Trash-Talking Democracy

How Leaders Erode Their Democracies and How to Stop Them

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Contents

List of Figures *i*

List of Tables *ii*

Preliminaries **1**

1 Preliminaries: Defining, Describing, and Measuring Democratic Erosion **1**
Defining Erosion 1
What Do Backsliders Want? 2
What do Backsliders Do? 5
  The Contents of the Playbook 5
  Measuring and identifying instances of erosion 10

2 What's Behind the Wave of Democratic Erosion? **13**
Causes of Erosion: Cross-National Evidence 14
  Inequality matters, national wealth and age of democracy not so much. . . . 15
  Contagion 18
Why are Unequal Democracies More Prone to Erosion? 20
  Democratic Erosion via Right-Wing Ethnonationalism 21
  The Populist Path to Democratic Erosion 46

List of Figures

1.1 Cases of Erosion 12

2.1 Inequality and Probability of Erosion 16
2.2 Inequality Effect Amplified in Wealthy Democracies 18
2.3 Working- and Middle-Class Support for Left Parties in Advanced Democracies, 1980-2010 23
2.4 Gini Coefficients for Disposable (Post-Fisc) Income, United States, United Kingdom, and Sweden, 1970-2000 24
2.5 Three Dimensions of Party Positions in Advanced Democracies 25
2.6 Social Polarization in U.S., U.K., and Sweden 28
2.7 Three Dimensions of Party Positions in The United States 29
2.8 Percentage of White Working-Class Support for Republican Presidential Candidates 33
2.9 Three Dimensions of Party Positions in The United Kingdom CHES 38
2.10 The Evolving Position of the UK Conservative Party 39
2.11 Relative Mentions of Market Economy and Social Policy by Swedish Social Democrats and Moderate Party, 1998-2010 42
2.12 43
2.13 Locations of Moderates, Social Democrats, and Sweden Democrats on Three Dimension 44
2.14 Locations of Left and Right Parties in Latin America 49

List of Tables

1.1 The Playbook: Targets, Strategies, Examples 6
2.1 Ideology and Institutional Impacts of Select Latin American Presidents . . . 51

Chapter 1

Preliminaries: Defining, Describing, and Measuring Democratic Erosion

Defining Erosion

What is democratic erosion? I follow Laebens (2022) in defining erosion — or *backsliding*, used interchangeably here — as a substantial decline in vertical and horizontal accountability in a democracy, a decline that is the result of purposeful efforts by the country's chief executive, its president or prime minister. The definition excludes declines that occur for other reasons, such as a practically necessary and presumably temporary weakening of mechanisms of accountability during international conflicts. It also excludes failed efforts by leaders to weaken accountability — though as we shall see, those failures are instructive.

Vertical accountability means that voters are able to assess the actions of incumbents and either reelect or cast them out of office. (If individual leaders are under term limits, voters can hold their parties to account.) Because the press and civil society organizations (CSOs) play key roles in informing voters and hence allowing them to hold governments accountable, infringements on the scope and actions of the press and CSOs also threaten vertical accountability. *Horizontal accountability* means that coequal branches of government, usually designated as such in national constitutions, are able to monitor and potentially block the actions of presidents and prime ministers when they would violate legal or constitutional standards. The coequal branches include high courts, the national legislature, civil administration watchdogs, and the like.

Backsliding lies between the normal course of government and military coups. The former involves stability and continuity of democracy, though often with many flaws that leave systems well short of democratic ideals. Coups are sudden and abrupt breakdowns in that stability. Democratic erosion, as the name suggests, is a slower process of decay than the coup, but one that — if unchecked — leaves the system deeply flawed. For example, the rights of citizens to peacefully protest may be permanently reduced, or the public's confidence in the integrity of elections may be lastingly diminished.

What Do Backsliders Want?

The standard assumption that political scientists make about politicians is that they are driven by the desire to attain and retain elected office. Even though many of them have public-oriented reasons for wanting to hold office, such as wishing to improve the lives of their constituents from good public policies, these objectives will be out of reach if the leader is out of power. So the simplifying assumption that politicians are office-seekers is reasonable.

Yet would-be autocrats stump us. They fit the mold of office-seekers perfectly, using their office to stay in power longer and with fewer constraints. Why don't *all* individuals who achieve high office try to undermine the institutions that come between them and longer-lasting, more absolute power? Why do most enter and exit office quietly, by constitutionally approved means?

There are three answers to this question. The first has to do with *innovation*. It simply did not occur to most presidents and prime ministers, in normal times, that they could flout norms and laws to the degree that backsliders have, not just overstepping but leaping over the usual boundaries. Early backsliders innovated by doing just that, adding to the menu of actions available to elected leders a series of democracy-threatening ones. (The specifics of this menu are explored in the next section.) Statistical evidence in the next chapter indicates that democratic backsliding feeds on itself, with early innovators (Hugo Chávez, Viktor Orbán) inspiring later copycats.

The second answer is that for many democratic leaders *opportunities*for backsliding are limited. Stated differently, for some leaders the perils should they attempt to undermine their democracy are daunting, including early loss of office and an end to their careers, should they try. Anticipating these perils, some otherwise-autocratic aspirants are kept in check. In the next chapter I explore some of the factors that may dissuade would-be autocrats from even trying to undermine their democracies. Voters may be less polarized by income and by partisanship; they may evince a reasonable confidence in political institutions. Perhaps the leader's party has the ability to end his career if his fellow party leaders oppose his moves toward autocracy, if they simply want to eliminate him as a rival. These and other factors may discourage the ambitious — even the reckless – from attempting to undo democratic institutions.

The third answer has to do with politicians' *motivations*. Many leaders of democracies are satisfied with having reached the pinnacle of national political power. They are not driven to extend their powers and perhaps their time in office beyond constitutional, legal, and normative limits. To explain why some presidents and prime ministers respect normal limits while others try to blow through them, it is helpful to consider a wider set of motivations driving the would-be autocrats.

Men and women who become the presidents or prime ministers of their countries are not shrinking violets. They are forceful individuals who want to get things done — policies achieved, legislative opponents thwarted, perks enjoyed. Conventional presidents and prime ministers sidestep legislatures with executive decrees, some of which are later found to violate the leader's constitutionally prescribed roles. In the United States, they sidestep an uncooperative Congress by issuing executive orders (e.g., Barack Obama concerning the rights of undocumented young people) and go to war without legislative approval (as American presidents from Richard Nixon to Bill Clinton to George W. Bush have done). They play hardball with the press, which all of them at some point decry as unfair and inaccurate. Such complaints are as old as broadsides and large-circulation newspapers. It is conventional for presidents and prime ministers to meddle, or threaten to meddle, with the composition of their high courts (FDR and threatened court packing). They violate campaign spending laws (Helmut Kohl in Germany). They close down legislatures to keep from being ousted or to block legislative opposition to their plans (Peru, the U.K.). They take kickbacks from companies that win government contracts (Lula da Silva in Brazil). Leaders have committed all of these violations without general declines in vertical and horizontal accountability occurring — that is, without eroding their democracies.

Eroders of democracy, by contrast, engage in battles on many fronts in efforts to expand their powers and lengthen their time in power. What makes these people tick?

A systematic answer to this question goes beyond this study. But we can draw on various sources to craft a reasonable list of the possibilities. No claim is made that the motivations listed below are exclusive to backsliders. Garden-variety democratic leaders share some of the same motivations, though seemingly with less tenacity.

These motivations include:

- **The belief that the nation's survival depends on their own continued leadership.** It is not uncommon to hear the backsliding leader claim that only he or she stands in the way of national catastrophe, even the annihilation of the country. For some, this is a firmly held belief, one that motivates the backslider in their efforts to undo their democracy. Przeworski (2019:20-21) observes that PiS, the Polish ruling party from 2015 until 2023, "believes that the very values that constitute Poland as a

Christian Nation are at stake and all their opponents are 'traitors'." For others, this stance is merely a public justification for backsliding. Whether it is a firm belief or merely a public justification may matter little to the backslider's success.[1]

- **Pursuit of financial fortune.** A few backsliding leaders have used their power to enrich themselves, their families, and their close associates, through various corruption schemes. These leaders attack institutions of horizontal accountability — courts, watchdogs, legislative inquirers — that threaten to expose and prosecute the leaders for these schemes. In South Africa, President Jacob Zuma and his close associates used their positions to elicit vast financial resources from state-owned enterprises. Donald Trump was always interested in leveraging his office to burnish his brand, and used his position to bolster his finances in ways that violated norms and skirted regulations.

- **Hatred of the opposition.** What political leader does not disdain the opposing party? Yet this feature should be considered a variable rather than a constant. In public performance, some politicians adopt a pose of affability, welcoming all comers (Ronald Reagan in the U.S. is a good example). Others pursue a polarizing stance that drives home the presumably nefarious qualities of their opponents. As a matter of heartfelt sentiment, some leaders do seem to be driven by hatred of the other side, and driven in ways that encourages attacks on institutions. Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil frequently expressed his views of opponents in violent terms. In one not-atypical interview he insisted that Brazil would only change for the better "on the day that we break out in civil war here and do the job that the military regime didn't do: killing 30,000."[2]

- **Historical chips on the shoulder.** Closely related to the last point, some backsliders appear to draw on wells of resentment as they make aggressive use of their office. Perhaps they see powerful actors as having conspired against them in the past, depriving them of the power and recognition they deserved. They need to vanquish the forces that, they believe, have cheated or humiliated them. Mexico's Andrés Manuel López Obrador believed that a conspiracy of partisan and institutional opponents carried out electoral fraud and kept him from office in 2006 and 2012; his attacks on various institutions, in particular the electoral administration body National Electoral Institute (*Instituto Nacional Electoral*, INE), reflect this belief. Donald Trump felt slighted by New York society and has been powerfully motivated by a desire to avenge these humiliations.

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[1] In the U.S., this last question has taken on legal significance, as former president Trump's culpability rests in part on whether he believed the 2020 elections were fraudulent or just pretended to believe it.

[2] The New York Times October 28, 2018, "Brazil's Polarizing New President, Jair Bolsonaro, in His Own Words."

- **Avoiding prosecution.** Avoiding prosecution by extending one's term in office is a strong motivation for some leaders. Some eroders have faced prosecution for wrong-doing that occurred before they became president or prime minister, others for actions taken in office but unrelated to their attacks on their democracies, and some face legal peril for their attempts to undermine elections. Benjamin Netanyahu is not yet on lists of backsliders. But he moved in that direction with his 2023 efforts to undercut the independence of Israel's supreme court. Netanyahu had been indicted on corruption charges. Bolsonaro faces legal peril for his efforts to undermine elections; Donald Trump for both pre-presidential alleged wrong-doing and for attacks on institutions. One among several of his motives for seeking a second term was to end the legal cases against him.

What do Backsliders Do?

Scholars who study democratic erosion across the world are struck by the similarity of tactics and strategies that aspiring autocrats deploy. So much so that they use the term *the Playbook* to refer to this set of actions. Perhaps we should not be surprised by the grim sameness of their tactics. A president or prime minister who wants to break loose of the binds of accountability will naturally deploy a predictable set of strategies, which I sketch here.

Scholars have noted that not just their actions but their rhetoric is an essential part of the aspiring autocrats' playbook. Hence Haggard and Kaufman (2021) observe that "backsliding is often associated with demonization of adversaries." This "demonization" has caught the attention of journalists and the general public, as well. Donald Trump in his 2016 campaign telegraphed the norm- and law-shredding that was to come with his verbal attacks — on the press ("liars" and "enemies of the people"), the civil administration ("deep state"), judges who were depicted as partisan hacks, and so on. My discussion in this section focuses on what the autocrats *do*, not on what they *say*. Yet what they say — about the courts, about elections, about the press, and so forth — is an extremely important part of the phenomenon of democratic erosion, as will be the focus of chapter three.

The Contents of the Playbook

The first column of Table 1.1 lists the institutional targets of backsliders. These include: the press, the courts, elections, the legislature and opposition parties, the civil administration (or bureaucracy), other official or semi-official bodies, and non-governmental civil society organizations. The second column offers examples of relatively mild strategies deployed against the relevant institution or target; the third column offers examples of harsher strategies and instances in which they were used. The examples are illustrative rather than exhaustive.

TABLE 1.1. The Playbook: Targets, Strategies, Examples

Target	Milder Strategy	More Severe Strategy
Press	Censorship (Turkey 2013)	Extrajudicial killings of journalists (Philippines 2022; Mexico 2022)
Courts	Change composition (Hungary 2010; Poland 2015; Mexico 2019)	Defy orders and decisions (South Africa 2021)
Elections	Reduce Ballot Access (U.S. 2020)	Dispute Outcomes as Fraudulent (Macedonia 2016; U.S. 2020; Brazil 2022)
Legislature, Opposition Parties	Defy Oversight (U.S. 2019-2022)	Close Legislature, Ban Parties (Nicaragua 2021)
Civil Administration	Regulatory Harassment (Serbia 2019)	Close Down, Take Over (Poland 2017)
Public Bodies	Weaken by De-Funding (Brazil 2019)	Disband or Staff with Loyalists (Botswana 2012)
Civil Society Organizations	Regulatory Harassment (Bolivia 2013)	Close Down Take Over (India 2014)

Note: Examples not exhaustive. Source of much of the information in this table is from the Democratic Erosion Event Dataset (DEED).

Attacking the **the press**, verbally and otherwise, is one of the first things would-be autocrats do. This priority is indicative of the inconvenience of having a free and independent press that reports on the irregularities, misdeeds, and violations of the law that leaders and their associates commit on the way to undermining their democracies. Encouraging self-censorship is an example of relatively mild actions, often backed by the threat of harsher measures. A notable instance of self-censorship was the “decision” of CNN Turkey to air a documentary about penguins during the Gezi Park uprising in 2013, while the government was viciously attacking protesters.[3]

Self-censorship can graduate into active government intervention. The government may deny the press resources that it needs to operate, as when the Chávez government in Venezuela manipulated the exchange rate available to independent newspapers, sending up the effective price of newsprint.[4] Governments may impose changes in ownership, with friendly investors taking over from independent owners, and the government may acquire previously independent outlets. Backsliding governments have taken actions to exercise indirect control over state-run and -acquired media. In Poland, the PiS government created National Media Council, and gave it power over the recruitment and dismissal of public broadcasting executives.[5]

An even more hostile environment for independent journalists can force them into exile. After years of electronic surveillence and other forms of harassment by the Bukele government, the newspaper *El Faro* left El Salvador and moved its operations to Costa Rica.[6] Journalist can be denied protection from violence, as they were during the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines,[7] Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil,[8] and Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico. In 2022 Human Rights Watch wrote that "President López Obrador has not only failed to address violence against the media, but he has used his daily morning news conferences to harass and intimidate journalists."[9]

Attacks on **the courts**, in particular high courts, come like clockwork at the outset of erosion processes. Independent courts enforce laws and constitutional provisions and hence are inconvenient for backsliders. The latter use a number of methods to alter the composition of the high courts in a way that will make it more friendly to the government's wishes. Backsliders reduce the roll of organizations of jurists and lawyers in selecting and appointing judges. They lower mandatory retirement ages to rid the courts of unfriendly senior jurists; they pack the courts, adding friendly judges; they change the jurisdictions and procedures of the courts, and they bring them under the control of government ministries.

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[3] These attacks were followed by the use of selective legislation to silence unfriendly journalists. See Zia Weise, How Did Things Get So Bad for Turkey's Journalists?, 2018-08-31, The Atlantic, line 1630 in DEED.

[4] See https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/23/beyond-propaganda-legatum-transitions-forum-russia-china-venezuela-syria/.

[5] https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/31/world/europe/poland-election-results.html?searchResultPosition=2.

[6] https://latamjournalismreview.org/articles/we-left-el-salvador-so-we-could-continue-in-el-salvador-how-el-faro-decided-to-move-its-management-to-costa-rica/.

[7] https://cpj.org/data/people/percival-mabasa/; https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/31/philippine-president-elect-says-corrupt-journalists-will-be-killed.

[8] https://cpj.org/data/people/dom-phillips/; https://slate.com/technology/2020/07/brazil-president-bolsonaro-attacks-press-journalists.html

[9] https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/05/03/mexico-address-persistent-violence-against-journalists.

They reduce budgets.[10] All of the strategies have been amply documented in the Polish and Hungarian cases.[11] But half a world away, in Mexico, President López Obrador pushed the appointment of two judges to the Supreme Court and forced the retirement of a third, all with the goal of reducing the independence of the court and eliciting friendly judgements, on, among other things, efforts to undermine other horizontal bodies.[12] And in El Salvador in May 2021, the newly seated legislative majority from the party of Nayib Bukele executed a "judicial coup": it fired the entire Supreme Court and the Attorney General. The Court promptly approved Bukele's bid to relax presidential term limits.[13]

Democracy-eroding leaders sometimes simply defy court orders and decisions, such as former president Jacob Zuma of South Africa, who in 2021 refused to appear in court to face allegations of corruption that occurred during his presidency.[14]

Military juntas eliminate vertical accountability by delaying or suspending **elections** altogether. Not so eroders. Their preferred strategy is to hold elections but to manipulate them, as needed. One tactic is to suppress turnout among likely opposition voters. Hence in 2020, as Donald Trump sought reelection in the midst of Covid-19 disruptions, Republicans went further than usual in discouraging voting in heavily African-American areas.[15] Another tactic is to claim that an election that they lost was fraudulent and to use this claim to interrupt transitions from an eroding government to a challenger. Examples include North Macedonia in 2016,[16] the U.S. in 2020, and Brazil in 2022. In all three cases, supporters were used as shock troops to protest elections, with varying degrees of violence.

