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Introduction

THIS BOOK is about the fraying of democracy. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, in two dozen countries around the world, elected presidents and prime ministers have come into office and attacked their own democratic systems. They have adopted a hostile stance toward key norms, actors, and institutions. Verbal attacks have been followed by destructive actions against these same targets. A prime minister might launch diatribes against the press, complaints that go beyond the usual ones about misquotes or biased reporting. Or he might question, implicitly or explicitly, the very value of an independent press. Hostile words have been followed by hostile actions—lawsuits against journalists, buyouts of independent news organs by wealthy friends of the leader, the establishment of official press-monitoring organizations, the closing down of troublesome venues.

And so it has been for other institutions. A president declares judges to be incompetent, corrupt, and biased, all of which would justify packing the courts with loyalists. Civil society organizations are agents of foreign entities and are banned if they have international connections. The civil administration is rebranded the “deep state,” public-sector experts are denigrated, and laws protecting their employment are challenged. Leaders who seem poised to lose an election challenge the integrity of

election-administration bodies; if they do in fact lose, they decry widespread fraud.

These developments are troubling and deeply confusing. In earlier eras, the main threat to democracy was the military coup, a threat confined to new democracies in poor countries. Now we face the prospect of democracy eating away at itself from within, and doing so in some wealthy and seemingly established systems. And whereas coups came as sudden explosions, impossible to hide, democratic backsliding has had a stealthy, gradual, slow-drip quality, making it harder for the population to realize what is happening until the process is well underway.

Democratic erosion in our day carries echoes of an earlier era. Between the First and Second World Wars, democracy was threatened across Europe and collapsed in some countries. Indeed, the 1930s offer lessons about how to put up guardrails around contemporary democracies.¹ The fraying of democracy nearly a century ago was a precursor to the outbreak of World War II. With autocratic aggressors again disturbing the peace in our own era, this history is a reminder of what is at stake in the survival and health of democracy.

Why is democracy eroding? The explanations that scholars and observers have offered usually focus on the actions or inactions of particular individuals, such as political party leaders' failure to put up guardrails to control backsliding leaders. Or they focus on features of the mass public that leave it tolerant of attacks on democratic institutions. Hence the focus on acute partisan polarization of the electorate, a feature that I will also discuss.

These explanations are accurate and important. But they fail to explain why the world is experiencing a wave of democratic erosion *at this time*, from the tail end of the twentieth century through the first decades of the twenty-first century. The account I offer in this book is just such an historical explanation, an answer to the question, why now?

1. See Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018).

To understand events of our day, we need to go back several decades. The roots of erosion lie in the latter decades of the twentieth century. In the wake of economic deregulation and the global integration of markets for goods and capital, income inequality grew. The promise of this era was that economic growth would spread throughout societies; a rising tide would lift all boats.

But it did not. To offer one example, in the U.S., vigorous economic growth from the end of World War II to 1980 was shared about evenly across low-, middle-, and upper-income groups. After 1980, income growth stalled for those at the bottom, was mediocre for those in the middle, and surged for those at the top. And like the U.S., most advanced democracies saw income gaps grow.

In the Global South, income gaps were already large in the 1990s, when markets were deregulated and barriers to trade and investment lowered. Globalization widened these gaps.

In the first part of this book I lay out the steps that go from income inequality to democratic erosion. I trace two distinct paths that end up in the same place: with elected leaders attacking their own democratic institutions. One path is via the rise of right-wing ethnonationalist parties, the other via left-wing populists. Societal developments from earlier decades and inequality in the era of globalization induced changes in party systems in the advanced democracies, and in new democracies in the post-Communist world. These party-system changes opened space for right-wing ethnonationalist parties, some of which would gain power and undermine their democratic systems. Party-system change in the Global South more often meant not an opening to new parties but the crystallizing of left-populist forces with enormous societal appeal. These shifts, over several decades, were the backdrop to democratic erosion in the first quarter of the twenty-first century.

