

Bibliographic essay

Erosion of Democracy and Autocratisation: Non-apocalyptic Approaches

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The twentieth century earned the name of the “century of democratisation” due to the number and quality of political systems that adopted this form of government during that period. Despite the promising outlook that could have been expected following the various waves of democracy (in particular, the third wave), the trend reversed in the final decade of the twentieth century (Carothers, 2002). The first quarter of the twenty-first century has seen a global move in the opposite direction. A large number of countries, whether liberal democracies, electoral democracies, hybrid regimes, or competitive or electoral autocracies, have experienced or are currently experiencing democratic erosion and backsliding in their institutions.

The leading organisations that conduct rigorous empirical analysis and monitoring of the quality of democracies (Varieties of Democracy [V-Dem] Institute, Freedom House, Economist Intelligence Unit, IDEA International...) have repeatedly provided evidence of a *third wave of autocratisation* worldwide (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019). Leaders and parties either regarded as populist or using populist strategies attain executive power (and often legislative power) through democratic means. Once in office, however, they proceed to erode the institutions and processes of the system. This includes restricting the freedoms of citizens and groups, as well as the rights of minorities; *aggrandising* their executive powers by straining constitutional provisions and the rule of law, either amending or violating them, thereby extending their own authority at the expense of other institutions such as the legislative power, the judiciary and independent oversight bodies; weakening or *capturing* these oversight institutions, nullifying their functions and their capacity for control; curtailing press freedom and media criticism, censoring or eliminating critical outlets; restricting or eliminating the opposition’s capacity to act, weakening it and subjecting its organisations and leaders to criminal prosecution; as well as altering, distorting and manipulating electoral rules, while still holding periodical elections, thus stripping them of their character as free and fair contests. They carry out all these transformations gradually and surreptitiously, almost covertly, hiding behind a facade of democratic legality that clearly distinguishes them from the dictators and autocrats of the past. This has earned the autocrats of the twenty-first century the label of “spin dictators” or “new autocrats” (Guriev and Treisman, 2022).



According to the data provided by these monitoring organisations, the result is a widespread erosion of the democratic attributes of political institutions, leading to *deterioration*, *backsliding*, *decline*, *de-democratisation* or even to *democratic breakdown*. Whatever the label used (Cassani and Tomini, 2018), the outcome is that these are genuinely auto-cratising trends. At the very least, they involve a deterioration in the democratic quality of the system in question; at worst, they result in it being transformed into an authoritarian regime. Most of these transformations are implemented on the grounds that they are in fact necessary to improve the existing democratic institutions to establish a “true” democracy, hiding under the umbrella of populist arguments and their strategies. These transformations very often involve eliminating the classic intermediary organisations found in liberal democracy (which, it is claimed, have corrupted the system and betrayed the citizens they are supposed to represent); radicalising and polarising competition with traditional political parties (which do not always remain untouched by this drift); and *affectively* polarising their respective citizens, among whom they ultimately find considerable support in subsequent elections. According to the empirical evidence presented, these processes have taken us back to the level of democracy that existed in the world in 1978, before the effects of the third wave of democratisation began to unfold.

In parallel to the above, a new and extensive academic field of study has emerged concerning *autocratisation* and *democratic backsliding*. Over the past decade, a number of books and academic articles have appeared which have provocatively heralded the death of liberal democracy: Levitsky and Ziblatt (*How Democracies Die*, 2018); Mounk (*People Vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom is in Danger*, 2018); Runciman (*How Democracy Ends*, 2017); and Galston (*Anti-Pluralism: The Populist Threat to Liberal Democracy*, 2018), among others. Academic journals have published a substantial body of papers providing detailed empirical analyses of these trends, their intensity and their various dimensions, including causes, manifestations, measurement and effects (see the first article in this special issue of the *REIS*).

