

Back from the Brink: Countering Illiberalism in Liberal Democracies.

Conference

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The literature on the current crisis of liberal democracy focuses on the rise of illiberalism and populism as well as on the erosion of democratic rights and institutions. Less systematic attention has been paid to how pro-democratic actors can prevent, contain, or resist illiberalism. The scholarship on responses to illiberalism is scattered across different subfields, including analyses of legal and judicial restrictions on extremism, studies of party organization and competition, works on civil society organizations and social movements, and analyses of voting behavior. This conference brings together scholars from different subfields of comparative politics and political sociology to discuss the conditions of viability and effectiveness of strategies to prevent the rise, contain the influence, and resist the power of political illiberalism in democracies.

Our focus will be on *liberal* democracies. Even though democracy is in retreat globally, the current predicament of liberal democracies poses specific challenges for comparative political analysis. The institutional reforms that instantiate incremental democratic backsliding in liberal democracies — freeing the executive from checks by institutions such as courts, media, independent agencies, international and supranational rights regimes; manipulating the access to vote of specific groups— are different from those observed in “electoral” democracies. So are the strategies to thwart them.

Unlike most literature on countering illiberalism in liberal democracies, which focuses on cases where illiberal governments have started to entrench their power, the contributions to this conference cover situations in which illiberals are both in power and in opposition. The success of figures such as Trump, Orban, Kaczyński, and others, has inspired populist right-wing parties and movements in other liberal democracies to also advocate removing national and supranational checks on executive power. Some of these parties are not in power but are rising rapidly in support and influence. Others (e.g., in the US), are on the brink of power. Pro-democratic forces are not doomed to fight back only *after* illiberals have reached power. They can act preventively too.

Finally, although long-term strategies such as redistribution, deradicalization programs or education reforms are often important to counter illiberalism, we complement this literature by focusing on strategies tailored to have effects in the short term. These are particularly salient in the current political juncture and include, but are not limited to: legal prosecution; the violation of informal constitutional conventions (pro-democratic “constitutional hardball”); actions of civil society organizations; and voter mobilization. All of them may entail navigating significant tradeoffs and dilemmas, which become sharper as illiberal forces become more influential in society. Yet, democrats are rarely defenseless, even when illiberal forces take over the executive.

Abstracts

David A. Bateman, Cornell University

Democratic hardball: when breaking democratic norms might preserve democratic values.

The threat of democratic backsliding in the US has prompted growing interest in what Mark Tushnet has called “constitutional hardball”: the pursuit of legal and constitutional changes with the intended purpose of biasing outcomes in favor of one party or set of outcomes over others. Such actions can be construed as constitutional and within the basic rules of the democratic game. But they are in deep tension with a broader concern that these rules ought to be insulated from the political contest for power. Nonetheless, a growing literature argues that in some circumstances hardball can paradoxically strengthen democratic institutions, even as they break previously held democratic norms. This paper provides a new definition of what I call democracy-reinforcing hardball, as well as a theoretically developed set of conditions under which it might be successful. I identify several criteria hardball tactics need to meet in order to be democracy-reinforcing: (1) they must meaningfully alter the institutional strength of the relevant parties and factions, (2) re-create a new self-enforcing equilibrium rather than simply invite more self-entrenchment, (3) and must not provoke sufficient backlash to overturn the constitutional order. Through a comparison of both “averted” and “non-averted” cases of backsliding, I identify some political conditions under which it is more likely that these will be met. As with other authors, I emphasize the importance of divisions within the authoritarian bloc, but also the need for a plausible democratic majority and some mechanism for constitutional-level change that can be recognized as “legitimate enough.” I conclude by considering the possible role that democracy-reinforcing hardball might play in arresting backsliding, as well as the dangers that it carries.

Giovanni Capoccia, University of Oxford

Countering Illiberalism in Liberal Democracies: Actors, Strategies, Temporalities

Most literature on the current crisis of liberal democracy focuses on the rise of illiberalism and populism as well as on the erosion of democratic rights and institutions. Less systematic attention has been paid to how pro-democratic actors can prevent, contain, or resist illiberalism. Focusing on liberal, advanced democracies, the paper maps the strategies that the government, pro-democratic parties, civil society organizations, and individual voters can adopt to counter illiberal movements in situations where illiberal parties have reached power (resistance); where they are in opposition but are serious contenders to attain executive power in the short term (containment); and where they are not on the brink of power but are rising in political influence (prevention). The discussion focuses on political strategies designed to have effects in the short term and explores their conditions of viability and success in these three different scenarios.

