

# **Back from the Brink: Countering Illiberalism in Liberal Democracies**

Conference

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November 3-4, 2023

## **Abstracts**

### **Capoccia, G. (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-democracy actors can counter illiberalism. This paper maps the strategies that the government, pro-democratic parties, and civil society organizations can adopt to counter illiberalism 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 outlines the tradeoff and dilemmas entailed in countering illiberalism in these three scenarios. With the purpose of identifying priorities for future research, the last section of the paper discusses the general conditions of viability and effectiveness of anti-illiberal strategies.

### **Mares I. (Yale University), “Defending parliament: Responses of mainstream parties to parliamentary erosion.”**

Historically, extremist parties have engaged in a process of parliamentary disruption, violating the rules of interaction, and slowing down the legislative process. How can democratic parties respond to these strategies and counter parliamentary erosion? This paper examines the political reforms adopted in Third Republic France and Weimar Germany which sought to defend parliamentarism. I propose a typology of the policies of parliamentary defense and an explanation of partisan demand for different policies that target individual or collective groups of legislators. I document that French legislators took a much more decisive approach in the defense of parliamentary institutions as compared to German lawmakers and show that this difference can be attributed to the more proactive position of the French Socialist party. While existing research on democratic erosion has highlighted the role of center-right parties in explaining regime breakdown, this paper demonstrates that in explaining parliamentary erosion, we need to consider the strategies of all mainstream parties and not just parties on the right.

**Bateman, D. (Cornell University), “Democracy-reinforcing hardball: Can breaking democratic norms preserve democratic values?”**

The threat of democratic backsliding has prompted growing interest in political “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. This paper provides a new definition of what I call democracy-reinforcing hardball, and a framework for thinking about when it might be successful. I first provide a critical overview of the growing empirical literature on averting democratic backsliding, highlighting how many of the proposed reforms ultimately take for granted conditions that no longer exist. I outline the conditions under which hardball might be democracy-reinforcing, and examine three historical cases in which it had the long-term effect of re-stabilizing a democratic political order.

**Ermakoff, I. (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.

**Valentim V. (University of Oxford), “Social norms, preference falsification, and supply of radical-right policy.”**

Individual-level support for democracy is often regarded as a safeguard against backsliding. I argue that this argument conflates two states of the world. In one, citizens are sincere democrats who genuinely support democracy. In another, they are staged democrats, who falsify a democratic preference to avoid social costs. In both states of the world, citizens do not overwhelmingly act against democracy. The crucial difference between the two states is that staged democratic support is not a stable safeguard against politicians with norm-breaching views. If they perceive that their policies have more private support than meets the eye, these politicians will be more likely to put forward policies at odds with democratic values. To test these expectations, I leverage a unique setting in Switzerland where referendum results provide information shocks about the private preferences of citizens. Using a dataset of referendum results linked to public opinion surveys and data on party’s positions, I show that when referendums suggest that radical-right positions are more popular than indicated by surveys, radical-right parties become less positive of minorities in the subsequent election. The results suggest that one reason why many citizens do not punish violations of democratic values is that they may not truly support those values.

**Ellinas, A. (University of Cyprus), “The political dynamics of democratic defense: Institutional responses to illiberalism in Greece.”**

The growing political prominence of illiberal actors in liberal democratic polities has added urgency to an ongoing debate about how democracies respond to illiberalism. Much of this discussion has focused on structural facilitators of democratic defense, underestimating the political dynamics driving institutional responses to illiberalism. This article develops a dynamic model to capture the factors driving change from institutional tolerance of, to defense against, ascending illiberalism. The model takes into account the tactical dilemmas over the use of institutional measures against ascending illiberals. Documenting the “tactical oscillation” of moderate actors, the article shows how democratic defense is integral to the competitive dynamics between the government and the opposition and between ideologically proximate and distant actors to the illiberals. Leveraging empirical evidence from Greece, the article documents the tactical dilemmas of moderate actors over the treatment of one of the most illiberal actors in Europe, the Golden Dawn. It then shows how the resolution of these dilemmas helped bring about a major shift from democratic tolerance to militancy. The analysis highlights the temporal specificity of institutional responses and casts new light on the tactical incentives of moderate actors, especially those most ideologically proximate to the illiberals, to repress them.

**Lieberman, R. (Johns Hopkins University) and D. 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.

**Cella, L. (University of Chicago), Çinar, I. (University of Chicago), Stokes, S. (University of Chicago), Uribe, A. (Stanford University), “Building tolerance for backsliding by trash-talking democracy: Theory and evidence from Mexico.”**

When aspiring autocrats erode their democracies, why do voters not necessarily turn against them? A prominent answer focuses on the advantages to these leaders of electorates that are polarized along partisan lines. We offer another answer. Aspiring autocrats can also maintain popular support by degrading their

democracies in the eyes of their citizens. If voters can be induced to believe that their democracy is already broken, then the leader's attacks matter less. This is the logic behind backsliders' strategy of trash-talking democracy. Using text-as-data methods, we distinguish polarizing statements from democracy-denigrating ones in the rhetoric of one contemporary aspiring autocrat, Mexico's Andrés López Obrador. We report on a survey experiment, being piloted in Mexico, that allow us to assess the effectiveness of democracy-denigrating speech on the public's tolerance of democratic erosion.

**Jákli, L. (Harvard University), Greskovits, B. (Central European University), and J. Wittenberg, (UC Berkeley), "Unmilitant democracy: Civil society and the vincibility of democracy in Hungary."**

Using an original dataset of partisan protest events (n=4,868) in Hungary (1989-2011), we argue that left-liberal parties' neglect in cultivating civil society during the post-communist period had deleterious downstream effects on Hungarian liberal democracy. First, it enabled the growth of an illiberal, right-wing civil society that facilitated Fidesz-KDNP's 2010 landslide electoral victory. Second, it deprived the left-liberals of mobilization resources that might have been used for contentious collective action to counter Fidesz-KDNP's early maneuvers at democratic backsliding, in particular their constitutional overhaul. Hungary is an object lesson in the dangers of minimizing anti-system threats during the prevention and containment periods

**Laebens, M. (Central European University) and M. Ślarzyński (Polish Academy of Sciences), "Opposing backsliding 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 and sustaining the criticism of PiS's power abuses. Through the case of Poland's main opposition party PO, we identify the challenges faced by opposition parties in the context of executive aggrandizement. Our contribution is an emphasis on the electoral realignment that frequently accompanies executive aggrandizement. This results in opposition parties having not only to contest the institutional transformation imposed by the government, but also having to adjust their policy positions, which become uncompetitive in the new political environment. Analyzing the case of PO, we discuss how opposition parties sometimes choose to move towards the incumbent's policies – such as in the case of welfare state policies – while distancing themselves further from the government on other issues – such as in the case of abortion policy. We suggest some hypotheses about the factors affecting opposition parties' policy choices in such contexts.