

THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF AUTOCRATIZATION

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Chapter 2

RETHINKING DEMOCRATIC SUBVERSION

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RETHINKING DEMOCRATIC SUBVERSION

Andreas Schedler

Introduction

We make history, Karl Marx famously wrote, yet not under conditions of our own making. In comparative politics, we study political regimes, yet not under conditions of our own making. Our changing agenda reflects changing realities. Over the past 50 years, our subsequent thematic waves followed the moves and moods of the time: the breakdown of democracies, transitions to democracy, democratic consolidation, the spread of electoral authoritarianism, and now democratic regressions in “the third wave of autocratization” (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; see also Chapter 3 in this handbook). In these thematic shifts, we sometimes accumulate knowledge and sometimes squander it. Sometimes we keep weaving threads of debate and sometimes we lose or abandon them. In this contribution, I wish to connect two strands of research that have become strangely disconnected, despite their structural affinities: the study of transitions *to* and *from* electoral authoritarianism.

In most instances within the contemporary “global crisis of democracy” (Diamond, 2019), the “death” of democracies has not been “rapid” but “slow” (O’Donnell, 1992). Military and executive coups continue to slay democratic regimes (see Tansey, 2017). Yet, the modal transition from democratic rule today unfolds as a “slow and at times opaque” “process of successive authoritarian advances” (’Donnell, 1992, pp. 19, 33) in the hands of elected governments. The terminology to describe such authoritarian transitions is still unsettled (Keck, 2023). To emphasize their defining element of agency, I will refer to them as processes of “democratic subversion”, which implies, unconventionally but appropriately, the designation of governments as subversive agents. Such transitions from democracy are the exact counterparts to transitions from electoral authoritarianism. The two are mirror images. The point of arrival of one is the point of departure of the other. Both are incremental and revolve around contested elections and institutional struggles within the formal framework of liberal democracy. Nevertheless, the debates on electoral transitions from and to democracy seem to be largely cut off from each other.

What can we learn by reconnecting them? As I wish to argue, the literature on democratic subversion has been resolutely actor centric. It has laid much emphasis on *the causal weight* of actors. At the same time, however, it has been ignoring *the perspective* of actors. By looking

at democratic subversion through the lens of democratic transitions (mostly, but not exclusively, from electoral authoritarianism), we can bring participant perspectives back into the picture. And by putting ourselves in the shoes of actors, we hope to shed fresh light on some simple, basic questions: What are the limits of structural approaches to the measurement and explanation of democratic subversion? How do we recognize a democratic crisis when we see one? How do we recognize processes of democratic subversion and their protagonists when we see them? And how should we think about resistance against democratic subversion?

The limits of structural measures and explanations

In the 1950s, international agencies like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund began collecting annual social and economic data from their member states. For a long time, in the political realm, nothing analogous existed. And in many respects, as in the creation of regime data, it couldn't. What modern dictatorship would have accepted describing itself as such? So, for instance, to assemble his list of stable and unstable democracies and dictatorships for his famous 1959 piece on the social requisites of democracy, Seymour Martin Lipset could only rely on "election results" for Europe and on "the judgments of experts and impressionistic assessments based on fairly well-known facts of political history" for Latin America (Lipset, 1959, p. 74).

Since the late 1960s, this has been changing, more slowly at first and quite dramatically in more recent years. Political science has been catching up with international agencies by constructing huge amounts of cross-national data on political structures, actors, and events (Schedler, 2012a). In particular, the discipline has been developing a variety of annual time series on political regimes and their characteristics. The Polity Index and Freedom House were the pioneers. They were complemented by initiatives like the Bertelsmann Transformation Index, the *Economist* Democracy Index, the Democracy Barometer, as well as political regime datasets by individual researchers. Today, the shining mega factory in global regime data production is V-Dem, the *Varieties of Democracy* project. Complex, sophisticated, and labor-intensive, offering more than 450 indicators annually "from 1789 to the present for all countries of the world", it is well on its way to crowding out its competitors.¹

These datasets have constituted huge public goods. Without them, the comparative study of democracy and authoritarianism could not have flourished as it has. We would not know, never ever, all that we know today on the dynamics of regime change and stability. Still, they do have inherent limitations, for descriptive as well as explanatory purposes.

On the descriptive side, the early literature on "competitive" or "electoral" autocracies agonized over the fact that neither typological nor continuous regime measures were tailored to capture these intermediate regime categories. Using graded measures to identify them required multiple decisions, including the conceptualization of regimes and regime boundaries, the choice of data-sets and indicators, the election of cut-off points, and the definition of temporal frames (how long does it take for a new regime to arise). As these decisions were not self-evident, but contingent and controversial, the resultant regime classifications were contingent and controversial as well (Bogaards, 2009, 2010).

