

Original Article

Modernization Theory of Democratic Stability is Over: Structural Conditions of Pre- and Post-2008 Democratic Backsliding

Submission ID 0304d003-7e7f-4e25-be97-5e68f67df0d0

Submission Version Initial Submission

PDF Generation 27 May 2025 08:27:17 EST by Atypon ReX

Files for peer review

All files submitted by the author for peer review are listed below. Files that could not be converted to PDF are indicated; reviewers are able to access them online.

Name	Type of File	Size	Page
The Modernization Theory of Democratic Stability is Over Anonimized - no tables .docx	Anonymized Main Document - MS Word	128.7 KB	Page 3
Figure 1.pdf	Figure	27.0 KB	Page 34
Table 1.docx	Table	14.9 KB	Page 35
Table 2.docx	Table	20.0 KB	Page 36
Online Appendix.docx	Supplementary Material for Review	1.4 MB	Page 38

Modernization Theory of Democratic Stability is Over: Structural Conditions of Pre- and Post-2008 Democratic Backsliding

What structural conditions are associated with post-Cold War democratic backslides? This article shows that between 1986 and 2007, the modernization explanation remained valid, with the probability of backsliding decreasing exponentially with a country's economic development and the age of democracy. Even before the crisis, structural preconditions had become more demanding, and their explanatory power fell to one-third of its Cold-War level. However, no structural explanation accounts for the backslides of the last fifteen years; a country's exposure to the financial crisis is the became the only (albeit weak) predictor. Finally, the study identifies a recurring sequence: backslides typically begin with growing affective polarization and party-system instability, then escalate into autocratization episodes that are frequently—though not invariably—accompanied by attacks on the judiciary.

Introduction

Over the past four decades, a trend of democratic decline has emerged in countries where it was once considered unthinkable. Several relatively economically developed democracies, such as Hungary, Turkey (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019), and Poland until the 2023 elections, have experienced democratic backsliding and even breakdowns. Moreover, even the most developed democracies like Italy and the United States have exhibited signs of decay in their previously stable party systems (Inglehart & Norris, 2017; Pappas, 2019), while, considering Donald Trump's victory in the 2024 presidential elections, the outcome of the political crisis for the latter is yet to unfold. As a result, the assumption that democracy is "certain to persist" in what was referred to as "well-to-do nations" is no longer taken for granted (1997).

One distinguishing feature of the current wave of democratic backsliding is its evolved character. After the end of the Cold War, democratic erosions have increasingly become incumbent-led and incremental, as opposed to the promissory coups from the past (Bermeo, 2016). The mechanisms that prevent such backslides are different. Historically, it was the coercive apparatus that played a pivotal role in preventing coups (Geddes, 2009). Hence, the connection between democratic stability, state capacity, and economic development was relatively straightforward. Contemporary safeguards are likely rooted in the structure of party systems (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Orhan, 2022; Tomini & Wagemann, 2018), public preferences (Claassen, 2020), and elite choices (Tilly, 2007), which are less dependent on structural factors. Notably, party systems have undergone significant changes in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, thus undermining the protective safeguards of long-established economically developed democracies (Chiaromonte & Emanuele, 2017). This raises two questions: Do these incremental, incumbent-led autocratizations share the same structural preconditions of

democratic breakdowns from the past? Are these preconditions consistent across the current wave of autocratization?

The incremental nature of democratic backsliding makes it challenging to determine whether this trend exhibits a systematic pattern. While the expert survey method is argued to give false positive results, narrowing the definition down while resorting to purely formal criteria is likely to give a false negative – with nothing in between. Most democracy indices fail to detect early signs of democratic backsliding before incumbents begin altering institutions. Once this process has commenced, there is a debate over whether country experts tend to overestimate the extent of autocratization in their countries following the public discourse and whether methods exist to adjust for this bias (Knutsen et al., 2024; Little & Meng, 2024). When an autocratization episode unfolds openly, there is no clear sequence in which the non-electoral components of democracy indexes deteriorate (Wunsch & Blanchard, 2023). One cannot find a single measure, for instance, media freedom, that deteriorates early and is always followed by a democratic breakdown. If, on the opposite, autocratization episodes are operationalized using narrower, objective criteria rather than expert-based assessments to avoid possible biases (Little and Meng, 2024), then almost the entire wave falls out of focus. This has led some scholars to reject the existence of the third wave of autocratization (Levitsky & Way, 2015; Little & Meng, 2024).

Previous cross-country studies of democratic backsliding have traditionally focused on overt changes at the core level of democracy: elections, and freedoms that enable them (Dahl, 1971, p. 221). This study addresses the operationalization problem by broadening the scope of democratic backsliding, paradoxically, beyond the definition of democracy. This helps analyze covariates of what precedes outright autocratization episodes while omitting possible expert bias. Drawing from an emerging literature that clarifies the previously vague processes of incumbent-led democratic backslidings (Bermeo, 2016;

Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Tomini & Wagemann, 2018; Wunsch & Blanchard, 2023), this study unveils their sequence.

In this paper, I show that its first stage of democratic backsliding involves the deterioration of party systems, characterized by increased affective polarization, followed by electoral volatility, leading to the rise of potential autocrats. The second stage entails undermining checks on executive power, often but not always, through erosion of constitutional court independence, culminating in autocratization episodes, this time marked by a significant decline in democracy indices. In addition, this paper is the first attempt to compare the preconditions for democratic instability before and after the 2008 financial crisis. I demonstrate that while the structural preconditions remained salient before the crisis, nowadays, democratic backsliding is no longer a threat exclusive to low-income young democracies; it can occur anywhere. The Granger causality tests identify the sequences of these processes, while the mixed effects regressions investigate their covariates.

Ex-post determinism of modernization theories

Since the study of regime change began, theories have linked it to economic development. In democratization scholarship spanning the late 1980s to the mid-2000s, economic development remained a key predictor of democratization and democratic stability (Boix, 2011; Inglehart, 2018; Vanhanen, 2003). Since economic growth is interconnected with most societal dynamics, theories have sought to explain this relationship through different causal mechanisms, ranging from cultural attitudes to economic inequality and social classes; nonetheless, the general direction remained consistent.

Most of the modernization approach critique is based on outliers: rich and autocratic polities such as China (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2022) or poor democracies

such as Mongolia (Fish, 2001). This, however, does not ruin the modernization argument if it is based on probabilistic, not deterministic logic.

At the same time, the modernization approach has a more serious inherent pitfall – ex-post determinism. Structuralist argument stems from an assumption that the countries that are non-democratic now will hardly democratize later unless they experience a structural change, and therefore all the features that distinguish them from stable democracies are assumed to lead to autocracy. However, it happened frequently that the factors and mechanisms that once were considered as pushing in an autocratic direction would become ambivalent later or even foster democratic change, and vice-versa.

For instance, classic Lipset's (1959) modernization study claimed that Catholic and Orthodox denominations of Christianity, as well as Islam, are counterproductive for democratization – right before the Catholic Church changed its stance during Vatican II and started to play the decisive role in democratizing the vast of South American (Mantilla, 2010). The gradual economic shift of the three post-WWII decades created the demand for democracy, which was an even more important change that enabled this wave (Przeworski and Limongi, 1997; Inglehart, 2018). These slow structural shifts were practically not identifiable before the 1974 Portuguese Revolution created what Huntington (1993, p. 100) once called a snowballing effect, with countries being inspired and influenced by one another. The collapse of the Communist world resulted in a wave of authoritarian collapses (Levitsky & Way, 2015), which served as another trigger.

If the Third Wave of Democratic Backsliding that began in 1993 and continues now (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019, p. 1107) is to be compared with the Third Wave of Democratization, the shift in structural conditions comes from the technical revolution of the last three decades, postindustrialization, and globalization. The former have

arguably brought about the rise of economic inequality and, in turn, a disappointment in democratic values (Inglehart & Norris, 2017). This made the party systems much more volatile, with very similar challenger parties appearing across those systems, while the rest of the political parties became more ideologically and affectively polarized (Chiaramonte & Emanuele, 2017; Giugni & Lorenzini, 2020; Bernhard, 2021, pp. 601–603; Celli & Ferrante, 2024). According to economic voting tradition (see a summary in Lewis-Beck and Nadeau, 2011), in economic crises, some voters would switch from the incumbent to the opposition without the new parties emerging. Guiso and colleagues suggest that the Great Recession became unique in this regard because the technological revolution with “global market competition, immigration, and robotization” – made neither traditional left nor traditional right response sound plausible (2024). Hence, the most affected voters either abstained from voting or supported the challenger, populist parties, causing a surge in party system volatility. In these circumstances, the 2008 crisis served as a trigger sweeping the safeguards of ever-stable party systems.

After the Cold War, democracy became the only internationally accepted option, which changed the democratic backslidings. Political leaders found an incremental manner to commit the aggrandizements of executive power (Bermeo, 2016) and tilt the playing field without resorting to major legislation change or open repression. Even though there is no literature on autocratizers learning from each other, this happened with democratizations (Bunce & Wolchik, 2006). Mechanisms that once thwarted outright coups differ from those guarding against executive aggrandizements nowadays. In the first case, their prevention relied heavily on a well-organized bureaucratic and coercive structure, notably the secret services (Geddes, 2009). In the case of incremental backsliding, one might expect that it should be dependent on the party systems, civil society, the state of checks and balances, and even affective polarization in the masses. In the same fashion, both individual- and country-level

evidence suggests that citizens with weak pro-democratic values are more likely to tolerate democratic violations (Gidengil et al., 2022; Stefanelli, 2023), while the countries with higher levels of affective polarization are more likely to experience democratic backsliding (Orhan, 2022).

The modernization studies of democratic breakdowns based primarily on the Cold War material would suggest that relatively economically developed democracies are safe (Przeworski & Limongi, 1997). Now, their results have become vulnerable and need re-evaluation, especially after the 2008 financial crisis, because one can hardly overrule the possibility of a similar ex-post determinism fallacy. At the same time, the modernization school that used to be salient in studies of democratization until now remained surprisingly unpopular in the recent wave of scholarship on autocratization. The reason was the scarcity of the data: unlike democratizations that normally follow lucid autocratic collapses, autocratizations are more hidden. Transitions from autocratic regimes occur through incremental, elite-driven intra-regime processes in just about 8% of cases (Geddes et al., 2018, p. 178). In contrast, as the next section shows, this scenario is prevalent in transitions from democratic regimes, particularly following the end of the Cold War (Bermeo, 2016).

