democratic accountability in response to a particular global event that does not trigger backsliding in other, less vulnerable democracies. Insofar as we can better distinguish causes of background vulnerabilities from causes of particular backsliding episodes, we may find that former theoretical rivals can in fact cooperate.

Second, despite the theoretical diversity presented above, we see space for some shared analytic frameworks that can better orient research projects, allowing communication across theoretical boundaries. Such a framework would have to be highly generalized to encompass a range of theoretical approaches: We are thinking here of an analogue of Sartori's (1970) ladder of abstraction in concept formation, which compensates for the greater denotative extension of a term with more circumscribed connotative intension. A candidate framework that we favor is Dahl's (1971) axiomatic approach to polyarchy, in which the probability of a democratic transition is positively related to the costs of suppression and inversely related to the costs of toleration. Thus, we can conceive of rising income inequality as raising the costs of toleration, while we can conceive of social capital as facilitating collective action and hence raising the costs of suppression.

Adapting Dahl's framework to the study of democratic backsliding motivates us to ask a defined set of questions rather than staking out an a priori theoretical commitment. For example, Dahl conceived of the two cost functions as monotonic and inversely related to one another, such that increases in the cost of toleration were exactly matched by decreases in the cost of suppression. This assumption of functional form probably reflects a tacit acceptance of modernization theory, but we are not bound by it.

We might hypothesize, for example, that vulnerability to backsliding in Third Wave democracies exists because while costs of toleration remain stable, costs of suppression have exogenously

increased. As we have seen, Third Wave democracies do not appear to have been systematically preceded by rising levels of income or decreasing levels of income inequality; in this sense, economic determinants of the costs of toleration do not appear to have made democratic transitions more likely. But the end of the Cold War and its associated support for dictatorships might have led to a rise in the costs of suppression, such that elites acceded in democratic transitions but bided their time, waiting for more propitious circumstances in which to turn back the clock. Alternatively, we might think of the emergence of new issues that substantially raise the costs of toleration and hence provide the rationale for an incremental or even a *sub rosa* assault on democracy, one that operates more covertly than a military coup and public seizure of power and hence is less likely to incur a costly response.

Third, regardless of the theoretical commitment one makes to motivate research, we think it highly useful to proceed within a balance-of-power framework. Relatively simple considerations of balance of power help to unify and integrate questions and insights. We can approach the study of vertical and horizontal accountability, for example, by considering the relative strength of actors who prefer greater or lesser degrees of constraint on executive power. We can approach the analysis of party systems by considering how, for example, dominant-party systems imply imbalances of power that in turn provide opportunities for executives to initiate backsliding. Oil rents may matter primarily because they create imbalances of resource-based power that may motivate and enable backsliding. Finally, we can integrate the study of coalition by considering how the relative sizes of the constituencies (including external actors) supporting and opposing the regime make backsliding more or less possible. In short, we see democratic backsliding as a consequence of shifting balances of power that favor incumbents, perhaps only temporarily, such that in an environment in which military coups are no longer desirable, incumbents seek partisan advantage by shredding some aspects of competitiveness, participation, and accountability.

Fourth, and finally, while we have acknowledged serious shortcomings in extant coalitional accounts, we continue to believe that a coalitional approach is worth taking very seriously, perhaps centrally. We believe that further development of social-structural and coalitional arguments is the most fruitful avenue for providing an encompassing approach to the balance-of-power framework that we see as implicit in so many of the hypotheses we have looked at. Moore's (1966) claim of "no bourgeoisie, no democracy" has not directly withstood the test of time, but his claim that stable liberal democracy is imperiled when economic resources are monopolized by antidemocratic social forces is still convincing. Moore's corollary that without a large prodemocratic coalition, efficaciously organized and with access to political institutions, democracy remains imperiled—with backsliding as one possible and even likely outcome—informs a great deal of the work we have surveyed. We close this article with the contention that this approach is the most fruitful way forward as well.

Consider the unsettling question of whether America is undergoing democratic backsliding under the Trump administration. Leading scholars of comparative politics have raised this possibility (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2016, Mickey et al. 2017), and two-thirds of the respondents to a recent public survey—including almost one-third of Republican identifiers—perceive Trump as having little or no respect for the country's democratic institutions and traditions (Superville & Swanson 2017).

