Cheerleaders for Autocracy: Parliamentary Speech Making During Democratic

Backsliding in Malawi and Zambia

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ABSTRACT

Legislatures worldwide have played a decisive role in enabling and preventing democratic backsliding. While most research has focused on the formal legislative role of parliaments in the backsliding process, this study focuses on the behavior of individual legislators and their discursive support for executives. We argue that government parties are likely to enhance pressure on government party legislators to support the executive during periods of backsliding. Using a new dataset of over 152,000 speeches from parliaments in Malawi and Zambia, we show that in both Malawi and Zambia, government party MPs were significantly more positive vis-à-vis the executive in parliamentary speeches during periods of backsliding. However, opposition MPs were not more critical of the executive in periods when democracy was eroding. The findings have important implications for understanding the institutional role of parties and legislatures in the process of backsliding.

In liberal democracies, legislatures play a central role in limiting executive power. During periods of democratic backsliding, civil society, opposition politicians, and ordinary citizens alike have often pleaded legislative members of the governing party to place country over party and express their discontent with devastating executive power grabs (Haggard and Kaufman 2021, Lorch 2022). However, while some individual members of ruling parties have demonstrated remarkable autonomy, such autonomy has proven to be rare.

Democratic backsliding is the process by which democratically elected leaders undermine democratic institutions to reduce executive constraints placed on them (Bermeo, 2016; Waldner and Lust 2018; Luhrmann and Lindberg 2019). Some studies have examined the role of legislatures and government parties during episodes of democratic backsliding (e.g. Dulani and Keeves van Donge 2006; Çınar, 2018; Haggard and Kaufman 2021; Riaz 2022). However, such studies often focus on broad legislative trends, high-profile legislators, or known defectors, without necessarily examining the micro-level behavior of legislators throughout parliament. Hence, we still have a limited understanding of individual legislators' reactions to democratic backsliding. What patterns of legislative behavior are we likely to see among government-party MPs during periods of backsliding? Will such processes be associated with intensified splits or more party cohesion? Will democratic backsliding enhance opposition/government legislative polarization?

This study offers a descriptive account of legislative behavior during successful periods of democratic backsliding. We argue that legislatures in such episodes become important showcases for government-party cohesion. When government parties are strong, they may enhance pressure on their legislators to increase displays of loyalty and strength. Individual legislators will respond to such pressure by displaying enhanced levels of partisan loyalty. The outward projection of government-party cohesion has the potential to minimize the risks of defection and popular

mobilization, effectively whitewashing the process of backsliding and legitimizing executive power grabs.

To examine legislative trends during backsliding, we systematically analyze legislator-level legislative speechmaking in two electoral democracies, Malawi and Zambia. Specifically, we examine backsliding episodes in Malawi from 2009 to 2012 and in Zambia from 2015 to 2021. We compare these periods to periods of democratic stability. Malawi and Zambia are not representative of every backsliding democracy in Africa or elsewhere. Both countries are examples of initially high levels of executive control and a strong government party. Nevertheless, within such scope conditions, the pair presents a challenging test of our theory. Both countries have traditionally been understood as weak party systems with volatile political parties. Both countries also use Single Member District elections (SMD), where individual legislators enjoy greater personal mandates.

Empirically, we rely on parliamentary speeches to measure individual legislators' overt support for the executive. Parliamentary speeches provide an underutilized yet effective means of measuring legislators' public positioning in relation to the executive. We create a new dataset of every speech made by every legislator in Malawi (from 2004 to 2019) and Zambia (from 2001 to 2021). For each speech, we code whether the speech expressed positive, neutral, or negative sentiment towards the executive. In total, the dataset consists of 152,000 speeches made by 895 legislators. The coding of speeches was made using an innovative machine-learning transformer model. Quantitative analysis of legislative behavior in Africa remains extremely rare, and to the extent that such analysis has been conducted (E.g., Wahman et al. 2022; Sanches and Kartalis 2024), it very rarely draws on multiple country cases. The empirical analysis of this paper is an important contribution to expanding the scope of legislative studies.

Results show that for both Malawi and Zambia, there is a statistically significant difference in speech tone between government and opposition legislators, with government-party legislators exhibiting a significantly more positive tone than opposition legislators. More importantly, the gap in tone between government-party and opposition-party legislators widens in times of democratic backsliding. This increased gap is a result of government-party legislators being more likely to deliver positive speeches during the two episodes of backsliding in our data and less likely to deliver negative ones. Opposition legislators, on the other hand, do not significantly change their tone. In fact, in Malawi we even find opposition MPs to more positive in times of backsliding. We further explore this somewhat surprising result and find that opposition MPs are distinguished by the political standing of the president's party in their constituency. Opposition MPs coming from constituencies where the president's party performs relatively well electorally are more likely to align with the executive in times of democratic backsliding. This finding suggests that while African parliaments may have become increasingly institutionalized (Opalo 2020; Collord 2024), incumbent governments still have the potential to successfully co-opt parts of the opposition (Young 2014).

The findings presented in this paper have important consequences for our understanding of democratic backsliding and elite cohesion. It does not offer a causal theory of backsliding but highlights descriptively the role of legislatures in successful episodes of democratic erosion (i.e., episodes where executives set out to entrench executive power and were successful in doing so). Legislatures, in the process of democratic backsliding, can provide discursive legitimacy for executives as they enhance executive power. Not only may legislatures fail to prevent backsliding, but they also become essential showcases for party unity in times when opposition forces may be looking for internal government divisions. Methodologically, the paper leverages the potential of

machine learning and parliamentary transcripts for studying broad trends in legislative behavior over time.

Backsliding and the Role of Legislatures in Africa and Beyond

Contemporary democratic backsliding is a gradual process that unfolds over long periods of time, whereby a democracy slowly loses its democratic qualities without a predetermined endpoint (Bermeo 2016; López Villegas and Frantz 2024; Waldner and Lust 2018). A central mechanism through which the backsliding process unfolds is executive aggrandizement (Bermeo 2016). Through the weakening of horizontal accountability mechanisms, elected leaders seek to concentrate power in their hands, helping them entrench their political authority (Levistsky and Ziblatt 2018; Haggard and Kaufman 2021).

Once executives attempt to aggrandize their power, the response of other institutions, such as the legislature and the judiciary, is key to determining whether the incumbent's efforts will become successful. However, there are several concerns regarding the ability of the legislatures to prevent executive power grabs, especially in Africa. First, the composition of the legislature may influence whether this institution can avert infringements on democratic norms and processes. If the governing party has a strong majority in the legislature, the legislature may be less likely to challenge the executive's ambitions and approve bills and amendments that may benefit their party leader (Boese et al. 2021; Haggard and Kaufman 2021; Laebens and Lührmann 2021; Lührmann et al. 2021). Second, in the African context, it is often assumed that legislatures serve as rubber-stamp institutions given their limited independence from the executive (Barkan 2009; Opalo 2020). In such contexts, legislatures may provide the incumbent with the tools to amass more power.

Since the adoption of multipartyism in Africa, however, recent work suggests that legislatures are not mere rubber stamps for the executive and that their behavior matters (Barkan 2009; Mattes and Mozaffar 2016). Beyond constituency service provision and representation, legislatures in the region have served to keep executives in check and to legislate. For instance, in Kenya, legislatures have been able to stop the adoption of executive bills (Opalo 2019). In Malawi, similarly, the legislature has successfully halted efforts by executives who have sought to change term limits or restrict civil liberties (Dulani and van Donge 2005; Dionne and Dulani 2024). However, there are high degrees of variation in terms of legislative strength across the continent, with some of them being weaker relative to the executive and legitimizing their behavior (Barkan 2009; Collord 2019; Opalo 2019). These mixed patterns underscore the need to examine legislative behavior more closely, not just because it may stop backsliding, but also because it may possibly facilitate it.

