

## How to Study Democratic Backsliding

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**DRAFT**

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The twenty-first century has been one of democratic backsliding. This has stimulated wide-ranging scholarship on the extent and causes of the erosion of democracy. Yet, an overarching framework that identifies levels of analysis, specific actors, particular behaviors, and psychological processes is lacking. Druckman offers such a structure that envelops elites (e.g., elected officials, the judiciary), societal actors (e.g., social movements, interest groups), media (e.g., television, social media), and citizens. He discusses erosive threats stemming from each actor and the concomitant role of psychological biases. He concludes by discussing various lessons, and suggestions for how to study democratic backsliding.

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The decade from 2012 to 2022 saw nearly 20% of the world’s liberal democracies disappear, dropping from 42 to 34. This signifies a dramatic wave of democratic backsliding that manifests not only among polities that shift from democratic to non-democratic but also democracies that have become less so. Indeed, a record number of nations have become more autocratic, with 33 countries composing 36% of the world’s population moving away from democratic tendencies (Boese et al. 2022; although see Little and Meng 2023). The trend has been widely recognized, carefully documented, and increasingly studied. Yet, a unified framework to study the politics and psychology of democratic backsliding does not exist. To be clear, scholars have long studied democratization and have provided many insights into institutional, societal, and individual variables that contribute to backsliding. What is missing is a conceptual scheme in which one can locate distinct levers and incorporate psychological processes. The goal of this paper is to provide a framework on which others can build. I begin in the next section with definitions of democracy and backsliding. I then present a structure that includes three levels of analysis—elites (macro), social organizations (meso), and citizens (micro)—and for each consider relevant behaviors and psychological exemplars that contribute to backsliding. My hope is to stimulate the development of a holistic approach to identifying, studying, and rectifying factors that contribute to the erosion of democracy. While the framework ideally generalizes, the examples and empirical focus come mostly from the U.S. context.

### **Defining Democracy and Backsliding**

There is a longstanding disconnect between theories of democracy—that is, what democracy entails—and relevant empirical studies of those who live in democracies (as well as the implications for whether democracy sustains). This can be seen in early works such as

Berelson et al.'s (1954: 307) claim that “requirements commonly assumed for the successful operation of democracy are not met by the behavior of the ‘average’ citizen.” Alternatively, Downs (1957: 266-271) suggests people vote to prevent the catastrophic democratic collapse that would come if no one voted. Neither of these portrayals coheres with developed democratic theory. The same can be said of more recent work that presumes democratic theory rests entirely on representation (see Maloy 2020). Althaus (2006: 76) describes the situation: “All too often, public-opinion scholarship makes assumptions about the philosophical import of empirical findings that turn out to be unsound—so often, and so unsound, that some of the core premises organizing social-scientific literature on public opinion might be judged irrelevant...”

More recently, due to the worldwide backsliding, there has been a shift in focus among those who study public opinion with more direct consideration of democratic stability.<sup>1</sup> Instead of exploring the ideological or informational bases of preferences, the impact of communications on preferences, the preference-policy relationship, correlates of vote choice, or the nature of partisanship, scholars have turned to the processes that contribute to sustaining or strengthening democracy or, alternatively, to the prevention of democratic backsliding.<sup>2</sup> Here I focus on factors that facilitate backsliding, taking an individual-level approach—that is, I look at individual actors’ decisions rather than the systematic construction of democratic institutions, cultural tendencies, or socioeconomic development.

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<sup>1</sup> One sign of this is the number of recently founded research initiatives for the study of polarization and democratic institutions. Select examples include the Democracy Center at the University of Rochester; the Agora Center at Johns Hopkins University; the Polarization and Social Change Lab at Stanford University; the Polarization Lab at Duke University; the Polarization Research Lab at Dartmouth College, the University of Pennsylvania, and Stanford University; and the Bright Line Project at the University of Rochester, the University of Chicago, and Dartmouth College.

<sup>2</sup> While strengthening democracy and preventing backsliding are linked, they are not identical. One could propose an intervention that strengthens democracy from its present state, but a failure to do so does not necessarily lead to backsliding.

This raises a host of conceptual and methodological issues. First, what is backsliding? Walder and Lust (2018: 95) state, “Backsliding entails a deterioration of qualities associated with democratic governance, within any regime. In democratic regimes, it is a decline in the quality of democracy; in autocracies, it is a decline in democratic qualities of governance.” The thorny challenge concerns identifying “democratic qualities of governance.” This is difficult as there is no agreement on what is a “democracy.” Nonetheless, I rely on Dahl’s (1971) classic formulation that emphasizes two dimensions. First, contestation occurs when members of the political system can contest the conduct of government. The envelope not just elections but also civil rights protections that ensure free speech and assembly and a competitive information environment, all of which involve debating proper governance (see Coppedge et al. 2008). Second, participation (or inclusiveness) concerns the scale with which members of the population have the right to engage in contestation.<sup>3</sup> Thus, backsliding occurs if any institution or norm that promotes or protects contestation or participation erodes.<sup>4</sup> In contemporary times, this is typically a slow process rather than a critical juncture; it also often occurs without clear visibility, which makes it difficult to diagnose (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, Walder and Lust 2018).

Of course, this raises yet another hurdle of articulating the rules and norms that sustain contestation and inclusivity. One cannot easily list every institution and norm. Carey et al. (2019: 700) explain, “the potential set of rights and principles a political leader might violate is vast.” While the most notable include free and fair elections, power transition, civil liberty protections, and expansive voting rights and representation, this is far from complete and, even so, still

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<sup>3</sup> Contestation means that citizens have the right to protest and speak; they must also *tolerate* others doing so to ensure inclusiveness (Sullivan and Transue 1999). Tolerance is thus fundamental.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, norms can be difficult to identify and often connect to changes in laws. For instance, many point to violations of norms in the U.S. starting in 2016 with (even) more vitriolic partisan media coverage and the Senate no longer abiding by presidential Supreme Court nominations. Yet, both could be traced to at least 1987 with the end of the fair use doctrine in media and the Democratic blockage of the Bork nomination.

requires identification of the institutions that govern each. This creates a problem insofar as there could be disagreement on what constitutes backsliding. Thus, in studying backsliding, one must specify what institution or norm is eroding by a given action and how that connects back to the definition of democracy one employs.<sup>5</sup>

In sum, to study backsliding, one needs to 1) state a definition of democracy, 2) describe relevant institutions or norms that operationalize the definition, 3) isolate the status quo nature of those institutions (which themselves may be far from “democratic”), and 4) identify an action that moves away from the status quo in a direction that makes the polity less democratic given the definition and operationalization. Consequently, the study of erosion differs from the study of democratization or the characterization of a current democratic state. It also is extremely difficult given a single action rarely results in visible backsliding. Additionally, the co-occurrence of many ongoing events means the counterfactual of the state of democracy sans some action will invariably remain ill-defined. Nevertheless, one can study erosion by stating the key parameters and then isolating dynamics that contribute to attitudes or behaviors that would, all else constant, point in an anti-democratic direction relative to current practices.

In what follows, I do not offer such specifics in a precise context. Instead, I take what could be construed as a necessary prior step of identifying the set of relevant actors and

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<sup>5</sup> Carey et al. (2019) provide a substantial list that includes seven elements: elections, voting, rights, protections, accountability, institutions, and discourse. Within each of these elements, they include a host of specific requisites. They show that their analyses of the presence of these institutions over time in the U.S. via retrospective expert ratings closely match the analyses of the Varieties of Democracies project that evaluates countries worldwide (also over time). Both show steady increase in the quality of U.S. democracy until about 2016, when there is a sharp decline. Carey et al. also show experts and the public generally agree on what principles matter most to democracy (e.g., free and honest elections, the protection of equal voting, and equal political and legal rights). There is less agreement though on whether the country meets these principles (with particularly distinct views by Trump supporters). Finally, Carey et al.’s list largely encompasses other scales. For example, Graham and Svobik (2020) include electoral fairness, checks and balances, and civil liberties. Braley et al. (n.d.) include banning rallies, ignoring court rulings, freezing journalists’ social media, reducing voting access, laws that electorally favor one party, using violence, and reinterpreting the constitution.

situations in which particular actions could be taken and highlight related psychological dynamics. This framework, which brings together a much larger swath of politics than is often studied in work on backsliding, can be employed to investigate particular politics and situations. I begin by discussing actors.

### **Democratic Actors**

Erosion depends on many actors in the system and even beyond as other countries and/or non-state actors have roles to play. I mostly attend to those within the system, discussing elites, citizens, and then societal actors.

#### ***Elites***

Ultimately, elites have the power to directly alter institutions and governance norms. Bartels (2023: 3) explores democratic erosion in Europe, stating that there is a “remarkable disconnection of ordinary public opinion from the developments that are commonly taken as indicative of a ‘crisis of democracy’ in contemporary Europe, and the crucial role of political leadership preferring or dismantling democratic institutions and procedures.” He points to Bermeo’s (2003) study of European and Latin American breakdowns that arrives at the same conclusion. Hopkins (2023: 297) similarly concludes that “Recent shifts in public opinion were thus not a primary engine of the Trump presidency’s anti-democratic efforts or their violent culmination. Such stability suggests that understanding the precipitating causes of those efforts requires attention to other actors, including activists and elites.”