Nevertheless, this academic output has also entailed other contributions which, unlike the alarmist or pessimistic tone of the works mentioned above, have provided compelling empirical evidence to argue for the resilience of most democratic regimes. These contributions have qualified the actual impact that this autocratic trend may have on the quality, stability and durability of democracies. By way of example, this study will briefly analyse three excellent works that have adopted a more optimistic stance from different perspectives. Their respective authors have warned of the risks involved and recommended continuing to be mindful of the dangers of autocratic erosion. Yet they have continued to find sufficiently robust institutional and attitudinal mechanisms in liberal democracies and among their citizens to successfully withstand the autocratic assaults of those who seek to destroy democratic regimes gradually and surreptitiously.

DEMOCRACY ERODES FROM THE TOP: LEADERS, CITIZENS, AND THE CHALLENGE OF POPULISM IN EUROPE

Bartels, Larry M. (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2023)

Larry Bartels' starting point is his disagreement with those who proclaim the death of democracies: he rejects their alarmism, their apocalyptic tone and what he considers to be

gross exaggerations regarding the “danger of collapse” of liberal democracy. He is convinced that many of these judgements have not taken sufficient account of the attitudes and preferences of the public. And that is precisely the aim of this book: to analyse the potential crisis of democracy in the light of the opinions and attitudes of European citizens; and to do so on the conviction that most of the actions that erode political systems are neither taken nor carried out by those citizens (nor are they based on their attitudes). Rather, Bartels argues that those actions are performed by political leaders whose ambition has little regard for liberal democracy, as Nancy Bermeo noted as early as 2003 (pp. 221 and 222).

The hypothesis of the book is that there is no evidence that can be consistently identified as being indicative of a crisis of democracy among public opinion across Europe and in individual European countries (either collectively or individually). This evidence is generally understood to have originated in the *Great Recession* or the *Euro-crisis* that began with the financial crisis of 2008 (p. 6): Economic disaffection, antipathy to immigration and European integration, ideological polarisation, distrust of and detachment from political elites, and dissatisfaction with the workings of democracy itself (and the substantial impact of these attitudes on support for right-wing populist parties). To test this hypothesis, Bartels analyses the attitudes of citizens in 23 European countries, using data from the European Social Survey from various waves between 2002 and 2019. As can be anticipated, Bartels’ analysis of public opinion attitudes finds no empirical support for the claim that democratic decline exists. He therefore concludes that the erosion democracies may be experiencing is due mainly to the actions of political elites: erosion “from the top”.

The opening chapters of the book are devoted to analysing the impact that the consequences of the Great Recession and the austerity policies implemented to manage it may have had on citizens’ political and social attitudes, particularly those relating to immigration, European integration, social services and the objectives of the welfare state. Surprisingly, “both functionally and politically, the European welfare state emerged from the Euro-crisis in remarkably good shape”, in the view of European citizens. Bartels notes sustained support for the objectives and policies of the welfare state and for European integration, and argues that the Euro-crisis had no impact on the public’s attitudes in this regard. He reaches the same conclusion regarding any change in attitudes towards emigration, despite the continued flows of migrants to European countries and what has been called the “refugee crisis” of 2015 and 2016. Despite the prevailing negative rhetoric on immigration among many leaders and in the media, public attitudes scarcely changed during the period under review. And where they did change, it was in the direction of an increase in positive and welcoming views towards immigration (partly thanks to generational change). Bartels only finds more hostility in certain conservative countries where prominent nationalist political leaders have waged intense anti-immigration campaigns.

An assessment of more distinctly political attitudes led Bartels to similar conclusions: over the two decades examined, there were only a few brief changes in terms of ideological polarisation, levels of trust in institutions and democratic leaders, and the degree of satisfaction with the functioning of democracy. These values have remained remarkably stable over time, and if they ever experience a decline, they recover quickly. Widespread declines in these levels are observed wherever and whenever dissatisfaction and disaffection with the management of the economy come to the fore. The political frustration felt by the pub-

lic as a result of the economic crisis was, for the most part, “modest in magnitude and of short duration”, with pre-crisis levels being quickly restored once the harmful economic effects of the crisis had subsided. For Bartels, the conclusion of this empirical analysis is unequivocal: “If Europe is experiencing a crisis of democracy, most Europeans seem not to have gotten the message” (pp. 145 and 13).

