

Effective Strategies to Resist Democratic Backsliding: An Events Analysis of Instigators, Targets, and Resistance Mobilization

Paul Friesen and Rachel Beatty Riedl

Center on Global Democracy, Brooks School of Public Policy

Cornell University

In contemporary cases of democratic backsliding, leaders deploy a range of attacks on democratic spaces with varying targets, pace, and effectiveness. The Democratic Attack and Resistance Events (DARE) dataset allows us to help answer urgent questions related to backsliding – which democratic spaces and institutions are targeted, by who, what galvanizes resistance actors to respond, and *what combination of conditions results in a greater likelihood of successful resistance against attacks?*

We find that attacks on institutions – the rule of law, judiciary, legislature, and electoral systems – are less common, but more severe. Attacks on institutions are also more likely to be *initiated by the legislature*, passing legislation that limits democratic institutional practice and processes. In comparison, attacks on civil liberties, media, and civil society, are more frequent but often less severe.

Regarding resistance, the *judiciary exhibits the greatest capacity* to directly stop legal attacks and abuse of power attacks. Critically, however, we find that the effectiveness of institutional resistance – judicial, legislative, and bureaucratic – is contingent on the degree of the ruling party’s legislative control. More frequent and successful institutional resistance occurs when the party associated with backsliding has only minority control in the legislature; institutional resistance is weak under the party’s majority control and nearly neutralized under supermajority control.

Motivation

What kind of “playbook” resistance actors have in responding to attacks on democracy is, to some degree, context specific. How the attacks take place (by whom, against whom, and whether they are legal/institutionalized channels or extra-institutional/coercive channels) will greatly influence how likely and how effective democratic resistance will be, and from where it will emerge. This specificity also suggests the potential for patterns. For example, attacks meant to concentrate power in the executive and weaken institutional checks and balances might catalyze certain types of responses among certain types of democratic actors, and less mobilization by others. It also suggests potential for learning across contexts, both amongst would-be autocrats attempting to limit rights and checks on power, as well as for democratic dissidents who seek to maintain full competition, expression, participation, and the rule of law.

We provide an analysis, drawing on a novel dataset, to identify such patterns and draw lessons about the effectiveness of democratic resistance strategies. We find significant variation in severity and types of attacks across democratic spaces. Attacks on spaces that are more social (related to the population), especially media, civil society, and political parties, undergo high rates of attack, are often more targeted to particular individuals or specific civic groups rather than generalized across the entire sector, and are frequently initiated by the executive (leader, bureaucracy, and coercive forces). In contrast, attacks on institutional spaces (how law is created and reviewed, and how leaders are selected and held accountable) tend to be attacked through “legal” processes or quasi-legal means and are often more severe.

We also find that the level and effectiveness of resistance vary significantly across domains, with the judiciary being the most effective, followed by the bureaucracy, and thirdly, civil society and or mass mobilization. Perhaps most importantly, we find that the level of resistance from key actors and the effectiveness of their efforts fall as the leader and ruling party increase their power over the legislature. In cases of supermajority legislative control, or similar status, these is extremely little institutional resistance.

While attacks on social spaces tend to be more narrowly applied in scope to specific people or organizations, the incremental nature of democratic backsliding means that these attacks are an important part of the backsliding toolkit, though they rarely result in large spikes of autocratization. The bulk of attacks target social actors and these tend to be small to medium in impact and accumulate over time to wear down the resistance capacity of these sectors. Instead, the key moments of backsliding occur when the executive takes over the legislature and/or judiciary. This is particularly the case when the executive gains a legislative supermajority and/or full judicial control sufficient to make constitutional changes.

When reviewing the case studies included in our dataset, the most severe instances involve a significant moment of legislative capture followed by incremental judicial control. Once these two domains of horizontal accountability are captured, efforts to resist across both social and institutional domains are much less effective, even in the electoral realm, because key opposition actors can be disqualified and the electoral playing field can be made highly unequal through “legal” channels. However, we also find that leaders’ widespread attacks on civil liberties are the most likely to mobilize mass protest since this is very likely to cause mass backlash and/or

catalyze an electoral opposition coalition capable of punishing the ruling party in the next elections.

Our data suggest a rich potential for further interactive sequencing arguments, to understand how the targets of democratic backsliding generate resistance in some domains and not in others, and how autocratizers are blocked in one domain (such as legislative control) may shift to another for more coercive crackdowns or plebiscitary popular appeals (e.g referenda to change the constitution, or to further concentrate power in the executive and away from an empowered legislature), and provide insight into whether such strategies and targets are likely to be effective, as well as which resistance efforts can turn the tide, under what conditions.

Gaps in Democratic Backsliding and Resistance Knowledge

A theory of contemporary “democratic backsliding,” centered around the incremental deterioration of democratic conditions by a legitimately elected leader, has developed over past decades (Diamond 2015; Bermeo 2016; Walder and Lust 2018; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2019; Haggard and Kaufman, 2021; Bernhard, 2021; Riedl et al. 2024; Carothers and Hartnett, 2024; Knutsen et al. 2024), alongside skeptical analyses on the topic (Brownlee and Miao 2022; Little and Meng, 2024; Weyland 2024). Most scholars agree that there has been a significant movement away from democracy among a diverse group of countries, including long-established democracies and advanced industrial democracies.¹ While the complexity of democracy as a concept (Dahl, 2000) and measurement (Coppedge et al., 2011) creates ongoing challenges, we identify an additional area ripe for further exploration – the mechanics of democratic backsliding and the likelihood and effectiveness of resistance specifically tied to how backsliding occurs. We also suggest a research agenda for more attention to resilience factors, those that stop backsliding from starting in the first place (Merkel and Lührmann, 2021; Riedl et al. 2024).

An emerging research agenda on resistance within cases of democratic backsliding suggests several encouraging lines to pursue. Resistance to democratic backsliding is still being conceptualized but is described as an adaptation to changing political landscapes (Lieberman et al. 2021), a system or pattern of adjustments to meet new challenges (Holloway and Manwaring, 2023), or the ability to withstand attacks, adapt to challenges, or recover from periods of autocratization (Merkel and Lührmann, 2021; Gamboa 2022). Resistance and resilience are often viewed as primarily institutional, but should also relate to popular sentiments like trust and democratic support, as well as the horizontal or vertical spaces like political parties and civil society organizations, along with mass movements and voting (see Croissant and Lott, 2024).

¹ The question of how experts code various elements of democracy is a worthwhile one. The managers of V-Dem have thought carefully about how to minimize judgment bias, including clearly labeling ordinal variable responses, making questions relatively specific, and a measurement model that takes into account expert coder reliability and whether a coder is stricter or more lenient, on average (Marquardt and Pemstein, 2023). Little and Meng (2024) posit that expert coders have become more pessimistic about democracy in recent years as the narrative of “democratic backsliding” has become more widespread. While it’s not possible to completely rule out such a trend, Knutsen et al. (2024) do not find evidence that more recent data is systematically more pessimistic across the V-Dem dataset.

A key focus has centered on the role of civil society as the front line in interacting with a leader and ruling party seeking to consolidate power, hamper checks and balances, and often reduce civil liberties (see Coppedge et al. 2022). Civil society and media freedoms are the most likely to initially come under pressure or attack (Wunsch and Blanchard, 2023). Research shows, however, that robust civil societies built through mass, non-violent political movements have helped newer democracies survive (Kadivar, 2018; Chenoweth, 2021), and proved instrumental to challenging anti-democratic constitutional amendments in countries like Malawi and Zambia, where the oftening leader lost the next election like (Rakner, 2021; Dionne and Dulani 2025). Civil society is most effective in resisting backsliding when organized and not polarized (VonDoepp, 2020). On the other hand, in Indonesia, civil society became increasingly ineffective at keeping leaders in check as ideological divides expanded and organizations atrophied (Mietzner, 2022).

Another line of research has sought lessons for how opposition politicians may halt backsliders. Opposition party coalitions increase the likelihood of successfully removing leaders engaging in democratic backsliding (Feldman and McCoy, 2024). On the other hand, overly aggressive actions from opposition leaders tend to backfire (Somer et al., 2019; Cleary and Öztürk, 2022). The core institutions of the political systems are, of course, other key sites for democratic attack and resistance, only referred to as horizontal, such as the bureaucracy, legislature, and judiciary. Within an independent bureaucratic state, key actors may maintain some capacity to resist, even as populist ideas may be leveraged by leaders to attempt to deconstruct their autonomy (Bauer et al., 2021). Critically, Boese et al. (2021) find, using the Episodes of Regimes Transformation dataset from V-Dem, that the judicial check on the executive variable appears to be the most dynamic source of resilience during the backsliding episode.

Research Questions

Given the ongoing nature of many cases of democratic backsliding around the world, including the United States, we seek to provide pragmatic accounts of resistance effectiveness based on our events dataset. In this paper, we focus on three questions, dedicating one section of our findings to addressing each.

1. ***How are attacks on democracy blocked or reversed?*** We report on the outcome of each type of democratic attack event and the key correlates of whether the attack was fully implemented as intended or whether it was partially or fully blocked.
2. ***What mobilizes resistance actors?*** We seek to uncover the correlates of different levels of resistance in response to attacks. This is because resistance mobilization against attacks is the primary driver of blocking their successful implementation.
3. ***How does legislative control influence both resistance mobilization and attack blocking?*** In our analysis, we find that the degree of control of the legislature by the party or coalition affiliated with the attack is a pivotal condition for the degree of resistance mobilization and effectiveness of mobilization.