Antonis A. Ellinas, University of Cyprus

Continuity and change in restricting right-wing extremism: The United States and Greece

This paper examines continuity and change in how liberal democracies respond to rising threats by extremist right-wing actors. The paper compares the United States and Greece, two cases that are rarely the focus of comparative analysis, despite their importance for understanding how democracies deal with extremism. In both countries, extremist right-wing organizations have been active for decades but were met with relative tolerance by institutional and political actors. For different historical reasons, democratic actors in both countries were similarly uneasy with the “militant” tactic of banning or restricting political organizations. Hence, when these organizations started gaining political traction, democratic agents avoided taking “militant” measures to restrict them. Despite these similar beginnings, recent years witnessed a sharp divergence in how the two countries treated right-wing extremist organizations. After nearly two decades of institutional tolerance, Greek authorities took restrictive measures against one of the most notorious right-wing parties in Europe, the Golden Dawn. By contrast, and even after the attack on the Capitol in January 2021, American institutional actors remain hesitant to undertake measures against strikingly similar organizations. The article compares the policy trajectories of restrictions to right-wing extremism in the two countries, identifying the key mechanisms accounting for continuity and change.

Ivan Ermakoff, University of Wisconsin Madison

Coordinating against authoritarian power bids

Issues of collective agency in times of authoritarian challenges underscore the need to prevent coordination problems both within and across groups committed to the preservation of a democratic regime. Doing so requires three lines of action. The first pertains to the ability to name and assess the nature of the threat posed by an authoritarian challenger. The second line of action relates to the need to overcome democratic groups’ propensity for equivocation and paralysis when faced with sudden bids for state power in the service of an authoritarian agenda. The third line of action establishes regular venues for communication across democratic groups for the purpose of devising strategies of democratic consolidation at different phases of an authoritarian challenge. The paper analyzes the success and failure of coordination strategies in comparative and historical perspective.

Hahrie Han, Johns Hopkins University

Civil Society as a Carrier for Democracy

From historical and comparative research, we know that associations and entities that constitute civil society can be carriers of democracy or authoritarianism. Yet, we do not know what the conditions are under which civil society promotes the habits, skills, and behaviors that lead people towards democracy

and the conditions under which it does the reverse. Drawing on data from civil society organizations in the United States, this paper explores those questions with a specific focus on questions of pluralism, and the conditions under which people adopt pluralistic attitudes and behaviors and the conditions under which they do not.

Melis G. Laebens, University of Oxford & Marcin Ślarzyński, Polish Academy of Sciences

The Opposition to the United Right Governments in Poland: Finding New Political Identities After Realignment

Since the electoral victory of PiS and its coalition, the United Right, in 2015, Poland has figured prominently in journalistic and scholarly works as a backsliding democracy. In this period, the opposition has faced the challenge of incorporating some of the popular initiatives of the new government while maintaining distance from its radical right-wing policies. To do this, opposition parties have been employing a trial-and-error strategy and learning from their mistakes. We show this process by presenting polling data on intentions to vote over time against important political shocks and government decisions (such as the sudden takeover of the judiciary, the judicial decision further limiting access to abortion, or the attempt to exclude TV group TVN24 from the market), and changes of leadership, policy stance, or coalition status on the opposition side. In addition, we trace back the events and conditions that contributed to the opposition's two electoral successes in this period: taking majority control of the senate from the government coalition in 2019, and running a very successful, if not victorious, presidential campaign in 2020. Leveraging over time variation in polling and electoral data, we discuss the extent to which strong leadership, coalition-building, decisively defending the rights of women and sexual minorities, embracing the distributive policies put in place by PiS, and developing an original patriotic discourse that can counter the government's nationalism without imitating it have contributed to different opposition parties' electoral viability. We argue that controlling many large and middle-sized cities' municipalities has been a critical resource for the opposition.

Rob Lieberman, Johns Hopkins University & Daniel Schlozman, Johns Hopkins University

Ethnic Parties and Democratic Backsliding: The Case of the United States

Accounts of democratic fragility and resilience in the United States have focused heavily on partisan polarization, the rise of partisan extremism, populism, and conflict over the boundaries of membership in the polity. Many of these threads have come together in the contemporary Republican Party, which we suggest is increasingly behaving like an "ethnic party," with risky consequences for American democracy. While some recent literature considers ethnic parties in divided societies to be a stabilizing force in democratic politics, an alternative approach suggests that ethnic parties can exploit and widen societal cleavages to gain power, and we argue that the Republican Party has followed the latter model. Ethnic parties are generally understood to represent minorities in fragmented societies. The Republican

Party, by contrast, increasingly represents an ethnically defined group that a) remains a majority in the United States, but b) fears that its dominant status in American politics is threatened. Under these conditions, we find that the “ethnicization” of the Republican Party has substantially contributed to the decay of American democracy. We consider both the history of the Republican Party in recent decades and contemporary data about both voting patterns and patterns of party nominations and leadership to chart the growing prominence of white racial identity as a key pillar of Republican politics. Considering the Republican Party as an ethnic party in comparative perspective, we suggest, can both help account for the distinctive patterns of democratic fragility in the United States and refine our understanding of the role of ethnic and racial politics in democratic backsliding and resilience.

