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Polarization versus Democracy

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POLARIZATION VERSUS DEMOCRACY

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When can we realistically expect ordinary people to check the authoritarian ambitions of elected politicians? An answer to this question is key to understanding the most prominent development in the dynamic of democratic survival since the end of the Cold War: the subversion of democracy by democratically elected incumbents and its emergence as the most common form of democratic breakdown.

The Figure on page 22 summarizes this troubling trend. At five-year intervals, it shows the percentage of executive takeovers—my shorthand for incumbent-driven subversions of democracy—as a share of democratic breakdowns over the period 1973–2018. I constructed this plot by first identifying all instances in which Freedom House downgraded a country from the status of Free or Partly Free in its annual survey of democracy, and then categorizing these downgrades according to the nature of the events they represent.

This exercise reveals that democratic breakdowns almost always come in one of two, very different forms: executive takeovers and military coups. Of the total of 197 downgrades, executive takeovers account for 88 cases—a plurality. Some of the prominent recent takeovers include the subversions of democracy by Hugo Chávez and his successor Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela, by Vladimir Putin in Russia, and by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey. The second category of democratic breakdown, the military coup, accounts for 46 cases. The remaining downgrades correspond either to instances of deliberalization in regimes where the executive was not elected in the first place (15 cases) or to phenomena best characterized not as democratic breakdowns but rather as the deterioration of state authority due to political instability (21 cases) or escalating civil conflict (14 cases).[1]

Executive takeovers thus constitute the modal form of democratic

breakdown over the past 45 years. Moreover, as Figure 1 on page 22 makes clear, what is most striking is their proliferation after the end of the Cold War. Before the 1990s, executive takeovers were only marginally more frequent than military coups. After the 1990s, however, the relative frequency of executive takeovers surged, and they have accounted for four out every five democratic breakdowns since the 2000s.

The rise in executive takeovers presents several challenges for our understanding of democratic stability. The first stems from the fact that, unlike military coups, takeovers are conducted by democratically elected incumbents. These politicians must enjoy—at least initially—sufficient popular support to capture the executive by democratic means. In most cases, they also need to muster enough electoral strength to control another branch of government, typically the legislature. The latter's complicity is usually essential in carrying out the kind of constitutional changes that facilitate the subversion of democracy: the abolition of term limits, the political subjugation of the judiciary, and the expansion of executive authority (sometimes by a constitutional shift from a parliamentary toward a presidential system).

Remarkably, many incumbents command significant popular support as they proceed to subvert democracy in their countries—and even after they succeed in doing so. Chávez, Hungary's Viktor Orbán, and Erdoğan, for instance, enjoyed and (in the latter two cases) continue to enjoy such support. They have been popular in both absolute and relative terms, typically leading their major competitors by double digits in election returns and public-opinion surveys. This seems to be the case even after accounting for the possible inflation of such figures due to these leaders' misuse of state resources, intimidation of their opponents, and other forms of manipulation. The most rigorous analysis of this phenomenon comes from Russia: Using list experiments, Timothy Frye and his collaborators found that support for Vladimir Putin in early 2015 was around 80 percent—and this is after discounting the roughly 10 additional percentage points that Putin receives in traditional surveys due to the reluctance of some respondents to openly state their disapproval.[2] The so-called "authoritarian populists" appear to be truly popular.

These observations point to an important puzzle about the role of ordinary people in democratic backsliding: Why do voters support politicians who undermine democracy? A quick explanation might be twofold. First, perhaps voters have not had enough time or clarity to recognize a subversion of democracy for what it is. Alternatively, maybe these voters do not care much about democracy in the first place. Neither of these explanations appears to be valid.