Consistent with a conceptual approach that requires reversion along at least two of three dimensions of democracy, observers point to two areas of critical concern that might indicate backsliding: participation and accountability. Concerns about antidemocratic restrictions on participation stem from the wave of state laws aimed to make it more difficult for likely supporters of Democratic candidates to register and cast their ballots. These laws have emerged over the past 15 years and are most common where Republicans have recently won state legislative majorities

(Highton 2017). Concerns about accountability stem from various efforts by the administration and the Republican-controlled Congress to undermine transparency and restrict the flow of information, including the refusal to release Trump's tax returns, limitations on media access to the administration, attacks on the media as purveyors of "fake news" and enemies of the people, and an unparalleled lack of transparency in the crafting of major legislation such as efforts to repeal the Affordable Care Act. Whether these and other actions constitute democratic backsliding will depend, in part, on how durable these actions are in the face of public opposition and institutional responses, such as judicial rulings on the constitutionality of extreme partisan gerrymandering.

Theories from across our six theory families have been invoked to explain the heightened risk of democratic backsliding. Efforts to analyze Trump's personality represent purely agentic theories, while theories associating Trump voters with authoritarian personalities represent political culture theories. Perhaps most pervasive are theories of political economy that link support for Trump to economic anxiety, seeing it as a populist reaction to economic globalization that threatens American jobs or as a reaction to rising economic inequality. These explanatory endeavors should be treated cautiously, however. Some of them simply explain the wrong contrast space: Explaining why voters gravitate toward Republicans or toward a figure like Trump is not equivalent to explaining democratic backsliding. Remember, our explanatory goal is to explain discontinuous and incremental erosion of democratic attributes, not the results of a particular election.

We thus see merit in a synthetic analysis that centers on coalitions, placing them within social-structural and political-economic conditions, to explain the current dynamics of American politics and the looming threat of backsliding. Mickey et al. (2017) point to the relatively recent democratization of the American South as accelerating a slow-moving partisan realignment of voters by race (Schickler 2016). This helped polarize Congress and also furthered the radicalization of the modern Republican Party. Radicalization and polarization in turn have two implications for potential backsliding. First, radicalization gives political elites incentives to seek permanent advantages within a basic democratic framework—to bend the rules, ignore norms, and pursue strategies that would have seemed off-limits in an age of greater overlap between the centers of the two parties. Notably, any of these actions taken individually is subtle enough to be plausibly denied or can be plausibly justified within a democratic normative framework; it is only when considered in concert that they constitute a threat to democracy. Second, increasing polarization means that some Republican voters will ignore potential threats to democracy, reasoning that allowing the opposition to come to power represents an even greater threat that must be defended against at all costs. Svolik (2017) presents a formal model of the effects of polarization on incumbent manipulation of the democratic process, while Bermeo (2003) provides thoughtful case studies of ordinary people refusing to defect from democracy while polarization among elites eroded democratic procedures.

This quick look at the fate of democracy under the Trump administration illustrates the challenges of explaining backsliding. On the one hand, it is not always simple to identify whether backsliding has taken place and to what extent. On the other hand, despite the existence of six well-populated theory families, we do not have an obvious theoretical framework for explaining backsliding. It is quite clear that many of the factors identified by existing theories—individual personalities, political cultures and institutions, economic conditions, and even international factors—are plausibly relevant to explaining backsliding. But it is perhaps equally clear that these broad theory families have not generated many testable hypotheses specific to explaining the distinctive outcome space of backsliding, which is incremental change within democratic regimes.

It is our sense, however, that a synthetic approach centered on coalitions is the most promising avenue for future research. Backsliding, after all, is an outcome of political struggles made possible by shifting balances of power; coalitional strength and its change over time are one fruitful way to explain these shifts in balances of power. It appears likely to us that under some coalitional

dynamics, major political actors are no longer satisfied playing strictly by the rules, losing gracefully, and competing again in the next round. Whether they can be constrained or whether they can continue unimpeded until democracy exists in name only depends on balances of power.

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