Combined, this initial analysis points to general findings around how to best resist democratic attacks. These focus on contributions from all resistance actors, but the bureaucratic and judicial resistance efforts are the most effective in blocking attacks. However, these are uncommon, and significant damage can be done to democratic spaces while a backsliding leader is in office. Civil society and mass protests play important contextual factors related to the country's level of resistance. In general, wealthier countries, those with strong democratic histories, and especially where the legislature is still a site of political contestation have higher rates of resistance. Overall higher rates of resistance and blocking are correlated with our recovery cases, or those in which a backsliding leader was removed through election or impeachment.

Dataset

Nearly all research on democratic backsliding relies primarily on one of two methods of study – statistical studies using generalizable quantitative data from expert surveys like V-Dem (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019; Boese et al., 2023; Wunsch and Blanchard, 2023) or comparative case study analyses that detail processes and mechanisms of regime dynamics (Cianetti et al., 2019; Croissant and Haynes, 2022; Arriola et al., 2022; Riedl et al., 2024). While illuminating, we seek a deeper integration between qualitative and quantitative sources on the key cases of backsliding that can potentially generate understanding the episode-specific and interactive dynamics at play between forms of democratic erosion and strategies and outcomes of resistance.²

Several important datasets exist that provide a useful starting point and comparison. V-Dem data have greatly expanded the ability of researchers to study regime trends and democracy. Because the data are aggregated ratings of expert coders, however, there is no direct explanation for a change in any indicator. Even if one trusts that the indicator is a strong representation of the concept and represents the best reasonable approximation of real events, the user is still not aware of *what events, either pro or anti-democratic, have occurred to produce this result*. Another disadvantage of using quantitative measures like V-Dem is that they aggregate all events and conditions into a single country-year score. A score that does not change across time may mean that no meaningful events have taken place, or it may mean the opposite – that important but fairly simultaneous attacks and resistance to backsliding occurred and end up canceling out on balance.

Another approach to data collection is recording important political events. We take inspiration from the Democratic Erosion Event Dataset (DEED) to record key events related to democratic backsliding. The creators envisioned that such a record of events would be best used alongside democracy indices (Baron et al., 2024). The events are gathered by a wide range of undergraduate students and checked by academic advisors, and the dataset contains events from around 100 democratic-leaning countries between 2000 and 2023.³ Each event is based on a

² There are inevitable trade-offs between thinner (generalizable) approaches to measurement and a thicker measurement strategy that contains a greater of judgments but also a more cohesive picture of the concept (Coppedge, 2012).

³ Version 6 - The DEED dataset works to cover all events for democratic leaning regimes (Started with V-Dem ROW 2 or above) from 2000 to present.

cited news source and includes a brief narrative.⁴ We build off the DEED effort, along with other supplementary new sources as well as democracy and human rights reports, to generate a list of democratic attacks and then follow up on each observation across a range of additional variables, with particular attention to linking the forms, strategies, and scale of resistance to each particular democratic erosion event.

The current DARE dataset provides coded events across 14 countries. These data are intended not to study and understand regimes generally, but pinpoint individual administrations where an elected leader of a democratic regime is working towards a less democratic regime. We thus first identify the political administrations under which the head of government engages in a pattern of actions in violation of the principles of liberal democracy. Currently, in selecting the countries, we seek to cover the most important cases of democratic backsliding, but also key recovery cases, while emphasizing balanced coverage across world regions. As a next step, we seek to expand the dataset to include all backsliding episodes since the beginning of the third wave.⁵ The government, time periods, and changes in the Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) score for the current 14 countries are shown in Table 1. We also report the number of events coded for each country during these time periods, which totals 1,170.

Table 1 – Country Cases and Observations					
Country	Government	Time Period	Episode Length	LDI Change	Observations
Brazil	Bolsonaro (PSL)	2018-2023	4	-0.10	51
Ecuador	Correa (PAIS)	2006-2017	11	-0.19	65
Guatemala	Giammattei (Vamos)	2019-2024	4	-0.11	61
Malawi	B. Matharika (DPP), P. Matharika (DPP)	2004-2012, 2014-2020	8, 6	+0.04, -0.03	45, 34
Poland	Szydlo, Kaczynski, Duda (PiS)	2015-2023	8	-0.40	71
South Korea	Lee, Park (GN, Saenuri, Liberty)	2007-2017	9	-0.14	50
<hr/>					
Benin	Talon	2016-	9	-0.22	76
Hungary	Orban (Fidesz)	2010-	15	-0.44	96
India	Modi (BJP)	2014-	11	-0.25	77
Indonesia	Widodo (PDI-P)	2014-	11	-0.16	44

⁴ It is then coded as one of four overarching action types - “precursors”, “symptoms”, “resistance”, or “destabilizing event”, and then classified under a more specific label. DEED represents a new way to potentially study democratic movements based on events to complement data like V-Dem. The impressive scope of DEED provides a breadth and depth of specific instances surrounding democratic erosion, and the DEED dataset adds instances of democratic resistance. While DEED dataset provided a useful starting point for our research agenda, we lacked significant country coverage on democratic resistance, coded information on the aggressors and specific targets (though this can often be inferred through the description), and an organization scheme to connect “symptom” events to “resistance”, as well as a meaningful measure of severity and outcome status of some events.

⁵ Our team is currently coding an additional 15 countries that have experienced democratic backsliding pressures in recent decades.

Serbia	Nikolic, Vucic (SNS)	2012-	13	-0.26	165
Tunisia	Saied	2019-	5	-0.34	40
Turkey	Erdogan (AKP)	2002-	22	-0.39	188
Venezuela	Chavez, Maduro (MVR, PSUV)	1998-	26	-0.55	107
					1,170

We thus include cases with both moderate and high democratic institutions and practices across Europe, Latin America, Africa, and Asia. In eight of the cases, democratic backsliding continues to be an ongoing process as of 2024 - Benin, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Serbia, Tunisia, Turkey, and Venezuela, with some of these countries deteriorating into full autocracy and others best described as hybrid or competitive authoritarian regimes. In another six cases – Malawi, Brazil, Ecuador, Poland, Guatemala, and South Korea – autocratizing governments were removed via elections, impeachment, or elite successors.

One key difference between the DARE and DEED datasets is that our project provides several additional codings about the democratic attacks to be used for analysis. These variables are overviewed in Table 2. For each event, three narratives are provided regarding the attack, resistance, and outcome of the event. Based on this information, we provide ordinal or categorical codings that help capture timing, instigators, targets, the scope and magnitude of attacks, and all of the different actors and actions of resistance associated with it. The outcome of the event is our main interest in the analysis – did the attack go unchanged or unpunished, or was there a partial or total amendment to the attack and/or was justice served on behalf of the affected?

Table 2: Key Variables

Variable	Notes
Date of Attack	Month, Year
Instigator (Name)	Up to three, Options: Leader, Legislature, Police, Military, Minister, Bureaucrats, Ruling Party, Judicial, Oligarch, Public Media, Unknown.
Target Space (Name)	Options: Media, Civil Society, Electoral System, Bureaucracy, Rule of Law, Political Parties, Judicial, Legislature, Civil Liberties
Attack Type	Options: Legal, Abuse of Power, Verbal, Other
Attack Narrative	One to two sentence description of attack
Root Action	Previous Attacks Connection
Attack Unit	Options: Process, Organizations, Leaders, Individuals
Attack Scope	1-5 (Ordinal)
Attack Magnitude	1-5 (Ordinal)
Resistance Narrative	One to two sentence description on resistance
Date of Resistance	Month, Year, if applicable
Resistance Actors	Names of resistance actors
Citizens Mobilization	0-5 (Ordinal)
Domestic Civil Society Mobilization	0-5 (Ordinal)

International Civil Society Mobilization	0-5 (Ordinal)
International Government Mobilization	0-5 (Ordinal)
Political Parties Mobilization	0-5 (Ordinal)
Judicial Mobilization	0-5 (Ordinal)
Legislative Mobilization	0-5 (Ordinal)
Bureaucratic Mobilization	0-5 (Ordinal)
Sub-national Mobilization	0-5 (Ordinal)
Outcome Implementation	Options: Fully, Partially, Not (Blocked), or Unknown
Outcome Narrative	Sentence Description of Outcome
Attack Sources	Links
Resistance Sources	Links

Descriptive Data

Across the 14 case studies that we examine, there are a range of patterns and outcomes when it comes to the democratic backsliding episodes. In six cases, the episode was arrested through the leader/party losing an election (Brazil, Guatemala, Malawi 2, Poland), or through the replacement of a more moderate successor (Malawi 1, Ecuador), or impeachment and removal of the leader (South Korea). All of these qualify as “recovering” cases.

Figure 1 shows the rates of successful and blocked attacks over time following the onset of a backsliding episode. The y-axis is thus the number of years since the onset. The x-axis is the sum of all attacks in that year, weighed by severity.⁶ In most cases, except for South Korea, backsliding administrations engage in a rate of attack rate during the first year of the episode. Both Ecuador and Poland, which are longer in duration, have additional peaks of attacks. In several of these cases – particularly Brazil, Guatemala, and Malawi – there is a significant proportion of blocked attacks, especially later in the episode. South Korea has the fewest attacks spread over the most time, but the notable attacks come later in the episode.

Figure 1 – Blocked and Implemented Attacks over Time: Recovering Cases

⁶ In the case the attack scale is one is equal to the most severe attack (maximum scope and magnitude). Each attack in that year is multiplied by its severity then than aggregated first for successful attacks and then blocked.