Opposition party leaders and legislatures are mainly a threat when the executive's party is not in control of the legislature. This was true of the U.S. House of Representatives during Donald Trump's presidential term. Trump resisted the House in its oversight efforts, with members of his administration defying congressional subpoenas in more than 100 instances.[17] At a higher level of intensity, President Nayib Bukele brought heavily armed soldiers with him for a speech he delivered in the Salvadoran Congress. The president was pushing for international lending to support new equipment for the security forces.[18]

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[10] For a description of these cuts and their motivations in López Obrador's Mexico, see Ríos Figueroa, J. (2022),"El poder judicial ante el populismo y la erosión democrática. El caso de México, 2018-2021," Revista de Estudios Políticos, 198, 187-217.

[11] see Kovács, Kriszta and Kim Lane Scheppele (2018). "The fragility of an independent judiciary: Lessons from Hungary and Poland—And the European Union." In: Communist and Post- Communist Studies 51.3, pp. 189–200.

[12] See Ríos-Figueiroa, Julio. 2023. "Democratic Backsliding and the Supreme Court in Mexico." Verfassungsblog: On Matters Constitutional.

[13] See Carlos Dada, "La dictadura millenial de Nayib Bukele", in https://www.planetadelibros.com/libro-populismos/376458

[14] https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/29/world/africa/jacob-zuma-prison.html.

[15] https://www.nytimes.com/article/voting-rights-tracker.html.; and https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/voter-suppression-2020.

[16] Institutional and symbolic aspects of illiberal politics: the case of North Macedonia (2006–2017).

[17] https://www.co-equal.org/guide-to-congressional-oversight/trump-administration-oversight-precedents.

Backsliding governments sometimes close down the national legislature. In 2015, opposition parties won a majority of seats in the Venezuelan congres. In 2017, the Venezuelan Supreme Court effectively shut down the national legislature and abrogated all legislative powers to itself.[19]

To preempt any possibility of opposition control or representation in the national legislature, the Nicaraguan government of Daniel Ortega went further. It ordered the arrest of all opposition candidates before a 2021 legislative election. Nicaragua's Supreme Electoral Council annulled the legal status of opposition political parties.[20] The ruling party declared itself the victor in all of the country's 153 municipalities. The status of the legislature and opposition parties is diagnostic of Nicaragua's full slide into autocracy.

Civil administrations can get in the way of eroders. They can resist pressure to violate laws and regulations, object to the appointment of unqualified but loyal bureaucrats, and play watchdog and whistle-blower roles. Little wonder that eroders take aim at employees of the "deep state." An example comes from Serbia in 2019 under the administration of Aleksander Vučić, of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). A whistle-blower implicated the father of Vučić's interior minister in an illicit arms scheme; the whistle-blower was arrested.[21] The PiS in Poland was more systematic, passing a law that changed the method of appointment of high-level civil service positions. Whereas before they had been filled through open competition, beginning in 2017 they were filled by parliament.[22] Donald Trump promised in a second administration to change the rules for hiring and firing public employees, in a way that would ease the appointment of loyalists.

Eroders use similar tactics to undercut other public bodies, in addition to the electoral administration bodies (EABs) mentioned earlier in connection to election manipulation. They may de-fund them or reduce their responsibilities. They may harass their staffs. President Bolsonaro aggressively undercut the indigenous affairs agency (FUNAI), removing civil servants and opening criminal investigations against employees and indigenous leaders.[23]

A still more executive-aggrandizing approach is to place such bodies under the authority of the office of the president or prime minister. Botwana's President Seretse Khama found it convenient to move several government bodies, including including the Directorate on

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[18] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-51439020.

[19] https://www.cnn.com/2017/03/30/americas/venezuela-dissolves-national-assembly/index.html.

[20] https://freedomhouse.org/country/nicaragua/freedom-world/2023.

[21] https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/freedom-world/2020.

[22] https://www.politico.eu/article/poland-crisis-constitution-kaczynski-duda/.

[23] Human Rights Watch, Brazil: Indigenous Rights Under Serious Threat, August 9, 2022.

Corruption and Economic Crime, into the Office of the President.[24]

The final target listed in Table 1.1 is the broad category of **civil society organizations**. Some are defenders of minority rights; others are independent producers of information and knowledge. Eroders attack them for reasons like the ones that lead them to attack similar entities in the public sector. Milder tactics include closer regulation, sometimes with the accusation that these organizations are stealthy agents of foreign interests.

A harsher tactic is to close these organizations down. In Bolivia, in the midst of a conflict between the Morales government and civil society organizations over energy policy and conservation, the government announced that four research NGOs would be closed down. The government accused these NGOs, which had long histories of work and advocacy in Bolivia, of "'lying and political meddling' to advance the interests of foreign governments and corporations ... [and] using funds from abroad to promote a 'transnational imperial policy' of environmental protection ..."[25]

In India in 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Home Ministry revoked the licenses of 20,000 NGOs, depriving them of their right to receive foreign funding.[26]

Another class of private organizations targeted by backsliders are academic and scientific institutions. Like the media, these institutions conduct research and produce knowledge that eroders sometimes consider inconvenient. The targets frequently include prestigious institutions of higher learning: in 2017, Viktor Orbán forced the Central European University out of Budapest.[27] Mexico's Lóopez Obrador cut budgets and imposed his appointees as leaders of previously independent academic institutions, such as the Center for Economic for Investigations and Teaching (Centro de Invetigaciones y Docencia, CIDE).[28] President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan purged thousands of university faculty members throughout Turkey after the failed 2016 coup attempt. Since 2018, he has appointed the rectors of major state universities, including the prestigious Boğaziçi University in Istanbul.

Measuring and identifying instances of erosion

Earlier I defined erosion or as an executive-driven, substantial decline in vertical and horizontal accountability. To turn this general definition into a more concrete coding scheme, I again follow recent work by Laebens (2022). (The implementation of Laebens's scheme is the product of a collaboration with Eli Rau, discussed in more detail in the next chapter.) Laebens's method is particularly useful because it allows us to draw a line between true cases of backsliding and more conventional instances of executive overreach, like the examples offered earlier in this chapter.

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[24] Economist Intelligence Unit April 2012.

[25] https://nacla.org/blog/2015/09/03/what27s-behind-bolivian-government27s-attack-ngos.

[26] FCRA licenses of 20,000 NGOs cancelled: Act being used as weapon to silence organisations, Deya Bhattacharya, 2018-10-26, Firstpost

[27] https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/06/george-soros-viktor-orban-ceu/588070/

[28] https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2021-12-15/la-fg-mexico-cide-strike

To qualify as eroding, a country has to be a democracy in the first place. Democratic theorists and researchers have long debated what the essential characteristics of democracy are — which features must be present if a country is to merit that name. Here I use a simplified criterion that homes in on whether a ruling party can lose elections and, if it does, whether it will step down, peacefully.[29] In this coding, to qualify as a democracy a country has to have experienced at least one peaceful alternation in power since the last period of autocracy.

When can we consider a democracy to have experienced erosion? As mentioned, Laebens (2022) conceptualizes it as a decline in both *horizontal* and *vertical accountability.* Ideally, democratic governments should face some constraints imposed by voters (vertical accountability) and by coequal branches (horizontal accountability) — the courts and the legislature, among others.

In a paper coauthored with Eli Rau, we identify declines in accountability with data collected by Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem). VDem is an international research organization housed in Gothenburg University, in Sweden.[30] To assess horizontal accountability, V-Dem asks their country experts questions like, Does the executive comply with high court decisions? Do the high court's decisions merely reflect government wishes?, and How likely is the legislature, or prosecutors, to investigate illegal activities by the executive? To assess vertical accountability, V-Dem asks country experts about the governments' treatment of the press (e.g., Does the government censor the press? Harass journalists?), of civil-society organizations (Does the government attempt to repress them?), and of election administration bodies (Do they have autonomy from the executive to apply election laws impartially?).

This procedure yielded 23 spells of erosion across 22 countries, illustrated in Figure 1.1.

This list overlaps considerably with those of other scholars who study eroding democracies. For example, Haggard and Kaufman's (2021) list is substantially the same; the differences largely reflect countries for which data were not yet available when Haggard and Kaufman concluded their study. The exceptions, which we code as eroding but they do not, are India under Narendra Modi, the Phillipines under Gloria Arroyo and Rodrigo Duterte, and Senegal under Macky Sall.

Figure 1.1 identifies the leaders behind the wave of democratic erosion that broke over

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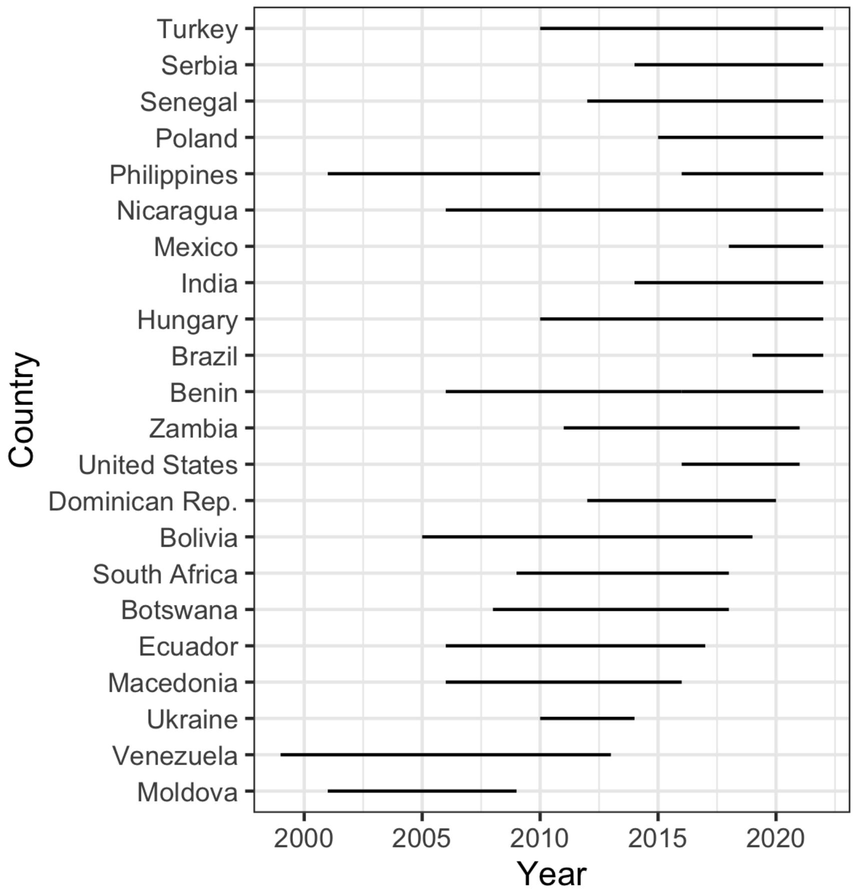
[29] See the discussion in Przeworski 20xx. The definition underscores how precarious American democracy has become since 2020, with the leader of a major party resisting stepping down peacefully.

[30] See, for instance, Mechova, 2017; for an overview, see Haggard and Kaufman, 2021.

FIGURE 1.1. Cases of Erosion



Note: Line segments indicate the years each country was experiencing erosion, following the coding rules established in Laebens (2022).

many parts of the world in the first decades of the 21st century. Why this happened is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 2

What's Behind the Wave of Democratic Erosion?

The election of Donald Trump flummoxed U.S. political scientists. Everything we had learned in decades of analyzing the causes of democratic instability told us: it cannot happen here.

From the start, Trump's election promised significant turbulence. During his 2016 presidential campaign, Trump had already shredded norms that were so "normal" we didn't even think about them, the way native speakers of a language follow grammatical rules that they can't even explain. Norms like, *Don't accuse a large national ethnic group of being criminals and rapists*, and *Don't encourage rally-goers to violently attack protesters (and promise to cover their legal costs if they do).* And *Don't plead with a rival foreign power to produce unfavorable information about your opponent (and less so, in public).*

As president, Trump continued to trample on norms. Half-way through the second year of his presidency, in August 2018, Bright Line Watch[1] asked a large group of experts to rate a set of the president's actions and statements, both on how important they were and how abnormal. So his statements and actions could be normal and unimportant, normal and important, abnormal and unimportant, or abnormal and important. Into the *very important/very abnormal* bucket, experts placed Trump's repeated description of the press as "the enemy of the people;" his repeated calls for criminal investigations of his former opponent, Hillary Clinton; and his scathing public criticisms of federal criminal justice and intelligence agencies. Hence what experts found most alarming, at that point, were Trump's *statements* rather than his *actions.* At the end of Trump's presidency, when Bright Line Watch asked the same question, the experts deemed many of his words *and* actions to be important and abnormal: his stoking of an insurrection at the capitol to interrupt the certification of the new president, his pressuring officials in several states to overturn election results, and his petitioning the Supreme Court to overturn the results.

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[1] Bright Line Watch was founded in 2017 to study the quality of democracy in the United States, mainly by surveying political science experts. It is a collaborative effort among researchers at Dartmouth College, Rochester University, and the University of Chicago. https://brightlinewatch.org/.

Causes of Erosion: Cross-National Evidence

All of this was surprising. Decades of research lead scholars to see the U.S. as a highly unlikely candidate for democratic instability. In prior research, one factor that stood out as a cause of instability was economic underdevelopment. Democracy dies in poor countries, not wealthy ones. A factor that had been found to solidify democracies was sheer endurance: young democracies die, not old ones. How could democracy be in trouble in the world's wealthiest country and its oldest democracy?

Prior research has produced statistical models that did a good job distinguishing which democracies were at risk of experiencing a military coup and which were not. When leading scholars plugged data describing the U.S., circa 2016, into these older formulas to calculate the risks of democratic decline, they found these risks to be minuscule – one in 3,000 according to one scholar, basically zero according to another.[2] But the formulas had been developed at a time – not many decades ago – when coups were the biggest risk to democratic stability. Though Trump tried to get help from the military to keep himself in power after his 2020 election loss, it stands to reason that the chances of an American coup d'etat are in fact small. And during Trump's term, U.S. democracy might be thought of as not so much dying as becoming severely frayed.

We seemed to need a new model, one that did a better job "predicting" the undeniable fact that American democracy was under stress, in unprecedented ways, as it was in many other countries. The old, received model denied reality.

Thus my colleague Eli Rau and I set about investigating what factors might be involved in the erosion of two dozen democracies around the globe. Perhaps the U.S. was an outlier, and in general poorer countries were more prone to backsliding. Another economic factor worth exploring was income inequality. Income gaps had grown in most world regions in the final decades of the 20th century. And prominent scholars writing in the first decade of the 21st century had argued on theoretical grounds that a skewed income structure would undermine democracy.[3] So perhaps inequality was the culprit for a recent spike in democratic backsliding.

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[2] Treisman, Przeworski

[3] Boix, Robinson and Acemuglu, Lipset.

Inequality matters, national wealth and age of democracy not so much.

What we found was that income inequality was *the* key economic risk factor in democratic erosion. Its effect was very robust: try as we may, we couldn't get rid of the statistical result. The association between income inequality and erosion held no matter how we measured inequality, no matter what statistical model we estimated, and with whatever set of statistical controls.[4] It held when we removed each country in our dataset, one at a time, and re-ran the analysis. And it held when, instead of calculating the likelihood of backsliding happening in any given year, we just looked at election years – how likely were they to be ones in which a backslider was elected? Short of unplugging our computers, we couldn't make the inequality effect go away.

It turned out that the United States under President Trump was not an outlier. The country's very unequal income distribution left it at greater risk of backsliding than were other advanced democracies in which income was more equally distributed.

The association between unequal income distribution and risk of backsliding can be seen in Figure 2.1. It reports the probability of a country's experiencing erosion in any given year, conditional on its level of income inequality. These risks range from single digits in the most equal countries to 32% in the most unequal. The most equal countries, with small Gini coefficients, are places like Sweden, Austria, or France; their risks of backsliding are slight. The most unequal countries are places like Brazil, Venezuela, and South Africa. Their risks run as high as one in three of experiencing backsliding in any given year. (All three countries did backslide.)

The contrast between the U.S. and Sweden brings these contrasts into sharper focus. Sweden is a country in which the differences between the wealthy and the poor are small. (Though they have grown, as discussed later.) Its Gini coefficient in 2017 was smaller than all but 13% of democracies. Our model puts Sweden's annual chances of erosion at four percent. The United States is a country with a very large gap between the wealthy and the poor — its Gini is larger than that of 60% of democracies. And its risk of erosion is more than twice Sweden's — nine percent in any given year.