By elites, I mean elected officials, candidates, non-elected government officials and staff, and the judiciary/legal actors (some of whom are elected and others not) (see Zaller 1992). The precise actions elites could take are along the lines of those identified by Ahmed (2022): violations of law (e.g., forging ballots, violence), violations of democratic norms (e.g., flouting

court rulings, election overrides by state legislatures), violations of ideals (e.g., rejecting compromise, constraints on civil liberties), and power-consolidating changes to institutions (e.g., reducing ballot access, gerrymandering). While some of these behaviors could apply to non-elites, elites have the clear capability to take these transgressive actions.

### ***Citizens***

The above discussion clarifies the importance of citizen vote choice and participation vis-à-vis elites: supporting potential autocrats can contribute to backsliding.<sup>6</sup> That said, it would be naïve to entirely dismiss citizens' attitudes and behaviors regarding laws, norms, and ideals. These define political culture (Almond and Verba 1963). If citizens view the institutions (e.g., laws, ideals) and norms as illegitimate, it normalizes violations for bold elites or extralegal actors. This portrait coheres with prior treatments of democratic stability. For instance, Weingast (1997) emphasizes the need for public consensus about crucial transgressions, as do Carey et al. (2019: 714), who explain that “bright lines require a consensus about which transgressions are critical and which more tolerable.” This ostensibly contradicts the earlier point about measured public opinion not influencing backsliding. However, the lack of evidence on this latter point could reflect the measurement challenges of identifying the relevant institutions and/or norms, the difficulty of gauging citizens' tolerance for violations by others (even if they do not advocate for such violations themselves), and the lack of study of the latent potential to react to violations.

### ***Societal Actors***

The discussion thus far rests on a definition of democracy that presumes a unilateral representative relationship. Indeed, Dahl (1971: 1) derives his definition, with which I began, as based on the idea that “a key characteristic of a democracy is the continuing responsiveness of

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<sup>6</sup> I put aside the role of non-citizens, even though they certainly play a role, particularly in debates about inclusiveness.



the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered political equals.” Yet, representation is not so simple given citizens possess endogenous preferences and elites do not simply respond (or not respond) to their constituents’ “bedrock” preferences. One needs to account for how citizens mobilize to protect their interests in the face of erosion. This idea traces back at least to Truman’s (1971 [1951]) latent groups. Truman (1971 [1951]: 512) suggests “widely held but organized interests are what we... called the ‘rules of the game’... The pervasive and generally accepted character of these unorganized interests, or ‘rules,’ is such that they are acquired by most individuals ... [and] expected to conform in some measured to the ‘democratic mold.’” In short, a large latent or potential group of Americans support democracy and could mobilize when needed.<sup>7</sup> This argument receives little attention (although see Luo and Przeworski 2023: 106), given the well-known challenges of collective action (Olson 1965) as well as the widely documented resource inequities in the organization of activities and influence (Schattschneider 1960, Baumgartner et al. 2009, Gilens 2012, Bartels 2017).

That said, mass protests in democratizing countries (e.g., the Arab Spring), the civil rights movement, the Tea Party Movement, the 2017 women’s march, the 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, and the 2023 Israeli protests about anti-democratic court reforms suggest such actions occur. Achen and Bartels (2016: 322) explain that while “‘potential interest groups’ are not entirely powerless, they are at a distinct disadvantage ... But not nearly enough is known about how much and why.”<sup>8</sup>

The point is that democratic erosion could stimulate societal response that places attention on the erosion and mobilizes opposition. In terms of theory, Disch (2021) offers the

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<sup>7</sup> Truman notes two threats to this include a lack of information about the occurrence of backsliding and/or the rigidification of overlapping cleavages.

<sup>8</sup> Achen and Bartels focus on social groups and their influence on policymaking, but extrapolation to groups to protect against erosion seems straightforward.

clearest explanation. She states that we must “assess democratic institutions and actors not by their responsiveness to what is ‘out there’ but by the way that they divide the social field, mount political conflict, and solicit political identification” (138-139). When it comes to factors that protect against backsliding, one must account not just for processes that lead to opinion formation and voting, but also factors that facilitate mobilization. Mobilizing actors such as social movement interest group leaders, opinion leaders, and campaign organizations stimulate action via messages/communicating logistics, while citizens can act by, for instance, joining a movement. This includes not just appearing in a single protest but other activities that can be of greater impact and import (e.g., Skocpol et al. 2022).

These meso-level organizations also shape democratic outcomes by influencing elected officials. They do so by lobbying, providing information and financial contributions, mobilizing or demobilizing voters on election day, advertising, and so on. An example is making donations contingent on an elite’s support or opposition to democratic transgressions.

A distinct crucial actor are the media that can shape both officials’ beliefs and actions as well as those of citizens. Media play a nuanced role in terms of democratic stability. On the one hand, a free media serves a fundamental role as a government watchdog (e.g., Baum and Potter 2015). On the other hand, contemporary media, most notably partisan media and social media, often receive condemnation for generating polarized societies due to one-sided information flows (e.g., Lelkes et al. 2017, Allcott et al. 2020).

### **Framework for Studying Democratic Backsliding**

The discussion thus far generates a framework. There are three levels of analysis: elites, societal actors, and citizens. This roughly maps into macro (governmental), meso (group), and

micro (citizen) levels.<sup>9</sup> For each level, there are the relevant actors and backsliding behaviors that may occur. Understanding the likelihood of a given activity means isolating the psychological processes that could contribute. This is what I attempt to do.

I present the framework in Table 1. The respective columns list the level, actors, backsliding behaviors (generally), and psychological contributors to the behaviors (that I subsequently discuss). The framework comes with five significant caveats. First, each element of the framework, particularly the psychological contributors, are by no means exhaustive. Second, they also are not exclusive—that is, while I connect particular psychological processes to specific actors, the same processes could and do apply to other actors. Third, as discussed, the application of each variable is tricky; it would require specifying the status quo in a given system and a manifestation of backsliding. I do not do that here, instead pointing to examples that could promote erosive behavior. Fourth, I do not include international forces, though I discuss them in the conclusion. Finally, I place media and its influence at the meso level (as a distinct meso entry), though one could argue they belong at the macro level. More generally, my discussion of media is relatively limited, as one could imagine an entire framework focused on varying types of media and their effects (e.g., Persily and Tucker 2020).

**Table 1: Framework for Studying Democratic Backsliding**

<b>Actors</b>	<b>Backsliding Behavior</b>	<b>Psychological Contributor</b>
<i>Macro (Elites' Actions)</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elected officials (federal/state/local)</li> <li>• Candidates</li> <li>• Non-elected government officials/staff</li> <li>• Judiciary/legal actors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Violate the law</li> <li>• Violate a norm</li> <li>• Violate an ideal</li> <li>• Power-consolidating institutional changes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Misperceptions</li> <li>• Status quo bias</li> <li>• Discriminatory behavior</li> <li>• Opportunity costs</li> <li>• Incompetence</li> </ul>

<sup>9</sup> I focus on individual decisions and thus I do not strictly echo the distinct levels of analyses.

<i>Meso (Social Mobilization)</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social movements</li> <li>• Interest groups/political action committees</li> <li>• Campaign organizations</li> <li>• Opinion leaders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organization miscommunication / Mistargeting citizens (prevents mobilization)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intersectionality</li> <li>• Organizationally-induced preferences</li> <li>• Overconfidence</li> <li>• Failed targeting</li> <li>• Two-step communication flow</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Citizens (mobilization decisions)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Citizens' inaction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Misattributions</li> <li>• Low efficacy</li> <li>• Homogenous networks</li> <li>• Backlash</li> </ul>
<i>Meso (Influence Elites)</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interest groups/political action committees</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Failure to act in response to transgressive elites</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loss aversion</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elected officials (federal/state/local)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ignore interest group expectations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low vulnerability</li> <li>• Market beliefs</li> </ul>
<i>Meso (Media Influence)</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Media organizations/platforms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incomplete or one-sided information</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fragmentation</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Failure to hold elites accountable</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confirmation bias</li> <li>• Low effort</li> </ul>
<i>Micro (Citizens' Actions)</i>		

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Citizens</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vote for an undemocratic candidate</li> <li>• Participate in transgressive activities (break laws, violence, spread misinformation)</li> <li>• Endorse / normalize a democratic transgression (e.g., norm)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• System justification</li> <li>• Anti-establishment orientation</li> <li>• Group threat</li> <li>• Misinformation</li> <li>• Motivated reasoning</li> <li>• Politicalization</li> <li>• Mental health (depression)</li> </ul>
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**Elite Actions**

Elites have access (or potential access) to governmental power and resources. These actors, as with the others discussed below, may or may not have democratic values (Welzel 2021). This is a salient question since some evidence suggests an asymmetry with those on the right (e.g., Republicans) being more likely to embrace erosive actions (e.g., Jost 2021, Grumboch 2022). Without denying the plausibility of this dynamic, I do not discuss it regarding elites, instead focusing on factors that could contribute to erosion, all else constant. (I touch on asymmetries among citizens.) As explained, elites could violate laws, norms, or ideals or change institutions to consolidate power. They may do each of these to maintain political control over society to ensure their preferred outcomes (Hassan et al. 2022). I identify five psychological tendencies that could lead to violations.