While empirical studies of democratic erosion in African and elsewhere have found that legislatures do not stop backsliding from progressing, we argue that legislatures may even bolster this process by legitimizing the executive's power grabs, especially if they manage to motivate instrumentally driven members of their own winning coalition (e.g. Boese et al. 2021a). Such legitimizing may be achieved when legislatures become discursive showcases of elite unity in the face of backsliding.

A study of parliamentary discourse during backsliding requires a broad scope over time and individual legislators. We believe that the focus on parliamentary speeches adds to our understanding by providing a unique insight into how backsliding is narrated, normalized, and justified by the legislature. African legislatures have often been regarded as institutions of clientelistic elite cooptation (Bratton and van de Walle 1997). Barkan (2009) notes that such

institutions have comprised a mix of "opportunist" and "reformist" MPs. A study of individual legislator behavior during backsliding provides an opportunity to quantify the prevalence of these legislative ideal-types and gauge the extent to which legislatures follow political self-interest or revolt against a power-grabbing executive to maintain institutional autonomy.

Legislative Speeches in Periods of Democratic Stability and Backsliding

Parliamentary speeches represent one of the most important tools available to legislators in parliaments across the globe (Bäck et al. 2022). While speeches do not necessarily mirror the innermost views of legislators or represent their "true" policy priorities, they can be understood as important pieces of strategic political communication. Parliamentary speeches offer legislators an opportunity to stake an individual position independent of the position taken by their political party. In this way, legislators can use the parliamentary floor to cultivate an individual political brand somewhat distinct from the party they represent (Duell et al. 2023).

Parliamentary speech-making is primarily directed towards two different audiences: other elites and voters. When communicating with other elites, legislators can use speeches to challenge or reinforce internal-party hierarchies by criticizing leadership, signaling dissent, or demonstrating loyalty. Speeches are serious and costly signals where legislators commit to a particular stance. Emboldened legislatures can use such signals to encourage other intra-party elites to challenge the executive and position themselves as leaders of intra-party rebellion. They can also use speeches to signal their continued loyalty to party leadership and reassure that they will continue being "team players" in the face of mounting opposition.

At the same time, legislators use speeches to address constituents. Speeches can be used to display legislators' concerns for locally important issues and development concerns, as well as to frame national-level debates for home audiences. They can highlight the issues they believe resonate with voters at home and use the floor to explain why legislation would benefit or harm local interests. This is especially important in the African context, where research has shown that voters attach significant weight to their legislators' ability to actively represent their constituencies and promote local development (Mattes and Mozaffar 2016; Frantzeskakis 2023).

In periods of stability, speech patterns follow predictable lines. Opposition MPs will use the floor to hold the executive accountable, criticize policy failures, and propose alternatives. However, they will not only be negative, but can also use speeches to formulate alternatives, draw attention to the needs of their constituents, or take credit for government achievements.

Government MPs will generally defend the record of the executive and their party. However, they may at times dissent from general party lines to add to the party's electoral appeal. In this sense, they may occasionally voice dissent, express local concerns, or disagree with certain policies. Such occasional criticism can help project the view that the party is a broad church, able to incorporate different factions with sometimes contradictory preferences. Despite these nuances, the standard assumption is that the role of opposition and government will lead to a clear and predictable divide in the tone that government and opposition MPs adopt vis-à-vis the executive:

H1: Government-party legislators have a more positive tone vis-à-vis the executive in parliamentary debates than opposition party legislators.

How do legislators act during periods of democratic backsliding? We suggest that partisan differences in speech-making will be accentuated during such periods. Backsliding forges a deeper division between the government and the opposition (Haggard and Kaufman 2021). For opposition MPs, such divisions will likely lead to a more confrontative tone. As argued above, not all debates need to be confrontative. However, during backsliding, higher levels of confrontation can be employed as a rhetorical device by opposition MPs to mobilize diverse groups of voters and civil society against creeping authoritarianism, while simultaneously defending institutions that are instrumentally important for opposition politics. As democracy/autocracy cleavages become more visible, the room for compromise is drastically reduced. Opposition parties will need to defend specific policy positions and even political institutions that will ensure their ability to compete fairly in the future. Opposition legislators will likely use parliamentary debates to raise awareness of executive transgressions and mobilize the electorate and civil society against the executive. A more confrontational tone is not necessarily restricted to issues directly related to democratic backsliding, but could also affect how opposition legislators relate to the executive on other, at least partially unrelated issues. We thus formulate H2:

H2: The tone of parliamentary speeches made by opposition legislators during periods of democratic backsliding will be more negative vis-à-vis the executive than speeches during periods of democratic stability.

During periods of democratic backsliding, government party MPs may have stronger incentives to demonstrate unity and loyalty towards the executive. As discussed above, government party MPs are not expected to always praise the executive. However, during periods of democratic

backsliding, government parties are less likely to tolerate internal opposition, as they prioritize unity over the potential benefits of a more open parliamentary climate. Forms of dissent could increase the likelihood of ruling party defections and signal cracks in the ruling coalition Government party MPs can provide a sense of continued support for the executive and normalize and trivialize the gradual process of democratic erosion. This way, parliaments may become performative theatres for authoritarian politics and create a sense of reduced conflict while important institutions are demolished.

In order to foster compliance among government-party legislators, executives have several tools at their disposal. None of these tools comes without cost to the executive, but the executive is likely to be more willing to pay these costs during critical backsliding periods. First, government parties can access centralized resources to reward loyal party elites, such as cabinet positions and party leadership functions. They can also punish those who fall out of line by cutting off personal or constituency resources to rebel MPs (Barkan 2009; Chaisty et al. 2018; Opalo 2020). Secondly, the party leadership, concentrated in the executive, often has significant power in determining the future career of legislators (Hazan and Rahat 2010). Career-motivated legislators operating within strong government parties are likely to adapt their parliamentary behavior accordingly.

The argument above motivates the formulation of hypothesis H3 below. The hypothesis does not imply a simple causal relationship between backsliding and government-party legislative behavior. We recognize that the ability of the executive to embark on democratic backsliding may be endogenously related to party unity and manifested in less party disunity. However, descriptively, we anticipate the following:

H3: The tone of parliamentary speeches made by government-party legislators are likely to be more positive vis-à-vis the executive during periods of backsliding than during periods of democratic stability.

Case Selection

In our empirical analysis, we focus on Malawi and Zambia, two African democracies that have recently experienced democratic backsliding. With our case selection, we break from the overwhelming majority of studies analyzing legislative behavior in North America and Western Europe (Bäck et al. 2021). A new, exciting research has started to take African legislatures more seriously. While traditionally, they were seen as mere rubber stamp institutions, overshadowed by all-powerful executives, recent contributions are highlighting how such institutions have become increasingly institutionalized and important venues for elite power sharing (Barkan 2009; Opalo 2020; Collord 2024).

In the empirical analysis, we compare how legislators communicate during periods of democratic stability (i.e., periods when the level of democracy was fairly stable) and periods of democratic backsliding. While the case-study literature describes backsliding episodes in Malawi (Cammack 2012; Wroe 2012; Resnick 2013; vonDoepp 2020; Gloppen et al. 2022) and Zambia (Goldring and Wahman 2016; Siachiwena 2022; Beardsworth et al. 2022; Hinfelaar et al. 2022b Resnick 2022; Hern 2023) it is worthwhile briefly introducing the backsliding episodes analyzed in this study.