A nine percent annual risk is nearly 30 times greater than one in 3,000, the estimate that is produced by the older models designed mainly to predict coups.

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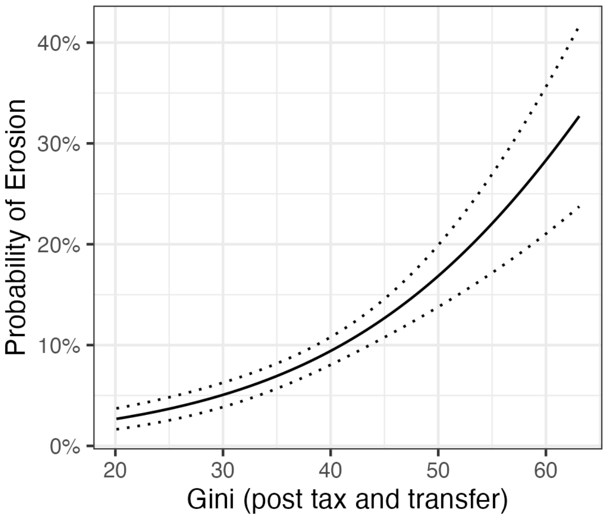
[4] There are several sources of data on income inequality, which vary in their methods and coverage. The data that we used for the estimations shown here were from SWIID. We repeated the statistical estimations with data from the the United Nation's World Income Inequality Database (WIID), the World Inequality Database (WID), and from the World Bank's World Development Indicators (WDI). We also use alternative measures of wealth and income shares.

FIGURE 2.1. Inequality and Probability of Erosion



Note: Probability of erosion is estimated with 95% confidence intervals from a bivariate logit model, regressing erosion on post-fisc Gini.

Even though we identified a robust connection between inequality and backsliding, there are certainly exceptions. For one thing, what we are identifying are *risk factors*. Just as someone can smoke all their lives and never contract lung cancer, so some highly unequal countries can avoid ending up with a president or prime minister who unravels its democratic institutions. (Colombia is one such country.[5]) But there are also clusters of countries in which the inequality effect seems to operate differently, perhaps for historical or cultural reasons. Central and Eastern Europe contain a cluster of countries that are have quite equal income distributions, by international standards, but that have also experienced democratic erosion. The list includes Hungary, Poland, Serbia, and Ukraine. The pattern also fits Russia. Russia fails to make most researchers' lists of democratic backsliders, for the simple reason that it never became democratic enough to backslide very far.[6] But Russia, too, is a country with a below-average Gini coefficient – meaning above-average income equality – and one that appeared as of the mid-1990s to be on a path to democracy, only to backslide into what it is, today, an authoritarian system.

Just as telling as the factors that place countries at risk of backsliding are those that do not. One factor that does not is the *age of a democracy* — the number of years since a country became a democracy and during which its democratic system was not interrupted by military coup or by other means. In 2017, the oldest democracy, at 218 years old, was the United States; the youngest, at five years, was Kosovo. But purely on the grounds of longevity, America's democracy was no safer from erosion than Kosovo's. Even when we remove the U.S. from our sample and re-estimate the statistical model, the results indicate that a longer history of uninterrupted democracy does not protect countries from erosion. The absence of a protective effect distinguishes the risk of backsliding from the risk of coups, which is larger in younger democracies.

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[5] See Gamboa, 2022.

[6] For a thorough discussion of why Russia failed to democratize, see Rish 2005

What role is played by poverty or economic underdevelopment? Since the mid-20th century, leading social scientists have used statistical analyses to show that poor countries are less likely than wealthy ones to be democracies.[7] And poor countries are more at risk of military coups.[8] Does economic underdevelopment put a democracy at heightened risk of erosion? The answer is that it does, but only weakly. We used gross domestic product per capita as a proxy for economic development, and reestimated our model. The re-estimate, which includes as potential causal factors both Gini and logged GPD per capita, does reveal a modest effect of underdevelopment. But it is smaller and less robust across statistical models than the inequality effect. The effect of high inequality on the risk of backsliding is about twice as powerful as the effect of low levels of economic development. And in some models, the GDP effect was not statistically different from zero.[9]

Poor countries also tend to have bigger gaps between rich and poor. So it important that when we consider GDP and Gini in the same statistical models, Gini remains a significant predictor of erosion.

Perhaps the inequality effect is mediated by income levels — perhaps inequality in poor countries raises the risks of backsliding more than it does in rich ones. As Figure 2.2 shows, in fact the opposite is the case. When we interact income inequality with income level, inequality is more of a threat in wealthier than in poorer countries. This pattern is consistent with perceptions of gaps between wealthy and poor individuals being more visible and more irritating to the latter in wealthier countries, a proposition I take up later.

Thus far, our foray into the correlates of backsliding turned up a strong and significant effect of income inequality, an iffy effect of national poverty, and no effect of the age of democracy.

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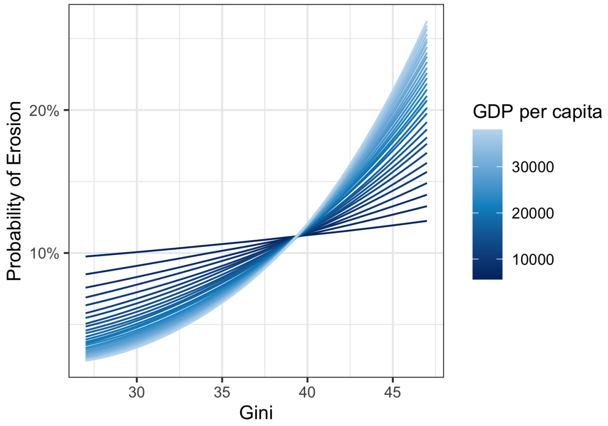
[7] See especially Przeworski et al. 2000, Londregan and Poole 1996, Lipset 1959.

[8] Londregan and Poole, etc.

[9] Consider a country with median Gini (34) and median GDP per capita ($16,000). Increasing inequality from the 50^{th} to the 75^{th} percentile has more than twice as large of an impact on erosion probabilities as does reducing GDP from the 50^{th} to the 25^{th} percentile.

FIGURE 2.2. Inequality Effect Amplified in Wealthy Democracies



Note: Estimates drawing on a model of democratic erosion with Gini and logged GDP as main and interacted effects.

Contagion

Researchers who studied the wave of transitions from dictatorship to democracy that took place in the 1980s and 1990s uncovered *demonstration* or *contagion* dynamics: the larger the number prior transitions from dictatorship to democracy in a region, the more likely a remaining dictatorship would be to follow on the road to democratization (see Mainwaring 2013, Mainwaring and Perez Linan 2013). The Sahel region and West Africa may have exhibited this dynamic with a recent spate of military coups. This wavelet began in Sudan in 2019, was followed by Mali in 2020 and again in 2021, and then in Gabon and Niger, in 2023. Seeing neighboring militaries seize power, with little in the way of international consequences, presumably encouraged neighboring coup makers.

Country studies of democracies that have eroded are suggestive of contagion or demonstration effects. Would-be autocrats in power early in the new century were role models and seeded ideas about effective tactics for later backsliders. An early slide toward authoritarianism began in Venezuela in 1999. Hugo Chávez's first step was to draft a new constitution, which allowed him to aggrandize executive powers and displace the national legislature with a body dominated by his allies. The tactic of a constitutional re-write was followed by subsequent Latin American leaders who eroded their own democracies, such as Ecuador's Rafael Correa in 2008 and Bolivia's Evo Morales in 2009.[10]

Demonstration effects also appear to be at work elsewhere. Viktor Orbán began his drive to undermine Hungarian democracy in 2010, at the outset of his second term in power. Donald Trump, along with right-wing ethnonationalist elsewhere, admired and sought to emulate Orbán. Jair Bolsonaro, elected president of Brazil in 2018 — shortly after Donald Trump's election in the U.S. — was an acolyte of Trump's; he accepted several invitations to the White House and Mar-al-Lago, Trump's Florida estate. Like Trump, Bolsonaro failed to be reelected and responded with the claim that he was defeated not by a majority of voters but by election fraud. Like Trump's supporters, Bolsonaro's violently attacked the seat of national government, in the midst of the presidential transition.

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[10] The option of a new constitution, drafted at a stroke, was not available to another Latin American leader, Álvaro Uribe of Colombia, whose effort to undermine his democracy were stiffled. See the discussion in Gamboa, 2017, 2023. Why not new constitution.

Is anecdotal evidence of contagion backed up by statistics? To see, we re-ran our models, adding a variable that simply registered the year of each observation.[11] Controlling for the year under observation tells us whether, for example, Bolivia in 2005 was less likely to experience backsliding than Bolivia in 2015.[12] In 2005 there were three countries that had commenced processes of democratic erosion. A decade later, in 2015, 18 countries had experienced spells of backsliding — 15 additional cases that might serve as role models for Bolivian leaders.[13]

And indeed, year-of-observation has a statistically significant and non-trivial effect on the likelihood that a democracy observed that year would be eroding. Yet the effect of inequality remains robust: controlling for year under observation, inequality remains a strong predictor of erosion.

How powerful is our statistical model? One way of thinking about its power is to imagine a country-risk expert who is assessing two democracies and needs to decide which one is at higher risk of experiencing democratic erosion in the future. She could guess, as if flipping a coin. Half the time she'd correctly guess which country was in greater danger of eroding, and half the time she'd guess the wrong country.

Our model moves us out of the world of blind guessing. Even without any other contextual information about a country's history or political situation, feeding a single data point about each country - its level of inequality, as estimated by its Gini coefficient - into our model enables us to correctly identify the country at higher risk of erosion two-thirds of the time. If we add the year of observation, the rate of correct predictions rises to 78%. Gini, year, and GDP together raise the rate of correct predictions to 80%.

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[11] Because countries enter the sample at distinct ages of democracy, this measure is not highly correlated with the age of democracy.

[12] Under the assumption that inequality did not change during the intervening decade.

[13] The initial three were Venezuela, Moldova, and the Philippines; Bolivia's eroding government came to office in 2005. The additional cases that had accrued by 2015 were Ecuador, Macedonia, Nicaragua, Benin, Botswana, South Africa, Ukraine, Hungary, Turkey, Senegal, India, Zambia, and the Dominican Republic.

Why are Unequal Democracies More Prone to Erosion?

One thing is statistical correlation, quite another is explanation. To bring the latter into focus, I will begin by exploring the strategies of political elites (leaders and parties). In the next chapter, I turn to the moods and behaviors of voters.

Potential for disgruntlement and democratic disappointment abound in economically unequal democracies. But the ways in which political leaders stoke and harness this disgruntlement vary. Though backsliding leaders deploy basically the same anti-institutional playbooks, the coalitions they court and the policies they promote are different. In recent decades, the world has experienced two distinct routes to democratic erosion: a right-wing ethnonationalist one, and a left-wing populist one. Right-wing ethnonationalism was more common in wealthier democracies, left-wing populism in the Global South.[14] Whatever "other" that leaders encourage their supporters to disdain, in both cases, income inequality gives a powerful resonance to their project.

The ethnonationalist-populist contrast reflects differences in the societies in which leaders operate, and differences in the way party systems evolved as they emerged in the 21st century. In a number of wealthy democracies, socioeconomic transformations in the latter decades of the 20th century altered the incentives that political parties faced and ultimately opened up space for right-wing ethnonationalism. In parts of the Global South, party competition crystallized around a single dimension, in which economic concerns were primary. These settings were propitious for left-wing populism.

In both settings, income inequality nurtured a widespread the sense among many citizens that they were being left behind and that their children would never have the opportunities enjoyed by privileged groups. This sentiment encouraged leaders to craft narratives explaining citizens' plight. Their lives hard because some "other" was intentionally making it so. Depending on the setting, that other might be a religious, ethnic, or racial group, or the rapacious wealthy.

Neither right-wing ethnonationalists nor left-wing populists necessarily erode their democracies when they achieve political power. The "right" kind of leader has to emerge, one driven by the kinds of the motivations sketched in chapter 1. The U.S. is an example. We have seen that, in light of its high level of income inequality and international role models of democracy-eroding leaders, there was about a one-in-eleven chance of a backslider acceding to the American presidency. Twenty-first century presidential candidates included John McCain, Mitt Romney, Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump. Of these people, only Trump had the mix of personality traits, including a dread of personal humiliation, that seemed to drive his willingness to shred American democracy.

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[14] There are exceptions, such as India, a developing-world democracy in which a right-wing ethnonationalist party, the BJP, has eroded democratic institutions.

The remainder of this chapter looks more closely at experiences of erosion, in both developing and wealthy democracies. Among the wealthy democracies, I will look closely at the U.S. experience, and compare it with those of two other advanced democracies that also saw the rise of ethnonationalist politics: the U.K. and Sweden. Neither of the latter two countries experienced full-scale democratic erosion, though the U.K. was a close call.

The left-wing populist mode of backsliding is more common in the Global South, in sub-Saharan Africa and in Latin America, where ethnonationalism finds less fertile ground. Here, the target is not an ethnic or religious minority, or immigrants, but a presumably nefarious economic elite.

Though these countries are different in many ways — with different political system (parliamentary versus presidential), party system size (two-party versus multi-party), rules for constitutionally deposing a chief executive, among others — a lesson that emerges is that erosion is more likely when the backsliding leader can sustain unwavering support among large groups of voters, even after he breaks rules and threatens national institutions. Explaining the dynamics of popular support is a task I take up in chapters 3 and 4.

Democratic Erosion via Right-Wing Ethnonationalism

The roots of democratic erosion can be found in changes in the incentives political parties faced, and the positions they adopted, in the final decades of the 20th century.

In the advanced democracies, political contestation during the post-World War II decades revolved around social democratic and conservative parties — Democrats and Republicans in the U.S., Labour and Conservatives in the U.K., Social Democrats and the Moderate Party in Sweden, among many others. Social Democratic parties brought together a coalition of the industrial working class, much of it organized into labor unions, and some low- and middle-income service-sector workers.[15] Conservative parties built coalitions around business owners, upper-income service and managerial employees, and, in some settings, rural voters. The left prioritized policies aimed at income redistribution and insurance against social risk (ill-health, job loss, old age). The right favored a small state that regulated lightly and redistributed little, though on social insurance it sometimes found its interests overlapping with those of labor and the left.[16]

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[15] The U.S. Democratic Party diverges in significant ways from European social democratic parties, given that until late in the 20th century it encompassed Southern conservative and racially exclusive party with a northern pro-labor, leftist one. See (cites).

[16] see Isabela Mares, The Politics of Social Risk: Business and Welfare State Development, CUP 2003).

Economic development and social transformations, with shrinking manufacturing sectors and growing service sectors, shifted the incentives facing political parties, particular on the left. In addition, social democratic policies came under strain in the 1970s, with oil shocks, inflation, competition from emerging industrial economies in the Global South, with consequent deindustrialization and welfare retrenchment.

With these changes, social democratic parties faced incentives to broaden their appeal to middle-income, white-collar workers, and to college-educated, liberal, urban professionals. Though they maintained their pro-worker and social-protection messages, their broadening appeals attenuated their identities as parties of the working class. The 1990s saw the parallel rise of the New Democrats in the U.S., New Labour in the U.K., and the Third Way in northern Europe. Left parties' policy stances shifted on welfare-state spending and global market integration in the direction of conservative parties, though without converging with the latters' stances.

The shift of leftist parties in Western Europe (including the U.K.) from mainly working-class to mainly middle-class voters is illustrated in Figure 2.3 (from Gingrich and Hausermann, 2015). As these authors explain, "left parties have attracted substantial electoral support among specific parts of the expanding middle class, substituting for a shrinking working-class base" (2015:51; see also Kitschelt 1994, Kriesi 1998, Oesch 2008).

Though leaders like Ronald Reagan made inroads with working-class constituencies, the traditional right did not, on the whole, take up the mantel of defender of the working class. The political right was invigorated in the 1980s by leaders like Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, who led an international shift among the advanced democracies toward more conservative policies.[17]

These shifts in the identities and brands of political parties occurred against a backdrop of growing income inequality. With few exceptions, the gaps between wealthy and poor citizens grew substantially, roughly after 1980. Figure 2.4 illustrates these trends in the U.S., the U.K., and Sweden. Inequality as measured here is post-fisc — it takes into into account taxes, transfers, and social expenditures. But the trends in pre-fisc, or market inequalities, followed a similar path.

