universität wien

BAK10: Comparative Democratic Politics

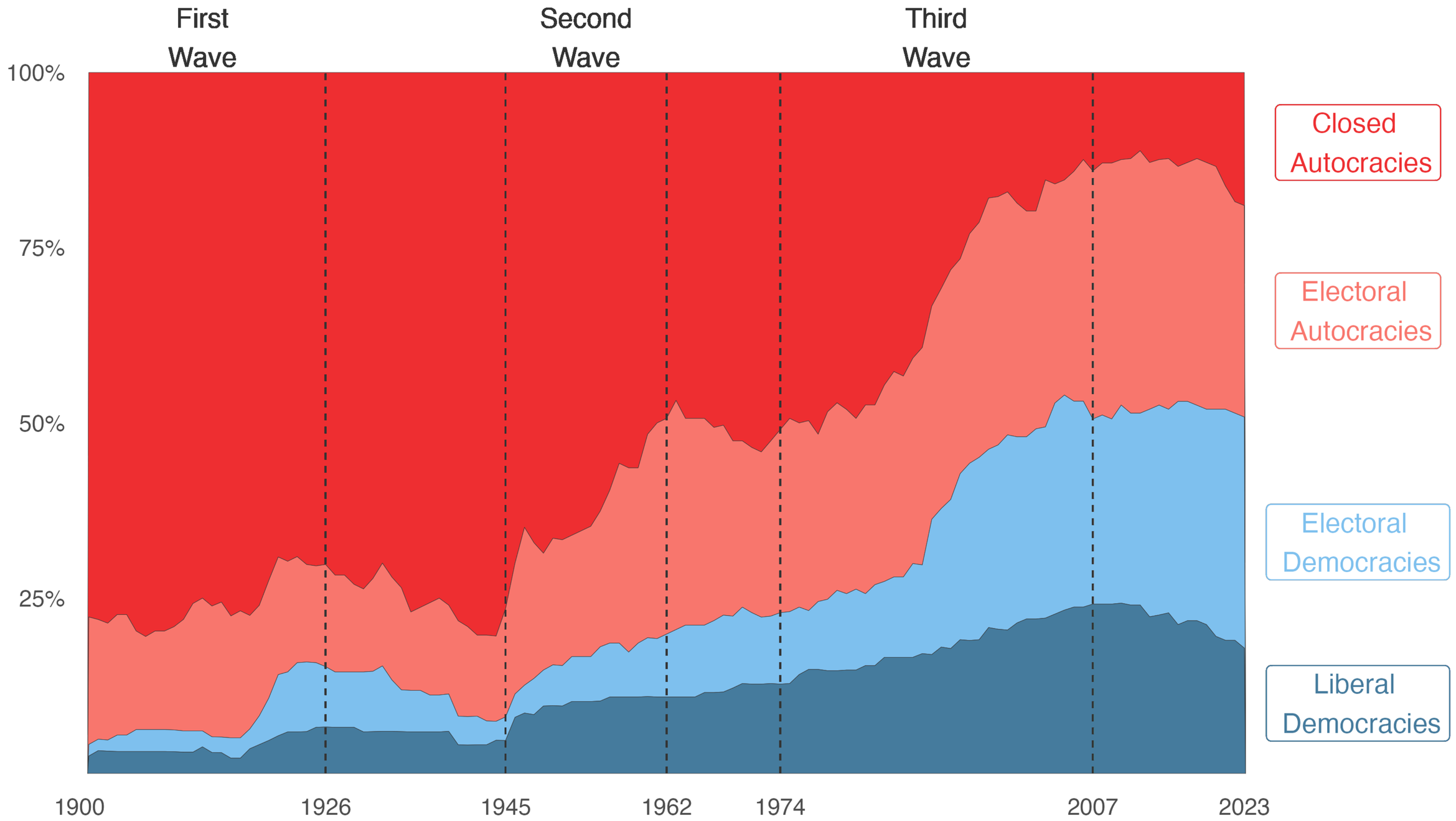
Week 4 - Democratic Backsliding

Leonardo Carella

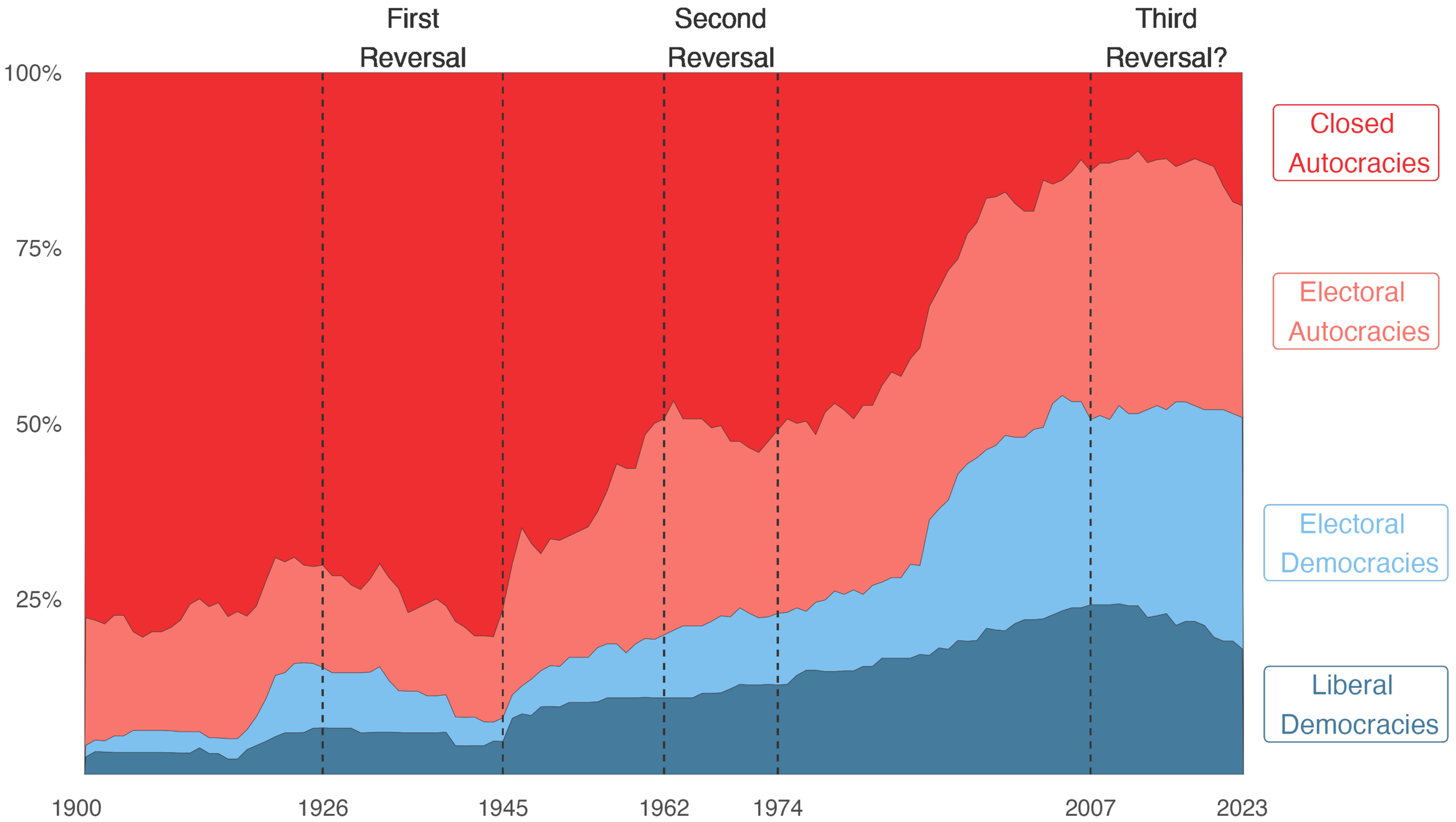
Where were we…?

- **Democracy** (week 1)
  - **Minimalist:** competition for public offices (“free and fair elections”).
  - **Liberal democracy:** + civil liberties, checks and balances, rule of law.

- **Democratisation** (week 3)
  - Huntington’s **‘three waves’** of democratisation.



Source: V-Dem, Lührmann et al. (2018)



Source: V-Dem, Lührmann et al. (2018)

