

I

Introduction

We live in difficult times for democracy. If this book found its way to your hands, this is probably not new information. In the United States (US), democratic insecurity may seem rather sudden, with the presidential election of Donald Trump in 2016, an outsider candidate with weak commitments to liberal democratic norms, uncomfortable admiration for authoritarian strongmen, a toxic mix of xenophobic and racial politics, and little deference to the Constitution. This view culminates in the violent January 6, 2021, insurrection, where Trump supporters broke into the US Capitol building to disrupt the certification of Electoral College votes confirming Joe Biden the successful and legitimate winner of the 2020 Presidential Election. For others, 2016 and everything that followed only laid bare the fragility of American democratic institutions, preserving counter-majoritarian institutions and exposed by gerrymandering practices and decades of voting suppression and, with it, a persistent second-class citizenship for America's ethnic and racial minorities. From either perspective, ordinary Americans are confronting an unprecedented crisis of democracy. This crisis is both sudden and systemic, and not easily resolved by changing presidents.

Democratic hard times are hardly unique to the US. Across the Atlantic, European democracies have far more practice with antidemocratic and illiberal politics. Yet this familiarity does not make it quotidian, and has not inured Europe to illiberalism and democratic instability. Exclusionary, national populist parties have gained alarming levels of support. In Germany, the extreme right-wing Alternative for Germany (*AfD*; *Alternative für Deutschland*) emerged as the third largest party in the 2017 federal elections. Successful far-right parties in France, Austria,

Denmark, Switzerland, and the Netherlands also exhibit traditional authoritarian attributes and issue positions that align with a broader populist transformation. In the United Kingdom (UK), British citizens narrowly voted to exit the European Union (EU) – a political and economic organization whose core purpose is shared peace, prosperity, and democratic commitment – supported by a campaign fueled on nationalism and xenophobia. Meanwhile, leaders like Turkey’s Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Hungary’s Viktor Orban have done serious, ongoing damage to their countries’ democratic governments, with the latter successfully accumulating unchecked executive power through emergency law during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. From Brazil to Poland to Israel and India, illiberal, exclusionary populism has surged, eroding democratic norms and institutions in the undertow.

Given the rise of antidemocratic movements and the frequent violation of democratic principles by leaders and political elites, even the casual observer would note democratic “backsliding” in some of the world’s most advanced democratic states. Together, the past few years comprise what Larry Diamond labels a “democratic recession” and what others have variously characterized as democratic deconsolidation, erosion, decay, or instability. It is a process of democratic undoing or, as Adam Przeworski puts it, “manifest signals that democratic institutions are under threat.”¹ This, of course, makes it challenging to identify a threat *a priori*, that is, before it happens and wreaks consequences. A threat could also be temporary or long-term, swift or slow-moving, as can the consequences. Furthermore, democratic backsliding may not present as a “one-time *coup de grâce*” but a “discontinuous series of incremental actions.”²

Democratic threats take many different shapes, but a shared definition that I use here is that they present an event or period of difficulty, with the intent to inflict damage upon and undermine the integrity and legitimacy of democratic institutions. A democratic threat – which can produce a democratic crisis – damages core features of democracy itself, such as free, fair, and regular elections, or participation. Under a maximal definition of democracy, democratic threat also includes harm to liberal democratic values that enable the functioning of democratic institutions, including

¹ Adam Przeworski, *Crises of Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 15.

² David Waldner and Ellen Lust, “Unwelcome Change: Coming to Terms with Democratic Backsliding,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 21 (2018): 95.

checks and balances, rule of law, government neutrality, as well as the norms and values of individual rights and civil liberties.

The contemporary democratic crisis is at once new but not unique; with every wave of democratization there is always a backlash in its wake. And each generation has experienced self-declared democratic crises. In Europe's interwar period, the democratic crisis was an existential one.³ In the 1970s, Michel Crozier, Samuel Huntington, and Joji Watanuki describe a different "crisis of democracy," as the "increasing delegitimation of authority" through the "decline in the confidence and trust which the people have in government, in their leaders."⁴ Written at the intersection of the Cold War and the Oil Crisis, the central concern was pessimism about democracy in the context of a dismal economic downturn. By the 1990s, the phrase "crisis of democracy" had taken on an altogether new meaning. The threat was not institutional replacement or erosion but participation. Declining levels of engagement in community life, political trust, and faith in government – as well as low voter turnout and union and party membership – were all treated as symptoms of a serious democratic crisis. Succinctly put by Macedo et al. in the US context, "Americans have turned away from politics and the public sphere in large numbers, leaving our civic life impoverished."⁵ In Britain, the specter of indifferent citizens also loomed large in a scenario described as post-democratic, noting that while "elections certainly exist and can change governments, public electoral debate is a tightly controlled spectacle."⁶