Precisely because they are carried out from within a democratic system, executive takeovers tend to proceed gradually, typically over several election cycles, and following a constitutionally mandated process. The resulting changes—especially when considered in isolation—rarely

FIGURE—EXECUTIVE TAKEOVERS AS A PERCENTAGE OF ALL DEMOCRATIC BREAKDOWNS, 1973–2018
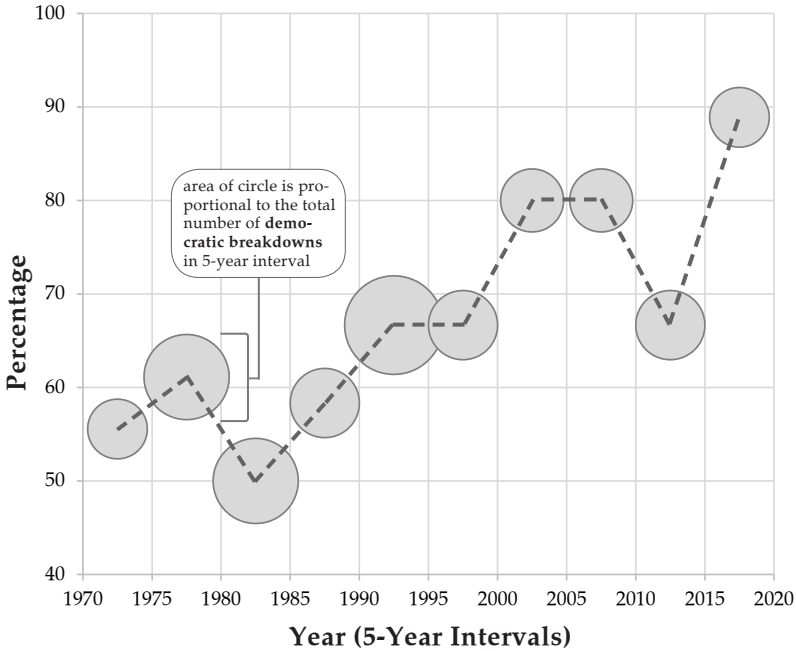
Source: Author's coding and Freedom House, *Freedom in the World,* 1973–2019.

amount to an outright violation of core democratic principles. It is this gradual, legalistic nature of executive takeovers that explains the shift in the lexicon of contemporary democratization studies from terms such as democratic breakdown, authoritarian reversal, or *autogolpe* to democratic backsliding, erosion, and degradation.

Yet when taken together and observed over time, such measures unambiguously subvert the democratic process, tilting the playing field in the incumbent's favor.[3] By the time Freedom House downgraded Hungary to the status of Partly Free in 2019, Orbán had governed for two terms; Erdoğan had served as prime minister and then president for more than a decade before Freedom House labeled Turkey Not Free in 2018. In both Hungary and Turkey, this period was marked by a vocal criticism of the illiberal inclinations of their leaders by the opposition and the press. Put differently, voters in both countries had ample opportunity to observe these leaders' authoritarian aspirations and to reject them by voting them out of power before it was too late. So why did they not take this opportunity?

Neither do the publics in countries that experience executive takeovers show a disregard for or ignorance of key democratic principles—at least when judged by political scientists' conventional measures. Venezuela, for instance, has historically exhibited some of the highest lev-

els of public support for democracy in Latin America. Throughout the 2000s—with Hugo Chávez well on his way to becoming the archetype of a Latin American authoritarian populist—70 to 90 percent of Venezuelans agreed with statements such as "Democracy may have problems but it is the best system of government." In fact, by this measure, around 70 percent of Venezuelans continue to support democracy today.[4] Similarly high levels of support for democracy prevail in other countries that are at risk of or already have experienced democratic backsliding.

In sum, the puzzle that the subversion of democracy by elected incumbents presents is this: Why do voters who routinely profess a commitment to democracy simultaneously support leaders who subvert it?

Democratic Principles versus Partisan Interests

The solution to this puzzle, I propose, lies in a vulnerability that is inherent to democratic politics. Electoral competition often confronts voters with a choice between two valid but potentially conflicting concerns: democratic principles and partisan interests. The likes of Chávez, Orbán, and Erdoğan excel at exploiting precisely this dilemma. Each has succeeded in transforming his country's latent social tensions into axes of acute political conflict and then presented his supporters with a choice: Vote for a more redistributive Venezuela, a migrant-free Hungary, a conservative Turkey—along with my increasingly authoritarian leadership—or vote for the opposition, which claims to be more democratic but offers less appealing policies and leadership.