First are misperceptions. A common starting point for any consideration of elites’ beliefs is what their constituents desire; indeed, a typical conception of dyadic representation suggests that elected officials represent the views of their constituents (e.g., Miller and Stokes 1963). Yet, a growing body of work suggests that “politicians are quite inaccurate estimators of people’s

preferences. They make large errors and even regularly misperceive what a majority of the voters wants... They misperceive not only the preferences of the general public but also the preferences of their own partisan electorate” (Walgrave et al. 2023: 209; also see Broockman and Skovron 2018, Sevenans et al. n.d.). Unelected elites, too, have similarly skewed views of public opinion, often imputing their own preferences to the public (Furnas and Lapira 2023). These misperceptions can undermine democratic responsiveness and lead to unequal representation with high-intensity activists (Hill 2022), donors (Kalla and Broockman 2016), or wealthy voters (Gilens 2012) having outsized influence. Indeed, Pereira (2021) offers evidence that officials’ misperceptions reflect unequal exposure to different constituencies—in particular, what could be called influential constituencies.<sup>10</sup>

These misperceptions and inequalities can contribute to erosion if influential constituents lead officials to take a backsliding action. A telling example comes from the Tea Party, which launched in 2009 and included voters who generally were right of the modal Republican both fiscally and socially (Parker and Barreto 2013). The network of local and national groups ostensibly influenced elections and pushed the Republican party in an anti-democratic direction: “the GOP is willing to ride this surging energy and is, by now, also committed to manipulating every institutional lever—to the edge of legality and perhaps beyond—to ensconce right-wing rule ... The Tea Party has thus turned out to be ... an authoritarian force” (Skocpol et al. 2022: 399). The issue here is that if elites (mis)perceive their party’s voters, due to the inordinate influence of selected groups, as tolerating undemocratic actions, they may transgress. Opinions and elections no longer serve as a guardrail (Hopkins 2023).

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<sup>10</sup> He also shows that misperceptions additionally stem from legislators projecting their own preferences onto voters.

Druckman et al. (n.d.) show that this extends to perceptions of the other party. They show that state legislators who (vastly) misperceive members of the other party as holding more anti-democratic attitudes (e.g., ignoring unfavorable court rulings, ignoring unfavorable election results) are more likely to hold such attitudes themselves. When those misperceptions are corrected, the legislators' own attitudes regarding laws and norms become more democratic.<sup>11</sup> That said, Kalla and Porter (2019) show that most officials decline to access information about their constituents' beliefs when offered such information. This work provides a stark reminder that perceptions matter when it comes to democratic transgressions.

A second psychological malady is a status quo bias, whereby people privilege the status quo unless incentivized otherwise. In political systems, formal institutions define the status quo. This means that informal norms that govern democracy could devolve and actors turn to the formal status quo as the "natural fallback," even if it is relatively less democratic. Along these lines, Helmke et al. (2021) show that when coordination on informal norms breaks down, legal rules become the reversion point. That allows politicians to use legal loopholes to benefit their party, which could contribute to erosion. The authors show that, in the U.S., democratic norms about electoral rules collapse if specific social groups are asymmetrically advantaged by their demise and those groups sort into a particular party (which then has the incentive to abandon the norm). They show the Republican party benefited from devolved electoral norms and thus engaged in legally permissible, but norm-violating, partisan gerrymandering (due to non-urban voters benefiting and becoming Republican) and voter suppression (due to non-Black voters benefiting and becoming relatively Republican) (also see Grumbach 2022). As the authors state,

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<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Pereira (2021) shows that exposure to information about the composition of the electorate in their areas leads officials to have more accurate perceptions.

“politicians can exploit constitutional loopholes to gain undemocratic electoral advantages” (448). Here backsliding occurs because elites naturally lean toward the institutional status quo.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, elites can manipulate what citizens view as the status quo. Grillo and Pratto (2023) show that if an extreme politician with anti-democratic inclinations wins office but then does not act as undemocratically as citizens expected, pro-democracy voters will offer support, ironically, because the incumbent is ostensibly more democratic than anticipated (as long as there is some uncertainty about the incumbent’s ideology). The politician wins office and can violate laws, norms, and/or ideals or take power-consolidating actions to some extent, but not enough that it will lead to an electoral loss. Erosion occurs gradually as the status quo expectation shifts to become less and less democratic. Put another way, elected officials exploit the status quo bias among voters by slowly moving the point of reference to more undemocratic scenarios (i.e., changing what is democratically acceptable), and then citizens accept increasingly undemocratic behaviors (e.g., UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s prorogation of parliament in 2019).

A third factor is discriminatory behavior with one group advantaged relative to another, all else constant (Pager and Shepherd 2008). Discrimination by governmental entities can violate laws that require non-discrimination based on race and other attributes; it also—even if not a legal transgression—counters the democratic ideal of inclusiveness. Many studies demonstrate broad elite discrimination. For instance, Butler and Broockman (2011) sent (fictitious) e-mail requests to state legislators in 44 states requesting information about how to register to vote in upcoming primary elections. Each legislator received a request that randomly varied the race and partisanship of the sender. The authors, following a common approach, signaled race with the

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<sup>12</sup> More generally, laws assert more influence and can shape norms (Lane et al. 2023).



name Jake Mueller for a White voter and DeShawn Jackson for a Black voter, pointing to the objective correlations of those names with the given races (e.g., from Census data). They report that when e-mails do not signal partisanship, legislators, overall, are roughly 5% less likely to respond to the request from the Black sender (DeShawn). This paper stimulated an enormous literature of more than 40 studies that consistently report racial bias in responsiveness, with a roughly 7 percentage point lower response rate for Black constituents and a 14 percentage point lower response rate for Latino constituents (Costa 2017).

Discriminatory behavior occurs among the judiciary as well. Shayo and Zussman (2011) use data from Israeli small claims courts, where there is virtual random assignment to judges; they find that judges rule more favorably for claimants who share their ethnic identity. The bias becomes more pronounced in the presence of recent nearby terrorism. This demonstrates a potential spiral of erosion, with violence precipitating discrimination that could exacerbate tensions. Harvey and Yntiso (2021) show that when judges switch from facing reelection to reappointment, they exhibit a large decrease in support of Black defendants when the judicial reappointment panel consisted of all White participants. Yntiso (2022) shows that marginally elected Republican prosecutors seek more stringent charges than Democrats for Black defendants (due to Black defendants typically residing in areas where Republican candidates do poorly and thus prosecutors appearing tough on crime with little cost).<sup>13</sup> Finally, there is evidence of electoral official bias: White et al. (2015) find that local election officials in the U.S. exhibit substantially less responsiveness to inquiries about voting from Latino-sounding aliases compared to non-Latino White ones. This occurred uniquely in areas without federal monitoring for discrimination. The withering of the Voting Rights Act means less systematic monitoring, the

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<sup>13</sup> There is substantial evidence of judicial gender bias as well (e.g., Miller 2019).

potential for more discrimination, and, consequently, the erosion of democratic ideals of inclusiveness and equal voting access (for a review, see Nathan and White 2021). Biases of these sorts among legal actors constitute threats of particular concern given the crucial role of judicial actors in ensuring the equal application of the law.

A more subtle psychological feature concerns the assessment of opportunity costs to entering politics. An opportunity cost refers to the highest valued option not taken; for government officials, it is the best alternative job. It turns out that decision-makers routinely ignore opportunity costs unless the decisions involve large resource considerations (more money) and/or limited resources (time) (Spiller 2011). Thus, presumably, most who run for office or serve in government consider their next best options given the resources and time required. How does this relate to democratic erosion? Hall (2019) shows that the opportunity costs of running for office, at least in the U.S. Congress, have substantially increased: the growing need for fundraising and media scrutiny along with relatively lower pay and fewer policy-making opportunities devalue running for and holding office. This, in turn, increases the opportunity costs of doing so, particularly for moderates, who may have even less incentive and chance to alter the status-quo policy agenda. This results in more extreme candidates and officeholders who ideologically polarize the legislature.

While there is no direct evidence linking ideological extremity to anti-democratic behaviors among elites, there is such evidence among citizens (e.g., Graham and Svobik 2020, Voelkel et al. 2023b). More generally, a more polarized legislature (consisting of extremists on all sides) “advantages defenders of the status quo... and can lead to a deteriorating quality of governance [that] may in turn undermine faith in our constitution” (McCarty 2019: 154-155). Opportunity costs also potentially result in lower-quality candidates: “Democratic governance

can function properly only when competent types... stand up and seek political office ... [and] high-quality citizens will not run for office unless they have the proper incentives to do so” (Hall 2019: 8, 107). In the U.S., one clear consequence has been a replacement of moderate Republican legislators with more extreme ones who have steered the agenda more toward social issues (Moskowitz et al. 2022). This creates increased gridlock that “increases voters’ tolerance for authoritarian leadership” (Mickey 2022: 119). Increases in opportunity costs among elites disincentivize moderate candidates (given their assessments of costs and benefits) and can spill over into erosive outcomes.