That globalization and growing income gaps would be augurs for unhealthy political developments was anticipated by the development economist Dani Rodrik. He explained that, in wealthy countries, globalization encouraged an inflow of labor; these were

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places where populist politicians mobilized on cultural or identity cleavages. In the developing world, globalization meant inflows of foreign-produced goods, finance, and investment; here it was easier for politicians to mobilize along class and income lines. Thus, Rodrik explains,

The “enemies of the people” are different in each case. Populist [*sic*] who emphasize the identity cleavage target foreigners or minorities, and this produces right-wing populism. Those who emphasize the income cleavage target the wealthy and large corporations, producing left-wing populism.²

Whether ethnonationalism or class is its “idiom,” mobilization draws its energy from the deepened divide “between the winners and the losers of exposure to global competition.”³

But deregulation and globalization did not lead to erosion in all countries. In the chapters to come, I will explain what placed some democracies at particular risk. As a preview, imagine a train on which presidents and prime ministers are travelling. They might get off the train before it arrives at a point at which their democracies erode, or they might remain on board. What is the profile of leaders who stay on the train until the bitter end, and what kind of society do they typically govern over?

Leaders from countries in which gaps in income and wealth are large are more likely to stay aboard. So are those who govern over populations that are bitterly polarized by partisanship, populations that see the other party as an existential threat. Likewise, presidents and prime ministers are more prone to stay on board if they govern over populations that are distrustful of political and

2. Rodrik (2018), p. 13. Rodrik uses the term “populism” differently than I do in this book. He uses it to describe a general category of politicians and suggests class and identity subvariants of populists. I refer to right-wing backsliders as “ethnonationalists” and reserve the term “populist” for left-wing leaders—with further distinctions, explained later, between populist and non-populist leftists, as I explain further in Chapter 2.

3. Rodrik (2021), p. 134.

societal institutions, from the traditional political parties to the press and the courts. A more institutionally trusting populace will be more prone to using its votes to pressure the leader to exit the train. And fellow leaders of the backsliders' party, who may have reasons of their own for wishing to see them off the train, will be better able to escort them off if the public is less enraptured by polarizing leaders.

The personal inclinations of presidents and prime ministers also matter. Even leaders of unequal, polarized, and institutionally distrustful countries may choose to exit the train voluntarily if they are committed to the ideals of liberal democracy and in awe of their constitutions and their states' founding generations. Presidents and prime ministers who have no such democratic commitments will gladly stay aboard. So will those who see the train as a great place to conspire to steal from the public and avoid prosecution. If they think they will exit the train and enter a courtroom where they will be tried for their misdeeds, they will prefer the safety of their compartments.

The train metaphor is of course a simplification. For one thing, the features that will keep leaders on the train are not entirely independent but connected to one another. Unequal countries are also more prone to being polarized. And their leaders don't just accept their societies as they find them. They encourage polarization, the mutual hatred of citizens, one against another. And having come to power by promising to shutter institutions, they encourage distrust in their countries' institutions. They try to get their followers to see the press, the courts, traditional parties, and election-administration bodies as broken. They advocate for replacing them with alternatives over which the executive exercises control. In short, these backsliding leaders trash-talk their democracies.

The image of a common destination where democracy is eroded all at once is also not quite right. In fact, leaders have chances to observe one another before they decide whether to exit or remain on board. Imagine some South American presidents, toward the outset of their journey, looking out the train's windows

and catching a glimpse of their Venezuelan counterpart engineering a rewrite of his country's constitution in ways that concentrate power in his hands. Imagine a North American president looking out to see a European prime minister rejiggering his supreme court to make it more friendly and sidelining news organizations that criticize him. The presidents who observe these dubious role models are encouraged to stay on board to try their hand at democratic backsliding in their own societies.

But the presidents and prime ministers whom we have been imagining are not hermetically sealed inside the train. In fact they are vulnerable to all kinds of actors who want to escort, pressure, or force them off. If enough judges maintain professional standards in their courtrooms, the leaders' efforts to crack down on opponents or steal elections can be thwarted. If enough civil society groups deny the leaders' efforts to normalize the shredding of rules, the backsliders' efforts to extend a cloak of respectability over their actions can fail. If democratic forces can win over voters with inspiring visions of a better collective future, and back these claims up with solid public policies, democracy can prevail.

In the second part of the book, I zoom in on the key question of how voters respond to backsliding leaders. I offer answers to a puzzle: If common citizens in democracies are not, in general, ready to jettison their systems of government, why do they put up with leaders who seem keen on doing just that? The answers center around highly polarized electorates and leaders who denigrate their country's institutions in the eyes of citizens.

In the final chapter of this book I offer reflections on how to put the brakes on democratic backsliding and how to repair countries in which democracy remains frayed, even after the exit of the backsliding leadership.