In effect, these incumbents ask their supporters to trade off democratic principles for partisan interests. I am employing the term "partisan interests" broadly: In some contexts, these are primarily about allegiance to a party or leader; in other contexts, they refer to voters' interest in specific economic and social policies. The deeper a society's political divisions along those lines, the easier it is for a Chávez, an Orbán, or an Erdoğan to exploit these divisions to his advantage. Incumbents such as these understand that most of their supporters would rather tolerate their authoritarian tendencies than back politicians whose platform these supporters abhor. This is because their countries' acute society-wide political conflicts raise the stakes in elections and, in turn, the price their supporters have to pay for putting democratic principles above partisan interests. In polarized societies, ordinary people become pro- or anti-Chávez, Orbán, or Erdoğan first, and democrats only second.

Political scientists have long recognized that deep social cleavages present dangers for democracy. In the 1950s, Seymour Martin Lipset observed that "inherent in all democratic systems is the constant threat that the group conflicts which are democracy's lifeblood may solidify to the point where they threaten to disintegrate society."[5] In the 1970s, Robert A. Dahl warned that democracy is in peril when it "becomes

polarized into several highly antagonistic groups,"[6] Giovanni Sartori worried about the "nonworkability" of party systems characterized by "center-fleeing polarization,"[7] and Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan cautioned that crises are more likely to emerge in political systems "characterized by limited consensus, deep cleavages, and suspicion between leading participants."[8] More recently, Carles Boix as well as Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson zeroed in on one social cleavage—the conflict over the redistribution of income—and showed how it impedes democratization.[9]

But when it comes to the actual process by which democracy fails, the earlier generation of scholarship was concerned primarily about another Cuban Revolution, Chilean coup d'état, or Spanish Civil War. Because democratic backsliding starts from a democratic status quo and is driven by democratically elected incumbents, an explanation of this process must confront the fact that voters in democracies have at their disposal an essential instrument of democratic self-defense: elections. They can stop politicians with authoritarian ambitions by simply voting them out office. What accounts for their failure to do so?

The arguments above suggest an answer: Deep social cleavages and acute political tensions—polarization, to use a term recently in vogue—undercut the public's ability to curb the illiberal inclinations of elected politicians. In sharply polarized electorates, even voters who value democracy will be willing to sacrifice fair democratic competition for the sake of electing politicians who champion their interests. When punishing a leader's authoritarian tendencies requires voting for a platform, party, or person that his supporters detest, many will find this too high a price to pay. Polarization thus presents aspiring authoritarians with a structural opportunity: They can undermine democracy and get away with it.[10]

Does Polarization Trump Civic Virtue?

The logic outlined above builds on a simple premise: Ordinary people are willing to trade off democratic principles for partisan interests.[11] In order to determine whether this is indeed the case, my collaborators and I conducted the following survey experiment in several countries, including Turkey, Venezuela, and the United States.[12] In each country, we asked a representative sample of voters to choose between two hypothetical candidates. Each candidate was described according to attributes such as policy platforms, party affiliation, and demographic characteristics.

Some candidates—chosen at random—were also described as supporting a measure that would violate a key democratic principle. The nature and severity of these violations varied, approximating the practices that elected incumbents have used or attempted to use in the country

EXAMPLE OF AN EXPERIMENTAL CANDIDATE-CHOICE SCENARIO

	Candidate 1	Candidate 2
Age	50 years old	40 years old
Gender	Male	Female
Race	White	White
Background	Business executive for 21 years	Lawyer for 8 years
Party	Republican	Democrat
Positions	Marijuana should be legal for recreational use and only sold in state-licensed dispensaries.	Marijuana should be illegal for everyone. No exceptions.
	Served on a subcommittee that reviews the structure of legislative staff offices.	Supported a proposal to reduce the number of polling stations in areas that support Republicans.
	Increase state aid across all local school districts.	Increase state aid to local school districts and prioritize poor school districts.
Which candidate do you prefer?	Candidate 1	Candidate 2

Source: Matthew Graham and Milan W. Svolik, Appendix for "Democracy in America?" March 2019.

in question. In Turkey, for instance, one such measure proposed firing government employees who did not support the candidate's party, and another suggested replacing judges who seem biased against the candidate's party. In Venezuela, one set of measures focused on changing the make-up of the electoral commission: The options were to maintain the significant progovernment bias of the electoral commission at the time of the study, to bias it even further by staffing it with more Chavistas, or to eliminate that bias by appointing a politically independent commission.

