

# Research Proposal for MACS 30200—Democratic Backsliding, Polarization, Inequality, and Press Freedom

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## 1 Research Question

Democratic backsliding has been receiving more scholarly attention since the rise of right-wing populist parties in Europe, the election of U.S. president Donald Trump in 2016, recent political development in Turkey, and a consecutive decline in the global freedom score reported by Freedom House (2006). Democratic backsliding differs from tradition regime breakdown and authoritarian reversion in a way that it is a gradual “deterioration of qualities associated with democratic governance, within any regime” (Waldner and Lust 2018). Bermeo (2016) defined it slightly differently as “state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy.”

Although we have developed more understanding about what democratic backsliding or erosion looks like and its symptoms, the independent variables or predictors of democratic erosion seem to be under speculation, rather than systematically analyzed. The goal of this research project is twofold. First, it aims to contribute to the current literature in democratic backsliding by asking if there are any significant relationships among democratic backsliding, political polarization, economic inequality, and freedom of the press. Our unit of analysis is a country. Our outcome of interest is whether or not a country backslid into a non-democracy while the predictors in question are whether or not political polarization is present, the level of economic inequality, and how free the media is. Second, it attempts to use available predictors of interest to classify regime types using supervised

statistical learning methods.

These relationships and their directions are essential as news media articles and scholarly work tend to associate weakening democracy with political polarization, inequality, and deterioration in freedom of the press. 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. However, their paper drew from historical-comparative perspective. Acemoglu and Robinson (2001, 2006), on the other hand, argued that when income inequality rises and the gap between the rich and the poor widened, the probability that the elites will opt for repression and de-democratize increases. In his recent article, Slater (2018) recalled experiences of Southeast Asian countries and attributed democratic erosion to reduction in press freedom.

Based on these claims, we should expect that when a country becomes polarized, it should be more likely that it will backslide into a non-democracy. Similarly, as economic inequality rises and freedom of the press deteriorates in a country, the probability of a country becoming a non-democracy should also increase. We, thus, should expect statistically significant positive relationship between our measure of democratic backsliding and political polarization, economic inequality, and freedom of the press respectively.

## 2 Data

Please refer to sample figures of the following data sets in the attached appendix.

### *Dependent Variable—Democratic Backsliding*

Pertaining to measures of democratic backsliding, I intend to derive a measure of democratic backsliding from two sources: Polity IV and V-Dem scores. Both scores are continuous. I am still deciding if distinguishing countries which experienced or did not experience democratic backsliding should be coded as a categorical variable.

## **sources**

Monty G. Marshall, Ted Robert Gurr, and Keith Jagers. Polity IV Project: Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions, 1800–2009. Center for Systemic Peace, 2010.

Coppedge, Michael, John Gerring, Carl Henrik Knutsen, Staffan I. Lindberg, Jan Teorell, David Altman, Michael Bernhard, M. Steven Fish, Adam Glynn, Allen Hicken, Anna Lührmann, Kyle L. Marquardt, Kelly McMann, Pamela Paxton, Daniel Pemstein, Brigitte Seim, Rachel Sigman, Svend-Erik Skaaning, Jeffrey Staton, Steven Wilson, Agnes Cornell, Lisa Gastaldi, Haakon Gjerløw, Nina Ilchenko, Joshua Krusell, Valeriya Mechkova, Juraj Medzihorsky, Josefine Pernes, Johannes von Römer, Natalia Stepanova, Aksel Sundström, Eitan Tzelgov, Yi-ting Wang, Tore Wig, and Daniel Ziblatt. 2019. "V-Dem Country-Date Dataset v9", Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project. <https://doi.org/10.23696/vdemcy19>

### *Independent Variable 1—Economic Inequality*

I plan to use two main measures of economic inequality: income inequality and wealth inequality. The data will be sourced from the World Inequality Database.

## **sources**

<https://wid.world/data/>

### *Independent Variable 2—Freedom of the press*

Similar to democratic backsliding scores, I plan to use an indicator of freedom of expression readily available in the V-Dem data set. To improve the robustness of the research, I am considering using the Freedom House's press freedom scores.

## **sources**

<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/freedom-press-2017>

### *Independent Variable 3—Political Polarization*

As far as I am aware of, there does not seem to be an index that measures the level of political polarization in a country. However, World Values Survey conducted opinion research which includes questions on democracy and political ideology. I am planning to come up with a method that calculates the level of political polarization based on these survey questions. In addition, I am reviewing relevant literature on polarization and paying specific attention to how scholars quantify it (DiMaggio et al. 1996; Gibler and Randazzo 2011; Hanna et al. 2013; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Bonica et al. 2014; Takikawa and Nagayoshi 2017; Primario et al. 2017; Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; Westfall et al. 2015; LeBas 2018; McCoy et al. 2018).

#### **sources**

Inglehart, R., C. Haerpfer, A. Moreno, C. Welzel, K. Kizilova, J. Diez-Medrano, M. Lagos, P. Norris, E. Ponarin B. Puranen et al. (eds.). 2014. World Values Survey: All Rounds - Country-Pooled Datafile Version: <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWVL.jsp>. Madrid: JD Systems Institute.

### **3 Analysis**

As briefly mentioned, the project goal is to understand the relationship between democratic backsliding, political polarization, economic inequality, and freedom of expression. In teasing out the relationships, I doubt that all independent variables will have a linear relationship with the dependent variable. Therefore, I plan to utilize Generalized Additive Models which allow different functional forms for each predictor. I am also interested in heterogeneous effects of each predictor. Marginal effect plots could be useful in this regard. Thus, I plan to use Python to process the data and use R to conduct the statistical analysis and interpretation.

Another goal of the project is prediction. I hypothesize that if the independent variables of interest are important to democratic backsliding, they should have certain predictive power. Therefore, I plan to utilize supervised statistical learning methods such as Linear Discriminant Analysis and Quadratic Discriminant Analysis to make predictions by adhering to cross-validation

methods. I plan to use Python to conduct such analysis.

## 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>.
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- 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>.

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