When I've talked to people about this project, some doubt that there is any "there there." Democracy is always messy, they point

out, and prone to ups and downs. In the U.S., many people became concerned about the strength of American democracy with the first presidency of Donald Trump. After Trump briefly receded from the scene, they comforted themselves with the thought that this had been a blip and that the solidity of American democracy had never really been in question. (For many, with Trump's reelection in 2024, concerns about the health of American democracy returned.)

The reaction is understandable. But in this book I present evidence that it's inaccurate. This was not a blip. Studies by leading political scientists concur that a wave of democratic erosion had indeed broken out over the world in the last two decades.⁴ The U.S. was part of this wave. Real damage has been done to more than a handful of democracies around the globe, damage that can last past the time when the backsliding leader leaves office. For instance, democracy is designed to offer peaceful ways to settle differences. Democracies that erode become more violent: peaceful protesters are subjected to harassment, public servants are threatened, judges require security details, and politicians are shot at.

The point extends to international relations. Democracies are less likely to go to war against one another, so a less democratic world is a less peaceful one.⁵

Furthermore, even if one would-be autocrat disembarks from our imagined train, societal conditions may remain ripe for an imitator to come along and reinitiate the process of erosion. The backsliding leader may exit the scene but leave behind an electorate that persists in viewing public institutions as corrupted and fellow citizens as existential threats.

In sum, democratic erosion is real; it can end in autocracy, and even when it does not, it damages democracy and weakens the

4. Key general works that make this point include Bermeo (2016), Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), Waldner and Lust (2018), and Haggard and Kaufman (2021).

5. Dafoe, Oneal, and Russett (2013).

rights, protections, and freedoms of citizens who live through the experience.

I have also encountered another reaction that goes like this. We call country x a “democracy,” but it’s far from ideal. It’s a place where people do not escape material deprivation, exclusion, or racism. It’s a place where the decks seem to be stacked against common people, where parents worry about their children’s futures. It promises equal rights and legal protections but often falls short. With all of these failings, what is the value of democracy, and why should we worry about its decline?

In fact, there is much evidence that democracies are better places to live than autocracies. They are more economically dynamic. By one estimate, a shift from autocracy to democracy is associated with a 20 percent increase in a key measure of national wealth, gross domestic product per capita, in the long run.⁶ This growth reflects more public spending by democracies on education and health care, as well as a better environment for private investment that the rule of law offers. Independent labor movements and electoral pressures produce greater income equality in democracies compared to autocracies—again, on average and over the long term.⁷ So there is reason to believe the words of an Argentine politician, uttered as his country stood at the threshold between a waning dictatorship and a rising democracy: “With democracy, not only do we vote, we also eat, we are healed, and we are educated.”⁸

Still, the question “what is democracy good for?” cannot be answered entirely in terms of economic dynamism or social benefits. A wise colleague, Cathy Cohen, offered this answer to the

6. Acemoglu et al. (2019). See also Rodrik and Wacziarg (2005) and Przeworski et al. (2000).

7. Oyèkolá (2023) p. 23. For a review, see Acemoglu et al. (2015).

8. The phrase is from Raúl Alfonsín who, in 1983, became Argentina’s first democratically elected president since 1973. I am grateful to Luis Schiumerini for the reference.

question: democracies don't always achieve the best and most fair outcomes. But they offer hope.

Here's what I think she means.

Consider the situation of minority groups, people who are set off from the majority population because of the way they look or the language they speak or the religion they practice. Often minority groups face harassment, abuse, and violence. These indignities might be meted out by their fellow citizens, by the police and security forces, or by other powerful actors. The key question is: do the minority groups have any recourse? Are there actions that they can take, as individuals or collectively, to pursue justice and restore dignity?

Democracies institutionalize formal rights that can offer recourse to minorities and the marginalized, as individuals and as groups. Political scientists debate definitions of democracy, but a widely shared one is that they are political systems in which governments protect a range of citizens' rights. Citizens have the right to express themselves on political matters without fear of punishment. They have the right to associate and to have access to alternative sources of information. Crucially, most adult citizens have the right to vote in free and fair elections. Governing parties can lose elections and, when they do, they step down peacefully.⁹

These institutional arrangements make democracies better able to protect citizens against arbitrary arrest, violations of habeas corpus, and discrimination due to race, ethnicity, and religion—in short, protect their human rights.¹⁰

In autocratizing countries, these protections weaken. Consider the situation of Turkey, a multi-ethnic society. Under governments led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Justice and Development

9. Most of the criteria I list can be found in Dahl (1998); the requirement that governing parties can lose and step down is emphasized in Przeworski (1991).