In *Malawi*, the period of democratic backsliding begins with President Bingu wa Mutharika's second term in office (May 2009) and comes to an abrupt end with the president's

death in April 2012.[4] President Mutharika and his ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) were re-elected by a landslide in 2009 amid strong economic growth and elite consolidation (Chinsinga 2010). However, shortly after his re-election, the country's economic fortunes took a sharp turn. Inflation and unemployment skyrocketed, and the country experienced an acute fuel and foreign currency shortage. In the context of economic failure, the government increased repression against opposition voices, academics, and the media. The government embarked on regressive legislation. It increased the government's ability to censor the media and reduced the judiciary's ability to check executive power (VonDoepp 2020).[5]

Backsliding in Malawi caught the attention of international as well as domestic players. The British High Commissioner was expelled after the leak of a private communique, citing his concern about the government's "increased autocratic tendencies." Civil society organized popular mobilization after a lecturer at the University of Malawi had been dismissed in an obvious attempt to stifle academic freedom. In July 2011, nationwide protests prompted deadly police repression. A total of 19 protesters were killed, and many more were injured. After the protests, many of Malawi's most prominent activists fled the country, fearing prosecution or violence (Cammack 2012; Wroe 2012).

Backsliding in Malawi came to an abrupt end when President Mutharika died unexpectedly in April 2012 from a heart attack. President Mutharika's death prompted the transfer of power to Malawi's Vice-President, Joyce Banda. While elites around the late president attempted to subvert

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[4] This is not Malawi's first episode of democratic backsliding. Malawi also experienced backsliding during the second half of Mutharika's predecessor, Bakili Muluzi, last term in office. President Muluzi increased repression of civil society, opposition, and the media as he unsuccessfully attempted to change the constitution to allow for a third term in office. However, Muluzi was ultimately unsuccessful due to legislative resistance (VonDoepp 2005).

[5] The infamous injunction bill, passed in July 2011, made it impossible for courts to grant ex-post injunctions against the government.

the constitution and bypass the Vice-President, these attempts were ultimately unsuccessful. The Banda presidency came to represent a return to more "normalized" Malawian politics.

In *Zambia*, our analysis concentrates on the backsliding period under the reign of President Lungu and his Patriotic Front (PF).[6] PF gained power in 2011 when it unseated the previously dominant Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD). Lungu's ascent to power came after the death of President Michael Sata and his victory in a 2015 by-election. Lungu managed to take control of the PF after a rigged primary election steeped in violence and controversy (Fraser 2017). His presidency came to be characterized by blatant assaults on democratic norms and institutions.

The Lungu administration embarked on constitutional reform to entrench executive power and undermine the independence of the legislature and the judiciary. In some cases, such attempts were successful, as with the controversial 2016 amended constitution (Hinfelaar et al. 2021). It was ultimately unsuccessful in other cases, as with the controversial Bill 10 (Chiluba 2021). However, democratic backsliding was not limited to institutional change but was also manifested by a systematic and unprecedented breach of democratic norms and bending of formal rules.

Throughout the Lungu presidency, the executive was aided by a judiciary packed with loyalists. The judiciary dismissed the opposition's presidential petition on the 2016 election based on a technicality. It also determined that President Lungu was allowed to run for President for a third time in 2021, despite the constitution's two-term limit.[7]

Levels of electoral manipulation in the PF regime were also unprecedented. The PF had come to rely heavily on violence and intimidation to curtail opposition campaigning. It also used

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[6] Like in Malawi, this is not Zambia's first backsliding period. Zambia also experienced backsliding when its first democratically elected president, Fredrick Chiluba, unsuccessfully attempted to run for an unconstitutional third term in office (Sishuwa 2020).

[7] The argument was made based on the fact that President Lungu's first term was not a full term. He only served for one year between the 2015 by-election and the 2016 regularly scheduled election.

the power of the state to shut down opposition campaigns and to finance re-election campaigns in 2016 and 2021 (Goldring and Wahman 2016). The Electoral Commission was criticized for its lack of transparency and fairness in relation to voter registration and lopsided enforcement of campaign legislation (Beardsworth et al., 2022).

The Lungu regime stands out in Zambian comparison by its use of repression. It frequently meddled in the internal affairs of civil society, and it shut down independent media sources (Goldring and Wahman 2016). Backsliding in Zambia came under particular international scrutiny in 2017 when police arrested the opposition leader, Hakainde Hichilema, on trumped-up charges. Hichilema ended up spending four months in jail before his release. The episode of Zambian backsliding ended in 2021, when President Lungu was resoundingly voted out of power by an electorate craving economic and democratic improvements (Hern 2022).

Malawi and Zambia both represent clear cases of democratic backsliding. The assessment of these episodes is supported by case study evidence and standard democratic indices. The appendix (section A) shows the development of different V-Dem indicators in this period. The focus on legislative behavior during African backsliding is a major contribution to this paper. While the literature on backsliding has ballooned in the last decade, most of this literature has focused on cases such as Eastern Europe and the United States. Africa remains highly under-studied, particularly from the more micro-level perspective adopted here (Arriola et al. 2022b). The comparative nature of this paper also breaks new ground; given extreme data scarcity, legislative studies in Africa are rarely comparative. Our analysis is, however, not free from scope conditions. Both Malawi and Zambia are cases of initially high levels of executive dominance, and in both cases, the government party had majority support in the legislature. We know from earlier

instances of backsliding that governments were more vulnerable under lower levels of party control (VonDoepp 2019).

However, within these scope conditions, we believe that Malawi and Zambia make for relatively difficult tests of our theory. First, both countries have traditionally been described as having weak party systems. Parties are volatile and many MPs win seats on independent tickets (Rakner and Svåsand 2010; Svåsand 2015). Weak party systems may make legislators subjectable to cooptation, but it has enabled significant party-switching and floor crossing (Young 2014; Arriola et al. 2022a). In other words, MPs who decide to break with their political party can often compete successfully outside their original party or on a different party ticket.

Second, both countries use SMD elections. Comparative research has suggested that SMD elections create high levels of legislator autonomy vis-à-vis political parties. In SMD electoral systems, legislators have a stronger personal mandate and are expected to cultivate a stronger personal political brand (Proksch and Slapin 2012).

Third, both Malawi and Zambia follow the parliamentary traditions of Britain, their former colonizer. The parliamentary debate rules in both countries afford little power to political parties in prioritizing speakers on the floor (Frantzeskakis et al. 2022, Wegmann and Evequoz 2019). The Westminster style of parliamentary debate grants every legislator the chance to speak by making themselves known to the speaker (Proksch and Slapin 2012). In other words, while party elites may use their formal power to silence their internal party critics in some parliamentary systems, this is impossible in Malawi and Zambia.

Data Collection

To understand whether MPs change their tone towards the executive during the episodes of backsliding discussed above, we systematically code a considerable corpus of data. The foundation for the analysis is a unique collection of parliamentary transcripts collected in Malawi and Zambia. Parliamentary transcripts for Malawi were collected from the parliamentary library in Lilongwe during two fieldwork trips in 2016 and 2022. These transcripts have not previously been made readily available to the public. The parliamentary transcripts for Zambia were mostly scraped from the parliament's webpage. However, as the electronically available transcripts are incomplete, we also undertook fieldwork in the parliamentary archives of Zambia in 2022, and we were able to complete the records available for the period 2002-2006. Upon completion of the data collection efforts, the corpus amounts to parliamentary debates that took place over 838 days in Malawi for the period 2004-2019, and 1224 days in Zambia for the period 2001-2021.

