

Why Do Voters Support Authoritarian Leaders? Understanding Democratic Backsliding



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Democracy Under Strain

There is growing concern that democracy worldwide is under threat. In many democratic countries, political leaders with authoritarian inclinations have increasingly sought to weaken democratic institutions and expand their own power. In the United States, for example, Donald Trump has, during his second term, taken actions that some media argued may expand presidential authority. These include the extensive use of executive orders in policy areas such as immigration and trade, as well as confrontations with judicial and administrative institutions. While the extent to which such actions constitute democratic backsliding remains debated, they have nonetheless raised concerns about the resilience of democratic checks and balances.

In some cases, political regimes transition from democracy to authoritarianism through deliberate actions by democratically elected leaders who systematically introduce authoritarian institutions and reshape political systems. This process, termed democratic backsliding, is exemplified by figures such as Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021).¹

A key feature of these cases is that the transition from democracy to authoritarianism has not occurred through overt violence, but rather through democratic means. Historically, there have been many instances in which countries, after democratizing, reverted to authoritarian rule through violent methods such as coups. In such cases, conflicts between the masses and political elites often persisted even after democratization, and authoritarian reversals emerged as part of elite backlash.

By contrast, recent authoritarian transitions have used democratic processes. Leaders first elected in free and fair elections increased their power by changing constitutions and institutions, shifting their countries toward authoritarianism. Often, these changes take place under formal democratic procedures. In short, backsliding happens through democratic means. To understand how, let us begin with Hungary.

How Democracy Eroded in Hungary

Following World War II, Hungary was governed under a one-party dictatorship led by the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party. However, following the 1989 constitutional revision, Hungary became one of the earliest countries in Eastern Europe to undergo democratization. It subsequently joined NATO in 1999 and the European Union in 2004, and was regarded as a leading democracy in the region. Yet,

as of 2025, Hungary's freedom score stood at 65 out of 100 and was classified as "Partly Free" according to Freedom House, a US-based international NGO that assesses levels of freedom across countries. The key figure behind this process of authoritarian backsliding was Viktor Orbán, one of the leaders of Hungary's democratization movement and, until April 2026, the country's prime minister.

In the 2010 general election, Fidesz, a party co-founded by Orbán, won a landslide victory, securing more than two-thirds of the parliamentary seats. After becoming prime minister, Orbán enacted a new constitution that reflected traditional Catholic values, including defining marriage as the union of a man and a woman. At the same time, he introduced electoral reforms that redrew district boundaries in Fidesz's favor and revised media laws to impose constraints on critical reporting. In the judicial sphere, his government lowered the retirement age for judges and prosecutors, a move widely criticized as undermining judicial independence. Furthermore, by amending the central bank law to increase the number of deputy governor positions, his government undermined the central bank's independence.

Democratic systems typically incorporate a range of institutional safeguards, such as legislatures, media, and courts, to prevent political leaders from abusing power. Orbán's reforms effectively weakened the legislature through electoral changes, curtailed media independence through revisions to media law, and reduced the authority of the Constitutional Court through judicial reforms. As a result, Orbán remained in office for nearly 16 years.

That said, Orbán was not simply an unpopular leader maintaining power through coercion, at least until recent years. Despite changes to the electoral and judicial systems, he continued to govern within those institutional frameworks. His rule was not sustained through overt violence by the military or police. Even where institutions have taken on more authoritarian characteristics, maintaining power would be difficult without a certain level of public support. In this sense, many Hungarian citizens were able to be understood as having, to some extent, tolerated the country's shift toward authoritarianism while continuing to support the Orbán government.

Is Supporting Authoritarian Leaders "Irrational"?

When considering democratic backsliding, the behavior of politicians or parties that seek to promote authoritarianism is relatively easy to explain. Self-interested politicians who pursue private gains would naturally attempt to expand their authority and power to secure greater benefits. Even politicians motivated by sincere ideological commitments may view expanded authority as

necessary to realize their goals more effectively. Regardless of their motivations, it is not surprising that politicians might consider it acceptable to introduce, at least to some extent, more authoritarian institutions to enhance their own power.

