

Countering Illiberalism in Liberal Democracies: Information, Legacies, Temporalities

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Abstract

The article lays the foundations of a research agenda on the conditions favoring short-term success against emerging illiberal challenges—necessary for democrats to rebuild support and strengthen democratic resilience. When confronting an illiberal executive (resistance scenario) or a rising illiberal opposition (prevention scenario), democrats face a temporal paradox: early in the confrontation, illiberals are easier to defeat, but uncertainty about the regime threat hampers coordination and mobilization. As illiberals gain influence, the threat becomes clearer, improving the chances of effective coordination, yet the range of viable countermeasures shrinks, reducing the likelihood of success. Exogenous information and favorable institutional legacies enhance democrats' ability to navigate this paradox successfully. When an illiberal opposition is on the brink of power, democrats enter trench warfare (containment scenario), best seen as part of a longer-run sequence. The article identifies key research challenges and summarizes how the contributions to this special issue address some of them.

Keywords

democratization and regime change, political regimes, non-democratic regimes

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Data Availability Statement included at the end of the article

Introduction

Despite disagreements about whether democracy is in global retreat (e.g., Bunce et al., 2025; Foa & Mounk, 2017; Ginsburg & Huq, 2019; Waldner & Lust, 2018) or not (e.g., Levitsky & Way, 2023; Little & Meng, 2024; Treisman, 2023; Welzel, 2021), most scholars agree that several liberal democracies have experienced democratic backsliding: the incremental erosion of accountability structures and civil and political freedoms by elected autocrats. Most also agree that backsliding has affected democracies that were considered consolidated (e.g., Bernhard, 2021, p. 586; Haggard & Kaufman, 2021, p. 1; Huq & Ginsburg, 2018, p. 82), and that mature democracies in North America and Western Europe are at risk (e.g., Levitsky & Way, 2025; Przeworski, 2019, pp. 1, 143). This raises urgent questions: how can illiberalism be countered, which strategies are available, what trade-offs do they entail, and under what conditions are they effective?

The literature is paying increasing attention to these questions, but the answers have so far remained partial. A substantial body of work has examined transnational processes, especially within the European Union (e.g., Blauburger & Sedelmeier, 2025; Coman & Buzogány, 2024; Kelemen, 2020, 2025; Kelemen & Scheppele, 2019; Müller, 2015; Wunsch & Chiru, 2025). In general, supranational and international pressures can counter backsliding (e.g., Ginsburg, 2021; Samuels, 2023) but can also contribute to it (e.g., Diamond, 2024; Dobson et al., 2023; Gunitsky, 2017). In any case, these are *external* forces, often shaped by *Realpolitik*. No international pressure could reverse backsliding in a superpower such as the United States, a regional hegemon like India or, within the EU, a major member state such as France or Germany.

One tradition of research on *domestic* strategies to counter illiberalism in democracies draws on the literature on social and economic sources of democratic stress, such as unemployment (e.g., Autor et al., 2020; Baccini & Weymouth, 2021; Colantone & Stanig, 2018a, 2018b; Eichengreen, 2018; Stutzmann, 2025), economic crises (e.g., Margalit & Solodoch, 2025), deindustrialization due to offshoring (e.g., Baccini et al., 2025; Rickard, 2022), inequality (e.g., Stokes, 2025), downward social mobility (e.g., Ciccolini, 2025; Derndorfer, 2025; Mutz, 2018), and perceived cultural threats, either in their own right (e.g., Dustmann et al., 2019; Margalit, 2019; Norris & Inglehart, 2019), or in interaction with economic factors (Colantone et al., 2025; Gidron & Hall, 2017, 2020; Rodrik, 2021). Based on these findings, many scholars advocate as remedies to democratic fragility initiatives aimed at reducing the popular appeal of illiberal forces, such as redistributive, industrial, and labor-market policies, deradicalization programs, and civic education initiatives (e.g., Amar et al., 2025; Cavailé & Marshall, 2019; Eroglu et al., 2025; Finkel et al., 2024; Koehler, 2016; Scheppele, 2018,

pp. 581–583). Others stress the importance of party institutionalization (e.g., Casal Bértoa & Rama, 2021; La Raja & Schaffner, 2015; Mair, 2013) and investing in civil society leadership and capacity (Han et al., 2021, 2024; Pressman et al., 2022). Addressing material concerns, bolstering democratic culture, and revitalizing intermediary organizations are often crucial for rebuilding democratic consensus (e.g., Müller, 2021), but most of these interventions operate on a *medium-to long-term horizon* (e.g., Autor et al., 2016; Kim & Pelc, 2021; Kubik, 2024) and do not solve the immediate problem of keeping illiberals out of power when they are close to winning it or removing them before they dismantle accountability mechanisms and civil liberties.

Domestic short-term strategies—those intended to affect outcomes within one or two electoral cycles—have received less systematic attention. Yet, they are critical to buy time for pro-democratic actors to rebuild support and for long-run measures to yield effects. A growing body of literature has focused on resisting backsliding (e.g., Cleary & Öztürk, 2022; Lührmann & Merkel, 2021; Nord et al., 2025; Riedl et al., 2023b; Tomini et al., 2023; van Lit et al., 2024; Weyland, 2024). In important contributions, Gamboa (2023) contrasts “moderate” and “institutional” counterstrategies with “radical” ones, arguing that the latter, which attack incumbents’ legitimacy rather than their policies, often backfire; Riedl et al. (2024) identify likely sites of resistance depending on different “pathways to backsliding”; Stokes (2025) underscores the importance of targeted constitutional reforms and of campaign messages that rebuke the democracy-degrading rhetoric of aspiring autocrats. As insightful as these arguments are, pro-democratic actors need not fight back only *after* illiberals have reached power; they can act preventively too. To fully understand how democrats can fight backsliding, theories must incorporate how pro-democratic forces can successfully counter illiberalism both *before* and *after* would-be autocrats attain executive power.

Two types of studies discuss countermeasures against illiberals in government or opposition. The first type analyzes individual countermeasures in a specific scenario. This literature is uneven and focuses only on a small subset of tools. Many studies, for example, focus on *cordon sanitaires* against illiberal oppositions (e.g., Axelsen, 2024; Turnbull-Dugarte, 2024; van Spanje & de Graaf, 2018), campaign and positioning strategies to defeat illiberals electorally (e.g., Krause et al., 2023; Meguid, 2005), or “militant democracy” legal restrictions and speech regulations (Loewenstein, 1937a, 1937b), while strategies such as the instrumental use of informal constitutional conventions or party gatekeeping, to mention only a few, remain understudied. Studies on resisting illiberal governments are similarly unbalanced, concentrating mostly on civil society mobilization (e.g., Backes & Lindenberger, 2024; Chenoweth, 2020; Meyer & Tarrow, 2018) and bureaucratic and judicial responses (e.g., Garcia-Holgado, 2025; Laebens & Lührmann, 2021; Scheppele, 2014; Staton et al., 2022), neglecting other possible strategies. Furthermore, much work on

individual countermeasures is spread across different disciplines and adopts a heterogeneous conceptual apparatus, which limits the cumulation of knowledge. For example, legal restrictions on extremism have been the object of analyses in constitutional law (e.g., Ginsburg et al., 2023; Ohlin & Hollis, 2021), political theory (e.g., Müller, 2012, 2016), comparative politics (e.g., Capoccia, 2013; Ellinas, 2020, 2023), and political economy (e.g., Mitts, 2025; Zuboff, 2019).

In addition to blind spots and conceptual incommensurability, a further problem of this sprawling literature is that it analyzes countermeasures in isolation, both from the simultaneous or sequential adoption of other countermeasures and from broader processes. However, countermeasures against illiberalism are rarely used in isolation; therefore, it is difficult to explain their success or failure while ignoring broader synergies. Even an analytical strategy focused on any *specific mix* of measures would have problems, as the outcome of any set of countermeasures is affected by factors such as the illiberals' ideological and organizational profiles, polity-level institutional and normative legacies, and the sequencing of individual measures. Finally, the effects of specific countermeasures and synergies evolve over time as illiberals update their tactics based on technological advances and historical learning, and democrats devise new responses and take proactive steps to reinforce the legitimacy of liberal democracy (e.g., Acemoglu & Johnson, 2023; Bennett & Livingston, 2025; Olsen & Tuovinen, 2023).

The second type of study considers catalogues of measures against illiberals in government and opposition. However, these works often merely present lists of desirable initiatives (e.g., urging parties to address grievances, field attractive candidates, or organize inclusive processes; Lührmann, 2021) without specifying the *conditions* under which such actions are feasible and effective (e.g., Lührmann et al., 2020; Malkopoulou & Norman, 2018). Politicians may be aware of the available defensive measures but face constraints and incentives that make adoption difficult. Developing the “anti-authoritarian playbook” requires not only a better conceptualization and systematic comparative–historical knowledge of how particular countermeasures work in specific contexts but also, most importantly, the theorization of more general conditions under which pro-democratic actors can navigate constraints and respond effectively.