Isabela Mares, Yale University & Qixuan Yang, Yale University

How extremist parties subvert parliamentary rules: evidence from one century of parliamentary activity

Extremist political parties enter parliament with the goal to subvert its capacity to deliberate and enact legislation. They do so by using a variety of strategies of disruption, which violate parliamentary rules and norms. These include provocation of other speakers, the use of offensive language and, even, violence. This paper examines the use of strategies of disruption, by drawing on a longitudinal dataset of disruption of the German parliament during the period 1880 to 2020. We also examine the responses of legislators of mainstream parties to these violations of parliamentary rules, distinguishing between neglect, counter-provocation and moral outrage. Using evidence from the Weimar period and the 20th legislative period of the Bundestag, we document that electoral considerations explain the incentives of legislators from mainstream parties to engage in provocation or counterprovocation.

Susan Stokes, Erdem Aytaç, Lautaro Cella & Ipek Çinar, University of Chicago

Divisive and Unifying Campaign Messages: Do They Work? Why and on Whom?

Aspiring autocrats thrive in polarized environments and attempt to push the process of polarization even further (Svolik 2019, 2020; Graham and Svolik 2020; McCoy et al. 2018). The scenario can easily lead to a downward spiral toward ever greater polarization, political violence, and the unravelling of democracy. Politicians who use polarized discourse know implicitly that anger is an *approach emotion*, and encourages participation (Aytaç and Stokes 2019). Yet presumably people dislike division and often pull away from polarizing messages, with a *why can't we all just get along?* response (see Cella 2022). Furthermore, along with anger and moral outrage enthusiasm and optimism and also approach emotions and hence helpful to politicians. In recent U.S. politics, optimism and unifying messages have powered successful campaigns of Ronald Reagan (*Morning in America*) and Barack Obama (*Yes We Can*) message and tag lines about there being “no blue states or red states but only the United States.” In an on-going set of survey experiments, conducted in the United States, Turkey, and Mexico, we are

studying the relative effectiveness of divisive and unifying political messages. Do they work? Do co-partisans of the political speaker have endless appetite for divisiveness, or do they eventually turn away from polarizing speech? What impact does each type of message have on people's sense of belonging to their political party? What impact do they have on participation and turnout?

Milan Svobik, Yale University

Indifference, Incompetence, or Trade-offs? Identifying the Sources of Tolerance for Authoritarianism

The main characteristics of contemporary democratic crises are the erosion of checks and balances and the manipulation of access to voting operated by elected autocrats. Using original experimental survey data from seven European countries (Sweden, Germany, Poland, Estonia, Spain, Serbia, and Ukraine), we differentiate between three potential explanations for why ordinary people support candidates who undermine democracy. One, they do not care about democracy; two, they do not know what democracy is; three; they are willing to sacrifice democracy to achieve other political priorities, like electing candidates who propose their preferred policies or come from their preferred party. The last part of the paper discusses the implications of the analysis for countering the electoral rise of illiberal parties and candidates.

Vicente Valentim, University of Oxford

All democrats are not alike: Social norms, preference falsification, and democratic resilience

Previous research has regarded individual-level support for democracy as a safeguard against backsliding. I argue this literature conflates two states of the world: one where citizens are *honest democrats*; and one where citizens are *virtue-signalling democrats*, who falsify a democratic preference to avoid reputational costs. In both states of the world, citizens do not overwhelmingly act against democracy. As such, in both, high quality politicians (for whom the opportunity costs of running for office are higher) have low incentives to enter politics with a radical-right platform. In leaving worse politicians running under a radical-right platform, this pattern of self-selection keeps the electoral success of the radical right low. The crucial difference between the two states is that when citizens are virtue-signalling democrats, trigger events can suggest to politicians that what seemed like true democratic support was actually driven by preference falsification. In so doing, high quality politicians can update their priors as to their likely electoral success and become more likely to run with a radical-right platform. I test these expectations with a survey experiment on individuals with political ambition. Different treatments highlight that citizens either hold sincere anti-radical right preferences; or that they display that behaviour in public but not in private. I expect respondents to be less likely to run for politics in the first treatment than in the second. If pro-democratic attitudes are brought about by preference falsification to avoid reputational costs, democratic support is a fragile equilibrium that does not represent a robust safeguard against radical-right success.