In the United States, candidates were presented as contenders for a state (rather than federal) office and endorsed a range of undemocratic policies that have historically been adopted at the state level. Some, such as gerrymandering and voter suppression, persist to this day. Across all contexts, the wording of these undemocratic positions avoided normatively leading language, thereby allowing respondents to decide for themselves whether or not a particular position threatened democracy. (For a sample candidate-choice scenario from the U.S. study, conducted with Matthew Graham, see the Box above. Candidate 2's support for

"a proposal to reduce the number of polling stations in areas that support Republicans" is an example of a position that violates democratic principles.)[13]

These experiments allow us to isolate the effect of a candidate's attempt to subvert democracy on her electoral prospects. Because undemocratic positions, and in some scenarios all candidate attributes, were randomly assigned, we can compare the share of votes received by undemocratic candidates to that of democratic but otherwise identical candidates. A decline in an undemocratic candidate's vote share is in effect a metric for the punishment that voters are willing to dispense in defense of democracy. This research design helps us to answer a key question about the role of ordinary people in democratic backsliding: Do voters value democracy enough to punish politicians who disregard democratic principles? And, critically, are they willing to do so when it requires voting against their own political interests or partisan loyalties?

Voters are reluctant to punish politicians for disregarding democratic principles when doing so requires abandoning one's favored party or policies.

Two major patterns emerge from these experiments. First, ordinary people support democracy, but that support is tenuous. Across the three countries—Turkey, Venezuela, and the United States—and a range of undemocratic positions, a candidate who backed an undemocratic measure suffered a loss in vote share of up to 35 percent. Such margins are often electorally decisive, effectively deterring or punishing incumbents with authoritarian inclinations. Crucially, however, the magnitude of this punishment decreases when policy or partisan differences between candidates are large or when the electorate is sharply divided. In other words, voters are reluctant to punish politicians for disregarding democratic principles when doing so requires abandoning one's favored party or policies.

Consider Venezuela. After his ascent to the presidency in 1999, Chávez managed to first reduce Venezuelan politics to a single left-right economic axis of conflict and then launched a series of assaults on the country's democratic institutions—a process that escalated under Nicolás Maduro, who succeeded Chávez in 2013. Venezuela's trajectory contradicts established wisdom about the influence of democratic experience, income, and attitudes toward democracy on democratic survival: Until Chávez, Venezuela was one of the longest-lived and richest democracies in Latin America, with high levels of support for democracy.

The conjunction of an aspiring autocrat and a highly polarized electorate explains Venezuela's trajectory. When, in 2016, I presented a representative sample of Venezuelans with a choice between a leftist candidate who intended to maintain Venezuela's heavily biased electoral

system and a rightist who would reform it by appointing an independent electoral commission, a narrow majority of Venezuelans opted for the latter, more democratic choice. But a majority of those on the left—who faced a tradeoff between their economic interests and democratic principles—chose to stick with the undemocratic status quo.

Even in the United States—a country that has been seen at least since Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1835) as an aspirational model of democratic civic culture—voters with strong policy or partisan preferences punished undemocratic candidates at lower rates than did those with moderate political loyalties. Furthermore, supporters of both major parties employed a double standard: These voters were more lenient toward an undemocratic candidate when that candidate belonged to their own party. When faced with a choice that pits democratic principles against partisan interests, voters appear to be willing to trade off the former for the latter. Significant fractions of Turks, Venezuelans, and Americans act as partisans first and democrats only second.

The second pattern that emerges from these candidate-choice experiments suggests that centrists are a key democratic force. Across contexts, political moderates punish undemocratic candidates more severely than do voters with strong policy preferences or partisan loyalties. In the United States, for instance, only moderate partisans—those who identify as independents but lean toward one of the two major parties—are willing to defect and oppose an undemocratic candidate from their favored party in large enough numbers to bring about that candidate's electoral defeat. This does not appear to be because moderates actually care more about democracy. Conventional measures indicate that stronger partisans value democracy just as much or even more than moderates do. Rather, it seems that when voting, centrists can afford to place a greater weight on democratic principles because of their weaker allegiance to candidates on partisan or policy grounds. Put simply, centrists provide precisely the kind of democratic electoral check that polarized societies lack.