This article lays the groundwork for a research program on the conditions under which newly emerging illiberal challenges in liberal democracies can be successfully countered in different scenarios. Rather than specific countermeasures or synergies, it models the *range of viable countermeasures* as affecting the likelihood of success in various situations. It develops a theoretical framework built on the *temporal paradox* at the core of the short-term confrontation between pro-democratic forces and illiberal challengers. In synthesis, if pro-democratic forces intervene early—before illiberals extend

their influence—they will normally dispose of a broader range of viable countermeasures and potential synergies, which increases the likelihood of success. At the same time, they are likely to face greater uncertainty among their own base and the public at large about the severity of the threat, which makes coordination and mobilization in support of countermeasures more difficult. If democrats delay intervention until the increased activities and influence of the illiberals themselves have reduced public uncertainty on the regime threat, coordination and mobilization will be easier, but democrats will have fewer viable countermeasures at their disposal and success will be less likely. *Exogenous information* and *institutional legacies* allow democrats to navigate this trade-off with a better chance of successfully confronting illiberals. Exogenous information on the nature of illiberals reduces uncertainty and facilitates intervention when a broader range of countermeasures is still available. Favorable institutional legacies at the onset of an illiberal challenge provide ready-to-use tools that operate as focal points, potentially speeding up the adoption of specific countermeasures and increasing the likelihood of short-term success. Unfavorable legacies raise costs and delay action, with negative effects on the chances of success. Given the current spread of illiberal movements, democrats are likely to face a protracted struggle. In the long run, as illiberals gain support, take power, or are defeated yet remain a threat, countries are likely to cycle through different confrontation scenarios.

The article is organized as follows. The next two sections clarify the framework's scope and introduce three ideal-typical scenarios of confrontation with illiberals: prevention, containment, and resistance. The two subsequent sections present the temporal paradox and theorize the effects of exogenous information and institutional legacies in prevention and resistance scenarios. The section after these discusses containment and introduces the long-term analysis of sequences of scenarios. The section that follows discusses the payoffs of attaining systematic knowledge of individual countermeasures, and the one after that outlines the research agenda flowing from the theoretical framework and summarizes how the articles in this special issue address some of the relevant research challenges. The conclusion summarizes the main points.

Scope

I adopt a minimal definition of liberal democracy as a regime in which parties compete for government in free and fair elections with full adult suffrage—a regime in which “parties lose elections” (Przeworski, 1991, p. 10; classically, Schumpeter, 1942, p. 269). This definition applies to many polities in different regions of the world. Three conditions must be met for electoral competition to be meaningful and sustained over time. First, civil and political rights, particularly freedom of expression and association, should be sufficiently

respected. Second, institutions of horizontal accountability, in particular an independent judiciary, should ensure a minimum respect for the rule of law.¹ Civil and political rights, enforced by an independent judiciary, are necessary to sustain democratic engagement and electoral competition without fear or coercion (Huq & Ginsburg, 2018, p. 86; Sadurski, 2019, p. 243; Scheppele, 2018).² The third condition is the existence of what Levitsky and Way (2010, p. 6) call a “reasonably level playing field” for electoral competition.³

The absence of a reasonably level playing field for electoral competition is the consequence of the unfair advantages that incumbents may create for themselves through the erosion of the rule of law, the curbing of constitutional checks and balances, and the disproportionate control over material and symbolic resources. These disfavor the opposition and all but ensure the executive’s unaccountability and permanence in power. This is the key marker of “competitive authoritarian” regimes, which, in most cases, are the ultimate outcome of the gradual process of democratic backsliding (e.g., Grillo et al., 2024; Huq & Ginsburg, 2018; Levitsky & Way, 2025). Levitsky and Way (2010) define competitive authoritarianism as a regime in which the opposition can meaningfully compete for executive power and occasionally win but in which, due to violations of civil liberties, electoral abuse, or a markedly non-level field of electoral competition, the incumbents are almost certain of re-election. Although all competitive authoritarian regimes respond to the same logic (Levitsky & Way, 2010, pp. 26–32), the category displays significant internal variation. Certain competitive authoritarianisms are more similar to closed authoritarianism, because of the strong repression of civil liberties and heavy electoral distortions, while others may be characterized by only occasional formal violations of electoral fairness or basic freedoms. In these, however, the unevenness of the field of electoral competition is so pronounced that the government is *de facto* unaccountable and almost unreplaceable.⁴

Confronting Illiberals: Prevention, Containment, and Resistance

Liberal democrats can counter illiberals in three ideal-typical scenarios. In the first scenario, illiberals in government engage in democratic backsliding, curbing constitutional checks and balances, manipulating electoral, suffrage, and campaigning rules, and restricting the free media and civil society opposition groups. In this case, the actions of pro-democratic forces follow a logic of *resistance* to backsliding. However, this is not the only scenario in which illiberal forces can be confronted. Pro-democratic forces can also seek to thwart illiberals—typically with more chances of success—before they take the government, or when they are forced into opposition after an electoral defeat. An illiberal opposition poses a threat to liberal democracy in two

scenarios: when it is on the brink of power, and when it is a smaller but rising political force. In a “brink of power” scenario, an illiberal party is a serious contender for government, alone or as a senior partner in a coalition. The immediate focus of pro-democratic forces will be on *containing* illiberals, to block them from attaining executive power. In a “rising illiberals” scenario, by contrast, an illiberal party or movement is on its way to becoming a major player in national politics. It may have experienced an upward trend in national polls, risen to power in subnational government, or even influenced coalition-making at the national level, but it is not expected to dominate the executive in the immediate future. In this scenario, the focus of defensive strategies will be on *prevention*: stemming the rise of illiberals and reducing the prospects of their future growth. The three scenarios contain internal variation, but in each, strategies against illiberalism respond to a distinctive logic —of resistance, containment, and prevention respectively.⁵

The three scenarios provide criteria for defining *success* in fighting illiberals —the *explanandum* of any model of democratic defense—that allow comparison across space and time (Table 1). In each scenario, a *minimalist* definition of success consists in *stopping the progression* of illiberal forces: avoiding further backsliding in a resistance scenario, preventing illiberals from taking over the executive in a containment scenario, and keeping their prospect of attaining executive power reasonably remote in a prevention scenario. A *maximalist* definition of success would instead turn on *reducing*

Table 1. Success Against Illiberals.

Scenario	Key characteristic	Definition of successful outcome	
		Minimalist	Maximalist
Resistance	Illiberals are in government	Stop further backsliding	Defeat incumbents electorally (→containment)
Containment	Illiberals are credible winners of upcoming elections, decisive to attain executive power	Prevent illiberals’ electoral victory	Reduce support for illiberals, making them unlikely contenders for governmental power in the short term (→ prevention)
Prevention	Illiberal forces are not close to dominating the executive but are a relevant political actor	Stop illiberals’ rise and keep their governing prospects unlikely	Turn illiberals into politically irrelevant actors

*the power of illiberals and the danger for liberal democracy: defeating illiberals electorally when they are in government, thus moving to a containment scenario; reducing their following in a containment scenario, thus lowering their chances of taking over the executive and moving to a logic of prevention; and rendering illiberals politically irrelevant in a prevention scenario. Definitions of *failure* mirror those of success, with a minimalist definition consisting of the inability to stop the advance of illiberals and a maximalist definition consisting of the shift to the next-worst scenario for liberal democracy.*

“By the Time You Know for Sure It Might be too Late”: The Temporal Paradox of Countering Illiberals in Liberal Democracies

In 1940, General Douglas MacArthur summed up the main reason for defeat in war in two words: “Too late” (quoted in [Reston, 1943](#), p. 64). Although democratic politics is obviously different from war, MacArthur’s expression captures a key determinant of the outcome of the confrontation between defenders and challengers of liberal democracy: timing. Indeed, at the core of the possibility of successfully countering illiberals in liberal democracies is a *temporal paradox*. The paradox applies to situations in which a *new* illiberal challenge presents itself—either in a prevention scenario, when a new illiberal actor emerges, or in a resistance scenario, when backsliding is undertaken by actors with a history of mainstream politics who, while in opposition, did not display illiberal intentions.⁶

The temporal paradox of countering illiberalism relates to the implications of different timings of intervention. If pro-democratic actors opt for *early intervention*, they will dispose, relatively speaking, of a larger range of countermeasures to contrast illiberal actors, which increases their likelihood of success. However, they also normally face greater uncertainty regarding the threat posed by these actors to liberal democracy. Uncertainty makes it difficult to coordinate and mobilize to support the adoption of countermeasures. By contrast, *delaying intervention* typically reduces uncertainty about the nature of the illiberals and their capacity to threaten liberal democracy, incentivizing pro-democratic forces to coordinate to confront them. At the same time, delaying intervention restricts the range of countermeasures and synergies available to democrats, which in turn reduces their chances of success in confronting illiberals.

