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Perspectives on Democratic Backsliding

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THE FORUM

The Forum: Global Challenges to Democracy? Perspectives on Democratic Backsliding

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There is a widespread perception that we are witnessing a period of democratic decline, manifesting itself in varieties of democratic backsliding such as the manipulation of elections, marginalization and repression of regime opponents and minorities, or more incremental executive aggrandizement. Yet others are more optimistic and have argued that democracy is in fact resilient, or that we are observing coinciding trends of democratic decline but also expansion. This forum highlights key issues in the debate on democracy's decline, which center on conceptual and measurement issues, agreement on the phenomenon but not its nature or severity, the importance of international factors, the emphasis we should put on political elites versus citizens, and the consequences of backsliding for global politics. Staffan I. Lindberg provides an empirical perspective on the scope and severity of democracy's decline, and argues that polarization and misinformation are important drivers for this current wave of autocratization. Susan D. Hyde highlights the detrimental consequences of reduced support for democracy by the international community, which has affected civil society organizations—important arbiters of democracy—especially

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severely. Challenging some of these conclusions, Irfan Nooruddin claims that any gains for democracy after the end of the Cold War were short-lived, failing to sustain democracy because of an overemphasis on elections and a disregard for structural factors. Finally, Larry M. Bartels argues that we need to look to political elites and not citizens if we want to protect democracy in the United States and elsewhere, which has important implications for how we study democracy and its challenges.

Existe la percepción generalizada de que estamos presenciando un período de declive democrático, que se manifiesta a través de diversos tipos de retroceso democrático, tales como la manipulación de elecciones, la marginación y represión tanto hacia los opositores a los regímenes como hacia las minorías, así como un mayor empoderamiento ejecutivo incremental. Sin embargo, hay personas que son más optimistas y que han argumentado que la democracia es, de hecho, resistente, y que estamos pudiendo observar tendencias coincidentes que señalan hacia el declive democrático, pero también hacia la expansión democrática. Este foro destaca asuntos de gran importancia en el debate sobre el declive de la democracia, que se centra en cuestiones conceptuales y en el acuerdo acerca de este fenómeno, pero no en su naturaleza o en su gravedad, en la importancia de los factores internacionales, en el énfasis que debemos poner sobre las élites políticas frente a los ciudadanos, o en las consecuencias del retroceso para la política global. Staffan I. Lindberg proporciona una perspectiva empírica sobre el alcance y la gravedad del declive de la democracia, y argumenta que la polarización y la desinformación son factores importantes para esta actual ola de autocratización. Susan D. Hyde destaca las consecuencias perjudiciales de la reducción del apoyo a la democracia por parte de la comunidad internacional, que ha afectado de manera más grave a las organizaciones de la sociedad civil, importantes árbitros de la democracia. Irfan Nooruddin desafía algunas de estas conclusiones, ya que afirma que cualquier ganancia en favor de la democracia después del final de la Guerra Fría fue de corta duración e incapaz de sostener la democracia debido a un énfasis excesivo en las elecciones y a un desprecio por los factores estructurales. Por último, Larry M. Bartels argumenta que, si queremos proteger la democracia en los Estados Unidos y en otros lugares, debemos mirar hacia las élites políticas en lugar de hacia los ciudadanos, lo cual tiene implicaciones importantes para la forma en que estudiamos la democracia y sus desafíos.

Selon l'opinion générale, nous assisterions actuellement à une période de déclin démocratique, matérialisé par divers retours en arrière: manipulation des élections, marginalisation et répression des opposants au régime et des minorités, auto-glorification croissante de l'exécutif. Toutefois, d'autres se montrent plus optimistes en affirmant la résilience de la démocratie ou l'observation de tendances coincidentes de déclin et d'expansion démocratiques. Ce forum met en évidence les problématiques clés du débat sur le déclin de la démocratie, dont les problèmes conceptuels, l'accord sur le phénomène, et non sa nature ou sa gravité, l'importance des facteurs internationaux, l'accent qui devrait être mis sur l'opposition entre les élites politiques et les citoyens, et les conséquences d'un retour en arrière pour la politique mondiale. Staffan I. Lindberg propose une perspective empirique sur la portée et la gravité du déclin de la démocratie, avant d'affirmer que la polarisation et la désinformation constituent des facteurs importants de cette vague actuelle d'autocratisation. Susan D. Hyde souligne les conséquences néfastes de l'atténuation du soutien de la démocratie par la communauté internationale qui a eu une incidence particulièrement importante sur les organisations de la société civile, arbitres de démocratie notoires. Irfan Nooruddin remet en cause certaines de ces conclusions en affirmant que toutes les avancées pour la démocratie obtenues après la guerre froide ont été de courte durée et n'ont pas permis de la renforcer, à cause de l'importance excessive accordée aux élections et de l'ignorance des facteurs structurels. Enfin,

selon Larry M. Bartels, nous devons nous tourner vers les élites politiques, et non les citoyens, pour protéger la démocratie aux États-Unis et dans le reste du monde, ce qui entraîne d'importantes implications pour l'étude de la démocratie et de ses défis.

Keywords: democracy, democratic backsliding, international democracy promotion, autocratization

Palabras clave: democracia, declive democrático, promoción de la democracia, autocratización

Mots clés: démocratie, déclin démocratique, promotion de la démocratie, autocratisation

Global Challenges to Democracy—The Main Issues

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All is not well with democracy. Earlier this year, Russia invaded its democratic neighbor Ukraine, a decision taken by the same leader who initiated Russia's descent into authoritarianism in 2000. Democratic backsliding also affects long-established democracies such as the United States and India. Partisan pressure on the electoral process, problems in the judicial system, and harmful immigration and asylum policies have contributed to the United States just barely meeting the threshold of a liberal democracy in the most recent Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) democracy report (Boese et al. 2023). India has lost its status as a full democracy because of discriminatory policies and violence against minorities, especially Muslims, and the increasing harassment of journalists and NGOs; it is now considered "partly free" by Freedom House (2022) and an electoral autocracy by V-Dem (Boese et al. 2022a,b). These developments have taken place over several years and in many countries. More countries have moved away from democracy rather than toward it for several years (Freedom House 2022; Boese et al. 2022a). Declines are happening across regions, including in strategically important and large countries such as Brazil, Nigeria, and Turkey, and in countries where democracy was thought to be consolidated, such as Hungary and Poland. These trends coincide with declining international support for democracy promotion, plausibly further emboldening authoritarian leaders.

This article brings together four leading scholars from international relations and comparative politics to discuss and analyze global challenges to democracy. The contributions build on contributors' remarks at the roundtable "Global Challenges to Democracy" held at the International Studies Association annual meeting in 2022.¹ This introduction outlines some of the main issues in the debate on democracy's decline. I then summarize each of the four contributions.

Conceptual and Measurement Issues

Democracy is a complex concept. Scholars agree that democracy is multidimensional, but that implies that different dimensions do not necessarily move with each

¹The presidential team organized three roundtables at the 2022 convention. See Abou Chadi et al. (2022) on inclusion in IR and Davies et al. (2022) on crises and IR scholarship.

other (Coppedge et al. 2011; Coppedge et al. 2022a). There is consensus on the most important elements: electoral, liberal, majoritarian, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian democracy are the most common conceptualizations in the current literature (Coppedge et al. 2011, 253–4). But as Bartels notes in his contribution below, democratic theory gives us few tools for adjudicating the tradeoffs among these dimensions. Prioritizing political equality in theory and practice, as egalitarian conceptions of democracy propose, will lead to rather different conclusions about the state of democracy and how to protect it than a minimalist, electoral conception of democracy. In practice, policymakers and scholars alike have often privileged electoral dimensions of democracy over others, which also happen to be easy to measure (Flores and Nooruddin 2016; see also Bartels' and Nooruddin's essays). But we have observed the unintended consequences of such decisions—political elites are strategic actors that adapt to incentives, and they may therefore continue to hold elections while systematically undermining aspects of democracy that have received less international scrutiny, such as freedom of expression, freedom of association, or the protection of minorities (Ding and Slater 2021).²

Reflecting some of the disagreement about how we should conceive of democracy, recent scholarship on US politics is paying increasing attention to liberal democracy and the central role of the carceral state in limiting the civil rights and liberties of historically marginalized minorities (Soss and Weaver 2017; Grumbach 2022). Scholars of democracy are also highlighting the serious and uneven electoral consequences of seemingly mundane procedural issues such as wait times in various contexts, including Kenya and the United States (Pettigrew 2017; Harris 2021). These issues do not figure prominently in how electoral democracy is traditionally measured, which could result in high scores on electoral democracy measures yet poorly reflect voters' actual experiences.