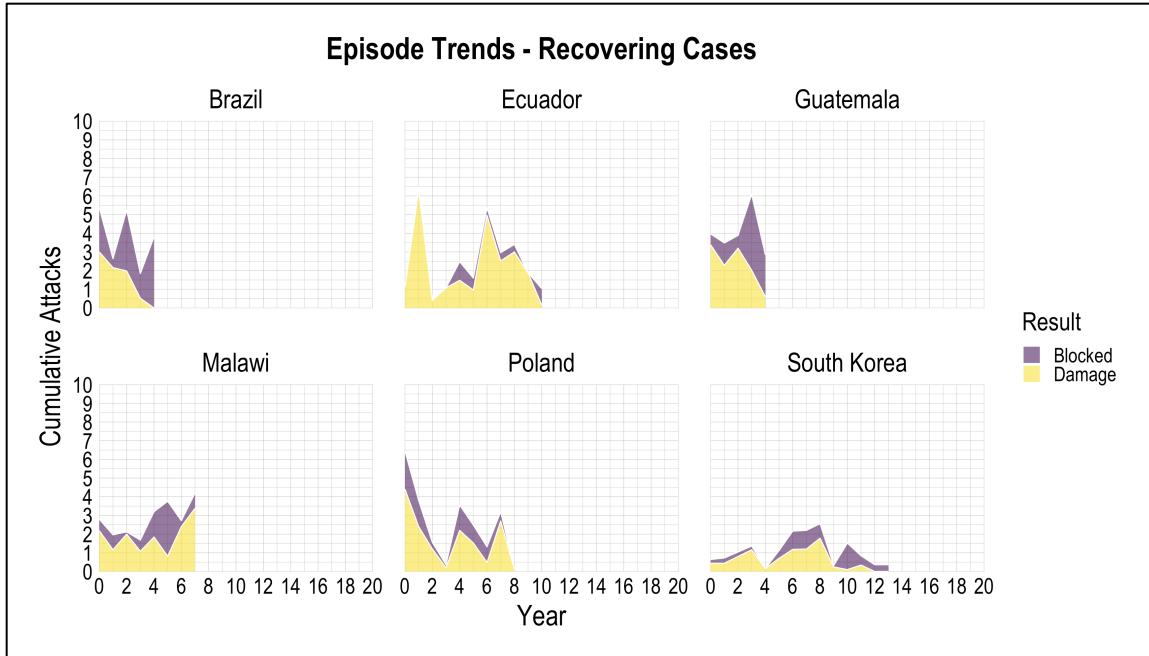
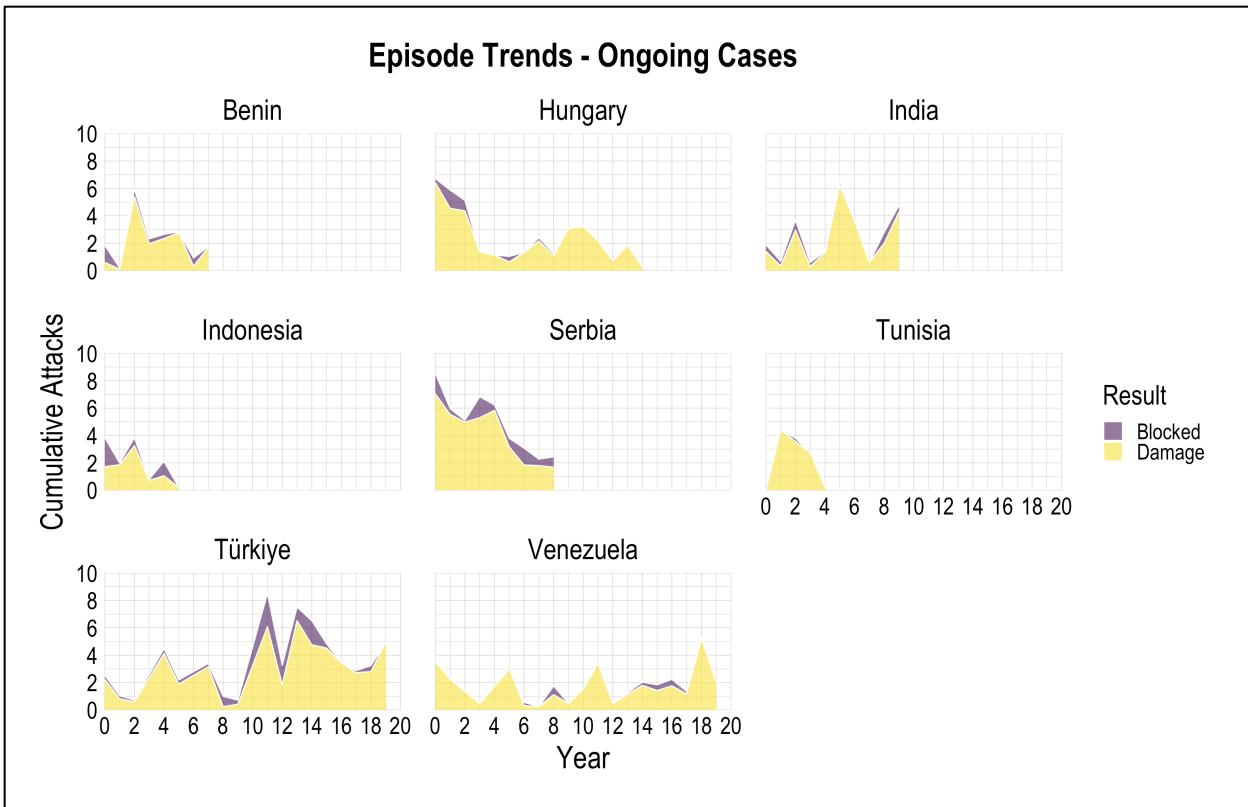


Figure 2 shows the episode trends across the remaining eight cases where the backsliding government has not yet lost power as of 2024. We observe a range of patterns over time, some with shorter durations and others over two decades including (such as Turkey and Venezuela).

Figures 2 – Blocked and Implemented Attacks by Country: Ongoing Backsliding Cases



Hungary and Serbia follow a similar trajectory regarding attack rates – very high in the first term and then declining thereafter. This is notable because these are two examples of legislative supermajority control, in which the legislature could essentially change the Constitution at will or “lawfare” (Schepppele, 2018). Thus, in each case, the government took advantage of this situation by passing a high rate of legal changes. In Tunisia and Benin, a major attack to gain more control of the legislature occurred in years two and one of the episodes, respectively, again significantly enhancing the power of the executive by essentially removing political opposition, and creating a pathway to ensure favorable judicial appointees in Benin. Indonesia and India are more moderate over time. Attacks peaked in India in 2020 around changes to citizenship laws and reaction to the farmers’ protest movement, and somewhat in 2023 as opposition MPs were excluded from parliamentary sessions and violent attacks against targeted groups ramped up.

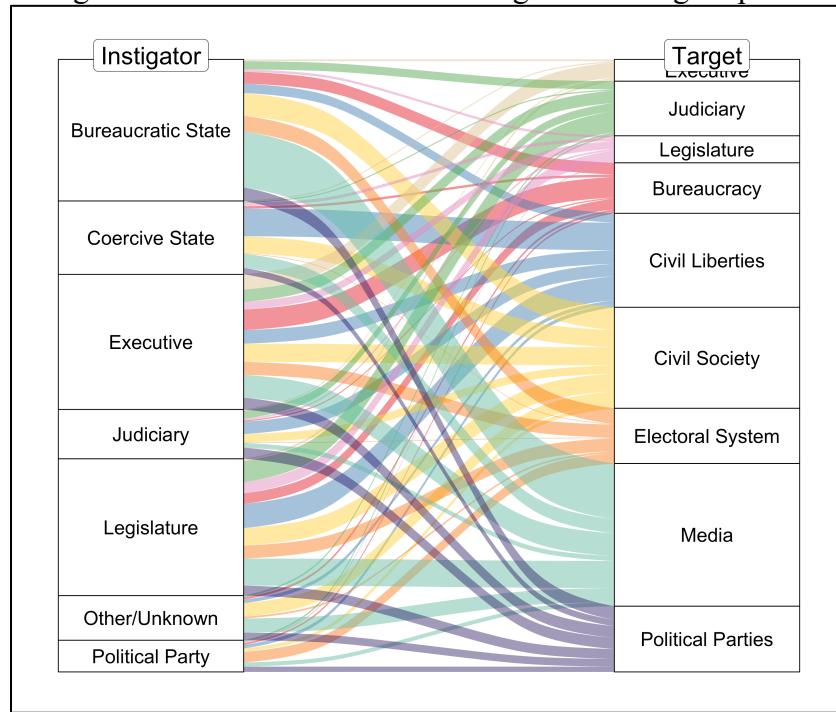
In the two cases with the longest duration and greatest degree of backsliding – Turkey and Venezuela – there were moderate attack rates, and then attacks peaked following critical events. For Venezuela, attacks increased to the highest rates during 2017 and 2018, centered around an election for President Maduro, whose weakened position spurred him to heavily rely on electoral manipulation and repression. For Turkey, backsliding increased on the heels of an insecure moment for President Erdogan, following the failed 2016 coup. The period from 2016 to 2018 was the most dramatic increase in attacks in Turkey. In both cases, middle-income democracies sank into full authoritarianism, accelerated by these key moments.

We also provide summary statistics around who instigates attacks, against what democratic spaces, how severe they were, and through what means. As anticipated, *democratic attacks come overwhelmingly from the state* – including the leader (executive) (22.1%), the bureaucratic states

where departments or ministries lead the attack (23.1%), and the coercive state, which encompasses the police, military, and intelligence services (12.0%). The second dominant institution is the legislature (22.4%). Other categories include the Judiciary (8.1%), members of the Ruling Party (5.2%), and Other/Unknown (7.2%).

