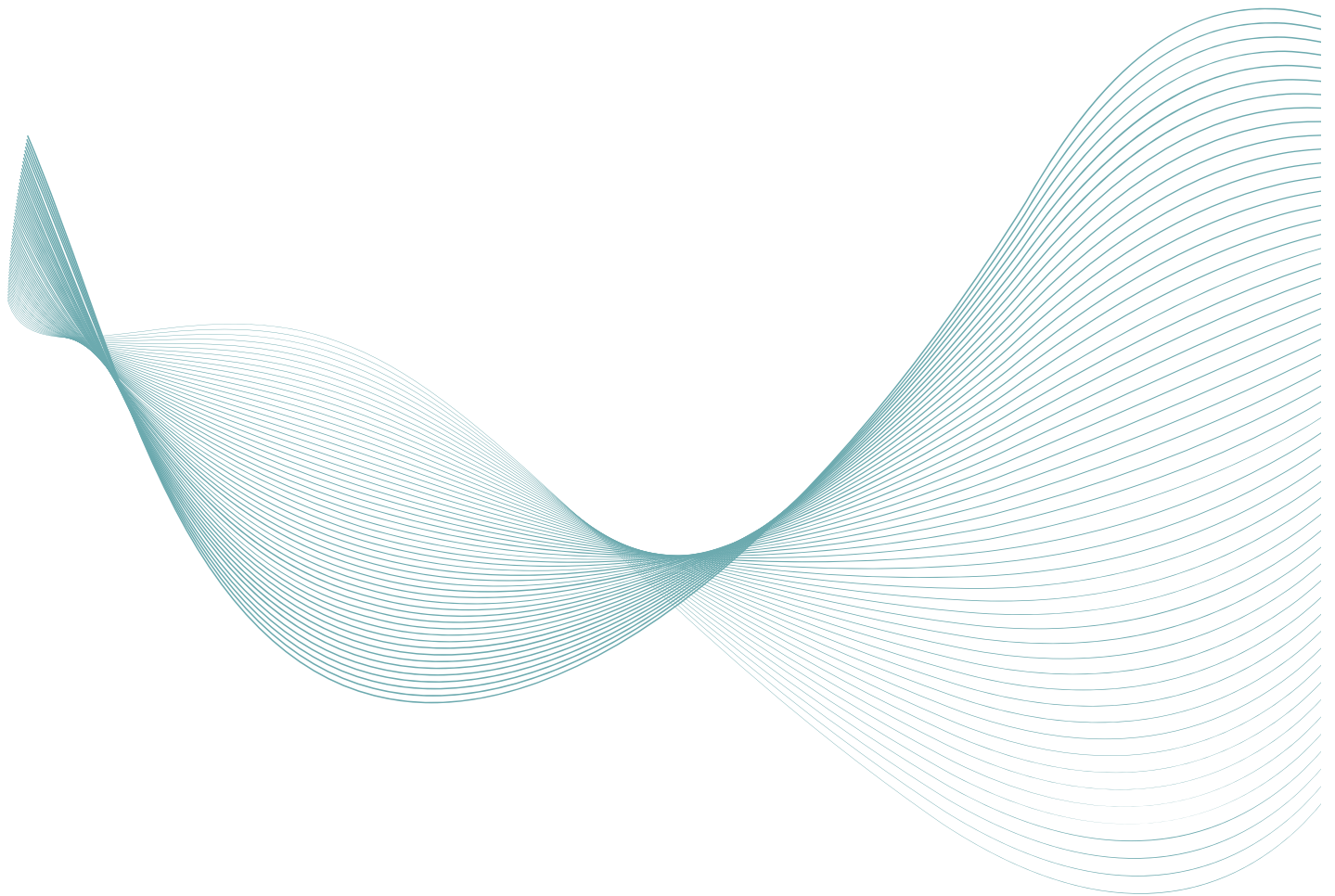

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Book Symposium: *Resisting Backsliding: Opposition Strategies Against the Erosion of Democracy*, by Laura Gamboa

By Laura Gamboa. Cambridge University Press, 2022. 320p. Paperback.

