

Public Political Attitudes and Democracy: Responding to and Enabling Backsliding

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the impact of political polarization, nationalism, demographic threat, and social group equality on democratic backsliding from 2013 to 2021, testing the implications of theories proposed by scholars of democratic quality and national and ethnic politics. A linear regression analysis finds that political polarization correlates with greater levels of backsliding, while social group equality correlates with lesser backsliding. Importantly, it also finds that countries with higher initial levels of democracy have greater levels of backsliding, suggesting that democracies are inherently unstable instead of consolidating. Then, through a case study on the Trump presidency in the United States, this paper argues that public priorities for partisan platforms, national order, and dominant ethnic status can undermine democratic quality as voters favor other interests over democracy.

KEYWORDS: Democratic backsliding; political polarization; nationalism; demographic threat; public opinion.

■ Introduction

Unlike earlier autocratizations, which were mainly achieved through coup d'états or auto-coups with clear transitions between regimes, contemporary de-democratization appears to be gradual, incremental, and initiated by elected leaders, and does not always result in a full reversion to autocracy.¹ This trend has inspired a new field of political scholarship analyzing democratic backsliding, defined as “a deterioration of qualities associated with democratic governance, within any regime”.¹ Studies on democratic backsliding are important because they help diagnose symptoms and causes of backsliding.

In this paper, I examine variables related to democratic backsliding, political polarization, nationalism, social group equality, and demographic threat. These variables are explored because they have been explored in the fields of public opinion, political theory, philosophy, and psychology but have not been context. These factors are important because while institutional actors may initiate backsliding, their decisions take place in response to the political environment provided by the public. In addition, I introduce the initial level of democracy as an independent variable to evaluate if there is a systemic feedback effect of democratic quality on itself.

I introduce a quantitative component to my methodology to complement and provide a concrete basis for my theories. I use regressions to link backsliding to other developments in public opinion, and social change drawn from various disciplines and test which of these variables are significant predictors of backsliding. The benefits of a regression lie in demonstrating a statistically significant correlation between the variables of interest. Then, I conduct a case study on democratic backsliding in the United States under Donald Trump to elaborate on some proposed causal mechanisms.

My regression results confirm the theory of deconsolidation by revealing a negative correlation between the initial level of democracy and the change in democracy, implying that highly

democratic countries are inclined to undergo decreases rather than further increases in democratic quality. Additionally, I find that political polarization negatively correlates with change in democracy, which means that more polarized countries experience backsliding to a greater extent. I find that social group equality correlates positively with change in democracy. In a second regression, I find that social group equality correlates positively with liberal democracy and political polarization. Still, that demographic threat to the majority ethnic group is not statistically significant, which suggests that demographic changes do not necessarily provoke a hostile political response.

In the following section, I review the literature on democratic backsliding as an inherent rather than anomalous phenomenon and on social and public opinion factors that could enable it.

■ Literature Review and Hypothesis

Inherent instability and deconsolidation:

Traditional scholarship holds that democracy creates its own demand, as democratic countries teach citizens liberal democratic values from a young age, and citizens uphold their rights after being able to experience them directly.² According to this line of traditional scholarship, consolidated democracies should maintain stable levels of high democracy. At the same time, authoritarian countries, without such a virtuous cycle, should exhibit consistently low levels of democracy.³ However, this paradigm fails to explain recent cases of declining democratic support in previously stable democracies, which has been conceptualized as “democratic deconsolidation.”⁴ To explain deconsolidation, the thermostatic model holds that public opinion moves contrary to policy output as the governing coalition overshoots the mean individual since the governing coalition appeals to the mean member of their coalition rather than the mean member of the general public.⁵ Applying the thermostatic model to democracy, Christopher Claassen⁶ showed that “increases in democracy dampen public mood, while decreases cheer it,” where mood is defined as “explicit

while decreases cheer it,” where mood is defined as “explicit support for democracy versus autocracy.” Specifically, counter-majoritarian, liberal aspects of democracy, such as checks on executive authority and respect for minority rights, cause backlash.⁶

I aim to confirm that democracy undermines rather than reinforces itself. Instead of examining Claassen’s mechanism, I test its implication using scholarly metrics of democratic quality to construct both my dependent and independent variables, which produces high internal consistency. My results can be used to make cross-national inferences.