Opportunity costs also can undermine institutional checks. Howell et al. (2023) show that courts may not check the executive because they worry that doing so will establish precedent that could later limit the executive during a crisis. They thus do not act against a potentially autocrat executive because they fear it will establish a problematic future baseline. The high opportunity cost of ruling (since shifting precedence is so difficult) prevents the court from acting as a fully effective check.

A final elite factor that could contribute to democratic backsliding is incompetence—that is, the inability to perform a task as it “should be done.” One challenge for elected and non-elected officials concerns acquiring the information needed to engage in competent decision-making. While variation certainly exists, extant evidence suggests that officials are motivated to obtain accurate information (Lee 2022) and often find ways to do so (e.g., Fong 2019), depending on their specific informational needs (Ban et al. 2023). That said, information access does not ensure expertise (Lupia and McCubbins 1998). While many accounts presume elite transgressions reflect their own anti-democratic tendencies, they instead could simply come from poor decision-making. Sheffer et al. (2017) show that politicians across three countries exhibit a

host of biases, including commitment to failed initiatives due to sunk costs, a status quo bias (a la the above discussion), and vulnerability to equivalency framing effects. A distinct literature documents a host of decision-making biases among judicial actors, such as the inclusion of irrelevant information (e.g., a defendant’s history) and anchoring biases (e.g., using exaggerated claims to baseline judgments) (Teichman and Zamir 2014).

These characteristics do not necessitate backsliding, but they do mean that politicians may be slow to counteract ongoing erosion due to decision-making biases. (Sheffer and Loewen 2019a,b; also see Kertzer 2022). Bendor and Bullock (2021) point out that incompetent leaders choose incompetent underlings, leading to a spreading effect. This makes incompetence a “key vulnerability in democratic governments” (322). In essence, incompetence leads to poor performance that can undermine legitimacy and opens the door to erosion (Walder and Lust 2018), especially because voters do not necessarily imbue the violation of democratic principles as an indication of incompetence (i.e., voters view competence and anti-democratic behaviors as distinct dimensions) (Frederiksen 2022a).

### **Social Mobilization**

The meso or societal level of analysis involves a range of actors and processes. I focus on organizational efforts to mobilize citizens in response to potential erosion and/or influence elites, citizens’ response to mobilizational efforts, and the media and their relationship with their audience.

#### ***Mobilization by Organizations***

Democratic erosion can be subtle such that most citizens are unaware of its occurrence. Yet, just as interest groups, advocacy organizations, and experts monitor the administrative state for abuses (McCubbins and Schwartz 1984), so do they watch for backsliding. These include

groups with missions to protect historically marginalized populations (e.g., Black Lives Matter, the National Organization for Women, the Anti-Defamation League) as well as academic or legal organizations that survey rights abuses (e.g., Brennan Center, Freedom House). The hope is that some entity will observe elite backsliding and mobilize citizens to express their displeasure via either protests that pressure politicians or voting decisions. Alternatively, they could apply direct pressure on government officials or candidates to act in ways that preempt transgressions or are held accountable for transgressions. Alas, there exist various obstacles that any organization or movement faces in stimulating citizen action or holding officials accountable; these stem from the organizations themselves and, in the case of citizens, a failure to act.

When it comes to organizations, the main challenges concern identifying and prioritizing an infringement. Two related structural problems that make identification difficult involve intersectionality and organizationally induced preferences. To provide context to the first structural problem, intersectionality, consider that erosive steps often initially affect some segments of society more than others. Voter suppression is a case in point insofar as it materially impacts Democrats and voters from demographic minority populations more than others. Not surprisingly, these individuals more readily organize in response to such discrimination. Enders and Panagopoulos (2021) show that Democrats were significantly mobilized by postcards highlighting the potentially disproportionate impact of ID laws on demographic groups that traditionally support the Democratic Party. Biggers and Smith (2020) show that Hispanic voters targeted by a voting purge in Florida increased their turnout in response.

Here is the twist: in these examples, the mobilizations are short-term solutions, as they do not undo the anti-democratic act of suppression. Doing so presumably would require, at the very least, a broad coalition to act against it. This is a difficult task, particularly given one side

(Republicans) benefits from the erosion. It also accentuates a challenge for organizations in constructing broad-based coalitions due to intersectionality—that is, a group’s inclination to favor advantaged constituents rather than disadvantaged ones who often face intersecting lines of marginalization. Strolovitch (2007) finds that most advocacy groups do not promote the interests of disadvantaged subgroups, such as low-income Black women, compared to those of advantaged subgroups, such as middle-class White women. For instance, a women’s group might focus on issues that matter to a majority of its constituency (e.g., violence against women) or those of interest to advantaged subgroups (e.g., affirmative action in higher education, relevant to middle-class women). In contrast, they pay scant attention to those of interest to disadvantaged subgroups (e.g., welfare reform) even though these issues affect similar proportions of women.<sup>14</sup> This approach reflects resource realities: those with resources can drive agendas, such as how funders shaped the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s (NAACP) early agenda away from addressing racial violence to segregation in education (Francis 2019). Consequently, certain infringements will not be recognized or will be ignored due to intersectional group biases.

Recognizing erosive behavior also can be made more difficult due to the psychology of organizational culture that refers to the assumptions taught to and brought to bear on those who work within an organization. These cultures shape the values, beliefs, and identities of those who work in them (e.g., Flamholtz and Randle 2014). Miscenko and Day (2016: 216) explain,

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<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Brower (2021: 153) shows that the original incarnation of the Violence Against Women Act “reflected the experiences and interests of the most privileged women that these [advocacy] organizations represented. This focus on immediate [crime control] solutions to violence resulted in policy solutions that were temporary, which required women to have other financial resources if they were to escape violence altogether. This approach also included services that required citizenship and English language proficiency...” That said, she also documents the rise of intersectional advocacy, which accounts for more diverse experiences and incorporates various issue domains including violence, welfare, immigration, and housing. Dwidar (2022) points to coalitional efforts as the prime strategy to advocate for intersectional group members.

“[p]eople spend a considerable portion of their lives at work or otherwise engaged in work-related activities. Correspondingly, organizations are often crucial in shaping a person’s identity ... occupational environments can also motivate change in personal traits and identity.” This suggests that even if organizations diversify in terms of their leaders, those leaders may adopt the beliefs of others in leadership, undermining efforts to address erosion directed at particular subgroups (e.g., those with intersectional identities). For instance, Druckman and Sharrow (2023) show that when women advance in governance organizations dominated by men, their preferences evolve away from pressing for equal opportunities (relative to those without commensurate positions). They resolve an identity conflict by adapting to the extant culture, a fairly typical response for individuals from historically subordinated social groups (e.g., Chattopadhyay, Tluchowska, and George 2004; Derks, Van Laar, and Ellemers 2006).

Why does any of this matter for democratic backsliding? As made clear above, erosion often occurs via the deliberate targeting of marginalized groups (e.g., voter suppression, violence, unequal opportunities). A suitable response often requires mobilization not just of those directly affected but by broader coalitions committed to protecting democracy. The psychology of intersectionality and organizational adaptation means that many organizations may fail to recognize or prioritize the interests of the affected parties. This allows erosion to go unchecked. One possible antidote is the emergence of less organization-based mobilization in response to rights violations. Indeed, Simonson et al. (n.d.) show the primary mobilizing mechanism for the 2020 mass BLM protests following the murder of George Floyd were Black individuals sharing personal stories to mobilize White protestors—i.e., cross-cleavage weak ties. This ties into Fisher and Rouse’s (2022) finding that these protests stimulated action by those motivated not just by race-based democratic violations (i.e., state-sponsored violence) but also other types of

inequalities, including those regarding women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and immigrants. Whether these informal communication channels suffice to counter intersectional and organizational biases that limit inclusiveness remains to be seen.

Even when organizations or individuals recognize and prioritize addressing an infringement, stimulating a broad response (e.g., messages) faces additional challenges. Collective action problems disincentive citizens from acting to protect democracy and coordination problems undermine acting in concert. Consider three psychological hindrances. First, those seeking to mobilize (e.g., organizations) may be overconfident in their messaging acumen. Such certainty leads to messages that impose more objectivity and expressions of morals (moralization) and judgment (Cheatham and Tormala 2017). This directly contradicts a well-documented effective strategy of moral re-framing that engages a given audience (rather than the speaker's) moral perspective (Feinberg and Willer 2019). For instance, Kalla et al. (2022) find personalized moral reframing works to stimulate interest in taking action on abortion. Indeed, this has long been emphasized as an approach of social movements (Bedford and Snow 2000), but overconfident messengers may not employ these re-framings.

Second, a related issue concerns failed targeting. Despite the evidence just discussed on moral re-framing, evidence for successful targeting is mixed (c.f., Tappin et al. 2022, Hernandez et al. 2023); moreover, targeting one population runs the risk of backfiring on those who feel disenfranchised by the message (e.g., Hersh and Schaffner 2013, Ostfeld 2019). This latter point aligns with the intersectional challenges, but this time from the messages rather than from prioritizing a perspective (Brower 2022); for example, Bonilla and Tillery (2020) show that frames for BLM that tie in Black feminist and LGBTQ+ populations depress overall mobilization, particularly among Black men. They explain, “social movement frames based on



subgroup identities can generate segmented public support for those movements” (959). More generally, it is often unclear what to target: identity, values, norms, etc. (Bayes et al. 2020). There is thus not only substantial heterogeneity among the population to target but also across ways to target. Third, messages often do not directly reach their targets but rather flow through a two-step communication flow where an intermediary or opinion leader passes it along to less engaged others. Carlson (2019) shows that such a process undercuts the information content and tone in the original message, often in biased ways (e.g., to reflect one’s partisan leanings). This, in turn, leads to less learning and, depending on the intermediary, distinct subjective evaluations.