Review by Rachel Beatty Riedl, Cornell University



Laura Gamboa's *Resisting Backsliding* marks a critical and refreshing turn in the study of democratic erosion. In a literature often dominated by analyses of how autocrats dismantle democracy, Gamboa shifts attention to the other side of the equation: how opposition actors resist and sometimes prevent such erosion. The result is a theoretically rich, empirically grounded, and intellectually

invigorating contribution that reshapes how we think about democratic resilience.

Rather than focusing solely on autocrats' strategies, Gamboa asks why some elected leaders succeed in eroding democracy while others fail. Her central argument unfolds in two stages: first, why voters elect potential autocrats; and second, how opposition forces respond once these figures take power. The book's innovation lies in the second question—what resources and repertoires oppositions wield, and how they deploy them to sustain democracy under threat.

Gamboa demonstrates that the endurance of democracy depends not only on institutional design or structural conditions but also on the agency and strategic choices of opposition actors. She distinguishes between institutional and extra-institutional strategies and shows that when opposition groups stay within democratic and legitimate channels—such as elections, legislatures, and courts—they are better able to sustain both domestic and international legitimacy. Such moderation, she argues, can shield democratic institutions from erosion and limit the incumbent's ability to consolidate autocracy.

A major theoretical contribution is Gamboa's emphasis on *time*. Both democratic erosion and democratic resistance are gradual processes. Gamboa's opposition actors adopt what might be called a "slow fight" approach: maintaining footholds, avoiding premature

confrontations, and “living to fight another day.” By resisting the temptation of short-term victories that could provoke harsher repression, they instead pursue incremental efforts that cumulatively constrain autocrats’ room to maneuver. This temporal perspective is key to her understanding of how democracies endure amid sustained pressures.

While Gamboa analytically separates the stages of an autocrat’s election and subsequent backsliding, one could imagine extending her logic backward in time: what strategies might pro-democracy forces adopt *before* an autocrat is elected? Can opposition actors identify and preempt non-democratic contenders early enough to avert democratic decline altogether? Is it possible to form effective blocks to authoritarian actors, and would this work for or against democratic practice and representation? These counterfactual questions push Gamboa’s framework toward a broader research agenda on preventive democratic resilience that remain to be explored.

Gamboa situates her argument within a comparative framework of weakly institutionalized party systems, fragile states, and struggling economies—the very conditions under which elected autocrats often emerge. Yet she argues that these structural factors alone cannot explain why some autocrats succeed while others do not. The answer lies in opposition behavior. Still, one might ask how these structural conditions interact with opposition choices. The interplay among state weakness, party fragmentation, and opposition strategy remains fertile ground for future research.

Gamboa conceptualizes regime outcomes dichotomously: either democracy survives, or it collapses into competitive authoritarianism. This clarity has analytic advantages, but it also raises measurement challenges. Opposition “success” might be better seen as a continuum. Even in competitive authoritarian regimes such as Hungary and Turkey, opposition parties and civil society leaders have at times constrained incumbents and maintained pockets of contestation. Conversely, in democracies that avoid full collapse, the quality of participation and rights may still erode. Recognizing these gradations could enrich our understanding of how opposition efforts shape the *degree* rather than the *existence* of democratic resilience.

Gamboa’s treatment of extra-institutional repertoires—coups, boycotts, protests, and strikes—invites careful reflection. While she groups these as radical efforts to unseat incumbents prematurely, not all are equally destabilizing. Protests, for example, can reinforce institutional channels of democratic accountability rather than undermine them. In Malawi, mass mobilization against electoral manipulation bolstered judicial legitimacy and helped restore democratic competition. The challenge, as Gamboa acknowledges,

is empirical: distinguishing between protests that defend institutions and those that abandon them.

At the same time, the assumption that moderation necessarily limits repression warrants scrutiny. Autocrats may still weaponize legality to punish even moderate opposition, as Fiona Shen-Bayh’s work on courts in Africa and recent developments in Senegal illustrate. Opposition strategies may shape the *legitimacy* of crackdowns more than their *likelihood*. And the interaction between extra-institutional and institutional domains can shape the room for maneuver and pressures that institutional actors contend with.

Finally, Gamboa recognizes that “the opposition” is never monolithic. Its internal cohesion—how well it coordinates across parties and disciplines its more radical wings—matters for success. Understanding how opposition unity evolves through interaction with autocratic incumbents—in relation to structural contextual factors and agential decisions about strategy and collaboration—remains another promising direction for future research.