Dataset Development

To facilitate the analysis, we quantify whether a speech is positive or negative and whether such emotions are related to the executive specifically. To capture speech-level tone, this paper uses sentiment analysis derived from a machine learning approach. Sentiment analysis allows us to compare broad patterns more systematically over longer time periods without making difficult sampling decisions on what MPs and speeches to include in the analysis. Several studies have shown the potential fruitfulness of using sentiment analysis to study "tone" in parliamentary speeches (e.g. Rheault et al. 2016; Rudkowsky et al. 2018; Osnabrügge et al. 2021) or other forms of text, such as social media posts (Ballard et al. 2023; Heseltine and Dorsey 2022). While such studies serve as important inspiration for the approach adopted in this study, our research question also requires some modifications to earlier applications. Most importantly, while earlier research

has been particularly interested in "emotiveness," we use sentiment analysis to measure tone directed to a particular actor (i.e., the executive).

To capture this tone, we code two distinct variables for all speeches at the paragraph level. The first variable captures the tone – whether the speaker is positive, neutral, or negative (1, 0, or -1, respectively). The second variable captures direction – whether the contents of the speech target the government or not (1 or 0, respectively). A paragraph is considered to target the government when its contents are about the president, the ministers, and, by extension, the executive branch. Examples of speeches and their coding are provided in the appendix (section B).

Given the size of the corpus, it was not feasible to hand-code every speech. Therefore, a set of 12,100 paragraphs of speech was hand-coded by the authors to be used to train classifiers. This training set consisted of 5,900 paragraphs of speech from Malawi and 6,200 from Zambia. To ensure intercoder reliability, sets of 500 paragraphs were double-coded by each pair of authors. On average, the ICR scores were 80% for tone and 78.8% for direction.

The training data was used to fine-tune RoBERTa, which is an innovative neural network transformer model (Liu 2019). These classifiers have proven highly adept at text classification and have been increasingly utilized in applications in the field of political science (e.g., Ballard et al. 2022, Wahman et al. 2021). Upon completing of the hand-coding, separate instances of the RoBERTa model were trained to code each indicator. To train and validate the models, we used K-fold cross validation, with k=10. Therefore, the training set was divided in 10 equal folds, of which 9 were used to train the classifier and 1 to validate the training. The process was repeated 10 times, at which point each fold had been used for validation. This process is effective in evaluating the robustness of a classifier as it removes the possibility of high validation scores due to randomly choosing "easy" validation data. Overall, the results indicate that the optimized

models perform well. They coded the tone of individual speeches with a weighted average f1 score of 85.4%, and whether a speech is directed towards the government with an f1 score of 88.5%. Additional information regarding the coding process and validation checks is provided in the appendix (Table C1). After validating the training process, we used the training set to train instances of the classifier that were used to code the entire corpus, at which point the entire dataset is coded at the paragraph level.

The next step is to compile the dataset into speeches. However, MPs taking the floor often talk about several topics in succession. In such cases, MPs may praise the government on one topic, and criticize it on another (e.g., Christiansen and Seeberg 2016). To avoid obscuring this nuance, we adopted the following approach. In addition to the variables discussed to this point, we also coded each paragraph based on the main policy topic that it addresses. Policy topics were drawn from the master codebook of the Policy Agendas Project (Baumgartner et al. 2006).[8] For this task, we leverage the classifier used by Brannon and Frantzeskakis (Forthcoming). That classifier is a BERT model which was fine-tuned using a hand-coded corpus of more than 27,000 paragraphs of parliamentary speech from Ghana, Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, and it coded the validation data with an average f1 score of 82.6% (precision: 83.2%, recall: 82.9%).

Upon completion of the previous steps, sequences of paragraphs on the same policy topic were compiled together in a single speech. This coding strategy allows for an MP taking the floor to make one speech or multiple consecutive ones, and it offers two distinct advantages. First, it serves to make speeches more comparable to each other in terms of length by breaking down the longer speeches into multiple shorter ones. Second, it enables us to retain information about legislators who convey multiple messages when they have the opportunity. Finally, for the

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[8] In addition to the main topics included, an additional category for procedural speech was included.

purposes of this project, we drop speeches that are not directed towards the government. We provide a flowchart of the data processing pipeline in the appendix (Figure C1). The finalized dataset includes over 152,000 speeches made by 895 MPs elected in Malawi (2004-2019) and Zambia (2001-2021).

Research Design

Our analysis explores the tone of government and opposition MPs discussing the executive. We compare this tone during periods of democratic stability and democratic backsliding. For Malawi, we code the backsliding period between Bingu Mutharika's re-election in 2009 and his death in April 2012. For Zambia, we code the backsliding period between Edgar Lungu's accession to the presidency in January 2015 and his electoral defeat in August 2021. We decided on a dichotomous approach where we code backsliding during the entire period. This is admittedly a crude approach; the salience of democratic affront will vary in the longer period. However, there is no way for us to quantify the level of backsliding on a more granular level (e.g., days or months) without significant measurement error. However, in the analysis section, we will also show specific trends surrounding the two most notable instances of backsliding in Malawi and Zambia, respectively.

To test H1, we observe whether government MPs are more likely to make positive speeches compared to opposition MPs. Given the nature of the dependent variable, which takes the values -1, 0, and 1, we use ordered logistic regression models with the unit of analysis being the individual speech. This allows us to estimate the likelihood of any given speech being negative, neutral, or positive. In addition, we include country fixed-effects, and the standard errors are clustered at the MP-level.

To test H2 and H3, we observe the change in the likelihood of government and opposition MPs making positive and negative speeches in periods of democratic backsliding compared to periods of democratic stability. Therefore, we incorporate an interaction between government membership and a binary variable coded as 0 for periods of democratic stability and 1 for backsliding periods. We include country-fixed effects, and cluster the standard errors at the MP-level. For ease of interpretation, the results of all models are discussed based on simulations. We include several relevant controls. First, since experience in the chamber tends to be associated with a more active and assertive role, we control for newcomer MPs (i.e., MPs elected for the first time in the current parliamentary period). We also control for ministerial appointments. MPs with a ministerial portfolio will routinely be called before parliament to defend government policy. In addition, we control for the gender of the MP, as female MPs tend to be less assertive and more "communal" when they take the floor (Brescoll 2011). We also control for whether an MP is independent; independents may be more likely to gravitate towards supporting the government in an attempt to join the government party ranks (Young 2014). Finally, we control for year and parliament to account for temporal elements. In the appendix (Table D1), we provide descriptive statistics for all variables.

Analysis

We begin our analysis by exploring our hypotheses in Figures 1 and 2. In Figure 1, we plot a kernel-weighted local polynomial of MP tone for each day that the parliament was in session. There are breaks at the beginning and end of periods of backsliding. The x-axis denotes time, and the y-axis shows the overall tone by government and opposition MPs on a given day. This

preliminary analysis indicates a clear gap between the tone of government and opposition MPs. For the vast majority of the time covered in this dataset, government MPs appear to be considerably more positive than Opposition MPs, although there are some instances where this gap is quite small.

Second, MP tone is noticeably different in periods of democratic backsliding compared to those of stability. Both government and opposition MPs appear to be more positive in their speeches toward the government during backsliding. In Malawi, both groups of MPs are very positive towards the executive in the first half of the backsliding spell, with this being the only period where opposition MPs make more positive than negative speeches. The trend is declining until Mutharika's death, but we still observe that even at the lowest point both groups of MPs are more positive than in other periods. For Zambia, this trend is less clear, but we still see that government MPs are consistently positive towards the government. Opposition MPs seem to be consistently more positive, and even when their tone dips, it is not by as much as in previous periods.