Despite an enormous expansion of disaggregate measures, these very same problems arise today when scholars use cross-national regime datasets to identify "autocratization episodes" (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). Alternative methodological choices yield diverging sets of cases (Jee, Lueders, & Myrick, 2022; Lott & Croissant in this volume), which end up feeding continuing debates about both global and regional trends and "the actual import and

urgency of the problem” (Cassani & Tomini, 2019, p. 122; see also Bochsler & Juon, 2020; Cianetti & Hanley, 2021; Croissant & Haynes, 2021; Little & Meng, 2023; Tomini, 2018, 2021, Part V of this volume).

Furthermore, given their medium to high levels of abstraction and aggregation, identical scores do not have identical meanings. Even if they share similar points of departure and arrival, observed instances of “autocratization” tend to be heterogeneous. They can reflect varying sets of actions carried out by varying sets of actors with varying types of democratic damage (see e.g., Cianetti & Hanley, 2021; Coppedge, 2017; Diamond, 2015, p. 145; Jee, Lueders, & Myrick, 2022, p. 757). As different categories of cases may derive from different configurations of causes, such heterogeneity involves considerable explanatory challenges. And so does the aggregate nature of regime data.

Regardless of their objects of measurement (like institutions, actors, or events), all cross-national datasets involve a two-fold aggregation of data. As their units of analysis are regime-years, they need to aggregate all information in time (by year) and space (by country). All their data points either put numbers on invariant macro phenomena or offer rough estimates of levels, shares, frequencies, or trends of political variables across time and space. This works well for information about the contexts of politics (structures and institutions), yet less so for politics itself. Political processes either disappear into a black box or get flattened into national one-year averages. As it cannot be otherwise, even behavioral measures only tell very thin stories. The US 2020 elections, for instance, lose much of their drama in the looking glass of V-Dem: Was there evidence of vote fraud? Almost none. Did losing parties and candidates accept their results? Most of them.²

Now, how can we explain phenomena that are sorted into cross-national time series? Only through other phenomena we put into the same format. Aggregate measures invite aggregate explanations, which generally means: structural explanations. Accordingly, large-N, cross-national explanations of contemporary autocratization processes have a clear structural bent. Putting politics in brackets, they strive to explain the occurrence of autocratizing spells through socio-economic, socio-demographic, cultural, or institutional factors (see Boese et al., 2021; Erdmann, 2011, pp. 32–33; Laebens & Lührmann, 2021; Tomini, 2018, Chapter 3; Welzel, 2021). What is wrong with structural explanations of autocratization? In principle, nothing, in particular, when contextual forces converge across countries to create either “golden opportunities” or “hard constraints” for illiberal actors. Grievance-based accounts that examine sources of popular discontent, like economic dislocation or security crises, focus on the former, institutionalist accounts that estimate preexisting levels of institutional strength, on the latter (for a combination, see Weyland, 2020). Yet, neither grievances nor institutions cause anything on their own (grievances need to be activated, institutions defended), both can be endogenous to the political process (actors may create grievances and destroy institutions), both are prone to “the fallacy of retrospective determinism” (Gamboa, 2022, p. 8), and both seem better at explaining the initial electoral success of illiberal actors than their subsequent ability to dismantle democracy (Gamboa, 2022, Chapter 3).

Besides, the present sense of democratic crisis appears to derive less from a clear contextual pattern of democratic retrocession than from the absence of a clear pattern. Recent transitions from democracy to authoritarianism have been driven by the exploitation (and manipulation) of a wide range of societal cleavages, such as class conflict (as in Venezuela and Thailand), religious conflict (as in Egypt and Turkey), or national self-assertion (as in Russia and Hungary) (see e.g., Bermeo, 2016; Diamond, 2015; Erdmann, 2011). They have also

taken place in highly diverse socio-economic circumstances, in relatively poor countries (such as Nicaragua and Bolivia) as well as in relatively rich ones (such as Thailand and Venezuela).

Prima facie, the diversity of contexts and origins of autocratization suggests a primacy of political agency over structures. Above all, the link between economic wealth and democratic stability is one of the most solid empirical regularities in political science. “Democracy is or is not established by political actors”, but “once established” it is “certain to survive in wealthy [countries]” (Przeworski & Limongi, 1997, pp. 177, 167). The mere fact that some relatively affluent democracies (such as Hungary, Venezuela, Thailand, and Turkey) have broken historical patterns and have not proven “impregnable” (ibid., p. 166) to authoritarian takeovers suggests that transitions *from* democracy may well follow the same logic as transitions *to* democracy: they are the work of actors rather than structures and hence “emerge randomly” (Przeworski et al., 2000, p. 89) with regard to their structural environment (see also Lührmann, Medzihorsky, & Lindberg, 2021; Chapter 11 in this handbook; Waldner & Lust, 2018; for contrasting views, see Chapters 6 and 8 in this handbook).