Resisting Backsliding offers a powerful corrective to one-sided narratives of democratic decay. By illuminating the opposition’s strategic toolkit—its resources, calculations, and long game—Gamboa opens a new frontier in the study of democratic resilience. Her argument is both sobering and hopeful: democracy survives not because institutions are invincible, but because actors learn, adapt, and persist in defending them. Pro-democracy strategies matter, and we have a lot to continue to learn from this current moment of democratic struggle.

Review by Raul Madrid, University of Texas

Resisting Backsliding is an important and compelling study of why some leaders have been able to systematically undermine democracy. The book argues that the strategies and goals of the opposition help determine whether democratic backsliding takes place. It explores these arguments through quantitative analyses as well as in-depth case studies of Colombia, Venezuela, Bolivia, Turkey, Poland, and Hungary.

As Gamboa notes, the political opposition may employ institutional strategies, seeking to defeat or hinder the executive through elections, the legislature, and the courts. Or they may choose to work outside of existing institutions by boycotting elections, promoting coups, and carrying out aggressive strikes and protests. Similarly, the political opposition may embrace moderate goals, such as seeking to block undemocratic reforms, or they may pursue more radical goals, such as aiming to get rid of executives before the end of their terms.

Resisting Backsliding makes the case that when the opposition uses extra-institutional strategies with radical goals, authoritarian leaders are likely to respond by prosecuting, jailing, and exiling opposition leaders, which tends to weaken the opposition's ability to resist democratic backsliding. By contrast, when opposition leaders opt for institutional strategies with moderate goals, they deprive authoritarian leaders of excuses to crack down on the opposition, which enables opposition leaders to continue to resist anti-democratic measures. Finally, when the opposition opts for either moderate extra-institutional strategies (e.g., using protests to try to block anti-democratic measures) or radical institutional strategies (e.g., seeking to impeach the executive), they may gain some short-term victories, but they often encourage repression in the long term.

Gamboa's arguments are important in part because they provide support for democracy promotion efforts, which have been under attack. Democracy is not doomed in poor countries or in the wrong regional neighborhoods, she suggests. The right strategies might just save, deepen, or even help establish democracy.

Her arguments also have significant implications for theories of democracy, because she shifts the focus away from structural factors—such as levels of development or inequality, political institutions, and geography—that have long dominated the democratization literature. *Resisting Backsliding* does not ignore structural factors. To the contrary, the quantitative analyses in Chapter 3 show that some structural factors, such as state capacity and party system institutionalization, are negatively correlated with the election of authoritarian-minded leaders. But these same variables are not correlated with the actual deterioration of democracy. Structural factors may give rise to authoritarian leaders, but they do not determine whether such leaders succeed.

Resisting Backsliding instead focuses on actors and agency, and it identifies opposition parties as key actors in the struggle for democracy. I am sympathetic to this argument since I have argued that opposition parties played a key role in the first wave of democratization in Latin America (Madrid 2025). Opposition parties have obvious incentives to promote democratization, and they sometimes have the capacity to achieve their aims.

The key, of course, is to determine under what circumstances opposition parties will succeed. *Resisting Backsliding* argues that opposition strategies make all the difference, but that begs the question of what determines these strategies. Are opposition strategies shaped by structural factors? Are the strategies endogenous to regime type?

It seems likely that structural factors, regime policies, and opposition strategies interact in complex ways.

First, opposition groups may be more likely to opt for moderate and institutional strategies in countries that have structural conditions that are propitious for democracy. For example, strong civil societies, educated populations, and linkages to the West may make it difficult for authoritarian regimes to repress opposition groups that contest elections or adopt other institutional strategies. By contrast, in less developed countries with fewer linkages to the West, institutional strategies may be shut down more easily.

Second, democratization is a multi-player game in which regime leaders will anticipate and respond to opposition strategies with actions designed to neutralize their effectiveness. Authoritarians can strategically deploy repression to foreclose institutional strategies and push opposition groups to adopt more radical approaches, which in turn serves to justify further repression.

Neither of these caveats take away from the book's significance. By highlighting the importance of opposition strategies and specifying what sorts of strategies are likely to be successful, *Resisting Backsliding* has laid out a valuable agenda for future research on democratic backsliding. It is up to all of us to build on this strong foundation.