But what about citizens? As authoritarianism advances, citizens' rights are likely to be curtailed. As politicians' power increases, the extent to which citizens' voices are reflected in political decision-making diminishes. Moreover, once authoritarian institutions are established, institutional inertia makes them difficult to dismantle. Nevertheless, in many countries, politicians and parties with authoritarian tendencies have won elections and accelerated democratic backsliding. Despite ongoing democratic erosion, support for such politicians often remains strong. This raises a central question: what mechanisms explain citizens' support for politicians who promote authoritarianism?

It is tempting to conclude that citizens are being misled by politicians and are making seemingly "irrational" choices. However, all these choices are irrational, blocking us from understanding why democratic backsliding occurs and from identifying effective prevention. To address the main issue, we should instead assume that citizens who support these politicians act according to their own logic. Accurately understanding this logic is essential to forge effective responses to democratic backsliding.

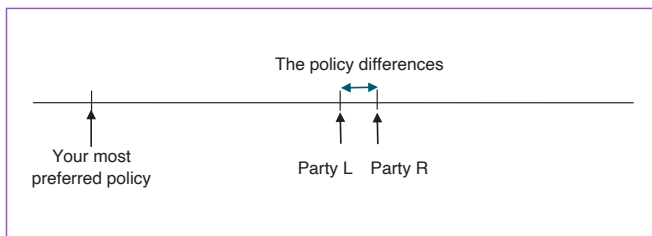
One useful approach to understanding behavior that may not be immediately intuitive is game theory. Game theory simplifies complex real-world phenomena to isolate their essential features and analyze them systematically. By modeling real-world interactions as games, it becomes possible to examine the incentives that lead individuals to adopt behaviors.

From a game-theoretic perspective, we can explore the rational reasons why individuals may support or tolerate democratic backsliding. This article introduces past game-theoretic analyses of why citizens may support democratic backsliding and consider the underlying mechanisms that give rise to such outcomes, as well as potential measures to address them.

When Policy Matters More Than Democracy

Suppose first that voters place primary importance on "remaining a democracy". They do not view institutional reforms that concentrate power in the executive as desirable, and they believe that politics should be conducted in accordance with democratic

CHART 1
Low Political Polarization



Source: Compiled by the author

procedures. In this case, when is the "value of democracy" important for voters? To explore this question, consider research based on game theory (Graham and Svobik, 2020).²

Imagine two political parties that advocate identical policy platforms. One party (or its leader) respects democratic procedures, whereas the other is power-oriented and places little value on such procedures. A power-oriented party may seek to introduce more authoritarian institutions by weakening the legislature and the judiciary. Assume that the only difference between the two parties lies in their attitudes toward democracy; they do not differ in policy positions, competence, or any other dimension. In this scenario, voters who value democracy should support the party that upholds democratic procedures.

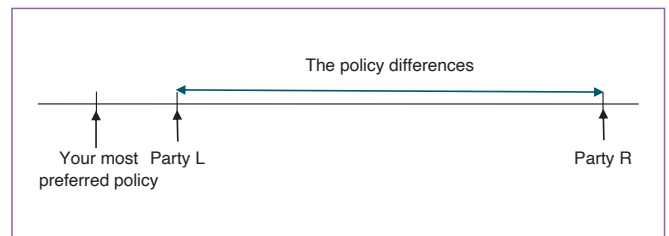
In reality, however, parties rarely differ only in their attitudes toward democracy; they also differ in policy. Consider, therefore, a left-wing party, called party L, and a right-wing party, called party R. As illustrated in *Chart 1*, suppose that party L proposes and is expected to implement policies that lie to the left of those proposed by party R. Further assume that you prefer policies located on the left side of the spectrum and dislike outcomes that deviate from your most preferred policy. From a policy perspective alone, party L is more attractive to you than party R. However, suppose that party R places greater value on democratic procedures than party L, and that party L adopts a more authoritarian stance. In other words, although you prefer party L in terms of policy, you prefer party R in terms of democratic values. You therefore face the following trade-off:

- Choosing party L leads to the implementation of more preferred policies.
- However, party L adopts a more authoritarian stance.

If the policy differences between the two parties are small, as in *Chart 1*, you may prioritize democratic values over policy and support party R. But what if the differences are large, as in *Chart 2*? When policy differences are substantial, it is more natural to expect voters to prioritize policy over democratic values. Even if democratic values are partially undermined, voters may seek to avoid the implementation of policies that are significantly misaligned with their preferences. In such cases, the importance of policy outweighs that of democratic values.