Figure 3 shows all attacks with instigators plotted against all democratic spaces. Some of the more prominent relationships between instigators and target spaces include: the executive (leader) making changes to the executive realm to increase their power (removing term limits or other constraints and mechanisms of accountability, over-riding the constitution or judiciary), the bureaucratic state attacking independent media through government regulations, the executive reducing the independence of the bureaucratic state (civil servants), and the coercive state attacking civil liberties and civil society (through repression, especially around protests).

Figure 3: Democratic Attacks – Instigators to Target Spaces



What is also apparent in Figure 3 is that some democratic spaces incur a greater number of attacks. Many of these spaces are social in nature – having to do with the general public and the social organizations that they interact with. We find the highest rates of attacks towards the Media (23.3%), Civil Society (16.5%), and Civil Liberties (15.3%). We also include opposition political parties as part of this societal category (10.8%). Combined, these spaces compose 66% of attacks in our dataset. We differentiate societal democratic spaces from institutional ones. Among the institutional spaces, the proportion of attacks by institutions includes Bureaucracy (8.2%), Electoral System (9.0%), Executive/Rule of Law (3.5%), Judiciary (8.9%), and Legislature (4.4%). Together, they compose about a third of attacks.

Critically, however, attacks are divergent not only in the democratic space affected or the specific actions taken but also in the *severity of the attack*. We measure severity through two dimensions

– Scope and Magnitude – each of which takes a value of one to five. The scope of the attack refers to the proportion of the democratic space affected. The magnitude is the degree of change away from the intended functioning of the space. For example, when a journalist is killed because of their work, we rate the incident as the lowest scope but the highest magnitude for the media space. If a leader demonizes and threatens all opposition parties, we rate this as having the highest scope, but the lowest magnitude affecting the political parties’ space.

Figures 4A and B show the number of attacks included across Social and Institutional democratic spaces, their Scope and Magnitude, and attack type. The coloring of each dot represented the proportion of attacks that were “legal,” essentially conducted using the rule of law through at least semi-legitimate pathways, typically laws passed through the legislature.

Figures 4 – Severity of Attacks by Proportion Legal

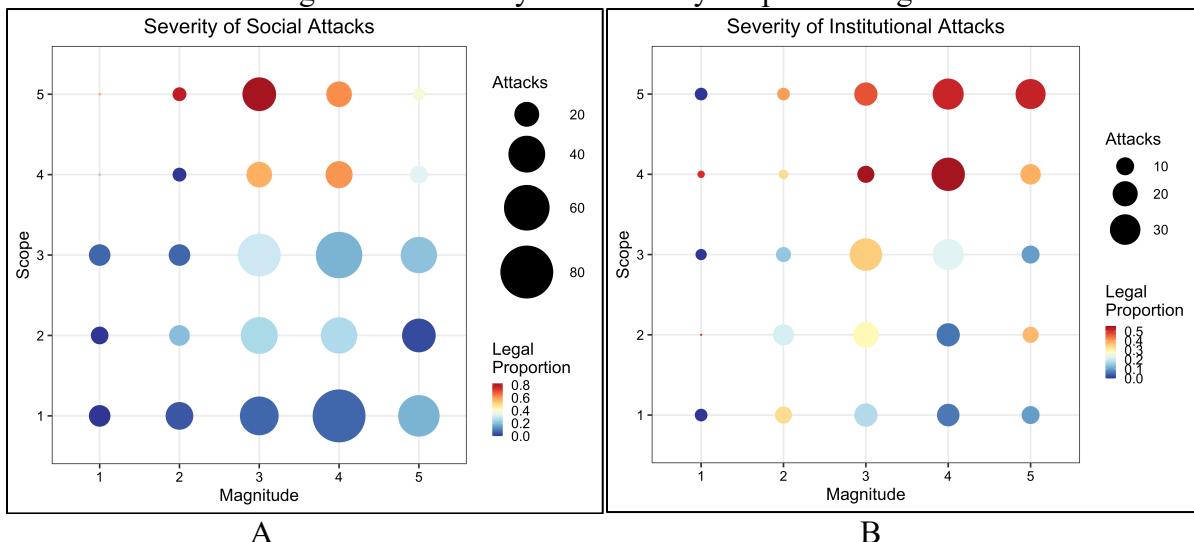


Figure 4A shows that the vast majority of attacks on social spaces tend to be limited in scope (under 3), though often moderate to high in Magnitude. Importantly, these attacks also tend to be overwhelming through abuses of power, and less so through legal processes. We also observe some *high-scope attacks, which are much more likely to be legal*. This differentiates strategies that are targeted against a particular individual or social entity (a club, media corporation, single civic group) which are often illegal, and those that are “sector-wide” which would include a legislative ban on certain types of social activity or media practices. **Overall, attacks against social spaces tend to be more common, range in magnitude, are lower in scope, and are less likely to be legal in nature.**

Compare this with Figure 4B, which captures all attacks on institutional spaces, which are less frequent. There are very few institutional attacks that are low in magnitude, and they tend to be much more severe overall. Also, *as the attacks become more severe (higher scope and magnitude), they are increasingly likely to be legal in type*. This makes intuitive sense, as the restricting of entire democratic spaces, especially institutions, is a high-risk strategy by the backsliding leader, and attacks may be viewed as more legitimate and/or harder to resist when they follow legal processes.

Findings

When are Attacks on Democracy Blocked?

Our analysis now turns to address the three questions probing the best strategies and conditions to resist attacks on democracy. First, we analyze the correlates of what makes attacks succeed (implemented fully without impunity) or not (blocked or perpetrators held accountable).

In total, we find that 70.6% of attacks are implemented in full, 18.1% are partially implemented, and the remaining 11.2% qualify as being fully blocked either through amendment (changing course), or through full accountability of wrongdoing. We convert this outcome status to an ordinal variable where 1 is equal to full blocking or accountability, 0.5 is partial blocking, and 0 is when the attack is fully implemented without repercussions. We use a linear regression model with other relevant variables sorted into four categories: 1) Resistance Actor mobilization, 2) Instigators, 3) Democratic Spaces, and 4) Contextual Factors. Figures 5 (A:D) shows the coefficients generated from a single regression model. Those shown in bold are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level.

The most dynamic findings predicting attack blocking are resistance actors' mobilization. Here each resistance actor is scored 0 (none) to 1 (maximum) on their degree of mobilizing against the democratic attack. Because of the differing nature of each resistance actor, the mobilization rates are different between them, as some resist in "small" ways frequently, others rarely resist, etc. Figure 5A critically shows that they are very different in effectiveness. This corresponds to an intuitive understanding of each actor: we shouldn't expect civil society to have the same type of power as the judiciary, for example, as it is the role of the judiciary to stop executive overreach, whereas it is the role of civil society to express social interests, connecting state and society. **The model highlights Judicial resistance as the most powerful.** The coefficient of 0.524 demonstrates that when the Judiciary goes from no mobilization to maximum mobilization, there is, on average, an increase in the blocking score of 0.524, essentially moving from fully implemented to partial block, or partial to full block. No other coefficient reaches this level of impact.

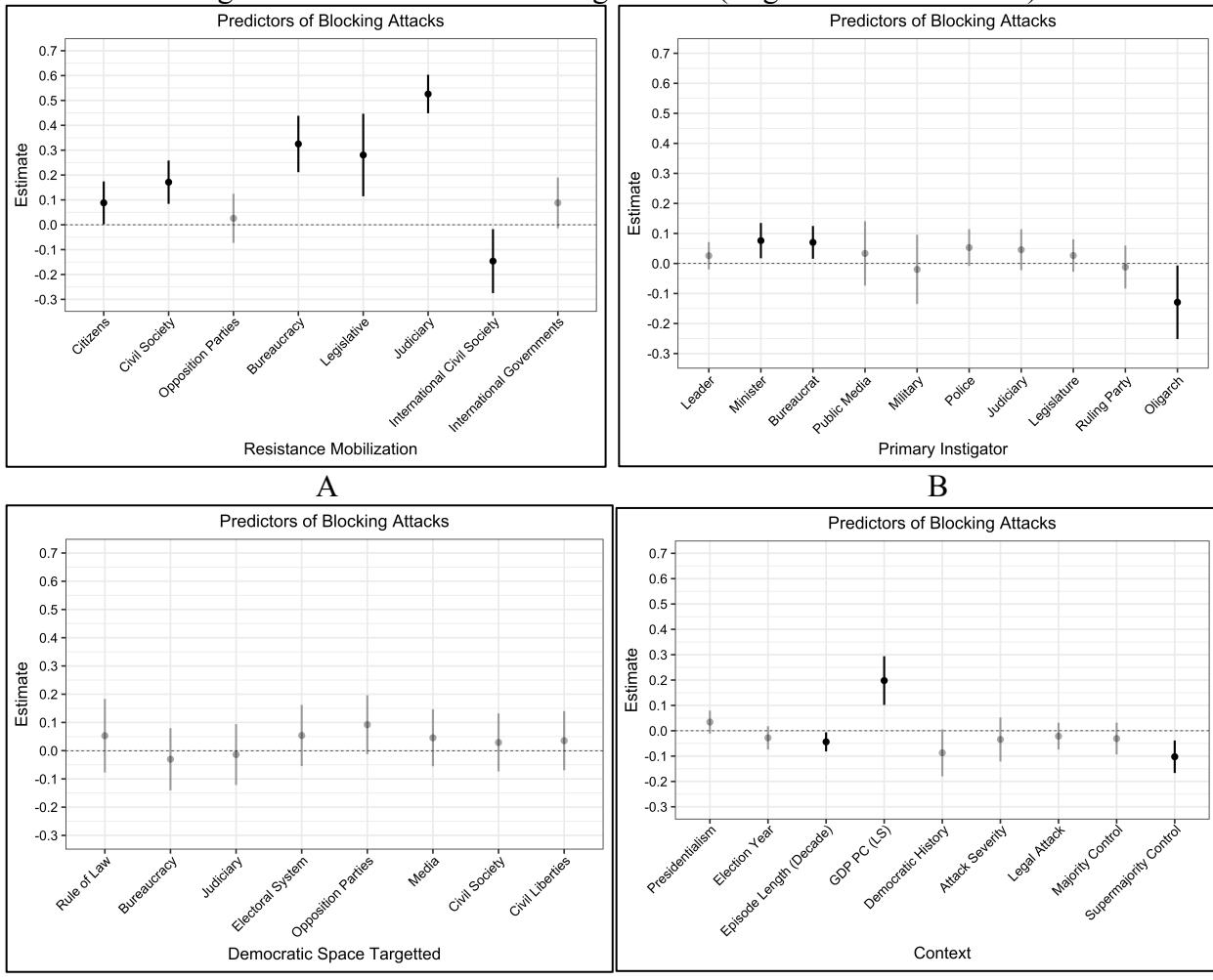
That said, several other resistance actors have statistically significant positive effects on increasing the likelihood of blocking, including Bureaucratic (0.323), Legislative (0.279), Domestic Civil Society (0.173), and Citizens (0.088). We categorized protests under Citizens, which very often go hand-in-hand with Domestic Civil Society mobilization. Critically, however, strong mobilization of the bureaucracy and legislature are powerful sources of resistance. As discussed in the following section, however, it's important to note that institutional resistance is less common than from civil society and citizens. And, judicial resistance may be bolstered by civil society mobilization.