H1: Initial democracy correlates negatively with change in democracy

External factors of democratic backsliding:

Public opinion factors present a concrete opportunity for quantitative studies, but so far lacks a wealth of mathematical analysis; Waldner and Lust¹ state that a limitation of existing socio-political theories is “the inability to generalize findings beyond the small number of case studies included in a study.” I perform a cross-national, quantitative analysis for two such dynamics, political polarization, and demographic threat, and reserve a third, nationalism, for further examination in my case study.

Polarization:

To extrapolate the relationship between polarization and democracy, I explore existing research on polarization and election behavior. According to Milan Svolik⁷, political polarization—where “most voters have a strong preference for their favorite candidate or party”—allows incumbents to subvert democracy through electoral manipulation. When their supporters strongly prefer their policies, punishing their undemocratic behavior means voters must support an opposition candidate they hate.⁷ In other words, in polarized societies, voters cannot afford to switch their vote for democratic reasons because the cost of policy preferences is high, acting as “partisans first and democrats only second.”⁸ This theory was corroborated by an experiment in Indonesia, which showed that participants did indeed betray liberal democratic institutions when exposed to partisan cues; notably, these results held up to a clientelist political system and high democratic support locally.⁹ Other studies have presented choices between different sets of candidate matchups, with either pro-democratic or anti-democratic positions in addition to left-right policy positions, to illustrate the same phenomenon.^{7,8} I predict that these undemocratic voter choices caused by polarization should, over an election cycle, produce a more undemocratic government. So, more polarized countries will have greater backsliding.

H2: Political polarization correlates negatively with change in democracy

Nationalism:

To determine whether nationalism enables, counteracts, or has no effect on backsliding, I review competing theories from political philosophy regarding the compatibility of nationalism with liberal democracy. Nationalism is “an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity, and identity for a population which some of its members deem to constitute an actual or potential nation”¹³, where the nation

is both homogenous and superior to the individual.¹⁰ Amir Yazici¹⁰ argued that “constant pursuit of national unity leads governments to repress minorities and violate empowerment rights” and “prioritization of collective national interests over individuals’ interests increases practices such as extrajudicial killing, disappearance, torture, and political imprisonment.” Albert Dzur¹¹ argued that nationalism merely fulfills the associational bonds necessary for a polity when democratic participation fails to do so. In his words, “national identity often serves to distract from the structural repairs in liberal-democratic institutions”.¹¹

Yazici¹⁰ contributed a quantitative element to the debate, showing that nationalism negatively correlates with various human rights indicators across 49 countries, which supports a competing view of nationalism and democracy as in conflict. I argue that nationalist doctrine can force voters to go against democratic principles, but, recognizing the limitations of a single quantitative metric in adequately capturing nuanced philosophical disputes, I reserve this variable to be further explored in the case study. I believe that this measure of nationalism, as a preference over democracy, enables backsliding.

Demographic threat and hostility toward minorities:

I refer to literature on demography and intolerance, which I then connect to democracy, which I then connect. Studies in political psychology have found that the perception of an increasing minority ethnic group population activates the majority group’s perceived threat to their social status as the empowered and dominant group; this, in turn, increases the majority group’s antipathy toward minorities, in-group affiliation, and support of anti-minority policy positions.¹²⁻¹⁴ This is consistent with more general findings that perceived threat is negatively correlated with political tolerance and positively with ideological authoritarianism.^{15,16}

While such psychological studies have demonstrated the effect of perceived demographic threat, I examine the role of actual demographic change and its relationship to democratic backsliding. Existing literature shows that actual demographic threat in communities has much less impact on anti-immigrant and in-group attitudes than a perceived threat because positive intergroup interaction counteracts the effect of perceived threat. However, it has also been noted that positive interactions may be less relevant on the scale of a cross-national survey.^{12,14} In turn, hostility toward minorities is connected to democratic backsliding through Inglehart and Welzel’s¹⁵ findings that a political culture of tolerance and self-expression determines the quality of democracy, given that hostility toward minorities is a prevalent form of intolerance. I perform a systematic cross-national test for the actual demographic threat theory, reaffirm the importance of tolerance, and connect the two to yield important insights on backsliding. I predict that demographic threat correlates negatively with social group equality, which then positively correlates with a change in democracy. Hostility toward minorities is hypothesized to be the mechanism that connects demographic threats to social group equality. However, this variable is unobserved, so statistical inferences cannot be made about it.