The situation depicted in *Chart 2* can be understood as a high degree of party polarization. Moreover, as voters themselves become increasingly polarized, the number of voters who perceive democracy's value as relatively low is likely to grow. In other words,

CHART 2
High Political Polarization



Source: Compiled by the author

the greater the degree of political polarization, the more likely individuals are to tolerate authoritarian behavior by politicians and parties. Consequently, greater political polarization increases the likelihood of democratic backsliding. Indeed, some empirical studies suggest that democratic backsliding is more prevalent in countries with greater political polarization (Graham and Svobik, 2020;² Haggard and Kaufman, 2021).¹

Do Voters Trade Democracy for Competence?

The previous section focused on voters who intrinsically value democracy. However, relatively few voters have direct benefits from “remaining a democracy”. Even so, voters may come to value democracy as a byproduct of other considerations (Luo and Przeworski, 2023).³

Suppose that voters care only about politicians’ competence and wish to elect more capable leaders through elections. At the same time, assume that some politicians adopt authoritarian tendencies, while others adhere to democratic procedures. Authoritarian politicians may introduce more authoritarian institutions, thereby increasing their chances of reelection. Consider two politicians: one with authoritarian tendencies and the other committed to democratic procedures. If there is no difference in competence between them, or if the authoritarian politician is less competent, the democratic politician will be chosen. The critical case arises when the authoritarian politician is more competent.

Suppose there is a highly competent authoritarian politician and an incompetent democratic politician, and voters choose the former. While this results in the election of a more capable leader, the authoritarian politician may increase their likelihood of reelection by introducing authoritarian institutions. Even if a more competent challenger emerges in the next election, the authoritarian incumbent may still be reelected. Thus, choosing a competent authoritarian politician entails the following trade-off:

- Voters can elect a more competent politician.
- However, even if a more competent challenger emerges in the future, the authoritarian incumbent may still be reelected.

If the latter effect is sufficiently strong, voters may instead choose an incompetent democratic politician to prevent democratic backsliding. This illustrates one reason why voters may come to value democracy, even if they initially care only about competence. But how often does this mechanism operate in practice? For the latter effect to be substantial, voters must place significant weight on the future and believe that more capable challengers will emerge from the opposition. However, voters are often preoccupied with their immediate circumstances, and it is difficult for them to believe that a stronger challenger will appear in the future. Consequently, cases in which voters come to value democracy in this indirect manner are likely to be limited.

Why Democracy Is Not Always a Priority

The main question of this article was why people tolerate the erosion of democracy. However, the preceding discussion suggests

that it may instead indicate the opposite question: why voters prioritize the intrinsic value of democracy. For voters facing immediate economic and social hardships, it is not surprising that the value of democracy may not rank highly among their concerns.

Orbán has implemented extensive family policies in Hungary, such as free access to fertility treatments and income tax exemptions for families after the birth of a third child. For families raising children, these policies are clearly attractive, even if they are part of a broader, exclusionary agenda aimed at reducing reliance on immigration. For voters seeking to maintain or improve their immediate living conditions, accepting some degree of authoritarianism in exchange for tangible benefits is neither surprising nor easily condemnable.

That said, the accumulation of small concessions of the form “a little authoritarianism is acceptable” can gradually erode democracy. As the powers of political leaders expand incrementally, there is always the possibility that they may eventually attempt a more sweeping weakening of institutions such as the judiciary and the legislature. The overall implication of the preceding analysis is therefore somewhat pessimistic: even in countries with competitive elections, persuading voters to resist democratic backsliding is far from straightforward.

Democratic Safeguards

At the same time, democratic systems possess institutional safeguards designed to preserve democratic governance, most notably the judiciary, the legislature, and the media. When executive leaders, such as presidents or prime ministers, attempt to exceed their authority and pursue authoritarian measures, these institutions can serve as effective constraints.