Incremental backsliding

The difference between the character of autocratizations and democratizations lies in the social attitude towards the two shifts. Democracy is internationally promoted using a range of methods from financial support (Bunce & Wolchik, 2006; Levitsky & Way, 2010) to direct military intervention (Downes & Monten, 2013) ironically, even if no democratic change follows in most of cases (Geddes et al., 2018, p. 184). Political leaders who bring about democratic change are, therefore, incentivized to advertise it as much as possible.

In the same fashion, even established autocrats never advertise their nature openly. Out of 197 countries, only a handful of monarchies openly acknowledge their autocratic nature such as Saudi Arabia, Brunei, or Oman. Yet, half of the existing countries remain autocratic (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2022). To distinguish between actual democracy and a dictatorship with formal elections, there exist numerous democracy indices, most of them based on the Polyarchy operationalized through expert surveys: elected officials, free and fair elections, inclusive suffrage, right to run for office, freedom of expression, alternative information, associational autonomy (Dahl, 1971, p. 221). These tools have proven themselves precise enough to unveil the democratic *façade* of the established autocracies.

However, even more than leaders in consolidated autocracies, those who bring about democratic backsliding are also incentivized to hide it (Bermeo, 2016, p. 15; Marinov & Goemans, 2014). In the past century, this window-dressing took the form of junta leaders openly committing outright political repression while stressing the temporary character of their picturesque military coups (Bermeo, 2016; Maeda, 2010; Tomini & Wagemann, 2018). This process has gone much further in the last three decades, as autocratizations happen through the incremental deterioration of state institutions that the elected incumbent commits (Bermeo, 2016; Maeda, 2010; Wunsch & Blanchard, 2023) – also known as executive aggrandizement (Bermeo, 2016). Only the scholarship of the recent five years yielded the intuition on how this new form of democratic backsliding looks and what politicians are the potential autocratizers (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Wunsch & Blanchard, 2023).

This article distinguishes between a longer process of *democratic backsliding* which includes the gradual deterioration of democracy's potential safeguards, and outright *autocratization episodes* which culminate this process with “sustained and substantial decline of democratic attributes” (Maerz et al., 2023). During the beginning

of a process of democratic backsliding, a party system experiences a shift that does not yet affect the country's level of democracy. Depending on the approach, either the existing mature party system collapses due to high volatility bringing up the fresh populist parties (Pappas, 2019, p. 82) – those that oppose people to the elites in their rhetoric (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 7); or the affective polarization in the elites grows to dangerous levels (Wunsch & Blanchard, 2023), making them abandon “mutual forbearance”, ending up with the outsiders with clearly anti-democratic traits coming to power (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

Even though these descriptions appear very diverse, these processes will likely happen together. Electoral volatility is argued to lead to polarization (Moraes & Béjar, 2022), and challenger parties coming to power due to electoral volatility are likely to be populist (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020) and anti-democratic (Pappas, 2019). Finally, on the individual level, populist partisans are likely to exhibit all of those characteristics (Stefanelli, 2023). At the same time, no known study compared the dynamic and the effects of volatility, polarization, and populism together when it comes to democratic backsliding.

This process is followed by an outright autocratization. There are differing views in the literature regarding the role of the Judiciary in this process. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) argue that the takeover of the judiciary is a necessary preparatory step that occurs before the onset of autocratization. In contrast, Wunsch and Blanchard (2023) argue that constraining the Judiciary can happen at any moment of autocratization episodes, but once it does, an autocratization episode is very likely to end with a breakdown of a democratic regime.

Democracy indices are conceptually not geared at capturing the first phase and even the attacks on the judiciary. Paradoxically, the actual level of the polyarchy (Dahl, 1971, p. 221) that they measure starts decreasing only in the very last stages of

autocratization when future autocrats change the formal rules of the game and repress their opponents. During the first phase, there is nothing undemocratic in the growth of volatility or polarization, populists or even the potential autocrats winning elections. Also, this stage easily becomes reversed because in most cases, challenger parties afterward simply lose elections and then either become entrenched in a country's political system or fade (Pappas, 2019, pp. 241–263).

During the second phase, an incumbent commits the steps that affect the country's polyarchy level and, therefore, democracy indices based on it (Coppedge et al., 2024; Freedom House, 2023). Still, incrementally undermining some of the safeguards does not affect the democracy indices much. For instance, the capture of a court of justice, which is widely considered to be a key event of democratic backsliding, only decreases its Freedom House democracy score by 5%, not fulfilling the single independent judiciary requirement F1 (Freedom House, 2023, p. 13). Similarly, in the core V-Dem Liberal democracy index, it would only affect one of its 15 parts, namely, the Judiciary component 3.7 (Coppedge et al., 2024, p. 173). In addition, there is an established pattern: first, future autocrats undermine media and civil society, and then they derail the core of democracy —free and fair elections (Alizada et al., 2022, p. 22). Thus, the most rapid decline of democracy indices happens several years *after* the incumbent has tilted the playing field and seized a de-facto autocratic power, if happens at all. Because of this, the indexes based on formal and strict criteria (Little & Meng, 2024) tend to overlook most cases of democratic backslidings.

Causes of democratic erosion

Are these quite different processes that may start with voters' behavior, continue in party politics, and finish with outright removal of the democratic institutions, rooted in the same structural preconditions? The studies that come from different traditions,

published recently and decades ago, and are aimed at different levels of aggregation, be it individuals, organizations, or countries, all point to the same three factors that prevent democratic backsliding in its different stages: economic development, equality, and regime tenure. In addition, the extent to which a country is affected by a Great recession might have a strong effect in the last 15 years.

The previous studies that test the structural correlates of democratic breakdowns point to the same societal characteristics. According to Przeworski and Limongi, once democracy is established in a somewhat upper-middle-income nation, it is “almost certain to survive”, while this threshold is set as low 6,000 dollars of yearly GDP per capita (1997, p. 165). At the same time, poor democracies with a yearly per capita GDP of less than 2,000 dollars face more than 10% yearly risks of collapse (Przeworski & Limongi, 1997). This result is, in general, supported by other scholars (Boix, 2011; Tomini & Wagemann, 2018). It also transfers to an individual level: scholars focusing on voter behavior and party systems agree that poor and less educated individuals are more likely to support anti-democratic populist parties (Kriesi et al., 2006; Rooduijn, 2018).

Also, the age of democracy is known to be positively associated with its survival chances (Przeworski & Limongi, 1997). The studies of electoral systems support show that the older democracies tend to have more stable party systems with less volatility and, therefore, fewer anti-systemic challenger parties (Lane and Ersson, 2007; Moraes and Béjar, 2022). On the individual level, the older the democracy is, the larger share of the citizens is educated under the democratic rule, and thus indoctrinated accordingly (Claassen, 2020).

Along with these three factors, Tomini and Wagemann (2018) also explain democratic breakdowns with the concentration of executive power, volatility of the party system, and various indicators of social instability – which, in this paper, serve as

dependent variables indicating the beginning of a long process of incremental democratic backsliding than as the factors that facilitate them. Democratic backsliding is also explained by elite preferences (Tilly, 2007, p. 79), yet testing these in large-scale research is hindered by data availability.

According to Inglehart and Norris (2017), the economic changes of the last half of a century, namely the transition to the postindustrial society have led to the rise of inequality. Service workers who constitute most of the workforce in postindustrial countries have less bargaining power than industry workers, which leads to the decay of unionism and the rise of the richest top 1%. This effect deepens even further with the computer era when one software product can be sold an infinite number of times thus enriching its developer. This growing inequality causes anxiety among the poorest and less educated, which, in turn, pushes them to xenophobia and gives ground to the support for the far-right anti-democratic forces that also happened to exploit the inequality issue (Inglehart & Norris, 2017, pp. 446–447; Oesch, 2008). Accordingly, democratic breakdowns and autocratizations are also known to happen in highly unequal countries (Boix & Stokes, 2003; Tomini & Wagemann, 2018). While their entire argument, to my best knowledge, has never been tested on a country level, many studies based on the individual level support it.

According to an influential work by Guiso and colleagues (2024), the collapse of party systems in old democracies after the 2008 Great Recession was caused by the inability of both traditional left and right to provide a convincing answer against the crisis in times of globalization. This paved the road for challenger parties, which gained strength in proportion to the voters' sense of insecurity. Their model explains the popular, demand side while assuming the voters are capable of such sophisticated political reasoning.

On the other hand, the above-mentioned findings have several limitations. The results of the individual- and party-level studies do not necessarily translate into the country-level findings because the preferences of individuals and actors are mediated by institutions. The existing big-N cross-country studies of structural correlates either concentrated on the open breakdowns of democratic regimes (Maeda, 2010; Przeworski & Limongi, 1997) or, at least, on the last stages of democratic backsliding when polyarchy levels begin to decline (Tomini & Wagemann, 2018) and never – on the earlier phases of democratic backsliding such as the capture of the constitutional court or the decay of party systems. In addition, to the best knowledge, only two such studies have been accomplished in the last twenty-five years (Maeda, 2010; Tomini & Wagemann, 2018), and are limited to the years 2004 and 2012 respectively – therefore, the most interesting decade of autocratization falls out of focus.

Moreover, the data that can indicate the levels of ideological and affective polarization, worldwide volatility, and attacks on the judiciary have only been published during the last few years. Therefore, it only now became possible to test in what sequences and under what conditions the earlier phases occur. Taking advantage of the freshly available data, this paper bridges this gap.

To sum up, my research question is:

- Under what structural conditions do different stages of post-Cold War and post-crisis democratic backslides occur?

My hypotheses are:

- The high level of GDP per capita decreases the level of electoral volatility (1.1), the probability of a serious attack on the judiciary (1.2), and the probability of an autocratization episode (1.3).

- The high level of inequality increases the level of electoral volatility (2.1), the probability of a serious attack on the judiciary (2.2), and an autocratization episode (2.3).
- The level of unemployment increases the level of electoral volatility (3.1), the probability of a serious attack on the judiciary (3.2), and an autocratization episode (3.3). It plays a more important role after the Great Recession.
- Older regimes experience less electoral volatility (4.1), less probability of a serious attack on the judiciary (4.2), and an autocratization episode (4.3).