Moreover, theoretical reasons for privileging actors over structures converge with practical imperatives. Scholars who study authoritarian transitions during the present “third wave of autocratization” (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019) are under the same practical pressures as those who studied democratic transitions during the “third wave of democratization” (Huntington, 1991). If they want to be relevant, they need to understand those things that may affect the course of history within their lifetimes. And those things are not things at all, but actors and their dynamics of conflict.

The return of uncertainty in democratic crises

In some ways, the preceding reflections on the limits of structural explanations are superfluous. I am preaching to the converted. The literature on democratic subversion is already overwhelmingly actor centered. Even though certain terminological choices like “democratic backsliding” (Bermeo, 2016), “democratic recession” (Diamond, 2015), and “democratic erosion” (Gamboa, 2022; Gerschewski, 2021) suggest the working of impersonal forces, the bulk of the literature attributes the stepwise demolition of democracies to “elected leaders” who “attack institutions iteratively, at the margins” (Cleary & Öztük, 2022, p. 205), thus pushing their democracies through “a relatively predictable sequence” into a “slow, formally legal descent” (Cianetti & Hanley, 2021, p. 77) toward authoritarianism.

In this sense, the contemporary literature on “authoritarian transitions” has gone “back to the roots” of the classic literature on “democratic transitions”. It has done so, though, in a paradoxical manner. By conceiving democratic regressions as actor-driven, it has placed actors at the very center of its explanations. However, in studying these processes, it has avoided doing what “transitology” did in a self-conscious way: putting itself in the shoes of political actors. Instead of adopting internal participant perspectives on democratic subversion, scholars of “backsliding” have mostly assumed external observer perspectives. Yet, if we look at “authoritarian transitions” through the lenses of its protagonists, we can see revealing similarities as well as dissimilarities with their counterpart of “democratic transitions”.

For actor-centered approaches that wish to take actor perspectives seriously, the first question they need to address is diagnostic: How do actors know a transition when they see one? How do times of regime change look from the internal perspective of participants, rather than from the external perspective of observers? Famously, Guillermo O’Donnell and

Philippe Schmitter identified “extraordinary uncertainty” (O’Donnell and Schmitter, 1986, p. 3) as the defining feature of transitions from authoritarian rule. Times of transition, they held, are times of “indeterminacy” (p. 5) in which authoritarian rules appear not to be written in stone anymore but open to change. Does the same hold for transitions from democratic rule? The answer is positive. Arguably, from the viewpoint of actors, authoritarian transitions begin just like democratic transitions, with the advent of institutional uncertainty. But this is easier to comprehend if we shed the language of transition.

Just as other teleological concepts, like democratic “backsliding”, “decay”, “demise”, or “death”, the notion of “transition” – a passage from one known point to another – presumes something which its protagonists cannot possess while it unfolds: knowledge of its point of arrival (see also Cianetti & Hanley, 2021). From the perspective of participants, it seems therefore more fitting to describe open-ended times of existential uncertainty as times of *crisis*. It is only in retrospect that actors can ascertain whether a “transition” to a certain destination did or did not take place.

Now, what defines the current “global crisis of democracy” (Diamond, 2019)? While the existence of a global wave of *democratic regression* is somewhat controversial, the existence of a global wave of *democratic anxiety* is less so (Cianetti & Hanley, 2021, p. 67). This anxiety is an expression of uncertainty. It speaks of the fact that even in so-called advanced democracies our comforting democratic certainties have given way to the alarming suspicion: “It can happen here” (Sunstein, 2018).

Using a well-known phrase, democracy is “consolidated when under given political and economic conditions a particular system of institutions becomes the only game in town, when no one can imagine acting outside the democratic institutions” (Przeworski, 1991, p. 26). Today, these boundaries of imagination have become porous. Fears that mainstream actors in positions of power (and not just fringe actors) may step outside democratic institutions have been feeding processes of polarization in the United States and elsewhere (Schedler, 2023). Just as the uncertainties of “transitions from authoritarian rule” implied that fissures had opened in the foundations of the authoritarian regime, the uncertainties of contemporary “democratic crises” imply that fissures have opened in the foundations of democracy. While the former meant the end of authoritarian consolidation, the latter spells the end of democratic consolidation (see also Schedler, 2019a).