Having established that basic political-democratic attitudes among the population have barely changed, Bartels studies their relationship with the supposed “populist explosion” or “populist wave” recorded globally, and in Europe in particular, over recent decades. To analyse this, the author examines the foundations of electoral support for 16 radical right-wing populist parties in Europe from a longitudinal perspective and in relation to the variables typically associated with explanations of populism and with the evolution of their respective levels of electoral support. He found no evidence to support a link between the consequences of the economic crisis and the rise in support for radical right-wing populist parties. According to Bartels, levels of right-wing populist sentiment have not changed substantially since the start of the century, and the effects of the Euro-crisis “did nothing at all to ‘fuel the flames’” (p. 148). The conclusion is that, despite what the media often suggest, the share of the vote achieved by these parties has, in fact, been rather modest, with few substantial changes, apart from occasional fluctuations in one country or another. These data leads the author to qualify this supposed “explosion” and to deny the existence of a “populist wave” in Europe. He further argues that the increase in support for these parties and this supposed explosion have not been driven by popular demand for the populist right, but rather by the “increased ability and willingness of populist entrepreneurs to mobilize and cater to that demand” (p. 150); a demand partially neglected by traditional political elites (*representation gaps*) (p. 160). “The populist ‘wave’, such as it is, reflects changes in the behavior of political elites, not shifting public opinion” (p. 150).

Bartels concludes the book with an analysis of the relationship between right-wing populist sentiment among the population, political leaders and the erosion of democracy. Given the democratic backsliding and decline that Hungary and Poland experienced for years, he focuses on these two cases to test his hypothesis that democracy is eroded “from above” and that, ultimately, quoting Nancy Bermeo (2003: 221), “the culpability for democracy’s demise lay overwhelmingly with political elites”. To a large extent, these elites gradually erode institutions after having come to power through democratic means and by advocating an improvement in the weakened quality of democracy... This is what Bartels calls –following Stokes (2001)– “illiberalism by surprise” (p. 215). The issue at stake is therefore to ascertain to what extent citizens remain willing, or able, to keep experimenting with “surprises” in relation to their democratic institutions and processes.

DEMOCRACY’S RESILIENCE TO POPULISM’S THREAT: COUNTERING GLOBAL ALARMISM

Weyland, Kurt (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2024)

As the title of his latest book indicates, Kurt Weyland starts from the hypothesis that, while populism may pose a serious risk to the very existence of democracy, in practice there is

not much cause for alarm. Globally, democracy is proving notably resilient to this threat: in his view, liberal pluralism tends to display considerable institutional strength against the autocratic drifts so widespread in today's world.

To test his hypothesis, Weyland adopts a comparative perspective to analyse the shift in political systems that have been buffeted by populism over the last 40 years, cases in which populist governments and leaders have brought about considerable erosion and decline to democratic institutions.

In contrast to those who adopt an *ideational* conception of populism (Mudde, 2007) and those who understand it as a *political logic* (Laclau, 2005), Weyland conceives populism as a political strategy of mobilisation and organisation (Weyland, 2001). And this political strategy, by its very nature, may prove to be vastly harmful to liberal democracy: it is anti-liberal and anti-pluralist in nature, and runs counter to the institutional checks and balances that democracy imposes on political power, as well as to the safeguards for individual and minority rights.

However, in Weyland's view, this intrinsic tendency of populism in its various forms has not, on the whole, achieved its objectives. Weyland tells us that the threat has its limits and external constraints, which have enabled most of the political systems in which it has operated to outlast their governments or to recover from the temporary damage they might have inflicted. This is because populism cannot freely create the conditions necessary for its own successful development and supplant liberal democracy.