H3: Demographic threat correlates negatively with social group equality

H4: Social group equality correlates positively with change in democracy

■ Methods

Democratic backsliding:

Data was retrieved from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) liberal democracy scores, which rated countries on a continuous scale from 0 to 1 by aggregating experts' survey responses on several dimensions of liberal democracy.^{16,17} Change in democracy was calculated as a country's score in 2013 subtracted from its score in 2021, with bounds [-1, 1]. A negative change in democracy indicates backsliding, while a positive change in democracy indicates improvement. Importantly for studying backsliding, V-Dem captures variation between gradients of democratic quality better than other metrics, which tend to compress scores toward extremes.^{18,19}

Polarization:

Data were retrieved from V-Dem's^{16,17} political polarization indicator, which gathered expert survey responses to the question, "Is society polarized into antagonistic, political camps?"

Demographic threat:

Demographic threat, a dummy variable, was determined to be present if the plurality ethnic group's size as a proportion of the total population decreased by more than 5 percentage points from 1993 to 2013 and resulted in a proportion of the total population before 75 percent. Data was taken from the CREG dataset, which records the relative sizes of ethnic groups in the country by year.²⁰

Ethnicity-based oppression:

Data was taken from V-Dem's^{16,17} social group equality with respect for civil rights indicator, which gathered expert survey responses to the question, "Do all social groups, as distinguished by language, ethnicity, religion, race, region, or caste, enjoy the same level of civil liberties, or are some groups generally in a more favorable position?" Although this metric considers factors other than ethnicity, it should sufficiently capture changes in ethnic power dynamics if the effect is significant.

Model:

In my first regression, I chose change in democracy (or negative backsliding) as my dependent variable and initial liberal democracy, polarization, and social group equality, as measured in 2013, as my independent variables. Since my independent variables are measured before my dependent variable, this model removes the possibility of reverse causation. In my second regression, I chose social group equality in 2013 as my dependent variable and the demographic threat from 1993 to 2013 as my primary independent variable of interest; I also entered Initial social group equality, liberal democracy, and polarization in 1993 as covariates. Since V-Dem ratings are compilations of qualitative measures without tangible interpretations, I standardize all variables except for the dummy for demographic threat.

Summary statistics for each of my regression variables are shown in Appendix A

■ Results and Discussion

Table 1: Predicting Change in Democracy

	Coefficients and Standard Errors
Liberal democracy (2013)	-0.440*** (0.097)
Polarization (2013)	-0.182** (0.080)
Social group equality (2013)	0.171* (0.094)
Constant	0.000 (0.071)
R-sq	0.11
N	179

Note: Table entries are standardized regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is the change in democracy from 2013 to 2021 (standardized).
*p < .10; **p < .05; ***p < .01

Table 2: Predicting Social Group Equality

	Coefficients and Standard Errors
Demographic threat	0.106 (0.131)
Social group equality (1993)	0.795*** (0.053)
Liberal democracy (1993)	0.180*** (0.055)
Polarization (1993)	0.130*** (0.047)
Constant	-0.003 (0.042)
R-sq	0.76
N	154

Note: Table entries are standardized regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. The coefficient for demographic threat, a dummy variable, is unstandardized. The dependent variable was social group equality in 2013.
*p < .10; **p < .05; ***p < .01

■ Discussion

Table 1 shows that backsliding occurred to a greater extent in countries with higher initial levels of democracy. Specifically, a 1 standard deviation increase in the initial level of democracy made the change in democracy more negative by -0.440 standard deviations. This confirms Foa and Mounk's⁴ concept of deconsolidation by demonstrating that more democratic countries not only fail to remain stable, but they are also more prone to decline. Though I did not capture the mechanism of public attitudes toward democracy, this finding is also consistent with Claassen's⁶ thermostatic hypothesis, in which a high level of democracy undermines, rather than reinforces, itself. This result suggests inherent instability in democratic quality in the time range studied.

As expected, political polarization negatively correlated with change in democratic quality, with a 1 standard deviation increase in the extent of political polarization correlating with a -0.182 standard deviation decrease in the change in democracy. Also, social group equality positively correlated with change in democratic quality, confirming that countries with more equality in terms of civil liberties have a more positive change in democratic quality. A 1 standard deviation increase in social group equality correlated with a 0.171 standard deviation increase in change in democracy.