Identifying agents of democratic subversion

Now, how do actors come to know (or to believe or suspect) that they are not just living through a period of uncertainty and crisis, but an actual process of democratic subversion? The literature provides a simple answer: democratic subversion is the work of undemocratic actors who come to power through democratic elections and then proceed to demolish the edifice of democracy brick by brick. The generic labeling of these democracy-subverting actors varies. Scholars speak, for instance, of “fascists” (Albright, 2018), “aspirational fascists” (Connolly, 2017), “the enemies of liberal democracy” (Mounk, 2018, p. 20), “authoritarian politicians” (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018), “despots and authoritarian governments” (Klaas, 2017, p. 48), “undemocratic leaders” (Chapter 12 in this handbook), “authoritarian leaders or parties”, “the autocratizers” (Tomini et al., 2023, p. 124 and 127), “anti-system parties” and “autocrats” (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021), “illiberal governments” (Pirro & Stanley, 2022), “illiberal leaders” (García-Holgado & Pérez-Liñán, 2021), leaders “with authoritarian tendencies” (Tomini et al., 2023, p. 126), “leaders willing to undermine democratic insti-

tutions”, “potential autocrats,” “presidents with hegemonic aspirations” (Gamboa, 2022), “democratically disloyal politicians” (Cianetti & Hanley, 2021, p. 70), or “anti-pluralists – actors lacking commitment to democratic norms” (Lührmann, 2021, p. 1017).

Again, the question arises: How can political actors recognize such antidemocratic “agents of destruction” (Diamond, 2021, p. 30) when they see them? During much of the 20th century, self-declared authoritarians did not pretend to adhere to basic democratic norms and principles. Openly and aggressively, they pursued systemic alternatives to liberal democracy. Today, in the age of democracy (and, indeed, even in the age of its global crisis), explicit authoritarian ideologies have become rare (see Pappas, 2016; Chapter 11 in this handbook). With the exception of Islamism, neo-Nazism, and the Chinese Communist Party, contemporary political actors profess at least lip service to liberal democratic values. Even fascists, like Vladimir Putin (Snyder, 2022), speak the language of antifascism. So, how can we tell actors who respect democratic constraints from those who are set to abuse their democratically conferred powers to subvert democracy?

Just like current studies of democratic subversion, the scholarship on democratic transition, too, rested upon a strong assumption of actor heterogeneity. It also divided the political world into actors who were committed to liberal democracy and those who were not. It had, however, a much easier job in distinguishing the two camps as they occupied contrasting positions of power. The enemies of democracy were running the authoritarian regime (“the authoritarian rulers”), while their opponents struggled to crack it from the outside (“the democratic opposition”). Unless and until they end up establishing an authoritarian regime, processes of democratic subversion do not afford participants such clarity.

Yet, if neither public declarations nor functional roles serve as reliable empirical indicators, how can we (as citizens, political actors, or academic observers) tell democrats from antidemocrats? How do we know about other actors’ democratic commitments? More often than not, we cannot know (for sure) but need to make (more or less uncertain) inferences from their words and deeds. We need to examine whether they say or do certain things, or have said or done certain things, which appear antithetical to the letter or the spirit of liberal democracy, or indicative of intentions to carry out (or a willingness to encourage or condone) attacks against democracy. If that sounds complicated, it is. We may have good reasons to suspect the democratic credentials of candidates who are former coup mongers (Hugo Chávez), secret service agents (Vladimir Putin), or law professors (Kais Saied), but we cannot be sure about the depths of their “democratic disloyalty” (Linz, 1978) until they reveal it in practice. The further they advance in their willful destruction of democracy, the easier it is to classify them as “authoritarian”.

In the study of democratic subversion, we political scientists have been reluctant to recognize the inferential uncertainties that envelop our actor classifications. More often than not, we have been creating illusions of epistemic certainty by attaching ready-made labels to political actors. Granted, in recent years, some scholars have begun to develop systematic comparative data on the democratic commitments of political leaders. Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán (2013) and Gamboa (2022) reconstruct political actors’ normative regime preferences on the basis of historical secondary sources. The new V-Party dataset delegates the observation and evaluation of political parties’ embrace of democratic pluralism to country experts (Lührmann, Medzihorsky, & Lindberg, 2021). In their dictionary-based analysis of public speeches, Maerz and Schneider (2021) locate heads of government on an index of liberalism. These are laudable efforts that deserve close examination. Nonetheless, in political science, we keep using generic labels that allow us to mark actors as carriers of dangerous ideas and designs,

without further need to examine their track record. The most prominent has been the label of populism.

Political leaders who subvert, or threaten to subvert, democratic rules and practices are regularly described as “populists” (for many others, see Levitsky & Loxton, 2013; Ginsburg & Huq, 2018; Mounk, 2018; Chapter 20 in this handbook). Some authors add the adjective “authoritarian” for clarification (e.g., Scheuerman, 2022; Chapter 8 in this handbook), while others consider it redundant (e.g., Müller, 2017). Despite ongoing definitional disputes and “a fair degree of confusion and ambivalence” (Moffitt, 2020, p. 94) that envelops the term, there seems to be rather wide agreement around the idea that populists define the cleavage between citizens (“the people”) and the political elite as the central conflict of democratic politics (Mansbridge & Macedo, 2019; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Schedler, 1996). This idea has three implications which the literature tends to overlook.