Merging the Data on Early Stages of Democratic Backsliding

I merged ten databases grouping them by country and year standardizing the country names using the “*countrycode*” package, and manually re-coding deviating country names. The two core datasets are produced by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project: the main V-Dem v14 dataset (Coppedge et al., 2024) and the Episodes of Regime Transformation (ERT) dataset (Maerz et al., 2023). Third, the data on inequality comes from the World Inequality Database. This indicator has the lowest percentage of missing values compared to other known data sets. Nevertheless, even in this case, most of the data was only present from the year 1985, which forbade me to compare post-WWII and post-Cold War cases of democratic backsliding. The 26 percent of missing observations were filled with values predicted via bootstrapping accounting for the cross-sectional nature of data using the “*Amelia*” package in R based on several dozens of other socioeconomic indicators from the V-Dem Background Factors block. Fourth, I added the ParlGov dataset (Döring et al., 2023) that approximates the ideological polarization between political parties in elections on the right-left scale. To access the data on societal affective polarization I used the dataset

collected by Orhan (2022) that aggregates the existing survey data but is limited to 159 observations. Hence, these two indicators of polarization are only used in Granger causality tests.

I did not include the two theoretically valid indicators of the first stage of democratic backsliding – the incumbent's anti-democrat attitudes and populism – analysis mostly because of data availability. In addition, as I describe in the Online Appendix, populism, even if defined in its utmost narrow sense, demonstrates inherent heterogeneity.

Following the results of Granger causality tests (see below), both electoral volatility and affective polarization are useful in predicting the further stages of backsliding, but only the data on electoral volatility has enough observations. As a result, my regression analysis includes three dependent variables, each of them corresponding to a certain interconnected stage of democratic backsliding – volatility, attack on the judiciary, and autocratization episode.

I combined the volatility indices from five different regional datasets: one focused on the entire world with a particular focus on Latin America (Mainwaring & Su, 2021; Mainwaring & Zoco, 2007), one focused on Western Europe (Chiaramonte & Emanuele, 2017), Bertoa and Enyedi for geographic Europe (2021), and Bogaards for Africa (2008). The merging algorithm, Table A4, and heatmap Figure A1 on the data availability are present in the online appendix.

Then, I constructed the second dependent variable, the Attack on the Judiciary. I combined four variables of the Judiciary block of V-Dem dataset (Coppedge et al., 2024, pp. 173–180) that indicate the shrinking of judiciary power in the current year: the reforms that decrease the power of courts of justice, the removals of the judges, attacks on the judges in media by government officials, and finally, the politically motivated increase in the number of judges. I constructed the index (Cronbach's alpha

is 0.73) by summarizing these indicators, dividing them by 4, and dichotomizing it at the value of 1, which indicates any outstanding attack toward the judiciary system.

Third and most straightforwardly, the presence of an autocratization episode is operationalized using the ERT methodology (Maerz et al., 2021). A certain period is considered to be an autocratization episode if a country experiences a decline of the Electoral Democracy Index of no less than 1% per year and no less than 10% per the entire episode.¹

The independent variables used in my research correspond to those used in the studies of democratization, democratic backslides, autocratic stability, party politics, and voter behavior: economic development, inequality, unemployment, and the age of the regime. Namely, I used the GDP per capita PPP, which is commonly used by most of the scholars of the modernization school of democratization to indicate the development of a country's economy. To estimate the inequality, I used the share of the wealth belonging to the country's richest one percent of the population. I used ILO unemployment estimates to assess how much a country is affected by the financial crisis. Finally, I calculated the age of a regime using the ERT data.

The resulting dataset under study covers a span of 36 years from 1986 to 2022. Specifically, for volatility, the data encompasses 91 competitive regimes with 2222 observations. For autocratization episodes and judiciary attacks, the data comprises 6475 observations across 180 countries, capturing 449 years when the judiciary was targeted, and 643 country years identified as autocratization episodes. The descriptive statistics for the resulting dataset are presented in Table A1.

¹ The reasonable increases of this threshold, for instance, to 20%, do not affect the results.

Granger Causality Tests

To trace the sequence of developments in democratic backsliding, I applied the Granger causality test.² It determines if one time-series variable can forecast another by comparing two models using the Wald test: one that predicts the future values of a dependent variable using only its own past values, and another that incorporates an independent variable into the prediction. For all pairs, I used a three-year gap³ – slightly less than one average electoral cycle. The results of the tests for all years are presented in Table 1 and Figure 1, while the separate results for the pre- and post-crisis periods are presented in the appendix, tables A2, A3. The text also presents the partial R squares (η^2) for the substantively significant predictors.

Table 1. Granger Causality Matrix, p-values – [about here](#).

Before autocratization episodes unfold, party systems experience a surge of volatility or even collapse, while partisans grow more hostile. A rise in affective polarization forecasts ($p = 0.03$, $\eta^2 \approx 3\%$) electoral volatility. Volatility itself Granger-causes subsequent autocratization episodes ($p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 \approx 1\%$) and attacks on the judiciary ($p = 0.01$, $\eta^2 \approx 0.5\%$); the signals are statistically sharp but substantively modest. By contrast, affective polarization predicts court attacks with medium strength ($p = 0.01$, $\eta^2 \approx 6\%$). Either a volatility surge or an assault on courts explains roughly six

² All the analysis in this paper is conducted in R; for Granger causality test, I used “*lmtest*” package, the regression models are fitted using the “*lme4*”, the graphs are depicted with the “*ggeffects*”, and the predicted probabilities are calculated with the “*margins*”.

³ The slight variation in the gap length does not affect the results.

percent of the new variance in future affective polarization, while mass polarization feeds back into volatility at about half that magnitude ($\eta^2 \approx 3\%$). Ideological polarization neither predicts nor is predicted by any variable. These effects are also non-reciprocal: autocratization episodes do not in turn increase volatility or any polarization.

The attacks on the judiciary granger cause the occurrence of autocratization episodes with very high levels of significance. However, this effect is reciprocal. Autocratization episodes are possible without the attacks on the judges, as those can be loyal naturally when the potential autocratizer comes to power. First, as Figure A4 shows, in many cases, the executives commit attacks on the judiciary during the autocratization years, not before those, often close to the end of autocratization episodes, which implies they are combined with other steps. Second, most of the autocratization episodes are not preceded by any attacks on the Judiciary. Finally, as the lower part of Figure A4 demonstrates, half of those regimes that experienced the attacks on the judiciary did not face autocratization episodes afterward.

The democratic backslidings are likely to begin with affective polarization, continue with volatility, and then turn to outright autocratization episodes often coupled with attacks on the Judiciary. The sequences of democratic backsliding did not change much after the 2008 crisis. The matrices based on pre- and post-2008 periods (see Tables A2, A3) are substantively similar.

Figure 1. The Three Steps of Democratic Backsliding with Granger Causality Scores – [about here](#)

Regression Analysis

Considering the panel character of my data, and to account for both within- and between-country effects, I conducted six mixed effects models. The first couple of linear models explain the level of volatility. Since the data on volatility is skewed

towards richer countries (see Figure A1), I weighted these models by GDP per capita to represent the general population. The occurrence of an autocratic episode and the presence of attacks on the judiciary are dichotomous, they are modeled with logistic regressions. Table 2 presents the estimates for the volatility and the average marginal effects for the chances of an attack on judiciary and autocratization episodes.

In the years preceding the 2008 financial crisis, the data revealed the strongest effect when it came to the level of economic development. The higher levels of GDP per capita used to be strongly associated with the low probability of autocratization episodes and attacks on the judiciary (see Table 2). When the GDP per capita would increase by ten thousand US dollars, the annual probability of having an autocratization episode on average decreased by 5%, and of a constitutional court being attacked in any way by 7.3%. Figure A2 depicts how the predicted probability of facing an autocratization episode decreases exponentially with the GDP per capita, breaching zero at 20,000. In addition to the probabilistic logic of the regression models 3 and 5, this effect is almost deterministic: the existing data shows only two country-years with episodes of autocratization since the years 1986-2008 in countries with a yearly GDP per capita PPP of more than 20,000 US dollars; both are oil-rich Kuwait in 1986 and Russia in 2007. In the same fashion, there had been only two economies of more than 20,000 US dollars with multiple instances of significant attacks towards the courts of justice in this period: Eritrea 1996-2007 and Equatorial Guinea 2002-2007, both are natural resources rich.

In line with my hypothesis 1.1, the more economically developed countries used to have significantly lower levels of volatility, with a curvilinear connection. On average, every 10,000 dollars was associated with a 6.4% decrease in the volatility score. This, however, was peculiar to this period, when the end of the Cold War brought about many competitive regimes. Many of those post-communist countries were

inherently poorer than their Western counterparts, more volatile, and experienced rapid economic growth and stabilization of their party systems simultaneously. For the same reason, contrary to hypothesis 2.1, Model 1 shows a statistically significant connection between the levels of inequality and volatility scores: each 10% of the country's wealth that belonged to the richest 1% was associated with a 2% decrease (sic!) in electoral volatility. Contrary to hypotheses 2.2 and 2.3, the inequality explains neither probability of an autocratization episode nor attacks on the judiciary, even for the years preceding the 2008 financial crisis. At the same time, in line with hypotheses 3.2 and 3.3, another indicator of economic insecurity had a dramatic effect on democratic stability: each 10% of the unemployed population increased the yearly likelihood of autocratization by 3% and of an attack on courts by 6%. Contrary to my hypotheses 4.1-4.3, regime tenure also has demonstrated a substantively subtle (yet sometimes statistically significant) effect on each of the stages of democratic backsliding.

The post-2008 crisis years show the most surprising results. First and foremost, the economic development or regime tenure no longer explain the late stages of democratic backsliding, the autocratization episodes and attacks on courts on justice. Pseudo-R-squares for Models 4 and 6 are as low as 1% and 3%. The data show almost one hundred autocratization country-years in countries with a GDP per capita of more than 20,000 US dollars. The only variable that remained significant and even gained power in predicting autocratization episodes is unemployment. Each 10% of unemployment increase the yearly likelihood of autocratization by 6%. Second, the model explaining the volatility almost did not deteriorate in its predictive power, and the effect of GDP per capita remained the same. However, the effect of inequality changed its direction: in the aftermath of the financial crisis, higher levels of inequality are associated with significantly higher levels of volatility. Every 10% of wealth

belonging to the top 1% is coupled with the 2.6% increase in volatility. This confirms the hypothesis 2.1.