Another complication in conceptualizing and measuring the decline of democracy is that national patterns can mask subnational variation, especially in federalist and decentralized states such as Argentina, Brazil, India, Mexico, or the United States (Giraudy, Moncada, and Snyder 2019; Harbers, Bartman, and van Wingerden 2019; Grumbach 2022). As Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018, 2) point out, the most consequential decline of democracy in the United States is happening in states, putting them at risk of “becoming laboratories of authoritarianism”, as they had been in the past (Mickey 2015). In India, on the other hand, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been in power at the national level since 2014, but ten of twenty-eight states are still controlled by non-BJP governments (Varshney 2022). Ignoring this variation could lead to quite erroneous conclusions about whether democratic backsliding is happening and at what level to address it. Disagreement on conceptual dimensions will make it challenging to design interventions for protecting democracy.

Agreement on the Phenomenon, but Not Its Severity or Nature

Political scientists have taken great interest in conceptualizing, measuring, and explaining these challenges to democracy (Bermeo 2016; Flores and Nooruddin 2016; Waldner and Lust 2018; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Diamond 2021; Haggard and Kaufman 2021). The terminology is still somewhat in flux—democratic backsliding, autocratization, or democratic recession seem to be the most prominent terms. Notably, compared to earlier waves of democratic breakdown, the current period more often takes the form of incremental decline from within rather than

²In her contribution to this forum, Hyde notes that no countries have stopped holding elections. She also argues that even if elections are held only to maintain a façade, they are still consequential for those citizens, and preferable to no elections. Nooruddin, on the other hand, is skeptical of the merits of such elections. More empirical research on citizens' perceptions of “low-quality” elections would be important for adjudicating this debate.

outright and rapid democratic collapse (Bermeo 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Waldner and Lust 2018; Diamond 2021).³

Most scholars of democracy, including in this article, agree that something is amiss. Data gathered across several projects measuring democracy have registered persistent and lasting declines (Boese et al. 2022a,b; Freedom House 2022). Country experts across the world, including Bartels in this article, have similarly raised alarm. Hyde's and Lindberg's contributions to this forum emphasize the seriousness of the global threat. Both suggest that reduced support for democracy by the international community leads autocrats to feel increasingly unencumbered in their behavior, with many dropping the "pseudo-democratic" mask (Hyde 2011b). In their essays, Hyde and Lindberg also note that declining support for democracy allows leaders to restrict aspects of democracy most crucial for its survival, such as the activities of civil society organizations. Nooruddin's contribution, in contrast, argues that the current period of democratic reversal results from faulty assumptions about the feasibility of building democracy abroad, and is a natural consequence of an overemphasis on national elections.⁴ In other words, he claims that a lot of what we label as backsliding today is an artifact of regimes that had been propped up by international democracy promoters. Hence, he remains deeply skeptical about their activities.

There are dissenting voices. Some scholars highlight democracy's resilience (e.g., Levitsky and Way 2015). Further, trends in some regions show that democracy is stagnating rather than declining, such as in Africa (Arriola et al. 2023) or Latin America (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2023). According to Arriola et al. (2023), democratic pressures persist in Africa, leading incumbents to adopt new tools that have hindered but not derailed pro-democracy actors. Yet others acknowledge that democracy's advance has slowed somewhat following the Third Wave, but argue that the rate of failure can be explained by lower levels of development and quality of democratic institutions in this larger pool of democracies (Treisman 2023). Finally, scholars have stressed that democracy is always in some kind of crisis, but that tensions emerging from citizens' hopes and dissatisfactions are part of what is best and most distinctive about democracy (O'Donnell 2007, 5; Przeworski 2018, 129–34).

Do International Dimensions Matter for Backsliding?

Several contributions in this article emphasize the role of international factors. Both Hyde and Nooruddin discuss the effect of international democracy promotion on backsliding but disagree on its implications. In earlier work, Hyde (2011b, 2020) has shown that international democracy promotion, in particular election monitoring, can deter electoral fraud and thus benefit democratization. However, developments in countries that are major democracy promoters, such as rising polarization in the United States or backsliding *within* the European Union, have undermined their pro-democracy advocacy (Samuels 2023). Declining support for democracy promotion has opened space for elites to repress citizens more openly, especially around elections (Hyde 2020). Hyde's and Lindberg's essays note that the decline of international support is most serious for citizen-driven pro-democracy movements, a claim that is corroborated in other work (Cooley and Nexon 2020; Glasius, Schalk, and de Lange 2020).

Others, on the other hand, dispute the positive effects of international democracy efforts. Nooruddin suggests that any positive effect was short-lived and shallow. Bush (2015), moreover, argues that few democracy assistance programs even intend

³ Boese et al. (2021, 2022a), however, note that the breakdown of democracy is often the final outcome. Moreover, the most recent data also show an uptick in coups, i.e., rapid breakdown (see Boese et al. 2022a).

⁴ There are parallels, however, in how contributors assess the current moment. What Hyde describes as pseudo-democrats dropping the mask, for example, is not inconsistent with Nooruddin's point on democratic regimes being propped up from abroad.

to foster regime change, and Meyerrose (2020) shows empirically that membership in organizations with democracy promotion elements increases rather than reduces the risk of backsliding. Furthermore, there has been a rise in shadow or zombie monitoring organizations (Hyde 2011b; Kelley 2012; Morgenbesser 2020); empirical work documents that these actors can undermine the efforts of credible democracy promoters (Daxecker and Schneider 2014; Merloe 2015). Work on international interventions into elections more broadly, including by zombie monitoring organizations, has shown that foreign meddling can increase polarization, such as by moving voters closer to the intervener's position (Corstange and Marinov 2012) or polarizing the beliefs of citizens who voted for losing candidates (Bush and Prather 2022).

The increase of polarization and misinformation as global drivers of autocratization are discussed in Lindberg's essay. The rise of social media—controlled by international technology companies rather than traditional media gatekeepers—disproportionately benefits outsiders and extremist candidates (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, 67–8). Simultaneously, anti-pluralist parties in several countries use social media to spread misinformation about opponents and out-groups, subsequently increasing polarization (Boese et al. 2022a). While polarization and misinformation damage democracy primarily through domestic channels, diffusion and emulation effects are also at play (Hyde 2020). In related work, Gunitsky (2014, 2017) has shown that hegemonic shocks can lead to waves of regime change through contagion and emulation.

The Role of Citizens versus Elites for Backsliding

Most theorizing on democratic backsliding privileges domestic factors such as leadership, political culture, political coalitions, institutions, or socioeconomic conditions (Waldner and Lust 2018). Domestic conditions are central to Bartels' claims on the US' democratic decline, but he is critical of explanations that view ordinary citizens as a primary driver of these changes. As earlier work has shown (Achen and Bartels 2016), and is corroborated in more recent research on citizens' commitment to democracy (Svolik 2019; Bartels 2020; Graham and Svolik 2020), citizens' attachment to democracy may have been mostly symbolic, and is thus unable to explain the recent decline of democracy in the United States.⁵ Bartels argues that the departure from an allegiance to democracy has instead taken place among political leaders, in particular the Republican Party. Hyde's and Nooruddin's essays raise similar points on elites, and much prior work has confirmed the crucial role of political elites and parties in explaining whether countries are willing to become and remain committed to democracy (Bermeo 2003; Thachil 2014; Ziblatt 2017; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).