This evidence suggests that ordinary people are indeed willing to trade off democratic principles for partisan interests—a factor that may explain why polarized democracies appear to be particularly vulnerable to democratic backsliding. These experiments were conducted between 2016 and 2018, but the patterns that they reveal are far from new. In *Polyarchy,* Dahl discusses a March 1966 Gallup survey that asked Argentines: "Would you consider it good or bad if the government were to ban Peronist participation in future elections?"[14] The answers show a strong correlation between a respondent's level of education and opposition to the banning of the Peronists. Critically, that correlation is negative: It was the most-educated Argentines who opposed this blatantly undemocratic proposal the least!

As Dahl observed, this correlation can hardly be read as evidence of strong commitment to democracy among the least-educated Argentines.

If anything, given the robust positive relationship between education and support for democracy in Argentina and worldwide, commitment to democracy was likely strongest among the most-educated Argentines. Rather, when confronted with this question, the better-educated—and better-off—Argentines in effect faced a tradeoff between their commitment to democratic principles and their economic interests. Peronism, with its redistributive and labor-friendly platform, threatened the latter. Consistent with the evidence from the candidate-choice experiments conducted more than half a century later, many of the most-educated Argentines decided in favor of their economic interests—by acquiescing to an electoral ban on a popular political platform. Three months after this survey was conducted, a military coup aimed explicitly at suppressing the left suspended Argentine democracy for half a decade.

Support for Democracy or Cheap Talk?

When political scientists measure the public's commitment to democratic principles around the world, they typically rely on a range of indicators of "support for democracy." These are often based on questions that ask directly about attitudes toward democracy as a political system—as in, "How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically; please answer on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 means 'not important at all' and 10 means 'absolutely important'"—or on questions that probe the attractiveness of authoritarian alternatives to democracy—such as, "Do you believe that when the country is facing very difficult times it is justifiable for the president to govern without Congress?"

Since at least the 1960s, when Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba first published their work on "civic culture," measures of this kind have been taken to reflect a polity's demand and even suitability for democracy.[15] In both democratization research and democracy-promotion practice, a country's "democratic culture" has been assumed to serve as a bulwark against authoritarianism. Barry Weingast articulated this view in the jargon of contemporary political science when he stated that democracy "becomes self-enforcing when citizens hold [democratic principles] in high enough esteem that they are willing to defend them by withdrawing support from the sovereign when he attempts to violate [them]."[16] Democracy survives, according to this line of reasoning, when opportunistic elites are kept in check by prodemocratic publics.

The evidence presented in this article raises questions about the real-world relevance of conventional measures of support for democracy. Large majorities in countries that have experienced democratic erosion—including Turkey and Venezuela—express a solid commitment to democracy according to such measures, both before and even after these democracies have been undermined by their leaders. And so do respondents in advanced democracies, including in the United States. Yet when confronted with a

choice between two candidates, one who shows little respect for demo-
cratic principles but appeals to voters' partisan interests and one who is
democratic but also less appealing, that commitment appears to be an order
of magnitude weaker—across Turkey, Venezuela, and the United States.

A partial explanation for this discrepancy may be that by asking
about support for democracy directly, conventional measures invite so-
cially desirable, politically correct responses. Most democracies have
imparted to their citizens that the only socially acceptable answer to the
question "Democracy may have problems but it is the best system of
government; do you agree?" is some form of "I agree." We should not
be surprised to hear precisely that response.

By contrast, in the candidate-choice experiments discussed earlier,
a candidate's undemocratic position appears as just one among several
characteristics, thus concealing that the investigator is interested in pre-
cisely that attribute. In other words, these experiments are "revealed-
preference" measures of support for democracy: Rather than asking about
democratic principles directly, they probe respondents' commitment to
these principles indirectly, by inferring it from their choices in election
scenarios that mirror the real-world dilemmas presented by democratic
backsliding. According to this methodology, respondents are believed to
"support democracy" not when they say they do, but when their choices
reveal a readiness to put democratic principles above partisan interests.