Table 2. Structural Correlates of Three Stages of Democratic Backslides in the years 1986-2007 and 2008-2022: Mixed Effects Model Estimates; β coefficients for MLM models 1,2, Linear Components for logit models 3-6. – about here

What happened after the Great Recession?

According to the results of my regression analysis, the modernization preconditions for democratic backsliding, almost undisputed in political science, ceased to exist after the 2008 crisis. Regardless of economic development or the regime age, the likelihood of facing democratic backsliding became similar.

Let me examine this shift in light of several structural to agency-based factors (Mahoney & Snyder, 1999). The data shows the biggest possible structural change, the rise of inequality, does not play any role. Neither has inequality increased in most continents (see Figure A3 in the appendix) nor influenced any backsliding trends (see the regression Table 2). The most agency-centric explanations also do not apply because autocratizers did not change their strategy after the 2008 crisis. According to three different databases on regime change, the ratio of modes of autocratization (coups versus executive aggrandizements) has indeed changed after the end of the Cold War (Bermeo, 2016) but remained stable since then (Powell & Thyne, 2011; Bermeo, 2016; Cassani & Tomini, 2019, p. 64), – neither did the share of attacks towards the Judiciary in V-Dem data, indicating the executive aggrandizement, change (Coppedge et al., 2024). Finally, according to the results of Granger causality tests (see tables A2 and A3 in the Appendix), the sequence of stages of democratic backslidings did not change after the crisis.

The answer lies in the middle of the funnel of causality (Mahoney & Snyder, 1999), institutions, and actors, namely, the change in party systems in most developed countries following the 2008 crisis. At first glance, on average, the volatility of votes within party systems, which paves the road to anti-democratic incumbents, has not

increased after then. However, in line with the literature (Celli & Ferrante, 2024; Chiaramonte & Emanuele, 2017), and as the second model in Table 2 suggests, the stability of party systems has become almost independent of economic development and the age of democracies.

The extent to which a country has faced the 2008 crisis has, indeed, affected all the stages of democratic backsliding. As my analysis shows, at the national level, unemployment, a primary consequence of the 2008 crisis, is positively associated with volatility (thus confirming hypothesis 3.1) This goes in line with an individual-level finding that the Great Recession often results in an individual's desire to vote for challenger, populist parties (Guiso et al., 2024). Moreover, post-crisis, unemployment remains the sole variable consistently explaining autocratization episodes with the same statistical and substantial significance.

Part of this effect emerges because the pre- and post-2008 backsliding countries are different. Figure A5 with average polyarchy levels in post-2008 autocratizers shows two peaks because of a new, second cluster of more democratic and economically developed⁴ nations, with their names listed below the figure. All of these cases have autocratized through executive aggrandizement which originated in the volatility of party systems (Bértoa & Enyedi, 2021; Chiaramonte & Emanuele, 2017) following the Great Recession. Those autocratization episodes are shallow – only a handful of those countries have, arguably, experienced a breakdown of democratic regimes.

As Figure A5 shows, the number of autocratization episodes in poorer countries has slightly decreased, making economic preconditions, on average, insignificant. Excluding countries with a polyarchy level above 60% restores some correlation

⁴ The mean GDP per capita of all post-2008 autocratizers is 11,110 dollars, whereas for this new group, it is 17,430.

between GDP per capita and autocratization likelihood, explaining about 10% of the variation.

Discussion

The preconditions for democratic stability are becoming increasingly more demanding with time, while their predictive power is deteriorating. The results suggest that the modernization approach, long dominant in explaining democratic breakdowns from the past, explains much less when it comes to the incremental episodes of democratic backslides that occurred in the first two decades after the Cold War, and nothing when it comes to the period after the 2008 crisis. Modernization theories of democratization would explain more than half of the variation of democracy scores (Boix, 2011; Inglehart, 2018; Vanhanen, 2003). The explanatory power of the models presented in this paper is two to five times less than that. As opposed to democratizations, democratic backslidings are much less advertised by leaders and chosen by citizens. The coups from the past used to be prevented by the security apparatus. Recent incrementally democratic backslidings are dependent on the stability of party systems and checks and balances. As a result, the phenomenon is much less dependent on the societal factors.

The probability of facing any stage of democratic backsliding, including a growth of party system volatility, an attack on the Judiciary, and an autocratization episode, all decreased exponentially with the economic development in the years 1986 to 2007. At the same time, economic development explains none of the above mentioned stages when it comes to the last decade and a half. The reason is that the Great Recession has destabilized party systems. Unemployment, one of its main indicators, is the sole variable that predicts all the stages of democratic backslidings after the 2008 crisis. In addition, the crisis left behind a new cluster of are developed

democracies that experienced a decline in democratic quality rather than a democratic breakdown.

Respectively, the economic preconditions of the years 1986 to 2007 were more demanding compared to the literature based on the pre-1990 data. The threshold when democracy is certain to persist has risen more than three times from what Przeworski and Limongi (1997) found using the post-WWII data. Whereas back in the time, this level of yearly GDP per capita was as low as 11,000 dollars in modern equivalent, now the lower error term of a predicted probability of facing an autocratization episode (see Figure A2) approaches zero close to 30,000 dollars. The value when democracy is safe exceeds twice the World Bank's understanding of a high-income economy (World Bank Country and Lending Groups, 2023). This also goes almost ten times beyond Inglehart's (2018) understanding of economic preconditions for democracy. According to him, democracy is likely to exist in a nation where the majority of individuals would take their physical survival for granted in their formative years, which refers to the transition to the middle-income group.

This paper has shown that a surge in volatility and popular affective polarization precedes autocratization episodes. This effect is stable throughout the entire third wave of autocratization. Interestingly, the order is very clear, and autocratization episodes are not followed by a growth of volatility or affective polarization: as the incumbent starts thwarting the freedoms, the electoral competition immediately becomes less intense. Contrary to Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) and in line with Wunsch and Blanchard (2023), the attacks on the Judiciary do not necessarily precede autocratizations, and do not happen in most of the autocratization episodes. Rather, the two steps show a robust association.

This paper challenges the common belief in political science that inequality and ideological elite polarization directly contribute to autocratization. It demonstrates that

the concentration of wealth in the top 1% does not correlate with autocratization, and only partially adds to the disintegration of party systems. Similarly, assaults on the Judiciary show only a weak statistical link to inequality. This questions the ideas of Inglehart, Norris (2017), and Schmitter (2017) , who suggest digitalization and resultant inequality pave the road for the anti-democratic sentiment. The link between the two is also questionable: as Figure A3 in the online appendix also demonstrates that the levels of inequality did not rise in the entire world: while this is true for Europe, they actually decreased in Latin America. Furthermore, despite the recent academic focus on polarization and democratic decline, measures of ideological polarization have not been linked to autocratization. In contrast, affective polarization appears more promising, although, as Schedler (2023) notes, the concept and its measurement are nascent. The only existing survey-based aggregated indicator of affective mass polarization has shown a very strong connection with autocratizations and attacks on courts of Justice, despite a small sample size (Orhan, 2022; Reiljan, 2020).

In support of Tomini and Wagemann (2018), but contrary to the mainstream modernization theories of backsliding (Przeworski and Limongi, 1997; Boix, 2011) and, especially, the entire scholarship on the party system volatility and movement parties (Della Porta & Diani, 2011; Kriesi et al., 2006; Rooduijn, 2018), this study has shown no connection between the age of democracy and the probability of democratic backsliding.

The article demonstrates that traditional preconditions for democratic stability are no longer relevant in the last 15 years because of two separate shifts. In the long run, indeed, preconditions for democratic stability are becoming more demanding and less decisive as they rely more on the party system than state capacity. However, we are now at the end of a period when the preconditions did not matter at all. The mid-run shock effect of the Great Recession destabilized the party systems in many developed

democracies, paving the way for potential autocrats. As electoral volatility gradually returns to the pre-crisis levels, the recent wave of autocratization might also subside, potentially leaving behind only a handful of democracies that have experienced breakdowns. This leaves ample room for the studies of political elites taking or not taking advantage of windows of opportunity the crises could provide. This one seems to be closing.

Bibliography

Acemoglu, D., & Robinson, J. (2022). Non-Modernization: Power–Culture Trajectories and the Dynamics of Political Institutions. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 25(1), 323–339. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051120-103913>

Alizada, N., Boese, V. A., Lundstedt, M., Morrison, K., Natsika, N., Sato, Y., Tai, H., & Lindberg, S. I. (2022). *Democracy Report 2022: Autocratization Changing Nature?* Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem).

Bermeo, N. (2016). On Democratic Backsliding. *Journal of Democracy*, 27(1), 5–19. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0012>

Bernhard, M. (2021). Democratic Backsliding in Poland and Hungary. *Slavic Review*, 80(3), 585–607. <https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2021.145>

Bértoa, F. C., & Enyedi, Z. (2021). *Party system closure: Party alliances, government alternatives, and democracy in Europe* (First edition). Oxford University Press.

Bogaards, M. (2008). Dominant Party Systems and Electoral Volatility in Africa: A Comment on Mozaffar and Scarritt. *Party Politics*, 14(1), 113–130. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068807083825>

Boix, C. (2011). Democracy, Development, and the International System. *American Political Science Review*, 105(4), 809–828. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055411000402>

Boix, C., & Stokes, S. C. (2003). Endogenous Democratization. *World Politics*, 55(4), 517–549.