Bartels notes that our discipline's current methodological preferences and ideological commitments disincentivize the study of the sociology and culture of political elites, which are concerns we should grapple with as a discipline. In addition to an increased focus on elites, though, we also need more studies of the connections elites have with citizens through parties or other civil society organizations. Promising examples that help us understand elites and citizens through an emphasis on meso-level actors are Thachil's (2014) study of non-party affiliates as agents of elite parties in India, Schickler's (2016) work on civil rights organizations and state parties for producing racial realignment in the United States, and Ziblatt's (2017) book on the role of party networks for the pro-democracy orientation of conservative parties in nineteenth-century Europe. For example,

⁵ However, studies of citizen preferences are affected by the challenges of conceptualizing democracy highlighted at the beginning of this article; citizens may weigh different aspects of democracy differently, and research designs have not sufficiently considered whether and how survey indicators match theoretical conceptions (Ahmed 2022). There is also evidence that the citizens voting for the losers—i.e., those most affected by the outcome—are more likely to defend democracy (Mazepus and Toshkov 2022).

Ziblatt (2017) shows that conservative parties with talented local party operatives succeeded in building flourishing, electorally competitive party organizations in the United Kingdom, while parties without such organizations instead relied on electoral manipulation and became authoritarian, such as in Germany.

The Consequences of Democracy's Decline

What are the consequences of this current wave of democratic backsliding? Contributors are overall pessimistic. Lindberg addresses the question by summarizing the many benefits of democracy for economic development, education, security and conflict, health, and public goods provision. A global and sustained shift toward authoritarianism will likely negatively affect all these outcomes. Hyde is also pessimistic, emphasizing the disappearance of constraints against overt repression and disenfranchisement. She offers a potential silver lining, which is that the reputation of democracy promoters who remain active will be less up for debate than in earlier periods, when we saw a rise of shadow organizations (Hyde 2011, Kelley 2012). But as Lindberg and Hyde highlight, big and powerful countries such as the United States becoming less democratic has important system-level consequences, including emboldening autocrats and diffusing non-democratic values and ideas across the world.

One important and serious trend coinciding with this current decline of democracy is an increase in various forms of political violence. We have seen this play out in Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, but the data also show an overall increase in international conflict (Davies, Petterson, and Öberg 2022). Also worrisome is an increase in intrastate or civil conflict; while initially declining after a peak at the end of the Cold War, there has been a rise since 2011 (Davies, Petterson, and Öberg 2022). But perhaps most concerning from the perspective of this article is the incidence of intra-systemic violence in democracies, that is, violence by actors who compete within the democratic system, but use force to further their electoral prospects (Birch, Daxecker, and Höglund 2020). Such violence is common in India, where vigilante groups affiliated with the ruling party attack minorities, especially Muslims, to improve the BJP's electoral chances (Jaffrelot 2021; Varshney 2022). But attacks against immigrants, minorities, and political opponents also seem to be increasing in the United States and Europe (Dancygier et al. 2022; Kalmoe and Mason 2022). Ever since a violent mob stormed the US Capitol to try to overturn the 2020 election results, few people need to be convinced that the risk of political violence is serious, even in established democracies. But the deeper and more uncomfortable questions, such as whether citizens actually oppose political violence against groups they dislike (Kalmoe and Mason 2022; Daxecker and Prasad 2023), or how to ensure that political elites condemn violence and remain committed to democracy (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018), still need better answers.

Summarizing the Contributions

Four leading scholars of democracy in international relations and comparative politics assess the challenges to democracy in the next sections. First, Staffan I. Lindberg uses data from V-Dem to describe the scope and severity of the third wave of autocratization, which has affected all regions of the world in the last 10 years. His essay suggests that polarization and misinformation are important drivers for this current wave of autocratization. Considering the many benefits of democracy, he concludes that we will observe negative implications across many areas beyond freedom, including conflict and security, welfare, justice, and the environment.

In the second essay, Susan D. Hyde highlights the detrimental consequences of reduced support for democracy by the international community. While no country has stopped holding elections, autocrats now repress opponents and minorities

more overtly, and the decline of democracy has affected citizen-led pro-democracy movements especially severely. Despite the many flaws of international democracy promotion efforts, she concludes that the weakening of democracy promotion threatens a more violent future, especially in large multi-ethnic countries.

Third, Irfan Nooruddin agrees with the overall assessment of a decline, but challenges some of Lindberg's and Hyde's reasoning. He suggests that an increase in democracy after the end of the Cold War was a result of regimes artificially propped up by the international community in so-called post-conflict states. He argues that these regimes failed because of the international community's emphasis on elections and a disregard for structural issues critical to driving democracy, such as the level of economic development or the presence of party organizations, among others.

Finally, Larry M. Bartels shares his observations as a lifelong scholar of US politics. He is deeply concerned about the state of US democracy, but argues that political elites, especially in the Republican Party, and not citizens are behind the current decline of democracy. His call for a return to political sociology of elites has important implications for how our discipline studies democracy and its challenges.

The State of Democracy: Global Challenges and Challengers⁶

STAFFAN I. LINDBERG

University of Gothenburg

There are numerous challenges and challengers to democracy across the world. The rise of polarization and misinformation are just two examples of challenges that concern academics and policymakers. Similarly, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the expansion of Chinese global influence illustrate how powerful autocratic states feel emboldened in challenging the post-Cold War liberal international order. In the last decade, declines in democracy have affected all regions and many countries in the world, constituting a third wave of autocratization (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Boese et al. 2022a). These declines across time and space suggest that global and domestic drivers are behind these trends. In this essay, I first sketch a picture of democracy's decline in the last 10 years. I then describe how autocratization unfolds across the world, including how it now threatens democracy in regions and countries where we thought of it as being stable. The following section discusses the drivers of this global decline. I conclude the essay with reflections on the consequences of this current wave of autocratization.

Democracy in Global Decline

The latest annual Democracy Report 2022 from the V-Dem Institute paints a grim picture (Boese et al. 2022a,b; Coppedge et al. 2023,2022b). In the last decade, levels of democracy have declined to 1989 levels for the average global citizen; that is, when we consider democracy relative to population size (Boese et al. 2022a).⁷ In just 10 years, the entire expansion of political rights and freedoms since 1990 has

⁶This essay is based on remarks at the roundtable "Global Challenges to Democracy?" held at the 2022 International Studies Association annual convention. These remarks build on the extended discussion in the article "State of the World 2021: Autocratization Changing Its Nature?" published in *Democratization*, and co-authored with Vanessa A. Boese, Martin Lundstedt, Kelly Morrison, and Yuko Sato. See Boese et al. (2022a).

⁷At the country level, democracy has declined to levels last observed in 2000. Since democracy hinges on the idea that "a people should govern itself" (Przeworski 2010, 3), the level of democracy experienced by the average citizen is substantively important and meaningful.

been wiped out. The post-Cold War optimism about the expansion and deepening of democracy turns out to have been rather premature, and may even seem a bit naïve in retrospect. Using the regimes of the World classifications, Lührmann, Tannenberg, and Lindberg 2018 show that this decline of democracy manifests itself across different types of regimes, i.e., both the number of closed autocracies and electoral autocracies are increasing. The increase in the number of closed autocracies from a low of twenty in 2012 to thirty in 2021 is notable since these regimes appeared at risk of becoming extinct until not that long ago (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Boese et al. 2022a, 985). Equally worrying is that electoral autocracies are in place in sixty countries in the world today, thus constituting the most common type of regime. Adjusted for population size, 70 percent of the global population lives in the ninety electoral or closed autocracies (Boese et al. 2022a,b). Of the eight-nine democracies remaining, the majority—fifty-five countries—are electoral democracies, leaving only thirty-four liberal democracies from a high of forty-two in 2021 (Boese et al. 2022a,b).