The model has two key elements. The first is the *uncertainty* about the extent of the threat that newly emerging illiberals represent for liberal democracy. In both the resistance and prevention scenarios, illiberals’ intentions are typically concealed or ambiguous at the start. As illiberals become more influential over time, the increased visibility of their activities provides

endogenous information about their ideological nature, which reduces uncertainty about the regime threat.⁷ In a resistance scenario, endogenous information comes from the incremental erosion of accountability structures by an illiberal executive; in a prevention scenario, it comes from the electoral and organizational expansion of an illiberal opposition, which increasingly reveals its political goals. The information that matters here is not private information, which pro-democratic elites may in some cases already have. Rather, information should be *publicly usable* by pro-democratic forces to foster coordination among them, often decisive for success against illiberals in both scenarios (e.g., Capoccia, 2005, pp. 214–220; Carothers, 2024, p. 254; Riedl et al., 2024, p. 21) and, where possible, to mobilize in defense of liberal democracy less aligned sectors of the electorate (e.g., Svolik, 2023; Voelkel et al., 2025). The second key element of the model is the *inverse relationship between the strength of illiberals and the range of viable countermeasures*. To counter illiberals, pro-democratic forces adopt various types of countermeasures, but in doing so, they are constrained by democratic values and practices. In different ways, discussed below in relation to either scenario, as illiberals gain strength, some countermeasures become less viable, not just in principle, but in practice too. Hence, in both scenarios, waiting to have more publicly usable endogenous information may ease coordination and mobilization but means facing stronger illiberals, which in turn restricts the range of viable countermeasures and synergies, and reduces the likelihood of success.

This dynamic is illustrated in Figure 1. The x -axis represents time. The use of a dual y -axis format allows for the representation of the change over time of the separate dimensions of endogenous information and viable countermeasures: the solid black line A represents the growth of endogenous information (measured on the left y -axis), and the dashed grey line B represents the decrease in the range of viable countermeasures (measured on the right y -axis). I^* is an exogenously set threshold at which endogenous information reaches a sufficient level for pro-democratic forces to act against illiberals—at time t^* on the x -axis, when they can rely on a range of countermeasures given by cm^* on the left-hand y -axis.⁸ The rest of this section discusses how the temporal paradox plays out in the resistance and prevention scenarios.

Resistance: Fighting Democracy’s Erosion

Democratic backsliding combines legalism and gradualism. To entrench their power, illiberal executives curb accountability structures, manipulate electoral and suffrage rules, and restrict the space for legal opposition. They typically do so by enacting new rules, reinterpreting existing ones, and repurposing institutions, while adhering to formal procedures (e.g., Magyar, 2016; Pirro & Stanley, 2022; Scheppele, 2013)⁹. These changes unfold over years, with each step easing the next (e.g., Haggard & Kaufman, 2021). This “stealth”

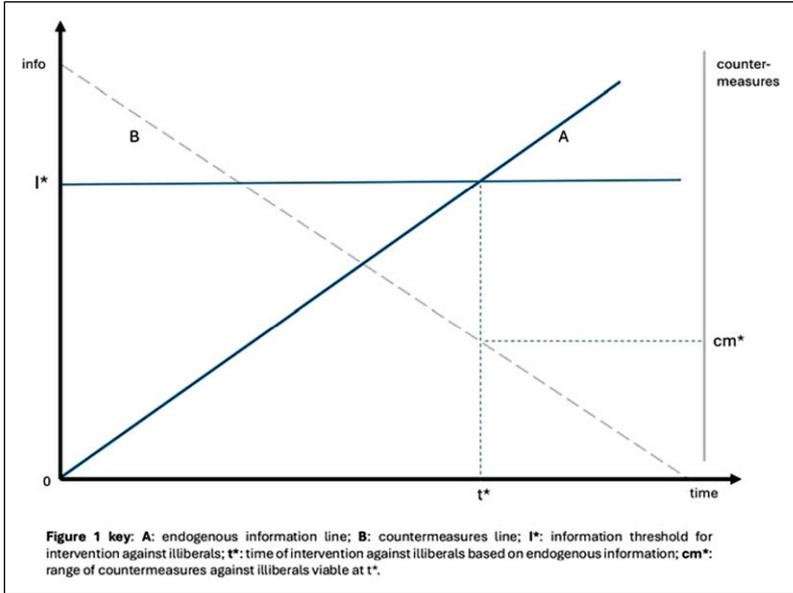


Figure 1. Endogenous information and range of viable countermeasures.

subversion of liberal democracy—the incremental erosion of democratic institutions and norms via ostensibly legal mechanisms used for anti-democratic ends (Przeworski, 2019, p. 178, citing Varol, 2015)—complicates the democratic opposition’s timely coordination and response. Key constituencies, such as moderate electors, civil servants, the military, and the police, often view procedurally legal reforms as legitimate (e.g., Ermakoff, 2020; Scheppele, 2018). Furthermore, propaganda, the technical complexity of some government initiatives, and the bundling of illiberal and genuinely democratic reforms often delay the detection of the erosion of checks and balances and of electoral fairness (e.g., Huq & Ginsburg, 2018, p. 97; Przeworski, 2019, pp. 183, 186; see also Luo & Przeworski, 2023).¹⁰

As the erosion of liberal democracy proceeds, opposition groups, the media, experts, and international actors increasingly denounce illiberalism, making the stakes of the confrontation with the executive gradually clearer. Reduced uncertainty about the threat to liberal democracy is likely to incentivize *coordination* among democratic opposition parties. Coordination depends not only on inter-party relations but also on intra-party dynamics. Consider a typical resistance scenario where three or four pro-democratic parties must coordinate to counter autocratization with more chances of success.¹¹ They are ideologically different but are, in principle, united by their support for liberal democracy. Parties are not unitary actors: factions and their

complex constituency of activists, members, interest groups, and voters shape internal decision-making (Adams et al., 2006; Miller & Schofield, 2003). Furthermore, parties make strategic choices under uncertainty, weighing uncertain costs and benefits (Adams et al., 2004; Budge, 1994). Alliance formation is no exception to this rule. The costs of the decision to enter a politically heterogeneous alliance are immediate and significant. Such alliances are symbolically costly, which may lead to vote loss, and often require painful compromises on issues that are important to some within-party actors, such as a party faction and its base. By contrast, when information about the potential regime threat is low, the benefits of coordination—defending liberal democracy or, more instrumentally, avoiding long-term exclusion from power—are uncertain and contestable. This increases the likelihood that some parties, or factions within them, will consider the benefits too uncertain and resist coordination. Even if party elites may privately recognize the danger, pushing for coordination with other parties against the base or important within-party actors, who do not yet perceive the threat clearly, would risk internal splits and leadership challenges.¹² This often prompts “wait and see” attitudes by some democratic leaders vis-à-vis the new government.¹³

As publicly usable information accumulates, pro-coordination forces within democratic parties can operate more effectively to bring the whole party on their position, not necessarily because the party elites who previously opposed coordination become personally more persuaded of its benefits (although that may play a role too), but because a larger share of their constituency within the party—activists, members, special interests, voters—becomes more willing to accept the compromises needed for a broad alliance that may stand better chances of resisting autocratization (Gessler & Wunsch, 2025).¹⁴ Ethnic or religious divisions between opposition actors may slow this process but, *ceteris paribus*, increased certainty about the threat is likely to make coordination more attainable.¹⁵

Increased information on the threat to liberal democracy may also induce voters to mobilize against autocratization (e.g., Voelkel et al., 2025). The effect of information about the threat to democracy is likely to be heterogeneous across the electorate: research has shown that, in the context of high polarization typical of a resistance scenario, many voters tolerate or support undemocratic behavior for various political, psychological, and cognitive reasons. Substantial segments of the electorate may be split about what “democracy” means (e.g., Bright Line Watch, 2022; Kaftan & Gessler, 2024); they may prioritize policy preferences over democratic procedures even when they correctly understand democracy (e.g., Carey et al., 2022; Ferrer et al., 2025; Graham & Svoblik, 2020; Svoblik, 2020, 2023); rationalize as “democratic” undemocratic behavior that accords with their preferences (Krishnarajan, 2023); hold non-liberal conceptions of democracy (Grossman et al., 2022; Wunsch et al., 2025); or take cues from undemocratic elites

(e.g., Kingzette et al., 2021; van Noort, 2023). However, when a sufficiently large share of voters values liberal democracy and perceives a growing risk to its survival as the executive's illiberal actions accumulate, increased information on the regime threat will benefit the democratic opposition. In some cases, as Svobik (2023) shows in his analysis of the 2019 Istanbul municipal elections, a consequential bloc of "pragmatic and persuadable" moderate voters may be pivotal in defeating incumbents. Be that as it may, democratic oppositions typically campaign on a mix of issue-based and regime messages, to attract both electors concerned about democracy and electors who are instead moved by pocketbook, cultural, or valence issues.¹⁶ The proportions of these two sets of voters obviously vary across contexts. Attaining the right balance between pro-democracy and issue-based appeals is crucial for defeating illiberals at the ballot box—at least until elections preserve a modicum of fairness (Scheppele, 2022).