### ***Citizens’ Mobilization Decisions***

With regard to mobilization, there exist additional challenges that stem from constituents (the mobilizers’ audience) processing the information and deciding whether to act.

Understanding political action is tricky given the incentives to slack from engaging in collective action (Olson 1965). There are, of course, sizeable literatures on decisions to join movements and protests. For instance, for protests, it is understood that people do so when they have a grievance (and understand against whom they have such a grievance), anger, social identification with the group acting, efficacy, resources to act, and network embeddedness (Zomeran, Postmes, and Spears 2008, van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013). Much of this can be operationalized in a cost-benefit calculus (Klandermans 1984) where some of the major costs involve risks (McAdam 1986) and the benefits, beyond identifying with the purpose, include attribution (toward whom they have a grievance) and efficacy assessments. I focus on the latter two levers.

As explained, several challenges make it difficult to design messages that induce individuals to believe their interests are at stake. If individuals are swayed about their interests, they also need to believe the action addresses the relevant target and that the action will matter.

The former entails attributions for the cause of the situation (e.g., blame attribution). In the case of democratic erosion, individuals thus must make an attribution to the relevant (governmental) actor as causing backsliding. Yet, there exist many sources of error that lead to misattributions. These include overweighting recent events (e.g., focusing on a recent transgression rather than a history of transgressions) (Huber et al. 2012), making attributions based on perceptions of the competence of relevant actors that may or may not be accurate (Graham and Singh 2023), making attributions based on random events that alter one's mood (e.g., Healy et al. 2010, Busby et al. 2015, Achen and Bartels 2016; c.f., Fowler and Hall 2018), only blaming those from the other party(ies) (Malhotra and Kuo 2008), and being vulnerable to blame-shifting rhetoric (Schlippak et al. 2022). For instance, Kikutaa and Uesugi (2023) find that irrelevant national events, precisely losing soccer games in Europe by teams with African players, shape protest behavior against the central government in Africa: a loss leads to negative evaluations of domestic politicians and triggers nonviolent protests. Alternatively, Schlippak et al. (2022) show that by shifting the blame for democratic and rule of law violations to an external actor (e.g., an international entity) lowers perceptions of the culpability of the government. These types of misattributions increase the mobilizational challenge, as it means communication not only needs to address the general benefits and costs of action but also ensure people correctly assign blame.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to attributions, individuals act when they feel it will be efficacious. The more one links their decisions with collective outcomes, the more likely they act (e.g., Polletta and Ho 2006). This means ensuring people perceive their own actions and/or those of their group as

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<sup>15</sup> There are some antidotes. For example, explicitly providing information on long-term trends vitiates recency biases (Healy and Lenz 2013, Druckman 2015), making people aware of the influence of random events combats their effects (Schwarz and Clore 1983, Healy et al. 2010) and providing more information about people's professional responsibility tempers partisan bias (Malhotra and Kuo 2008).

impactful (Finkel and Mueller 1998, Lubell et al. 2007). Han et al. (2021) explain that people need to perceive themselves as agents of democracy—“It is about developing people’s capacity, their sense of their own agency, and their loyalties to one another ... [This is] developing people as agents of democracy” (158). Young (2020) studies the response to state-sponsored election violence in Zimbabwe, finding that those with higher levels of self-efficacy are more likely to report that they would attend an opposition rally.<sup>16</sup> In a more democratic context, it is well documented that political efficacy played a notable role in motivating actions in the U.S. civil rights movement (Beaumont 2010).<sup>17</sup>

A psychological barrier to efficacy comes from biased socialization patterns that limit the development of efficacy among certain groups. For instance, Bos et al.’s (2022) theory of gendered socialization suggests children come to learn that politics is a masculine domain; girls exhibit substantially less political interest and ambition than do boys. This coheres with Fox and Lawless (2014) who show more women view working for a charity as the best way to pursue change, whereas significantly more men view running for office as the best way to do so. Women in the U.S. continue to be relatively less interested in politics, less likely to follow it, less likely to engage in small group discussions, and more pessimistic about their ability to influence it—in short, they have less confidence that they can use politics to effect change (Schneider and Bos 2019, Beauvais 2020, Wolak 2020). These variables closely connect to efficacy and can lower collective action among women. Indeed, Coffé et al. (2010) show that women are less

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<sup>16</sup> Young points out that a key here (in stimulating protest and social activism) is that people perceive the state as repressive.

<sup>17</sup> When it comes to race and efficacy in contemporary America, it seems fairly contingent on descriptive representation (e.g., efficacy among African Americans increased as Obama’s likelihood of winning in 2008 increased; West 2017).

likely than men to engage in collective political action (e.g., a demonstration, attending a political meeting, or a rally).

A distinct psychological barrier to efficacy is misperceptions. For instance, Stauffer (2021) shows that perceptions that women are included in legislatures leads to higher efficacy among both males and females. Yet, many misperceive their inclusion (over- or underestimating inclusiveness), which then alters their sense of efficacy. Lee (2010) shows that, in Hong Kong, feelings of collective efficacy (i.e., belief that a collectivity can achieve a desired outcome) depend on perceptions of the competence of the public, how representative politics are of the public, and how supportive the media are of pro-democracy protests. Collective efficacy, in turn, shapes protest decisions. Since these perceptions are manipulable, they likely could be inaccurate and undermine efficacy (see Bolsen et al. 2014).

As briefly mentioned, social networks play a role in altering the cost and benefit calculations of protesting. Exactly how these networks operate in the context of social movements and/or protests is well studied, with tie strength (weak or strong) and relationship to a movement (insider or outsider) being among the relevant variables. One potential hurdle, given residential partisan sorting (Brown and Enos 2021) and media partisan sorting (Broockman and Kalla 2023) is homogenous networks. For instance, Druckman and Sharrow (2023) show that sex segregation undermines the coalition building between males and females to address gender inequities. As mentioned, Simonson et al. (2023) reveal the potential power of heterogenous cross-cleavage networks in their studies of the BLM protests in June 2020; the protests were notable not just for their efforts to address state violations of civil rights (and hence, undemocratic behaviors), but also their cross-racial and cross-partisan composition. The authors show that this stemmed in part from the mobilization of White people through Black people's

stories of victimhood spread through social media (see Jost et al. 2018). If the networks had remained homogenous, the size of the protests would have been much smaller and the lasting changes that the protests stimulated much fewer (e.g., Dunivin et al. 2022, Peay and McNair 2022).

Another challenge for any social movement, including those that seek to solidify democracy, is that it can generate backlash. For example, Simpson et al. (2018) show that if a protest turns violent, it can generate opposition to the group and its cause. For example, the authors show that the use of violence by an anti-racist group against White nationalists decreases support for the former and increases it for the latter. Even if it does not generate a backlash, movement by one group but not another can generate polarization. For example, Reny and Newman (2021) find that after the BLM protests, high-prejudice and politically conservative Americans exhibited no or very little change in perceived anti-Black discrimination or evaluations of the police. Since others changed their views, the result was increased polarization with respect to race and law enforcement. Even more problematic is that social movements sometimes embrace anti-democratic conspiracy theories (e.g., the Deep State is conspiring against Donald Trump, the 9/11 attacks were an inside job) that contribute to erosion (Sternisko et al. 2020), as well as explicit anti-government paramilitary, White power movements (Belew 2018).

### **Social Group Influence on Elites**

Social organizations also can hold elites accountable. A large literature explores the extent to which groups influence political decisions by providing information, resources (i.e., money), campaign support, and so on. As such, organizations can make such support contingent on officials and candidates not taking (or endorsing) transgressive actions. For example, Li and

Disalvo (2022) find that, following the January 6<sup>th</sup> Capitol insurrection, companies with Democratic-leaning stakeholders significantly decreased their campaign contributions to Republican legislators who objected to the Electoral College results, thereby leading to significant losses in corporate political action committee contributions. This reveals that business groups can play a significant role in protecting democratic institutions. Alas, an organizational challenge for similar regular actions is loss aversion. Tetlock and Boettger (1994) explain that facing a decision to hold others accountable prompts loss aversion—a desire to minimize losses since experiencing losses outweigh commensurate gains—and a status quo bias. In the context of erosion, this suggests that organizations will avoid altering the relationships they have developed with officials, all else constant. The January 6<sup>th</sup> example may be more of an exception than the rule.

Even if organizations exercise such accountability mechanisms, there remains the question of whether they hold sufficient power to influence elites (e.g., did the January 6<sup>th</sup> response alter the behaviors of those deprived of contributions?). This presumably depends on a cost-benefit electoral calculation by politicians. The reality is that many, if not most, politicians enjoy some safety (i.e., low electoral vulnerability), and so the exact sway of withholding or providing donations or other resources from one or a few groups is likely minimal; more generally, the influence of interest groups remains unclear (e.g., Baumgartner et al. 2009, Leech 2010). Coordination across groups could be more powerful, but coordination (particularly in safe-seat districts) is difficult and less common (Hassell 2023).