Beyond trends for different types of regimes, individual indicators that form the V-Dem democracy indices show that many aspects of democracy are eroding even if the aggregate score has not declined, at least for now (Boese et al. 2022a, 987). Civil society restrictions (CSOs) and government censorship are increasing at a greater rate than other indicators, reflecting both the growing diffusion of illiberal norms, and that autocrats are aware of the importance of CSOs for protecting democracy (Glasius, Schalk, and de Lange 2020; Boese et al. 2022a). Interestingly, indicators that measure clean elections are not worsening to the same extent, which could reflect that autocrats have learned to adapt to constraints on electoral manipulation imposed by international democracy promoters. While international democracy promotion efforts are also weakening (see, e.g., Hyde 2020), they have long prioritized elections over other aspects of democracy (see also Nooruddin in this forum), which is why we might be observing these somewhat diverging trends.

How Autocratization Unfolds

How does autocratization unfold as a process? Boese et al. (2021) find that democracy broke down in almost 80 percent of all instances since 1900, when autocratization started in a democracy. Similarly, of the ten countries with the largest movement toward autocracy during the last 10 years, all were initially liberal or electoral democracies, but seven of these top ten are now electoral autocracies (Boese et al. 2022a, 990). Hence, democracy is at risk in countries and regions where observers had previously thought of it as stable and secure. In addition to democratic backsliding in the United States, autocratization is affecting the European Union more than we would like, and not just in the usual suspects such as Hungary and Poland. More than 20 percent of countries in the European Union are moving toward autocracy, including Croatia, the Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Poland, and Slovenia. Since 2018, Hungary is no longer a democracy; after first winning power in 2010, Viktor Orbán has established an increasingly authoritarian-leaning regime through exacerbating biases in an already disproportionate electoral system, gerrymandering, frequent constitutional changes benefitting the incumbent, and election giveaways (Scheppele 2022). So far, there have been few penalties from the European Union despite Hungary breaching the organization's democratic standards.⁸

Trends in other regions mirror those in Europe, with autocratizing countries exceeding democratizing ones in all regions except the Middle East. Autocratization in important and large countries such as India and the United States is especially worrisome, both because it affects so many people, and because of their importance

⁸ In 2022, the EU initiated a procedure against the Hungarian government over human rights breaches, which could see it lose EU funding, <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-triggers-rule-of-law-procedure-against-hungary/a-61607618>.

in international politics. Finally, autocratization is also changing in nature. Political leaders increasingly behave openly as autocrats, no longer paying lip service to democratic values, a point Hyde reiterates in her essay. Autocratization is also increasing in speed. In recent years, autocratization has more often taken the form of coups, that is, rapid breakdown rather than incremental backsliding from within (Boese et al. 2022a,b). Overall, the climate in the international system is becoming increasingly hostile to democracy.

The Drivers of Democratic Decline

The global decline of democracy has spurred growing interest in conceptualizing and explaining these trends. Alternately discussed as autocratization, democratic backsliding, or democratic decline, research has identified a variety of domestic and global drivers (Bermeo 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Waldner and Lust 2018; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Boese et al. 2021, 2022a). Here, I want to highlight two drivers that are affecting countries across the world. The first driver is the rise of polarization to levels that is hostile to democracy in many countries, including but by no means limited to current and former liberal democracies. Forty countries have reached toxic levels, and examples are found all across the spectrum of democracies and autocracies (Boese et al. 2022a, 993).⁹ But in democracies that have begun to or are moving toward autocratizing, the rise is chiefly driven by anti-pluralist parties whose hostile rhetoric and behavior against out-groups violate democratic principles. As Svobik (2019) has shown, citizens in highly polarized contexts such as the United States are willing to trade off their support for democracy for potentially conflicting considerations such as partisanship. Unsurprisingly, then, a rise in polarization often coincides with an increase in autocratization, and the two also reinforce each other.

The second important contributor to autocratization is a rise in misinformation.¹⁰ Misinformation is a key challenge for democracy when large segments of the public are misinformed in the same direction, systematically biasing public opinion (Jerit and Zhao 2020). These concerns are not entirely novel, given well developed literatures on the role of propaganda and misinformation in authoritarian regimes (Arendt 1968; Wedeen 1999; Hassan, Mattingly, and Nugent 2022). But the rise of social media has made it easier for extremists to spread misinformation at home and abroad (Guess and Lyons 2022). Political elites—especially “wanna-be” dictators—use misinformation to distort public opinion, subvert accountability, and fuel polarization in democracies (Boese et al. 2022a, 997). Well-known examples such as rampant misinformation during the Trump Presidency and in the run-up to the Brexit referendum show how it has benefitted extremists in Europe and North America, but this challenge to democracy is truly global. Yet government spread of misinformation both domestically and abroad is on average the highest among autocracies, especially those like China and Russia that seek to influence other countries and those like Hungary, Turkey, and the Philippines that seek to stabilize and reinforce their new electoral authoritarianism at home (Boese et al. 2022a, 998).

Conclusion

What does the decline of democracy mean for the future of global politics? In short, it has negative consequences across all parts of political, economic, and social life.

⁹ Polarization refers to a division of society into Us versus Them groups where groups hold negative views of each other (Somer, McCoy, and Luke 2021). V-Dem measures political polarization as “the extent to which society is polarized into antagonistic, political camps where political differences affect social relationships beyond political discussion (Boese et al. 2022b, 33).

¹⁰ Guess and Lyons (2022, 10) define misinformation as “constituting a claim that contradicts or distorts common understandings of verifiable facts”.

In a series of policy briefs titled “The Case for Democracy”, the V-Dem project has summarized the wealth of research pointing to the benefits of democracy.¹¹ Democracies are better at reducing poverty, achieving economic growth, and reducing inequality than autocratic regimes (V-Dem 2021c, policy brief #27). Democracies also have higher education enrollment, spend more on education, and have better school attendance (V-Dem 2022b, policy brief #35). Further, democracies do not fight wars with each other and are less likely to engage in other forms of conflict (V-Dem 2021e, policy brief #30). They also provide better health care and have greater life expectancy (V-Dem 2021d, policy brief #29). Democracies have a greater female political participation and representation and improve civil liberties for women (V-Dem 2021a, policy brief #28). Finally, they provide more public goods, invest more in climate change mitigation, and have reduced CO₂ emissions more than autocratic regimes (V-Dem 2021b, policy brief #31; V-Dem 2022a, policy brief #33). The benefits are thus manifold, highlighting the risks posed by this current, third wave of autocratization. The wave began when Putin came to power in Russia in 2000; his invasion of Ukraine 22 years later exemplifies the risks of autocratization and just how much bolder today’s autocrats have become.

International Actors and Domestic Politics in an Era of Global Challenges to Democracy

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How should researchers approach the international dimensions of democratic backsliding? As the current period of geopolitical tumult brings with it numerous challenges to democracy, scholars have begun to debate how these potentially seismic shifts in geopolitics will influence democracy and democracy promotion around the world. One important aspect is democracy promotion. Will international actors continue to promote democracy? Will they continue to play an important role in pressuring countries to have more democratic elections and holding them accountable when they do not? Will this pressure have any effect against a backdrop of other powerful and often countervailing global trends?

As is now well established, democracy is under threat in many countries around the world, afflicting both new and long-standing democracies (Bermeo 2016; Mechkova, Lührmann, and Lindberg 2017; Lührmann et al. 2018; Freedom House 2019; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). Globally, the transition from an era of democratization to one of democratic backsliding (i.e., the peak of the most recent “wave” of democratization (Gunitsky 2017)) occurred around 2013, according to several prominent organizations (Lührmann et al. 2018; Freedom House 2019, Boese et al. 2022b). For example, using Freedom House’s measure, 2013 was the year in which more countries moved away from toward democracy than moved in a democratic direction, a trend that has continued through today.

Yet this current era in which democracy is challenged from within states as well as from outside their borders is a marked shift from the prior era in which democracy was globally dominant, and international pressure for countries to look and act democratic was widespread. To understand the international dimensions of democratic backsliding, it is first helpful to consider the international dimensions of democracy, with a focus on democracy promotion, before speculating about some trends worth additional scholarly engagement.

¹¹ All policy briefs are available at <https://www.v-dem.net/pb.html>.