And today's crisis of democracy is different still. While internal tensions and even dysfunction are inherent to complex systems, it manifests today as a type of gridlock in a uniquely hyper-partisan political arena – what Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer term "pernicious polarization."⁷ From political parties to mass attitudes, "team" identity is stronger than ever, where average citizens are willing to suffer democratic – even

³ Giovanni Capoccia, *Defending Democracy: Reactions to Extremism in Interwar Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

⁴ Michel Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington, and Joji Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy*, vol. 70 (New York: University Press New York, 1975), 162.

⁵ Yvette M. Alex-Assensoh, *Democracy at Risk: How Political Choices Undermine Citizen Participation and What We Can Do about It* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2005).

⁶ Colin Crouch, *Coping with Post-Democracy*, vol. 598 (London: Fabian Society, 2000).

⁷ Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer, "Toward a Theory of Pernicious Polarization and How It Harms Democracies: Comparative Evidence and Possible Remedies," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 681, no. 1 (2019).

economic – losses for ideological or partisan-motivated gains.⁸ This may lead political elites to disregard threat, deny the seriousness of threat, or even perpetuate threat outright. In this context, we increasingly see evidence of a solidifying and deepening regime cleavage, or conflict, over the foundations of the democratic government itself, between those who support democracy and those who do not, with elected officials sometimes siding against democracy. As Tom Pepinsky observes, writing about the US, “Regime cleavages emerge only in governing systems in crisis, and our democracy is indeed in crisis.”⁹

Moreover, the current moment is so disturbing not just because of its substantive features – the values it is attacking and how – but its breadth. There is a global dimension to today’s illiberal turn.¹⁰ Economically aggrieved and racially resentful voters have found voice in populist parties around the world, as a network of illiberal leaders prop up one another from the US to Brazil to Russia. Today’s wide-reaching democratic backsliding is occurring among recent democratizers and advanced democracies alike.

But unlike late democratizers, which are described as weakly institutionalized and fragile to begin with,¹¹ explanations for backsliding in advanced democracies present a different set of constraints. We not only expect to see different mechanisms at work, where elite-driven coups or

⁸ Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels, *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*, vol. 4 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017); Diana C. Mutz, “Status Threat, Not Economic Hardship, Explains the 2016 Presidential Vote,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115, no. 19 (2018); Tyler T. Reny, Loren Collingwood, and Ali A. Valenzuela, “Vote Switching in the 2016 Election: How Racial and Immigration Attitudes, Not Economics, Explain Shifts in White Voting,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 83, no. 1 (2019).

⁹ Thomas Pepinsky, “Why the Impeachment Fight Is Even Scariest Than You Think,” *Politico*, October 31, 2019.

¹⁰ Valeriya Mechkova, Anna Lührmann, and Staffan I. Lindberg, “How Much Democratic Backsliding?,” *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 4 (2017).

¹¹ For instance, democratizers of Eastern and Central Europe face unique institutional and economic circumstances from incomplete democratic transitions as well as frustrations of EU accession. See Milada Vachudova, *Europe Undivided: Democracy, Leverage, and Integration after Communism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Ulrich Sedelmeier, “Anchoring Democracy from Above? The European Union and Democratic Backsliding in Hungary and Romania after Accession,” *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 52, no. 1 (2014); Mitchell Alexander Orenstein, *Out of the Red: Building Capitalism and Democracy in Postcommunist Europe* (University of Michigan Press, 2001). Also see Robert R. Kaufman and Stephan Haggard, “Democratic Decline in the United States: What Can We Learn from Middle-Income Backsliding?,” *Perspectives on Politics* 17, no. 2 (2019).

declarations of emergency powers¹² are thought of as challenges for new democracies or things of the past, there is also a different time horizon for crisis. In democracies that have been consolidated for a century or more, it may be unthinkable to imagine a coup-driven regime change overnight but much more likely to envision small, gradual, and layered changes that add up to erosion. Also, unlike coups or a violent insurrection, these piecemeal changes are much more likely to go unnoticed (or, even more worrying, unchecked). Thus, in advanced democracies, the nature of erosion may be slow-moving and experienced in increments but noticed only in hindsight and in the aggregate. Finally, they may also be more consequential. Long seen as constitutive of the global liberal order and immune to most sources of erosion, as democracy is widely considered to be “the only game in town,”¹³ backsliding in advanced democracies upends regime stability.