According to Weyland's examination of the cases analysed, populism can only achieve its aims when two restrictive conditions are met: institutional weakness in the political system (which widens the autocrat's room for manoeuvre) and unusual circumstances that allow populism to secure substantial electoral support (either by resolving serious economic, political and social crises, or by promoting politically-motivated economic benefits for a large part of the population). But these restrictive conditions (which Weyland calls "conjunctural opportunities") are fostered and shaped by objective, pre-existing, exogenous circumstances; and the populist leader can only perceive and capitalise on them (perhaps dramatically amplifying their harmful effects), but cannot create them at will. Where such opportunities exist, the populist leader must be able to make proper use of them to achieve their aims, which will not always be easy. Only a small number of the political regimes in which a leader has attempted to erode the democratic system have become established as authoritarian or autocratic regimes. Weyland concludes that the danger of autocratisation and democratic decline is smaller than other authors had predicted, since, in light of his analysis, democracy is considerably resilient and does not die easily.

Institutional weakness can arise from several sources: the type of system of government (presidential or parliamentary, as a parliamentary system a leader can aggrandise their power far more easily – and do so with a greater semblance of legality – by exceeding the legal limits of the formal separation of powers); a federal structure, which opens up different kinds of opportunities across various territorial units; an electoral system that is inadequately implemented or openly manipulated; and crises stemming from systemic corruption, pernicious electoral fragmentation, and so on.

The unusual circumstances that create an opportunity to widen a leader's popular (and electoral) support base can stem from a severe economic crisis (a commodities crisis, hyperinflation, offshoring, etc.) or a health crisis (COVID-19); a crisis arising from a natural disaster and the effective or ineffective management of its consequences; high levels of crime

and insecurity; international influences (to which Weyland also pays attention); or any other context that generates social and political unrest and instability. These circumstances produce a widespread sense of crisis and ungovernability among the population, which may allow the populist leaders to present themselves as the “saviour of the people” and thereby substantially expand their electoral support.

However, these two *conjunctural opportunities* —regarded as “necessary conditions”— must occur together, in Weyland’s view: they must coincide and interact. Only this combination can create the *sufficient conditions* for the populist leader to effectively erode and bring an end to the democratic regime. And many political systems have institutional, political and social mechanisms that will mitigate such crises, preventing them from becoming genuine opportunities for populist leaders to achieve their aims by bringing an end to the democratic system.

Weyland devotes several specific chapters in the book to analysing cases of right-wing neoliberal populism and left-wing Bolivarian populism in Latin America, right-wing traditionalist populism in Europe, and right-wing populism in the United States. The conclusion he draws from this analysis is that such suitable “conjunctural opportunities” rarely arise simultaneously, and it is even rarer for populist leaders to manage to use them or leverage them effectively for their own purposes. Populism, in all its forms, is (by its very nature) a dangerous threat to democracy. However, democracy has demonstrated considerable resilience, which makes it possible for democratic systems to avert or overcome that threat. Ultimately, this lessens the pertinence of alarmist narratives.

THE BACKSLIDERS. WHY LEADERS UNDERMINE THEIR OWN DEMOCRACIES

Stokes, Susan C. (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2025)

The main argument put forward in Stokes’s book is that the current erosion of democracy is caused by leaders who seek to expand their power at the expense of democratic institutions and processes. They do this by exploiting certain circumstances, chiefly the consequences of income inequality, and make use of ideological and affective polarisation strategies, as well as the denigration (or *trash-talking*) of democratic institutions and opponents. She examines these processes of autocratisation based on the well-founded conviction that they have not been as effective as is often claimed, given that democracy persists and there are still both ample opportunities and a willingness to curb this pernicious trend.

Stokes follows Laebens (2023) in conceptualising autocratisation as a process in which democratically elected presidents or prime ministers gradually aggrandise their power at the expense of that held by other political institutions (the legislature, the judiciary or supervisory bodies), straining (if not actually violating) constitutional provisions and undermining mechanisms of *vertical*, *horizontal* and *social* accountability. She analyses the main factors that have been put forward to explain these processes: the consequences of globalisation in terms of increased uncertainty and economic and income inequality; the weakness of the institutional framework; transformations in the media; growing social diversity and cultural changes (regarding values); and changes in party systems —including the emergence of new parties and unconventional leaders—.