One limitation of our analysis is the crude coding of the backsliding period. While it is impossible to code granular variations in backsliding on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis throughout the backsliding period, it is possible that particular focal events accentuate discursive trends. Two particular backsliding events are particularly salient; in Malawi, the pro-democracy protests, resulting in deadly government protests (Cammack 2012). The protests started in February 2011 and ended with President Mutharika's death in April 2012. In Zambia, the incarceration period of the opposition leader, Hakainde Hichilema, between April and August 2017 is particularly salient (Wahman 2017). In the appendix (Figure D5)), we show descriptive trends around these salient backsliding events. Indeed, we observe that government and opposition

differences in tone diverge particularly in these periods, compared to the rest of the broader backsliding period.

Figure 1: Government vs Opposition tone over time
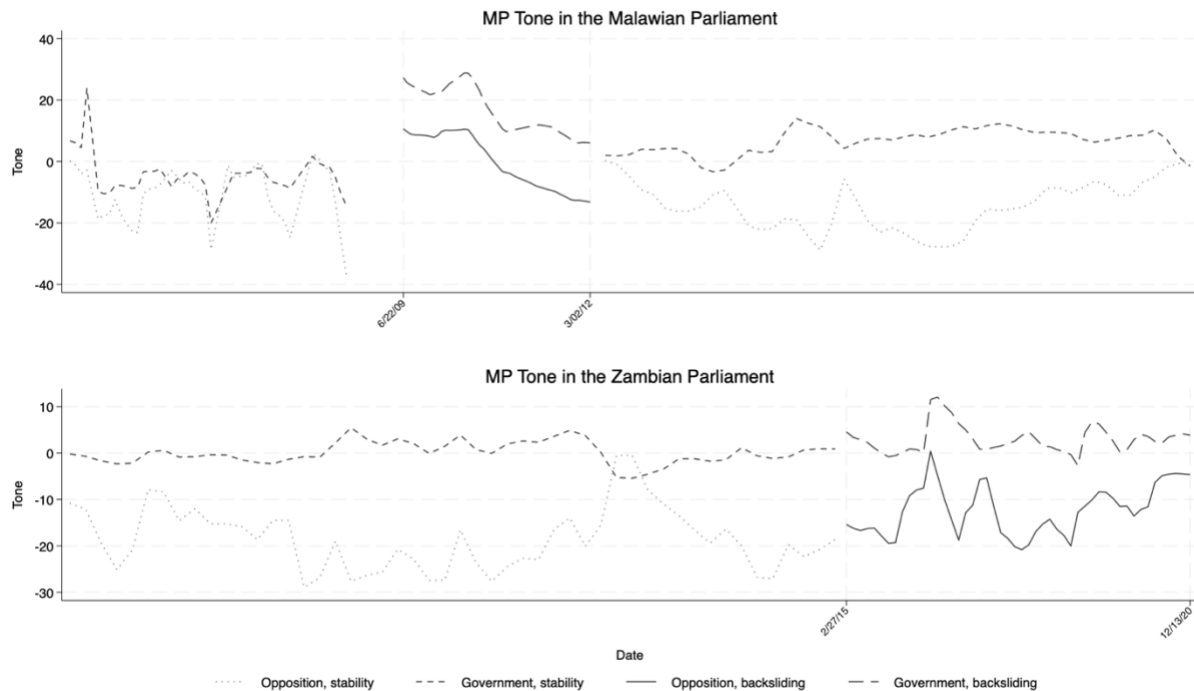
In Figure 2, we summarize the tone of government and opposition MPs in periods of democratic stability and backsliding. The tone axis takes values from -1 (i.e., all speeches by a given group of MPs are negative) to 1 (i.e., all speeches are positive). The confidence intervals are calculated based on MP-level clustering.

Figure 2: Government vs Opposition tone in periods of Stability and Backsliding
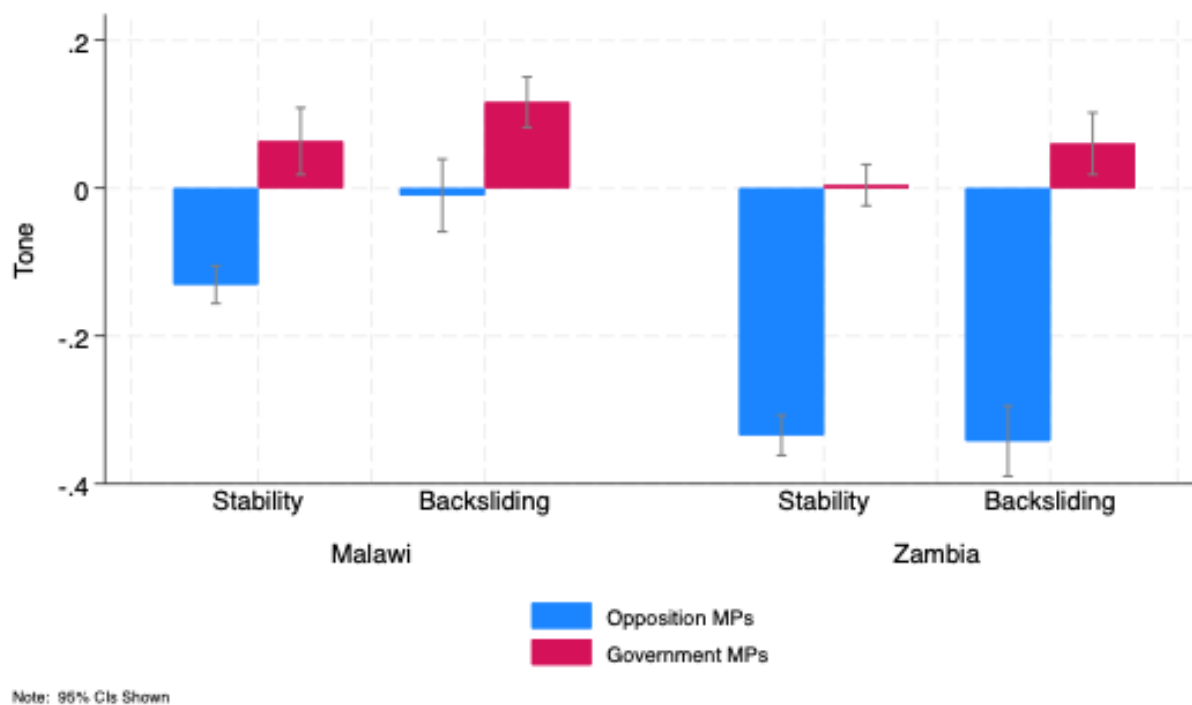
First, in all scenarios, government MPs appear more positive than opposition MPs. Furthermore, comparisons of means tests indicate that the difference in tone per speech between government and opposition MPs is statistically significant in all individual periods of stability and backsliding (Appendix Table D2). Second, when comparing the two sets of periods in each country, we observe clear differences. In both countries, government MPs are more likely to make positive speeches, with Malawians moving from 0.06 to 0.12, and Zambians from 0.004 to 0.06. On the contrary, opposition MPs seem to behave differently, with Malawians moving in a positive direction (from -0.13 to -0.01) and Zambians in a negative direction (from -0.33 to -0.34). Overall, these observations offer some initial support for H1 and H3, but not for H2.