In a resistance scenario, the temporal paradox arises because the executive's backsliding actions that generate endogenous information, potentially spurring opposition coordination and moving pragmatic voters, also shrink the space for legal opposition. Democratic opposition—whether it mobilizes in the street, pursues strategic litigation, or resorts to informal obstruction in representative assemblies—typically stays within the limits of legality, at most resorts to forms of civil disobedience, and eschews violent methods. Consequently, the more an illiberal government restricts the possibilities for legal opposition—by harassing independent media, intimidating opponents, judges, and lawyers, pressuring universities and civil society organizations, and curtailing spaces for protest—the fewer countermeasures and synergies will be available to a democratic opposition. As the executive extends its power, broader and more heterogeneous opposition fronts must be assembled to contrast it (Przeworski, 2019, pp. 183–184; see also Jiménez, 2023). Incentives to form them become stronger, but by the time a larger front has formed, the government may have significantly tilted the playing field in its favor, thus reducing the democrats' chances of success.¹⁷

In sum, backsliding's gradual and legalistic character makes effective opposition most feasible at the beginning of the process, before the executive substantially aggrandizes its power. However, this is when publicly usable information is scarcest, making it difficult to attain coordination and mobilize less aligned voters. Later, when uncertainty about the regime threat diminishes and arguments for resistance strengthen, opportunities for effective action narrow, and chances of success decrease.

Prevention: The Problem of ex ante Evidence

In a prevention scenario, the main source of uncertainty about the threat to liberal democracy is that illiberal opposition parties often present a public face

that is more moderate than their true goals (e.g., [Ermakoff, 2020](#)). By definition, a newly emerging illiberal opposition has never governed; *ex post* evidence that it would undermine liberal democracy if elected is not available. Typically, *ex ante* evidence of illiberals' intentions is not straightforward: the public face of anti-system parties differs from their "backstage" —internal communications with cadres and militants— where, away from public scrutiny, they reveal their true colors ([van Donselaar, 1995](#)). As illiberals expand their activity and influence, however, concealing their backstage becomes harder.¹⁸ To begin with, increased influence attracts greater public scrutiny. Furthermore, their leaders will struggle to control peripheral actors in a growing organization; local elites are often less media-savvy than national ones and are more prone to expressing extreme views. Finally, as illiberal parties grow, their international ties intensify and become more visible. These may include foreign leaders whose illiberal ideology is not controversial in public opinion (e.g., [de la Torre, 2017](#)). For instance, despite ongoing debate about whether the ideology of European radical right parties is compatible with liberal democracy, many of their leaders have publicly endorsed Viktor Orbán, Jarosław Kaczyński, Donald Trump, or (mostly pre-Ukraine war) Vladimir Putin (e.g., [Butt & Byman, 2020](#); [Pascale, 2022](#)), and most of their MEPs voted against the European Parliament's resolution declaring Hungary an "electoral autocracy" ([European Parliament, 2022](#))—none of which helps their liberal-democratic credentials.¹⁹

When an illiberal opposition actor is small, the lack of a sense of an urgent regime threat often leads mainstream parties to ignore the potential danger that it may represent for liberal democracy, and may lead some of them to form selective alliances with it (e.g., in local government), or to adopt strategies that advantage it in order to siphon votes from mainstream rivals ([Meguid, 2005](#)).²⁰ As an illiberal opposition grows and generates more endogenous information about the threat it can pose to liberal democracy, pro-democratic forces have stronger incentives to coordinate to halt its rise. Numerous examples exist, both historical and contemporary. In interwar Belgium, for example, the leaders of the Catholic, Liberal, and Socialist parties, despite deep internal divisions, quickly agreed to back a common candidate (Prime Minister Paul Van Zeeland) and coordinate against far-right leader Léon Degrelle, whose Rex party appeared to be on an unstoppable rise.²¹ Van Zeeland's electoral victory *de facto* ended Degrelle's authoritarian project ([Capoccia, 2005](#), pp. 114–116). A similar dynamic was observable in the 2024 legislative elections in France, when parties of the left, center, and moderate right coordinated to prevent the *Rassemblement National* from achieving a majority ([Regan-Lefebvre, 2024](#)). Regarding voters' mobilization, in a prevention scenario illiberal actors are by definition smaller than in a resistance scenario, and therefore a larger share of the electorate may be receptive to pro-democracy messages.²² Even then, in most cases, pro-

democratic parties will also campaign on the substantive grievances that fuel support for illiberals.

As the illiberals' growing strength reveals more endogenous information, thus incentivizing coordination and mobilization, it also narrows the range of viable countermeasures. In a prevention scenario, legal restrictions on extremist dissent, strategies of gatekeeping and informal exclusion, and even civil society mobilization will be practically more viable against a weak illiberal opposition than against a strong one. Legal restrictions become harder to enforce and more prone to backlash against a larger illiberal opposition; for example, it is relatively easier to disband an illiberal party that has, say, 3% of the vote than one that has 25% (e.g., [Kirchheimer, 1961](#), p. 160). By the same token, informal strategies of obstruction and discrimination face increasing difficulties as the illiberals' following increases. For example, policing entryism of extremist candidates in mainstream parties is harder if the candidates in question have a large personal electoral base. To give another example, concluding informal agreements to exclude illiberal MPs from certain offices, such as the presidency of parliamentary committees, will be more difficult the more seats their party commands. As the repertoire of viable countermeasures shrinks, the likelihood of successfully confronting illiberals decreases.

In sum, as an illiberal opposition grows electorally, it reveals more about its political goals, making democrats' reaction more likely—but at the same time, its growth in influence makes some countermeasures increasingly unviable, thus reducing the chances of success.

Comparative Statics: The Effect of Exogenous Information and Institutional Legacies

Exogenous Information

Exogenous information and *institutional legacies* allay the trade-off between endogenous information and the range of viable counterstrategies in prevention and resistance scenarios. Exogenous information is publicly usable information on illiberals' true goals and their potential threat to liberal democracy, which has a separate source from the illiberals' activities. Complementing the endogenous information available at any point in time, exogenous information allows pro-democratic forces to act against illiberals *earlier* in the confrontation and thus rely on a broader range of countermeasures, making success more probable. In [Figure 2](#), the effect of exogenous information on the possibility of earlier action ($t' < t^*$) against illiberals is represented by an upward shift of information line A (to A'). Earlier intervention allows pro-democratic forces to dispose of a broader range of viable countermeasures ($cm' > cm^*$).

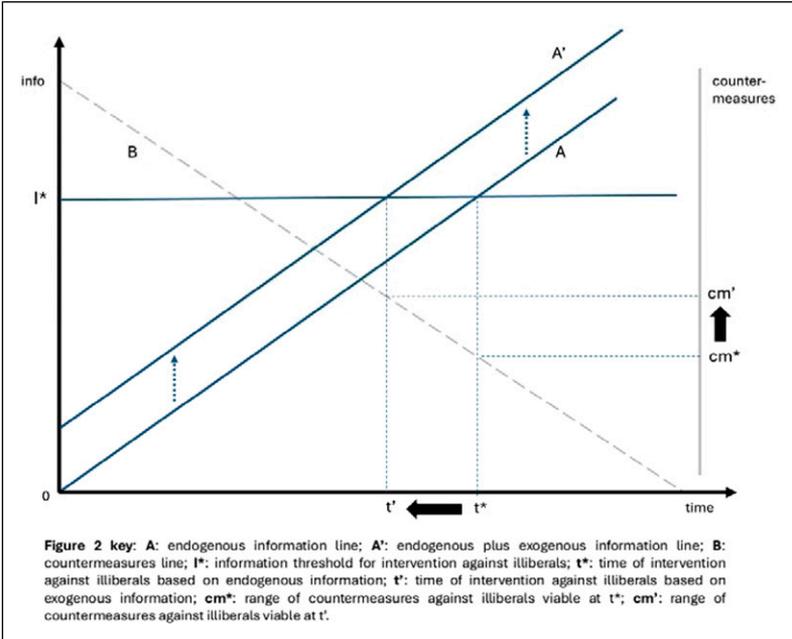


Figure 2. Effect of exogenous information.

