

Literature Review for MACS 30200—Democratic Backsliding, Polarization, Inequality, and Press Freedom

Sanittawan Tan

1 May 2019

1 What is democratic backsliding?

This article mainly speaks to research on regime change in comparative politics. This section takes readers through a brief review of the concept of democratic backsliding, differentiates it from conventional regime breakdown, and explores several explanations of possible associations or even causal mechanisms that lead to democratic backsliding.

Democratic backsliding is a rather new concept that is emerging in regime change literature in comparative politics. In their annual review article, Waldner and Lust (2018) define it as follows: “[Democratic] [b]acksliding entails a deterioration of qualities associated with democratic governance, within any regime.” They focus on backsliding within democracies and argue that backsliding occurs through “a discontinuous series of incremental actions.” Bermeo (2016) offers a similar definition: “the state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an

existing democracy.” These two definitions clearly highlight a slow and incremental process that constitute backsliding, rather than an abrupt breakdown or a regime change.

However, another distinct characteristic of democratic backsliding is that in many cases the means to weaken or eliminate democratic institutions are perfectly legal. Bermeo (2016) points to at least two means. First, democratic institutions are deliberately weakened by the executive branch, a process she coins “executive aggrandizement.” One outstanding example is Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Erdogan gradually undermined the checks and balance of the Constitutional Court by securing the ability to appoint 14 out of 17 Constitutional Court judges. His government revised laws to allow criminal prosecution of journalists and created a series of defamation laws in an attempt to silence critics (10-11).

Second, elections are strategically manipulated much in advance. Bermeo argues that manipulations include suppressing media access, preventing opposition candidates from running an election, and changing electoral rules to favor the incumbent government (13).

This article agrees with the definition of democratic backsliding provided by and . Thus, countries that can experience democratic erosion has to be a democracy in the first place and they have to show signs of backsliding through one of the means that Bermeo mentions. What then constitutes a democracy? For the ease of operationalization, I will use Przeworski et al.’s (2000, 28-29) coding rules. A country is considered an autocracy or authoritarian if at least one of the following conditions is true:

- The chief executive is not elected.
- The legislature is not elected.
- There is no more than one party.
- We have yet to observe lawful alternation. This applies only to countries that none of the first three rules apply. There are some cases where one party has ruled for an extended period of time. There are elections, but one party has not lost an election.

The next section briefly distinguishes between democratic backsliding and democratic breakdown.

2 Democratic backsliding and democratic breakdown

Where do scholars draw the line between democratic backsliding and democratic breakdown? The answer is still being contested but for a good reason. Democratic backsliding is more difficult to detect and classify because it slowly occurs. Democratic breakdown, on the other hand, is easier to witness since it involves an abrupt regime change. One of the traditional ways that democracy breaks down is via coup d'état. Other types of breakdown include intervention by foreign forces.

There are three major schools of thought that explain democratic breakdown. The first is the elite-driven models which include those who argued that

transitions are a result of intra-elite conflicts. Haggard and Kaufman (2012) note that, in some cases, the military or factions within the military stage a coup d'état against an incumbent government or economic elites may mobilize the mass, the military, or militia to topple office holders (508). The second is the redistributive models of democracy (e.g. Acemoglu and Robinson, 2001, 2006). Acemoglu and Robinson (2006) posit that the relationship between income inequality and the probability of democratization is an inverted U shape, democracy is likely to break down when income inequality is high—but not too high— because elites are fearful of extreme redistribution and will resort to coup d'état if the cost of coups is not high. Therefore, redistributive pressure leads to a democratic breakdown. The final explanation emphasizes the role of international factors in aiding/hindering democratic transitions (e.g. Poast and Urpenlainen 2015). Bermeo (2016) argues that a regime change through “promissory coups,” which occurs when the military stages a coup d'état, promises to hold an election and restores democracy as soon as possible, is a variety of democratic backsliding. I argue that promissory coups more closely resembles traditional democratic breakdown since there is a disruption in the regime. Hence, this paper only treats cases where there is a gradual attempt to weaken checks and balance, accountability, and participation as democratic backsliding.

3 Theories of democratic backsliding

Waldner and Lust (2018) imply that democratic backsliding is under theorized since it is a new research frontier. This is reflected by the current stage of the literature on democratic backsliding which appears to be an amalgam. Some focus on describ-

ing the process (Varol 2015, Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, Ginsburg and Huq 2018) while others seek to evaluate particular country cases (Lieberman et al. 2018, Norris 2017). The closest to theory building is a group of work that attempts to draw causal links between democratic backsliding and other concurrently observed events or characteristics of a democracy such as political polarization and a decline in press freedom.

Lieberman et al. (2018) argue in their article that erosion of democracy in America is caused by polarized two-party presidentialism, exclusion of certain groups from civic membership such as groups divided by race and economic status, and erosion of democratic norms. McCoy et al. (2018) propose a causal chain that links political polarization to democratic erosion. They argue that elites or movements adopt and spread polarizing discourse. Polarization reduces collective action and, once polarized, the opposing groups adopt a zero-sum perception. The resulting perception leads to a willingness of the polarized camps to engage in conflict and to tolerate authoritarian-leaning leaders at the expense of liberal democracy (25-26). Slater (2018) also recalls experiences of Southeast Asian countries and attributes democratic erosion to a reduction in press freedom. As Bermeo (2016) points out, one of the means to erode democracy is media buyout which undermines checks and reduces the transparency of a regime.