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Review by Giovanni Capoccia, University of Oxford

Laura Gamboa's *Resisting Backsliding* has the merit of shifting the debate toward what until recently was the hidden face of democratic crises, namely the role of democrats themselves. Earlier analyses of backsliding focused on autocrats, their coalitions, or the structural conditions that enabled them. Yet no theorization of backsliding—or of democratic breakdown more generally—is complete without taking seriously the agency of pro-democracy forces and their role in shaping outcomes. Could democrats have blocked erosion or a full-blown crisis? If so, why did they fail to act? Were there moments when the process could have been reversed? Why were those openings not exploited? These questions are now central as liberal democracies around the world face sustained illiberal challenges.

Theorizing democratic agency is difficult, and much of our methodological toolkit is ill-suited to it. Still, it is essential—and Gamboa's book contributes to the task. The book also explores other dimensions of backsliding, but its main takeaway is that opposition strategies that

directly attack the legitimacy of an illiberal executive tend to be less effective than strategies that target specific policies and initiatives. Equally important, her comparative analysis highlights the synergies that can be forged among pro-democracy actors—opposition legislators, civil society organizations, courts—to resist backsliding. Other scholars can build on these insights in analyses of resistance against illiberal executives. Developing and deepening the analysis of counterstrategies against illiberalism, as well as establishing a shared conceptual vocabulary to generate cumulative knowledge, should be high on the research agenda.

In contributing to this symposium, I draw attention to an underexplored dimension of the process of resisting backsliding and countering illiberalism, namely its temporalities. Pro-democracy forces do not only confront illiberals when the latter occupy executive office—this is the scenario of resistance that is most commonly analyzed. In addition, they confront illiberals in the opposition, which typically affords democrats greater room to act and potentially better odds of success. As such, two further ideal-typical scenarios of confrontation with illiberals can be distinguished, each with a distinct logic (Capoccia 2024). First, before illiberals capture government, democrats must thwart their rise, limit their influence, and raise the political costs of holding extreme positions. This scenario is characterized by the logic of prevention. Second, when autocratizing executives are defeated at the ballot box, yet illiberal forces remain viable contenders, democrats must constrain them and prepare for trench warfare. This scenario is characterized by the logic of containment.

These three scenarios—prevention, containment and resistance—correspond to a range of strategies and synergies that democrats can adopt. The illiberal challenge is not going away, and democrats will be likely engaged in this confrontation for a long time. As countries cycle through different scenarios, our theories must make room to analyze the order of these changes and the strategic adaptations they require.

Such an analysis of temporality goes beyond merely differentiating between scenarios. It also requires analyzing the trade-offs that democrats must navigate at different moments of their confrontation with illiberals. For example, as backsliding intensifies, pro-democracy actors may feel a greater urgency to coordinate and set aside long-standing differences. Yet that urgency often materializes just as the institutional space for action narrows: media capture constrains communication, legal changes hobble courts and electoral commissions, suffrage reforms favor incumbents, and harassment and restrictive legislation deter civil society mobilization. The result is a temporal dilemma: the stronger the incentive to cooperate, the smaller the opportunity set. Understanding the

strategic implications of this dilemma is essential. How does a heightened sense of urgency translate into actual coordination among opposition parties and civil society organizations? What mechanisms facilitate or hinder coalition-building under increasing repression? What roles do uncertainty and information play? What campaign strategies are most likely to be effective? And how do these questions apply to scenarios of prevention and containment?

A forthcoming volume (Capoccia 2024; Capoccia & Mares, forthcoming) tackles these issues by developing a framework for the temporal dynamics of countering illiberalism and a common vocabulary for the analysis of strategies and synergies typical of each scenario. Advancing this research agenda should be a priority for comparative politics in the coming years. On this path, Gamboa's book will remain a point of reference.

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Response from Laura Gamboa, University of Notre Dame

I am deeply grateful and honored for the generous and thought-provoking reviews written by Giovanni Capoccia, Rachel Beatty Riedl, and Raul Madrid. The questions and comments they pose are key to advancing our understanding of democratic resilience. Given space constraints, my response will focus on three topics: the sources of opposition strategies, the dynamic nature of democratic backsliding, and the timeline of autocratizing episodes.