10. The greater protection of human rights by democratic than by authoritarian regimes has been the focus of much social science research, a review of which can be found in Davenport (2007).

Party (AKP), press freedoms, judicial independence, and confidence in elections have frayed. The largest minority population is that of Kurds. Kurds in Turkey face harassment, abuse, and violence. Turkish governments since the early twentieth century have tried to ban the use of the Kurdish language and suppress Kurdish political organizations.

Though Kurds in Turkey have mounted violent separatist movements, they have also sought representation through non-violent political parties. In the increasingly constricted space of Turkish democracy, these peaceful actors have seen their rights severely curtailed. One dynamic Kurdish party leader had to run his presidential campaign from a prison cell.¹¹

In Turkey's fraying democracy, space for peaceful collective action has narrowed for everyone. In May and June 2013, Turks with a wide variety of ethnic and religious identities—secular Turks, Alawites, some devout Sunnis—as well as from a range of political and civil society organizations, protested together in the hundreds of thousands. The Gezi Park protests began as an effort to protect a green space in central Istanbul and ballooned into a major national uprising. The Turkish press, partly under government-friendly ownership and partly self-censored, did not cover this massive event, which most people learned about from cellphone-camera footage and social media posts. Protesters met with a harsh police response.

When I visited Istanbul on research trip in 2015, I met Mücella Yapıcı. She is an architect and a former secretary of the Istanbul Chamber of Architects. She had been active in the Gezi Park protests. I remember a shudder coming over me when Mücella told me that she faced prosecution on the charge of "setting up and leading an unlawful organization." Her prison term, should she be convicted, would be more than 20 years. Later that year, Mücella was exonerated in court. But in 2022, her Gezi-related charges were

11. The party is the People's Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP), the leader, Selahattin Demirtaş.

heightened to “attempted overthrow of the government.” Then 71 years old, she was convicted and sentenced to 18 years in prison.

The American experience of extending, or denying, rights to minorities yields similar lessons. The slow expansion of rights in the twentieth century led to greater protections against violence, harassment, and abuse. But the recent erosion of American democracy poses threats to these very rights, threats that harm all Americans.

By standard definitions, the U.S. is a democracy, though many caveats apply. Money plays a big role in American politics, and has since the nineteenth century. The expansion of suffrage in the U.S. has been slow. Women did not gain the right to vote in national elections until 1920. The exclusion of women from “universal” suffrage led Robert Dahl, a renowned democratic theorist, to define the U.S. and other countries well into the twentieth century as “male democracies.”¹² African-Americans did not gain the right to vote until Reconstruction. But in the era of Jim Crow, poll taxes, literacy tests, and other barriers rendered that right a dead letter in much of the South.

Jim Crow was a period of enormous violence against Black Americans. More than 4,400 were killed in lynchings, incidents of mass violence often carried out with the complicity of local officials. (Mexicans, Italian, and Chinese immigrants and indigenous people were also lynched, though in lower numbers than Blacks.¹³) The perpetrators were almost never prosecuted.¹⁴ Local activists, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and newspapers that brought attention to these crimes eventually curtailed lynchings in the 1930s. Without freedoms of speech, association, and the press, their work would have been much more difficult.

12. Dahl (1998).

13. See Carrigan and Webb (2003).

14. Blacks were also targeted by other forms of violence, such as assaults, rapes, and murders (without the public spectacle of lynchings). See Wood (2018).

Continued violence against Black Americans, as well as prejudice and other indignities, are ongoing blights on American democracy. Today these actions are sometimes followed by prosecutions and punishment. Legal accountability would rarely happen if not for an active civil society that agitates for it. Still, in recent years, false claims of widespread fraud in elections have encouraged a return to constraints on ballot access. Democratic erosion puts the rights of minorities, and of citizens more broadly, on the defensive.

Brave citizens in autocratic countries press for change, but the risks they run can be staggeringly high. The risks are high as well in severely frayed democracies, like Turkey, to which the experience of Mücella attests. Democracies in general offer room for action and hope; they are systems worth fighting for, and worth fighting to make them better.

Here is a road map to chapters to come. I begin, in Chapter 1, by describing democratic erosion. Erosion happens when presidents and prime ministers reduce the constraints they face, constraints imposed by courts, legislatures, public administrators, the press and voters. Erosion is not something that leaders passively experience. They purposefully weaken these institutional constraints with a series of strategies that scholars aptly describe as the aspiring autocrats' "playbook," detailed in Chapter 1.