Bunce, V., & Wolchik, S. (2006). International diffusion and postcommunist electoral revolutions. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 39(3), 283–304. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2006.06.001>

Cassani, A., & Tomini, L. (2019). *Autocratization in post-Cold War Political Regimes* (1st ed. 2019). Springer International Publishing : Imprint: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-03125-1>

- Celli, V., & Ferrante, C. (2024). The Italian payback effect: The causal impact of the great recession on political discontent. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2024.2325642>
- Chiaramonte, A., & Emanuele, V. (2017). Party system volatility, regeneration and de-institutionalization in Western Europe (1945–2015). *Party Politics*, 23(4), 376–388. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068815601330>
- Claassen, C. (2020). Does Public Support Help Democracy Survive? *American Journal of Political Science*, 64(1), 118–134. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12452>
- Coppedge, M., Gerring, J., Knutsen, C. H., Lindberg, S. I., Teorell, J., Altman, D., Angiolillo, F., Bernhard, M., Borella, C., Cornell, A., Fish, M. S., Fox, L., Linnea Gastaldi, Gjerløw, H., Glynn, A., Good God, A., Grah, S., Hicken, A., Kinzelbach, K., Marquardt, K. L., ... Ziblatt, D. (2024). *V-Dem Codebook v14* (p. 431). V-Dem Institute.
- Dahl, R. A. (1971). *Polyarchy: Participation and opposition*. Yale university press.
- De Vries, C. E., & Hobolt, S. B. (2020). Challenger Parties and Populism. *LSE Public Policy Review*, 1(1), 3. <https://doi.org/10.31389/lseppr.3>
- Della Porta, D., & Diani, M. (2011). *Social movements: An introduction* (2. ed., [Nachdr.]). Blackwell.
- Döring, H., Huber, C., Manow, P., & Quass, A. (2023). *Parliaments and governments database (ParlGov)* [Dataset]. ParlGov. <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/parlgov>
- Downes, A. B., & Monten, J. (2013). Forced to Be Free? Why Foreign-Imposed Regime Change Rarely Leads to Democratization. *International Security*, 37(4), 90–131.
- Fish, M. S. (2001). The Inner Asian anomaly: Mongolia's democratization in comparative perspective. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 34(3), 323–338.
- Freedom House. (2023). *Freedom in the World Research Methodology* (p. 16). Freedom House. <https://freedomhouse.org/reports/freedom-world/freedom-world-research-methodology>
- Geddes, B. (2009). *How Autocrats Defend Themselves Against Armed Rivals* (SSRN Scholarly Paper 1451601). <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=1451601>
- Geddes, B., Wright, J., & Frantz, E. (2018). *How Dictatorships Work: Power, Personalization, and Collapse* (1st ed.). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316336182>
- Gidengil, E., Stolle, D., & Bergeron-Boutin, O. (2022). The partisan nature of support for democratic backsliding: A comparative perspective. *European Journal of Political Research*, 61(4), 901–929. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12502>
- Giugni, M., & Lorenzini, J. (2020). The Politics of Economic Crisis: From Voter Retreat to the Rise of New Populisms. In T. Janoski, C. de Leon, J. Misra, & I. W. Martin (Eds.), *The New Handbook of Political Sociology* (pp. 715–737). Cambridge University Press.

- Guiso, L., Herrera, H., Morelli, M., & Sonno, T. (2024). Economic insecurity and the demand for populism in Europe. *Economica*, 91(362), 588–620.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/ecca.12513>
- Huntington, S. P. (1993). *The third wave: Democratization in the late twentieth century* (Vol. 4). University of Oklahoma press.
- Inglehart, R. (2018). *Cultural evolution: People's motivations are changing, and reshaping the world*. Cambridge University Press.
- Inglehart, R., & Norris, P. (2017). Trump and the Populist Authoritarian Parties: *The Silent Revolution* in Reverse. *Perspectives on Politics*, 15(2), 443–454.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592717000111>
- Knutsen, C. H., Marquardt, K. L., Seim, B., Coppedge, M., Edgell, A. B., Medzihorsky, J., Pemstein, D., Teorell, J., Gerring, J., & Lindberg, S. I. (2024). Conceptual and Measurement Issues in Assessing Democratic Backsliding. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 57(2), 162–177. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S104909652300077X>
- Kriesi, H., Grande, E., Lachat, R., Dolezal, M., Bornschie, S., & Frey, T. (2006). Globalization and the transformation of the national political space: Six European countries compared. *European Journal of Political Research*, 45(6), 921–956.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2006.00644.x>
- Lane, J.-E., & Ersson, S. (2007). Party System Instability in Europe: Persistent Differences in Volatility between West and East? *Democratization*, 14(1), 92–110.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13510340601024322>
- Levitsky, S., & Way, L. (2015). The Myth of Democratic Recession. *Journal of Democracy*, 26(1), 45–58. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2015.0007>
- Levitsky, S., & Way, L. A. (2010). *Competitive authoritarianism: Hybrid regimes after the Cold War*. Cambridge University Press.
- Levitsky, S., & Ziblatt, D. (2018). *How democracies die*. Broadway Books.
- Lewis-Beck, M. S., & Nadeau, R. (2011). Economic voting theory: Testing new dimensions. *Electoral Studies*, 30(2), 288–294.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2010.09.001>
- Lipset, S. M. (1959). Some social requisites of democracy: Economic development and political legitimacy. *American Political Science Review*, 53(1), 69–105.
- Little, A. T., & Meng, A. (2024). Measuring Democratic Backsliding. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 1. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S104909652300063X>
- Lührmann, A., & Lindberg, S. I. (2019). A third wave of autocratization is here: What is new about it? *Democratization*, 26(7), 1095–1113.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1582029>
- Maeda, K. (2010). Two Modes of Democratic Breakdown: A Competing Risks Analysis of Democratic Durability. *The Journal of Politics*, 72(4), 1129–1143.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381610000575>

- Maerz, S. F., Edgell, A. B., Wilson, M. C., Hellmeier, S., & Lindberg, S. I. (2023). Episodes of regime transformation. *Journal of Peace Research*, 00223433231168192. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433231168192>
- Maerz, S. F., Edgell, A., Wilson, M. C., Hellmeier, S., & Lindberg, S. I. (2021). *A Framework for Understanding Regime Transformation: Introducing the ERT Dataset* (SSRN Scholarly Paper 3781485). <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3781485>
- Mahoney, J., & Snyder, R. (1999). Rethinking agency and structure in the study of regime change. *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 34(2), 3.
- Mainwaring, S., & Su, Y.-P. (2021). Electoral Volatility in Latin America, 1932–2018. *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 56(3), 271–296. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12116-021-09340-x>
- Mainwaring, S., & Zoco, E. (2007). Political Sequences and the Stabilization of Interparty Competition: Electoral Volatility in Old and New Democracies. *Party Politics*, 13(2), 155–178. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068807073852>
- Mantilla, L. F. (2010). Mobilizing Religion for Democracy: Explaining Catholic Church Support for Democratization in South America. *Politics and Religion*, 3(3), 553–579. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048310000179>
- Marinov, N., & Goemans, H. (2014). Coups and Democracy. *British Journal of Political Science*, 44(4), 799–825. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123413000264>
- Moraes, J. A., & Béjar, S. (2022). Electoral volatility and political polarization in developing democracies: Evidence from Latin America, 1993–2016. *Party Politics*, 135406882210950. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688221095098>
- Mudde, C., & Kaltwasser, R. C. (2017). *Populism: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Oesch, D. (2008). Explaining Workers' Support for Right-Wing Populist Parties in Western Europe: Evidence from Austria, Belgium, France, Norway, and Switzerland. *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale de Science Politique*, 29(3), 349–373. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20445147>
- Orhan, Y. E. (2022). The relationship between affective polarization and democratic backsliding: Comparative evidence. *Democratization*, 29(4), 714–735. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2021.2008912>
- Pappas, T. S. (2019). *Populism and liberal democracy: A comparative and theoretical analysis* (First edition). Oxford University Press.
- Powell, J. M., & Thyne, C. L. (2011). Global instances of coups from 1950 to 2010: A new dataset. *Journal of Peace Research*, 48(2), 249–259. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343310397436>
- Przeworski, A. (1999). *Democracy and the market: Political and economic reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America* (Repr). Cambridge Univ. Press.
- Przeworski, A., & Limongi, F. (1997). Modernization: Theories and Facts. *World Politics*, 49(2), 155–183. JSTOR.

Reiljan, A. (2020). 'Fear and loathing across party lines' (also) in Europe: Affective polarisation in European party systems. *European Journal of Political Research*, 59(2), 376–396. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12351>

Repucci, S., & Slipowitz, A. (2022). *Freedom In The Word 2022. The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule* (Freedom in the World, p. 34). Freedom House.

Rooduijn, M. (2018). What unites the voter bases of populist parties? Comparing the electorates of 15 populist parties. *European Political Science Review*, 10(3), 351–368. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773917000145>

Schedler, A. (2023). Rethinking Political Polarization. *Political Science Quarterly*, qqad038. <https://doi.org/10.1093/psquar/qqad038>

Schmitter, P. C. (2017). The future of democracy is not what it used to be. *Zeitschrift Für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft*, 11, 459–467. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12286-017-0350-0>

Stefanelli, A. (2023). The Conditional Association Between Populism, Ideological Extremity, and Affective Polarization. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 35(2), edad014. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edad014>

Tilly, C. (2007). *Democracy* (1st ed.). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511804922>

Tomini, L., & Wagemann, C. (2018). Varieties of contemporary democratic breakdown and regression: A comparative analysis. *European Journal of Political Research*, 57(3), 687–716. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12244>

Vanhanen, T. (2003). *Democratization a comparative analysis of 170 countries*. Routledge. <http://www.myilibrary.com?id=2437>

World Bank Country and Lending Groups. (2023). World Bank Data Help Desk. <https://datahelpdesk.worldbank.org/knowledgebase/articles/906519-world-bank-country-and-lending-groups>

Wunsch, N., & Blanchard, P. (2023). Patterns of democratic backsliding in third-wave democracies: A sequence analysis perspective. *Democratization*, 30(2), 278–301. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2022.2130260>