All of the respondents highlight the need to explore the sources of opposition strategies. Human agency, Madrid and Riedl note, interacts with structural, institutional, and international factors such as state capacity, party system institutionalization, civil society strength, and linkages to the West. What strategies oppositions choose and whether these succeed will likely depend on contextual opportunities and resources. And indeed, agency is shaped by both domestic and international variables; the question, of course, is how and to what extent. While resources and opportunities do create incentives to use institutional or extra-institutional strategies and/or to aim for radical or moderate goals, they do not overdetermine these preferences. We have

seen oppositions use electoral strategies in closed authoritarian regimes (e.g., Venezuela 2024) and non-institutional strategies in backsliding democracies where the opposition had a legislative majority (e.g., Bolivia 2008).

As scholars we are often pre-disposed to assume that these structural and institutional variables have specific effects on the opposition's strategic choices. We suppose that oppositions in countries with more institutionalized party systems, stronger civil societies, and closer linkages to the West are more likely to resort to moderate institutional strategies—compared to oppositions in countries with inchoate party systems, weaker civil societies, and looser linkages to the West. Yet one wonders to what extent these intuitions are true in contexts of democratic erosion. Less institutionalized party systems, for example, can facilitate incumbent defections—especially in deeply polarized contexts (Gamboa 2020)—or create cracks in authoritarian coalitions (Meléndez-Sánchez & Perelló 2025) that facilitate congressional obstruction or electoral victories. Likewise, well-organized civil society organizations (CSOs) can engage with or support institutional strategies (e.g., the ACLU in the US). Others, however, might use their strength to thwart attempts to leverage institutional strategies (e.g., Venezuela between 2002-03).

Turning away from the more slow-moving structural and institutional conditions, Capoccia highlights the importance of temporality in shaping opposition tactical choices. In his view, oppositions are shaped by the dynamic scenarios they encounter during long processes of autocratization. The incentives and opportunities they face change over time, shaping the back and forth of democratic erosion. By focusing too much on the opposition, my book, ironically, ends up downplaying the executive and the tactics it uses to neutralize opposition actions. Repression, in particular, might enhance oppositions' incentives to cooperate, even while making it harder to do so. In my new book with Rachel Schwartz (forthcoming), we propose an analytic framework that better captures this process. Our findings challenge some of the assumptions we have made about autocrat-opposition interactions. We uncover, for example, that increased repression and more overt attacks on democracy can foster vertical cooperation (parties-CSOs) in weakly institutionalized party systems, but only in conditions of experienced and well-organized CSOs (consider Guatemala vs. Perú).

Riedl and Capoccia also question how we think about the success and failure of autocratizing episodes. Oppositions, Capoccia posits, not only confront would-be autocrats after they have attained office, but they can also help prevent illiberal leaders from coming to power in the first place and can contain them after electoral defeat. As Riedl suggests, it is essential to think about opposition “successes” as a continuum. These points

are well taken. My book is silent about opposition tactics before autocrats come to power as well as past regime breakdowns. This choice was a deliberate one, as I focus on the period between the democratic election of an autocrat and the survival or breakdown of democracy. I sought not only to fill in what I thought was an important gap but also to circumscribe the scope of my argument. For example, the connection between moderation and limited repression is, as Riedl suggests, bound to be weaker in authoritarian contexts rather than democratic ones.

The book's narrow temporal focus is also a consequence of the cases it explores. Reading Capoccia's comments, for example, I wondered how *prevention* and (to a lesser extent) *containment* might work differently in parliamentary and presidential systems. The scenarios he proposes and the different trade-offs they present are clearer in parliamentary systems where illiberalism is entirely partisan and unlikely to die after an electoral defeat. I wonder how we can think about similar stages for presidential systems where potential autocrats have been mostly outsiders competing on establishment/anti-establishment cleavages that other parties (united or not) struggle to campaign on (Handlin 2018). Neither Chávez nor Uribe would have been electorally defeated had the opposition presented a coordinated front. Coalition-building, which has been so important to defeat authoritarian parties in Europe, would have in fact proven detrimental to defeat these Latin American executives who have risen to power by indicting mainstream parties for “colluding against the people.”

As a whole, the reviews show the exciting state of this field. When I first conceived of this book, twelve years ago, democratic backsliding was thought of as unidirectional, timeless, and ultimately inevitable. The questions posed by the reviews suggest that this is no longer the case. Political scientists are producing new research to better theorize and understand processes of democratic backsliding as well as how to stop the forces of authoritarianism.

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