Officeholders also might not adjust their behavior because they anticipate that the market will address the issue. For example, Malhotra et al. (2019) demonstrate that when firms commit to voluntary environmental programs, this can preempt government officials, voters, and activists

from pursuing more draconian regulations. Druckman and Valdes (2019) reveal a similar dynamic with regard to setting minimum wage standards. This can become relevant to backsliding insofar as elites may not sanction one another for transgressions because they believe the market will do so. Such faith in the market could be misplaced, though, given it does not inherently reward democratic behavior.

### **Media and Its Influence**

I have thus far said little about the media, even though they play an enormous role in democratic polities. Detailed treatment of media organizational decisions and audience reactions is beyond my purview (and a topic of considerable debate). Instead, I accentuate one point on each respective topic. First, understanding how media structure shapes their impact on democratic erosion requires an appreciation for the massive fragmentation that has occurred since the 1990s. Prior to then, many worried that media relied too much on governmental sources and thus failed to serve as a suitable external check (e.g., Iyengar and Kinder 1987:132). Starting with cable television (Baum and Kernell 1999) and then evolving with the internet and social media, the media ecology has transformed into a niche system. Consequently, market incentives have shifted, raising the specter of acute echo chambers, including for those who may hold undemocratic attitudes (Sunstein 2002). Moreover, fragmentation can contribute to incomplete information as outlets or social media opinion leaders opt for one-sided portrayals that cater to their niche audiences. Kalla and Broockman (2022) capture a similar idea with “partisan filtering,” which refers to selective reporting of information in terms of both what to cover and how to cover it. The authors provide an example of CNN covering the United States’ inferior performance relative to Europe in containing the COVID-19 pandemic, which undermined

perceptions of Trump’s performance on the issue. In contrast, Fox News covered data indicating that COVID-19 was less dangerous than many thought.<sup>18</sup>

The question of whether media, broadly speaking, contribute to erosion is difficult to answer given self-selection issues (people choose to consume particular media but also are influenced by it). This breaks into two audience decisions: exposure and acceptance. Selective exposure (or “echo chambers”) could be problematic insofar as it can sever access to varying perspectives that contribute to reasoned opinions. More directly, it can reaffirm the beliefs of those with undemocratic attitudes. The extent of selective exposure is difficult to gauge since it requires direct observation of people’s media choices (Prior 2013). Two recent studies offer some evidence, however. Broockman and Kalla (2023) employ behavioral measures of television consumption, political administrative data, and survey data to show that about two-thirds of the partisan media audience align ideologically with their network (e.g., Republicans watch Fox News, Democrats watch MSNBC), and partisans generally do not consume channels from the other side. The authors (30) conclude that “our findings suggest that partisan echo chambers are relatively common among partisan media viewers. Partisans who consume their side’s partisan media channels almost never also consume the other side’s partisan channels.” Regarding social media, Wojcieszak et al. (2022) find analogous evidence of echo chambers on Twitter, showing that partisans are much more likely to share the posts of elites who are members of their own party.<sup>19</sup> Psychologically, echo chambers and selective exposure stem from confirmation biases, where audience members seek out information that confirms their standing beliefs and identities,

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<sup>18</sup> Aside from fragmentation, another organizational trend of relevance is the substantial decline in local media that provide their audience with information about their representatives. Moskowitz (2023) shows that the absence of local news has contributed to the rise of partisan polarization in the U.S. Congress.

<sup>19</sup> Fiorina (2022) offers a careful analysis that questions whether social media directly affects political attitudes at all.



leading to less diverse exposure. For instance, Druckman et al. (2012) show that once a perspective is (randomly) established, individuals then seek to pursue affirmative information even when offered a broad range of information choices.

In terms of acceptance, growing evidence suggests media effects. These include the internet generating affective polarization (Lelkes et al. 2017); Facebook contributing to issue polarization (Allcott et al. 2020) and low trust in institutions (Green et al. 2023); and certain cable news channels (Fox News) leading to an increase in misinformation (Garrett et al. 2019), and shaping attitudes, policy preferences, and issue salience (Kalla and Broockman 2022). Echo chambers, combined with these types of effects, represent a threat to democratic accountability, as citizens do not receive balanced (objective) information about leaders, and thus their evaluations may be divorced from actual performance. Along these lines, Druckman et al. (2023) show highly polarized partisans support leaders from their party regardless of their actual performance on COVID-19 response. Bisgaard (2019) shows that even when partisans accurately assess economic performance, they selectively assign blame and responsibility to protect leaders from their party (also see Bisgaard 2015). This provides a clear throughway to erosive behaviors since leaders do not have to answer for their actions.

Candidates also can use media to mislead—for example, repeated exposure to President Trump’s claims of electoral fraud in 2020 led Trump supporters to lose trust and confidence in elections (Clayton et al. 2021). Susceptibility to such misinformation or “fake news” partially stems from low effort. Pennycook and Rand (2021) explain that poor truth discernment stems from a lack of careful reasoning and source heuristics, while misperceptions stem from low effort. This is akin to more System 1 processing, which can be countered with accuracy inducements (Pennycook and Rand 2022).

In sum, the fragmentation of the media ecosystem has altered organizational incentives in ways that could decrease the likelihood of individuals accessing diverse views. Further, confirmation biases and low levels of effort make audiences susceptible to becoming more polarized. This could contribute to erosion if it means voters no longer hold officials accountable and/or base their beliefs and behaviors on false information.

### **Citizens' Decisions**

A sizeable research program explores citizens' democratic attitudes. While citizens rarely play a direct role in democratic erosion (Bermo 2016), they matter in at least three ways: they can vote for or against candidates who transgress; they can participate in transgressive actions themselves, such as violence or spreading conspiratorial-laden misinformation; and they can normalize anti-democratic beliefs such as affirming the behavior of those who break laws, violate civil rights, and so on.

One characteristic that can contribute to such behaviors is system justification. This refers to “the social psychological process whereby prevailing conditions—whether social, cultural, sexual, economic, legal, or political—are accepted, explained, and justified simply because they exist” (Jost 2020: 84).<sup>20</sup> People defend the status quo even if it is unjust and exploitative due to a need for certainty, security, and social acceptance. Those with high social justification tendencies often rationalize an undemocratic erosion of the extant system. This can, perhaps ironically, occur even among the most vulnerable: Haines and Jost (2000) show that when people are (arbitrarily) put in a low-power situation where outcomes depend on others, they exaggerate the legitimacy of the decision-makers. Jost (2020: 142) explains, “the idea that dependence on authorities for desired resources activates system justification motivation, and contributes to the

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<sup>20</sup> This is related to but distinct from authoritarianism and social dominance.

legitimation of powerholders.” Of course, those who benefit from the system also will seek to justify or rationalize its maintenance, even with anti-democratic tactics. Jardina and Mickey (2022) suggest that White people with strong White identities have historically rejected racial pluralism insofar as they worry that the democratic system may evolve so that it works better for people of color. They show that as White consciousness increases, so do anti-democratic attitudes, specifically that the president should not have to worry about the courts and Congress, and that a strong leader should be able to bend the rules. Although, strictly speaking, system justification correlates with conservatism, Jardina and Mickey (2022) find here that the effect of White consciousness manifests for partisans from both sides.

Jardina and Mickey’s results echo with group or racial threat stemming from demographic change; that is, a “perception by the dominant group that an outside group threatens their group’s prerogatives” (Quillian 1995: 586). These threats can be economic, political, or symbolic/value-based (Blalock 1967) and can be real or perceived (c.f., Enos 2016, Craig and Richeson 2014, 2018). Group threat leads to more conservative attitudes and more negative attitudes toward minorities (Craig and Richeson 2014, 2018), more support for restrictive immigration policies (Quillian 1995, Major et al. 2018), and more support for extreme wings of parties (Willer et al. 2016) and anti-democratic candidates like Trump (Mutz 2018). More directly relevant to backsliding, Druckman and Shafranek (2020) show that White individuals, presumably due to threat, exhibit discriminatory behaviors in terms of excluding Black individuals from the political sphere, with obvious implications for participatory inclusiveness. In their study of the 2020 election, the Annenberg IOD Collaborative (2023) offers evidence of how group threat led to clear anti-democratic stances with regard to rejecting the 2020 election results and being less critical of the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection. They explain:

The concept of status threat posits that when a dominant group in society feels threatened, it reacts in ways designed to retain its societal position ... Whether the threat is real or not, such feelings can lead to discrimination, against and animosity towards supposed outsiders (257-258)... The debate over the election's outcome, and even over January 6, is not only about an election but also about who will wield power in America. It is about the nation's changing demographics, the sense that once-dominant groups are no longer as dominant, and the feeling that power is slowly beginning to be dispersed more widely (329).

