

The New Reverse Wave: Democratic Backsliding in Contemporary Democracies

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Abstract— In 2026 CE democracy is facing a turmoil, while the formal democratic regimes remain relatively high, the quality and substance of democratic governance have deteriorated in many of them. This phenomenon is popularly called "Democratic Backsliding" i.e. the gradual erosion of democratic institutions, norms and practices within a formal democratic setup. This article situates democratic backsliding within Samuel P. Huntington's Waves of Democracy, arguing that contemporary democratic decline indicates a new form of regression distinct from earlier authoritarian reversals. By comparing Cold War era, democratic reversal with post-Cold War patterns of internal erosion, this article highlights how majoritarianism, populism, executive advancement and institutional weakening have become a recent cause for democratic backsliding. This article highlights the contemporary situation of democratic champions like the United States, Brazil, Philippines, India, and Turkey and emphasizes the need for democratic resilience through institutional safeguards, political pluralism and civil society engagement.

Index Terms— Populism, Illiberal Democracy, Autocracy, Institutional Erosion, Majoritarianism, Executive Aggrandizement

I. INTRODUCTION

The post-Cold War era was widely seen as the victory of liberal democracy, with the collapse of authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe simply paving the way for End of Politics.¹ The expansion of electoral politics in the Global South, and the global consensus around democratic governance led scholars to describe the 1990s as a moment of unprecedented democratic optimism. However, this optimism has gradually given

way to growing concerns. In practice, democratically elected governments have weakened across regions in terms of institutional checks, restricted civil liberties, judicial independence, and manipulated electoral processes with standstill electoral system. This phenomenon, commonly termed as democratic backsliding, has become a main concern in contemporary times. In 2024, 64 per cent of respondents residing in 12 high-income democracies reported low levels of satisfaction with the state of their democraciesⁱ, and for the first time in 20 years, the world has more autocratic countries than democracies. Unlike classic democracies, where breakdowns were marked by coups or revolutions, democratic backsliding "at its most basic denotes the state-led elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy."ⁱⁱ In democratic backsliding, elected leaders rather than external forces play a central role in undermining democratic norms from within.

This study examines democratic backsliding from a historical and comparative perspective. Building on Samuel P. Huntington's theory of democratic waves, it argues that the current period of democratic decline constitutes a new form of reverse wave one in which electoral institutions remain formally intact while the substantive foundations of democracy are progressively eroded. By comparing patterns of democratic backsliding during the Cold War and post-Cold War eras and analyzing case studies of Brazil, India, Turkey, Philippines the paper seeks to enhance understanding of the causes, dynamics, and consequences of democratic regression in the contemporary period.

also ended and thus ideological evolution had reached its final stage with liberal democracy becoming supreme.

¹ Francis Fukuyama in 'The End of History and the Last Man'(1992) argued that that with end of cold war, the ideological battle between liberalism and socialism

There is a visible growth in the study of democratic backsliding in recent years, where earlier studies largely examined events such as regime collapse, military interventions, or rise authoritarian rule. This research focuses on the subtle decline of democratic systems. Democratic Backsliding according to Nancy Bermeo is a deliberate, state-driven weakening or removal of institutions that sustain democratic governance. On similar patterns, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that modern democracies are more likely to erode from within than to fall through violent disruption. They emphasize how elected leaders often exploit legal and constitutional mechanisms to strengthen their power, including amending laws, controlling media outlets, and politicizing independent and formal institutions. Supporting this perspective, the *Journal of Democracy* has repeatedly highlighted how populist leaders use electoral legitimacy to undermine opposition forces and weaken liberal democratic principles. In context of India, international scholars and commentators point to democratic decline taking place through policies, dissent control, and mounting pressure on autonomous institutions such as media. It is a long-term outcome of Analyses centralized authority, populism and deepening ideological divisions.

Many studies taken together suggest that democratic backsliding is a gradual process rather than an accidental or abrupt development that is shaped by the actions of political leaders, weakened institutional frameworks, and wider socio-economic forces within society.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: HUNTINGTON'S WAVES OF DEMOCRACY