As reported in Table 2, the second regression investigates factors in 1993 that correlate with social group equality in 2013. In particular, the independent variable of interest is whether the majority ethnic group experienced a demographic threat over this time period. I find that the relationship between the presence of demographic threat and social group

equality is not statistically significant ($p = 0.418$). In fact, the coefficient is positive ($\beta = 0.106$), suggesting that diversifying demographics could even improve interethnic power dynamics if positive interethnic interactions outweigh the effect of perceived threat. Additionally, the initial level of liberal democracy positively correlates with social group equality, with a 1 standard deviation increase in the former associated with a 0.180 standard deviation increase in the latter even after controlling for initial social group equality, suggesting that the broader integrity of democratic institutions improves protection for the civil liberties of marginalized ethnic groups. Surprisingly, political polarization positively correlates with social group equality, implying that more politically fractured countries have less discrimination given an equivalent starting point.

To further elaborate on the mechanisms of democratic backsliding, I examine the roots of democratic backsliding in the United States.

■ Case Study

I investigate democratic backsliding under President Donald Trump in the United States as a case study to demonstrate and exemplify how the independent variables in Study 2 interacted with democratic backsliding. This case study can help understand the theoretical mechanisms by which my independent variables affect democratic backsliding and why my quantitative methodology may have failed to capture these mechanisms.

The United States was chosen as a case study because it exemplifies how my independent variables interact with democratic quality. Also, the United States has experienced democratic backsliding, political polarization, rising nationalism, and demographic change, which, in addition to being a popular subject of study for scholars due to its geopolitical significance, allows for a plethora of data and research to be available on each of the phenomena discussed. These three variables provided a public opinion setting receptive to Trump, who “trampled institutional and normative checks on its authority,”²¹ most notably disrupting the peaceful transfer of power after the 2020 elections.^{22,23}

Bonikowski²⁴ identified Trump’s threats to prosecute election opponent Hillary Clinton, the firing of FBI director James Comey, encouragement of violence at his rallies, and condemnation of the media, judiciary, and social protest as important elements of his subversion of democratic norms since they discredited checks to his authority. Levitsky and Ziblatt²⁵ proposed that these violations of “mutual tolerance” and “procedural forbearance” can, even while remaining within the bounds of the law, undermine democratic quality by illegitimizing opposition, shutting down civic discourse, and creating an opportunity to threaten the peaceful transfer of power. Oliver and Rahn²⁶ found that Trump’s mobilization of the public in 2016 was unusual and unique in its appeals to populism and ethnocultural nationalism.

Polarization:

Between 2004 and 2014, the Democratic and Republican parties adopted more unfavorable views of the opposing party and became more internally ideologically homogeneous.²⁷

This increase in partisan polarization has meant that partisans “treat core party issues as immune to debate,”²⁸ which contradicts the mutual tolerance for the legitimacy of opponents’ arguments that Levitsky and Ziblatt²⁵ found to be necessary to prevent backsliding. Moreover, by fostering significant aversion toward the opposing candidate, polarization allowed Trump’s illiberal rhetoric to be unpunished by his voters. In 2016, 53% of Republicans and 46% of Democrats reported that they voted against the opposing party’s candidate more so than in favor of their party’s candidate.²⁹

Because Trump won without broad popularity even within his coalition, he faced less voter accountability, enabling him to perform undemocratic actions as outlined above.³⁰ Trump, in fact, leveraged this by saying that “you have no choice but to vote for me” because of his favorable economic policies, implicitly claiming license to disobey norms without electoral consequences.³¹ This is also consistent with Lenz³², who found that voters more easily adapt their policy preferences than their candidates.