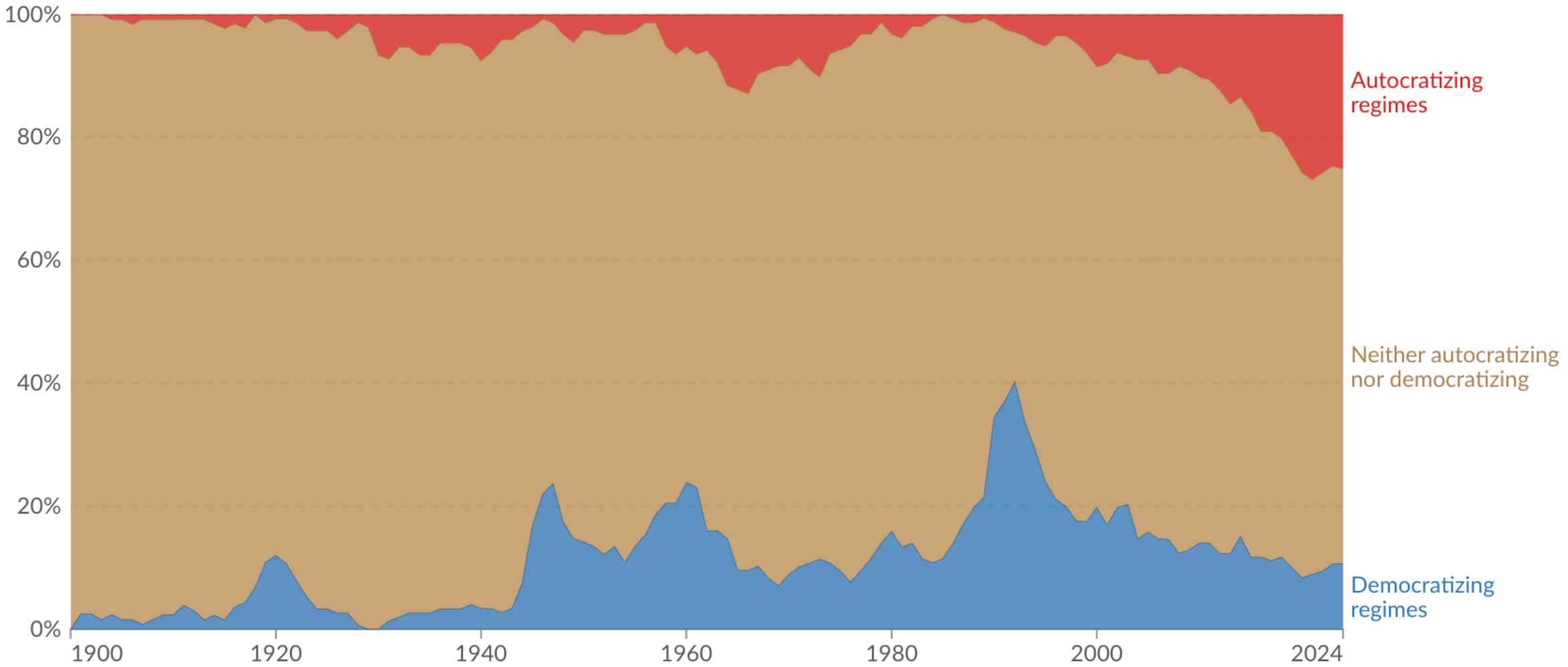
Countries that are democratizing and autocratizing, World

Data by Episodes of Regime Transformation and V-Dem.

Our World in Data

Table | Chart

Edit regions | Settings



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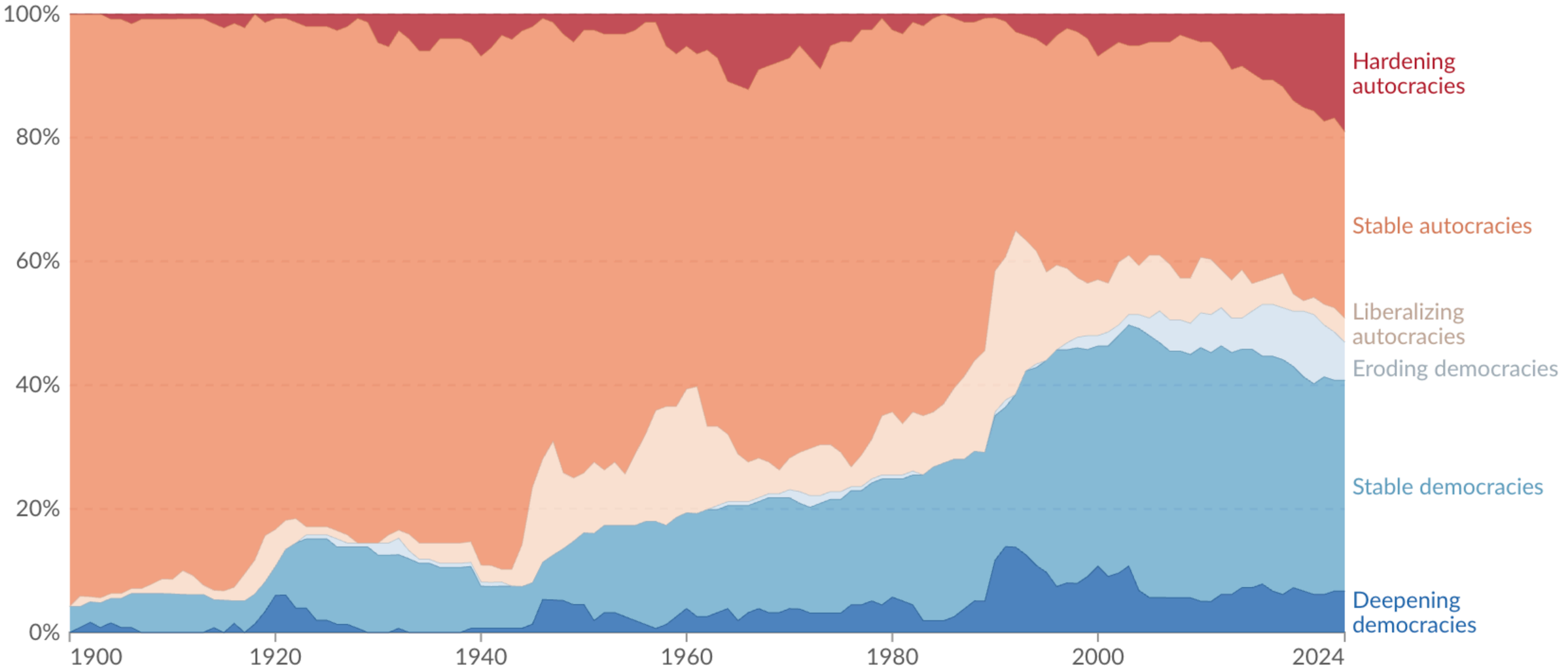