Samuel P. Huntington's theory of democratic waves provides a strong foundation for examining the expansion and contraction of democracy. He identified three major democratization waves, each followed by a reverse wave that partially undid democratic gains. The First Wave (1828–1926) expanded voting rights across Western Europe and North America but was later undermined by the rise of fascist and authoritarian regimes. The Second Wave (1943–1962), driven by post-war rebuilding and decolonization, eventually receded as military governments took power in parts of Latin America and Asia. The Third Wave (1974 onwards) saw democratic

transitions across Southern Europe, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and some regions of Africa and Asia. Huntington argued that “each wave of democratization has been followed by a reverse wave,” emphasizing democracy's cyclical nature. However, the current reverse wave differs significantly from earlier ones. Unlike past reversals that often involved clear regime changes, modern democratic decline typically occurs within systems that still appear democratic. Elections continue, constitutions remain in place, and democratic language persists even as democratic institutions weaken, which makes it crucial to identify the difference. Today's reverse wave does not necessarily abolish democracy instead, transforms it into a weakened form often labeled as electoral autocracy or illiberal democracy. Therefore, while Huntington's framework remains useful, it must be updated to reflect the more subtle processes driving contemporary democratic erosion.

Democratic Backsliding during the Cold War Era

During the Cold War, democratic backsliding usually took the form of direct regime collapse having a face value. Democratically elected governments were frequently removed through military coups, often justified by claims of stability, anti-communism, or national security. Latin America offers prominent examples, such as Chile (1973) and Argentina (1976), where military juntas replaced elected administrations. In these cases, democratic institutions were dismantled quickly and openly. Constitutions were suspended, political parties banned, and civil liberties restricted. External factors especially superpower rivalry and foreign intervention played a significant role in these developments. As a result, democratic breakdown was often sudden, coercive, and externally driven.

Importantly, Cold War-era backsliding was generally recognized as a clear shift toward authoritarianism. There was little ambiguity about the nature of these regime changes, and the international community typically responded accordingly. This clarity sharply contrasts with contemporary patterns of diminishing democracies.

Democratic Backsliding in the Post–Cold War Era

After end of the Cold War era, democratic backsliding has followed a distinct path. Rather than being replaced by outright authoritarian rule, democracies are increasingly weakened from within by leaders who

were elected through legitimate processes. As the Journal of Democracy explains, modern backsliding is “less about coups and more about constitutional manipulation, media capture, and the erosion of checks and balances”, where populism has played a significant role. Populist leaders claim to embody the “true will of the people,” framing opponents, courts, and independent media as illegitimate or part of an elite. Majoritarianism further accelerates this trend by treating electoral victory as a justification for unlimited power, sidelining minority protections and dissenting voices.

III. UNITE STATES

Democratic backsliding in United states under Trump 2.0 is no different and indicate weakening of state institutions, which covers the executive branch, Congress, the judiciary, and grand corruption. Similarly, non-state actors, which include the media and civil society, are under severe pressure but remain relatively resilient. However, elections are still a means of contesting and changing powerⁱⁱⁱ. It is observed that a major means of weakening democracy is executive aggrandizement. Leaders increase executive power through legal changes that diminish the role of legislatures and courts, while maintaining a facade of legality. Elections continue to occur, but their fairness and competitiveness are steadily compromised. This form of backsliding is particularly concerning because it unfolds slowly and becomes normalized over time. Democratic erosion proceeds in incremental stages, making it harder for citizens and international actors to identify and respond effectively.

IV. EMERGING DEMOCRACIES

Brazil has often been described as one of Latin America’s most stable post-authoritarian democracies. Yet recent developments show how democratic systems can weaken without formal collapse. As Levitsky and Ziblatt famously argue, “democracies die not with a bang, but with a whimper” (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Brazil’s recent experience reflects precisely this pattern erosion through norms, rhetoric, and polarization rather than outright institutional breakdown. During Jair Bolsonaro’s presidency, democratic norms were repeatedly challenged. Bolsonaro consistently questioned the credibility of

Brazil’s electronic voting system, despite a lack of evidence as a result rhetoric weakened public trust in elections, a core democratic institution. Bolsonaro’s confrontational approach directly violated the norms of mutual toleration and institutional forbearance. He also targeted the Supreme Federal Court (STF) and the Superior Electoral Court (TSE), portraying them as political enemies rather than neutral guardians of the constitution. This behavior aligns with what Nancy Bermeo describes as democratic backsliding through “the weakening of checks on executive power” carried out by elected leaders themselves (Bermeo, 2016). Freedom House observed that “persistent attacks on electoral integrity increase the risk of political violence and democratic instability” (Freedom House, 2023). The Brazilian case confirms how rhetoric questioning impact election outcomes and mobilizing extremist action threatening democratic continuity. Due to these factors democratic vulnerability remains intact and eroding civil liberties and political institutions.