Ethnocultural nationalism and demographic threat:

While explicit personal prejudice in the United States has declined in recent years, institutional and policy racism, which relates to implicit personal prejudice, has been rising. Between 1980 and 2019, the White population in the United States decreased from a dominant majority of nearly 80% to 60.1%, and Whites are projected to comprise a minority of the total population by 2045.^{33,34} Many Whites perceive this seismic demographic shift as a perceived threat to ethnic, social dominance. 28% of White census respondents said that having a majority-minority country was very or somewhat bad, compared to only 26% who said it was very or somewhat good.³⁵ More strikingly, 55% of white Americans said that they believe discrimination against white people exists, reflecting a sense of victimhood.³⁶

The perceived threat to dominance made white voters more hostile toward ethnic minorities. Electorally, this was manifested in increased support for Donald Trump in 2016 among voters who feared cultural displacement, who then carried out policies furthering discrimination.³⁷ While explicit personal prejudice, measured by my methodology, declined significantly in America from 2007 to 2016, institutional racism has seen an uptick in recent years.^{38,39} The Trump administration defunded the Civil Rights Division and curtailed the Department of Justice’s oversight of discriminatory police departments. Discriminatory immigration policies that targeted Muslims and Hispanics violated human rights norms.²¹ Freedom House stated that systemic racial inequality deteriorated in recent years, adversely impacting the United States’ political equality, a component of democratic quality.²¹

Analysis:

For political polarization, this case study corroborated Svoлик⁷, showing that partisan polarization in the United States bound voters to Trump and his undemocratic actions. For nationalism, Trump’s rhetoric betrayed democratic norms of civil speech by exploiting an appetite for relentless nationalism, using national unity and security to legitimize undemocratic proposals. For demographic threat, white voters in the Unit

ed States interpreted a majority-minority future as a threat, which informed racist and undemocratic policies.

■ Conclusion

I find that democratic quality is inherently unstable instead of reinforcing itself, corroborating theories of deconsolidation and a thermostat model for democratic support. I also find that political polarization is associated with backsliding, likely because it causes voters to neglect defending democracy. While social group equality is negatively associated with backsliding, the relationship between it and demographic threat is insignificant. This implies that increasing ethnic diversity does not necessarily forebode a decline in democracy. My case study on the United States illustrates that subversion of democratic norms is enabled and encouraged by political polarization and ethnocultural nationalism. Most essentially, across these different variables, my results suggest that the public can enable democratic backsliding without explicit support for an authoritarian alternative simply by refusing to defend liberal democracy, instead favoring pursuing other political priorities.

My paper also provides opportunities for future research to confirm these general findings with more empirically rigorous measures to capture my variables. While V-Dem is effective in describing phenomena in aspects of democratic quality, analyzing survey data, if it can be acquired reliably across countries and years, would more accurately capture public opinion and thereby elucidate some of my hypothesized mechanisms.

This paper also raises broader theoretical questions. For nationalism, to what extent and in what ways liberal nationalism can exist before it competes with and potentially overrides democracy is a question for further research. For polarization, researchers of party institutions should aim to identify how parties can be structured to capture ideological diversity and polarization while preserving voter choice without partisan polarization as a corollary. For demographic threat, political psychologists should examine why the perceived threat to social dominance increases authoritarian tendencies. Also, research should continue studying connections between personal prejudice and systemic discrimination and how micro-level racism interacts with meso- or macro-level institutions.⁴⁰

Besides introducing avenues for further research, this paper contributes to existing scholarship on democratic backsliding by introducing the comparative method to test theories presented by Foa and Mounk⁴ and Claassen⁶ on deconsolidation, by Svobik⁷ on polarization and candidate choice, and by several psychologists and sociologists regarding demographic change and hostility toward minorities. I confirm the statistical significance of inherent instability, polarization, and social group equality as predictors of backsliding. While the relationship between demographic threat and social group equality was insignificant, my case study showed that ethnocultural nationalism, as detailed by Yazici¹⁰, undermined civil liberties for ethnic minorities in the United States. As anti-democratic actors within democratic states worldwide seek to undermine democracy, entering pivotal conflicts against institutions and

pro-democratic actors that will set the trajectory of political developments, this study provides a contextual understanding of what public environments assist backsliding and how they do so.

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■ Appendix

Table 3: Summary statistics for each of my regression variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Change in democracy	-0.023	0.095	-0.409	0.341
Liberal democracy (2013)	0.411	0.273	0.007	0.895
Polarization (2013)	-0.132	1.341	-3.817	2.958
Social group equality (2013)	0.919	1.189	-2.319	3.511
Social group equality (1993)	0.768	1.249	-2.714	3.043
Liberal democracy (1993)	0.361	0.273	0.014	0.884
Polarization (1993)	-0.218	1.394	-3.761	3.140

Note: Demographic threat is excluded since it is a dummy variable. 16 observations had a recorded value of 1 (threat present), and 138 observations had a recorded value of 0 (threat absent).