

# Civil Resistance and Democratic Backsliding

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### **Abstract**

Can peaceful resistance movements provide a remedy for democratic backsliding? The number of pro-democracy movements globally is growing, but the world is experiencing a “third wave of autocratization” and the effectiveness of civil resistance is declining. In this paper I examine the effectiveness of civil resistance in preventing or reversing democratic backsliding. Large, diverse, and enduring campaigns can check aspiring autocrats by signaling popular preferences and inspire elite defections which could stop autocratization in its tracks. However, maximalist movements can be perceived as destabilizing and polarizing in democracies, which may make it an ineffective strategy to stop or reverse democratic decline. I test the propositions using panel data on a subset of democracies experiencing democratic decline and data on civil resistance. The study is important for activists and scholars alike, as it improves our understanding of how civil resistance can be an effective weapon against leaders with autocratic aspirations.

# 1 Introduction

The optimism following the third wave of democratization has all but faded out, and the world today is facing a serious threat from the decline of democracy globally. Political leaders in countries such as the USA, Poland, Brazil, Hungary and India have violated the rules of democracy, and more than half of the world's population is living in non-democratic countries (Lührmann et al., 2020). Moreover, we have yet to see the full political consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic where most existing democracies have violated some democratic standards for emergency provisions and in non-democracies the pandemic has served as an accelerator for further autocratization (Kolvani et al., n.d.).

While the global trends in democratic stock are bleak, the deepening of autocratization over the past decade has led to an enormous surge in pro-democracy resistance. Millions of people continue to demonstrate their commitment to democracy through mass protests, strikes, sit-ins and noncooperation. Even so, we have little systematic knowledge on such movements' role in protecting democracies. Experiences from countries like Thailand and Nepal show the importance on gaining knowledge on how to stop the gradual decline of democracy as it makes countries that have already experienced one democratic breakdown more likely to experience another (Croissant & Haynes, 2021). In this paper, I advance our understanding of how to prevent democratic breakdown by asking the following question: Can civil resistance provide a remedy for democratic backsliding?

The contribution of this paper is threefold. Firstly, I discuss the existing literature on democratic backsliding and show why there is a need for more research on the role of mobilized civil society actors in protecting democracy. Secondly, I advance the literature on civil resistance and its effect on democracy by examining the mechanisms that link civil resistance and democratization, and discuss which mechanisms can also prevent democratic breakdown. By civil resistance, I refer to non-institutional, strictly nonviolent mass mobilization that seeks to push regimes in a more democratic direction, while acknowledging that the term often entails a wider array of movements, strategies and goals which are not examined in this paper (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011).

I argue that civil resistance can thwart and even reverse democratic backsliding in two ways. Large and diverse movements can signal preferences, put pressure on politicians and their supporters, and inspire elite defections - effectively stopping aspiring autocrats in their tracks by removing the immediate support they rely on to stay in power. Moreover, ordinary citizens can thwart backsliding by voting the incumbent out of office. Large and diverse movements can mobilize voters to defeat the aspiring dictator in an election.

Finally, I bridge the literature on civil resistance and the literature on democratic breakdown and test if the mechanisms that make civil resistance an effective tool for achieving democracy also can prevent further democratic subversion and democratic breakdown. I also test if civil resistance increases prospects for removing incumbents with autocratic aspirations through elections.

The results from my analysis suggest that: TBA

The results is important for all pro-democracy advocates in the world, highlighting the importance of . . . .

## **2 Theory**

### **2.1 What is democratic backsliding?**

Defining democratic backsliding is no easy task, and the literature examining its causes has not agreed upon one definition. Part of this is explained by the desire to define concepts in a way that captures the characteristics of the empirical phenomena we seek to explain, and the nature of democratic backsliding has changed over time. However, the conceptual definition of democratic backsliding becomes very important in order to distinguish different scenarios where regimes become less democratic from each other because the causes and effects of regime change are likely to be very different in different institutional contexts. The causes of the breakdown of a liberal democracy and a transition from one type of autocracy to another may have very different causes, and also affect the onset and dynamics of protest differently. Recent studies on democratic backsliding show that it has changed from open-ended coup

d'état and obvious election day fraud to more subtle, gradual forms of democratic decline (Bermeo, 2016; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). Furthermore, modern democratic backsliding is often caused by democratically elected leaders with autocratic ambitions (Svolik, 2020).

Following this, democratic backsliding is defined as the decline of quality of democracy, and this can both be a discontinuous series of events or a single event like for instance a coup (Waldner & Lust, 2018, p. 95). This definition of democratic backsliding includes the gradual trends we observe in later decades, and excludes the decline of democratic governance in non-democracies.