Exogenous information can have multiple sources. One of these is cross-border learning—a form of diffusion.²³ Generally, pro-democratic forces in countries where new illiberal challenges emerge later have at least the theoretical advantage of using foreign comparisons to warn their base and voters about the dangers of inaction. In a resistance scenario, oppositions can draw an intertemporal analogy between newly proposed backsliding reforms and earlier reforms enacted in countries where autocratization is more advanced. On that basis, they can argue that, if adopted, the proposed reforms would have similar effects in their own country, and can point to the failure of democratic oppositions abroad to react promptly to reforms and initiatives that, although presented as harmless for liberal democracy, were in fact the bellwether of further democratic erosion.²⁴ Such negative foreign examples provide the opposition with a cognitive shortcut that helps communicate risks early, when the harmful potential of government-sponsored reforms may not be obvious to the mass public.²⁵ This, in turn, can help justify broad alliances and mobilize segments of the electorate while margins for action remain relatively wide. Recently in Israel, for example, opponents of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s planned judicial overhaul repeatedly invoked Hungary and Poland—widely considered as plausible comparators—as cautionary cases where the democratic opposition was slow to respond to initial reforms, and

executives significantly eroded liberal democracy (Roznai, 2024; Roznai & Cohen, 2023).²⁶ The ensuing backlash against Netanyahu's reforms —sustained mass demonstrations for over 40 weeks until Hamas's October 2023 attacks— garnered broad societal support and led to the suspension of the executive's plans (e.g., Lerner et al., 2025). Similar rhetorical strategies are used in prevention scenarios. In interwar Europe, for example, pro-democratic actors in several democracies drew parallels with Hitler's and Mussolini's "legal revolutions" to highlight the dangerousness of domestic extremists and justify the adoption of appropriate countermeasures (e.g., Capoccia, 2005; Ermakoff, 2023). Today, analogies with foreign autocrats are often emphasized by pro-democratic actors to signal the illiberal character of domestic oppositions.²⁷

Other potential sources of exogenous information on illiberals' intentions are leaks, evidence of domestic illiberals' ties with foreign autocrats, and investigative journalism. Prominent examples of the latter come from prevention scenarios, where reports on the "backstage" of illiberal opposition actors by investigative journalists (or sometimes from law enforcement; Backes, 2022) have been used to rally pro-democratic forces. A recent case occurred in Germany: in February 2024, journalists exposed a secret meeting between senior figures of the extreme right *Alternative für Deutschland* and representatives of a neo-Nazi international network to discuss the mass "repatriation" of migrants and German citizens of foreign origin. These revelations sparked nationwide demonstrations lasting several days and intensified calls for increased restriction and monitoring of the AfD, which produced a temporary but significant dip in the party's poll numbers. In decentralized systems where an illiberal actor governs locally, performance in subnational offices can also yield partially exogenous information about their intentions and governing style (Grumbach, 2022; Kaufman et al., 2025).

Institutional Legacies

To counter illiberals, democrats must coordinate not only on recognizing and confronting the challenge, but also on which countermeasures to adopt (Capoccia, 2005, p. 234). So far, the discussion has assumed that the cost of activating countermeasures is zero—that is, that the formal rules, jurisprudential traditions, informal conventions, party organizations, social norms, and mobilizational infrastructure underlying the relevant countermeasures are already in place when information on the illiberal threat is sufficient. Indeed, such *favorable institutional legacies* can act as focal points for pro-democratic forces (Schelling, 1960), who can coordinate more easily to enact the relevant measures by referring to precedents. By contrast, *unfavorable institutional legacies*—that is, the *absence* of the aforementioned conditions—force pro-democratic actors to spend political capital and resources to publicly justify

the adoption of unprecedented countermeasures against illiberals. This is likely to delay their adoption. Graphically, this effect is represented (Figure 3) by a downward shift of line A (to A''): at constant levels of information, the friction in activating countermeasures caused by unfavorable legacies delays the response of pro-democratic actors ($t'' > t^*$), thus *restricting the range of viable countermeasures* ($cm'' < cm^*$) and lowering the probability of success.

Institutional legacies, understood broadly to include normative legacies, therefore shape which countermeasures are immediately viable in each scenario. In a resistance scenario, relevant legacies concern independent judiciaries and bureaucracies—including the military and law enforcement—with a strong constitutional ethos, which can sometimes withstand executive pressure (e.g., Garcia-Holgado, 2025; Hasen, 2022). Opposition parties with strong roots in civil society and local government are also critical (Casal Bértoa & Rama, 2021). The strength of civil society itself—ideally, a preexisting multi-level (national and subnational) infrastructure of organizations that bridges functional and professional boundaries and maintains ties to regime pillars such as organized business or the military—is important too (e.g., Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Chenoweth et al., 2022; Sharp, 2002; see also Fisher et al., 2019).²⁸ By contrast, a mistrusted judiciary, bureaucracies without traditions of constitutional loyalty, opposition parties

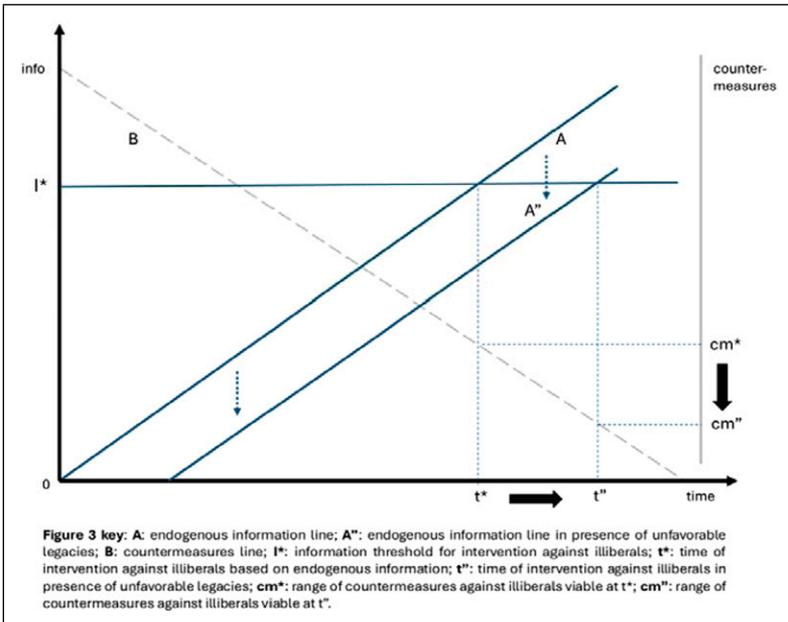


Figure 3. Effect of unfavorable institutional legacies.

with a thin social presence, and a weak civil society delay effective responses to backsliding, giving the executive time to close further avenues for dissent.

The same can happen in a prevention scenario, where, as discussed below, a wider array of countermeasures is in principle available than in a resistance scenario. However, whether relevant legacies exist is an empirical question. A liberal democracy may lack legislation and jurisprudential traditions restricting illiberal activities; key parties may be organizationally weak and unable to exercise effective gatekeeping; informal constitutional practices may indirectly advantage rising illiberal oppositions and be resistant to change; and pro-democratic civil society may be small or disorganized. Under such conditions, enacting the required countermeasures is costly and at times infeasible. Building an infrastructure for sustained mobilization takes time and resources. Moreover, significant segments of the public may view new legal restrictions or ad hoc reinterpretations of informal constitutional conventions as unjustified “extraordinary politics” aimed at a competitor that vocally asserts its democratic legitimacy.

In this respect, a focus on institutional legacies clarifies the advantages that more consolidated liberal democracies may have, but also the limits they may encounter, in countering illiberalism. This analytical move complements structural accounts of democratic resilience that, although insightful, do not theorize *democratic agency* (e.g., Brownlee & Miao, 2022). In consolidated democracies, favorable institutional and normative legacies are more likely to exist than in unconsolidated democracies. However, even when favorable legacies exist, they do not operate automatically; they must be *activated*. More generally, as the current predicament of many established liberal democracies shows, referring to consolidation in general is too undifferentiated to indicate the potential for successful democratic self-defense. A democracy can be consolidated, yet lack legacies that enable the rapid adoption of the appropriate countermeasures needed to repel a new illiberal challenge. For example, consider Donald Trump’s political rise in the United States, which was unanimously considered a consolidated democracy before 2016. The weak gatekeeping capacity of U.S. political parties, combined with the importance of candidates’ personal resources in electoral campaigns, made Trump’s takeover of the Republican Party possible. Robust free-speech jurisprudence made it difficult to prosecute him for his role in the January 6, 2021, insurrection, allowing him to run again in 2024 and ultimately secure a second mandate. Finally, an “exceptionalist” political culture (e.g., Lipset, 1996) makes it unlikely that rhetorical strategies centered on negative foreign examples gain traction and enable the opposition to give early warnings in a language easily understood by the mass public.