This last point suggests that conventional measures of support for de-
mocracy may be flawed in a more fundamental way: They fail to cap-
ture respondents' willingness to trade off democratic principles for other,
competing ends. In Poland's upcoming parliamentary elections, the elec-
torate will not be facing the simple choice between a democratic and an
authoritarian alternative, with the former represented by the liberal oppo-
sition and the latter by the incumbent Law and Justice party. To be clear,
the conservative Law and Justice has indeed attempted over the past four
years to rewrite Poland's constitution to its political advantage. Yet the
decision that Poles will confront in the fall of 2019 is more aptly described
as a choice between a Law and Justice party that shows little respect for
democratic principles but has at the same time presided over high rates of
economic growth and generous welfare programs, and a prodemocratic
opposition that can claim no such accomplishments. Put differently, a
large part of the Polish electorate—especially the voters who make up
Law and Justice's rural, socially conservative base—will be asked to put
democratic principles above their economic and political interests.

It is tradeoffs such as this one that aspiring autocrats exploit. By de-
sign, conventional measures of support for democracy fail to capture
them. This does not automatically imply that democratic values do not
matter for democratic stability; in fact, the evidence I have presented sug-
gests that they do indeed matter, and they matter in a potentially politi-
cally decisive way. Rather, precisely when support for democracy is sup-

posed to be crucial—when an electorate confronts an illiberal incumbent at the ballot box—conventional measures miss a key dilemma faced by voters and, as a result, overstate their willingness to resist authoritarianism. Conventional measures of support for democracy are a poor guide for what we can realistically expect from voters in defense of democracy.

Ordinary People in Democratic Backsliding

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a series of academic surveys asked residents of Chile's three largest cities whether a military government was appropriate for their country.[17] The vast majority of the respondents, roughly 70 percent throughout this period, responded "No." According to the same surveys, almost all Chileans believed that their country was democratic and a plurality chose "freedom and democracy" from among several options as what made them "most proud of Chile." These answers are consistent with Chile's status at the time as one of Latin America's most mature, stable democracies.

The last survey to ask such questions was fielded in Santiago in February 1973. Even then—amid the strikes, protests, and hyperinflation that marked President Salvador Allende's tenure—73 percent of respondents opposed a military government. Crucially, differences across Chile's ideological spectrum were modest: A military government was opposed by 80, 71, and 62 percent of those on the left, center, and right, respectively, and by 77 and 73 percent of those who supported the Socialists and Christian Democrats, the two largest parties. Seven months later, in September 1973, a military coup brought to power one of the most repressive dictatorships of the twentieth century.

Ordinary Chileans did not have much say in the 1973 military coup, and were they to resist it, they faced virtually certain death, torture, or imprisonment. The capacity of ordinary people to shape the course of democratic backsliding is very different. Unlike in the case of military coups, those who oppose an executive takeover do not need to engage in costly, possibly violent resistance—such as protest, civil disobedience, or armed struggle. In a democracy, ordinary people can stop politicians with authoritarian ambitions by simply voting them out office.

A better understanding of when we can realistically expect ordinary people to resist authoritarianism is therefore essential to an explanation for democratic backsliding. A key factor, I proposed, is the intensity of a country's political conflicts. The political differences that Lipset called "the lifeblood of democratic politics" turn into structural opportunities for aspiring autocrats when they solidify into hostile camps in a climate of pronounced political polarization. The political acumen of Chávez, Orbán, or Erdoğan lay in their ability to draw political battle lines along societal cleavages that were only simmering when these leaders were first elected. Once they succeeded, elections confronted their support-

ers with the choice between their partisan interests on the one hand and democratic principles on the other. The evidence that I presented suggests that significant fractions of divided electorates are indeed willing to sacrifice the latter in favor of the former. Polarization erodes an electorate's ability to resist authoritarianism.