*Figure 3: Simulations on the tone of Government and Opposition MPs*
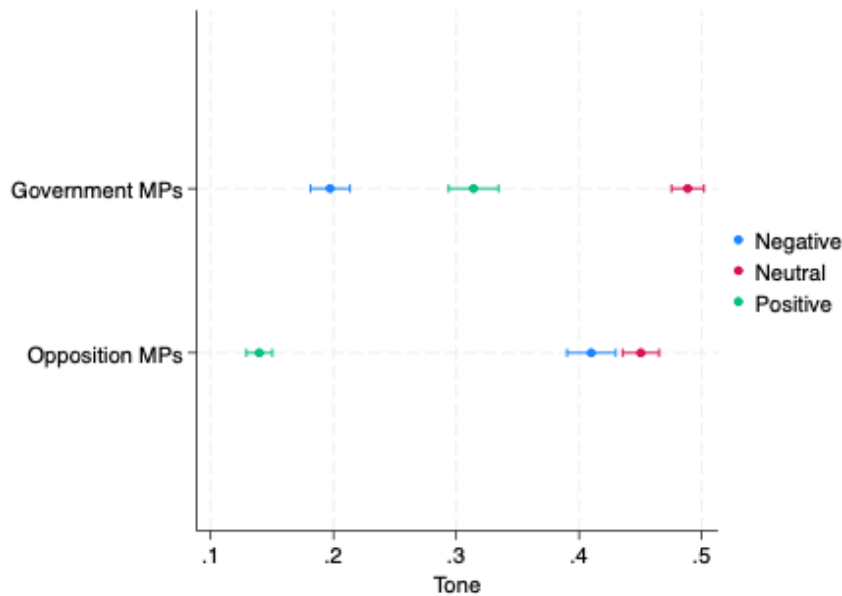
We formally test H1 in the appendix (Table D3, Model 1) and present simulation results in Figure 3. The top line shows the likelihood of a single speech given by a government MP being negative, neutral, or positive. The bottom line gives the same information for a speech given by an opposition MP. While neutral speeches are most common for both government (48.7%) and opposition MPs (44.8%), government MPs are much more positively disposed towards the executive. When taking the floor, the probability of making a positive speech is 31.2% (95% CIs: 29.3-33.2) while the probability of making a negative speech is 20% (95% CIs: 18.4-21.6). On the other hand, opposition MPs make speeches that are positive towards the government 13.9% (95% CIs: 12.9 – 15) of the time and negative speeches 41.3% (95% CIs: 39.4 – 43.2) of the time. Overall, these results offer strong support for H1. They are perhaps unsurprising, but an important validation of our data.

In Figure 4, we present simulations based on our model testing H2 and H3 (see Appendix Table D3, Model 2). Each panel depicts the marginal effect of a constituent term included in the interaction. The left-hand panel shows that, compared to opposition MPs, government MPs are

more likely to make positive speeches by 16.7% (95% CIs: 14.2 – 19.1) during periods of stability and by 19% (95% CIs: 15.6 – 22.3) during periods of backsliding. In addition, government MPs are significantly less likely to make negative speeches by 21.6% (95% CIs: 18.8 – 24.4) during periods of stability and by 20.2% (95% CIs: 16.7 – 23.8) during periods of backsliding.

Figure 4: Marginal Effects Simulations on the Tone of Government and Opposition MPs

Note: The 95% confidence intervals are included
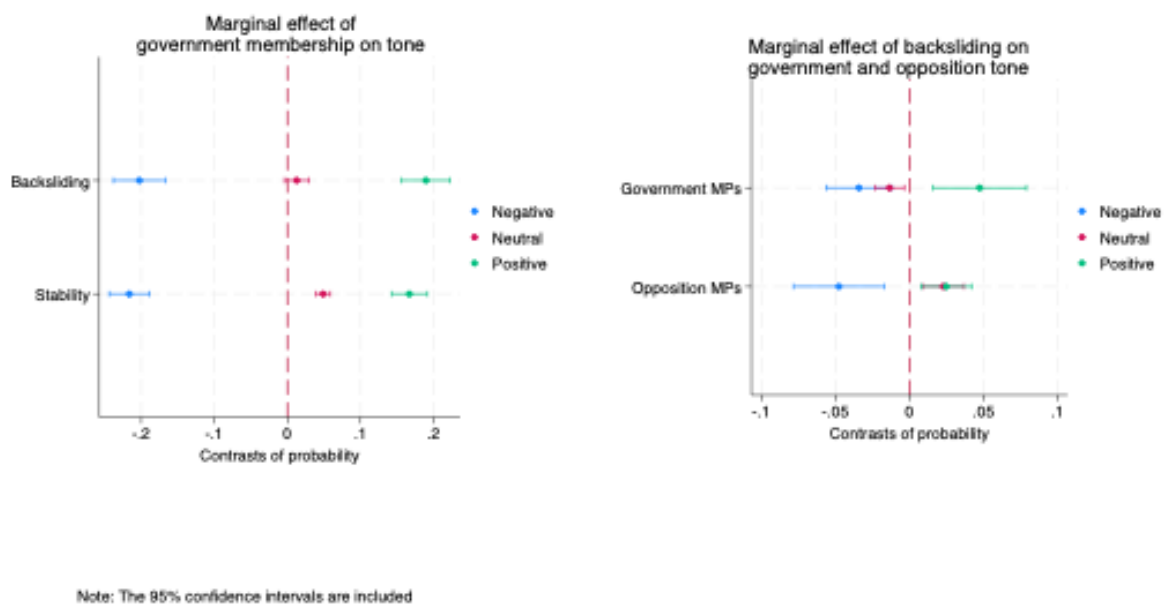
The right-hand panel depicts the change in behavior for government and opposition MPs during periods of democratic backsliding. During periods of backsliding, government MPs taking the floor are 4.7% (95% CIs: 1.6 – 7.9) more likely to make a positive speech and 3.4% (95% CIs: 1.2 – 5.6) less likely to make a negative speech. Taken together, these results offer strong support for H3, stating that in periods of backsliding, government MPs will be more supportive of the executive.

On the other hand, the results for the opposition MPs contradict our expectations. During backsliding, opposition MPs make more positive speeches by 2.5% (95% CIs: 0.1 – 4.2) and fewer negative speeches by 4.8% (95% CIs: 1.7 – 7.8). Therefore, we find no support for H2, stating that in periods of backsliding, opposition MPs will be more negative towards the government. As indicated by Figure 2, this finding seems to be driven by opposition behavior in Malawi. We return to this finding later to disentangle this surprising finding.

Robustness Checks

To increase confidence in our findings, we also conduct a series of robustness tests. First, the effects we observe might be due to changes in the composition of the chamber as opposed to backsliding. To address this, we re-ran the main analysis with the addition of MP-level fixed effects, and we find that the results remain unchanged (see Appendix Table D5, Figures D3-D4).

A second concern is the potential for cohort effects arising from the prolonged periods of backsliding, which may lead to the election of certain types of MPs. This problem is mitigated by the fact that backsliding in Zambia began during the middle of the 2011 parliamentary term, and the process in Malawi did not last for the entirety of the 2009 parliament. However, some newly elected MPs in the 2016 Zambian parliament only hold their seat during backsliding. For this reason, we rerun our analysis, dropping the newly elected Zambian 2016 MPs(see Appendix Table D9). All results remain robust.

Third, we test whether our results replicate when using a more traditional, dictionary-based measure of sentiment, although we believe our purpose-built measure to be more appropriate. We use the lexicon developed by Rheault et al. 2016, which measures emotion in parliamentary debates (see Appendix Table D4, Figures D1-D2). The results remain consistent regarding H1 and

H3. Government MPs are generally more positive, and even more so during periods of backsliding. However, when using this dependent variable, we do not find that opposition MPs are significantly more positive during periods of backsliding.