Democratic Backsliding

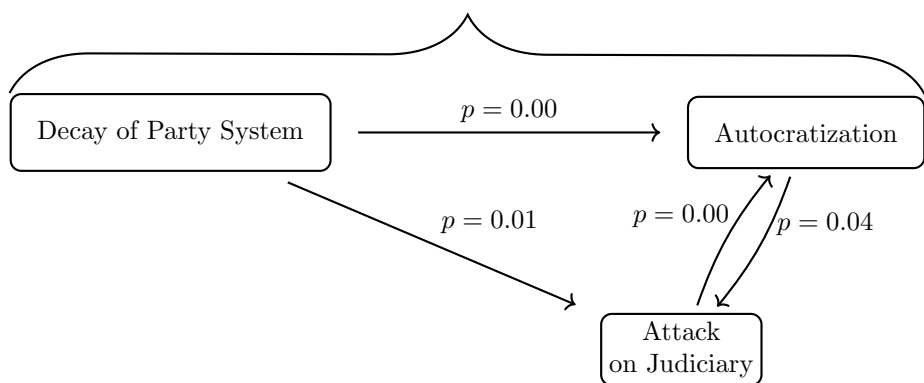


Table 1. Granger Causality Matrix, p-values

DV \ IV	Autocratization Episode	Attack on Judiciary	Volatility	Affective Polarization	Ideological Polarization
Autocratization Episode		0.04	0.00	0.51	0.61
Attack on Judiciary	0.00		0.01	0.01	0.58
Volatility	0.74	0.63		0.03	0.54
Affective Polarization	0.20	0.18	0.23		0.84
Ideological Polarization	0.20	0.60	0.47	0.38	

Table 2. Structural Correlates of Three Stages of Democratic Backslides in the years 1986-2007 and 2008-2022: Mixed Effects Model Estimates; β coefficients for MLM models 1,2, Linear Components for logit models 3-6.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Level of Volatility		Attack on Judiciary		Autocratization Episode	
Time span	1986- 2007	2008- 2022	1986- 2007	2008- 2022	1986- 2007	2008- 2022
GDP per capita (thousands)	-19.1*** (2.86)	-6.37** (4.78)	-0.21*** (0.76)	-0.07 (0.2)	-0.16*** (0.4)	-0.06` (0.03)
Regime`s Age (decades)	0.78*** (0.15)	0 (0.5)	0.23** (0.07)	0.12 (0.2)	-0.2*** (0.05)	-0.007 (0.06)
Inequality (share of wealth that belongs to the top 1% of the population)	-34.5*** (8.6)	24.5* (10.7)	-3.39 (2.88)	7.2` (4.25)	0.67 (2.34)	-3.8 (3.4)
Unemployment	0.95*** (0.17)	-0.06 (0.12)	0.18** (0.05)	-0.06 (0.06)	0.1* (0.4)	0.1** (0.5)
Constant	42.5*** (4.4)	22.3** (6.73)	-9.36*** (1.41)	-10.23 (1.2)	-4.2*** (0.4)	-5.7** (1.9)
AIC	11505	5038	1035	664	1103	1413
Log Likelihood	-574	-2512	-510	-325	-554	-700
pseudo R ² c	0.17	0.06	0.12	0.01	0.34	0.02
pseudo R ² m	0.66	0.54	0.96	0.95	0.81	0.93

Num. observations	1510	712	3793	2682	3793	2682
Num. groups: country	91	58	180	179	180	179
Num. groups: year	22	15	treated as numeric		22	15

Standard errors in parentheses; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Online Appendix

Table A1. Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Dependent Variables				
Autocratization Episode (dummy)	0.1			
Attack on Judiciary (dummy)	0.06			
Volatility	20.7	14.1	0	83.7
Independent Variables				
Inequality (% of wealth that belongs to the top 1% of the population)	29.1	8.6	0	60.2
GDP per capita (thousands)	13.7	15.1	0	101
Regime`s Age	54	40	0	121
Unemployment	6.2	4.84	0.04	33.8

Table A2. Granger Causality Matrix for Years 1986-2007, p-values

Dependent Variable	Autocratization Episode	Attack on Judiciary	Volatility	Affective Polarization	Ideological Polarization
Autocratization Episode		0.41	0.39	0.96	0.73
Attack on Judiciary	0.00		0.14	0.04	0.86
Volatility	0.35	0.11		0.90	0.28
Affective Polarization	0.14	0.80	0.51		0.38
Ideological Polarization	0.53	0.22	0.35	0.98	

Table A3. Granger Causality Matrix for years 2008-2022, p-values

Dependent Variable	Autocratization Episode	Attack on Judiciary	Volatility	Affective Polarization	Ideological Polarization
Autocratization Episode		0.00	0.00	0.37	0.24
Attack on Judiciary	0.00		0.06	NA	NA
Volatility	0.39	0.62		0.01	0.96
Affective Polarization	0.31	NA	0.97		0.65
Ideological Polarization	0.52	NA	0.64	0.08	

Note: the combination of judiciary attacks with polarization lacked enough observations; hence, the coefficients are not present. As opposed to the previous period, in the years 2008-2022, the volatility does not predict autocratization episodes and attacks on the Judiciary, while the effect between the latter two is no longer reciprocal. This is unlikely to be a consequence of data availability because the number of judiciary attacks is stable between the years of observations.

Table A4. The Summary of Existing Cross-Country Datasets on Party System Volatility, Ordered by Coverage

Authors	Time Frame	Geographic Coverage	Publicly Available
Mainwaring, Gervasoni, and Espana-Najera 2016	1946-2006	Democratic world	+
Kim, Bernhard, and Hicken 2022	1945-2018	Autocratic world	-
Bértoa and Enyedi 2021	1849-2022	Geographical Europe	+
Chiaramonte and Emanuele 2015	1945-2015	Western Europe	+
Mainwaring and Su 2021	1932-2018	Latin America	+
Moraes and Bejar 2023	1993-2016	Latin America	-
Powell and Tucker 2014	1989–2009	post-Soviet Union	-
Bogaards 2008	1966-2004	Africa	+

Note: In cases of overlaps between the datasets, the preference was given in the order they are mentioned. If the elections are regular, I carried volatility scores forward until the next elections. Even though the entrance of new parties into the playing field (known as extra-system volatility or type-B volatility) is theoretically more appealing than the overall volatility, these studies use different thresholds of what is considered to be the “system”. For instance, it varies from 2% for Mainwaring and Zoco (2007) to 1% for Chiaramonte and Emanuele (2017). Therefore, I stuck to the overall volatility.

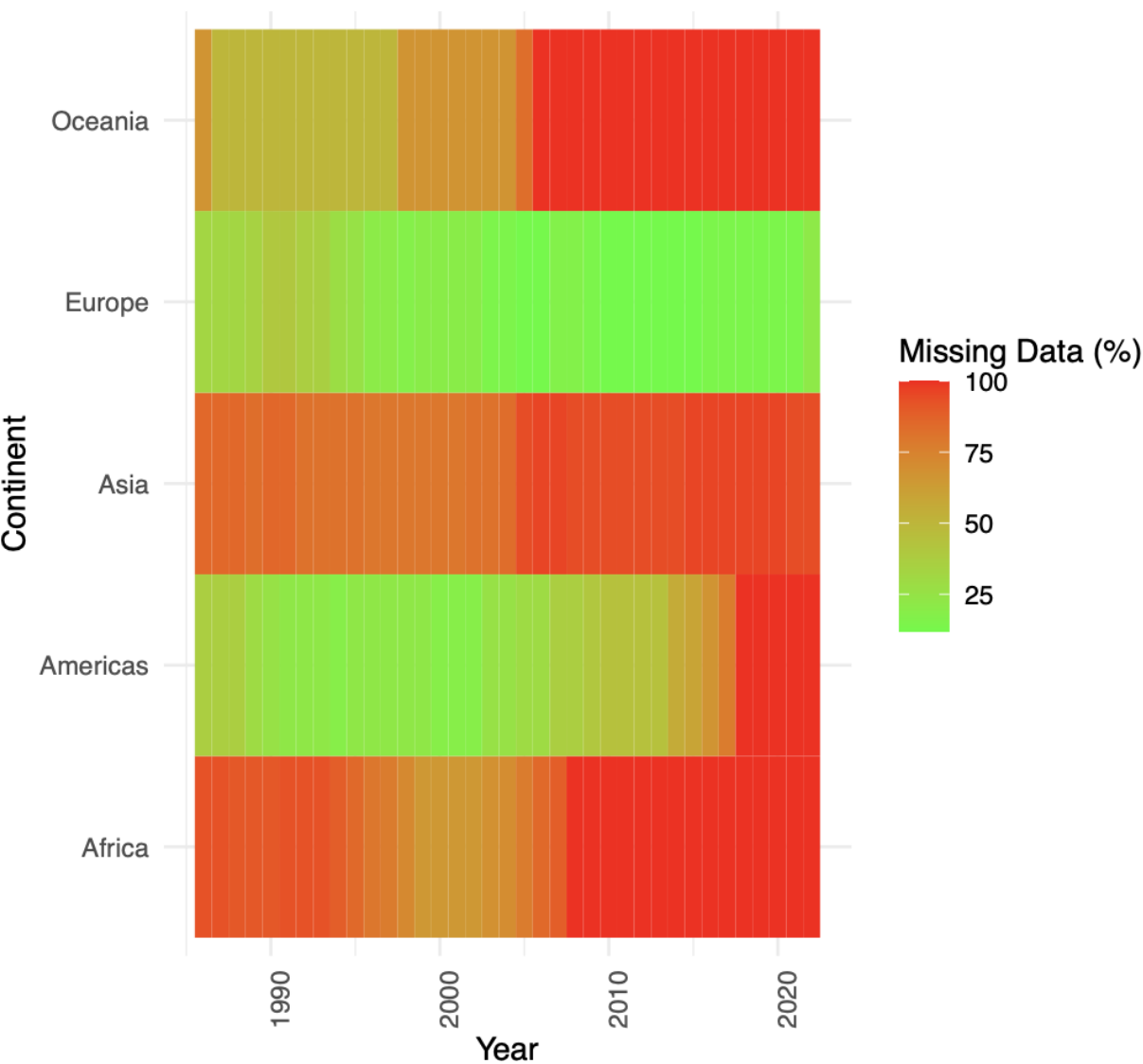
Explanatory note on populism: I refrained from using data on populist parties. The studies on those are limited by the heterogeneity of the populist parties and the aggregation problem, to say nothing of a lack of data. The populist parties, even if operationalized in the most narrow sense (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 7) – demonstrate a striking inherent heterogeneity (Peters and Pierre, 2020). They can originate from different grievances: from “decreasing trust in public institutions and political actors” to a “backlash against globalization and a resurgence of nationalism and xenophobia”, can be seen anywhere on the right-left spectrum, and, most importantly can interact differently with the state institutions (Bauer *et al.*, 2021, pp. 268–272). Therefore, these parties are not equally dangerous to democratic regimes. This heterogeneity also implies different partisans. Even though inequality and poverty are proven to play an important role in individual support for

anti-democratic populist parties, the studies agree that these are not the most decisive factors, because individual attitudes such as trust in government are more significant (Rooduijn, 2018). Also, things change when it comes to the support of radical left-wing and centrist populists. In this case, while poor individuals are still more likely to support such parties, education is positively associated with the support of the radical left while age matters less than with their right-wing counterparts (Ramiro, 2016).