Democratic decline in the Philippines has followed a more coercive path, driven by state violence, weakened accountability, and systematic attacks on civil liberties. While elections continue, the substance of democracy has been significantly hollowed out. Under President Rodrigo Duterte (2016–2022), democratic norms deteriorated sharply. His anti-drug campaign resulted in thousands of extrajudicial killings. Human Rights Watch reported that “police and unidentified gunmen have killed thousands of Filipinos in Duterte’s ‘war on drugs,’ often without any credible investigation” (Human Rights Watch, 2020). This climate of fear undermined the rule of law and discouraged dissent. As Bermeo explains, modern democratic backsliding often occurs through “state-sanctioned violence that eliminates opposition without suspending elections” (Bermeo, 2016). Independent media also came under sustained pressure. ABS-CBN lost its broadcasting license after repeated presidential attacks, while Rappler faced legal harassment. Misinformation has further weakened democratic participation and manipulating political narratives which distort public debate and reinforce elite control over political outcomes. Under President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., democratic pressures persist, while formal institutions remain intact, accountability mechanisms remain weak. As Freedom House observes, “impunity for political elites continues to undermine democratic

governance in the Philippines” (Freedom House, 2023). Journalists and activists continue to face threats, reinforcing a long-standing culture of fear.

Similarly, Turkey offers a prominent example of democratic backsliding in the post-Cold War era. Once regarded as a successful democratic transition, Turkey has seen substantial erosion under prolonged executive dominance. Constitutional reforms have centralized power in the presidency, weakened judicial independence, and curtailed media freedom. Despite holding regular elections, Turkey increasingly resembles a competitive authoritarian regime. Democratic institutions remain in form, but not in function, reflecting a common pattern of contemporary democratic decline. A key factor shaping Turkey’s political landscape is the threat of Islamic terrorism, particularly from groups such as ISIS and PKK-affiliated factions. Terrorism has been both a genuine security concern and a political instrument used to justify emergency powers, suppress dissent, and expand state surveillance. In the aftermath of attacks, the government has often implemented Emergency decrees and expanded executive authority, Mass arrests and purges within the civil service and restrictions on press freedom and civil society. These actions have contributed to an environment where security is prioritized over democratic liberties, reinforcing authoritarian governance under the guise of stability and counterterrorism.

India presents a unique and complex case of democratic backsliding in the contemporary world. Unlike classical instances of democratic collapse in other countries, where authoritarian government directly took over, India continues to function within the formal structure of electoral democracy. Regular elections, constitutional continuity, and multiparty competition still persist. Yet, beneath this procedural stability, scholars increasingly point to a gradual erosion of liberal-democratic norms, institutional autonomy, and pluralist safeguards. Whether this pattern aligns closely with the contemporary understanding of democratic backsliding as a process rather than event-based phenomenon is a complex to understand.

Historically India has witnessed a strong democratic decline: The Emergency and presently also it is continuously alleged that the key democratic institutions have remained formally in place but the practices underpinning democracy have deteriorated.

This informal democratic decline in contemporary India stands in stark contrast to the Emergency, when Indira Gandhi formally eliminated nearly all democratic institutions. From a theoretical standpoint, India exemplifies what Levitsky and Ziblatt describe as democratic decay through the weakening of informal norms mutual toleration and institutional forbearance rather than the suspension of constitution, formal institutions or abolition of elections. The Indian case also complicates earlier Cold War-era models of regime change, where democracy typically gave way to authoritarian rule through coups or emergency regimes, somewhat matching with present case of the United States. In post-Cold War democracies like India, backsliding manifests through the internal reconfiguration of democratic institutions rather than their outright dismantling.

A significant dimension of India’s democratic backsliding debate concerns the increasing centralization of power within the executive. The ruling party’s dominance, particularly since 2014, has coincided with a strong-leader model of governance that prioritizes decisiveness and popular legitimacy over deliberative institutional checks. While executive assertiveness is not inherently undemocratic, its consequences become problematic when accompanied by the marginalization of oversight bodies and the concentration of decision-making authority.

Parliamentary functioning offers a critical illustration through the frequent use of money bills, the curtailment of parliamentary debates, and the passage of major legislation with limited committee scrutiny have raised concerns about the dilution of legislative accountability. These practices, while constitutionally permissible, signal a departure from the spirit of parliamentary democracy that emphasizes deliberation, opposition engagement, and transparency. The modality of India’s democratic decline reveals how democracies die today: not through a dramatic coup or midnight arrests of opposition leaders, but instead, it moves through suppression of the opposition, intimidation of media, and centralization of executive power. It is also claimed by many scholars that by equating government criticism with disloyalty to the nation, the incumbent government is diminishing the very idea that opposition is legitimate. Such patterns contribute to what scholars’ term “executive aggrandizement,” a hallmark of democratic backsliding in contemporary

electoral democracies. So, who is responsible for this democratic decline? It is not just the leading politicians, institutions or political legacy but the general public who gets manipulated and gets divided in the name of populist agendas and furthermore stops questioning their representatives. The ideological inclination of governments is not responsible for this backsliding, but unenlightened masses, irresponsible media and unbothered opposition are the root cause, which can be corrected by ensuring government accountability.