Consider the case of South Korea. On the night of Dec. 3, 2024, then-President Yoon Suk Yeol declared a state of emergency martial law in a televised address. Martial law, depending on its scope, can allow the military to assume extensive authority over administrative functions and to restrict fundamental rights, such as freedom of expression. Subsequently, the martial law command announced sweeping measures, including the suspension of political activities such as those of the National Assembly, local councils, political parties, and public gatherings. Although the South Korean president is granted emergency powers, including the authority to declare martial law in response to severe national threats, invoking them outside wartime or comparable crises is widely regarded as highly unusual. Furthermore, reports indicated attempts to restrict the functioning of key institutions, including the National Assembly, and to detain prominent political figures. Under the constitution, however, the president is required to notify the National Assembly without delay when exercising emergency powers, and such measures must be lifted if the Assembly so demands. These developments were therefore widely interpreted as stretching constitutional limits and as resembling an attempt to extend executive power beyond institutional constraints.

Nevertheless, the attempt to suppress the legislature failed. In the early hours of Dec. 4, members of the National Assembly convened and passed a resolution demanding the lifting of martial law, which

was subsequently revoked. Yoon was later impeached by the Assembly, and subsequent legal and constitutional proceedings ensued. In other words, what some described as a form of “self-coup” was ultimately thwarted by the legislature and judiciary, illustrating the potential effectiveness of democratic safeguards.

In Hungary as well, Viktor Orbán was defeated in the election in April 2026 and subsequently left office. This suggests that, as long as government selection is conducted through elections, even if political institutions are reshaped to one’s advantage, power cannot be maintained without preserving a certain level of public support. It also indicates that Hungary’s elections finally functioned as intended. Furthermore, the newly emerging party Tisza can be interpreted as having been perceived by voters as a “competent opposition”, as discussed in the analysis above.

These examples suggest that institutional safeguards can still function, at least to some extent, as an effective safety net. At the same time, institutional safeguards have their limits. In particular, some scholars have argued that democratic erosion may be difficult to reverse once it begins (Howell, Shepsle, and Wolton, 2023).⁴ Political leaders may find it difficult to transform institutions in a fully authoritarian direction all at once. However, they may gradually expand their authority over time, sometimes in response to perceived necessity and changing circumstances.

In such cases, courts and legislatures are often called upon to judge whether such expansions of power are permissible. If these institutions reject such attempts, the expansion does not proceed. But if they accept them, these decisions can become precedents, allowing future leaders to retain and build upon the same powers. As long as systems rely on precedent, it is difficult to roll back authority once it has been granted to political leaders.

Therefore, executive power may expand incrementally over time. Under such conditions, there is no guarantee that a future leader will not make use of these accumulated powers to pursue a more pronounced authoritarian shift. In this sense, institutional safeguards, while important, have inherent limitations. In Hungary as well, as long as the new government party maintains the authoritarian institutions established by Orbán, it cannot be considered a democracy. The key question going forward will be whether the country can return to a more democratic trajectory.

How Can Democratic Backsliding Be Prevented?

While the preceding discussion highlights the mechanisms that enable democratic backsliding, it also raises a critical question: how can it be prevented?

A first implication is the importance of institutional design as discussed in the previous section. As illustrated by the case of South Korea, the presence of independent institutions, such as courts, legislatures, and the media, can play a crucial role in constraining executive overreach. However, these institutions do not operate automatically. Their effectiveness depends on both formal rules and political actors’ willingness to uphold them. Once these institutions are weakened, restoring them can be extremely difficult.

A second implication concerns the incentives faced by voters. As

discussed earlier, voters may tolerate authoritarian tendencies when doing so helps them secure preferred policies or competent leadership. This suggests that simply strengthening institutions is not sufficient. It is also necessary to reduce the trade-offs that voters face between policy outcomes and democratic principles. For example, when political polarization is high, voters may perceive the policy stakes of elections as so large that they are willing to overlook violations of democratic norms. Reducing polarization, therefore, may indirectly help protect democracy.

Third, the information environment plays a critical role. When media systems are fragmented or dominated by pro-government actors, voters may not fully observe the extent to which democratic institutions are being eroded. In such contexts, even rational voters may fail to respond to democratic backsliding. Ensuring access to diverse and reliable sources of information is therefore essential for democratic accountability.

Finally, it is important to recognize the limits of purely institutional solutions. Even well-designed systems can come under strain if a sufficient share of voters is willing to support leaders who undermine them. This underscores the importance of understanding the underlying logic of voter behavior rather than dismissing it as simply irrational.

In sum, preventing democratic backsliding requires a combination of robust institutions, a balanced political environment, and an informed electorate. While none of these conditions can fully eliminate the risk of democratic erosion, together they can serve as an effective safeguard against it.

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