Much of the growth in income inequality in the last decades of the 20th century was driven by skyrocketing incomes and assets among the top 10% wealthiest citizens.[18] But after the Great Recession, the dynamic changed. Lupu and Pontusson (2023, p. 9) study changing income distribution in 15 advanced democracies. In all but five countries, the

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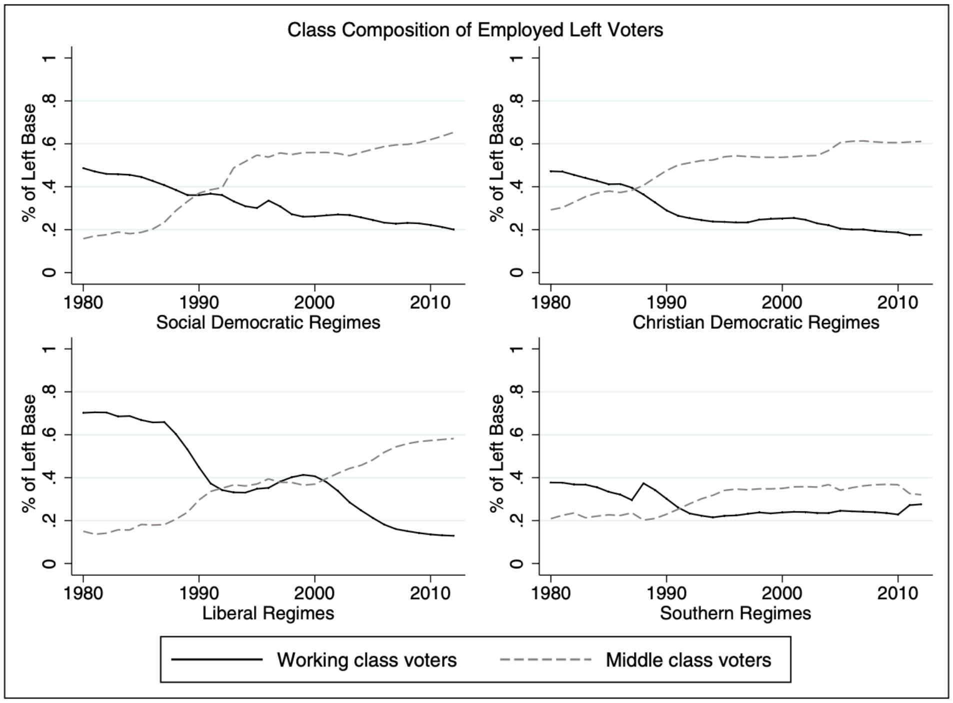
[17] See Klingemann, Hans-Dieter, Richard Hofferbert, and Ian Budge. 1994. *Parties, Policies, and Democracy* Boulder, Westview Press.

[18] Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the 21st Century*, Harvard University Press 2014.

FIGURE 2.3. Working- and Middle-Class Support for Left Parties in Advanced Democracies, 1980-2010



Note: Source: Gingrich and Hausermann 2015, p. 59. [Explain "regimes."]

income share of the wealthiest 10% declined between 2008 and 2018. Hence "the structure of inequality became less right-skewed in many countries in the 2010s (2023:10)," increasing inequality meant stagnating wages for low- and middle-class citizens.

Hence the 21st century arrived at a moment when a legacy left whose identity as representatives of the working classes was becoming diluted, and a legacy right that remained committed to a small state and modest redistribution. A space was thus opened into which stepped right-wing ethnonationalist parties.

In the advanced democracies, how did new ethnonationalist forces differ from legacy left and right parties?[19] Figure 2.5 illustrates the parties' positions on three dimensions: (1) *welfare state stances* — should the state be large and support generous welfare provisions, or small and eschew social spending? (2) *Economic openness* — is the party in favor of integration with global markets or of a more protectionist regime? And (3) the salience and nature of *national identities* — does the party emphasize an essential national identity

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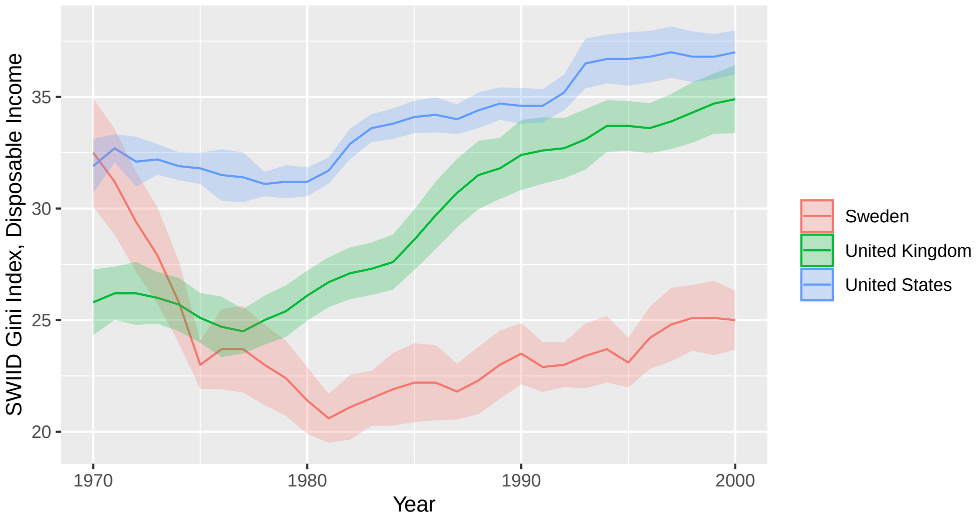
[19] Sweden Democrats, the Austrian Freedom Party, France's National Front and National Rally parties, the British National Party and the UK Independence Party, among others (see Lewis and Sumit 2017 for a fuller list and discussion).

FIGURE 2.4. Gini Coefficients for Disposable (Post-Fisc) Income, United States, United Kingdom, and Sweden, 1970-2000



Note: Solid lines indicate mean estimates; shaded regions indicate the associated 95% uncertainty intervals.
Source: Standardized World Income Inequality Database v9.5 (Solt 2020).

Note: Source: SWIID

that pivots around an original or majority ethnic, religious, or racial group, while vilifying racial, ethnic, or religious others? Or are "the people" defined broadly and inclusively? (Or does the very construct of popular identities have low salience in the party's messaging and policies.)

Ethnonationalist backsliding also occurred in some middle-income countries. India is an example. Income inequality rose sharply in the era of pro-market reforms, between 1990 and the outbreak of the global financial crisis — reforms undertaken in the 1990s under the left-of-center Congress Party and its prime minister, PV Narasimha Rao. The dominant right-wing party emerging in this period was the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The BJP is a Hindu nationalist party whose rhetoric and policies denigrate and marginalize India's Muslim minority. In its early years, the BJP retained the stalwart support of its elite base while at the same time building a lower-caste following. It achieved this balancing act by providing social benefits to lower-caste Hindu voters through third-party religious organizations (Thachil, 2014). This strategy persisted under the government of Narenda Modi (Jaffrelot 2019). Brazil is another middle-income and highly unequal country in which a right-wing leader eroded his democracy.[20] Bolsonaro's path diverged in some ways from the ethnonationalist one. He railed against indigenous groups in the Amazonian region, small

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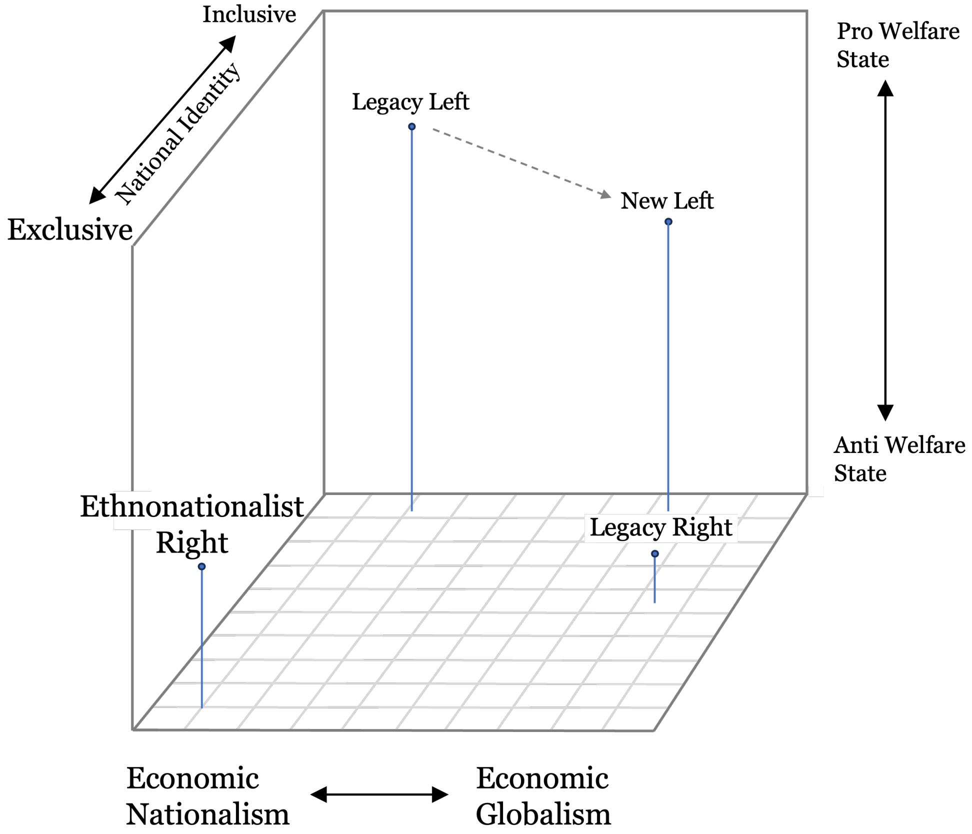
[20] Income distribution in Brazil, like in much of South America, became more equal in the early 2000s, but remained very high when Bolsonaro came to power.

FIGURE 2.5. Three Dimensions of Party Positions in Advanced Democracies


Inclusive
National Identity
Exclusive
Legacy Left
New Left
Pro Welfare State
Anti Welfare State
Ethnonationalist Right
Legacy Right
Economic Nationalism
Economic Globalism

Note: The locations of each type of party is an rough approximation. For more precise locations of UK and Swedish parties, see Figures 2.9 and 2.12 below,.

and vulnerable groups. But instead of vitriol toward religious, ethnic, or immigrant others, his main messages were of partisan hatred, aimed at social democratic party supporters. Mutual hatred of each party's leaders was the basis of polarized political and social identities in Brazil.[21]

In the advanced democracies, broadly speaking as of about 1980, legacy left parties occupied a pro-welfare state, inclusive, and somewhat economically nationalist position. (Though, on the last dimension, factors like the size of domestic markets and the nature of core industries played an important part.) Over the following decade, many left parties migrated toward more economically globalist and somewhat less generous welfare-state positions. The legacy right, in turn, changed less, though its pro-small-government position in many countries became more extreme. The legacy right favored a smaller and lighter-touch state and integration with the world economy (with caveats, again, related to position of the broader economy, and their own sector, in the world economy). It occupied a middling position on the national-identity dimension — it may have harbored xenophobic instincts but tended not to make these positions especially salient.[22] Hence the right occupied a position in the cube in the southeast and rear corner.

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[21] See Samuels, David J., and Cesar Zucco. 2018. Partisans, *Antipartisans, and Nonpartisans.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; and João Areal (2022) "'Them' without 'us': negative identities and affective polarization in Brazil," *Political Research Exchange* 4:1, 2117635, DOI: 10.1080/2474736X.2022.2117635

As the left drifted downward (in the terms of Figure 2.5) on the state-size dimension, and rightward on the economic-integration one, new forces of the ethnonationalist right found an opening. Again with some variation across countries, the ethnonationalist right in the advanced democracies adopted positions that, vis-a-vis the legacy right, were more ethnically exclusionary, somewhat more pro-redistributive, and economically nationalist. Compared to the left, the ethnnationalist right's positions were more exclusionary and economically nationalist, and less favorable to welfare spending. Its position in the cube was in the southwest and forward corner.

Indeed, putting the last two dimensions together, some ethnonationalist parties embraced what is known as *welfare chauvinism* — favoring generous state spending but only on the true "people." An example comes from a 2020 speech by Donald Trump: "Instead of providing free healthcare and jobs to millions of refugees, we need to rebuild our inner cities and take care of Americans."[23]

In some countries, like the U.S., an ethnonationalist leader and faction took over the legacy right-wing party. In others, like the U.K., ethnonationalist parties failed to gain a long-term foothold, but a strong ethnonationalist faction emerged within the legacy conservative party. In yet others, like Sweden, ethnonationalists formed new parties that competed with, and sometimes entered into alliances with, the legacy right.[24]

Not all of these right-wing ethnonationalist parties won elections. Even when they did, not all undertook to shred democratic norms or destroy democratic institutions. Still, anti-institutional instincts drove many such parties and their leaders. Their anti-institutionalism was in part a byproduct of their need to break the power of legacy political parties. But circumstances could embolden or tame them. Countries with less-polarized income distributions also tended to have less-polarized politics, as was the case of the three wealthy democracies considered here (see Figure 2.6). The figure traces changing levels of partisan polarization at the societal level, between 1995 and 2020, according to expert surveys conducted by the VDem. All three countries experienced an increase in polarization in the 21st century. The rise in polarization in the U.S. begins earlier and grows much larger than in the U.K. Sweden began and remained at a substantially lower level of polarization than those experienced by both of the other countries.

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[22] And some business sectors were favorable toward immigration, given their labor needs.

[23] "Remarks at a Rally at Canton Memorial Civic Center in Canton, Ohio." https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-rally-canton-memorial-civic-center-canton-ohio (February 22, 2020).

[24] Calling attention to the profound shift in European party systems brought on by economic integration and immigration, Hooghe and Marks (2018) argue that party positions tend not to shift (they are "sticky"), so that this "critical juncture" is marked by the emergence of new far-right parties. This observation is more apt for proportional representation, multi-party systems than for first-past-the-post, two- or two-and-a-half party systems, like the U.S. and the U.K. In both of those countries, the longer-term impact of the critical juncture was to shift legacy parties rather than produce large new parties. Hooghe and Marks may also be downplaying the shifts in positions of legacy parties in light of the integration-migration shocks. For instance, in Sweden, Social Democrats, responding to their loss of votes to the right shifted to a harsher stance on immigration; and the Moderate Party was forced by its new allies on the ethnonational right to adopt a more pro-welfare state stance. Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, "Cleavage Theory Meets Europe's Crises: Lipset, Rokkan, and the Transnational Cleavage." *Journal of European Public Policy* 25(1):109-135.

Lower levels of partisan polarization put more pressure on right-wing ethnonationalists to modulate their rhetoric, in pursuit of votes. In the process, they became less of a threat to democratic governance.[25]

Figure 2.5 is of necessity a simplification, glossing over, for instance, differences among leaders and factions inside political parties.[26] The discussion that follows explores this further complexity. It also sheds light on the circumstances in which ethnonationalist forces have tried and succeeded, tried and failed, or failed to try to erode their democracies.

Democratic Erosion in a Wealthy Democracy: The United States

In the U.S., democratic erosion took place under a political party that was taken over by a right-wing ethnonationalist leader. The backdrop to this development was deindustrialization, a diminished industrial working class, and the repositioning of the major political parties. All of these developments had roots in the final decades of the 20th century.

Societal Developments and Party Change. Beginning in the 1980s, the U.S. economy lost manufacturing industries to foreign competition and to American firms that moved abroad in search of lower wages. Regional deindustrialization was also spurred by firms leaving the Rust Belt in favor of more business-friendly Southern states, where wages were lower and labor unions scarce. (It was their departure that was the cause of the "rust.") The loss

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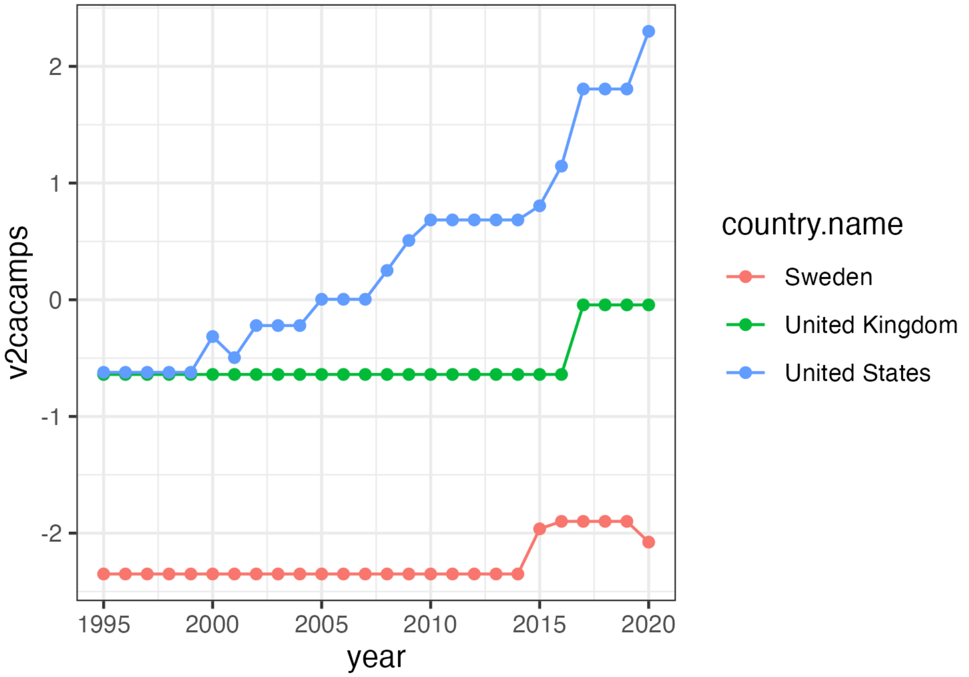
[25] This dynamic is perceptible in the evolution of Italy's Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia*) party, an erstwhile fascist party that attempted to quell fears that it would emulate the Hungarian experience under Orban after it became the leading party in a governing coalition in 2022. To this point, this government has not undermined Italian democracy to the extent that some feared. Likewise Marine Le Pen, leader of the National Rally party (*Rassemblement National*, RN — until 2018 Le Pen's party was the National Front (*Front National*) — toned down her right-wing ethnonationalist discourse in search of votes in 2018. Marine Le Pen has not to this point won the presidency of France, so it's hard to know to what degree she would undermine French democracy, if in power.