Most of what we know about democratic crises in advanced democracies focuses on the role of elites. For instance, many contemporary studies as well as a large current of historical comparative work drawing insight from Europe’s interwar years place elites at the front and center.¹⁴ These accounts detail how elites employ a series of institutional and rhetorical strategies to undermine liberal democracy. The successes of these “bad actor” strategies are reflected in the failure of elections to constrain illiberal and antidemocratic interests, lack of checks on executive and legislative power,¹⁵ as well as elite polarization.¹⁶

Examples of elite-centered definitions abound. In *How Democracies Die*, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt focus on the diminished role of party gatekeeping. They flag specifically whether “political leaders, and especially political parties, work to prevent [extremist demagogues] from gaining power in the first place” as an “essential test for democracies.”¹⁷

¹² For coups, see Nancy Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding,” *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (2016). For institutional careening, see Dan Slater, “Democratic Careening,” *World Politics* 65, no. 4 (2013). These produced immediate and rapid regime change.

¹³ Juan J. Linz and Alfred C. Stepan, “Toward Consolidated Democracies,” *Journal of Democracy* 7, no. 2 (1996): 15.

¹⁴ Juan J. Linz, *Crisis, Breakdown and Reequilibration* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Capoccia, *Defending Democracy: Reactions to Extremism in Interwar Europe*; Sheri Berman, *Democracy and Dictatorship in Europe: From the Ancien Régime to the Present Day* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

¹⁵ Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding.”

¹⁶ Berman, *Democracy and Dictatorship in Europe: From the Ancien Régime to the Present Day*; Daniel Ziblatt, *Conservative Political Parties and the Birth of Modern Democracy in Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

¹⁷ Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018), 7.

Elites are responsible for who gets on the ticket, as well as preserving norms of mutual tolerance and forbearance. Stephen Haggard and Robert Kaufman describe democratic backsliding outright as “a process in which democratically elected leaders weaken democratic institutions.”¹⁸ Nancy Bermeo defines backsliding as a “*state-led* debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy” (emphasis added).¹⁹ And Milada Vachudova’s definition also focuses on “the work of incumbents,” which dismantles counter-majoritarian institutions, state and media independence, and advances illiberal, ethnopopulist appeals “to control the cultural, academic, artistic, and economic life of the country.”²⁰ Other accounts of the contemporary crisis drill into institutional aspects of electoral integrity,²¹ the weakening of horizontal checks,²² and the skillful interests of outsider, far right populist parties.²³ But, by and large, these are all top-down stories about political elites – about their naked, authoritarian aspirations, their tenuous allegiance to rule of law or civil liberties, or their failure to enforce institutional and political checks to prevent erosion.

We know much less about the role of everyday citizens in times of democratic crises. What we do know focuses mostly on how eroding support for democracy among citizens allows for these power grabs to take place,²⁴ or when citizens choose undemocratic leaders through

¹⁸ Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufman, *Backsliding: Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

¹⁹ Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding,” 5.

²⁰ Milada Vachudova, “Ethnopolitism and Democratic Backsliding in Central Europe,” *East European Politics* 36, no. 3 (2020): 328.

²¹ Pippa Norris, Sarah Cameron, and Thomas Wynter, *Electoral Integrity in America: Securing Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

²² Tom Ginsburg and Aziz Z. Huq, *How to Save a Constitutional Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

²³ William A. Galston, *Anti-Pluralism: The Populist Threat to Liberal Democracy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017); Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, “Trump and the Populist Authoritarian Parties: The Silent Revolution in Reverse,” *Perspectives on Politics* 15, no. 2 (2017); Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press Cambridge, 2007); Milada Vachudova, “From Competition to Polarization in Central Europe: How Populists Change Party Systems and the European Union,” *Polity* 51, no. 4 (2019).