Peak Democracy Promotion as a Reference Point

One of the most interesting developments in global affairs in the latter half of the twentieth century is that democracy became something that most powerful international actors were pushing for in sovereign states rather than (or in addition to) more problematic forms of international interference, like propping up friendly dictators, fomenting coups, and overt military intervention. This development is at the heart of why I argue that international election observation became an international norm and why I think many countries in the world adopted (sometimes superficial) democratic institutions (Bush 2011; Hyde 2011a,b).

Of course, since the early days of democracy promotion in foreign policy, democracy has fluctuated over time in the degree to which it is important, both globally and as part of specific dyadic relationships between powerful and less powerful states. One can debate the origins of democracy promotion as a foreign policy strategy, but promoting democracy abroad has been a consistent component of US foreign policy for presidents from both political parties since the end of WWII, albeit with plenty of variation in the degree to which it is emphasized and how general positions of support for democracy manifested into rhetoric, action, and material aid. Similar patterns can be traced in a number of other democracy-promoting states, such as the UK and Germany, and within various forms of global governance, most prominently the many intergovernmental organizations that still include adherence to democratic practices and respect for human rights in their membership agreements.¹² I define democracy's peak global dominance between 1990 and 2003, bookended by the end of the Cold War and the US invasion of Iraq under the pretense of democracy promotion, as well as a few other US foreign policy decisions that undermined democracy promotion. Not only were many of the most powerful states in the world democratic and engaged in foreign democracy promotion, they were also relatively unchallenged by geopolitical rivals espousing alternative models (Gunitsky 2014).

It is important to note that even during its peak between 1990 and 2003, democracy promotion was imperfect and often overridden by other foreign policy goals. States pushing democracy abroad did not necessarily do at home what they said other governments and peoples should be doing within their own borders. Charges of hypocrisy against democracy promoters were often valid. Nevertheless, during this period, many governments throughout the world felt like they needed to react in some fashion to the idea that they should be looking and acting like democracies, even in cases in which leaders adopting democratic reforms had no intention of being held accountable to their own citizenry, much less losing and relinquishing their hold on power via a peaceful democratic election.

This is an important reference point for thinking about more recent trends in democratic backsliding. Democracy promotion has continued since 2003 but has been eroded by both declining enthusiasm among proponents and challenges from rising authoritarian powers, potentially contributing to our current era of democratic backsliding (Hyde 2020).

Declining International Support for Democracy

Scholars will be working to understand the impact of these global changes in democracy and its international support for some time. In some ways, the transition to a world in which democracy is challenged brings an opportunity to better understand the consequences of the prior era of stronger international support for

¹²The European Union has been particularly effective at using membership conditionality to encourage democratic reforms (Kelley 2010), for example, but many international organizations, including the OAS, the UN, the AU, etc., include references to democracy in their membership requirements (Pevhouse 2005; Davis-Roberts and Carroll 2010; Donno 2013).

democracy. Research is still tentative, but I'm watching a few trends closely, and I am using this forum as an opportunity to share my speculation.

If democracy promotion really peaked between 1990 and 2003, and if international pressure for democracy has in fact decreased noticeably in the last 15 years or so (documenting this is outside the scope of this brief commentary), this could have a number of possible effects on elections and democracy that scholars can begin to think about as the evidence accumulates. Note that this thought experiment recognizes all of the caveats about prior democracy promotion efforts: that even at its peak, it was contested, often hypocritical, subsumed by other foreign policy goals, wildly inconsistent for countries deemed strategically important, less confrontational than it could be (Bush 2015), and fairly thin overall. It also recognizes that democracy promotion activity remains widespread today, and may be counterbalanced by efforts from non-democratic states.

Beginning with what has not changed, it is still the case that, as far as Nikolay Marinov and I can tell using the National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy data (Hyde and Marinov 2012), no country has stopped holding elections. There was a COVID-19 pandemic drop in the election trendline that I was concerned might be used by some leaders to delay elections indefinitely (Hyde 2020), but the world just set a record in 2021 in terms of the total number of national elections held annually, seeming to have mostly recovered from the pandemic drop in elections.

However, even if most or all countries are continuing to hold elections, leaders operating within institutions that have not yet fully democratized have less incentive to keep up "democratic" appearances as the global prominence of democracy has declined. While superficial democracy is not true democracy, dropping the act can have consequences for many citizens within these countries. Many hybrid regimes were not fully functioning democracies by any stretch of the imagination, but when leaders of these countries and their state apparatuses have to toe the line and, at minimum, not get caught blatantly repressing their opponents, life is potentially a little better for those who would otherwise experience more severe and overt forms of state-sponsored violence, particularly within the political opposition, the human rights community, and independent media.

There is indeed some evidence that overt repression around elections has increased in the past decade. Additionally, there are documented increases in harassment, targeting, and killing of journalists in many countries. One plausible explanation for this is that many countries whose leaders used to expend significant effort to keep up plausible deniability that their country was democratic have this declining incentive to keep up the act. They have dropped the pseudo-democratic mask, so to speak, and politicians in many countries around the world are embracing more overtly autocratic language and practices.

An important contributing factor to this declining incentive is the drop in overt support for citizen-driven pro-democracy movements in other countries around the world (e.g., Carothers and Brown 2018; Cooley and Nexon 2020). When citizens in authoritarian countries try to hold their government accountable or demand democratizing reforms, protest is one available tool. But when citizens protest against authoritarian rule, the entity that is supposed to protect them (the state) is the same entity most likely to harm them. During the era of peak democracy promotion, citizen movements could count on Western actors or democracy-promoting neighbors in the region to come in and support these citizen-driven movements for democracy change (Bunce and Wolchik 2011), providing some diplomatic cover and material or strategic support. As we've seen recently in Belarus and Hong Kong, Western support for these protest movements was muted and weak. It is not at all clear that more foreign support for these movements would have made a difference, but such counterfactuals are hard to analyze, and it is difficult to know *ex ante* which citizen

movements for democracy can grow powerful enough to bring about meaningful change when they are quashed early by emboldened repressive authoritarian states.

Less support for citizen-driven movements is particularly consequential because this is the form of democracy promotion most likely to be effective, as opposed to dropping in democratic institutions (a lesson that was clear to democracy promotion organizations well before Iraq and Afghanistan). We are still studying this, but my best conjecture about when democracy promotion is most likely to be effective is when it is able to give some cover for and support to a citizen-driven movement for democracy.

One positive development in the decline in support for democracy is that we may also be seeing less abuse of “democracy promotion” as cover for foreign imposed regime change, and fewer efforts to promote democracy by force. It is probably good for everyone if powerful states do less of that, as it is ineffective as a democracy promotion tool except in the most favorable of circumstances. Even in those cases, it is wildly expensive and undermines other more legitimate and effective efforts to support democratic movements in other states.

Conclusion

If democracy is under threat, including within many countries that used to lead democracy promotion efforts, is continuing these efforts worth it? To me, this question centers on the counterfactual. If the alternatives are worse, then it makes sense to continue democracy promotion, in part because it is a type of foreign intervention in the domestic affairs of sovereign states that can align with the people and their bid for more rights rather than the elites and their efforts to repress those freedoms.

When the United States and other Western democracy-promoting countries move away from promoting democracy in other countries, they are not likely to leave other countries alone. A policy of strict noninterference would probably not be in their interest, particularly given the possibility that it would leave countries open to further alliance with and intervention by their adversaries. When the United States has moved away from democracy promotion in specific countries in the past, they are much more likely to engage in other strategies of political interference that are more nefarious, including overt international interference in the elections of other sovereign states, supporting military coups, the imposition of Western-allied dictatorships, and the like (Jamal 2012; Lake 2016; Bubeck and Marinov 2019; Levin 2020).

Thus, moving away from democracy promotion is likely to mean more blatant support (sometimes covert) for particular parties and candidates in elections, giving a freer hand to those who want to steal elections and manipulate other levers of governing to remain in power within the country. This potential move away from democracy promotion is, in my book, likely to further contribute to democratic backsliding. Intervening in another country to support their citizens' participation in democracy is preferable to interfering to help a candidate who is best aligned with the foreign actor's foreign policy preferences to steal the election. Pseudo-democracy is probably better than outright personalist or military authoritarianism in terms of the magnitude of human suffering.