The first step in explaining why democracies erode is to gather data from democracies around the world, those that have eroded and those that have not, and to use statistical techniques to identify likely causes of erosion, a task I report on in Chapter 2. The model reveals structural factors that put countries at increased risk of erosion. The key risk factor is income inequality. The most unequal democracies have about a 30% chance of eroding in any given year, the most equal ones, a mere two or three percent chance. The statistical association between inequality and erosion

helps explain why, as suggested earlier, the world experienced a wave of erosion in the aftermath of a period of globalization and deregulation.

Chapters 3 and 4 lay out the links in the chain connecting inequality to democratic erosion. Chapter 3 follows the story through the rise of right-wing ethnonationalists in the Global North; chapter 4 traces it, mainly through left-wing populists, in the Global South.

Whether they are right-wing ethnonationalists or left-wing populists, democratic eroders cannot succeed if they lose too much support among voters. When democracies collapse after military coups, mass public opinion stops mattering. When democracies decline at the hands of self-aggrandizing elected leaders, public sentiment still must be attended to. Sustained support for the backsliding leader from the public often made the difference between a steady decline of democracy and a decline that was cut short. Understanding democratic erosion, then, requires that we dig deeply into how voters respond to backsliding leaders, and into how these leaders try to keep voters on board with their project. These are tasks that I undertake in Part 2 of the book.

Chapter 5 explores the logics of polarization and democratic trash talk. Chapter 6 explores the evidence for these logics. A polarized public means that large numbers of voters will tolerate anti-democratic actions by their leader as the price to be paid for keeping the despised other side out of power. Because polarization is good for backsliders, they have powerful incentives to drive voters even further toward hatred of the other side. Examples of presidents, prime ministers, and other party elites using highly polarizing rhetoric are not hard to come by.

Still, there are limits to the effectiveness of polarizing strategies. Polarizing rhetoric stirs up the backsliders' followers. But it also stirs up the supporters of opposing parties and alienates independent or less-engaged voters. An alternative strategy, and one less prone to alienating opposition and independent voters, is one that I call trash-talking democracy: political leaders' use of rhetoric

aimed at persuading voters that the country's core political institutions are profoundly flawed. When backsliders use polarizing speech, their implicit message is, *keep me in power in order to stave off the catastrophe that would result if the other side wins*. When they trash-talk, the implicit message is, *don't worry about my weakening of key institutions, they were a shambles already*. They also imply that only concentrating more power in the hands of the president or the prime minister will allow the democracy to flourish. These institutions are already corrupt and elitist—the message goes—and should be torn down in order to build a better system. Backsliding leaders trash-talk democracy in order to encourage cynicism among the citizenry.

Polarization and democratic trash talk are, then, strategies to boost support for backsliding leaders. The power of these strategies lies in part in the grains of truth they contain. Opposing parties do include extreme members who would, if given free rein, seriously harm the interests of the backsliders' followers. Democratic trash talk, likewise, is not all smoke and mirrors: some judges are corrupt, some journalists are inept and mendacious.

But backsliders don't just exaggerate. Their success often relies on large swaths of the citizenry believing claims that are outright falsehoods. Chapter 7 delves into why normal people might believe crazy claims made by self-interested leaders, such as that a well-regulated election was “stolen” from the true victor. This exploration forces me to go deeper into the psychological dimensions of demagoguery and backsliding.

If income gaps, polarized attacks on others and on elite institutions, and powerful, reality-distorting psychic bonds between backsliders and voters lie behind democratic erosion, how can they be countered? Chapter 8 identifies weak points and contradictions in the would-be autocrats' strategies of rule. In it I draw on social-science evidence for how to de-polarize and how to counter the effects of democratic trash talk and rebuild optimism about democracy. Clearly that last project means fighting to make democracy work better, especially for the kinds of citizens who

have good reasons to see themselves as left behind by the wealthy and by elites. A simple lesson, which takes us back full circle to Chapter 2, is that income inequality carries distinct political risks. Reducing inequality and shoring up democracy are not separate tasks, but instead go hand in hand.

Much is at stake, then, in the health and survival of democracies around the world. Everyone can play a part, from political activists to pro-democratic party leaders, to lawyers and judges and voters. The outpouring of academic studies from scholars around the globe has made a difference. Protecting democracy will require inventiveness and courage, as well as analytical acuity about why we have gone off track and how to get back on it.

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