[26] As an example of this complexity, a well-informed observer of conservative and right-wing politics in the U.S., Stephanie Slade, recently named [number] of "new right" movements, which included …

FIGURE 2.6. Social Polarization in U.S., U.K., and Sweden



Note: Data from V-Dem: "Is society polarized into antagonistic, political camps?"

of well-paying jobs for people without college degrees and the decline of the labor movement were part of the story of increasing income inequality, pictured in Figure 2.4 (page 32).

These macro trends were followed by shifts in the positioning and brands of both major political parties, shifts that would help pave the way for an ethnonationalist takeover of the GOP in the 21st century. Beginning in the 1980s, the Republican Party adopted a more stridently anti-government, anti-spending position — downward on the vertical dimension in Figure 2.7. President Ronald Reagan's rhetoric encouraged the view that government was always a problem, never a solution. His oft-repeated dictum was, "The nine most terrifying words in the English language are 'I'm from the government and I'm here to help." In 1985, a conservative anti-tax lobbyist with close ties to the GOP, Gover Norquist, famously declared his aim to "cut the government in half" in 25 years "to get it down to the size where we can drown it in the bathtub."[27] In a later era, the view that the entire federal government and its budget were suspect would feed into a radical anti-institutional nihilism, embraced by much of the party's leadership and many of its constituents.

Yet for all this, Reagan's style was soft-spoken, his campaign rhetoric generally inclusive, his instincts coalitional. It is this relatively inclusive stance that locates the legacy

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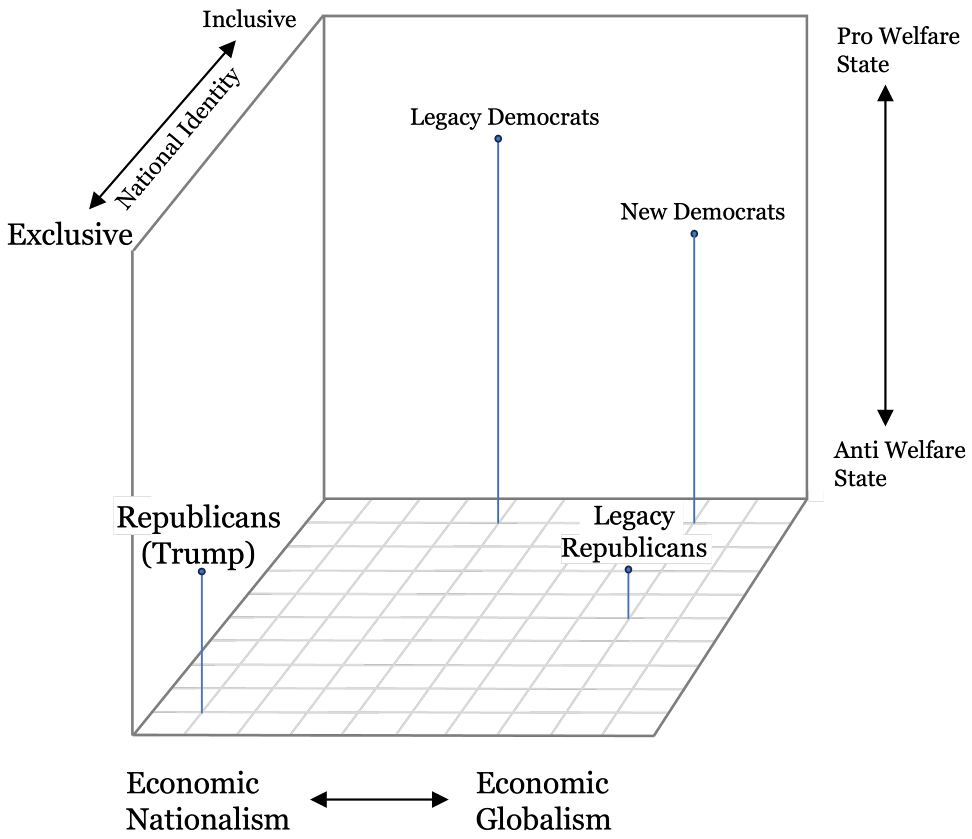
[27] Grover Norquist

FIGURE 2.7. Three Dimensions of Party Positions in The United States


Inclusive
National Identity
Exclusive
Pro Welfare State
Anti Welfare State
Legacy Democrats
New Democrats
Republicans (Trump)
Legacy Republicans
Economic Nationalism
Economic Globalism

Republicans toward the "back" on the national identity position in Figure 2.7. Later ethnonationalists in the GOP pushed this position "forward," toward the exclusive end of this dimension. What is not captured in the figure is the aforementioned shift in tone, explored in Chapter 4. The rise of a take-no-prisoners style of partisanship is associated with GOP leaders in the Clinton era, no one more than House Speaker Newt Gingrich.[28]

Turning to the Democratic Party, as in many other advanced democracies in the final decades of the 20th century, the left edged away from large-state and economic-nationalist positions. Party leaders sought a formula for retaining some rural and White working-class support, and for keeping a foothold in the previously Solid (Democratic) South. Bill Clinton was a self-described New Democrat, the former governor of a Southern state who, together with others, sought to redefine the party in the wake of election losses in the Reagan-George H.W. Bush years. In 1996, President Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act — a workfare policy that aimed benefits at the "deserving poor." The 1996 reform was the byproduct of negotiations between Clinton and Speaker Gingrich. New

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[28] Julian Zellizer, *Burning Down the House: Newt Gingrich, the Fall of a Speaker, and the Rise of the New Republican Party*, Penguin, 2020.

Democrats also favored global economic integration. Clinton was a strong champion of the North American Free Trade Agreement with Canada and Mexico (NAFTA), which had been negotiated by his Republican predecessor and which was greeted with skepticism by American labor.

Hence in the terms of Figure 2.7, the Democratic Party shifted from the *Legacy* to the *New Democrat* position: it moved vertically downward, away from earlier, firmer welfare-state positions, and horizontally rightward, away from economic nationalism and toward a position favoring integration with international markets.

Until Donald Trump's election in 2016, the parties remained defined by these positions. The GOP spawned several rounds of rebellion against what its members saw as the profligacy of Democrats and of any Republicans who failed to put up sufficient resistance against the other side. The Tea Party and, in the House of Representatives, the Freedom Caucus were expressions of this hard-line approach. Barack Obama kept progressive and centrist wings of the Democratic Party in balance, maintaining the New Democrats' embrace of global integration while succeeding where Clinton had failed in introducing health-care reform. With his powerful rhetorical skills and Reagan-esque tone of optimism, Obama won over many among the kinds of voters who had been defecting to the GOP in presidential races since the Reagan years.

The GOP leadership understood Obama to be a threat. It greeted the passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) with loathing. The election of a Black president also encouraged the party's more blatantly racist instincts. Donald Trump's political profile rose with his championing of "birtherism," the claim that Obama was born in Kenya and therefore constitutionally unqualified to run for president.

Trump's 2016 presidential bid was the beginning of a big change in the Republican Party, at least rhetorically. Trump himself contained many contradictions. He cultivated an image as an extremely wealthy and successful —"very, very, very successful"[29] — businessman, but also as an anti-elitist and protector of working- and middle-class men and women. Trump frequently portrays himself as a friend of the working class: "I've spent my professional life among construction workers, bricklayers, electricians and plumbers. I feel more comfortable around blue collar workers than Wall Street executives."[30] He also fuses his base's economic grievances with criticisms of policies that aid immigrants. For instance,

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[29] Trump campaign speech, July 16, 2016. This was a common theme for the candidate and president, which sometimes included quite a bit of detail. In a speech on June 16, 2015, he explained "So I have a total net worth, and now with the increase, it'll be well-over $10 billion. But here, a total net worth of — net worth, not assets, not — a net worth, after all debt, after all expenses, the greatest assets — Trump Tower, 1290 Avenue of the Americas, Bank of America building in San Francisco, 40 Wall Street, sometimes referred to as the Trump building right opposite the New York — many other places all over the world."

[30] Speech on September 9, 2016.

> I refuse to let another generation of American children be excluded from the American Dream. Our whole country loses when young people of limitless potential are denied the opportunity to contribute their talents because we failed to provide them the opportunities they deserved. Let our children be dreamers too.[31]

Trump's self-portrayal as the representative and defender of the common American tapped more into his base's aspirations than their actual lived experiences.

For the Republicans, Trump represented a solution to a dilemma that many pro-business parties face: how to gin up popular support without alienating elite voters and donors. To attract low-income voters, Trump edged away from anti-welfare, pro-small-government orthodoxy that had defined the legacy Republican Party. His actual record was quite in line with this orthodoxy, as in his 2017 tax reform and his repeated efforts to repeal the ACA. But Trump was also aware that his core voters might be turned off by too-vigorous efforts to reduce government spending. For instance, before the 2022 mid-term elections, he chastised fellow Republicans who called for radical cuts to popular social programs like social security and Medicare. Hence, whereas the majority of party leaders remained steadfast advocates of small government, a gap opened between them and others who edged "upward" on the vertical dimension in 2.7.

A vertical shift upward for the Republicans would be in line with the positioning of ethnonationalist parties in Europe. Dalton and Berning (2022) track these parties' positions, and find that they "now generally represent centrist views on economic policy combined with starkly conservative positions on the cultural cleavage," especially on immigration.[32]

Ethnonationalism represents a strategy for parties that aim to stitch together support from business elites and working-class voters. A long-standing tactic in the U.S. has been to exploit racial divisions.[33] It is helpful to persuade White working-class voters that social programs mean higher taxes for them and benefits for other people.

Trump offered his own version of this strategy. His pre-politician history included many episodes of blatant anti-Black racism.[34] When he entered politics, he shifted to more nuanced positions on race.[35] One prong of his strategy was to court Black voters by disparaging

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[31] The last sentence is an allusion to the DREAM Act, a proposal that would give temporary conditional residency to undocumented immigrants who entered the U.S. as children.

[32] Dalton and Berning 2022, "Ideological Polarization and Far-Right Parties in Europe." In: Brinkmann, H.U., Reuband, KH. (eds) Rechtspopulismus in Deutschland. Springer VS, Wiesbaden. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-33787-2-2.

[33] Frank, but also responses to this.

[34] Excluding Black renters, with his father; his assumption of guilt of the Central Park five, which he clung to even after the courts exonerated them.

[35] On how racial identities and Trump's 2016 campaign, see Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2019, Identity Crisis:

Democratic elected officials, in particular big-city mayors. In his narrative, Democrats took Black voters for granted while failing to solve their problems. But Trump sometimes positioned himself in a more antagonistic position toward African Americans, for instance when he cultivated ties with White nationalist groups and derided Black Lives Matters activists as "symbols of hate."

Trump followed similar patterns with Jewish voters. His explicit discourse was friendly toward this group, but he used more subtle cues to cultivate anti-Semitic supporters.

In contrast to his equivocating rhetoric towards Blacks and Jews, Trump unambiguously took aim at Muslims and at immigrants. The candidate set the tone in his 2015 campaign-announcement speech, when he declared:

> When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you [pointing to a person in the crowd]. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us [sic]. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.

Anti-immigrant political rhetoric has a long history in the U.S. But what was distinctive about Trump's approach was his blaming immigrants not for "stealing" American jobs – at a time of record high employment rates – but of criminality and drug trafficking.

As a former president, Trump's anti-immigrant discourse became more virulent, with themes of ethnic purity and contamination. In an October, 2023 interview, he said:

> Nobody has any idea where these people are coming from, and we know they come from prisons. We know they come from mental institutions and insane asylums. We know they're terrorists. Nobody has ever seen anything like we're witnessing right now. It is a very sad thing for our country. It's *poisoning the blood of our country.* It's so bad, and *people are coming in with disease.* People are coming in with every possible thing that you could have.

I have been describing Trump's repositioning of the Republican Party toward the front of Figure 2.7, in the direction of an exclusionary national identity. He also engineered a shift leftward on the horizontal, economic-nationalism dimension.

Indeed, Trump's anti-immigrant stance bled into his economic nationalism. Recall the 2015 formulation, "They're sending people that have lots of problems …" It's an odd formulation, since migration is usually driven by decentralized decisions by families and

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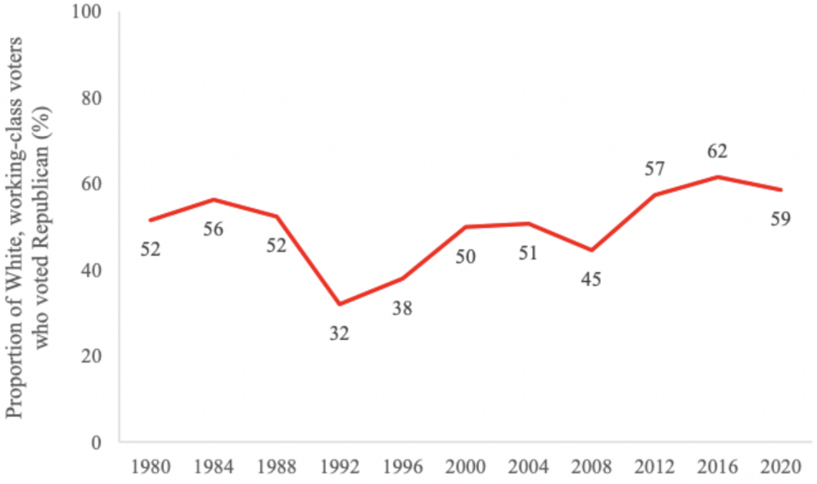
The 2016 Campaign.

individuals, not by directives of an ill-defined "they." But for Trump, the formulation is significant. One of the reasons the ethnonationalist discourse is powerful is that people are sensitive to being told that something bad is being done to them, on purpose, a point I develop further in Chapter 4. So in this case, the powerful fiction was that, presumably, the Mexican government was deliberately sending criminals, the insane, and the unclean over the border, to victimize Americans.

These various prongs in Trump's cross-class strategy yielded some success. The typical Trump voter was an affluent Republican. But Trump continued prior trends by also attracting support from working-class voters. Figure 2.8, from Carnes and Lupu 2020, shows that strong majorities of White working-class voters chose Trump: 62% in 2016 and 59% in 2020.

FIGURE 2.8. Percentage of White Working-Class Support for Republican Presidential Candidates



Note: From Carnes and Lupu, 2020. The values are the percentage of non-Hispanic White ANES and CCES respondents with no college degree and below-median incomes.

The American ethnonationalist president eroded U.S. democracy, in ways outlined in the last chapter. Trump was at war, rhetorically and politically, with a plethora of institutions, any of which could get in the way of his aspirations for power and his need to escape the humiliation of losing. He was at war with the legacy GOP (RINOS were "the lowest form of life")[36] and with the Democratic Party ("an angry mob, bent on destroying anything or anyone in their path").[37] He was at war with election administrators, state legislatures and governors when they resisted his election-fraud claims; with Congress and with his own law enforcement agencies when they investigated him; with the Courts, which he depicted as mere offshoots of the political parties. He was at war with the "corporate press," which he believed demeaned him and offered information to the public that could weaken him.

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[36] RINOS is an acronym meaning Republicans in Name Only; Oct 28, 2020

[37] "Remarks at a 'Make America Great Again' Rally in Missoula, Montana." https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-make-america-great-again-rally-missoula-montana.

Though Trump eroded American democracy, he also encountered effective resistance. More voters opposed than supported him. The courts rejected his claims of electoral fraud. The armed forces resisted being drawn into his attempt at a palace coup.

The institution that put up little resistance was his own political party. The virtual absence of partisan resistance distinguishes Trump's success from Britain's briefer brush with democratic erosion, recounted below.

A Near-Miss: The United Kingdom

The quality of British democracy declined since 2020, though not enough for researchers to place it on the list of eroding democracies. Yet in the aftermath of the Brexit vote, a government sharply focused on extracting the country from the European Union did so in part by trampling on laws and norms and by pursuing changes that were squarely in the would-be autocrat's playbook. The leader most responsible for the autocratizing thrust, Boris Johnson, was removed from power after three years. But there are enduring aspects of this autocratizing episode, visible both in a virulently ethnonationalist faction of the Conservative Party and in curtailments of accountability in the U.K. Complacency about the strength and resiliency of Britain's democratic institutions is ill-advised.