Even when favorable legacies exist, consistent with focal point theory, not all legacy-supported strategies are optimal (Schelling, 1960): familiar responses are not necessarily the best fit for new challenges. For example, the revelations that spurred anti-*AfD* demonstrations in Germany also elicited

calls to legalize the party. Germany has favorable legacies for both countermeasures: a lively civil society (e.g., [Trotschke, 2024](#)) and strong anti-extremist legislation (e.g., [Capoccia, 2013](#)). Yet, while popular mobilization seems a viable strategy, legalization might be de facto unenforceable given the *AfD*'s size—the party currently polls at about 30% in the Eastern *Länder* and 20% nationally (e.g., [Kirchheimer, 1961](#), p. 160). In other words, democratic consolidation does not necessarily imply the presence of legacies that are best suited to defend liberal democracy against a specific illiberal challenge.

Introducing Long-Term Analysis: Containment and Sequences of Scenarios

The *containment* scenario is unlikely to be associated with a newly emerging illiberal challenge.²⁹ It either follows a prevention scenario—if the rise of illiberals is not effectively stopped and they approach executive power—or a resistance scenario—if pro-democratic forces unseat an illiberal executive. Accordingly, the temporal paradox does not apply. In a containment scenario, information about the true nature of illiberals is generally abundant. If containment follows prevention, endogenous information about their ideology will accumulate during their rise in the previous scenario, possibly supplemented by exogenous information. If containment follows resistance, the recent record of illiberals in government sharply reduces uncertainty about the threat. For example, the government record of the PiS-led coalition in Poland leaves few doubts about its illiberal character once in opposition. Regarding institutional legacies, the polarization that characterizes containment scenarios typically makes overcoming unfavorable legacies difficult.

Although containment occurs only within sequences of scenarios, it should not be treated as transitional. Rather, it is best understood as “trench warfare” between defenders and opponents of liberal democracy: a potentially durable equilibrium in which illiberals credibly compete for executive power, pro-democratic actors repeatedly keep them out, and serial electoral defeats do not induce moderation ([Michel et al., 2020](#)). Liberal democracy will probably emerge transformed from a protracted struggle with illiberals, but only two exit paths from containment, both long-term, would allow preserving its fundamental values and institutions: the political moderation of illiberals, or their electoral decline and their replacement by a liberal-democratic opposition. Regarding the former pathway, the “inclusion–moderation” literature shows that under some conditions, participation in legislative processes and subnational government can foster ideological moderation (e.g., [Kalyvas, 1998](#); [Tepe, 2019](#)). As for the latter, the long-run effects of discrimination and restrictions on illiberal oppositions have been studied in nondemocratic regimes ([Cavatorta & Merone, 2013](#); [Freer, 2018](#)) but remain underexplored in

democracies (but see [Bateman, 2022](#)). A systematic analysis of the conditions favoring or hindering either pathway is an important priority for future research on the long-run dynamics of confronting illiberalism in liberal democracies.

More broadly, the framework developed here advances the conceptualization of the long-term confrontation with illiberals *as a sequence of scenarios*—historical episodes in which pro-democratic forces confront illiberals at different stages of ascent to, or retreat from, power. A two-level periodization underpins this approach: the emergence of a new illiberal challenge in a scenario of prevention or one of resistance marks the start of a new period, which may subsequently encompass multiple scenarios as illiberals' strength and governmental positions change over time. For example, since 2016 the United States has cycled through resistance (2016–2020), containment (2020–2024), and again resistance (2025–). Within the limits of this article, it is impossible to engage in a full theorization of the long-term dynamics of confrontations with illiberals. However, countries with stronger democratic traditions will only have an advantage in defeating illiberals in the long run if democrats activate and preserve (and if necessary rebuild) favorable legacies in successive short-term confrontations, and if illiberals do not significantly and durably damage said legacies during their stints in power—for example, by staffing courts and bureaucracies with loyalists, conquering independent media, or disabling civil society actors.

Studying Individual Countermeasures

The theoretical framework developed here links the likelihood of successfully confronting illiberals to the *range* of viable countermeasures in each scenario and at different times. Hence, testing the hypotheses generated by the framework requires systematic, cumulative knowledge of the individual countermeasures that comprise said range. However, as mentioned, comparative knowledge remains unsystematic and uneven.

First, a common conceptual vocabulary is necessary. [Table 2](#) offers a (necessarily incomplete, but logically exclusive and exhaustive) classification of the most typical short-term countermeasures by actor type and scenario.³⁰ Actors can be institutional (government, legislative majorities, individual MPs, bureaucracies, judiciary), political (parties, associations, unions), and civil society organizations.³¹ Countermeasures fall into three categories: *formal*, which are based on formal rules—legislation, administrative decisions, and judicial rulings; *informal*, which consist of actions not explicitly grounded in formal rules and not prohibited by them—various forms of exclusion, discrimination, and obstruction; and *mobilizational*, consisting of the activation of a repertoire of contentious politics strategies.

Table 2. Short-Term Countermeasures Against Illiberalism.

Measures	Actor	Prevention	Containment	Resistance
Formal	Executive, bureaucracy, parliamentary majority	Legal and administrative restrictions; parliamentary sanctions.	State of emergency; “preventive legalization”.	Legislation (in presidential systems if the executive does not control the parliamentary majority). Subnational government and bureaucracy.
	Judiciary	Prosecution and adjudication of legal restrictions.	Prosecution and adjudication formally possible but likely contested.	Constitutional review of legislation; non-application of laws in ordinary litigation
Informal	Executive/parliamentary majority	Pro-democratic “constitutional hardball”.		Possible if the executive does not control the parliamentary majority; impossible otherwise.
	Parties	Gatekeeping; Cordon sanitaire (national and subnational).		Filibustering
	Civil Society organizations	Gatekeeping		
Mobilizational	Parties	Pursuit of entrenchment in civil society.	Calls to participation; intensified competition (national profile) in local and by-elections; strategic campaigning on regime vs. substantive issues; anti-illiberal rhetorical strategies.	
	Civil Society organizations	Support for legal prosecution	Appeals by civil society leaders.	Grassroots’ pressure on MPs; litigation; civil resistance.
		Street protest, boycotts; electoral mobilization.		

The typology in [Table 2](#) serves several purposes. First, it helps identify countermeasures that comparative politics has largely overlooked. For example, among formal measures, legal scholarship points to “preventive legalization,” possible in containment scenarios: the formalization of informal constitutional practices to preempt quiet violations by a future illiberal executive and force overt law-breaking or legal change, which increases the likelihood of resistance ([Bauer & Goldsmith, 2020](#)). Full-blown states of emergency—a last-resort response to the breakdown of public order ([Ferejohn & Pasquino, 2004](#))—also remain a blind spot for comparativists. Among informal measures, a major lacuna is “constitutional hardball”—the asymmetric stretching of constitutional conventions to advantage one side—which has been studied mainly when practiced by illiberals ([Fishkin & Pozen, 2018](#); [Helmke et al., 2022](#); [Košar & Šipulová, 2020](#); [Tushnet, 2004](#); see also [Kidd, 2025](#)) but that can be decisive for democrats as well ([Bateman, 2022](#)). Still among informal measures, party gatekeeping has rarely been analyzed within the broader repertoire of responses to illiberalism (but see [Capoccia, 2005](#), pp. 172–174; [Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018](#)).

Furthermore, the typology foregrounds the importance of studying *synergies* between countermeasures: pro-democratic actors typically deploy multiple tools to counter illiberals in each scenario, compounding their effects. Recent work on resistance has begun to analyze synergies between contentious politics and parliamentary initiatives, litigation (Gamboa, 2023), and electoral mobilization (Skocpol et al., 2022), but attention to synergies in prevention and containment scenarios has typically been scarce (an exception is Ellinas & Lamprianou, 2024). Finally, adding to the discussion above of how the range of viable strategies changes within prevention and resistance scenarios as illiberals grow stronger, Table 2 offers a synoptic view of how this portfolio shifts *across* scenarios. Formal countermeasures shrink markedly from prevention to containment: a strong illiberal opposition on the brink of power renders many legal tools *de facto* unenforceable. In containment, even prosecutions of illiberal politicians for non-political crimes will likely be perceived as politically motivated by a significant share of the electorate (e.g., Rekker & van Spanje, 2022).³² In resistance scenarios, liberal forces are in opposition; hence, formal options are largely confined to the weaker tools available to courts and subnational institutions (e.g., Gamboa et al., 2024; Stokes, 2025, pp. 199–200).³³ Judicial disapplication of legislation typically triggers backlash (Staton et al., 2022), although peak courts can sometimes buy time by mobilizing domestic (Gerzso, 2023; Laebens & Lührmann, 2021) and international (Scheppele, 2014) support networks. Subnational governments and bureaucracies may refuse to implement illiberal laws or support autocratizing executives (Hasen, 2022; Nou, 2019), with actions that may often be merely symbolic, but that may also lead to protest or litigation, and in rare cases even be decisive—as happened with the resistance of election administrators in the face of the efforts to overturn the 2020 U.S. election (Nou, 2021).³⁴ Informal countermeasures, being less publicly visible than formal ones, may be easier to adopt—even at odds with prior constitutional practice—in scenarios of prevention and containment than of resistance, though even in the former scenarios they are more likely to be publicly contested the stronger illiberal forces are. Mobilization against illiberals remains broadly possible across all three scenarios. However, some tactics, such as counter-demonstrations, may pose greater public-order risks in containment than in prevention, given the larger size of the illiberals in the former scenario. In resistance scenarios, the executive may curtail legal avenues for protest, making mobilization more difficult.