Other statistically significant findings shown in Figure 5B point to attacks instigated by the bureaucratic state (Bureaucracy and Ministers) as being easier to block, and attacks being less

likely to be blocked when oligarchs are involved (though this is a relatively rare occurrence). Figure 5C, which presents the different democratic spaces, does not point to any significant findings, which may suggest there are predeterminants of which sector is attacked according to the autocratizer's calculations of where they are likely to be effective.

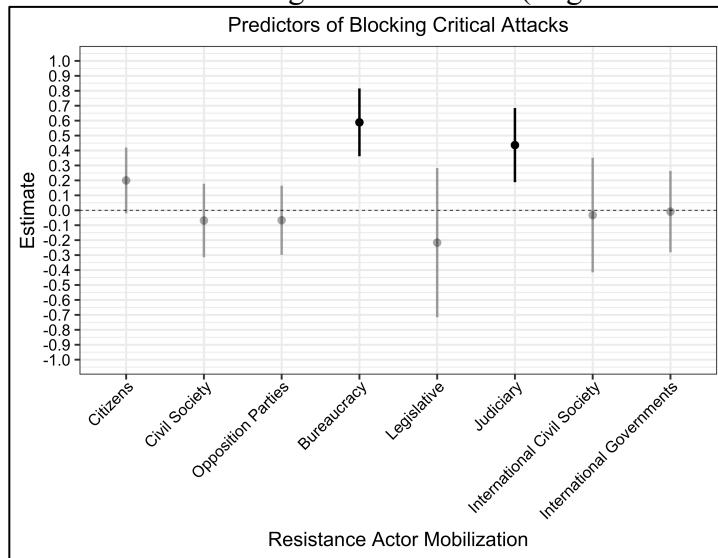
Finally, we draw some important lessons from contextual variables. These variables cover the severity and type of attack alongside other factors reflecting the nature of the political system. We find three important variables relevant to the likelihood of attack blocking. First, *as the episode advances, blocking becomes somewhat less common* – for each decade into the episode, blocking falls by (-0.043), which makes intuitive sense given the increased capture of democratic spaces. Secondly, wealthy countries, on average, have higher rates of blocking, holding all else equal. An increase from the poorest to the wealthiest country in our sample increases the blocking score by an average expected 0.198. Third, *the strength of the ruling party's legislative control is negatively associated with attack blocking*. We examine this dynamic more fully in the third section. Compared to non-majority control, majority control is negative, but not statistically significant; however, supermajority control is associated with a drop of -0.102 in blocking attacks.

Figures 5: Predictors of Blocking Attacks (Regression Coefficients)



We re-run the analysis using the same variables for a subset of attacks deemed critical - measures by one of the top two severity ratings ($n=114$). Because these are pivot moments where often the independence of a democratic space is on the line, the predictors of attack blocking may differ. The full results are shown in the appendix, but in Figure 6, we highlight the central findings – *in critical moments, only two variables are significant deterrents – Judicial and Bureaucratic mobilization*. Such scenarios may include when the backsliding leader seeks to use executive power to engage in drastic actions like overturning election results or an autogolpe (self-coup) or imprisoning opposition leaders. We find that, overall, the rates of success of these attacks mirror all attacks generally, but the bureaucratic actors often responsible for implementing them, as well as the judicial actors in charge of protecting the rule of law are the essential actors able to protect against such attacks coming to fruition.

Figure 6: Predictors of Blocking Critical Attacks (Regression Coefficients)



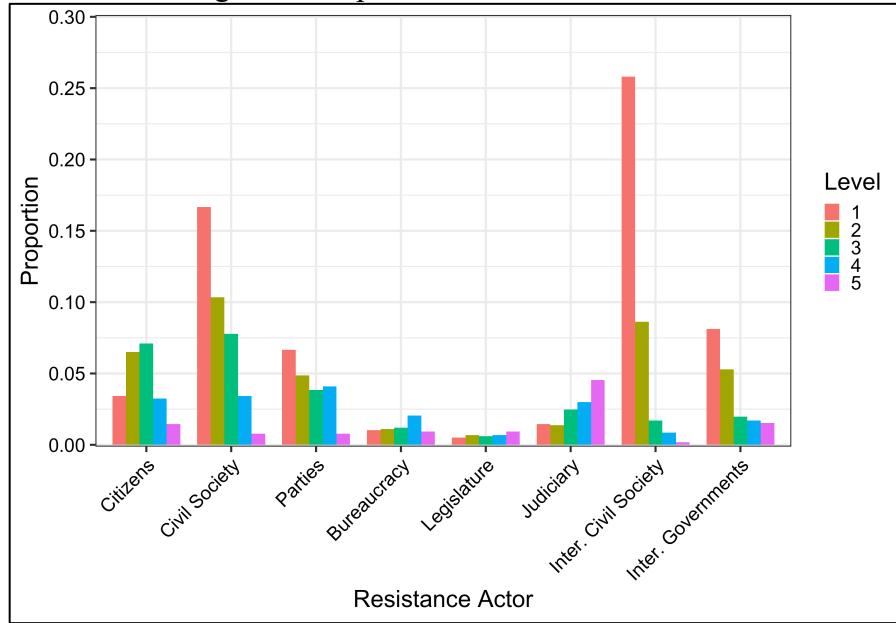
How are Resistance Actors Mobilized?

In this second section, we ask what leads to the mobilization of key resistance actors. The actors we captured data on vary significantly in how often they mobilized and to what degree they were effective against attacks. While significant mobilization is less common than weak or no mobilizations, understanding the conditions for strong mobilization is essential since this is the key to stopping or blocking attacks on democracy.

In Figure 7, we present the rates of mobilization for each resistance actor. The y-axis is the **proportion of attacks** for which the resistance actor engaged in some resistance, rated one to five (maximum). We find especially high rates of low-level resistance efforts by both domestic and international civil society. For a larger number of attacks, the only resistance is that one or a few civil society actors release press statements, reports, or articles condemning and drawing

attention to the attack without much in the way of tangible actions. These sorts of responses are nearly always rated as one or two on the mobilization level. We also see that while many resistance actors have a larger number of low-level resistance actions – domestic civil society, international civil society, international government, and opposition parties – **the institutional resistance actors tend to have the same or even higher rates of strong mobilization, but lower overall.** This is because of the powerful position of institutional actors, especially the judiciary, relative to those with less political power, like international civil society groups.