Although I agree that there are a number of problems with democracy promotion and there is massive room for improvement (especially in giving newly elected leaders in post-conflict and fragile states the fiscal space to provide public goods [Flores and Nooruddin 2016]), taking the foot off the gas pedal of global support for democracy has reduced the perceived value of looking and acting like a democracy. This may not change the total number of true democracies in the world, but it has changed the strategic dynamics associated with leaders who were maintaining a veneer of democratic practices. The result of greater support for democracy was

that many leaders were engaged in more subtle and at least sometimes less harmful forms of manipulation of the political process in a manner that preserved opportunities for citizen movements to get a toehold and, potentially with international support or the threat of international condemnation, sometimes were able to use that toehold to demand meaningful expansion of political liberty in a manner that is imperfect but significantly less violent than many of the likely alternatives, particularly in large multi-ethnic countries. As Przeworski writes, “In the end, the miracle of democracy is that conflicting political forces obey the results of voting. People who have guns obey those without them. Incumbents risk their control of governmental offices by holding elections. Losers wait for their chance to win office. Conflicts are regulated, processed according to rules, and thus limited. This is not consensus, yet not mayhem either. Just regulated conflict; conflict without killing. Ballots are ‘paper stones’” (Przeworski 2018). Lesser support for democracy emboldens such leaders, thereby further contributing to democratic backsliding.

There are still a great number of questions and a long list of concerns about how the current global challenges to democracy will play out. Researchers should continue to keep these recent developments in historical context, and understand challenges to democracy in each country as challenges that have both local and global dimensions. Precisely because domestic political elites represent the single most potent threat to democracy, international support for democracy, and a global defense of democracy, including the ability of pro-democracy domestic actors to learn strategies of resistance from their counterparts abroad, remain essential strategies for all efforts to counter democratic backsliding.

Post-Conflict Democracy Promotion is Dead. Long Live Democracy!

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Poor democracy. How quickly its fortunes have faded. Just when it was beginning to believe that its fifteen minutes of fame might last forever, it is watching its obituaries drafted. Thirty years after history ended, it now appears that the age of democracy might be ending too. What went wrong?

In this essay, I advance three arguments. First, perhaps counter-intuitively given my opening, I argue that the bad news about democracy, and the inordinate attention paid to the phenomenon of democracy backsliding, is exaggerated and distortionary, and rooted in an incorrect reading of the empirical record of democracy’s boom years of the 1990s. Second, one cannot understand what ails democracy without considering the structural attributes of the context into which these democracies were being birthed. Too frequently, the contemporary study of democracy is siloed and fails to benefit from insights from conflict studies, political economy, and history. Third, since it’s not satisfying to have a murder mystery without a body, I argue that it is not democracy that is dead, but the strange theater of democracy promotion, and, to that, good riddance.

A Stylized History of Democracy Promotion

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War gave rise to the rebirth of nations that had been swallowed behind the Iron Curtain and offered a fresh opportunity to end violent domestic conflicts that had riven the only slightly

older “new” countries that had emerged just a couple of decades earlier from colonization. In uniquely American style, these epochal events were seen as vindication of American exceptionalism and a lease to make the world safe for democracy once again. A recharged United Nations unveiled its Agenda for Peace, and bereft of the Cold War sponsorship that fueled their fighting, rebel groups and the governments they fought were forced to the negotiating table like so many reluctant squabbling siblings being told it was time to behave and get along. Negotiated settlements proliferated, as did a cottage industry in political science seeking to document and explain the variant outcomes of these previously unsolvable conflicts.

Drunk on their new role as the undisputed heavyweight champion of the world, pundits and policymakers in Washington, DC, forged a second Washington Consensus (since the original economic iteration had been such a rare success). The crux of the second coming of the Washington Consensus was the idea of democratic reconstructionism (Ottaway 2003). Just as their Ivy League-educated policy ancestors had rebuilt war-torn Europe and Japan through the Marshall plan and US-led constitution-writing, this new generation would rebuild societies in the Founding Fathers’ image. After all, if Germany and Japan could have been saved from themselves and turned into the leading democracies and economies of the day, why could not the same be done in Angola, Zaire, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Peru, Colombia, and elsewhere. To support this effort, the World Bank established a new Post-Conflict Assistance Fund (Flores and Nooruddin 2009b), and as Susan Hyde has so ably documented, the field of election monitoring was birthed (Hyde 2011b, see also Carothers 2007, Kelley 2012).

In our 2016 book *Elections in Hard Times*, as well as a series of papers before and after, Thomas Flores and I document the veritable explosion of elections being held in these optimistically labeled post-conflict democracies. Thanks to the pioneering data collection efforts of NELDA (Hyde and Marinov 2012), as well as of the V-Dem project (Coppedge et al. 2022a,b,2023) and the Polity project (Marshall et al. 2017), we traced the ubiquity of electioneering. The contours of this story are by now well-rehearsed. Elections to choose a country’s national executive leader, once relatively uncommon, are today the norm, with just a small handful of holdouts. Even better, a great many of these elections feature competition between elites and all permit universal adult suffrage. The biggest expansion of the right to elect one’s leaders followed the fall of the Soviet Union, as autocratic leaders globally lost the sponsorship of Moscow and Washington, DC, since the Cold War calculus that justified their existence no longer applied. As Flores and I document, the second dynamic unfolded simultaneously as civil wars around the world ceased for much the same reason. The political solutions to the sectarian cleavages that had fueled these conflicts were the initiation of democratization efforts predicated on the holding of post-conflict elections (Flores and Nooruddin 2009a, 2012). Democratic reconstructionism was all grown up.

It is easy to be cynical about these efforts, but it must also be admitted that Western elites put at least some of their money behind their abundant rhetoric. The European Union and the United States invested fiscal and human capital into growing a democracy promotion market. Liberal democratic values were the product, and the end of the Cold War and of history meant that there was no longer any competition in the ideological marketplace. Such marketing efforts took the form of capacity building and technocratic advice on the nuts and bolts of administering “free and fair” elections. More elections, in more places, with election observers boldly venturing where none had gone before to spread the good word to the uninitiated (Carothers 1997). Election management bodies were created and charged with drawing up voter rolls, registering voters, and promoting the credibility of vote counts and results (Kerr and Lührmann 2017; Bush and Prather 2018). To supervise their work, international election monitors joined the fray, flying in to watch over and then issue their stamps of approval without

which the quality of the election would be suspect (Hyde 2011b).¹³ The short-term result of this flurry of activity was a democratic boom-time in the late 1990s, the millennialism optimism of which is ably captured in book titles such as *The Global Resurgence of Democracy* (Diamond and Plattner 1996).

The editors of that triumphant volume also compiled *The Global Divergence of Democracies* (Diamond and Plattner 2001) just 5 years later making clear just how fleeting the victory of democracy was. Essentially, the heyday of democratic reconstructionism and the democracy promotion industry lasted at most a decade before we hit a plateau and then entered the current phase of agonizing over democratic backsliding (see Waldner and Lust 2018 and Meyerrose 2021 for thorough reviews). The question I pose is not whether there is backsliding but whether the 1990s were simply a mirage of democracy, optimistically mistaken for the real thing, and from which retreat is less about the lack of democracy's resilience than an indictment of the democracy promotion industry that set it up to fail. The answer is somewhere in the middle.