Based on what we know about how democratic regimes break down and the association between inequality, political polarization, and press freedom, this article aims to statistically analyze the relationship between them and democratic backsliding. It contributes to the empirical research on the topic since extant literature mostly adopts qualitative methods, namely case studies, to trace these relationships. What

this article will leave for future research is to develop a theory that explains how and why democratic backsliding occurs.

References

- Acemoglu, Daron, and James A. Robinson. 2001. "A Theory of Political Transitions." *The American Economic Review* 91 (4): 938. ISSN: 00028282. <http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsjsr&AN=edsjsr.2677820&site=eds-live&scope=site>.
- . 2006. *Economic origins of dictatorship and democracy*. Cambridge Univ. Press. ISBN: 0521855268.
- Bermeo, Nancy. 2016. "On Democratic Backsliding." *Journal of Democracy*, no. 1: 5–19.
- Bonica, Adam, Howard Rosenthal, and David J Rothman. 2014. "The Political Polarization of Physicians in the United States: An Analysis of Campaign Contributions to Federal Elections, 1991 Through 2012." *JAMA internal medicine (Print)*, no. 8: 1308. ISSN: 2168-6106. <http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edscal&AN=edscal.28772317&site=eds-live&scope=site>.
- Delia, Baldassarri, and Gelman Andrew. 2007. "Partisans Without Constraint: Political Polarization and Trends in American Public Opinion." <http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsbas&AN=edsbas.71C14458&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

- Ginsberg, Tom, and Aziz. Huq. 2018. *How to Save a Constitutional Democracy*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Haggard, Stephan, and Robert R. Kaufman. 2012. "Inequality and Regime Change: Democratic Transitions and the Stability of Democratic Rule." *The American Political Science Review* 106 (3): 495. ISSN: 00030554. <http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsjsr&AN=edsjsr.23275430&site=eds-live&scope=site>.
- Hanna, Alexander, Chris Wells, Peter Maurer, Lew Friedland, Dhavan Shah, and Matthes. 2013. "Partisan alignments and political polarization online." *Conference on Information Knowledge Management*: 15. <http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edb&AN=103019507&site=eds-live&scope=site>.
- LeBas, Adrienne. n.d. "Can Polarization Be Positive? Conflict and Institutional Development in Africa." *AMERICAN BEHAVIORAL SCIENTIST* 62 (1): 59–74. ISSN: 00027642. <http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edswss&AN=000429623800004&site=eds-live&scope=site>.
- Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel. Ziblatt. 2018. *How Democracies Die*. Crown.
- Lieberman, Robert C., Suzanne Mettler, Thomas B. Pepinsky, Kenneth M. Roberts, and Richard Valelly. n.d. "The Trump Presidency and American Democracy: A Historical and Comparative Analysis." *Perspectives on Politics*: 1–10. doi:10.1017/S1537592718003286.

McCoy, Jennifer, Tahmina Rahman, and Murat Somer. 2018. "Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities." *American Behavioral Scientist* 62 (1): 16–42. ISSN: 00027642. <http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=hch&AN=128683062&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

Norris, Pippa. 2017. "Is Western Democracy Backsliding? Diagnosing the Risks." <https://research.hks.harvard.edu/publications/getFile.aspx?Id=1514>.

Poast, Paul, and Johannes Urpelainen. 2015. "How International Organizations Support Democratization: Preventing Authoritarian Reversals or Promoting consolidation?" *World Politics* 67 (1): 72–113. doi:10.1017/S0043887114000343.

"Political polarization in social media: Analysis of the "Twitter political field" in Japan." 2017. *2017 IEEE International Conference on Big Data (Big Data), Big Data (Big Data), 2017 IEEE International Conference on*: 3143. ISSN: 978-1-5386-2715-0. <http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsee&AN=edsee.8258291&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

Przeworski, Adam, Michael Alvarez, Jose Antonio Cheibub, and Fernando Limongi. 2000. *Democracy and development: political institutions and well-being in the world, 1950-1990*. Cambridge studies in the theory of democracy. Cambridge Univ. Press. ISBN: 978-0-521-79032-1.

- Shanto, Iyengar, and Westwood Sean J. 2015. "Fear and Loathing across Party Lines: New Evidence on Group Polarization." *American Journal of Political Science* 59 (3): 690. ISSN: 00925853. <http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsjsr&AN=edsjsr.24583091&site=eds-live&scope=site>.
- Slater, Dan. 2018. *After Democracy*, November. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-11-06/after-democracy>.
- Varol, Ozan. 2015. "Stealth Authoritarianism." *Iowa Law Review* 100 (4): 1673–1742. ISSN: 00210552. <http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=102648598&site=eds-live&scope=site>.
- Waldner, David, and Ellen Lust. 2018. "Unwelcome Change: Coming to Terms with Democratic Backsliding." *Annual Review of Political Science* 21:93–113. ISSN: 10942939. <http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edswss&AN=000433417100006&site=eds-live&scope=site>.