First, representative democracy involves a structural division between citizens and their representatives. The ambition of keeping the two from drifting apart too far is not antidemocratic *per se* (see Laclau, 2018; Mansbridge & Macedo, 2019, pp. 70–73; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). Besides, even when populists display antidemocratic behavior, their opponents should not be assumed to be better by definition (Baykan, Gürsoy, & Ostiguy, 2021; Stavrakakis, 2018).

Second, at its origins, populism is a discourse of opposition politics. Within a conception of populism as anti-political-establishment politics (Schedler, 1996), the notion of “populism in power” is, strictly speaking, incoherent. When populists come to power, they transcend their motivating conflict, their opposition against the representative elite, as they have become part of the representative elite. Once in government, they are obliged to transform themselves. Some turn to nationalism, adopt a clear position on the left–right axis, and direct their aggressive energies toward the opposing camp. Others displace their critique of elected elites toward a critique of public officials and move on from conquering *the government* to conquering *the state*. In doing so, they often tap republican traditions of public integrity (O’Donnell, 2001) – rather than simple notions of majoritarian democracy (Mounk, 2018; Pappas, 2016; Slater, 2013) – and invoke the partisan capture of the state to justify the partisan capture of the state (Schedler, 2021, pp. 267–269). As they claim all power for themselves, their colonization of public institutions is more likely to jeopardize the integrity and impartiality of public institutions than to restore it (Loewer, 2022). The dangers to democracy are palpable. Yet, given the ideological diversity of contemporary assailants on public institutions (Chapter 11 in this handbook), the broad notion of populism may tell us little about the ideational justifications of their power grabs (see also Cianetti & Hanley, 2021; de Oliveira, 2022).

Third, “populism is only thinkable in the context of representative democracy” (Müller, 2017, p. 77: see also Pappas, 2016, p. 29). When populists, in a democratic context, mobilize the people–elite cleavage, they denounce structural failures of a democracy which they often redescribe as an authoritarian system. When democrats mobilize the people–elite cleavage in a non-democratic context, they oppose a genuine authoritarian regime. It makes no sense to conceive them as “populists” (e.g., Nokhrin, 2021) and even less so to label authoritarian rulers as such (which explains why concerns about populism have been absent in the literature on authoritarian regimes and democratic transitions).

These considerations speak against using “populism” as an omniexplanatory concept that allows us to understand everything and anything that certain political actors say and do. In

part simplifying, in part confusing, it hardly serves as a reliable shortcut to identify the protagonists of democratic subversion. Instead of conceiving these protagonists as transparently pre-identified “authoritarian leaders” who come to power and start attacking democracy, it seems more appropriate to conceive them, more cautiously and more precisely, as elected leaders who, after entering into government with more or less solid democratic credentials, start attacking democracy and hereby reveal (or confirm) themselves as non-democratic (see also Albertus & Grossman, 2021, p. 119; Bartels, 2020b, p. 31, Chiopris, Nalepa, & Vanberg, 2021).

Observing processes of democratic subversion

Electoral authoritarian regimes establish the institutions of liberal democracy on paper yet subvert them in practice through severe and systematic manipulation. When they exert harsh, overt repression, it is easy to recognize their democratic facades for what they are. When they employ more indirect and covert strategies of manipulation (or embark on processes of transition), it is much harder and controversial to establish their nature (see Schedler, 2013, Chapters 1–4). In processes of democratic subversion, such descriptive controversies run even deeper. There are no easy cases, only hard ones, as all assessments of piecemeal democratic norm violations demand complex judgments under uncertainty, normative as well as prospective ones.

Normative judgments: To make an impression on democratic citizens, governmental norm transgressions need to be visible. Subversive undercover actions outside the public view (or below the threshold of public awareness) will fail to put them on alert (Suh & Tarrow, 2022; Tomini, Gibril, & Bochev, 2023, p. 121). But publicity alone is not enough. For citizens to view antidemocratic actions as such, they must observe them (i.e., get the facts right) but also must evaluate them as such (i.e., understand their normative implications). To the extent that democratic norms are complex and contentious, their application to governmental behavior is so, too (Grossman et al., 2022, Krishnarajan, 2023). Moreover, processes of democratic subversion are incremental. They proceed in small steps, each of which, viewed in isolation, may seem innocuous (Landau, 2013), while their cumulative, interlocking effects are hard to trace. On top of that, most autocratizing governments dismantle democracy under the pretense of improving or even saving it (Gandhi, 2019). Citizens must see through their pretense which is, “in our age of bitterly contested realities” (Rushdie, 2017, p. 40), no small feat.