Figure 7: Proportion of Resistance Events



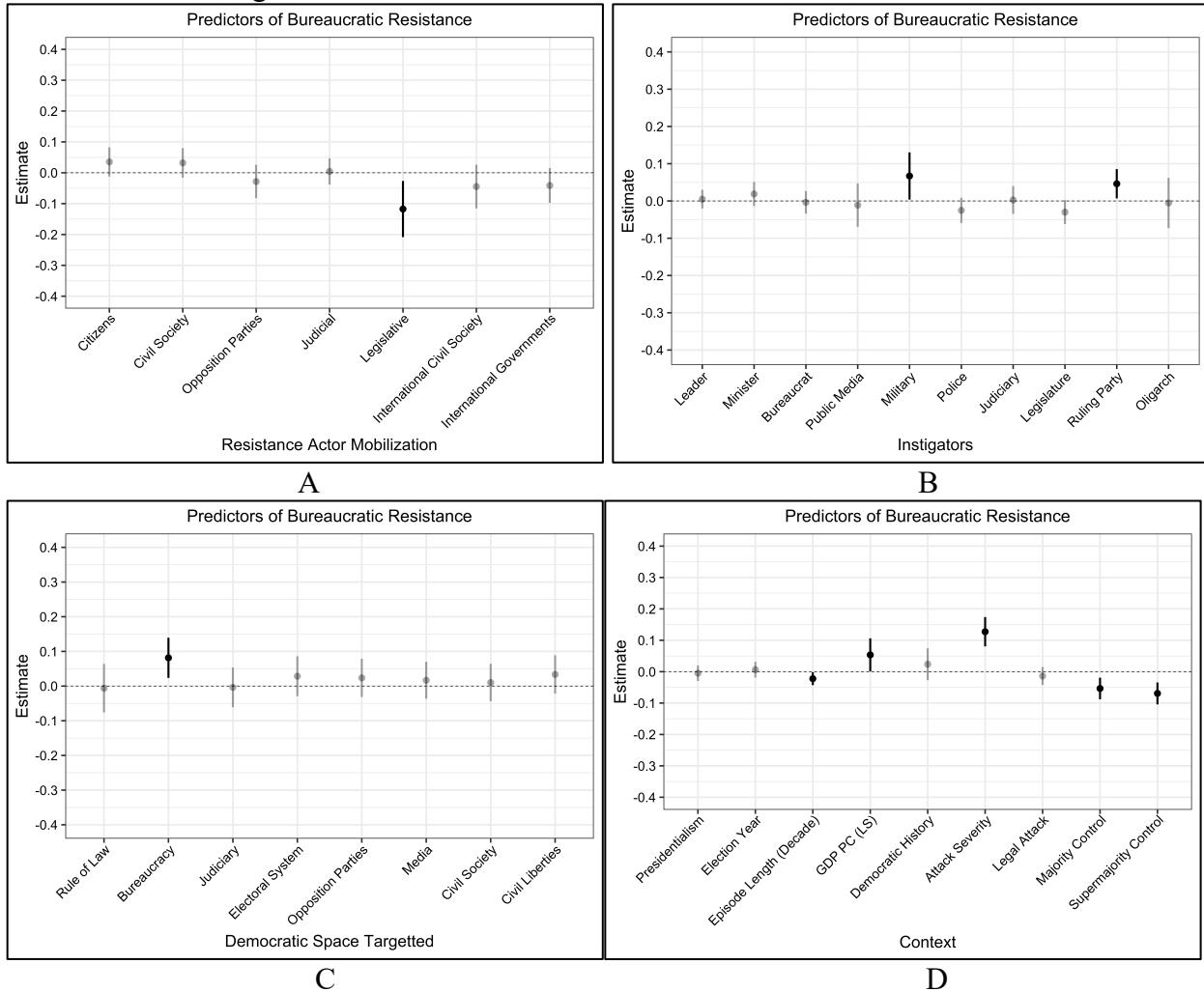
Based on the findings thus far, we know that institutional resistance is both highly effective at blocking attacks but also not very common. Because Judicial and Bureaucratic resistance are the two most important resistance forces, we further analyze the correlates of greater mobilization for these two actors. Figures 8 (A:D) first scrutinizes any variables from our core model that help predict strong Bureaucratic resistance mobilization. The outcome is standardized from 0 (no) to 1 (maximum) resistance.

We do not find that bureaucratic resistance is aided by other resistance actors, and is especially uncommon alongside Legislative resistance, though this is likely due to the nature of the attacks that each is responding to (abuse of power versus legal). Bureaucratic resistance is more likely in response to military/coercive instigated attacks, in some cases, sinister plots like coup or assassination attempts. Note that we include military actors within bureaucracy when it comes to resistance – in such cases refusing to follow anti-democratic orders. In a similar vein, we see that bureaucratic actors are most likely to respond to attacks against an independent bureaucracy.

Finally, Figure 8D highlights several important contextual factors that mirror previous findings. Bureaucratic resistance is expected to be higher, on average, among wealthier countries and when attacks are more severe. On the other hand, we see that bureaucratic resistance mobilization is expected to be lower the longer the democratic backsliding episode goes on and

the stronger the control of the ruling party in the legislature. In this case, both majority control and especially supermajority are discouraging relative to non-majority control.

Figures 8: Predictors of Bureaucratic Resistance Mobilization

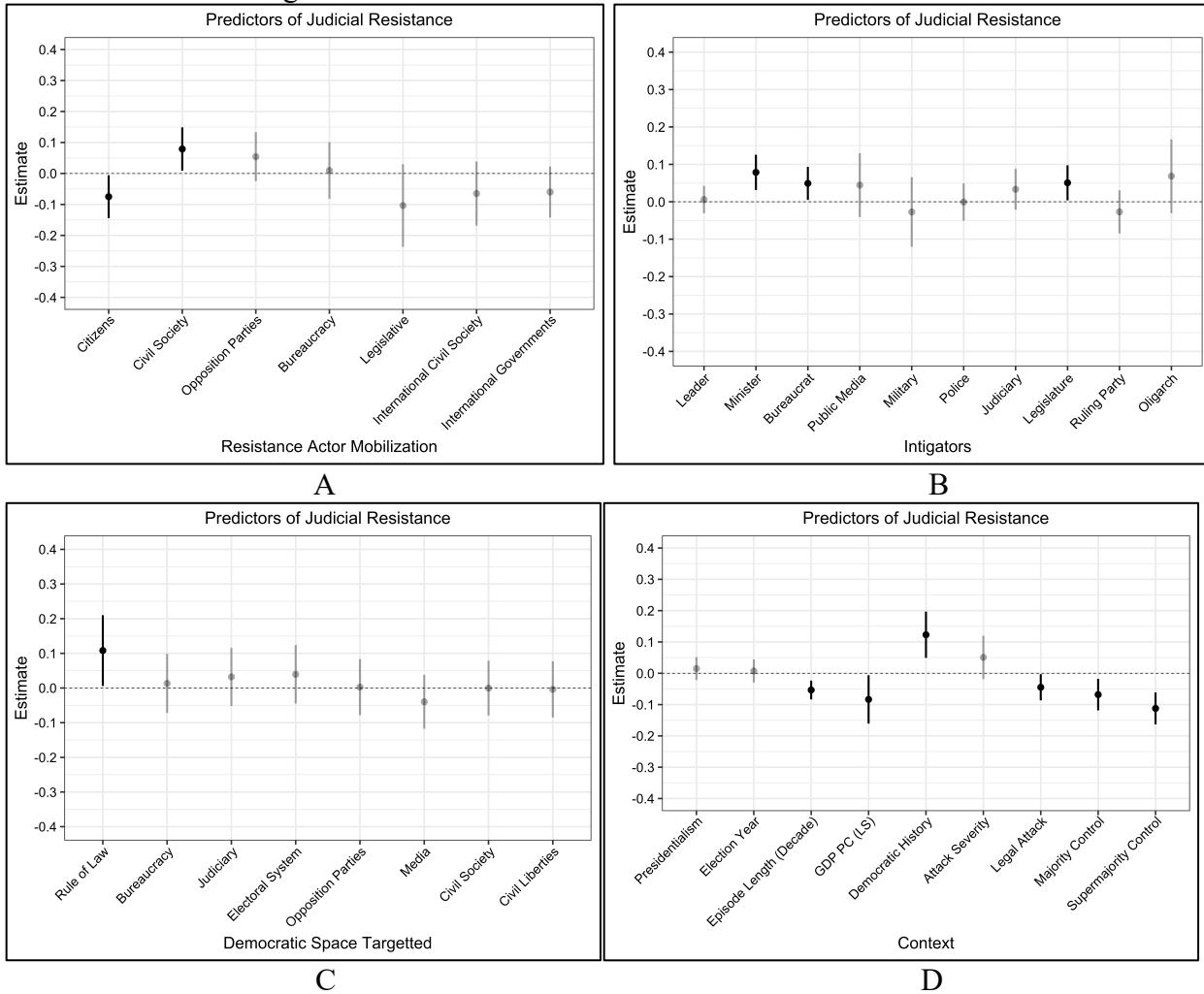


No other resistance actor is as pivotal as the Judiciary. Not only does judicial resistance have the highest likelihood of blocking attacks, but it is also the most common among the core political institutions. We repeat the analysis with judicial mobilization as the outcome, measuring from 0 to 1. Figure 9A shows that **judicial resistance increases alongside civil society action, though not protests**. Practically speaking, this is likely because the judiciary commonly requires that cases against instigators be brought before it, a role that civil society plays in many countries. Bringing cases before the court by legal firms and non-profits is often rated in our dataset as a moderate act of civil society resistance.

The findings from Figure 9B confirm that the Judiciary is most likely to get involved when attacks originate from the bureaucratic state or legislature – the two other core branches of government for which the Judiciary has specific accountability roles. Figure 9C highlights that Judicial resistance is most likely to react strongly against an attack on the rule of law (executive),

specifically, when the leader oversteps their constitutional authority, again, an intuitive finding given the judiciary's idealized role in a democracy.

Figures 9: Predictors of Judicial Resistance Mobilization



Finally, several important findings emerge in Figure 9D. Like other models, the conditions of being further along in a backsliding episode and stronger ruling party control of the legislature are associated with weaker judicial resistance. In addition, however, we see that **a more robust history of democracy over the past 50 years is a strong predictor of greater judicial mobilization, while wealth is not.**⁷ The other meaningful contextual variable is that the judiciary is less likely to mobilize against legal attacks compared to abuses of power, which are much more likely to fall under the category of “breaking the law”.

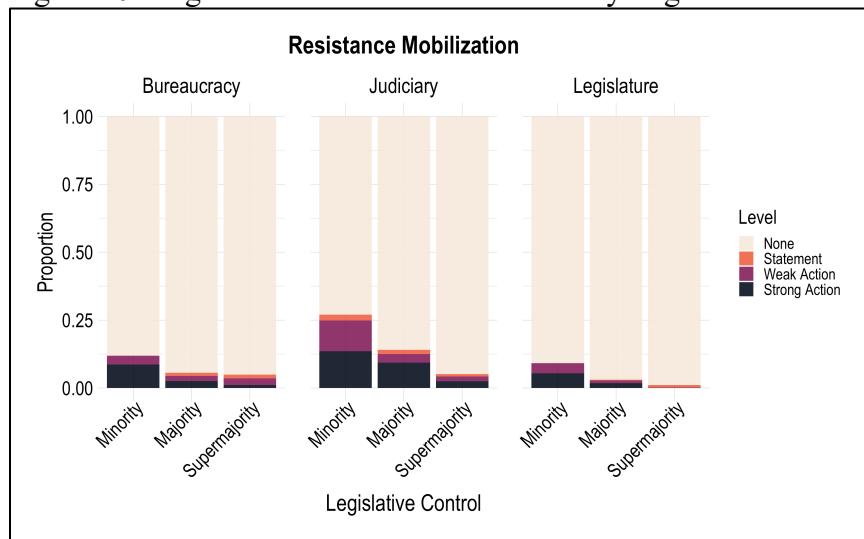
⁷ The Democratic History variable represents the proportion of the past 50 years under which the case was above the global average based on V-Dem’s Liberal Democracy index. Thus, one equal to all of the past 50 years is above this threshold.