Table A5. Autocratization Episodes in the Years 1986-2022 According to the ERT Dataset

Country	Years of autocratization episode	Country	Years of autocratization episode	Country	Years of autocratization episode
Afghanistan	2016 to 2022	Guatemala	2018 to 2022	North Macedonia	2000
Algeria	1992 to 1993	Guinea	2019 to 2022		2005 to 2012
Armenia	1994 to 1997	Guinea-Bissau	2012 to 2013	Pakistan	1999 to 2000
Armenia	2020 to 2022		2022 to 2022	Palestinian Territories	2006 to 2008
Azerbaijan	1993 to 1996	Guyana	2019 to 2022	Papua New Guinea	2007 to 2013
Bahrain	2011 to 2017	Haiti	1992 to 1992	Peru	1990 to 1992
Bangladesh	2002 to 2007		2001 to 2004	Philippines	2001 to 2005
Bangladesh	2011 to 2022		2011 to 2022		2016 to 2022
Belarus	1995 to 2001	Honduras	2006 to 2010	Poland	2016 to 2022
Benin	2018 to 2020	Hong Kong	2015 to 2022	Romania	2021 to 2022
Bolivia	2006 to 2020	Hungary	2006 to 2022	Russia	1993 to 2012
Botswana	2015 to 2022	India	2000 to 2022	Rwanda	1993 to 1995
Brazil	2016 to 2022	Indonesia	2009 to 2022	Serbia	2010 to 2022
Bulgaria	2001 to 2018	Kuwait	1986 to 1986	Slovenia	2011 to 2021
Burkina Faso	2014 to 2015	Kyrgyzstan	2012 to 2022	Solomon Islands	2000 to 2001
Burkina Faso	2018 to 2022	Lesotho	1994 to 1995	South Korea	2008 to 2014
Burundi	1987 to 1988	Lesotho	2015 to 2017	Sri Lanka	2005 to 2006
Burundi	2009 to 2016	Liberia	2003 to 2004	Sudan	1989 to 1990
Cambodia	2013 to 2022	Libya	2014 to 2014		2019 to 2022
Central African Republic	1999 to 2004	Madagascar	1997 to 2002	Suriname	1991
Chad	2017 to 2022			Tajikistan	1992 to 1995
Comoros	1999 to 2000	Malawi	2009 to 2010	Tanzania	2015 to 2022
Comoros	2015 to 2022	Maldives	1999 to 2005	Thailand	199
Congo-Brazzaville	1994 to 1998	Mali	2012 to 2016		2005 to 2007
Croatia	2013 to 2022		2007 to 2013		
Côte d'Ivoire	2017 to 2022		2017 to 2022		2013 to 2014
	2000 to 2000	Mauritius	2014 to 2022	Tunisia	2014 to 2022
	2020 to 2022	Moldova	1998 to 2005	Turkey	2005 to 2017
Dominican Republic	1987 to 1991		2013 to 2017	Uganda	1986
Ecuador	2007 to 2013	Mongolia	2015 to 2022	Ukraine	1996 to 2004
Egypt	2013 to 2014	Myanmar	2021 to 2022		2010 to 2014
El Salvador	2018 to 2022	Nepal	2000 to 2003		2021 to 2022
Estonia	1991 to 1992	Nepal	2012 to 2013	United States	2016 to 2022
Fiji	1987 to 1988	Nicaragua	2006 to 2022	Uruguay	2015 to 2022
	2000 to 2001		1996	Venezuela	1998 to 2022
	2006 to 2007		1999	Yemen	2013 to 2016
Gambia	1993 to 1995		2009 to 2010	Zambia	2010 to 2017
Ghana	2019 to 2022		2016 to 2022		

Figure A1. The Heatmap of Missing Data on Volatility by Continents Collected Across Existing Datasets



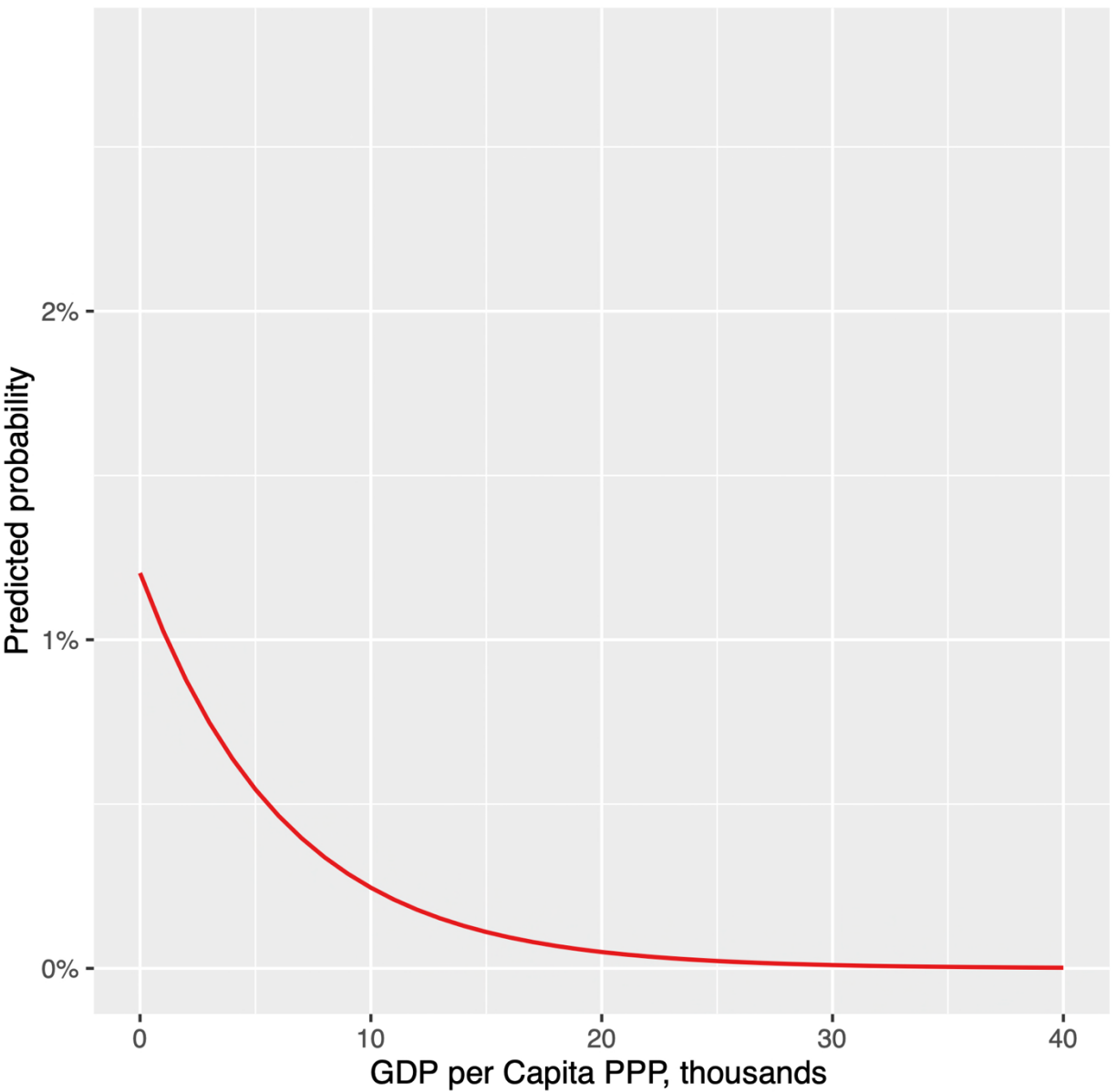


Figure A2. Predicted Probabilities of Autocratization Episodes Each Year and Countries' GDP per Capita PPP in the Years 1986-2007

