

Democratic Decline in the United States: What Can We Learn from Middle-Income Backsliding?

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STEPHAN HAGGARD AND ROBERT R. KAUFMAN

Special Issue Article

Democratic Decline in the United States: What Can We Learn from Middle-Income Backsliding?

Robert R. Kaufman and Stephan Haggard

We begin what can be found from academic thinking in middle income countries about the decline in American democracy. We then discuss the implications for the United States. We conclude with some thoughts on the future of American democracy.

The decline of Donald Trump has challenged the widespread assumption that rich, liberal democracies are so entrenched in advanced economies that they are immune to power through electoral means. Rich as he is, Trump has made a political campaign out of mass voting. He has mobilized voters and the media, threatened his opponents, attacked the courts, and even threatened to shut down the government and challenge the independence of the courts and the Federal Reserve and intelligence agencies.

In liberal democracies a single "big man" candidate can win a political contest not only with electoral support but also with substantial legislative support. The "national" checks on executive authority and other

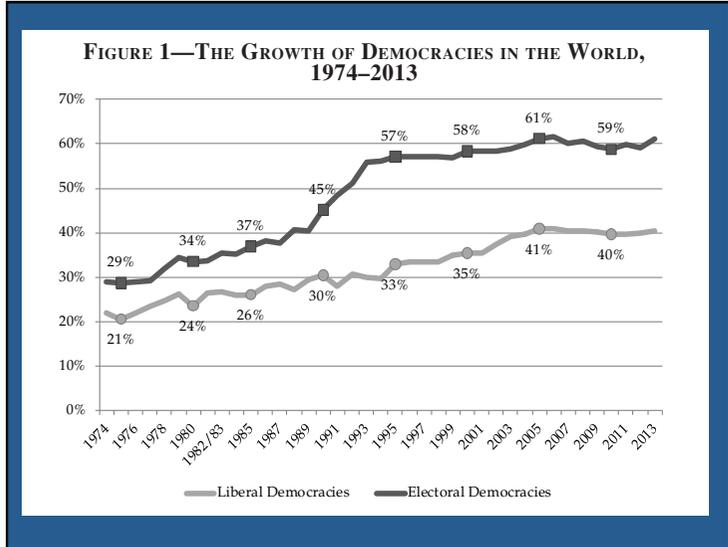
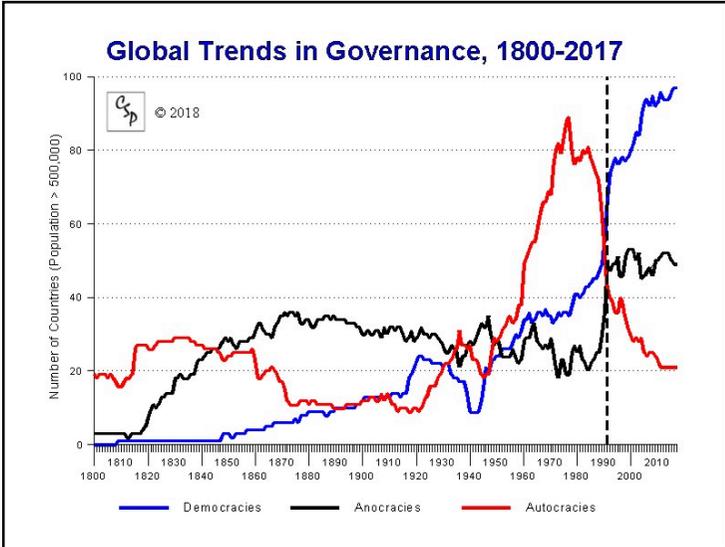
provisions of political and legal. Civil liberties are not as well protected in these countries as they are in the United States. The "national" checks on executive authority and other provisions of political and legal. Civil liberties are not as well protected in these countries as they are in the United States.