These developments took place against a backdrop of rising anti-immigration sentiment, rising partisan polarization, and almost uninterrupted growth in income inequality. In 1970s, the U.K. was considerably more equal than the U.S. As Figure 2.4 (p. 27) reminds us, by the end of the 20th century its Gini index had increased greatly and was converging with America's. The U.K.'s growing polarization is illustrated in Figure 2.6 (p. 31). In partisan polarization, as in income polarization, Britain's trends were less pronounced than America's, more pronounced than Sweden's. The latter country is the one of the three that avoided backsliding, as discussed later.

Why Britain's experience of backsliding was less dramatic than the U.S.'s, but much more so than any in Sweden, helps shed light on factors that encourage or protect against democratic erosion.

Societal Developments and Party Change in Britain. The general outlines of societal and political changes in the U.K. are familiar. Deindustrialization, and with it the decline in the size and clout of the industrial working class, led to a repositioning of political-party identities and constituencies. The British working class was not orphaned by the Labour Party. But it was less tightly bound to Labour, as a party and as a political identity, in the early 21st century than it had been in the 20th.

In the 1980s, the legacy right shifted positions in ways similar to those of the Republican Party in the U.S. The Conservative Party party moved toward lower taxes and greater opposition toward state involvement in the economy. At the same time that Ronald Reagan governed the U.S., his close ally and ideological look-alike, Margaret Thatcher, governed in the U.K. The Conservative Party held power under Thatcher from 1979 until 1988 and then under John Major until 1997. Thatcher cut taxes on the wealthy and trimmed elements of the welfare state.[38] Electorally important third parties — the Social Democrats and Liberal Democrats — were more socially liberal than the Conservatives and more fiscally conservative than Labour.

The evolution of the Labour Party in this period also paralleled that of U.S. Democrats. Already having shifted stances in ways that diluted the party's working-class identity, Labour's long period out of power invigorated a moderate leadership that hoped to reverse this decline. Hence, just as the New Democrats reacted to their long period out of office by tacking to the center, so did New Labour under Tony Blair.

Without abandoning its commitment to the welfare state, Labour shifted downward somewhat on the size-of-state dimension (vertical axis) and rightward on the economic integration dimension (horizontal axis). It expanded its core base beyond working-class voters to white collar, socially liberal, and university-educated voters.[39]

In the 2000s, having been out of power for more than a decade, the Conservative Party, under the leadership of David Cameron, also attempted to modernize its position and compete for educated and socially liberal voters.

This convergence of Labour and the legacy Conservative Party produced discontent among Britain's "left-behind" voters. This discontent found expression, in the 2000s and 2010s, in reactions against immigration. The U.K. had been a multicultural society since the 1950s, with large numbers of citizens of South Asian and West Indian origins, among other groups. But it experienced an upsurge in immigration, first from EU accession states, then from Syria and North Africa. After 2004, 10 Eastern European countries joined the EU. The Blair government viewed the eventual arrival of migrants from these countries as inevitable and a boon to the U.K. economy. But other Western European member states sought a more gradual transition by accepting the EU-permitted temporary caps on the numbers of migrants. The Blair government did not, and the surge of migrants was sharp and compressed in time. Between 1997 and 2007, immigration rose from 48,000 to close to 270,000 per year.

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[38] On the rightward shift of the Conservative Party, see Evans and Mellon 2016. As Pierson shows, efforts at retrenchment were more successful in some areas than others. The Thatcher government was successful in cuts to counsel housing, unemployment insurance, and public pensions. Paul Pierson, Dismantling the Welfare State? Reagan, Thatcher, and the Politics of Retrenchment, CUP, 1994.

[39] After the Blair era, the Labour Party again shifted leftward; see Whiteley et al. 2013.

Ford and Goodwin (2017) describe a clash between a more diverse and international Britain "left behind" voters — older, less educated, White, and working-class. Many of the latter felt

> cut adrift by the convergence of the main parties on a socially liberal, multiculitural consensus, a worldview that is alien to them. Among these voters, national identity is linked to ancestry and birthplace, not just institutions and civic attachments, and Britishness is far more important to them than it is to liberal graduates.

The migration crisis of 2015 made this issue all the more salient to voters, not least due to efforts by anti-immigrant zealots. One was Nigel Farage, founder of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), a successor to the British National Party. In 2015, Farage's UKIP became the third-highest vote-getter in the country. Anti-immigrant parties drew some of the working-class vote away from Labour. The probability of a working-class English voter supporting UKIP was two percent between 2004 and 2012. In 2015, it grew to 23%.[40]

Given British electoral institutions and geography, UKIP's stunning rise in vote shares did not translate into any parliamentary seats. But the influence of the party was large. Farage was a leading, stridently anti-immigrant voice. Though Euroskepticism had a long history in the Conservative Party, potential electoral competition on its right flank spurred divisions inside it. A substantial segment of the party's leadership shifted to a position not unlike that of Trump and his allies in the U.S. They embraced exclusivist national identities, remained substantially conservative on size-of-state issues, and opposed to global economic integration — in this case, in the immediate sense of demanding Britain's exit from the EU (see Figure 2.9, p. 38).

Under pressure from Euroskeptics and anti-immigration voices inside his own party, in 2013 Prime Minister Cameron promised a referendum on EU membership, should his party win an outright majority in the 2015 election, which it did. In the 2016 Brexit vote, the Conservative Party was deeply divided. Of 323 Tory MPs, 138 voted Leave in the referendum – 43% of the parliamentary party. Among Labour Party elites, Brexit was unpopular — only 10 Labour MPs voted for Leave, 218 for Remain. But anti-immigrant, nationalist sentiment was widespread among Labour voters, as well, many of whom voted for Brexit. [Brexit book.]

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[40] Evans and Tilly chapter 4 p. 183.

Right-wing ethnonationalists became an important faction inside the Conservative Party, though they did not achieve hegemony within that party, as did their counterparts in the American GOP. But under an anti-EU leader, British institutions would fray.

Where the parties ended up, as of 2019, is reflected in Figure 2.9. The numerical locations for each come from surveys of experts in the politics of European countries, collected by the Chapel Hill Expert Survey-Europe (CHES-Europe) project.[41] The placements of parties on each of the three dimensions represents the average expert assessment on questions related to the dimensions of redistribution, national identity, and globalism/economic nationalism.[42]

Though systematic data for earlier periods are lacking, scholars of British politics trace a shift in the Labour Party from a higher position on the Pro/Anti-Welfare State dimension toward the middling position it occupied as of 2019, somewhat higher than the Liberal Democrats and higher than the Tories and UKIP. The evolution of the Conservative Party, in turn, is illustrated in Figure 2.10. The right-wing ethnonationalist faction of the party, represented here as the "Brexiteer (Braverman)" faction, is considerably more nationalistic with regard both toward the external economy and toward domestic issues of immigration and diversity.

The Johnson Government and Threats to Democratic Institutions. Boris Johnson — journalist, long-time Euroskeptic, former Mayor of London — became Prime Minister after Brexit had felled two of his Conservative Party predecessors. The *raison d'etre* of his government was to extract Britain from the EU, even if the two could not negotiate the terms of the UK's exit — even if it had to be a "no deal Brexit," in the slogan adopted by hard-line Brexiteers. Johnson's single-minded drive to achieve a goal that had thwarted his predecessors goes some way toward explaining his aggressions against democratic institutions during his three years in government. His antagonists included pro-EU members of his own party, parliament, the courts that constrained him, and members of the public who protested his transgressions.

The institutions and principles that his government attacked included:

- **Parliament**. Johnson came to office in August 2019 anticipating that his EU exit plans might be blocked by Labour and anti-Brexit Tories in House of Commons. John-

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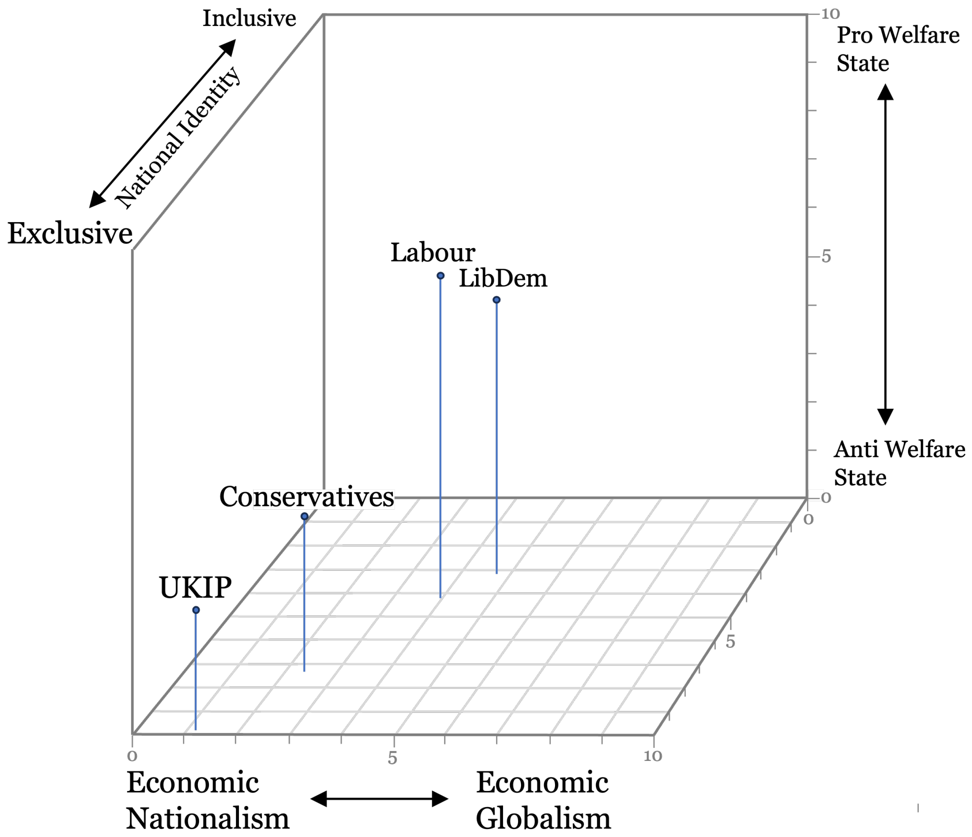
[41] See Jolly, Seth, Ryan Bakker, Liesbet Hooghe, Gary Marks, Jonathan Polk, Jan Rovny, Marco Steenbergen, and Milada Anna Vachudova. 2022. "Chapel Hill Expert Survey Trend File, 1999-2019." Electoral Studies 75 (February). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2021.102420

[42] The dimensions and scores were as follows: REDISTRIBUTION, position on redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor (from 0 = Strongly favors to 10 = Strongly opposes); NATIONALISM/Identity = position towards cosmopolitanism vs. nationalism (0 = Strongly promotes cosmopolitan conceptions of society, 10 = Strongly promotes nationalist conceptions of society); globalism/economic nationalism EU POSITION = overall orientation of the party leadership towards European integration redistribution (1 = Strongly opposed to 10 = strongly in favor).

FIGURE 2.9. Three Dimensions of Party Positions in The United Kingdom CHES

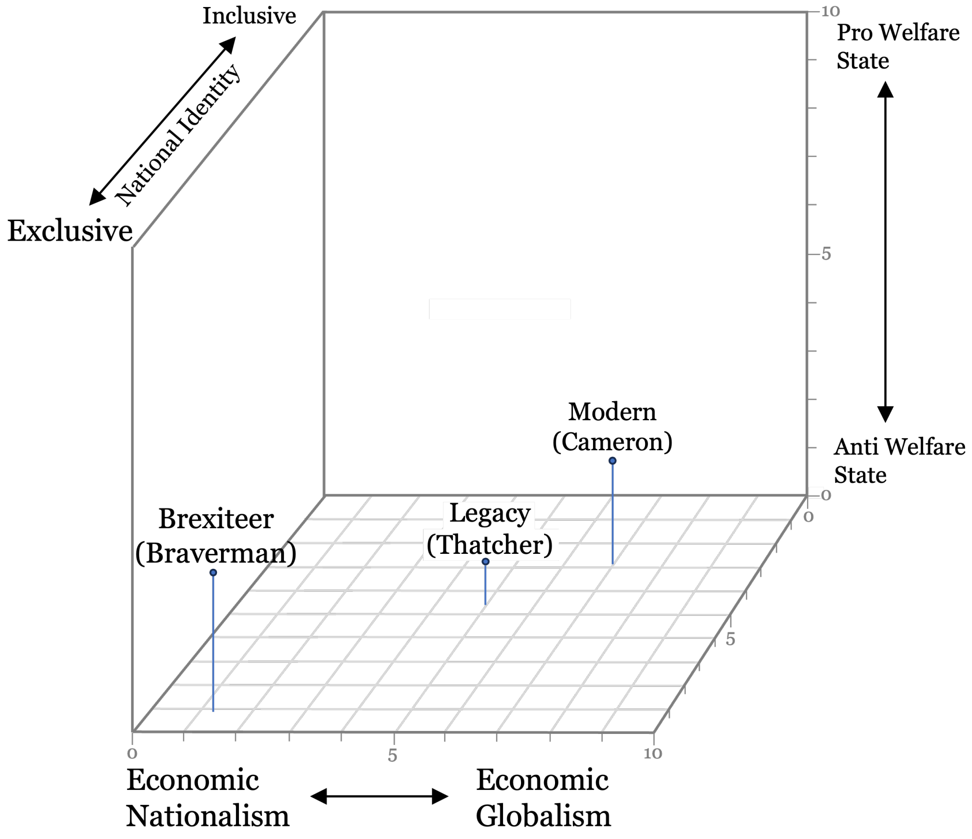


Note: The numbers on axes reflect expert evaluations of party positions as of 2019, from the CHES-Europe 2019 project (Jolly et al. 2021.

son therefore shut down parliament. On September 10, he announced its prorogation, or temporary closure, a move anticipated by British constitutional theory but controversial in this context. Initially, Parliament was to remain closed until mid-October, leaving little time for debate about Brexit before the deadline for departing the EU on October 31.

- **The Right to Protest**. The prorogation controversy sparked street demonstrations throughout the country. Later during the Johnson administration, large and sometimes unruly protests took place on environmental and racial-justice issues. In April 2022, Parliament approved the Police, Crime, and Sentencing Act. It included restrictions on "unacceptable" protests. The bill gave discretion to police to criminalize protests that they deem a "public nuisance."

FIGURE 2.10. The Evolving Position of the UK Conservative Party



Note: The numbers on axes reflect expert evaluations of party positions as of 2019, from the CHES-Europe 2019 project (Jolly et al. 2021.

- **Press Independence**. Though the prime minister himself was a journalist, his government derided the press and threatened aggressive measures against critical outlets. It proposed privatizing a public television channel, according to critics in the wake of mocking coverage of the prime minister.

- **The Integrity of Elections**. A 2022 Elections Bill instituted voter ID laws and placed the election administration body under the authority of a government ministry. Electoral fraud is extremely rare in the U.K. British campaigns and elections are more centralized and have, for a century and a half, been more tightly regulated than in the U.S. The introduction of photo id requirements are estimated to have reduced voter turnout substantially, especially among young Britons.

Tightened regulation of voting and of protests threaten to permanently weaken mechanisms of vertical accountability in the U.K. On protests, further restrictions were imposed by the government of Rishi Sunak, a successor to Johnson.[43] Other measures were only half-heartedly pursued by the government (e.g., press privatization) or were effectively resisted. This was the case for prorogation, which, in late September 2019, the Supreme Court declared "unlawful." The reopened parliament squelched Johnson's plans for the no-deal Brexit, as well as his attempt to call snap elections. The courts proved an effective bulwark against aspects of democratic erosion in the U.K.

On the whole, British democracy eroded less drastically than did American democracy. Why?

One answer is that Johnson failed to gain the kind of hold over his party that Trump achieved over his. Johnson resigned as prime minister in June 2022 in the midst of scandals and mass resignations among his cabinet. He survived a vote of confidence in June 2022. But with more scandals, and by-election defeats, party officials began to call for him to resign. (An ethnonationalist faction remained active in the Conservative Party after Johnson's removal, represented, for instance, by Suella Braverman, a Home Secretary in the Truss and Sunak cabinets.)

There is a sense in which the Conservative Party ended Johnson's term as prime minister. Hence it is tempting to attribute the U.S.-U.K. contrast to differences in institutional design. British parties have a degree of control over their leaders that is lacking in parties' relation to U.S. presidents. In Britain, a prime minister can be removed from office "[quote Cameron."].

But rather than a difference in the parties' relative power, the real difference was in each parties' desire to dump its leader. And, behind that, public opinion of the leader. The general election of December 2019, in which the Conservatives had won a large majority of seats, was the high point for Johnson in public opinion. His slide, both with voters in general and with Conservative Party voters, was steep. By the time he resigned, his net approval ratings — percent approving minus percent disapproving — were about the same as those of Theresa May (2016-2019) at the end of her time in Number 10. May was perceived as a particularly inept and hapless prime minister.

Boris Johnson lost his hold on British voters, and thus was pressured out by his political party, which had both the institutional ability to replace him as prime minister and the electoral incentive to do so. The story is in sharp contrast to that of Trump, whom his party was loathe to oust, given his large, unshakeable following among Republican voters.