Finally, we consider the possibility that the type of speaker might change in periods of backsliding. It could be the case that fewer MPs take the floor. In addition, some MPs might avoid speechmaking during polarized periods. To address this concern, we construct a different version of the dataset at the year-MP level, which includes one observation per elected MP/year. Two new dependent variables are developed as a result. The first is *overall tone*, which is the sum of all negative (-1), neutral (0), and positive (1) speeches for a given year. The second is average tone, which is *overall tone* as the percentage of the total *number of speeches* made by an MP. Using both measures provides an informative overview of the *tone* in the chamber at a yearly level. The results (see Appendix Table D6, Figures D3-D4) remain consistent with those discussed up to this point. There is consistent support for H1 and H3 regardless of the dependent variable used. Similarly, opposition MPs are significantly more positive in both cases, which goes against H2.
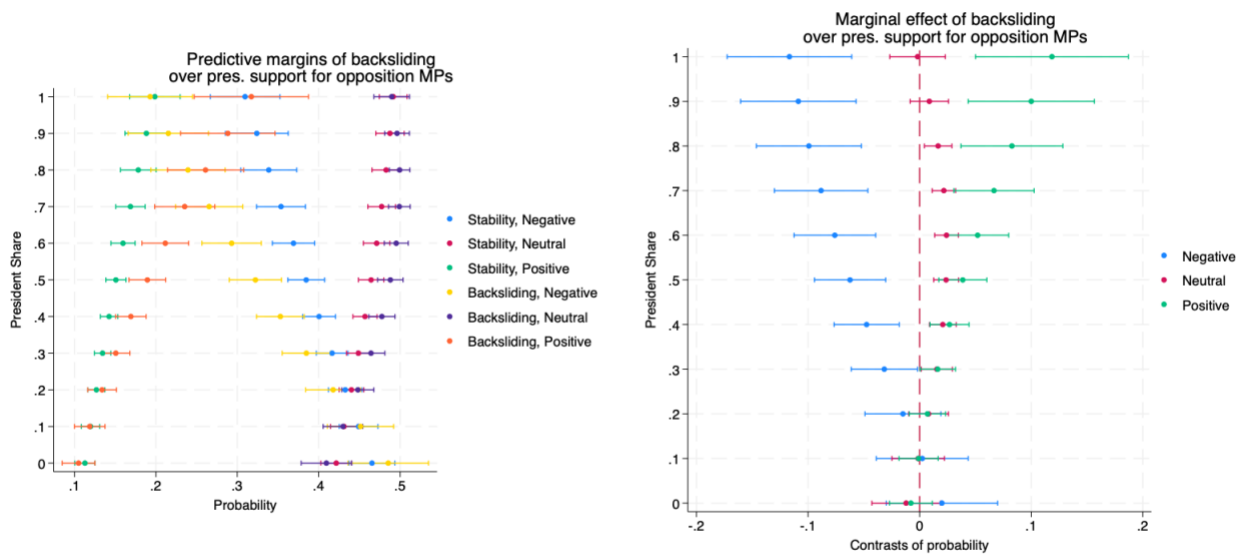
Exploring the Opposition Finding

In this section, we further explore the surprising finding for the opposition MPs. On aggregate, we find that opposition MPs become more positive during backsliding. This change is driven by the behavior of Malawian MPs. This result is the complete opposite of our expectation. One possible explanation is that the finding is driven by the strategic calculations of opposition MPs. MPs have been known to shift party allegiances in both Malawi and Zambia. Defecting to the government has great resource benefits for MPs and their constituencies. This is particularly true in Malawi, where defections to the ruling party have been historically very common (Young

2014). It may be that some MPs who formally belong to the opposition essentially behave as incumbent MPs, especially if they hail from constituencies where re-election on the government party ticket is likely.

To investigate this possibility, we ran an additional analysis where we interacted backsliding with the vote share obtained by the incumbent president in the MP's constituency in the previous election (see Appendix Table D7). The results from the simulation are presented in Figure 5. We present the results for opposition MPs in the top row and for government MPs in the bottom row. It is clear that support for the president at home has a substantial effect on MPs. Looking at the left side graph, we observe that when support for the president is low, opposition MPs are very likely to make negative speeches and very unlikely to make positive ones. This is consistent in periods of both stability and backsliding. However, as presidential support increases, opposition MPs become increasingly less likely to make negative speeches and more likely to make positive speeches. In addition, this trend is amplified during periods of backsliding, which is evident in the right side graph of Figure 5. Therefore, some opposition behavior is potentially explained by strategic positioning to signal a willingness for co-optation. These findings are interesting in light of recent discussions on African legislatures and highlight the still precarious nature of legislative opposition in contexts of executive dominance (Rakner and van de Walle 2009).

Figure 5: Levels of Presidential Support and MP Tone

Predictive margins of backsliding over pres. support for opposition MPs

Marginal effect of backsliding over pres. support for opposition MPs

Note: The 95% confidence intervals are included

It is also possible that opposition MPs are more negative on specific critical topics in periods of backsliding. In particular, they may try to increase the salience of democracy issues by speaking more frequently about democracy. To investigate this possibility, we coded an additional indicator capturing whether a speech is about a topic relevant to democracy. The coding process followed to create this indicator is similar to the one used to develop the measure on tone. Speeches were coded as relevant to democracy if they discussed issues related to term limits, presidential terms, electoral fraud/violence/meddling/reform, the judiciary, referendums, democracy, propaganda, regime, regime change, civil liberties, repression, media freedom, academic freedom, freedom of association, transparency, or rule of law.

The relevant logistic regression model is presented in the appendix (Table D8, Model 12). Marginal effect simulations based on that model are presented in the top row of Figure 6. The top left graph shows that being a member of the government party has no statistically significant effect

on the likelihood of speaking about democracy in either period. Similarly, neither group of MPs is more likely to speak on issues related to democracy in periods of backsliding.

Figure 6: Speaking about Democracy

Note: The 95% confidence intervals are included
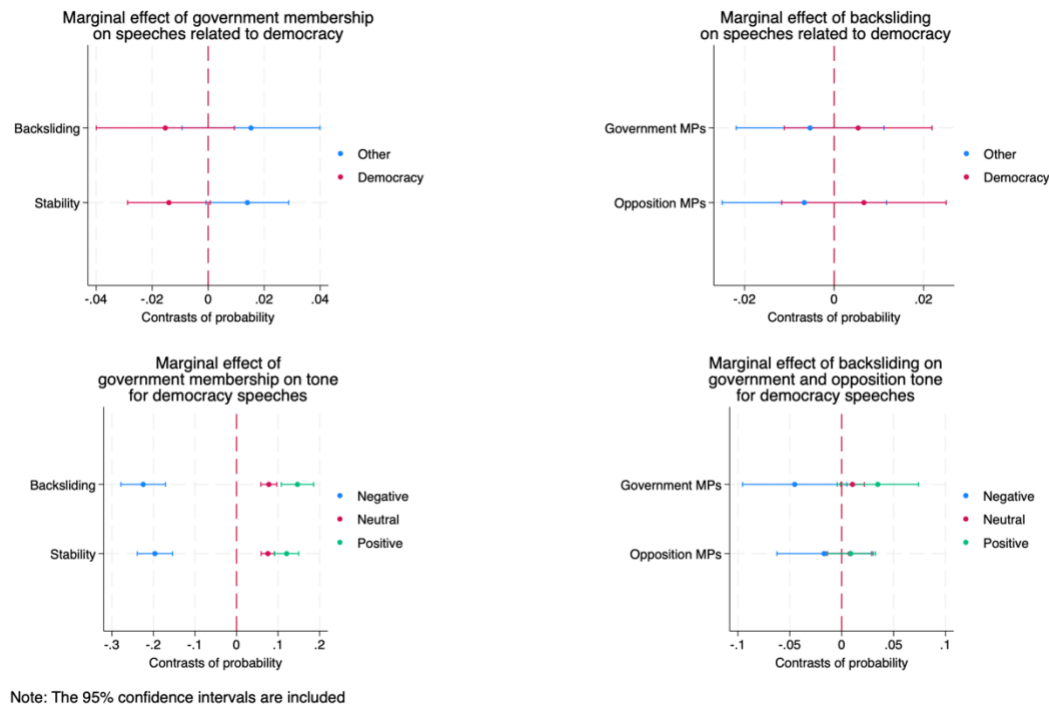
In the bottom row of graphs, we examine whether MPs' tone changes when they discuss democracy-related issues during the different periods. Thus, we run a model with the specifications of our main models, but with the corpus of speeches limited to democracy-related speeches (Appendix Table D8, Model 13). Simulations of the marginal effects are presented in the bottom row of Figure 6. The bottom left graph shows that, as in previous cases, when speaking about democracy, government MPs make significantly more positive speeches and significantly fewer negative speeches than opposition MPs during both periods. Moving on to the bottom right figure, we observe no statistically significant changes for either group of MPs.