Research Agenda and Contributions to the Special Issue

The propositions developed above guide empirical research on the conditions under which illiberalism can be successfully countered in liberal democracies. While building a systematic comparative-historical analysis of

countermeasures and synergies is crucial to model the range of those available in different situations, research on the temporal paradox model itself should proceed in three main directions.

First, *information dynamics*: empirical work should test—and theory should refine—hypotheses about the effects of information on confrontations with illiberals in prevention and resistance scenarios. Priorities include the analysis of the ambiguity of the political communication of emerging illiberal challenges, the conditions under which different types of exogenous information are effective in triggering coordination and mobilization against illiberals, and the impact of both endogenous and exogenous information on the power dynamics within and between pro-democratic actors that facilitate or hinder coordination. Much remains to be done in this respect. For example, the ambiguity of newly emerging illiberal challenges is currently studied more in the context of resistance scenarios than in prevention, where the double discourse of emerging challengers and its political implications have not yet been systematically explored. Furthermore, not every journalistic revelation about the “backstage” of illiberal actors suffices per se to trigger action against illiberals—nor does the mere presence of plausible international comparators. The conditions under which these sources of exogenous information can spur action against illiberals require further investigation.

The second line of inquiry regards *institutional legacies*. As mentioned, not all countermeasures that are viable in principle in a given scenario will be historically available in every case. Why do some democratic actors inherit a situation in which formal, informal, and mobilizational countermeasures can be readily deployed against a new illiberal challenge, while others do not? Under what conditions can democrats overcome the disadvantage of unfavorable legacies and fight illiberals effectively? Given the heterogeneous nature of the different types of countermeasures, explaining the variation in institutional legacies across space and time requires theoretical and methodological pluralism, spanning constitutional history, the study of social and political development, and institutional analysis.

Finally, the *long-term dynamics* of confronting illiberals should be systematically analyzed. Scholars have begun to study the consequences of cycling through scenarios, focusing on the prospects for democratic reconstruction after backsliding, and often reaching sobering conclusions given the normative and practical obstacles that democrats encounter in performing this task (e.g., [Bianchi et al., 2025](#); [Bill & Stanley, 2025a, 2025b](#); [Bobek et al., 2023](#)). More broadly, extending the framework to theorize long-run processes means analyzing how earlier scenarios affect the confrontation with illiberals in later ones against the background of long-run geopolitical and economic dynamics and slow-moving cultural processes such as the normalization of illiberal ideas ([Valentim, 2024](#); [Valentim et al., 2025](#)).

The articles in this special issue advance this wide-ranging agenda by analyzing the design and effects of hitherto unexplored individual countermeasures, as well as specific dynamics highlighted by the temporal paradox framework. In pathbreaking analyses, Mares, Bateman, and the collaboration between Cella, Cynar, Stokes, and Uribe bring the comparative politics toolkit to the study of countermeasures that have been neglected in the literature. In a structured-focused comparison of the French Third Republic and Weimar Germany, Mares examines how proximate and non-proximate parties shape the success of a “menu of strategies” against extremists seeking to erode parliamentary functionality (Mares, 2026). Bateman’s comparative-historical study of the post-Reconstruction United States, early twentieth-century United Kingdom, and the French Fourth Republic identifies the conditions under which different “constitutional hardball” measures used to deter short-term illiberal threats can safeguard liberal democracy in the long run (Bateman, 2026). By analyzing the rhetoric of former Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Cella, Cynar, Stokes, and Uribe highlight the importance of communicative strategies used to attack liberal democracy and the possible responses—often noted but rarely systematically analyzed (Cella et al., 2026; see also Stokes, 2025).

The remaining articles foreground elements of the temporal paradox. Laebens and Słarzyński’s analysis of the 2023 Polish elections shows how the “sense of urgency” generated by eight years of PiS-led democratic erosion shaped pro-democratic leaders’ threat perceptions and facilitated coordination among opposition forces, which proved crucial in defeating the incumbents. They also document the strategic intertwining of issue-based and pro-democracy messages in democratic parties’ campaigns (Laebens & Słarzyński, 2026). Jakli, Greskovits, and Wittenberg analyze unfavorable legacies in Hungary during the early Orbán years, showing that the center-left lacked the mobilizational infrastructure that would have made early resistance to backsliding more effective (Jakli et al., 2026). Lieberman and Schlozman offer a historical-institutional analysis of the U.S. Republican Party through the lens of ethnic politics. Their long-run reconstruction of the party’s progressive “ethnification” as the vehicle of a declining white majority explains the rising receptivity to radicalized racial attitudes and candidates, culminating in the illiberalism of the Trump presidencies (Lieberman & Schlozman, 2026). Finally, Valentim examines the normalization of illiberal views. Focusing on Switzerland, he shows that when referendum results reveal unexpectedly high support for illiberal positions, far-right parties tend to radicalize, and citizens become more willing to express illiberal views openly. These punctuated events facilitate long-run normalization, implying that any attempt to counter it must target private beliefs rather than their (possibly falsified) public expressions (Valentim, 2026).

Conclusion

Research on countering illiberalism in liberal democracies is not a search for a silver bullet. At the same time, the elusiveness of panacean solutions does not render any analysis futile. Systematic, cumulative knowledge is needed to map the full catalogue of countermeasures across scenarios, to enable scholars to research the conditions that facilitate success when defenders of liberal democracy—bound by its rules and norms—confront adversaries who exploit those very rules and norms to dismantle them.

This article develops the theoretical foundations of a research agenda on how pro-democratic forces can successfully confront illiberals, particularly in the short term—a problem whose urgency outmatches current knowledge. Short-term responses are essential to preserve liberal democracy long enough for democratic parties to rebuild consensus and longer-term policies to take effect. The adoption of countermeasures in scenarios of *resistance* and *prevention* is subject to a *temporal paradox* at the core of the politics of confronting newly emerging illiberal challenges. Delaying intervention to reduce public uncertainty about illiberals' intentions typically narrows the available repertoire of countermeasures and synergies, thus reducing the chances of success. Intervening early maximizes the range of available countermeasures, but diffuse uncertainty regarding the regime threat makes coordination harder and risks alienating less aligned voters. Two exogenous factors affect the chances of democrats successfully navigating this tradeoff. *Exogenous information* can facilitate early intervention by providing publicly usable evidence that helps rally sufficient support when a wider set of countermeasures remains viable, thus favoring success. *Institutional legacies* influence the timing of intervention by making tools available for timely action. Where relevant legacies are present, prompt action is possible; where they are absent, the political capital required to summon an effective response delays intervention and lowers the probability of success.

In *containment* scenarios—when illiberals stand on the brink of power—defenders of liberal democracy are drawn into a war of attrition. The stakes of each national election exceed those of normal alternation in power and entail the risk of executive capture by illiberals who may then erode accountability and manipulate electoral rules to entrench themselves in power. Containment is necessarily part of a long-run *sequence of scenarios*; future research should pay attention to how prior episodes of confrontation affect later ones and how social, economic, and geopolitical conditions influence each scenario in the sequence. Building cumulative knowledge of countermeasures, tracing the dynamics and effects of endogenous and exogenous information, and identifying the sources of variation in institutional legacies across time and space constitute important frontiers for theoretical refinement and empirical research.

In summary, comparative politics has substantial work ahead to fully understand how liberal democracy can effectively face illiberal challenges. The task is important for advancing our knowledge of liberal democracy and its vulnerabilities, as well as for providing practical guidance to those seeking to preserve it. The alternative is described by Hans Kelsen in a rather fatalistic article (misleadingly titled “Defense of democracy”) that he wrote on the eve of the Weimar catastrophe: democracy will sink under our eyes like a wrecked ship, and all we can do is keep its memory alive so that future generations may return to it (Kelsen, 1932). Hardly an acceptable prospect.