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[43] The Public Order Act of 2023 appeared to be motivated by environmental activists, since several such organizations were actually named in the act. In the event, rather quiet and respectable protesters, such as the Republicans who rallied against the monarchical form of government, were removed from public places — in that case, during the coronation of King Charles, seemingly at the whim of the police.

Ethnonationalism Without Erosion: Sweden

Sweden has long been considered a model of a generous welfare state. The model relied for decades on high levels of unionization, a centralized wage-bargaining system, and broad support for social insurance and for full-employment policies. Sweden is the country in northern Europe in which social democrats controlled government for the longest period of time in the 20th century — nearly without interruption from the 1920s through 1991.

Beginning in the 1970s, economic pressures —in particular high inflation — encouraged austerity and some retrenchment of the welfare state. The Social Democratic government's 1990 call for a wage freeze and temporary ban on strikes failed to clear the parliament (*Riksdag*) and led to the fall of the prime minister. Under a subsequent conservative (Moderate Party) government, Sweden abandoned its full-employment policy and abolished foreign exchange controls. Though undertaken by the Moderate Party, these measures had the support of the outgoing Social Democratic finance minister (see Notermans 2000:195 ff). Still, in the mid-1990s, Sweden's social expenditures were higher than those of all other OECD countries. As of 1995, Sweden spent 36.4% of GDP in gross public social expenditure; the U.K. spent nearly 26%, the U.S. 17%. Only Denmark had higher social spending.[44]

At the close of the 20th century, contrasts between the Social Democrats and center and center-right parties — the most important among them the Moderate Party — were fading. The Social Democrats shifted closer to the right's positions on social and economic policy, as just seen, and on economic integration. In a 2003 referendum on joining the Eurozone, the Moderate Party was in favor. The Social Democrats were internally divided, with some leaders in favor and others opposed; the party took no official position. The failure to stake out an alternative stance to that of the Moderates diluted the Social Democrats' image or party brand.

The Social Democrats' shift can be traced in its rhetoric, class bases of support, and responsiveness to the party's lower-income constituents. On rhetoric, Oskarson and Demker analyze the party manifestos of the Social Democratic and Moderate Parties between 1988 and 2010. Figure 2.11 shows the frequency of mentions in each party's manifesto of the market economy and social policy. Positive values indicate that the right party mentioned the topic more often than did the Social Democrats; negative ones that the Social Democrats mentioned it more often. The Social Democrats' manifesto always mentions social policy more frequently than does the Moderate Party, but the difference shrinks over time. The larger number of mentions of the market economy by the conservatives peaks in 1994; by

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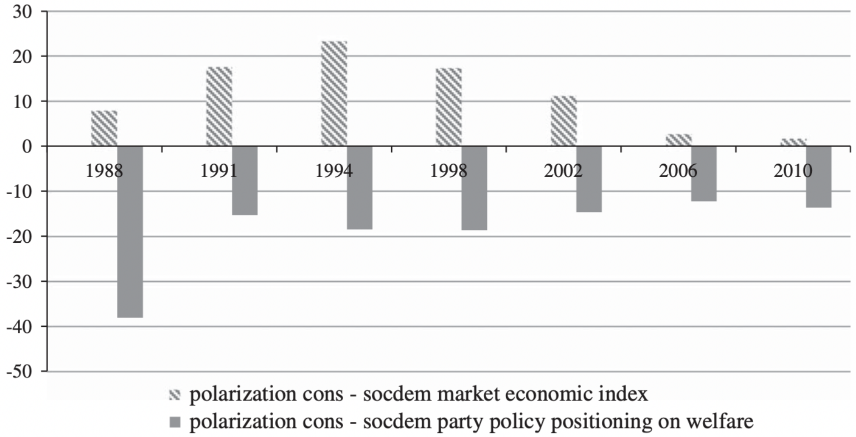
[44] William Adema, "Revisiting real social spending across countries: a brief note. OECD *Economic Studies* 30, 2000-1. These differences are less pronounced when one takes into account private social benefits (taken on by employers, with tax incentives), and taxes on transfers.

2010 the two parties mention it at almost equal rates.

FIGURE 2.11. Relative Mentions of Market Economy and Social Policy by Swedish Social Democrats and Moderate Party, 1998-2010



Note: From Oskarson and Demker 2015:641. Positive values indicate more mentions by Moderate Party, negative ones, more mentions by Social Democrats.

In line with the changes in party program, the class composition of support for Swedish Social Democrats also shifted away from blue-collar workers and toward middle-class voters. This trend is reflected in the upper left panel of Figure 2.3 on page 27. Though the Social Democrats remained committed to a generous welfare state, they were also responsive to "post-materialist" issues, such as environmentalism and women's rights.

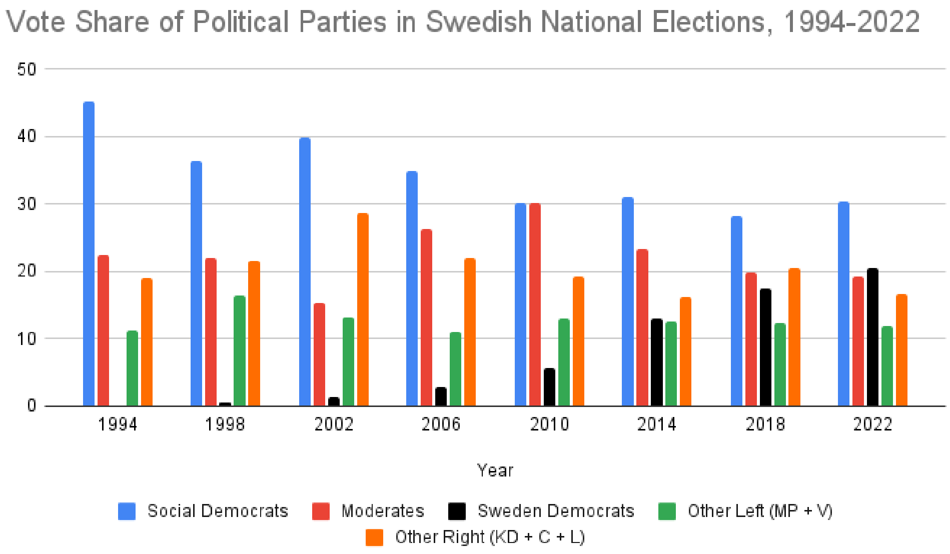
Regarding the responsiveness of the Social Democrats to their traditional constituents, Mathiesen and coauthors uncover another change. They show that, until 1997, on policies about which the wealthy and poor voters disagreed, Social Democratic governments shifted policy in a pro-poor direction. But after 1998, that moderating effect disappeared. At the end of the 20th century, and in the first two decades of the 21st, Social Democratic governments in Sweden were just as biased toward affluent constituents as were conservative ones.

As in the U.S. and the U.K., the dilution of the Swedish legacy left's identity as a working-class party opened space for new ethnonationalist entrants. Concerns about immigration and the changing nature of Swedish society were not invented out of whole cloth. In the final decades of the 20th century, Sweden was gradually becoming a more diverse society. The percentage of foreign-born residents grew from less than seven percent in 1960 to nearly 13% in 2006. In 1985, a Social Democratic government implemented the *Sweden-wide program*, which dispersed asylum seekers throughout the country, making "the refugee issue more tangible and politically acute for many voters" (Rydgren 2006:42). The effort at dispersal of immigrants fueled a nascent welfare chauvinism. With surveys stretching from the mid-1980s through 2002, Egar (2009) finds that that larger the percentage of foreign-born residents in any Swedish county, the less its residents supported welfare-state spending.[45]

Immigration was not initially an issue that divided Swedish political parties sharply. Party stances on migrants became more polarized in the early 2000s (Odmalm 2011), and more so still with the emergence of anti-immigrant parties.

Sweden Democrats. The Sweden Democrats party was founded in 1988. The party benefited from the Social Democrats' shift toward the right on economic policy, as well as on the new salience of the immigration issue. In electoral vote share, it rose from being a very minor party in national elections, to third place in 2018, and then to second place, behind the Social Democrats but ahead of the largest party of the legacy right — the Moderate Party — in 2022. Through the 2010 elections, its growing popularity coincided with a decline in the Social Democratic Party's vote share; after the 2010 elections, its rise coincided with a declines for the legacy conservative party, the Moderates (see Figure 2.12).

FIGURE 2.12



Note: (Add trendlines to show SD rose at expense first of Social Democrats, later of right)

The general contours of party-system change in Sweden were quite like those of the

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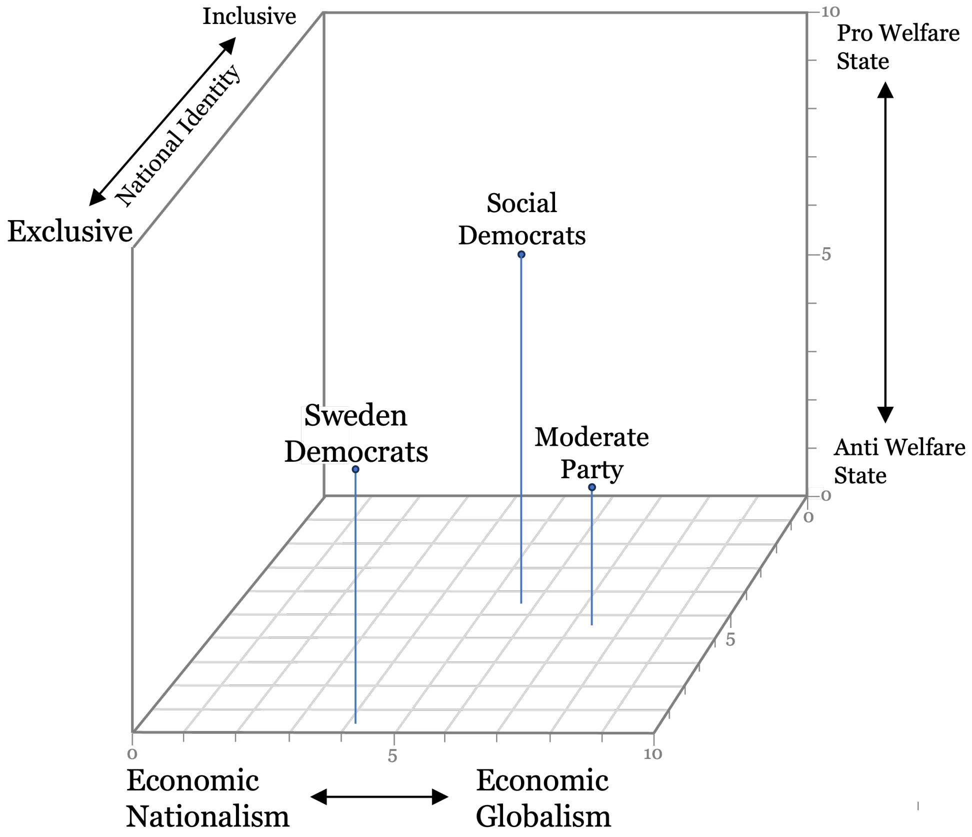
[45] Her data are pooled from surveys in 1986, 1992, 1997, and 2002. A unit increase the the percentage of foreign-born in a Swedish county decreases support for the welfare state by -.47, on a scale from zero to two. Alongside of people's reactions to immigration, they also tended to support welfare-state spending if they were from low-income families, had children, and were leftist party supporters, or had received social assistance (unemployment insurance) are more supportive.

U.S. and the U.K. (see Figure 2.13). The legacy right party's positions remained relatively unchanged. The legacy left drifted down on the size-of-state dimension and to the right on economic integration, though without arriving at the position of the Moderates. The Swedish legacy left also attempted to toughen its stance on immigration, though it never arrived at the extreme occupied by the ethnonationalist Sweden Democrats (see Demker and Odmalm 2021).

FIGURE 2.13. Locations of Moderates, Social Democrats, and Sweden Democrats on Three Dimension



Note: These locations reflect 2019 expert evaluations from the CHES-Europe project. See Jolly et al. 2021.

The Sweden Democrats, then, occupied the exclusionary and economic-nationalist area of the cube. They also took a more pro-redistributive position, compared to the legacy right. As Rothstein notes, the Sweden Democrats largely back "Sweden's universal model for social protection, which has long been popular, and do[es] not want to be linked too closely to any concrete proposal for curtailing it ..." (2023:38). He notes that the Sweden Democrats forced the Moderate Party toward more generous social policy as a condition for SD support for a

Moderate government.

Despite its rising popularity, the Sweden Democrats for many years remained untouchable for Sweden's political class, including for parties on the right. Its far-right origins made it anathema, even if, since 2005, "its leadership clique had pursued a steady path towards mainstream politics, seeking co-operation with other parties" (Ayott and Bolin 2022: 1060). Hence in a late 2014 "December Agreement," both conservative and leftist party blocs agreed to allow the bloc with the largest vote share to form a government. "The aim was clear: to construct a cartel that would exclude SD [Sweden Democrats] from all influence. It was almost as if the parliamentary arena was to be truncated, with seven parties acting as if the eighth was not there." (Aylott and Bolin 2019, p. 1505.)

The *cordon sanitaire* around the Sweden Democrats would eventually be lowered. After the 2022 election, as the largest party on the right, it could no longer be ostracized. In forming a government, traditional parties of the right had the choice of supporting leftists in their formation of a government or coming to power themselves with some sort of agreement with the far-right Sweden Democrats. They chose the latter.[46]

The Sweden Democrats, now second in vote shares only to the Social Democrats, had a profound influence. A party once treated as beyond the pale by parties of the left and the right, is now a leading force. It has brought issues to the fore that were previously less salient and less divisive in Swedish politics — in particular, immigration and crime — and has induced legacy-right and -left parties to shift their own positions on redistribution and on immigration.

And yet, none of these developments has, as yet, posed a threat to Swedish democracy — certainly not of the kind that rising ethnonationalist forces did in the U.S. The independence of the Swedish judiciary has not been threatened. The press is not, generally, ridiculed by people in power. Civil servants are not reviled. The integrity of elections is not placed in doubt.

A simple explanation for this difference is that Sweden has not yet had a right-wing ethnonationalist head of government. The executive has been under the control of the legacy left or legacy right parties, throughout.

But this fact is itself a symptom of the lesser polarization of Swedish politics (illustrated in Figure 2.6 on page 31) and the smaller space available for parties that might want to upend the democratic system. Social and political trust remain high in Sweden, by international standards, though Sweden Democrat voters "stand out by expressing significantly lower social trust than do supporters of any of the other seven parties in the Riksdag (Rothstein 2023, p. 39.)[47] This lower level of polarization and greater confidence in institutions helps explain a remarkable fact: the leader of the largest party in the bloc of parties that won the largest number of votes and seats in the Riksdag is broadly seen as having no legitimate claim on the prime ministership. Though the right-bloc parties evinced the predictable "flexibility" or opportunism when they lowered the *cordon sanitaire* around Sweden Democrats in 2022, still there was no question of its leader becoming prime minister or even of the party formally joining the government. Nor did the Sweden Democrats demand the prime ministership or cabinet positions.[48]

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[46] At the Castle of Tidö, a month after the 2022 election, the four right and center-right parties, including the Sweden Democrats, agreed to principles of power-sharing. The Moderate's Ulf Kristersson would be prime minister at the head of a minority government, one that would rely on Sweden Democrats for "confidence and supply." Confidence and supply meant that the party would support the government on votes of confidence and on the budget, but remained free to vote against it on other bills. Nor would the Sweden Democrats hold cabinet positions. But they would hold the chair of four standing committees. Further influence was gained with the appointment of half a dozen Sweden Democratic special policy advisors in the cabinet office of Prime Minister Kristersson.

The dynamics of party politics have also tamed the Sweden Democrats to a greater degree than has been true of the Trump Republicans or the Tory Brexiteers. To make their way to positions of influence, the Sweden Democrats have had to make large changes to their positions and style. That said, Sweden Democrats have forced policy compromises on the establishment right. And these concessions are not minor, including drastic cuts to immigration, the softening of the right's stance on social policy, and the weakening of its efforts to curtail climate change.[49] Yet the Sweden Democrats have not pushed its establishment conservative partner-party to attack Swedish democratic institutions.

A general lesson, then, is that right-wing ethnonationalism can be a threat to democracy, but only when it operates in a setting of generalized skepticism about the democratic institutions and about the government's ability to pursue public policies that enhance the public's welfare.

The Populist Path to Democratic Erosion

A second route to erosion is taken by leaders who identify themselves as champions of poor and working-class voters. These leaders rail not against immigrants or minorities but against the rich. The leaders are associated with the left, meaning with parties or movements that favor income redistribution, social protections, and intervention of the state in setting prices for goods and labor. Just as not all right-wing ethnonationalists are backsliders, not all left-wing populists are backsliders, either. Some leftist leaders who use harsh rhetoric against the wealthy in power pursue the backsliders' playbook, others do not.

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[47] Bo Rothstein, "The Shadow of the Swedish Right," *Journal of Democracy* 34(1):36-49.