Effectiveness of Resistance Across Legislative Control

Many of our models point to a few common trends, in particular that the strength of control over the legislature by the ruling party diminishes resistance across actors. In this section, we further scrutinize how the different levels of legislative control impact resistance efforts. Note that the legislative control categorization is not fixed for each country across our data, and changes over the course of several episodes. In fact, in several cases, early major institutional attacks centered on controlling the legislature through the creation of new legislatures (Ecuador, Venezuela), closure of the legislature (Tunisia), *de facto* banning of opposition parties from the legislature (Benin), and significantly reducing the power of the legislature (Turkey), not to mention supermajority control follow dominant electoral performances (Hungary, Serbia). In the first five cases, the backsliding leader essentially achieved a much more powerful legislative position after a successful attack against opposition within the legislature.

Successful resistance to attacks requires that actors mobilize frequently and that this mobilization is effective in achieving its goals. In examining both required conditions, we find that legislative control has a dramatic effect on each. Figure 10 plots the frequency of resistance mobilization by strength (None =0, Statement only = 1, Weak Action = 2/3, and Strong Action = 4/5), across legislative control status. We organized legislative control by three levels: 1) Minority, where the ruling party has less than 50% control (n=185), 2) Majority, where the ruling party or coalition have between 50% and 65% control (n=515), and 3) Supermajority control, where the ruling party or coalition has two-third control (n=449). Depending on the constitutional rules, supermajority control has different degrees of power, not least of which is the ability to change the constitution without any other checks.

Figure 10: Degree of Institutional Resistance by Legislative Control

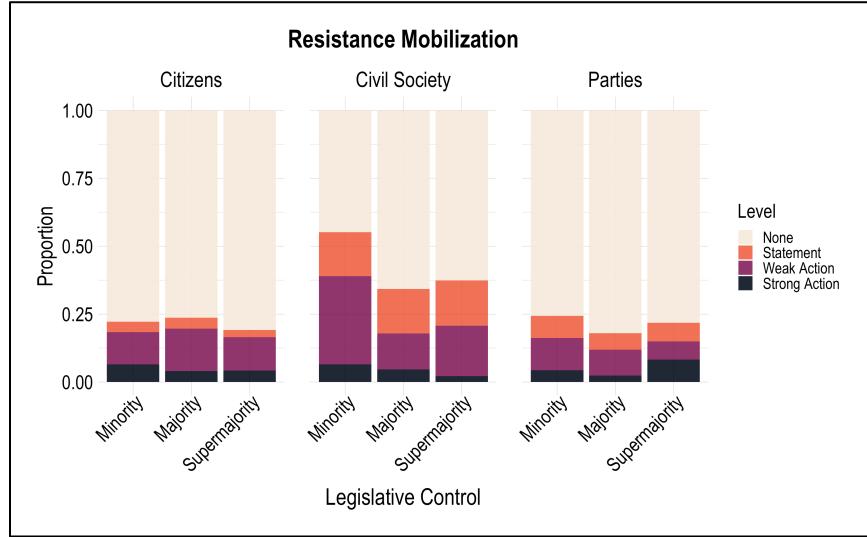


The proportions presented in Figure 10 show that the legislative control status has a dramatic impact on the frequency of mobilization for the Bureaucracy, Judiciary, and Legislature. This makes intuitive sense for the legislature, but it's interesting how significant the effects are for the other key resistance actors – the Bureaucracy and the Judiciary. For example, the proportion of attacks with any Bureaucratic resistance falls from 12% under Minority control to 6% under

majority and 5% under supermajority control. Similarly, the proportion of any Judicial mobilization decreases from 27% under minority legislative control to 14% under majority control to 5% under supermajority control.

Figure 11 presents the rates of democratic resistance by legislative control for the domestic social actors – citizens (protests), civil society, and opposition parties. **Unlike the institutional resistance actors, they are little affected by legislative control, aside from a small difference between minority and majority legislative control among civil society actors.** Again, this draws a distinction between the likelihood and forms of resistance between the institutional and social spaces.

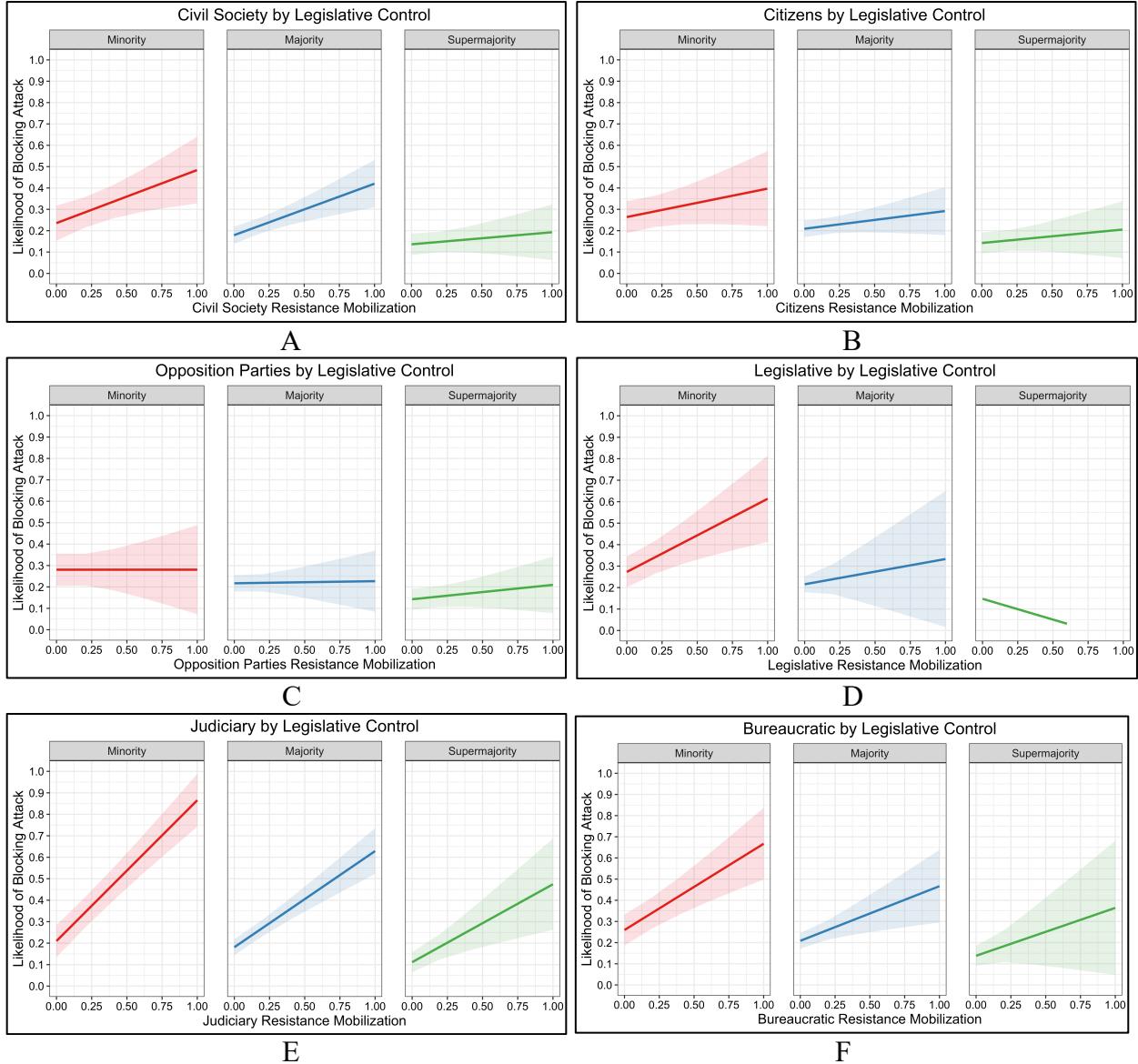
Figure 11: Degree of Social Resistance by Legislative Control



Our previous findings highlighted that resistance effectiveness was also impacted by legislative control for overall blocking likelihood. To better understand these dynamics, we interact the degree of mobilization for domestic resistance actors across the three legislative control statuses. The results are shown in Figures 12 (A:F), where the y-axis shows the expected likelihood of blocking an attack across the resistance mobilization level, holding all other covariates at their means.

Most resistance actors are influenced by the legislative control variable. The two least affected are the Opposition parties (C) and Citizen protests (B). For each, the slopes are largely flat (horizontal), demonstrating they have little overall effectiveness and that this is not really influenced by legislative control. For citizen protests, at least all three slopes are bearing slightly upward. Domestic Civil Society is more impacted, as shown in Figure 12A. Moving from no to maximum resistance is associated with an increase in blocking from 0.24 to 0.48 (24-point change) under minority governments, but this constricts to only a five-point increase under supermajority control.