Adopting a comparative perspective that includes cases from all five continents, she draws on a range of rigorous data sources to assess the impact of these factors. She concludes that the variables with the greatest bearing on the likelihood of autocratisation are the rise in income inequality (whether real or perceived, and driven by globalisation) and changes in party systems. These changes, which affect both traditional left-wing and right-wing parties, result in large segments of the electorate being neglected and have ultimately fostered the emergence of new populist right-wing parties and radical-left parties. These new actors (whose assumptions and strategies some traditional parties have adopted uncritically) deploy polarisation (both ideological and affective) and trash-talking strategies to fulfil their aims of eroding democratic institutions (legislators becoming ineffective, pursuing their own interests at the expense of citizens; the judiciary becoming partial and corrupt; the media growing commercialised and biased; and political parties and other intermediary organisations turning inwards, disregarding the real interests and needs of the population... This denigratory strategy earns them considerable acceptance and support among large sections of the electorate, since it weakens or forestalls a stronger democratic reaction of rejection and *counter-mobilisation* among citizens).

Backsliders thus erode the fundamental institutions of liberal democracy, while maintaining a façade of being champions of democracy for their supporters. Stokes provides evidence that levels of support for democracy as a form of government have not changed substantially among the population, not even among young people, beyond the variations produced by the life-cycle effect. The induced rise in polarisation (which radicalises public debate and reduces society's various divisions to a single dimension, "us versus them" (Somer, McCoy and Lukes, 2021) drives an increase in the tolerance of citizens who support democracy towards the backsliding that restrictions on democratic safeguards entail. The leader justifies these restrictions as essential in order to *save democracy from the threats* that traditional leaders and their followers (the out-group) pose. The result is the capture of political institutions and their weakening, if not their decline.

Furthermore, Stokes explores the psychological underpinnings of grassroots support for these trends towards the erosion of democracy. She devotes a chapter to the analysis of emotions and their manipulation at the service of backsliders' aims. Without fully engaging with the literature arising from the *affective turn* that emerged at the turn of the century (Marcus *et al.*, 2000), she distinguishes between *approach* emotions (anger/rage, indignation, enthusiasm), which trigger pro-activation and mobilisation) and *withdrawal* emotions (sadness, disgust, fear, which instead trigger demobilisation). She then relates the deliberate use of these emotions by political leaders across various case studies.

Nevertheless, after noting these findings, Stokes emphasises that levels of democracy around the world remain high (particularly following the rise seen in the final decades of the twentieth century). She argues that "backsliding has elicited widespread resistance" (p. 185) from a wide range of political and social institutions and actors across many countries, which most often manage to effectively counter the autocratic drifts of backsliders. It is not possible, she writes, to speak today of a global decline of democracy, since very few countries have experienced erosion severe enough to turn them into full autocracies, as authors such as Treisman (2023) and Little and Meng (2024) had previously shown, drawing on rigorous evidence.

In the final chapter of the book, Susan Stokes analyses various strategies of resistance, anti-erosion strategies and strategies of repair, all of which are aimed at halting and reversing democratic erosion and possible autocratisation, and at defending democracy. These

are strategies that are or can be implemented by legislators, the judiciary, advisors and opinion leaders, military commanders, journalists and the media, academics, activists and citizens. They include strategies of re-politicisation, de-politicisation and creation (or restoration) of public political trust in democratic institutions. Stokes points out that, unlike the dictatorships of the past (which immediately shut down any scope for resistance), when today's backsliders aggrandise their power from within the executive, they weaken democracy, but do not eliminate the scope for resilience and democratic restoration. As the author concludes, in this context "it is up to everyone who values democracy – and who fears autocracy – to use this space, with courage and creativity" (p. 214).

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