[48] I am grateful to Bo Rothstein for this observation. Note that the situation of influence without responsibility also has some benefits for the Sweden Democrats. It allows them to retain an outsider status while achieving a decisive influence on public policy.

[49] In the Tidö agreement, in exchange for its support of the current government, the party gained "full and equal influence in six policy areas (or 'projects') – healthcare, climate and energy, fighting crime, migration and integration, schools, and growth."

In addition, not all leftist leaders are populists. The key difference, as argued by Çinar et al (2020), is the distinctly Manichean, good-versus-evil framing of class conflict by populists, a point further developed in chapter 4.

When democracies in the Global South have small communities of recent immigrants and large numbers of indigenous and Afro-descended voters, ethnonationalism finds less fertile ground. Class conflict becomes the idiom of populist discourse. In Latin America in particular, rather than identity and redistributive dimensions becoming separated, they tend to overlap. With a compressed dimensionality of politics, class conflict becomes turbo-charged as a discourse of party competition and electoral campaigning.

High levels of income inequality, and regional contagion effects, as well as many leaders' incentives to break with inherited party systems, help explain outbreaks of democratic erosion in Latin America: in Venezuela under Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro, Bolivia under Evo Morales, Ecuador under Rafael Correa, Nicaragua under Daniel Ortega, and Mexico under Andrés Manuel López Obrador. Democratic erosion in Latin America has not been the sole province of the left; Jair Bolsonaro is the most salient case of a right-wing backslider, along with Nayib Bukele of El Salvador. But the modal form of erosion in this region has been under the leadership of leftists.

Populist backsliding has taken place in other parts of the Global South. Sub-Saharan Africa produced prominent cases, such as in Zambia under Michael Sata and in South Africa under Jacob Zula.

We saw that in wealthy democracies, ethnonationalists took advantage of shifting incentives that legacy parties faced, in effect slotting themselves into a new dimension on the three-dimensional cube. In Latin America, the evolution has been different. Rather than a new dimension emerging, politics became crystallized along a single, left-right dimension. This happened roughly in the second decade after redemocratization. It is not that there is only one *issue* of disagreement or debate; rather the parties' positions on a series of issues tend to bundle in predictable ways.

To break this down: The economy is an ever-present topic in Latin American electoral politics. It's difficult to imagine a presidential campaign in the region in which economic matters were not front and center. Mexican candidates argue over taxes and a universal guaranteed wage; Argentines over how to restore price stability; Brazilians about how to revive economic growth. Improving security and reducing crime are also frequent topics (see Castrorena and Zechmeister 2016). Both the economy and crime can be framed as *valence issues*, as opposed to *position* issues. Valence issues are ones on which there is no disagreement. No parties inveigh against prosperity, and none hopes for higher rates of crime (D. Stokes 1963). But these areas of concern can — and in Latin American party politics often do — get framed as position issues. One side wants prosperity with redistribution, the other wants to leave income distribution to the market. One side wants a hard line toward criminals (the "hard hand" or *mano dura*), the other doubts that this approach will work if root causes go unaddressed.

In Latin America, parties that hold leftist positions in one issue tend to hold leftist positions on the other, and the same is true for the right. Researchers in the Chapel Hill Expert Survey Latin America (CHES-LA) project conducted expert surveys about the policy positions of political parties in 12 Latin American countries.[50] From their data we are able to calculate the correlations between parties' positions on different issues, including preferences for state-versus-market control of the economy, crime, gender and sexuality, and others. Focusing on surveys from 2019, I compute the correlation between pairs of issues for individual parties and then calculate averages of those correlations. In the 12 Latin American countries that CHES-LA covers, the average correlation between parties' positions on the economy and crime is 0.77, which is quite high. The same pattern emerges when one adds another issue area: social rights, such as gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights. The correlation coefficient between economic and social rights is 0.71, between crime and social rights, 0.91.[51] On ethnonationalist issues — e.g., immigration and indigenous rights — Latin American parties' positions tend to map, again, onto a left-right dimension. Right-wing leaders, such as Jair Bolsonaro, advocate for rapid assimilation, and left-wing ones, such as Evo Morales, press for cultural pluralism and indigenous rights.[52]

By contrast, the correlation between parties' stances on the economy and on social issues was much lower in Europe. When I repeated the calculations with CHES Europe data, the correlation between economic and social issues was 0.38 — much lower than in equivalent correlations for Latin American parties. Thus, whereas references to the "left" and the "right" in the context of wealthy democracies can lead to confusion, in the Latin American setting, this simplification is quite apt.

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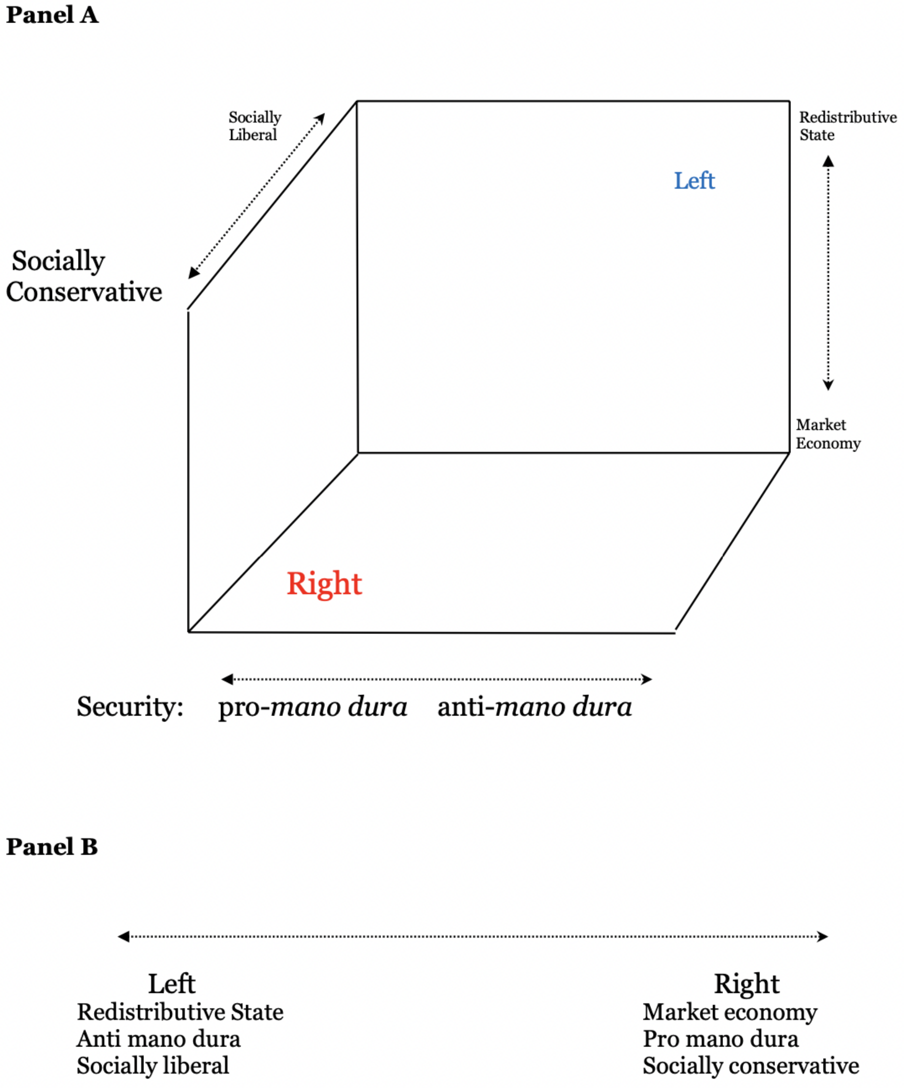
[50] Cecilia Martínez-Gallardo, Nicolás de la Cerda, Jonathan Hartlyn, Liesbet Hooghe, Gary Marks, and Ryan Bakker. 2022. "Revisiting party system structuration in Latin America and Europe: Economic and socio-cultural dimensions." Party Politics Vol. 0(0) 1–13.

[51] The data from from the the Chapel Hill Expert Survey gathers opinions from regional experts about the positions of political parties in the two regions, across a wide range of issues.

[52] Of course sometimes there are tensions, such as between Rafael Correa and indigenous political organizations in Ecuador; see Hale (1994) for an account of tensions between the revolutionary Nicaraguan state and Miskito Indians. For the broader context of indigenous politics in newly democratized Latin America, see Yashar 2005.

We can still deploy a cube like those mapping party positions in the wealthy democracies described earlier (see the the Panel A of Figure 2.14). But actual parties will tend to cluster in two corners of the cube — the pro-redistribution, pro-leniency, and socially liberal corner, and the pro-market, tough-on-crime, socially conservative corner. Hence the more compressed depiction in Panel B of Figure 2.14, with a single dimension.

FIGURE 2.14. Locations of Left and Right Parties in Latin America


Panel A
Socially Liberal
Redistributive State
Left
Socially Conservative
Market Economy
Right
Security: pro-*mano dura* anti-*mano dura*
Panel B
Left
Redistributive State
Anti mano dura
Socially liberal
Right
Market economy
Pro mano dura
Socially conservative

Note: Panel A: Locations of Left and Right parties on economy, crime, and social rights dimensions. Panel B: LA party positions on one dimension.

The sharpness of the left-right dimension has not been a constant feature of post-transition democracy. In the first decade after democratization in Latin America, candidates often equivocated on their economic positions, running as protectors of the poor but then pivoting, once in office, to austerity measures that often exacerbated inequality.[53] Indeed, in this early period, it appeared that a new kind of political leader was emerging, one who combined fiscal conservatism with a persona and tone that appealed to the poor.[54] And voters seemed wary of electing economic leftists in the early post-transition years, perhaps reflecting a lack of confidence in the solidity of their democracies.

But in a second or third wave of elections, the left-right economic dimension crystallized. Parties offered, and voters were drawn to, more outspoken agendas of economic redistribution and equality. In Chile and Brazil, Ecuador and Bolivia, Venezuela and Uruguay, among others, parties came into office that identified as "leftist."

These "pink tide" governments, which began to appear in the early 2000s, were quite different from one another. They differed ideologically, in their degrees of radicalism or moderation, and in their internal organizations (for a discussion, see Levitsky and Roberts, 2011, Introduction). In retrospect, it has become clear that they also differed in their impact on democratic institutions. Some left those institutions in tact; others undermined them. Right-wing governments also undermined democracy in Latin America: in Brazil under Bolsonaro and in El Salvador under Bukele. Table 2.1 distinguishes presidents from the left and the right, and between those that left democratic institutions in tact and those that eroded them.

Table 2.1 suggests that how democracy fared was probably influenced not just by the intentions of the leader — though that certainly plays a part — but also by the institutional setting. The Southern Cone countries of Argentina and Chile experienced less party-system fluctuation and as yet have produced no presidents who pursued the autocrats' playbook.[55] They are also countries with somewhat less acute income inequality. In contrast, the Andean region stands out for having produced several would-be autocrats. Even the exceptions in this region are not so exceptional. Peru has experienced enormous political turmoil, with one successful and another attempted "self-coup" since it returned to democracy in 1980. For institutional reasons, Peru's presidents stand out for their weakness rather than for their excessive strength. And in Colombia, a powerful right-wing president, Álvaro Uribe, attempted to erode democracy. But, as Gamboa (2022) explains, he was kept from doing so

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[53] Stokes 2001.

[54] Kenneth Roberts, "Neoliberalism and the Transformation of Populism in Latin American Politics," *World Politics* 48 (October 1995), 82-116; Kurt Weyland, "Neopopulism and Neoliberalism in Latin America," *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 31.

[55] This is not to say that the party systems were stable or party brands unchanging over time. Especially Argentina. What's more, at the time of this writing, a candidate whose campaign pronouncements sounded like those of a right-wing ethnonationalist was elected president of Argentina. It is too soon to tell whether he will erode that country's democratic institutions.

TABLE 2.1. Ideology and Institutional Impacts of Select Latin American Presidents

	Ideology:	
	Left	Right
Institutions In Tact:	Bachelet, Lagos (Chile) Petro (Colombia) Kirchners (Argentina) Lula (Brazil)	Pinera (Chile) Uribe (Colombia) Macri (Argentina) Calderón (Mexico)
Institutions Eroded:	Chávez, Maduro (Venezuela) Morales (Bolivia) Correa (Ecuador) Ortega (Nicaragua) López Obrador (Mexico)	Bolsonaro (Brazil) Bukele (El Salvador)

by effective parliamentary resistance.

One incentive in common between many populist and ethnonationalist backsliders was to challenge the inherited party system. Several Latin American backsliders came to power at notable moments of party-system breakdown, and they benefitted from this breakdown. The most remarkable collapse was in Venezuela, the earliest eroding democracy in our period. Venezuela's system had been strongly bi-partisan; for decades, the center-left Democratic Action (*Acción Democrática*, AD) competed against the center-right Copei. The 1992 embrace by the AD government of austerity, privatization, and pro-market reforms blurred its mildly social democratic party brand and provoked an enormous popular backlash.

In national elections between 1947 and 1998, the combined vote share of AD and COPEI had dipped below 70% only four times, whereas the range for their combined shares in the remaining nine elections was between 71% and 93%. In 1998, the candidate jointly supported by the two dying establishment parties won a mere 34% of the vote.

As he campaigned that year, Hugo Chávez called for the destruction of the old order, which he decried as corrupt and in decay. The only "peaceful and democratic path [is] ... a leap away from a moribund democracy, a cauterized system, where the Republic came to an end ... to a new democracy, a true democracy..." (Hugo Chávez, July 30, 1998).

Eventual populist autocrats came to power amidst a party system in shambles in Bolivia and Ecuador, as well. In Bolivia, Evo Morales's background was as the head of the coca growers union. His political party, Movement Toward Socialism (*Movimiento al Socialismo*, MAS), did not compete for parliamentary representation until nearly 20 years after Bolivia's transition to democratic rule. MAS leaders were from outside of the Bolivian political class. The party system of Ecuador, in turn, had been fragmented since the 1980s. An eventual backslider, Rafael Correa, came to office in 2006, as a minority president — the majority in the legislature opposed him. In the midst of acute conflict with the legislature and the constitutional court, Correa used a plebiscite to allow the drafting of a new constitutions; new elections in 2009 brought him back to power with a legislative majority behind him. In his second term brought conflicts with the independent media and judiciary.

Compared to Bolivia and Ecuador, Mexico's party system evinced greater stability. And the eventual backslider, López Obrador, was very much an insider on the partisan left. His successful 2018 campaign was his third run for the Mexican presidency, and López Obrador fervently argued that he had been kept from winning by a fraudulent conspiracy that included both other major political parties, the election administration body, and the "conservative elite." Indeed his actions after the 2006 elections, which he lost by a small margin, previewed his denigration of democratic institutions while in office.[56]

Left-Wing Populism and Democratic Erosion in South Africa. Left-populist eroders appeared outside of Latin America. One was Jacob Zuma, South Africa's leader from 2009 to 2018. Zuma had powerful reasons to undermine South African institutions, such as the courts and civil service: he used his presidency to redirect public resources to himself and his close associates. Eventually, Zuma's party prevailed over its president, and he was deposed over mounting corruption scandals.

To support his efforts, Zuma's deployed a rhetoric of left-wing populism, with an element of ethnic conflict. The difference between South Africa and the cases of ethnonationlist erosion or near-erosion that I examined earlier in this chapter is that an ethnic minority — White South Africans — were part of the economic elite. South Africa's discourse of ethnic hostility overlapped with a discourse of protecting the poor. Indeed, Zuma's faction of the ANC declared itself the protectors of "'ordinary people', those who are not well educated, who don't speak English well, who live in shacks or small towns and rural areas and who are excluded from the economy and the formal institutions of the state" Swilling 2017: 10.

In Zuma's discourse, the argument for defending the poor bled into one of disregard for democratic institutions. Zuma's group promoted a discourse that was

> profoundly mistrustful of the formal 'rules of the game,' whether of the Constitution or of government. The formal rules are rigged, this position proclaims, in favour of whites and urban elites, and against ordinary people. Radical economic

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[56] He held an alternative "inauguration" in the central square of Mexico city, while his supporters blocked the entrance to the Congress and forced the actual ceremony to be held in secret.

> transformation is thus presented as a programme that must frequently break the rules – even those of the Constitution. The argument is compelling at first glance, especially because unemployment and poverty are presented as overwhelmingly black experiences.

To summarize, around the world, the backsliders' playbook has been deployed by a dizzying variety of presidents and prime ministers. The social coalitions they appeal to, the policies they pursue, and the enemies they identify — these vary across a wide range. But the fuel for these leaders is a popular following. Certainly they can manipulate the institutional setting in ways that insulate them from dips in popular support, as when the the Orbán government redrew electoral districts throughout Hungary, or when the Polish PiS government took control of much of the national media. But the Polish PiS's loss of elections in 2023 shows that, even with such manipulation, a loss of support puts the backsliding leader at risk. With all the many contrasts between Trump in the U.S. system and Johnson in the British one, the most consequential difference was popular support for the executive — solid for Trump, waning for Johnson.

Hence the importance of digging more deeply into the nature and dynamics of that support, as I do in the next chapters.