The authors point out that the group most susceptible to these threat dynamics is the historically dominant group of White Christian men. Bartels (2020) provides similar evidence of more general anti-democratic attitudes among Republicans such that those who expressed higher levels of ethnic antagonism (e.g., believing there are unfair government resources afforded to immigrants, believing there is discrimination against White people, having negative attitudes toward those on welfare) exhibit more opposition to democratic norms, including agreeing that strong leaders should sometimes bend rules and that it is hard to trust the results of elections.<sup>21</sup>

Threat also can contribute to individuals adopting anti-system perspectives, although such views, regardless of their origins, constitute a unique factor that could lead citizens to support anti-democratic candidates or the violation of norms. For example, Uscinski et al. (2021) construct an anti-establishment scale, orthogonal to left-right orientations, that envelops conspiracy beliefs, populism, and Manichean orientations. They show that it correlates with the acceptance of political violence, time spent on extremist social media platforms, and belief in misinformation. At the extreme, there could even be a population who use democratic means to elect anti-democratic officials intent on dismantling the system (Wollheim 2016).

Of course, factors other than anti-establishment beliefs make individuals susceptible to misinformation, and misinformation can lead to anti-democratic choices or behaviors. In fact,

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<sup>21</sup> Economic threat also matters, as democratic systems are prone to failure as social mobility declines, inequalities increase, etc.; of course, the systems themselves thrive with market economic institutions (e.g., Acemoglu and Robinson 2012).

even low information can have negative consequences; Bartels (1996) shows that those who possess less political information vote significantly differently than they would have if they were “fully informed” (also see Lau and Redlawsk 1997). The more significant concern in recent years has been misinformation, which refers to something that is “false, misleading, or [based on] unsubstantiated information” (Nyhan and Reifler 2010: 304; also see Lazer et al. 2018). Misinformation can lead to misperceptions, as discussed earlier with regard to elites (Jerit and Zhao 2020). It is commonly presumed that there exists a citizen misinformation problem with consequences for democratic backsliding. For instance, Jee et al. (2022: 761) explain, “An erosion of shared understanding of facts can severely undermine rational-critical public discourse ... [and] increases popular support for democratic erosion...”

Even so, misinformation and misperceptions matter only if they affect crucial attitudes and behaviors. There is growing evidence that they do (e.g., Flynn et al. 2017). For example, during COVID-19, science misperceptions led people to ignore health advice (e.g., masking, vaccination), and to become hostile toward groups that people misattributed as being responsible for the pandemic (Romer and Jamieson 2020, Van Bavel et al. 2020, Druckman 2022b). Politically, disagreement about basic facts (e.g., the state of the economy) can engender negative perceptions of political adversaries (Kennedy and Pronin 2008, Reeder et al. 2005), including the other side’s favored media outlets (Arceneaux, Johnson, and Murphy 2012), which renders political compromise difficult. It also alters voting behavior. Gunther et al. (2019) suggest that false information substantially shaped swing voters’ decisions (those who had voted for Obama in 2012) and contributed to Trump’s 2016 election victory (also see Weeks and Garrett 2014).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> While not exactly misperceptions, Luo and Przeworski (2023) show that backsliding can occur because citizens fail to recognize erosive steps in time to take action and vote out the erosive officials.

Partisans also tend to have vastly incorrect perceptions of those from the other party, viewing them as more ideologically extreme and engaged (Druckman et al. 2022), more prejudiced (Moore-Berg et al. 2020), more obstructionist (Lees and Cikara 2020), and more demographically stereotypical (Ahler and Sood 2018, Rothschild et al. 2019) than they actually are. To see why this becomes democratically problematic, consider Weingast’s (1997) theory of democratic stability. He (262) explains that the “roots of democratic stability [lie] in rational calculation: Citizens aid those who are threatened because the potential victims will later fail to come to their aid if they fail to come to the victims’ aid.” Put another way, citizens hold elites from their party accountable in maintaining democratic norms because they anticipate that those from the other party will do the same.<sup>23</sup> If partisans come to anticipate that those from the other side will not hold their leaders accountable, then they will stop doing so, too—for the system to be self-reinforcing, everyone needs to believe the other side will check its leaders. If they misperceive the other side as flouting democratic norms, it is highly problematic. The same is true when it comes to partisan violence: partisans evade violence because they anticipate the other side will as well (Mernyk et al. 2022).

In the contemporary U.S., partisans vastly misperceive the anti-democratic attitudes and support for partisan violence of those from the other party. Braley et al. (n.d.) find that partisans, on average, view members of the other side as being “probably” or “definitely” likely to violate more than 5 of 7 democratic norms (e.g., ignoring controversial court rulings by judges from the other party, reducing polling stations in towns that support the other party), even though the actual average is approximately 1.35 of 7 (across parties). Mernyk et al. (2022) report that

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<sup>23</sup> This is a coordination game: “how one citizen group reacts to a [sovereign] transgression depends on how it anticipates that the other group will react. If the first group anticipates that the other group will challenge, then it is best off challenging. But if it believes the other will acquiesce, then it is better off acquiescing” (Weingast 1997: 248).

partisans overestimate the average amount of support for partisan violence by out-partisans by between 245% and 442%. Moreover, there exist significant relationships between these misperceptions and attitudes. Partisans' anti-democratic attitudes and their support for partisan violence are correlated with their perceptions of how members of the other party would act.<sup>24</sup> Thus, misperceptions directly lead to anti-democratic and violent attitudes that could affect vote choice and normative expectations.<sup>25</sup>

Many suggest that the psychological process underlying misperceptions is one of directional motivated reasoning (Flynn et al. 2017). This theory focuses on a motivation or a goal that is a “cognitive representation of a desired endpoint that impacts evaluations, emotions and behaviors” (Fishbach and Ferguson 2007: 491). Scholars often distinguish between directional and non-directional goals. Directional goals involve gathering and processing information to support or confirm a specific desired conclusion, such as when a climate skeptic rejects ostensibly compelling evidence of climate change to maintain that skepticism. In contrast, non-directional goals involve gathering and processing information in a way that is independent from specific conclusions such as forming an accurate or concise opinion.

While debate continues about the extent to which directional goals manifest (e.g., Druckman 2012, Guess and Coppock 2020), they seem prevalent in many political contexts (Lavine et al. 2012, Groenendyk 2013, Lodge and Taber 2013, Bolsen et al. 2014, Leeper and Slothuus 2014, Groenendyk and Krupnikov 2021). Such goals can lead to anti-democratic attitudes and behaviors. Jost et al. (2022) point to three directional motivations. First, ego-

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<sup>24</sup> As explained, similar dynamics occur with elites.

<sup>25</sup> Some work suggests that one can correct misperceptions and thus temper anti-democratic attitudes and support for partisan violence (e.g., Lees and Cikara 2020, Ruggeri et al. 2021). Yet, the robustness of these corrections is unclear (Druckman 2023), and, more generally, misinformation corrections have mixed results, at best (Walter and Tukachinsky 2020).

justifying mechanisms involve the self-serving tendency to advance and maintain one's own pre-existing beliefs, opinions, and values and to defend against information that might contradict any of those. These may be at work, for example, when a voter strongly supports a candidate and consequently rejects credible information that the candidate has engaged in corrupt behavior or alternatively accepts misinformation concerning the candidate's integrity. The result can be voting for a candidate that violates laws or one who would pursue executive aggrandizement—Gidengil et al. (2021) show that voters are willing to support candidates who would weaken legislative and judicial checks on the executive if the candidate shares their position on abortion.

Second, system-justifying mechanisms reflect the fact that some individuals and groups are motivated to preserve the status quo—and to resist various forms of social change—while others are motivated to challenge or improve upon it. There exist individual differences in system justification that, as discussed, can have backsliding consequences. Third, group-justifying mechanisms involve group-serving tendencies to advance and maintain the interests and assumptions of the in-group against one or more out-groups (“us vs. them”). These can come in various forms but the one most relevant for backsliding concerns defense of one's partisan group at the expense of democratic norms and institutions. For instance, Graham and Svulik (2020) find that partisans prefer candidates from their own party even if they violate norms such as electoral fairness, checks and balances, and/or civil liberties (also see Kalmoe and Mason 2022 on partisan violence).<sup>26</sup> Voters might even rationalize what they view as democratic, perceiving typical policies with which they disagree (e.g., proposing to increase everyone's taxes to spend more on unemployment benefits) as more undemocratic than objective democratic

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<sup>26</sup> Voter support for undemocratic candidates also reflects the constrained choice with which they are presented; it does not necessarily indicate that they, all else constant, prefer undemocratic actions (e.g., The Bright Line Watch Project 2022).



transgressions where they agree with the policy (e.g., reduce everyone's taxes and spend less on unemployment benefits, prohibit all labor union leaders from running for Congress for 10 years) (Krishnarajan 2023). This suggests conditions ripe for citizens' misconstruing violations of democratic norms (also see Carey et al. 2022, Frederiksen 2022). That said, there are limits, as Frederiksen (2023b) shows that voters do not blindly accept anti-democratic behavior. They punish in-party candidates as much as other candidates for behaving undemocratically, and they punish candidates with whom they agree on policy more than candidates with whom they disagree (even if they may end up voting anti-democratic candidates from their party).