While this was unexpected, it can be better understood when we take into consideration the baseline predictions of an opposition MP making a positive/negative speech about democracy. These simulations, which are not graphically presented, indicate that opposition MPs are always extremely negative in this category of speeches. During democratic stability, a democracy-related speech by an opposition MP is 69.3% (95% CIs: 66.1 – 72.5) likely to be negative and 11.9% (95% CIs: 10.4 – 13.4) likely to be positive. Similarly, during periods of backsliding, their speeches are 67.6% (95% CIs: 64 – 71.2) likely to be negative and 12.8% (95% CIs: 10.7 – 14.8) likely to be positive. This indicates the existence of a ceiling effect with opposition MPs already being so critical of the government during democracy-related debates that they are not able to react more negatively during periods of backsliding.

A final consideration concerns the degree of party cohesion displayed during periods of backsliding. While the opposition overall appears to become more positive, it is important to also look at the position held by individual opposition parties, and to consider whether that position is consistent, or whether MPs seem to behave independently. The boxplots presented in Figure 7 provide information on the government parties – DPP and PF – as well as the main opposition parties. The graphs hint at the existence of a reasonable, but not extreme, variation as indicated by the length of the whiskers. Also, there are a limited number of outliers. Critically, all outlying opposition MPs exhibit a more positive tone towards the executive compared to the rest of their party.

Figure 7: MP Tone by Party during Backsliding Periods
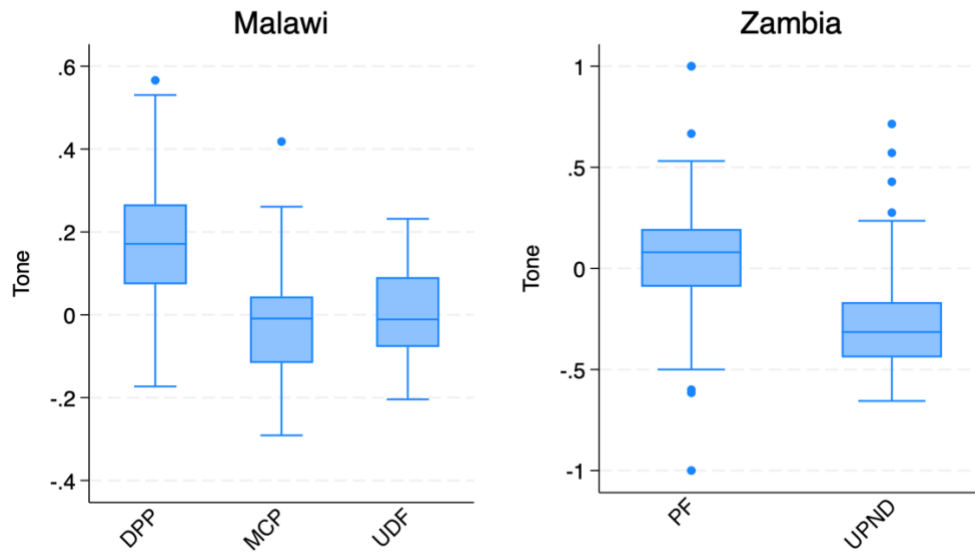
Taken together, the results presented in this section suggest that opposition members may not want to become marginalized in parliament and lose access to centralized resources, particularly when the government party has a strong majority. On the other hand, while the opposition is always ready to confront the executive on democracy related issues, it does not escalate this behavior during periods of backsliding. These findings are rather alarming. They highlight why legislatures may legitimize executives' actions during backsliding periods. Government party MPs become more positive vis-à-vis the executive during periods of backsliding (as hypothesized in H3), and so do opposition MPs (opposed to H2).

Conclusion

Legislatures can serve important roles in the process of democratic backsliding. While most existing research has focused on their formal powers in preventing legislation from subverting democracy, we focus on the legislature's role in discursively legitimizing the executive during backsliding periods.

Focusing particularly on two cases, Malawi and Zambia, we find that government party MPs are more likely to use parliamentary speeches to communicate a positive sentiment vis-à-vis the executive during periods of democratic backsliding. The findings related to opposition MPs are more nuanced. Overall, we do not find that opposition MPs become more critical during periods of backsliding. Partly, this null finding is explained by opposition MPs in government party strongholds behaving similar to government-party MPs and increasing their support for the executive during backsliding. In addition, opposition MPs are very critical in all democracy-related debates, but that seems to restrict their ability to adapt their rhetoric during periods of backsliding.

Taken together, these findings highlight how legislatures can provide discursive support for executives when embarking on the contentious project of backsliding. Executives can leverage strong party unity while benefiting from opposition fragmentation. In this way, the role of the legislature in periods of backsliding extends beyond providing formal support for the executive's legislative agenda. We argue that legislatures play an important role in signaling elite unity.

This paper also makes important methodological contributions to literatures on democratic backsliding and legislative studies. The paper provides a first application of cutting-edge sentiment analysis to analyze parliamentary speech in periods of backsliding. The methods applied here could be used to describe broad legislative trends in a wider set of cases. They could also be used to identify individual rebels and loyalists. Such applications would contribute to our understanding of legislator autonomy and identify the characteristics of MPs who are more likely to become advocates for progressive democratic change (Barkan 2009). In African legislative studies, this remains an exciting avenue for future research.

This paper has been focused on descriptively documenting changes in parliamentary speeches during periods of democratic backsliding. This descriptive step is important for future

research focused on studying the more causal impact of legislative speech on processes of backsliding and public opinion. A particularly fruitful avenue of future research would involve identifying the extent to which government-party unity in contrast to government party division has important consequences for popular resistance to backsliding.

Furthermore, more qualitative research is needed to better understand the diverse motives of individual MPs that encourage compliance and resistance in the face of backsliding, both among government and opposition-party MPs. This study was concentrated on two particular countries, and the case selection does pose specific scope conditions. It is likely that incentives for resistance will depend on several factors including party institutionalization, executive power, levels of decentralization, electoral system, and levels of clientelism. We believe that this paper and other excellent work in the field highlight the promise of studying legislatures in order to better grasp the nature of elite politics in the process of democratic backsliding.

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