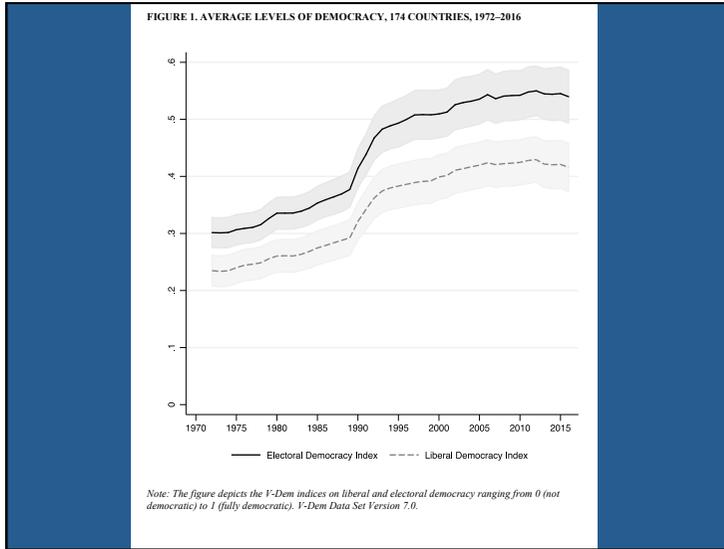
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They are authors of *The Political Economy of Democracy: Transition, Growth, Development, Democracy, and Welfare* (Cambridge University Press, 2014). They also co-edited *The Political Economy of Democracy: Transition, Growth, Development, Democracy, and Welfare* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

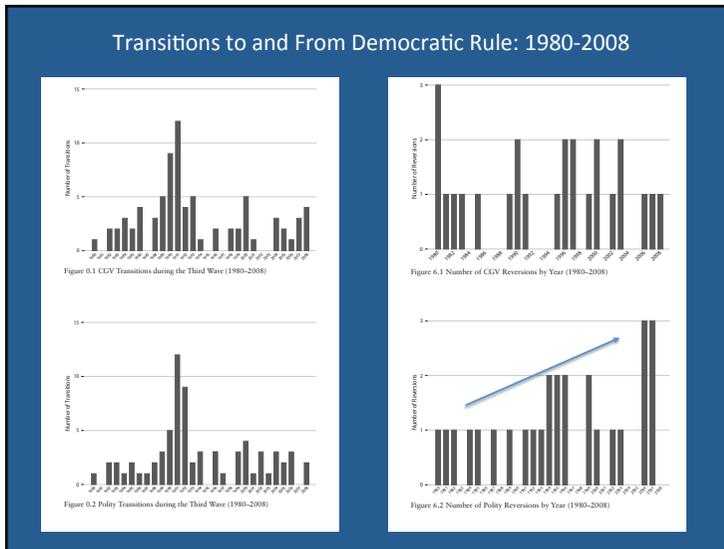
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Four Sources of Pessimism

- The global slowing from 2006 and the “democratic recession” debate (Diamond vs. Levitsky and Way 2015)
- Authoritarian resilience
 - The stability of competitive authoritarian rule (Levitsky and Way 2010)
 - The survival—and even “hardening”—of unambiguously authoritarian regimes (for example, Dimitrov 2013; Russia, the 19th Party Congress debate)
- **Breakdowns: reversions to authoritarian rule**
- **Backsliding, and in both middle-income and advanced industrial states**



Breakdowns

- Scope
 - Mainwaring and Bizarro (2018) using V-Dem data: among 91 new democracies 1974-2014, 34 broke down (37.3%)
- Causes
 - Carothers (2002) “The End of the Transition Paradigm”: can structural constraints—think broadly level of development and modernization theory—be finessed?
 - Haggard and Kaufman (2016): not only level of development but “weak democracy syndrome”: low levels of democracy to begin with, praetorian histories and, going back to earlier work, crises (Haggard and Kaufman 1995)
 - Mainwaring and Bizarro: similar, plus “good vs. bad neighborhoods”

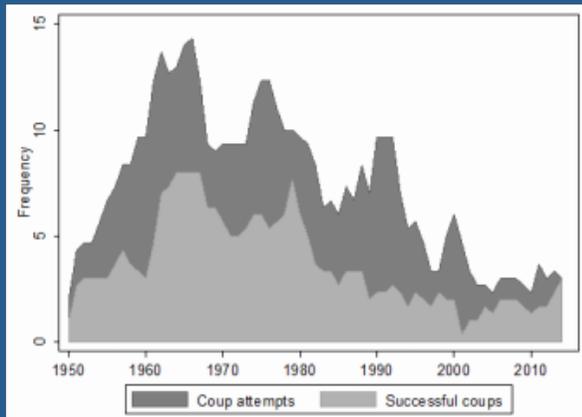
TABLE 1—BREAKDOWNS

Country	Transition	Breakdown	Country	Transition	Breakdown
Armenia	1990	1996	Nepal	2009	2011
Bangladesh	1992	2005	Nicaragua	1990	2008
Belarus	1992	1996	Niger	2000	2009
Burkina Faso	1993	2015	Peru	1981	1992
Comoros	2007	2015	Philippines	1988	2004
Dominican Rep.	1982	1990	Russia	1992	2000
Fiji	1993	2000	Serbia	2001	2017
Fiji	2002	2007	Solomon Is.	1978	1999
Ghana	1980	1981	Sri Lanka	1995	2005
Honduras	1990	2010	Suriname	1976	1980
Macedonia	1998	2012	Tanzania	1996	2001
Madagascar	1994	2001	Tanzania	2006	2016
Malawi	1995	2004	Thailand	1997	2006
Maldives	2009	2014	Turkey	1988	2014
Mali	1993	2012	Ukraine	1994	1998
Moldova	1992	2005	Ukraine	2006	2014
Montenegro	2003	2007	Zambia	1994	2014