The truth is that there were real gains made for global democracy as a once-in-a-generation opening internationally occurred with the collapse of the Soviet Union. But the truth is also that the efforts to build democracies, especially post-conflict ones, were shallow and willfully ignorant of all the hard-won lessons of previous such imperialist efforts. Rather than consider the patient task of building social consensus and legitimacy around democratic principles of compromise and constraint or investing in political party institutionalization and sustainable state capacity, democracy promotion was too focused on holding national elections. This was especially true in societies where the democracies were being formed in the aftermath of violent internal conflicts that had necessitated international intervention. Loathe to be cast as neo-colonial overlords, Western powers stressed the need to hand over the reins of government as quickly as possible to a local authority legitimated by popular support. The tried-and-true playbook for identifying and installing such a government was through national elections, often held mere months after the conflicts that preceded them had concluded (Flores and Nooruddin 2012).¹⁴ The images that dominated were undeniably emotive and powerful, as photojournalists captured the joy of everyday citizens exercising their franchise, ink-stained fingers held aloft in triumph. But the core of democracy is not what happens on election day but rather what occurs between them. Then, when the world's attention shifted to the next election *du jour*, politics resumed and overwhelmed the flimsy constraints placed on leaders by nascent institutions and weary populations. The winner-takes-all nature of elections raised the stakes at the polls and often unraveled the fragile peace (Flores and Nooruddin 2009a, 2012). Incumbents used their power over the security sector to intimidate, harass, and persecute opposition candidates, especially in societies where violent civil conflict remained a grim reality (Flores and Nooruddin 2022). In a nutshell, if the democratic moment was heralded by the first elections, the second and third elections that followed initiated its plateau and backsliding phases. The

¹³ Kelley (2009, 2012) is more skeptical than Hyde about the value of election monitors but agrees that their imprimatur became a "norm" for aspiring democracies. Beaulieu (2013) summarizes and contrasts the key contributions of Hyde and Kelley nicely.

¹⁴ A related research question is when and how the sequencing of local and national elections might affect the prospects of democracy following conflicts. This is easier to do in theory than in practice because the empirical record provides almost no variation to leverage: After conflict, almost all countries hold national executive elections before they hold local elections (Flores and Nooruddin 2016). One observation, therefore, is that post-conflict democratization is conceived as a top-down process rather than a bottom-up one. Yet the historical record of developed democracies suggests that party formation and institutionalization are most resilient when they begin locally and then scale across the entire national geography (see Panebianco 1988; Chhibber and Kollman 2004). Democracy promoters are not blind to the importance of local elections for long-term democratic health, but they all too often privilege national elections as the first step in the democratization journey for the reasons cited above.

speed of this transformation is evidenced by how quickly terms such as electoral authoritarianism and hybrid regimes entered the political science lexicon.

What Comes after Democracy Promotion?

Where does this somber assessment leave democracy promotion, especially in post-conflict societies? For dead, I would hope, but perhaps that is too churlish. While the revealed record of post-conflict democracy building is poor, the importance of the lessons learned from the policy failures of the past two decades for our understanding of democracy and democratization is profound. The syllabi of a standard graduate syllabus on the topic taught in the 1990s—such as the one I took 25 years ago—are unrecognizable from the versions being taught in PhD programs today, just as those syllabi would have been very different from those taught by the postwar giants of our discipline. If, as [Guillermo O’Donnell \(2007\)](#) insightfully observed, democracy is in perpetual crisis, then it is also true that the nature of and solutions to those crises differ with each age. In that spirit, I offer three thoughts for where we might go from here as we continue our Sisyphean labor of supporting democracy globally.

First, there is no such thing as post-conflict, a point made less absurd by what’s happening in the United States today as Americans grapple with the complex commemoration of the Civil War, or in India, where a revanchist hardline Hindu nationalism is erasing the last 70 years of liberal secularism and rewriting the last 700 years of history to meet an unslakeable thirst to relitigate the horrors of partition. Even more mundanely, the empirical record of conflict recidivism makes clear that “post-conflict” is at best an aspirational status ([Jarland et al. 2020](#)) and that conflict histories are better understood as contextual factors that condition a country’s prospects for democratic gains after elections ([Flores and Nooruddin 2016](#)). The notion that the cessation of fighting via a negotiated settlement or ceasefire marks a new phase in a country’s political development is farcical, and the rush to hold elections in a grand symbolic gesture to mark a break with the past was doomed to fail. Rather, what careful country studies make clearer is that conflict legacies alter every aspect of subsequent political life, from the formation of political parties to the policy positions they take and how voters assess leaders (e.g., [Weintraub et al. 2015](#); [Walden and Zhukov 2020](#)). In that very real sense, everything we thought we knew about democratization at the start of the post-1989 era was not particularly useful for the democratization efforts that followed ([Diamond 2006](#)). Policymakers might have done the reading, but the syllabus was woefully out of date.

Second, and yet, what alternative is there? Is it not better for the fighting to cease and for elections, however problematic, to replace war as the means by which elites and the people they influence to determine who has power? In that sense, democracy by definition is “post conflict” and we should, I would repeat, retire the label and category and focus simply on whether it is possible to build legitimate, sustainable democracies . . . anywhere. The answers to that question might not be any more encouraging, but at least it is the right question. The challenges facing “consolidated” democracies around the world, from the United States to India and everywhere in between, indicate that the challenges of “post-conflict” democracies are not unique, even if they might be a bit heightened. Instead of hiving off those countries as if they are special cases, we must think about answers that are relevant across a broad spectrum of aspiring democratic regimes. Such inquiry is likely to lead us away from a focus on international interventions of the type lumped under the aegis of democracy promotion, and toward a more classical domestic focus on fiscal and bureaucratic capacity, social cohesion, and economic well-being that have historically been the cornerstones of successful democratization.

And, finally, we need to ask on whose shoulders the blame for democracy’s ills falls. Is it that of the democracy do-gooders, as my essay (indisputably unfairly) implies, or of the corrupt, venal domestic leaders who exploit ethnic and religious

cleavages and use outright brute force to undermine the will of the people? “Both” is the right answer, I think, but as Achen and Bartels have so devastatingly argued in *Democracy for Realists* (2016), voters themselves cannot be left unblemished. To understand why democracy is backsliding in post-conflict and in consolidated societies, we have to ask, “whose democracy is it to hold and to lose?” This perhaps is the most daunting realization of the democratic backsliding era we are living through: that everyday citizens are perhaps less confirmed small-d democrats than we wish them to be, and that their choices of leaders—Trump, Modi, Erdogan, Orbán, Duterte, Bolsonaro—might in fact imperil the survival of the very democracies that gave them the choice in the first place (see [Bartels 2020, 2023](#), this volume; [Lupu et al. 2022](#); [McDaniel et al. 2022](#), 165–7; [Mazepus and Toshkov 2022](#); [Shortle et al. 2022](#); [Torcal and Magalhães 2022](#)). If true, the prospects for democracy are even worse than reported, and well-meaning foreigners promoting democracy will do little to help. Indeed, they will just make things worse ([Corstange and Marinov 2012](#); [Daxecker 2012, 2014](#), [Meyerrose 2020](#)).

Democracy’s Challenges—and Ours

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I have been studying American politics for most of the past 40 years. Like most scholars in the field, I spent most of that time thinking that it was safe to ignore some of the momentous issues occupying political scientists focusing on other parts of the world. Political violence? Democratic instability? Those were other people’s problems—or so we thought.

No more. In recent years, Americanists have scrambled to catch up with the broader discipline’s understanding of the vicissitudes of democracy. We have begun to absorb their warnings to the United States regarding how democracies die ([Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018](#)) and how civil wars start ([Walter 2022](#)). We have also been reminded of the recurring crises of democracy in our own political history ([Mettler and Lieberman 2020](#)). Insofar as Donald Trump has been a catalyst for our political upsets, he has been very bad for America but very good for political science, as my friend John Zaller has put it.

Defining Democracy

Here, I report two reflections spurred by my own remedial education in democratic functioning. First, and most fundamentally, I have been struck by how confused we all are about what democracy *means*. Political scientists like to tell their students that democracy is a continuous variable, not a dichotomy. But in reality, it is a complex, multidimensional variable, and democratic theory provides very inadequate conceptual tools for thinking about the relationships and possible trade-offs among the various dimensions. As a result, measurement and analysis of democratic performance, however careful, tend to be remarkably disjointed and arbitrary. Scholars often fasten upon particular indicators of democracy—especially those that are relatively easy to measure, and especially if they are threatened by people whose politics we dislike—with little real understanding of their broader significance.