## **2.2 Previous research**

Previous research on democratic backsliding finds strong evidence to the claim that we are facing a global recession of democracy (Diamond, 2021; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; Mechkova et al., 2017). The trend is to a large degree driven by gradual setbacks under a legal facade in democracies (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). However, the literature on the causes of democratic backsliding is quite new.

Waldner and Lust 2018 identify six theory families for causes of democratic backsliding: political agency, political culture, political institutions, political economy, social structure and political coalitions, and international actors. Building on Moore, they argue that without a large pro-democratic coalition, democracies are vulnerable to backsliding, and that future studies should center coalitional arguments within socialstructural and political-economic conditions to explain democratic backsliding in the USA (Waldner & Lust, 2018, p. 109).

In a study on Benin, Ecuador and South Korea - three countries that experienced democratic erosion but managed to avoid democratic breakdown - Laedens and Lührmann (2021) identify three mechanisms that can halt democratic erosion before it leads to the breakdown of democracy. Studying all three cases in depth, they argue that parliamentary and judicial oversight, pressures from civil society and the media, and competition between parties and within parties played a key role in stopping further democratic erosion in all three countries

(Laebens & Lührmann, 2021). The next section goes deeper into the second mechanism on how pressure from civil society, in the form of civil resistance, can stop democratic backsliding.

## **2.3 How ordinary citizens can check aspiring autocrats**

Why should civil resistance be an effective remedy against democratic backsliding? In democracies, groups and movements from civil society play a key role in creating diagonal accountability (Mietzner, 2021). In countries where freedom of association is allowed and civil society is allowed space, it is possible to organize counter-mobilization against aspiring autocrats (Bermeo, 2016). Such counter-mobilization against politicians bending the rules of democracy has been observed in many countries, including the USA, Indonesia, Poland, the Czech Republic and many others. In Indonesia, robust civil society groups were instrumental in protecting democratic principles that previous nonviolent movements had pushed for when conservative elites tried to repeal democratic reforms (Mietzner, 2021). In Benin, civil society mobilized to support and legitimize a new electoral code that enabled the opposition to win a majority of the seats in the legislature (Laebens & Lührmann, 2021). I argue that there are two ways civil resistance can stop democratic backsliding.

### **2.3.1 How civil resistance can check democratically elected leaders**

A large body of literature on civil resistance and democracy argues that civil resistance increases prospects for democracy (Bethke & Pinckney, 2019; Celestino & Gleditsch, 2013; Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Lambach et al., 2020; Pinckney, 2020). I build on this literature to identify mechanisms that can make civil resistance an effective tool for stopping or reversing democratic backsliding. Few studies on civil resistance distinguish between mobilizing for democratic governance in an autocratic institutional contexts and mobilizing to prevent democratic backsliding in semi- and full democracies. As previously mentioned, democratic backsliding is often driven by incumbents seeking to expand their political power, and they often do so through the existing institutional framework (Lührmann & Lindberg,

2019).

Compared to violent or no dissent, resistance that is large and nonviolent is more likely to lead to sustainable democratization (Celestino & Gleditsch, 2013; Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Lambach et al., 2020). One of the reasons why civil resistance movements are more likely to succeed in achieving their goals compared to violent campaigns is because they have a mobilization advantage (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). Nonviolent dissent has lower participation costs than violent dissent which makes civil resistance campaigns attract a larger part of the population and more resources (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). By attracting a larger part of the population, civil resistance campaigns increase their momentum which makes campaign success more likely (Chenoweth & Belgioioso, 2019). Studies suggest that if campaigns manage to get 3,5 % of the population into the streets, they never fail (Chenoweth, 2021). Civil resistance campaigns are more likely to reach such mobilization levels compared to more violent forms of contention.

Moreover, civil resistance campaigns can use a wide array of strategies to target key sectors of society which in turn can increase costs, inspire elite defections and coerce governments to comply to the campaign's demands (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Schock, 2013). Because of lower participation costs, civil resistance campaigns attract a more diverse audience of participators (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). More diverse movements may both increase the campaign's leverage and resilience which are two important factors for campaign success. Increased leverage leads to a higher likelihood of elite defections and loss of support for the incumbent. More resilient campaigns are better equipped for withstanding and recovering from repression which is key to maintain mobilized (Schock, 2005). Maintained mobilization increases velocity which again increases prospects for campaign success (Chenoweth & Belgioioso, 2019).