Prospective judgments: In addition to evaluating the democratic significance of norm transgressions, citizens need to assess their future implications. They need to see what is happening before their eyes and recognize ongoing breaches of democratic norms. But they also need to consider what these breaches hold for the future. Is this as bad as it gets? Are these breaches no more than minor, exceptional, and reversible offenses by a government that remains committed to democratic governance or, in any case, constrained by countervailing actors and institutions? Or is the worst to come yet? Are these breaches ominous signs of authoritarian entrenchment? Is the government willing and able to take the country all the way down the road toward electoral authoritarianism? Of course, these questions have no unique answers but admit a range of reasonable responses. The ensuing controversies are likely to pit observers against each other who situate themselves at different points along the axis of tranquility vs anxiety. Regularly, democratic pessimists hold optimists to be blind, naïve, in “denial” (Cohen, 2001), while the latter view the former as hysterical

participants in a “moral panic” (Cohen, 2011) (see also Somer, McCoy, & Tuncel, 2022, pp. 16–17).

These judgmental challenges entail the impossibility of developing simple, objective “litmus tests” (see Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 21) of either democratic commitments or democratic trajectories (see also de Oliveira, 2022). When we adopt the perspective of external experts who strive to offer objective accounts of actors and processes, in a non-judgmental manner, through “mere observation” (Schedler, 2012b), we overlook a fundamental feature of the politics of democratic subversion, namely inescapable and inexhaustible controversies about basic facts: Who is who? What is happening? Where are we? Where are we going? These controversies are not incidental to authoritarian transitions but endemic, and they pose formidable obstacles to democratic resistance.

The evolution of resistance (at two levels)

In political economic approaches to authoritarian regimes, “the dictator” often appears as a lone sovereign who observes his environment, ponders his interests, and decides whatever he thinks is convenient (the *locus classicus* is Tullock, 1987). Studies of democratic subversion often adopt similar “executive-centric” (Cleary & Öztürk, 2022, p. 207) perspectives (see also Gamboa, 2022, Chapter 1.2) when they describe the dismantling of democracy as the work of “elected political leaders, greedy for power and wealth, who knock away various types of constraints on their power and enlarge and entrench it in undemocratic ways” (Diamond, 2021, p. 30). Illiberal governments, however, never act in isolation. They are not “bowling alone” (Putnam, 1995) but always face some form of resistance. Accordingly, after some initial neglect, the literature has been placing increasing attention on countervailing forces to autocratization (Boese et al., 2021; Cleary & Öztürk, 2022; Gamboa, 2022; Ginsburg & Huq, 2022; Chapter 13 and 22 in this handbook; Keck, 2023; Merkel & Lührmann, 2021; Schedler, 2019b; Scheuerman, 2022; Somer, McCoy, & Tuncel, 2022; Tomini, Gibril, & Bochev, 2023; Weyland, 2020; Weyland & Madrid, 2019).

Processes of democratic subversion obey a very specific temporal logic. They unfold in self-reinforcing spirals in which initial authoritarian advances lay the ground for subsequent ones. The set of constraints and opportunities that illiberal governments face is endogenous to their own accomplishments. The further they advance in the destruction of democracy, the further they can go. This temporal logic carries deep implications for opposition strategies.

First, as many authors have noted, the incremental nature of subversion creates obstacles for the mobilization of resistance. The succession of more or less “subtle changes” (Landau, 2013, p. 189) eroding the foundations of democratic governance deprives opposition actors of clear rallying points (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Gamboa, 2022; Ginsburg & Huq, 2018, p. 18; Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Przeworski, 2019).

Second, the further the regime moves toward electoral authoritarianism, the harder it becomes to halt or reverse the process. Vigilant democrats therefore must confront and strive to neutralize attacks against democracy early on, while they may still be able to halt their self-reinforcing logic: *Webret den Anfängen* (beware the beginnings)!

Third, under electoral authoritarian conditions, ruling and opposition parties confront each other in a complex “two-level” or “nested” game (Tsebelis, 1990). At the game level of electoral competition, they compete over voter support. At the meta-game level of institutional manipulation, they struggle over the openness, fairness, and integrity of democratic

institutions (Schedler, 2013, Chapter 4). These institutional struggles gain more and more weight the deeper the regime sinks into authoritarian waters. At its end point, the resistance against democratic subversion follows the exact same logic as the resistance against electoral authoritarianism (see Schedler, 2013, Chapters 4 & 9).

The literature has recognized the first two problems – though only in the abstract, without studying them empirically. We know, and we know that opposition actors know, that authoritarian “salami tactics” dilute democratic protest and that vicious circles of democratic regression demand early, preemptive resistance. We do not know, however, how opposition actors actually strive to meet these challenges. How do they grapple with the dilemma of resisting small, initial steps of autocratization without appearing unreasonable, exaggerating, or hyperbolic to their constituencies?

By contrast, even in general terms, the scholarship on “democratic backsliding” has shown little awareness of the third problem, the two-level dynamics of nondemocratic elections. In full-fledged electoral autocracies, opposition actors need to take both game levels seriously if they wish to dislodge the authoritarian incumbent through peaceful ways. Rather than taking citizen support for granted, they need to fight for it with creative determination. And rather than accepting the rigged system they confront as invincible, they need to fight it, again, with creative determination (Bunce & Wolchik, 2011; Lindberg, 2009; Schedler, 2002, 2013). With some exceptions (Cleary & Öztürk, 2022; Gamboa, 2022; Somer, McCoy, & Tuncel, 2022), the literature has been reluctant to accept the nested logic of opposition struggles against democracy-subversive governments. It tends to ascribe to voter preferences the weight they only carry in democracies, and to manipulative strategies the solidity they only possess in consolidated autocracies.