These arguments and evidence suggest that we need to rethink the role of ordinary people in democratic backsliding. The main protagonists in most academic and journalistic accounts of democratic backsliding are aspiring autocrats; it is leaders such as Chávez, Putin, and Erdoğan who are credited with the undoing of democracies. Ordinary people, by contrast, are often absent from the drama. If they appear in the cast at all, it is almost always in the role of victims. These accounts present the struggle for democracy's survival as one between opportunistic, even antidemocratic elites and liberal, prodemocratic masses.

This narrative fails to account for a key fact: As Chávez, Putin, and Erdoğan have eroded democracy in their countries, they have done so with the tacit and sometimes explicit consent of significant portions—sometimes majorities—of their electorates. To be clear, this is not to exculpate autocrats. Only in rare instances have ordinary people actually demanded dictatorship, and even in those cases, these were small fractions of the public, as Nancy Bermeo has documented.[18] But because democratic backsliding is a process that starts from a democratic status quo, ordinary people play a central role in it. They are indispensable, even if reluctant, accomplices. Aspiring autocrats succeed in subverting democracy only when given the opportunity by a factious public.

NOTES

1. The remaining thirteen cases could not be unambiguously categorized. For complementary perspectives on the dynamics of democratic breakdown, see Valeriya Mechkova, Anna Lührmann, and Staffan I. Lindberg, "How Much Democratic Backsliding?" *Journal of Democracy* 28 (October 2017): 162–69; Daniel Treisman, "Is Democracy in Danger? A Quick Look at the Data," (unpublished manuscript, 2018); Tom Ginsburg and Aziz Z. Huq, *How to Save a Constitutional Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

2. Timothy Frye et al., "Is Putin's Popularity Real?" *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33, no. 1 (2017): 1–15; Daniel Treisman, "Presidential Popularity in a Hybrid Regime: Russia Under Yeltsin and Putin," *American Journal of Political Science* 55 (July 2011): 590–609.

3. For a discussion of this process, see especially Andreas Schedler, "Elections Without Democracy: The Menu of Manipulation," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (April 2002): 36–50; Treisman, "Presidential Popularity in a Hybrid Regime"; and Steven Levitsky and

Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

4. See the AmericasBarometer, Latinobarómetro, and the World Values Survey.

5. Seymour M. Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1959), 83.

6. Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 105.

7. Giovanni Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 163.

8. Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 28.

9. Carles Boix, *Democracy and Redistribution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

10. These arguments parallel those of Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, who have recently highlighted the dangers that polarization represents for democratic stability in the United States, and Murat Somer and Jennifer McCoy, who have examined the psychological in-group/out-group dynamics by which polarization threatens democracy. See Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018) and Somer and McCoy, "Déjà Vu? Polarization and Endangered Democracies in the 21st Century," *American Behavioral Scientist* 62 (January 2018): 3–15. For a classic investigation of the role of voters and polarization in the breakdown of democracy, see Nancy Bermeo, *Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times: The Citizenry and the Breakdown of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

11. For complementary perspectives on the microfoundations of democratic backsliding, see also Carlo M. Horz, "Electoral Manipulation in Polarized Societies" (unpublished manuscript, 2018); Zhaotian Luo and Adam Przeworski, "Subversion by Stealth: Dynamics of Democratic Backsliding," (unpublished manuscript, 2018); and Monika Nalepa, Georg Vanberg, and Caterina Chiopris, "Authoritarian Backsliding" (unpublished manuscript, 2018).

12. Research in the United States was conducted jointly with Matthew Graham and is presented in "Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States" (unpublished manuscript, 2018); pilot studies in Tunisia and Northern Ireland were done in collaboration with Nathan Grubman and Bonnie Weir, respectively.

13. For further details about the design of these experiments, see Matthew Graham and Milan W. Svolik, "Appendix to 'Democracy in America?'" accessible at *https://campuspress.yale.edu/svolik*.

14. Dahl, *Polyarchy,* 140.

15. Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963).

16. Barry R. Weingast, "The Political Foundations of Democracy and the Rule of Law," *American Political Science Review* 91 (June 1997): 245–63.

17. These surveys cover the period 1967–73 and come from the CEDOP/Hamuy Archive at the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, Cornell University.

18. Bermeo, *Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times*.