Additionally, partisan motivated reasoning links to affective polarization—that is, the extent to which partisans dislike the other party relative to their like for their own party. It is well documented that affective polarization has substantially increased in the twenty-first century (Iyengar et al. 2019). Druckman et al. (n.d.) suggest that those with higher levels of affective polarization have an increased likelihood of engaging in partisan motivated reasoning. While scholars debate whether affective polarization directly influences support for anti-democratic candidates and/or undemocratic practices (e.g., Kingzette et al. 2021, Broockman et al. 2022, Voelkel et al. 2023a,b), it seems clearer that it—and, concomitantly, motivated reasoning—contributes to acceptance of officials who make democratic functioning more difficult. This includes opposition to compromise across parties, supporting more extreme positions on public policy, and evaluating the performance of public officials based on their partisan affiliations rather than their actions (Levendusky 2023, Druckman et al. n.d.). These attitudes, in turn, provide leeway to elites to exploit citizens' partisan blinders and take undemocratic actions (e.g., Grillo and Pratto 2023).

Distinct from polarization is politicization, an inconsistently employed term. I use it to refer to when an actor exploits “the inevitable uncertainties about aspects of science to cast doubt on the science overall ... thereby magnifying doubts in the public mind” (Steketee 2010: 2; see Oreskes and Conway 2010). This becomes relevant to democratic backsliding because it means that political actors can undermine scientific information, which leads citizens to dismiss consensus scientific evidence. For instance, introducing uncertainty leads citizens to dismiss evidence regarding emerging technologies, nuclear energy, and climate change (Bolsen et al. 2014, Bolsen and Druckman 2015, 2018). Beyond undermining the role of expertise in democracies, such uncertainty can also lead citizens to cling to misinformation. For instance, Druckman (2022a) shows that the misperceptions that partisans from the other side possess extreme anti-democratic and violent attitudes can be corrected with scientific information from a poll. Yet, that correction is easily undermined by politicizing it and pointing to the inherent informational uncertainty. Thus, politicization facilitates the maintenance of support for undemocratic practices and partisan violence.

Depression, my final example of a psychological process relevant to backsliding, must be discussed with care. Depression is a common mood disorder where an individual experiences a persistent feeling of sadness and hopelessness and/or loses interest in most activities. Any discussion of depression needs to definitively clarify that its effects should not be attributed to the individuals who suffer but rather to contributory social conditions and inadequate provisions for treatment. The COVID-19 pandemic saw a more than threefold increase in those suffering from depressive symptoms, with the prevalence jumping from 7% in 2019 to 33% in 2021 (Baum et al. n.d.). These symptoms can affect backsliding in at least three ways. First, Landwehr and Ojeda (2021) show that, across four countries, depressive symptoms substantially reduce the

probability of voting by diminishing political motivation and physical energy (also see Ojeda 2015, Ojeda and Pacheco 2019). This limits participatory inclusiveness. Second, Green et al. (2023) provide evidence for a link between depressive symptoms and conspiracy beliefs, particularly among relatively advantaged demographic groups (i.e., White, male, high-income, educated) and those who lack social support. Conspiracy beliefs can contribute to backsliding by leading people to accept misinformation and develop anti-establishment orientations. Third, Baum et al. (n.d.) show that depression, when combined with conspiracy beliefs and/or participatory inclinations, correlates with increased support for political violence. Insofar as low participation, conspiracy beliefs, and violence each can contribute to backsliding, a country with poor mental health also may be one that finds itself with poor political health.

## **Conclusion**

I began this essay with statistics about the number of systems that have eroded over roughly the past decade. This has prompted social scientists from varying backgrounds to study democratic erosion. Numerous recent studies focus on micro-level dynamics underlying erosion even though it is a sliver of the processes that contribute to backsliding. It ignores the bulk of the framework and, perhaps most importantly, often misses the point that systems backslide and how citizens affect that process is not well specified. Scholars studying citizens' decisions would benefit from thinking carefully about how their work informs knowledge about system backsliding.

I am under no illusion that the framework I put forth is definitive. What is clear, though, is that backsliding depends on many actors and behaviors, and future work can situate itself within this or other holistic frameworks and offer greater clarity about erosion. In so doing, the psychological factors on which I focused could be expanded upon or studied more in depth.

Ultimately, understanding democratic backsliding requires an appreciation of the interaction between psychology and context, including the institutions that govern organizations and polities.

I conclude by highlighting selected lessons and open questions. First, any study of democratic backsliding must explicitly address the conceptual challenges of defining democracy, identifying relevant institutions and norms, and clarifying how a given action weakens the system. Second, any single study must choose a level of analysis and particular actors; however, more attempts are needed to connect the micro-meso-macro levels that influence erosion. Failure to do so can result in ecological inconsistencies. For instance, Orhan (2022) shows a significant relationship across 53 countries and more than 170 election surveys such that higher levels of country-level affective polarization lead to more democratic backsliding. Similarly, Boese et al. (2022: 33) conclude, “When polarization develops to toxic levels, democracy is typically dismantled...” (Boese et al. 2022: 33). These results contradict Broockman et al.’s (2022) individual-level study within in the United States that suggests no relationship between affective polarization and accountability, democratic norms, and various other related outcomes. They (20) state, “attempting to reduce affective polarization ... may not be the most effective way to reverse these [anti-democratic] trends.” Voelkel et al. (2023a) arrive at similar conclusions. Even if these latter papers are accurate, it is entirely possible that affective polarization affects backsliding via alternative routes, such as lowering the likelihood of cross-cutting cleavage protests (e.g., partisans cannot be mobilized by those from the other party), policy extremity that provides autocratic elites leeway, etc.<sup>27</sup> The challenge of connecting individual psychology to

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<sup>27</sup> Frederiksen (2022b) suggests that effects may depend on the amount of democratic experience. He finds that, across 43 countries and more than 50 years, undemocratic incumbent behavior decreases incumbent approval when democratic experience is low (but not when it is high).

system outcomes has long been acknowledged; more than sixty years ago, Key (1960: 55) explained that it “is, one must concede, a truly formidable task to build a bridge from observation of the atoms of the political system to the system itself. It may even be impossible to bring into significant relation to the macroscopic political order much of the knowledge of the behavior of individual electors, for there may be no relation, significant or otherwise.” An initial necessary step entails recognizing, across levels of analysis, the various interdependent processes that occur.

Third, related to the prior point, studies should consider the constituent systems that compose polities. While I did not discuss this point, the reality is that federal systems involve multiple democracies, and even non-federal ones do as well, given local government. In the U.S., states were historically seen as laboratories for democracy, but this portrayal has shifted such that many now view them as “laboratories for backsliding” (Grumboch 2022). Moreover, what occurs at distinct levels of government has implications for other levels. As Rocco (2022: 301) states, “episodes of democratic collapse at the state level have had profound reverberations for national politics.”

Fourth, I have ignored the role of international actors even though they can play a substantial role in affecting backsliding. Theories suggest that external threats can unify domestic rivals who come together either to jointly respond or due to heightened national identity (e.g., Levendusky 2018). That said, Myrick (2021) finds little evidence for either mechanism, showing instead that responses become politicized contingent on the polarizing conditions in the country. On the flip side, domestic polarization or erosion can influence a country’s standing—Goldsmith et al. (2023) show that when those in allied countries perceive

backsliding, it decreases the soft power and perceived international status of the backsliding country.

Fifth, it is this intersection of the micro-meso-macro levels that makes statements about backsliding difficult. The counterfactual of how a system would function sans a given action is impossible to assess. The explicit counterfactual is the state of democracy at a prior time, but the implicit one when it comes to a causal claim is what democracy would look like without a given action, all else constant. This latter assessment obviously needs to be made with caution.

Sixth, I have focused on the psychological levers of democratic backsliding. My motivation for doing so stems partially from the lack of past attention. Further, understanding the psychology of backsliding among relevant actors can provide leverage for those interested in interventions aimed at countering erosion. A large research agenda has developed and tested behavioral interventions aimed at countering polarization or anti-democratic attitudes among the public (e.g., Hartman et al. 2023, Voelkel et al. 2023b). This is an informative research agenda, but there must be attention to the interaction between individual decision-making and contextual/institutional settings. Behavioral nudges can work in isolation, but in competitive democratic environments, it becomes less clear whether such approaches can have enduring effects (Druckman 2023). This suggests the need for a consideration of the structural factors such as the media ecosystem and socialization that influence backsliding. On the latter point, Frederiksen (2022c) finds that young people are less likely to sanction undemocratic behavior than older people, which is perhaps unsurprising given they tend to have been socialized at a time that has led them to exhibit relatively high levels of affective polarization (Tyler and Iyengar 2022). I do not intend to end on a pessimistic note; the intervention literature is a

promising first step but needs to move toward not only considering structural factors but also the levels of backsliding discussed here.

Finally, I recognize that I have evaded the difficult task of identifying the precise transgressions that generate erosion, instead opting to provide a framework to think about that process. The next step is to proceed at an acute level with individual studies of particular transgressions at precise levels of analysis. What is important is that such work situates itself (and the psychological processes) in a larger framework. A last point is that identifying erosive behaviors itself likely requires more engagement with normative theory. Earlier in the essay, I suggested that empirical work has problematically been removed from normative work.<sup>28</sup> More than sixty years ago, Lazarsfeld (1957) highlighted the need for empirical analyses to study questions derived from political philosophy. The study of democratic backsliding demands such consideration given the very topics under study rely on an agreement of what democracy entails.

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<sup>28</sup> An exception to which is research on deliberative democracy (e.g., Dryzek et al. 2019).

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