Opposition Politics and Democratic Responsibility

While the ruling party's actions form a crucial part of the backsliding narrative, the role of the opposition cannot be overlooked. Democratic resilience depends not only on those in power but also on the capacity and conduct of opposition forces. In India, opposition fragmentation, ideological incoherence, and strategic reliance on extra-institutional mobilization have, at times, weakened the effectiveness of democratic contestation.

Frequent parliamentary disruptions, walkouts, and boycotts often justified as protest against executive dominance have paradoxically contributed to the erosion of institutional legitimacy. By withdrawing from legislative spaces, opposition parties risk reinforcing executive control rather than challenging it. Additionally, the tendency to frame all institutional outcomes as illegitimate when unfavorable undermines public trust in democratic processes themselves. Electoral contestation has also increasingly shifted from programmatic debate to symbolic and identity-based mobilization across the political spectrum. This shift narrows the scope of democratic choice and reinforces polarization, making democratic compromise more difficult. Thus, while opposition parties often position themselves as defenders of democracy, their strategies sometimes inadvertently contribute to democratic fatigue and cynicism among citizens. The media occupies a central position in assessments of democratic backsliding in India. Traditionally regarded as the fourth pillar of democracy, large segments of the Indian media are now criticized for their proximity to political power and corporate interests. The decline of quality journalism, the rise of partisan television debates, and the amplification of majoritarian narratives have collectively reshaped the public sphere. Rather than

acting as a watchdog, sections of the media increasingly function as agenda-setters aligned with dominant political discourses, either siding with majority or oppositional forces. This transformation does not involve direct censorship in most cases but operates through ownership patterns, advertising dependence, and informal pressures. As a result, critical voices are often marginalized, while dissenting perspectives are framed as anti-national or illegitimate.

Simultaneously, digital media and social platforms have intensified political polarization. Misinformation, selective outrage, and algorithm-driven echo chambers weaken deliberative democracy by privileging emotion over evidence. The regulation of digital spaces, while necessary, has raised additional concerns regarding free speech and state overreach, further complicating the democratic landscape.

India's elections remain largely competitive and participatory, distinguishing it from outright authoritarian regimes. However, concerns regarding campaign finance opacity, the unequal access to media coverage, and the use of state resources during elections point to an uneven playing field. Debates surrounding electoral institutions, particularly the Election Commission, reflect a broader crisis of institutional trust. Even in the absence of proven manipulation, the perception of bias can be democratically corrosive. When citizens and political actors lose confidence in neutral arbiters, democratic legitimacy suffers, regardless of procedural compliance.

Democracy watching organizations categorize India as "hybrid regime" that is, neither a full democracy nor a full autocracy. Whereas, the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project relegated India to the status of "electoral autocracy" and the Economist Intelligence Unit moved India into the "flawed democracy". India in the Comparative Backsliding Framework - Placed within the broader comparative literature, aligns with post-Cold War cases where democracy erodes from within, rather than collapse from above. Unlike Turkey, where constitutional changes have overtly consolidated executive power, India's backsliding is more incremental and contested. This makes the Indian case especially significant, as it demonstrates how democratic decline can coexist with electoral continuity and constitutional formality. However, the persistence of elections should not obscure the

weakening of accountability, pluralism, and institutional autonomy.

India's experience thus reinforces the argument that democratic backsliding is not merely about regime change but about the quality of democratic practice for which the leading government, opposition parties, media, institutions and public are all together responsible.

V. CONCLUSION

Democratic backsliding stands as one of the most pressing political challenges of our time. Viewed through Huntington's framework of democratic waves, the current decline represents a new kind of

reverse wave marked not by sudden collapse, but by gradual internal erosion. Comparing Cold War-era backsliding with that of the post-Cold War period highlights a shift from outright authoritarian takeover to a subtler process of democratic hollowing. The democratic backsliding can occur in a wide range of political contexts, regardless of a country's history or institutional strength. Confronting this issue requires more than maintaining democratic procedures; it calls for a renewed dedication to democratic norms, institutional independence, pluralism and combined efforts of incumbent government and oppositional parties in reversing the current trend of democratic decline.

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