Figures 12: Effectiveness of Blocking Attacks by Resistance Actor and Legislative Control



As expected, the other institutional resistance variables are strongly influenced by legislative control. Figure 12D shows how the legislature, as a resistance actor, is impacted. Under minority control conditions where the opposition holds meaningful power, moving from no to full resistance is associated with an increase in blocking of 34 points. This falls to 11 points under majority (with very large confidence intervals) and is null under supermajority. Legislative control has an impeding effect on the judiciary as well. In Figure 12E, moving to full judicial resistance increases the likelihood of attack blocking by 66 points, which then falls to 45 points under majority conditions, and 35 points under supermajority control. When analyzing Bureaucratic resistance in Figure 12F, its effectiveness is also impacted. Moving from no to maximum bureaucratic mobilization is associated with a 41-point increase in blocking under

minority control situations, a 36-point increase in majority control, and a 22-point increase under supermajority.

In cases of supermajority legislative control, only Bureaucratic and Judicial resistance have meaningful impacts in halting attacks on democracy, and in each case, their effectiveness is diminished by up to half compared to other legislative control conditions.

Conclusion

In sum, by connecting the empirical episodes of democratic attacks with the specific instances of resistance that arise in response, we can draw important lessons about the form and effectiveness of democratic resistance. While the importance of judicial and bureaucratic resistance cannot be overstated, we also recognized that these do not occur in a vacuum. They are infrequent, but powerful, responses to particular types of attacks. At times when the horizontal institutions of accountability, such as the judiciary, bureaucracy, and legislature are already captured, social resistance may be the only avenue, which decreases the likelihood of stopping attacks.

Our analysis also suggests the importance of legislative control, and this reinforces earlier recommendations against total opposition boycotts, which deliver a powerful supermajority to the executive to engage in “legal” procedural attacks on democracy via legislative processes. The interaction between civil society actors and the judicial realm highlights the important role of civic and professional sector mobilization in making legal challenges against the regime, which can then be taken up by the judiciary. While less powerful, we find that civil society and protest mobilization do help block attacks on democracy, not to mention help mobilize popular movements against the leader heading into elections, the primary method of removal.

In addition to expanding the set of cases, we plan to further investigate the sequential processes of democratic attacks and resistance episodes, including the severity and magnitude, legal procedures, and types and effectiveness of resistance actors responding.

Work Cited

- Arriola, Leonardo R., Lise Rakner, and Nicolas van de Walle. *Democratic Backsliding in Africa?: Autocratization, Resilience, and Contention*. Oxford University Press, 2022.
- Bauer, Michael W., B. Guy Peters, Jon Pierre, Kutsal Yesilkagit, and Stefan Becker, eds. *Democratic backsliding and public administration: How populists in government transform state bureaucracies*. Cambridge University Press, 2021.
- Bermeo, Nancy. "On democratic backsliding." *Journal of democracy* 27, no. 1 (2016): 5-19.
- Bernhard, Michael. "Democratic backsliding in Poland and Hungary." *Slavic Review* 80, no. 3 (2021): 585-607.
- Boese, Vanessa A., Amanda B. Edgell, Sebastian Hellmeier, Seraphine F. Maerz, and Staffan I. Lindberg. 2021. "How Democracies Prevail: Democratic Resilience as a Two-Stage Process." *Democratization* 28 (5): 885–907. doi:10.1080/13510347.2021.1891413.
- Baron, Hannah, Robert A. Blair, Jessica Gottlieb, and Laura Paler. "An Events-Based Approach to Understanding Democratic Erosion." *PS: Political Science & Politics* (2023): 1-8.
- Brownlee, Jason, and Kenny Miao. "Why democracies survive." *Journal of democracy* 33, no. 4 (2022): 133-149.
- Carothers, Thomas, and Brendan Hartnett. "Misunderstanding Democratic Backsliding." *Journal of Democracy* 35, no. 3 (2024): 24-37.
- Cianetti, Licia, James Dawson, and Seán Hanley, eds. *Rethinking Democratic Backsliding' in Central and Eastern Europe*. London & New York: Routledge, 2019.
- Chenoweth, Erica. *Civil resistance: What everyone needs to know®*. Oxford University Press, 2021.
- Cleary, Matthew R., and Aykut Öztürk. "When does backsliding lead to breakdown? Uncertainty and opposition strategies in democracies at risk." *Perspectives on Politics* 20, no. 1 (2022): 205-221.
- Coppedge, Michael. *Democratization and research methods*. Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Coppedge, Michael, Amanda B. Edgell, Carl Henrik Knutsen, and Staffan I. Lindberg, eds. *Why democracies develop and decline*. Cambridge University Press, 2022.
- Coppedge, Michael, John Gerring, David Altman, Michael Bernhard, Steven Fish, Allen Hicken, Matthew Kroenig et al. "Conceptualizing and measuring democracy: A new approach." *Perspectives on Politics* 9, no. 2 (2011): 247-267.
- Croissant, Aurel, and Jeffrey Haynes. *Democratic Regressions in Asia*. Routledge, 2022.
- Dahl, Robert A. *On democracy*. Yale University Press, 2000.
- Diamond, Larry. "Facing up to the democratic recession." *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 1 (2015): 141-155.
- Feldman, Ben and Jennifer McCoy. "Bet on Big-Tend Opposition Electoral Coalitions to Defeat Democratic Backsliding," *CEIP: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. United States of America*, 2024.
- Gandhi, Jennifer, and Adam Przeworski. "Authoritarian institutions and the survival of autocrats." *Comparative political studies* 40, no. 11 (2007): 1279-1301.

- Ginsburg, Tom, and Aziz Huq. "Democracy's Near Misses." *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 4 (2018): 16-30.
- Hacker, Jacob S., and Paul Pierson. 2021. *Let Them Eat Tweets: How the Right Rules in an Age of Extreme Inequality*. New York, N.Y.: Liveright Publishing Corporation.
- Holloway, Josh, and Rob Manwaring. "How well does 'resilience' apply to democracy? A systematic review." *Contemporary Politics* 29, no. 1 (2023): 68-92.
- Haggard, Stephan, and Robert Kaufman. *Backsliding: Democratic regress in the contemporary world*. Cambridge University Press, 2021.
- Kadivar, Mohammad Ali. "Mass mobilization and the durability of new democracies." *American Sociological Review* 83, no. 2 (2018): 390-417.
- Knutsen, Carl Henrik, Kyle L. Marquardt, Brigitte Seim, Michael Coppedge, Amanda B. Edgell, Juraj Medzihorsky, Daniel Pemstein, Jan Teorell, John Gerring, and Staffan I. Lindberg. "Conceptual and measurement issues in assessing democratic backsliding." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 57, no. 2 (2024): 162-177.
- Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt. *How democracies die*. Crown, 2019.
- Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan Way. "The Resilience of Democracy's Third Wave." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 57, no. 2 (2024): 198-201.
- Little, Andrew T., and Anne Meng. "Measuring democratic backsliding." *PS: Political Science & Politics* (2023): 1-13.
- Lieberman, Robert C., Suzanne Mettler, and Kenneth M. Roberts, eds. *Democratic resilience: Can the United States withstand rising polarization?*. Cambridge University Press, 2021.
- Lührmann, Anna, and Staffan I. Lindberg. 2019. "A Third Wave of Autocratization is Here: What is New About It?" *Democratization* 26, no. 7: 1095–113. At
- Marquardt, Kyle L., and Daniel Pemstein. "Estimating latent traits from expert surveys: an analysis of sensitivity to data-generating process." *Political Science Research and Methods* 11, no. 2 (2023): 384-393.
- Merkel, Wolfgang, and Anna Lührmann. 2021. "Resilience of Democracies: Responses to Illiberal and Authoritarian Challenges." *Democratization* 28, no. 5: 869–84.
- Mietzner, Marcus. "Sources of resistance to democratic decline: Indonesian civil society and its trials." In *Democratic Regressions in Asia*, pp. 161-178. Routledge, 2022.
- Pérez-Liñán, Aníbal, Nicolás Schmidt, and Daniela Vairo. "Presidential hegemony and democratic backsliding in Latin America, 1925–2016." *Democratization* 26, no. 4 (2019): 606-625.
- Rakner, Lise. "Don't Touch My Constitution! Civil Society Resistance to Democratic Backsliding in Africa's Pluralist Regimes." *Global Policy* 12 (2021): 95-105.
- Riedl, Rachel Beatty, Paul Friesen, Jennifer McCoy, and Kenneth Roberts. "Democratic backsliding, resilience, and resistance." *World Politics* (2024).
- Riedl, Rachel Beatty, Jennifer McCoy, Kenneth Roberts, and Murat Somer. "Pathways of democratic backsliding, resistance, and (partial) recoveries." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 712, no. 1 (2024): 8-31.
- Scheppele, Kim Lane. "Autocratic legalism." *The University of Chicago Law Review* 85, no. 2 (2018): 545-584.
- Somer, Murat, Jennifer L. McCoy, and Russell E. Luke. "Pernicious polarization, autocratization and opposition strategies." In *Resilience of Democracy*, pp. 61-80. Routledge, 2023.

- VonDoepp, Peter. "Resisting democratic backsliding: Malawi's experience in comparative perspective." *African Studies Review* 63, no. 4 (2020): 858-882.
- Wunsch, Natasha, and Philippe Blanchard. "Patterns of democratic backsliding in third-wave democracies: a sequence analysis perspective." *Democratization* 30, no. 2 (2023): 278-301.
- Weyland, Kurt. Democracy's Resilience to Populism's Threat: Countering Global Alarmism. Cambridge University Press, 2024.
- Waldner, David, and Ellen Lust. "Unwelcome change: Coming to terms with democratic backsliding." *Annual Review of Political Science* 21, no. 1 (2018): 93-113.

Appendix