²⁴ Yascha Mounk, *The People Vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018); Matthew H. Graham and Milan W. Svoblik, “Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States,” *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 2 (2020).

popular elections.²⁵ To be sure, public support for democratic survival is essential,²⁶ and mass support by ordinary people plays a crucial role in sustaining democracy when elites try to subvert it.²⁷ But the role played by citizens extends beyond voting. Citizens may have a weak understanding of democratic norms, or support democracy in the abstract while endorsing illiberal, undemocratic actions.²⁸ We can study illiberal cultural contexts²⁹, or ask about political leanings and attitudes toward authoritarianism,³⁰ but we want to know the role democratic citizens play during these moments of crisis. Political elites play a central role in times of democratic uncertainty, but so do citizens.

Mass politics is not merely the field in which elite politics play out, nor are the masses passive recipients of antidemocratic or illiberal messages by political leaders. A democracy, by definition, draws legitimacy from its citizens. Through participation and liberal value commitments, citizens not only shape elite preferences and decisions, they also ensure democratic quality and good governance. Indeed, what distinguishes advanced liberal democracies from weakly institutionalized alternatives is not just the quality and endurance of democratic institutions but citizens' commitment to – and participation in – them. Citizens do not just support abstract democratic principles but practice them; they may hold intensely opposing views while also accepting the legitimacy of elections and commitment to rules that structure transfers of power. Given their capacity for mobilization, citizens can be either the bulwark against or handmaid of erosion. And, unlike most theories about democratic backsliding that

²⁵ Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding.”

²⁶ Seymour Martin Lipset, “Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics,” (1959); David Easton, *A Framework for Political Analysis*, vol. 25 (Hoboken, NJ: Prentice-Hall Englewood Cliffs, 1965).

²⁷ Nancy Gina Bermeo, *Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times: The Citizenry and the Breakdown of Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 1999); also see Christopher Claassen, “Does Public Support Help Democracy Survive?,” *American Journal of Political Science* 64, no. 1 (2020).

²⁸ John L. Sullivan, James Piereson, and George E. Marcus, *Political Tolerance and American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

²⁹ Marc Morjé Howard, *The Weakness of Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); James Dawson and Seán Hanley, “What’s Wrong with East-Central Europe?: The Fading Mirage of The Liberal Consensus,” *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (2016).

³⁰ Graham and Svobik, “Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States.”; Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

“treat citizens as a relatively homogenous group,”³¹ differences exist *between* citizens – in the form of socioeconomic and political cleavages – which may exacerbate erosion where commitment to institutions that traditionally structure and balance those differences are weak. Thus, democratic breakdown may be as much about the decisions that citizens make – to engage in politics, to guard against elites’ authoritarian impulses – as it is about the violation of norms by those in charge. Especially in advanced democracies, this means that looking at citizens is essential for understanding the contemporary crisis.

The insight that “mass politics matters” is hardly novel. On top of being core to the definition of democracy, one of the most prominent areas of research in comparative politics examines democratic quality through the lens of citizen attitudes and behavior. Its analytical starting point is that citizens and mass politics are the origin of democratic legitimacy and performance. These works – from Ron Inglehart and Pippa Norris to Russ Dalton, Christian Welzel, and others³² – take citizens seriously, looking at the cross-national character of citizenship and quality of democracy and using surveys to get at comparative mass politics of support for democracy. But there is a significant gap in this literature, too, as it has not engaged with backsliding more directly, in which citizens don’t just change alongside a crisis but in response to it. Here, I endeavor to bring the backsliding and citizenship literatures together. Centering citizens in an analysis of democratic crisis requires looking beyond who citizens vote for and why,³³ and to a wider array of citizen attitudes and norms that, when confronted with democratic crisis, may make undermining democracy feasible or frictional.

So, what are citizens doing in the face of democratic crisis? What does democratic crisis do to public norms? Are citizens upholding liberal democratic values or abandoning them? There are at least two different ways to think about citizens in these hard times. We can look at protests

³¹ Waldner and Lust, “Unwelcome Change: Coming to Terms with Democratic Backsliding,” 103.

