

## Instrumentally Democratic? How Political Elites, Radical Movements, and Citizens Increasingly Participate in Democratic Backsliding

*Alberto Stefanelli – Research Statement*

While most citizens think democracy is the best form of governance, its widespread endorsement often coexists with a pervasive and deep-seated rejection of fundamental democratic norms like freedom of speech and minority rights. Notably, citizens in countries like Poland, Venezuela, Turkey, and Hungary express strong support for democracy while simultaneously electing leaders with illiberal tendencies. What explains the paradoxical coexistence of widespread support for democracy and its absence in practice?

The project I propose to undertake throughout my time as a postdoctoral researcher seeks to answer this question. It develops a novel approach to examine contemporary manifestations of democratic backsliding – i.e., the progressive disdain of democratic norms and principles. Thus far, existing literature has predominantly explored "events" or "instances" of democratic backsliding. These studies either focus on the attacks on democratic institutions by populist leaders or citizens' reluctance to condemn undemocratic actions. However, the relational dynamics underpinning modern democratic backsliding remain unclear. Building on the expertise on populism and democracy gained throughout my PhD, this proposal aims to bridge this critical gap. I posit that backsliding results from the interplay of multiple processes that progressively shift the meaning of what democracy means. Specifically, I conceptualize backsliding as a meta-process situated at the nexus of three focal points of analysis: a progressively illiberal understanding of democracy by **political elites** (macro), a mounting conflict over the meaning of democracy between **different radical groups** (meso), and a discontent with how democracy works fueled by **citizens' feelings of nostalgic deprivation** (micro).

First, I aim to explore the progressive normalization of illiberal practices by elected politicians – a largely overlooked aspect in the current literature. The underlying idea is that politicians with anti-pluralist and majoritarian tendencies are progressively accepted in the system since they refrain from acting as undemocratic as citizens would expect. Once accepted, voters may "normalize" some of their norm-eroding actions over time. In such instances, erosion unfolds progressively and goes relatively unnoticed as the status quo gradually tilts towards increasingly undemocratic positions. In the United States, for example, gerrymandering has been largely normalized: both Democrats and Republicans manipulate electoral district boundaries for their electoral advantage. A recent example is the attempt of Democrats to gerrymander the New York electoral district. They claimed that the existing, more neutral lines—which enabled Republicans to win four House seats—were discriminatory against Black voters.

I plan to study this "illiberal contagion" pattern using a longitudinal and micro-historical approach that charts the evolution of the concept of 'liberal democracy' from the 1980s to the 2020s. I aim to explore how and why **politicians of both radical and mainstream parties** have progressively shifted towards a conception of democracy marked by anti-pluralist and majoritarian preferences for political representation. To gain insights into the temporal dynamics of democratic backsliding, I will pay particular attention to significant political events such as the 2008 economic crisis. I concentrate on parliamentary debates, party press releases, and politicians' social media posts in Italy, France, the United States, and Slovakia. This allows me to cover a variety of countries with different political traditions and degrees of extremism, extending beyond the far-right and much-considered examples of Hungary and Poland. I will compile a new dataset and leverage the recent advances in Large Language Models, such as the new Roberta model by the Manifesto Project, to analyze this large corpus.

Second, I plan to broaden my current research by moving into the meso level and examining **the role of radical groups and movements**. Existing literature has largely ignored how contemporary forms of democratic erosion are linked to mounting divergences between social groups with different normative understandings of what is "good" for democracy. When certain aspects of democracy become salient but competing groups resort to different interpretations, each other's values and worldviews cause

fundamental and seemingly unbridgeable misunderstandings. In such cases, citizens may be strongly motivated to endorse whatever measures to safeguard democracy from the other side's supposedly anti-democratic measures. Paradoxically, this leads individuals on both sides to tolerate increasingly severe transgressions to "protect" democracy from the other side.

To explore this possibility, I will conduct an experiment in the United States and France. The two country cases have been selected for the presence of radical movements with opposing conceptions of democracy. The experiment involves showing real-world examples of audio interviews of groups with an opposite conception of what is "good" for democracy (e.g., protection VS rejection of minority rights). I will then measure the effects of these interviews to assess whether individuals progressively accept equally serious democratic violations to "protect" democracy from the other side's positions. I will also manipulate whether the content of these interviews is challenged (or not) during the conversation and measure participants' perceptions of how popular those views are in the general population. This will allow me to test whether correcting misperceptions or providing counter-framing reduces the propensity to endorse undemocratic norms.

Third, I plan to examine the **social structuring of nostalgic deprivation**. Nostalgic deprivation refers to the longing for an idealized past in economic, political, and socio-cultural terms. An illustrative case is the nostalgic reverie of Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again" campaign slogan that promised the American White working class a return to a glorious, more comfortable past. I argue that this type of nostalgia—widely employed by populist leaders—is linked to feelings of relative deprivation, which in turn generates more ambiguous evaluations of liberal democracy. In this context, those who have benefitted from the system but now feel progressively threatened by the current political and demographic changes are more likely to justify a return to the past, even if this entails embracing anti-democratic stances. For instance, in the US, white people with strong White-racialized identities may reject pluralism and minority rights as they worry that the democratic system may evolve so that it works to favor the non-white population.

To assess how nostalgic deprivation is related to illiberal attitudes, I will conduct a series of conjoint experiments in Slovakia, the United States, and Italy due to the widespread usage of nostalgic rhetoric by populist leaders on opposite sides of the ideological spectrum. The experiment manipulates feelings of nostalgic deprivation and relevant political issues. This will allow me to assess whether norm erosion is linked to nostalgia in relation to (1) one's economic security (realistic threat) or (2) cultural norms and traditions (symbolic threat).