It is easy to agree that intentionally suppressing electoral turnout is anti-democratic. But how bad is it really, and why? Many political scientists seem to share the conviction of political activists that low turnout systematically skews election outcomes and substantive policy, but the evidence on that score is weak ([DeNardo 1980](#); [Nagel and McNulty 1996](#); [Martinez and Gill 2005](#)). Moreover, most

of the measures so far adopted to suppress turnout seem to have had rather modest effects. While they deserve condemnation, reversing them would barely make a dent in the problems of American democracy.

Meanwhile, over the past 20 years, a growing literature has documented massive disparities in political influence between affluent and poor people—much larger disparities than could conceivably be accounted for by differences in turnout. At first, these findings were limited to the United States (Gilens 2012; Gilens and Page 2014; Bartels 2016, chap. 8). More recently, however, parallel studies in a variety of other affluent democracies with rather different political cultures and institutions have produced surprisingly—and depressingly—similar results (Bartels 2017; Schakel, Burgoon, and Hakhverdian 2020; Elsässer, Hense, and Schäfer 2021).

Research along these lines is at an early stage. But if the findings hold up, then even the most putatively “democratic” political systems may turn out to be such a far cry from genuine democracy, as many people seem to conceive of it, that everything else is just a rounding error. That would be a substantial blow to both our democratic pretensions and scientific pretensions—rather like discovering that the Earth is not the center of the universe, or that humans are related to apes. Much of our existing theory and research would look primitive or simply beside the point in that new light.

Public Opinion or Elites?

Wrestling with the processes of democratic erosion has also reinforced my sense that contemporary political science, especially in the United States, is heavily over-invested in understanding public opinion. That focus partly reflects a sound scientific preference for looking where the light is good. Survey research, for all its problems, provides a level of precision and replicability that is infeasible in most areas of political science. But sometimes the keys are simply not under the lamppost.

Our penchant for studying public opinion is also partly a matter of ideology. It is comforting to political scientists who are also democratic citizens to think that the preferences and actions of ordinary people are, somehow, the fundamental driving force of democratic politics. This conviction reflects our normative investment in what Chris Achen and I have referred to as the “folk theory” of democracy (Achen and Bartels 2016). A natural implication of the “folk theory” is that the health of a democratic system depends primarily upon the good or bad attitudes of citizens. But what if it does not?

Recent research (Bartels 2020; Graham and Svobik 2020; Lupu, Plutowski, and Zechmeister 2022) has called attention to the willingness of Americans—and not only Americans—to countenance violations of democratic norms in pursuit of their substantive political values. That willingness has loomed large in contemporary US politics due to the looming “threat”, as many Americans see it, of momentous demographic and social change (Hetherington and Weiler 2009; Bartels 2020). But it is hardly a new phenomenon. Ordinary citizens have never attached much more than symbolic importance to democracy’s “rules of the game”. Studies dating back more than half a century (Prothro and Grigg 1960; McClosky 1964) have documented the stark limits of their allegiance to abstract democratic principles when those principles are perceived as providing cover for odious people or policies.

The more dramatic and consequential change in recent years has been in the allegiance to democratic values of *political leaders*. Herbert McClosky (1964) pointed to political elites as the keepers of the democratic creed in the face of mass befuddlement and indifference. In his data from the 1950s, they were indeed relatively united in support of democratic institutions and procedures, but that is no longer the case. Many of the leaders of the contemporary Republican Party seem to have jettisoned the democratic creed in favor of doing what it takes to get and keep power. With a few exceptions, even those who have stopped short of endorsing

outright authoritarian measures have countenanced rhetoric and behavior that would have been considered beyond the pale only a decade ago.

Why is that? One plausible explanation does go back to public opinion and the “folk theory” of democracy. The United States, perhaps more than any other country in the world, has attempted to “democratize” the nomination of political candidates through primary elections. Letting ordinary people choose the candidates *sounds* democratic, but can produce all sorts of mischief. Most momentously, that’s how we got Donald Trump as the Republican nominee in 2016. Trump was not the first choice of a majority of Republican primary voters, but in a crowded primary field, his strong factional support was enough to prevail (Polsby 1983; Achen and Bartels 2016, chap. 3; Cohen et al. 2016). The remarkable partisan loyalty of Republican voters in the general election did the rest.

The “democratization” of primary elections also shapes the political incentives of members of Congress. At least, many observers have imagined that the prospect of facing a militant pro-Trump party “base” in future primary elections has constrained congressional Republicans who might otherwise be inclined to resist anti-democratic encroachments—a stark example, if true, of how “democratic” political institutions can exacerbate underlying tensions in a country’s political culture. While there has been surprisingly little systematic research focusing on the 147 Republicans in Congress who voted to “decertify” electoral votes from Arizona or Pennsylvania on January 6, 2021, Strawbridge and Lau (2022) found that they tended to come from districts in which Trump was highly popular—a pattern consistent with the hypothesis of constituency influence, though hardly dispositive.

Even if constituency pressures are important, they are far from determinative of elected officials’ behavior. It is telling, for example, that every one of the eight Republican senators who voted to “decertify” electoral votes on January 6th had a Republican colleague representing the very same constituents who did not. Alas, large-scale statistical analyses tend to shed little light on the psychological and cultural factors that might explain why political elites think and act as they do. A revival of old-fashioned political sociology (Putnam 1976; Carnes 2013) might go some way toward clarifying the role of social backgrounds and training, social networks, political ambition, and other factors in these fateful decisions and in the maintenance and impact of democratic norms more broadly. But that sort of work is not sufficiently “scientific-looking” to be fashionable in contemporary political science.

Beyond the United States

The predominant role of political elites in democratic backsliding is not limited to the United States; it is even clearer in contemporary Hungary. The substantial erosion of Hungary’s democratic institutions under Viktor Orbán is often portrayed as the culmination of a rising “wave” of right-wing populist sentiment in Europe. But Hungarian public opinion was hardly the driving force behind Orbán’s project of “illiberal democracy”. Support for his party, Fidesz, in the run-up to the crucial 2010 election was utterly unrelated to the factors driving support for right-wing populists elsewhere, including anti-immigrant sentiment, opposition to European integration, and political distrust. Those factors only came into play later, after Orbán began to rely on heavy-handed scapegoating of immigrants and the EU in his efforts to maintain public support (Bartels 2023, chap. 7).

In 2010, Fidesz won a narrow and rather conventional-looking electoral majority over a discredited incumbent party, then exploited its overrepresentation in the National Assembly to retroactively declare a “voting booth revolution”, a transparent pretext for an aggressive attack on judges, journalists, and other potential opponents. Ordinary citizens mostly acquiesced in this power grab in exchange for prosperity, order, and validation of their national identities. (They reported substantially more positive evaluations of the economy and life in 2019 than they

had a decade earlier, as well as greater trust in politicians and—ironically—greater satisfaction with the workings of Hungarian democracy.) While their willingness to prioritize the quality of their daily lives over democratic checks and balances may be considered egregious, it can hardly be considered surprising.

There is a clear parallel here with Nancy Bermeo's analysis of dozens of breakdowns of democracy in 20th-century Europe and Latin America. "Ordinary people generally *were* guilty of remaining passive when dictators actually attempted to seize power", she wrote, but "in the vast majority of our cases, voters did not choose dictatorship at the ballot box. . . . Democracies will only collapse if actors deliberately disassemble them, and the key actors in this disassembling process are political elites" (Bermeo 2003, 235, 222, 234). With due allowance for the distinction between democratic backsliding and full-scale collapse into dictatorship, the same might be said of Hungary.

What is less clear, at least to me, is *why* Orbán exploited the opportunities provided by Hungary's political institutions to entrench himself in power—or conversely, why other political leaders with roughly similar opportunities have not done likewise. Here, too, the theories and methods of contemporary political science provide a rather meager toolkit for analysts striving to understand when and why political actors are constrained by what Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018, chap. 6) referred to as "the unwritten rules" of democratic politics.

The scientific study of democracy is vitally important, especially when democratic values and institutions are under severe pressure. To do our distinctive part in preserving those values and institutions, political scientists will need to produce clear-headed theories transcending comfortable normative assumptions and diligent empirical analysis transcending familiar methodological furrows.

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