In numerous case histories, scholars of democratic subversion have been documenting the stepwise demolition of democratic institutions (e.g., Batory, 2016; Bogaards, 2018; Corrales, 2011, 2015; Esen & Gumuscu, 2016; Grzymala-Busse, 2018; Magyar, 2016; Pirro & Stanley, 2022; Selçuk, 2016). These analyses often carry an air of fatality and have paid little attention to the strategic challenges of reverting authoritarian encroachments (Schedler, 2013, Chapters 4 & 9). Scholars have expressed some faith in the integrity and courage of public officials (Laebens & Lührmann, 2021; Lührmann, 2021; Ginsburg & Huq, 2018, 2022; Posner, 2018; Tomini, Gibril, & Bochev, 2023, pp. 124, 127). They have placed certain trust in the weight of individual resistance (Snyder, 2017), civic associations (Barndt, 2010), and public protest (Acemoglu, 2017). And they have offered normative reflections on the permissibility of responding to democracy-subversive transgressions with democracy-restoring ones (Müller, 2016; Schedler, 2021; Scheuerman, 2022) as well as some practical reflections on the limited applicability of the toolset of “militant democracy” against governmental attacks on democracy (Gerschewski, 2022; Taggart & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2016, pp. 360–361).

Yet, we have seen scant systematic research or reflection on *the strategic logic* of re-democratizing struggles. How do opposition actors view their structures of opportunity and constraint? Do they agree on the severity of the unfolding democratic regression? Do they converge on their priorities of democratic defense? What are the vulnerabilities and dependencies they perceive within the regime? What do they think the illiberal government needs from them or from the population at large? How popular do they think it is? Do they see potential allies inside the government? Do they hope to attract public servants to their cause? What is the repertoire of strategies they ponder? Do they consider electoral opposition alliances? Electoral boycotts? A recourse to violence? An alliance with security forces or the military? What are their worst-case scenarios? And what are their optimistic ones? And so forth.

All these questions await answers. Perhaps it is not up to political scientists to provide them, though, but for opposition actors to shed their “learned helplessness” (Seligman, 1972) and to raise them in the first place. In the United States where, luckily, neither of the two predominant parties has gained a secure grip on power, both have been scheming intensely to wrest control over democratic institutions from the other side (Faris, 2019; Keck, 2023; Swan, 2022). In Eastern Europe, by contrast, domestic actors have been tempted to delegate the job of re-democratization to the European Union (Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018; Uitz, 2019; Zgut, 2022). Their outward orientation seems to reflect the sense of helplessness that threatens to overwhelm opposition actors when they see their margins of maneuver progressively constricted by an overpowering executive. In other contexts, where no outside *deus ex machina* (like the EU) can be expected to intervene, such despair may push opposition actors toward transgressive radicalism (Cleary & Öztürk, 2022; Tomini, Gibril, & Bochev, 2023).

Good at documenting democratic defeats with lament and melancholic resignation, the literature has zeroed in on one potential agent of resistance, the main culprit, grand accomplice, and potential savior of democratic regressions: the voter. Campaigns of democratic subversion unfold like processes of “democratization by elections” (Schedler, 2002) in reverse. They create dynamics of “autocratization by elections” in which citizens progressively lose their voice, rather than recovering it. While the role of voters is unclear and controversial at the beginning of transitions *from* electoral authoritarianism (Schedler, 2013, Chapter 4), it appears all decisive at the beginning of transitions *to* electoral authoritarianism. Citizens appear as nothing less than *the prime movers* of democratic subversion (or at least, as key veto players). Without their consent, their willingness to grant electoral mandates to democratic demolition men, these processes would not get off the ground. And without their willingness to withdraw their consent and stop voting for transgressive governments, the rescue of democracy looks distant (Albertus & Grossman, 2021; Laebens & Öztürk, 2021; Lührmann, 2021; Pepinsky, 2017).³ Even if voters are often more ignorant at the beginning and less powerful later on than straightforward presumptions of popular responsibility suggest, these presumptions have inspired a rapidly growing literature on the utilitarian, normative, cognitive, and emotional bases of citizens’ puzzling disposition to abdicate their democratic rights and liberties (e.g., Arbatli & Rosenberg, 2021; Bartels, 2020a; Broockman, Kalla, & Westwood, 2023; Cohen & Smith, 2016; Graham & Svulik, 2020; Chapters 7 and 12 handbook; Krishnarajan, 2023, Simonovits, McCoy, & Littvay, 2022; Svulik et al., 2023).