³² Ronald Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles among Western Publics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015); Russell J. Dalton, *The Good Citizen: How a Younger Generation Is Reshaping American Politics* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2021); Russell J. Dalton, *Citizen Politics: Public Opinion and Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2013); Christian Welzel, *Freedom Rising* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Pippa Norris, *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Government* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

³³ Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*.

as an example of these different views. From one perspective, civil society and civic activism have never been stronger. The Women's March of January 21, 2017, the day after the inauguration of President Donald Trump, was the largest single day of protest in modern US history, with an estimated 4 million marchers turning out. Voter turnout in the 2018 US midterm election reached record numbers. The Black Lives Matter movement protests against police brutality in the wake of the death of George Floyd were widespread and well-attended, even during social distancing and stay-at-home orders of the COVID-19 pandemic. Enthusiasm spread across the world. In Europe, where marches are more typical and frequent features of expression since 1968, there have regularly been large protests in support for the science of climate change, and against nationalist politics, like the UK leaving the EU, and anti-Islamophobic and far right politics in Germany. In this vision of the contemporary crisis, the citizenry has never been more active, vocal, and critical in speaking out against government abuse and ethnopopulism. And, in some cases, protests not only give voice but produce real change, such as removing long-standing monuments to the Confederacy.

The second view of contemporary citizenship today, however, is quite different. Despite the overwhelming turnout at the Women's March – where Facebook feeds filled up with pictures, knitting circles showed off their bespoke pink pussy hats, and social media circulated the cleverest and wittiest signage – in reality, the March drew only 1% of the US population. Furthermore, unlike traditional social movements, it did not capitalize on its moment of support and transform into an organized political structure but petered out, a result of in-fighting, divisive leadership, and supporter fatigue. Subsequent political moments that generated strong outrage were not met with similarly sized protests – not on the eve of Impeachment, nor to protest family separation of asylum seekers at the border. Black Lives Matter in May–June 2020 is a notable exception, but that too ebbed with many cosmetic changes, like changing the Mississippi state flag, but not widespread or substantive police reform and accountability.

Perhaps more significant we also see the rise of illiberal citizen mobilization, like that witnessed in Washington, D.C. on January 6th. PEGIDA, a German nationalist, anti-immigrant movement, and the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, VA are two further examples. These protests do not match their liberal counterparts in size but, by their presence and through their web of supporters, present a very real and often violent threat to liberal democracy. Extremist groups often mobilize to expressly oppose and physically intimidate progressive marches, such

as those of the Black Lives Matter movement. And, in France, a country accustomed to regular protesting, the Yellow Vest movement (*Mouvement des gilets jaunes*) seems to combine both liberal and illiberal elements. Motivated by rising fuel prices, high costs of living, and tax burdens on the working class, the movement spans the political spectrum to include both left and right and has often resulted in violent clashes between and amongst protestors, bystanders, and police. Or, in a further example of blended purpose, antiracism protests in Paris to protest the death of Adama Traoré (a Malian French man who died in police custody in 2016) interlaced antiracism with anti-Semitic slogans, shouting “*Salé juif*” (dirty Jew) at counter-protestors.

But, to look beyond protesting, most citizens are not marching. They are passive, or – arguably worse – living online in social circles defined by polarization and insularity, sharing information and opinions largely among other like-minded citizens within their ideological silos. And evidence suggests that exposure to opposing views on social media only leads to further polarization.³⁴ These divisions are deepening over time. In a 2014 Pew Research Center poll, 27% of Democrats and 36% of Republicans saw members of the opposite party not only as unfavorable but as a “threat to the nation’s well-being.”³⁵ By 2016, those percentages increased to 41% and 45%, respectively.³⁶ And polarization, while certainly pronounced in the US system, is not exceptional to the US system; cross-national evidence shows a number of advanced democracies characterized by problematic and deepening rifts.³⁷

The most vital dimension of a strong democracy is uncoerced political participation,³⁸ but civic participation itself does not guarantee democratic strength. Like protesting, voting offers a second example of the

³⁴ Christopher A. Bail et al., “Exposure to Opposing Views on Social Media Can Increase Political Polarization,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115, no. 37 (2018).

³⁵ Pew Research Center. “Political Polarization in the American Public.” June 12, 2014, available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/> (accessed January 2, 2021).

³⁶ Pew Research Center. “Politics and Foreign Policy Survey. April 12–19, 2016, available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/dataset/april-2016-politics-and-foreign-policy-survey/> (accessed January 2, 2021).

³⁷ Noam Gidron, James Adams, and Will Horne, “American Affective Polarization in Comparative Perspective,” *Elements in American Politics* (2020).

³⁸ Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963).