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Data Availability Statement

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Notes

1. I define the rule of law as the set of mutually sustaining normative, institutional, and behavioral patterns whereby judges, officeholders, legislators, and constituents are committed to the protection of individual rights and are accountable to legal statutes (Ermakoff, 2020, pp. 166, 176, citing Kelsen, 1967).

2. Some classifications distinguish between “liberal democracies,” where horizontal accountability institutions impose limits on the executive’s action, and “electoral democracies,” where they are ineffective or absent (e.g., Lührmann et al., 2018). I consider as liberal democracies any regimes in which these institutions provide *at least a minimal check* on the executive and may therefore be targeted by an autocratizing incumbent. On the less effective (but present) impact of horizontal accountability institutions in less-than-fully institutionalized (“delegative”) democracies, see O’Donnell (1994, p. 61). For a similar use of “liberal democracy” across different levels of institutionalization of horizontal accountability institutions, see e.g. Staton et al. (2022) and Baldwin (2023).
3. An additional defining characteristic often mentioned in earlier debates is the absence of unelected (e.g., military or religious) authorities that dominate elected bodies (Collier & Levitsky, 1997).
4. The literature agrees that a marked unevenness of the electoral field differentiates competitive authoritarianism from liberal democracy (where incumbents also enjoy a limited advantage; e.g., Bartolini, 1999, 2000), but attempts at operationalization have been rare. A discussion of operationalization strategies is beyond the scope of this article.
5. Consider an illiberal party serving as a junior partner in a coalition with a mainstream party. If the mainstream party aims to preserve liberal democracy, it will have entered the coalition to prevent the illiberals’ further growth. If, instead, the reason for the coalition is that the mainstream party has radicalized, the logic would be one of resistance (by the opposition).
6. This applies, among others, to post-2010 Hungary, Poland between 2015 and 2023, Israel after December 2022, and the US during Trump’s first term. The US Republicans started radicalizing before 2016 (e.g., Skocpol & Williamson, 2012), but Trump’s illiberal first presidency, culminating in the January 2021 assault on the Capitol, marked a qualitative difference vis-à-vis previous developments.
7. The model has no teleological implications. The “earlyness” or “lateness” of democratic responses refers to the development of illiberals’ activities and influence, not to the mere passing of time.
8. A and B are drawn as straight lines for simplicity. The strength of illiberals and the range of viable countermeasures may follow nonlinear patterns, but they will be in a tradeoff. Setting I^* at the notional level that would trigger action against illiberals in *any* liberal democracy, I^* is determined by A’s slope (the speed at which information reaches the threshold), while B’s slope (the speed at which the stock of viable countermeasures decreases) determines cm^* . Exogenous variables, such as a country’s historical experiences with extremism and authoritarianism, influence A’s and B’s slopes.
9. In some countries, incumbents took illegal (e.g., arrests of opponents, closure of media outlets, removal from office of opposition MPs and Constitutional Court justices) as well as extralegal actions (such as calling a referendum *ultra vires* to establish a new Constituent Assembly). Overall, these have been exceptions rather than the rule.

10. Legitimacy and undetectability also have an international dimension. For example, taken individually, backsliding reforms typically elude checklists of good governance criteria set by international organizations (Scheppelle, 2013, 2014; Varol, 2015, pp. 1678–1680, 1694–1699, 1716–1718).
11. I refer to parties for simplicity, but the same argument applies to other collective actors, such as unions or civil society organizations, which may be crucial in resisting backsliding. In two-party systems, the same reasoning can be applied to the factions within the pro-democratic opposition party.
12. Hierarchically organized parties, where leaders enjoy a wider scope for maneuver (Schumacher et al., 2013), do not escape this logic, provided—as is normally the case—that their organization includes accountability mechanisms that internal opponents can use (Bräuninger & Giger, 2018, p. 529).
13. Near-identical “wait-and-see” reactions by democratic leaders can be observed in the aftermath of many authoritarian takeovers, ranging from Hitler’s (e.g., Ullrich, 2025) to Trump’s (e.g., Gessen, 2020).
14. Coordination does not necessarily imply the building of a formal coalition. The “menu of coordination” includes informal options such as assisting candidate nominations, promoting strategic voting, and running coordinated campaigns. A country’s institutional environment shapes the set of viable options for coordination, and pro-democratic parties usually select those that minimize their symbolic costs (e.g., Selcuk & Hekimci, 2020).
15. The delay in the formation of large opposition fronts to resist backsliding is well documented in several countries (e.g., Selcuk & Hekimci, 2020; Enyedi & Mikola, 2024; Corrales & Kronick, 2025).
16. The coordination of opposition actors and the choice of campaign strategies are analytically distinct. An opposition may decide to coordinate to have more chances to unseat an illiberal incumbent and opt for a campaign strategy in which policy-based messages predominate (e.g. Laebens & Slarzynski, 2026).
17. Broader and more heterogeneous coalitions are vulnerable to government-driven wedge issues (e.g., Scheppelle, 2022). Exogenous factors such as international or domestic crises may offer opportunities to democrats to unseat the government at later stages of the backsliding process (Laebens & Lührmann, 2021).
18. Fringe extremist actors may not conceal their views, but they do not pose a serious threat to democracy unless they resort to violence. Hence, the temporal paradox does not apply.
19. In any case, should radical right parties erode liberal democracy once in power, their voters are likely to support them. European electorates overall disfavor autocratic candidates, but radical right voters (as well as abstentionists, a constituency to which many such parties appeal) are the *least* inclined among all electors to punish candidates who curb checks and balances or civil liberties but support their preferred policies (Svolik et al., 2023).

20. Meguid shows how, in some circumstances, center-left parties may adopt campaign strategies that enhance the political visibility of the extreme right to subtract votes from the moderate right, and vice versa (Meguid, 2005).
21. The argument is obviously probabilistic. Failure to coordinate despite sufficient information on the threat is possible, typically with lethal consequences for democratic survival (Capoccia, 2001, 2005).
22. In the Belgian case, Van Zeeland's campaign centered on defending democracy from the fascist threat (Ermakoff, 2023).
23. Diffusion is the process by which decision-making in autonomous jurisdictional units is systematically influenced by dynamics and events taking place in other jurisdictional units. Learning—the alteration of information about the potential consequences of adopting the policies, practices, or institutions of a different unit—is one mechanism of diffusion (e.g., Simmons et al., 2006).
24. The literature refers to this process as “negative learning.” Recipients of diffusion not only adopt best practices (“positive learning”) but also reject practices and models that have failed (e.g., Goldring & Chestnuts Greitens, 2020; Houle et al., 2016, p. 694; Simmons & Elkins, 2005, p. 37).
25. Note that the information in question may, in principle, be factually incorrect—what matters is whether it is credible for the democratic base and the relevant parts of the public.
26. As well-established in the diffusion literature, foreign models diffuse only to countries where actors view them as plausible comparators based on cultural, historical, and developmental commonalities (e.g., Simmons & Elkins, 2004, p. 175).
27. Diffusion also occurs among illiberals, who may learn—and receive assistance—from foreign counterparts (e.g., Diamond et al., 2016; Scheppele, 2018, pp. 550–552).
28. For example, in Israel, the support of reservists, lawyers, academics, and other groups was crucial in stalling Netanyahu's reforms.
29. When a party displays illiberal inclinations only *after* reaching executive power, its prior period in opposition cannot be considered a case of containment. The theoretical framework presented here is predicated on a “reading history forward” approach (Capoccia & Ziblatt, 2010).
30. Table 2 lists the countermeasures that are in principle viable at the start of each scenario.
31. Scholars have emphasized the importance of individual citizens (e.g. Snyder, 2022) and voters (e.g. Graham & Svolic, 2020) to resist backsliding. Citizens and voters are crucial for defeating illiberalism more generally—any anti-illiberal measures would need to gain at least their tacit consensus—but they are typically mobilized by the actors listed in Table 2 (e.g., Wutke & Foos, 2024). Voting behavior research remains indispensable for clarifying which sectors of the electorate (if any) are likely to be persuaded by pro-democratic messages (e.g. Svolic, 2023; Voelkel et al., 2025).
32. For example, in the United States, Trump's prosecutions while out of office did not significantly affect his poll numbers (Markovits & O'Donohue, 2025).

33. In presidential systems, the legislature can resort to formal measures if the liberals only control the executive.
34. Many scholars underscore the importance of an impartial bureaucracy for election administration in liberal democracies (e.g., [Huq & Ginsburg, 2018](#), p. 86; [Jacobs & Choate, 2022](#); [Nou, 2013](#)).

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