In sum, once the wrong people come to power and the protective wall of established institutions starts crumbling, comparative scholarship seems to suggest that “there is little that can be done to prevent a democratic reversal” (Gamboa, 2022, p. 7) beyond hoping for a change of mind by voters. Given our scholarly tendency to watch democratic regressions with informed resignation, the best practical advice that we seem to be able to give tallies with the admonition novelist Mario Vargas Llosa (2023) has offered to voters in Ecuador and elsewhere: “vote better”!

Conclusion

When we survey the state of contemporary democracies through the lens of cross-national time-series data, we can see when something goes wrong, though often not exactly what and why. Aggregate descriptions only provide blurred synopses of democratic regressions, while structural explanations cannot account well for the willingness nor the capability of

elected governments to subvert democracy in dissimilar structural, institutional, and cultural contexts.

Recognizing the limits of structural explanations, the scholarly literature on democratic subversion has been plainly actor centric. In most comparative political research, we have studied such regressions as the result of powerful actors, rather than overpowering conditions. Somewhat paradoxically, though, we have tended to adopt external observer perspectives that fail to acknowledge the viewpoints that matter most in the dynamics of political conflict: the internal perspectives of participants themselves. We have tried to understand actors from the outside, ignoring their views from the inside. Above all, we have tried to identify the protagonists of democratic subversion, assess their democratic commitments, and trace their harmful actions through “mere observation”, in a neutral and objective manner. By doing so, we have created illusions of epistemic certainty that overlook a fundamental political reality: the “essentially contested” (Gallie, 1956) nature of democratic subversion.

We can only understand actors, and offer rational explanations for their behavior, when we put ourselves in their shoes and try to see the world how they see it. When we look at processes of democratic subversion from the viewpoint of participants, we can see that they confront very similar political uncertainties as democratic actors do in their struggles against authoritarian regimes. Just like authoritarian crises, democratic crises start with the emergence of “existential uncertainties” in which the nature of actors, the state of the regime, prevailing correlations of power, and future scenarios turn into a matter of complex and contentious judgments. Taking these uncertainties (as well as the ensuing controversies) seriously means taking politics seriously. Inside every black box, there is a white box trying to get out (Glanville, 1982). In the study of democratic subversion, the white box inside the black box of our observer accounts contains intense political contention over the identity of actors (who are genuine democrats, who subversive authoritarians?), the meaning of their actions (are they defending democracy or attacking it?), the nature of democracy (what does democratic governance demand?), and the state of democracy (do we still inhabit a common democratic house, or has it been torn apart by our adversaries?). Unless we recognize these controversies as endemic to democratic crises, both our assessments of democratic threats and our reflections on democratic resistance will carry an air of unreality (or partisanship).

Often resigned to the apparent popularity of democracy-subversive governments, the scholarly literature tends to seek democratic remedies from external actors (like the European Union) or non-political decision-makers (like judges and public officials). Still, a growing body of research is recognizing the importance of political resistance to democratic subversion. The destruction of democracy is not the work of lonely lunatics. Subversive governments need lots of agents and meet lots of opponents. Rather than placing hopes of redemption on designated heroes, their opponents need to engage in careful and patient strategic thinking.

They need not invent the wheel of resistance anew but can build on the lessons we have been learning from democratic resistance against electoral authoritarianism. Effective resistance requires attention to both levels of autocratization by elections. At the level of voter persuasion, opposition actors need to think about creative campaigns that reach the hearts and minds of voters, rather than discarding them as prisoners of propaganda. At the level of institutional manipulation, they need to think about creative strategies of civic resistance that exploit the structural dependencies of subversive governments, rather than accepting their omnipotence. Is any of this easy? Of course not. If it were, no one would even try to subvert a democracy in the first place. Rethinking democratic subversion from the perspective

of actors does not make things easier. Quite to the contrary, both resistance to democratic subversion and its study look more complicated. What we lose in simplicity, however, we gain in realism.

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Notes

- 1 For Polity data, see <https://www.systemicpeace.org>, for Freedom House reports on Freedom in the World, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world>. For the BTI, see <https://democracybarometer.org>, for the Democracy Index, <https://infographics.economist.com/2022/democracy-index-2021>, and for the Democracy Barometer, <https://democracybarometer.org>. For some individual datasets, see Alvarez et al. (1996), Geddes et al. (2014), Vanhanen (2000), and Wahman et al. (2013). For a description of V-Dem, <https://www.v-dem.net/about/v-dem-project>.
- 2 Summary of V-Dem variables “Election other voting irregularities” (v2elirreg) and “Election losers accept results” (v2elaccept) (V-Dem Codebook v12, March 2022), with results from V-Dem Country Graphs (https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/CountryGraph).
- 3 For a skeptical voice on the role of citizens in historical cases of democratic breakdown, see Bermeo (2003).

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