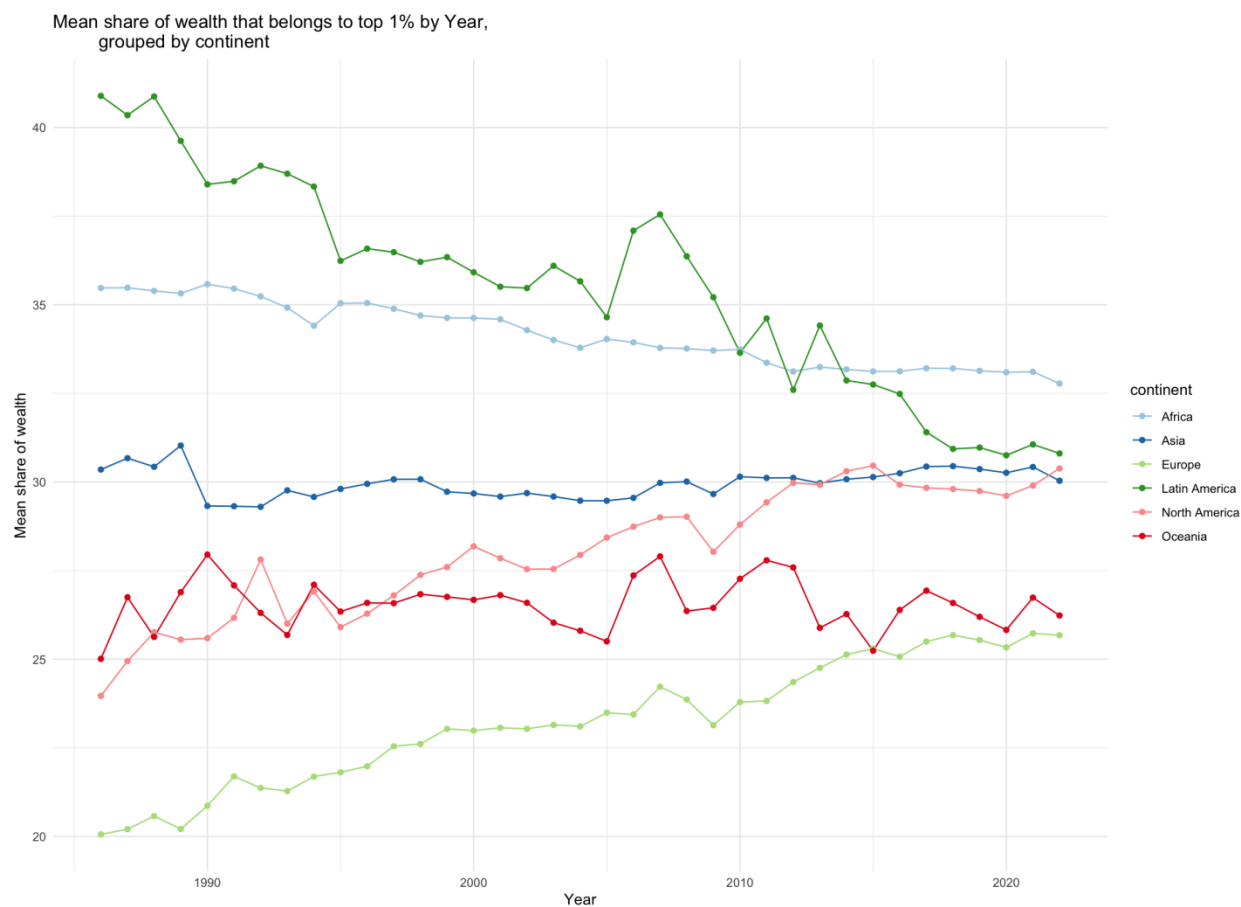


Figure A3. The Levels of Inequality in the Years 1986-2023 by Continent According to the WID Data

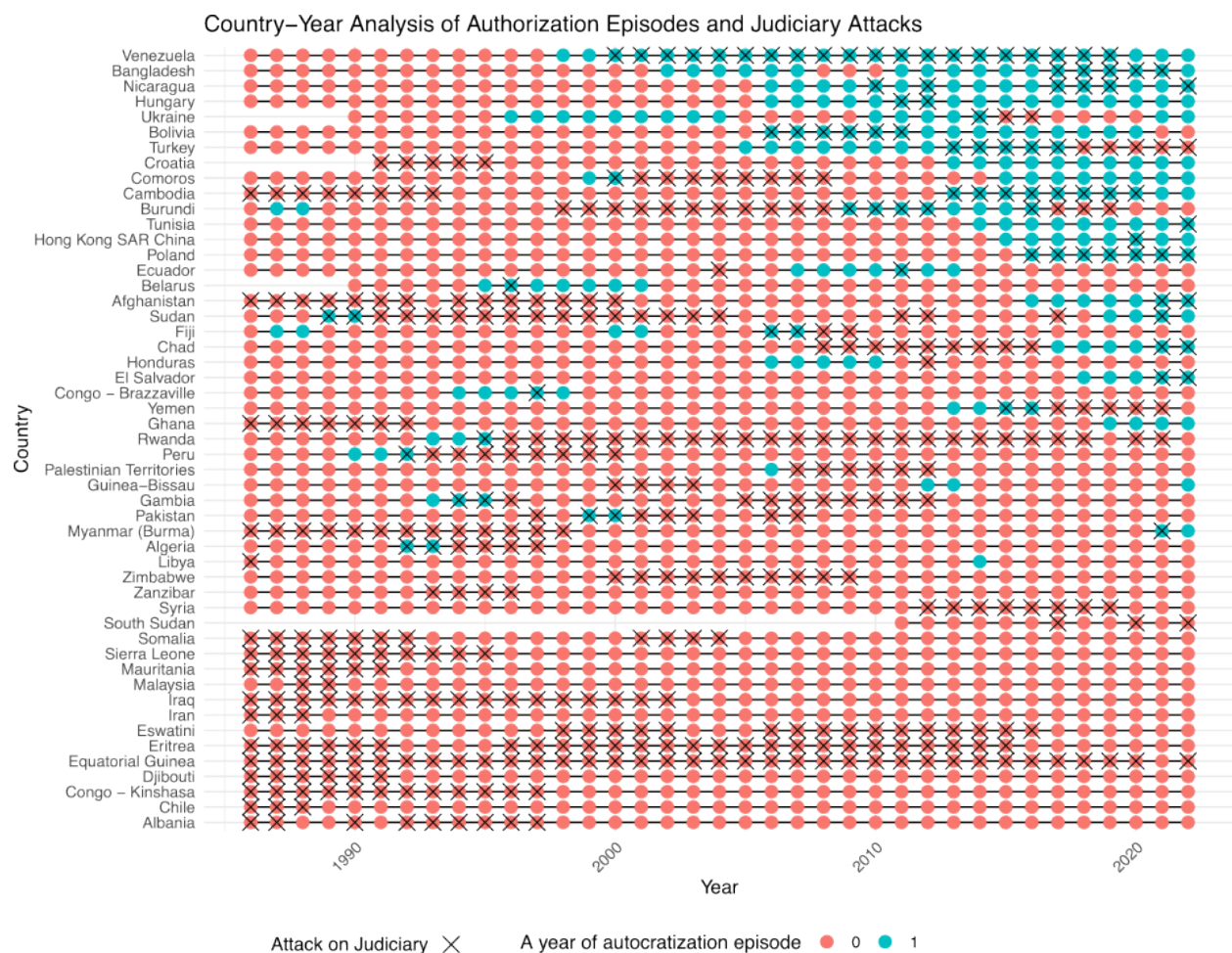


Figure A4. The Occurrence of Autocratization Episodes and Attacks on the Judiciary in Time

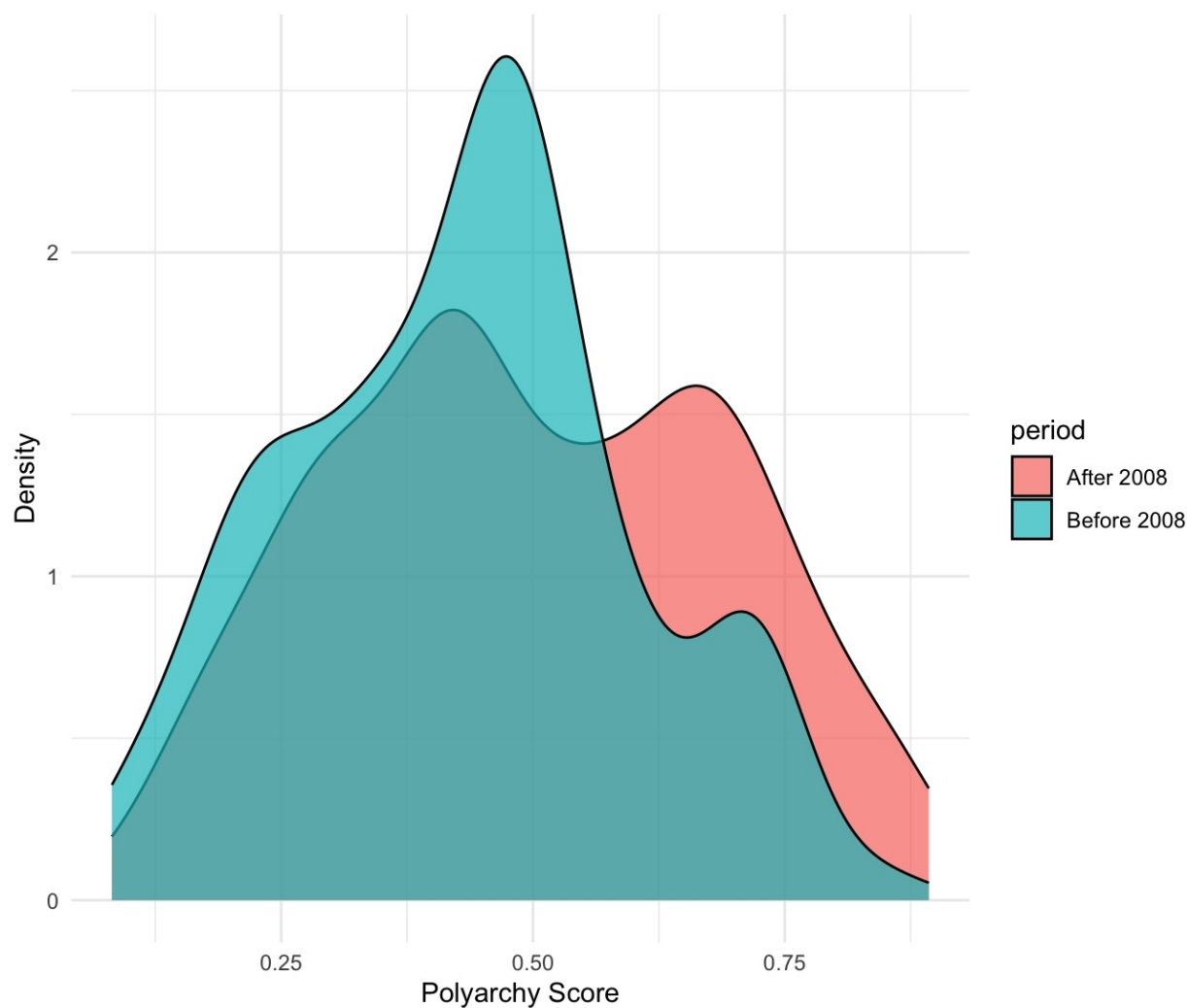


Figure A5. The Density Plot of pre-and post-2008 crisis V-Dem Polyarchy Scores for the Country Years with Autocratization Episodes

Note: those new, countries more democratic countries are Armenia (2020-2022), Benin (2018), Burkina Faso (2018-2021), Bulgaria (2008-2018), Bolivia (2008-2018), Brazil (2016-2022), Botswana (2015-2019), Ecuador (2008-2009), Ghana (2019-2022), Guyana (2019), Croatia (2013-2022), Hungary (2008-2015), Indonesia (2009-2019), India (2008-2014), South Korea (2008-2014), Lesotho (2015), Moldova (2013-2014), Mali (2008-2009, 2011), Mongolia (2015-2021), Mauritius (2014-2019), Poland (2016-2020), Romania (2021-2022), El Salvador (2018-2019), Serbia (2010-2011), Slovenia (2011-2021), Tunisia (2014-2020), Uruguay (2015-2022), United States (2016-2022).