### **2.3.2 Mobilizing a democratic electorate**

The second way civil resistance can prevent further democratic backsliding and democratic breakdown is by mobilizing an electorate that vote the incumbent out of office. Broad and

diverse mobilization against a dictator can reveal information on democratic violations in a context where media have been restricted. Moreover, populist leaders capitalize on rising polarization in society causing ordinary citizens to identify themselves as pro-leader for their prospective party, and democrats second (Svolik, 2019, p. 23). Diverse, large and widespread movements can draw political attention to the importance of protecting democracy and vote politicians violating democratic principles out of office. Gillion and Soule find that protests that express liberal issues lead to a greater share of vote for Democrats in the two-party vote, while protests on conservative issues lead to a higher share of the votes for Republicans (Gillion & Soule, 2018). Another study by Jonathan Pinckney adds to the importance of the size of protest. Using rainfall data to instrument march size, Pinckney finds that the Women’s March following Donald Trump’s inauguration as president of the United States led to a significant increase of Democratic vote share in the 2018 election (Pinckney, 2019). As discussed in the previous section, civil resistance is more likely to mobilize a large number of people, making campaign success more likely (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). Following this, we should expect large, frequent and diverse civil resistance to increase prospects for defeating the incumbent in the next election.

## **2.4 Why civil resistance in democracies might fail to counter democratic backsliding**

However, civil resistance alone might not counter democratic backsliding. Laebens and Lührmann argue that pressure from civil society combined with parliamentary and judicial oversight and electoral competition explained the success to prevent democratic breakdown in South Korea, Benin and Ecuador. Following this, civil resistance might be a necessary condition to prevent democratic breakdown but not a sufficient condition. However, it might also be the case that civil resistance is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition to stop democratic backsliding. In Indonesia, incumbents have capitalized on this polarization to justify increased illiberal measures which reduced resources available to civil society activists organizing protests (Mietzner, 2021). Incumbents with autocratic motives can often be

perceived as generators of polarization, and use high levels of polarization to shift balances of power in their favour. Under such circumstances, further protests might intensify existing polarizing conditions. Ordinary citizens' might also hesitate to punish politicians that violate democratic principles if it means abandoning one's own party or preferred policies even if there are movements calling for the ousting of incumbents driving democratic backsliding (Svolik, 2019). This was the case in Bangladesh where civil society mirrored the divide between secularists and the nationalist party. For the Bangladeshi who emphasize the nation's Islamic character, punishing their own politicians meant opening up opportunities for the Bengali who advocate the country's ethnolinguistic Bengali identity (Lorch, 2021).

## 2.5 Hypotheses

H1: Civil resistance stops democratic subversion in countries experiencing democratic backsliding.

H1a: Large and diverse mobilization stops decline in polyarchy score  
H1b: Large and diverse mobilization stops decline in v2x-frassoc-thick  
H1c: Large and diverse mobilization stops decline in v2x-freeexp-altinf

H2: Civil resistance lowers the probability for democratic breakdown in countries experiencing democratic backsliding  
H2a: Protest lowers probability for democratic breakdown in countries experiencing democratic backsliding  
H2b: Large movements lowers probability for democratic breakdown in countries experiencing democratic backsliding

H3: Civil resistance increases chances for incumbent defeat in election  
H3a: Large protests increase probability for incumbent defeat in election  
H3b: Widespread protests increase probability for incumbent defeat in election



## 3 Data and research design

### 3.1 Potential research designs

1) Identify cases of democratic erosion on subcomponents of electoral autocracy and match them. This is not very different from studies that have already been done in Asia in terms of identifying mechanisms that can stop democratic erosion, but I will do it quantitatively and include a larger sample.

2) Panel data using the Episode of Regime Change dataset from V-Dem

3) Study episodes of democratic backsliding in democracies with potential for democratic breakdown. Variable for this called "aut-ep-prch: Is there an ongoing autocratization episode within the political unit that has/had the potential for a regime change? Clarification: By regime change, we mean a reclassification from democracy to autocracy ("democratic breakdown"). To count as a "democratic breakdown", the country must move from democracy to autocracy".

#### 3.1.1 potential dependent variables

a) subcomponents of democracy (V-Dem). b) autocratic episode (ERT dataset). c) electoral outcomes.

#### 3.1.2 Potential independent variables

a) diverse coalitions: diverse coalitions should be a good counter against polarization b) large protests: signal preferences and puts pressure on incumbent supporters c) large+frequent protests: signal preferences and puts pressure on incumbent supporters, plus increased costs over time d) widespread protests: signal widespread preferences, unite country against incumbent

### 3.1.3 Potential methodological issues

Democratic erosion and attempts to counter it can take years to manifest, hard to observe causal relationship

## 4 results

## 5 discussion

## 6 conclusion

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