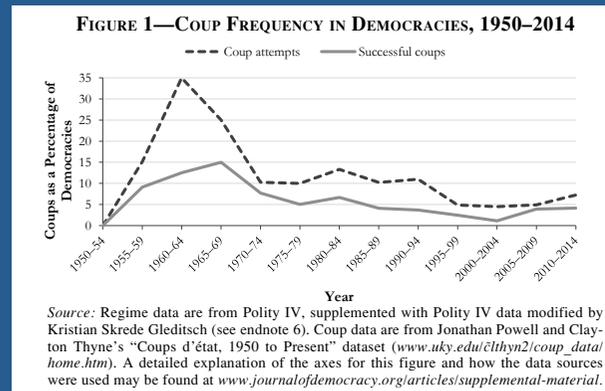
Backsliding

- More ambiguous causal processes
- The decline of the coup, including both military and civilian/executive coups (*autogolpes*, as in Peru; Powell and Thyne 2014)
 - The nuance of “promissory” coups with mixed results
- Rather, “executive aggrandizement” (Bermeo 2018) on the part of democratically-elected governments and autocrats

The Declining Incidence of Coups... (Powell and Thyne)



...and Against Democracies in Particular (Bermeo 2018)



Bermeo on Backsliding

- ...when elected executives weaken checks on executive power one by one, undertaking a series of institutional changes that hamper the power of opposition forces to challenge executive preferences. The disassembling of institutions...is done through legal channels, often using newly elected constitutional assemblies or referenda. Existing courts or legislatures may also be used, in cases where supporters of the executive gain majority control of such bodies. Indeed, the defining feature of executive aggrandizement is that institutional change is either put to some sort of vote or legally decreed by a freely elected official—meaning that the change can be framed as having resulted from a democratic mandate.

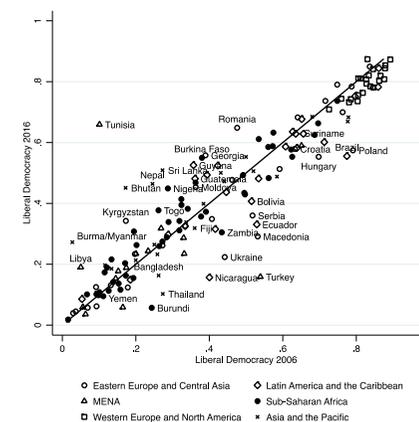
Backsliding II

- Among new democracies, wide debate on causes and whether stable
 - Mainwaring and Bizarro (2018) identify “stagnation” as an equilibrium—low-levels of democracy—but that deterioration typically ends in regime change (citing only Poland and Ecuador)
 - Slater 2013 on careening, Lust and Waldner (2018); Bermeo (2018), the V-Dem group (Luhman et. al, Mechkova).
- **The US and advanced industrial states debate**
 - Frum (2017), Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), Sunstein (2018), Huq and Ginsberg (2018), Mounk (2018), Lawfare

Complex Issues of Measurement

- (Easily) observed outcomes—coups, shuttering of legislatures—vs. latent variables and above all ambiguity
- The three constitutive components of democracy
 - The integrity of elections (for example gerrymandering and vote suppression)
 - Horizontal checks, independence of the judiciary and rule of law (for example, weakening independent centers of expertise or delegated authorities such as central banks)
 - The protection of rights and liberties, not only core rights such as speech and assembly (assaults on integrity of the press) but disfavored minorities (immigrants, refugees, LGBTQ)
- Incrementalism and “normalization”

FIGURE 4. BACKSLIDING AND ADVANCING COUNTRIES, 2006 TO 2016



Note: The figure depicts V-Dem's Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) ranging from 0 (not democratic) to 1 (fully democratic). V-Dem Data Set Version 7.0.

Countries with Net Increases and Declines in Freedom House Scores 2006-2016



Democratic Decline in the US

- Where to look for comparators given no reversions among advanced industrial states?
 - The interwar period (Linz and Stepan, Capoccia, Levitsky and Ziblatt)
 - Middle-income countries that for both structural (Przeworski et. al. 2000) and political reasons (“consolidation”) appeared anomalous reversions (Haggard and Kaufman 2016, ch. 8)

Democratic Decline in the US

- Using V-Dem data, middle-income countries with at least 8 years of “reasonable” democracy ($> .5$) that subsequently experience statistically-significant declines
 - Currently considering lower thresholds
 - Advantage of identifying “episodes” rather than changes over fixed time periods
- Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Macedonia, Nicaragua, Poland, Serbia, South Korea
- ...but as with many others, honing in on Turkey, Hungary and Venezuela as anomalous

A Stylized Sequence: “Baskets” of Causal Variables

- Polarization
 - We focus on mass polarization, and can be socio-economic (inequality generally; trade, technology or urban-rural related), ethnic-tribal (around immigration in US and Britain; Abranjo and Hajnal 2015); or cultural (elite resentment; for example Kramer 2016)...
 - ...but need to think about elite roles more carefully (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018 put more weight on norms, elite consensus and “guardrails,” including through parties)

Polarization

- Effects
 - Undermines faith in political institutions, contributes to dysfunction, weakens the center and incentivizes anti-system/populist appeals that demonize oppositions
 - Svoboda model (2018): polarization induces acquiescence to bad elite behavior
- Majoritarian conceptions of democracy

The Crucial Role of Legislatures

- Distinctive feature of backsliding: that legislatures delegate power to presidents (Venezuela, or Turkey shifting between the two systems) or party leaders in parliamentary systems (Hungary)
 - In Venezuela and perhaps other cases, the formation of parallel “constitutive assemblies”
 - Supermajorities permit constitutional revisions
 - Via regular legislation
 - Via deference and acquiescence to abuse

Backsliding as Process

- Back to Bermeo: the hunch that the process itself is not just an outcome but exerts causal effect
 - Ratchet effects that ultimately tilt the electoral playing field
 - The media and judiciary early in the process?
 - Law enforcement
 - Corruption, and building private sector support (Balint Magyar on Poland;
 - Endgame: undermining integrity of elections, direct attacks on oppositions and civil society
 - Attenuation of rights, including not only basic liberties but of marginal groups that are part of mobilizational strategy (immigrants and refugees, LGBTQ, the Trump ban on transgender in the military)

The US Case in Brief: Polarization

- Polarization: the US debate on class, race/ethnicity and their connections
 - Even prior to uptick in inequality and effects of global financial crisis, the longer history of party realignment on race going back to Nixon Southern strategy (Mickey, Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018)
 - For example, class and status anxieties triggering views on immigration, even in districts where no contact
 - The alt-right goes mainstream

Polarization

- Left populism
 - Shattering the Republican (and Democratic) parties on trade
 - But ethnicity and immigration dominant, most obviously in current shutdown
- Key difference with other cases: *not* an electoral majority nor now a legislative one

Institutions

- Sources of Congressional acquiescence
 - The primary problem and the “party of Trump”
 - To date, acquiescence on conflicts of interest
 - Common interests on taxes and particularly judicial appointments (underappreciated; McConnell)
- Congressional pushback (and dysfunction)
 - Failures on Obamacare, spending and immigration...
 - ...now pushback on trade policy
 - The unknown limits on collusion and Mueller

Institutions II

- But highly unlikely that Congress would cede power to executive
 - And not only because of supermajority and political constraints...
 - ...but because of Constitutional hurdles to amendment and ultimately norms of protecting prerogatives
 - And hopefully, judicial and other institutional independence (although with doubts on that score given appointments)

Backsliding

- Surprising level of judicial pushback on executive orders and Trump actions
- Nonetheless, the laundry list
 - The assault on the media and the promotion of cognitive polarization
 - The demonization of immigrants—most of which are citizens—blacks (NFL debate), transgender in military and the rise of hate crimes and decentralized violence
 - The debates about policing
 - Dogwhistle politics more generally
 - **Acquiescence or even encouragement of vote suppression and gerrymandering**

Conclusion: Backsliding

- While in middle-income countries risk of outright reversion are clear
 - Mainwaring and Bizarro (2018): is middle-income backsliding stable?
- The optimistic school: Trump as an anomaly and the theory of “bounce back” and resilience
- But alternative: Slater’s (2013) “careening” or Carother’s “feckless democracy,” characterized by
 - Ongoing polarization and party swings
 - More overt politicization and delegitimation of judiciary
 - Cognitive polarization
 - Government dysfunction
 - Anomie, decline in trust in government and decentralized social violence