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Democratic Backsliding

- Term popularised by Nancy Bermeo (2016), who noticed:
  - Decline in coups, autogolpes, outright vote fraud, typical of democratic breakdowns in the Cold War.
  - Increase in executive aggrandisement and ‘strategic manipulation’ of the electoral process

FIGURE 1—COUP FREQUENCY IN DEMOCRACIES, 1950–2014

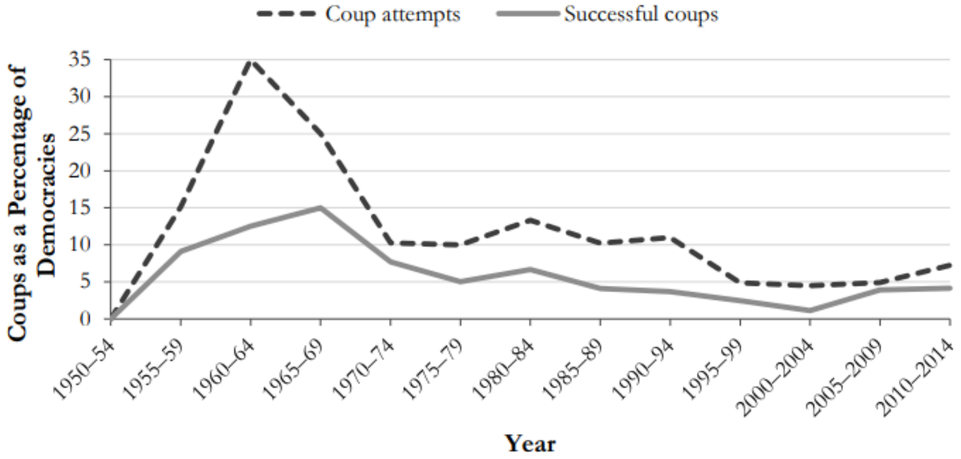
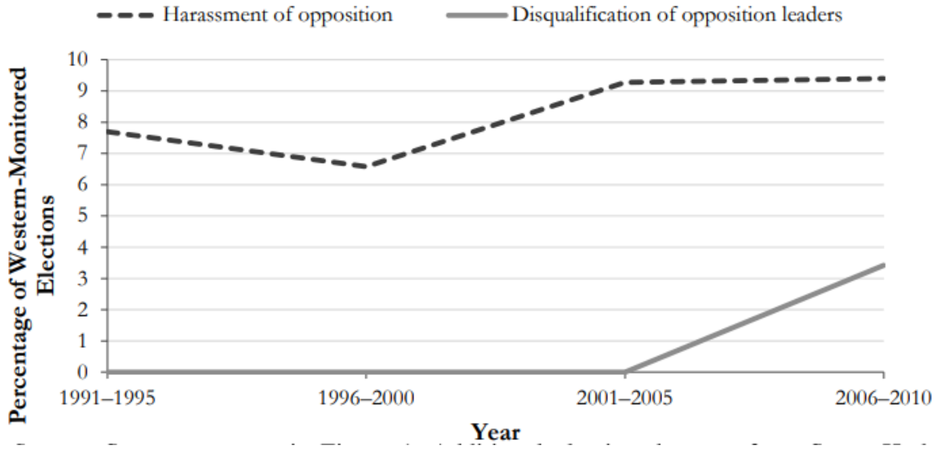


FIGURE 3—OPPOSITION HARASSMENT AND LEADER DISQUALIFICATION, 1991–2010



- Bermeo, N. (2016). On democratic backsliding. Journal of democracy, 27(1), 5-19.

Democratic Backsliding

“Incremental erosion of democratic institutions, rules and norms that results from the actions of duly elected governments” (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021)

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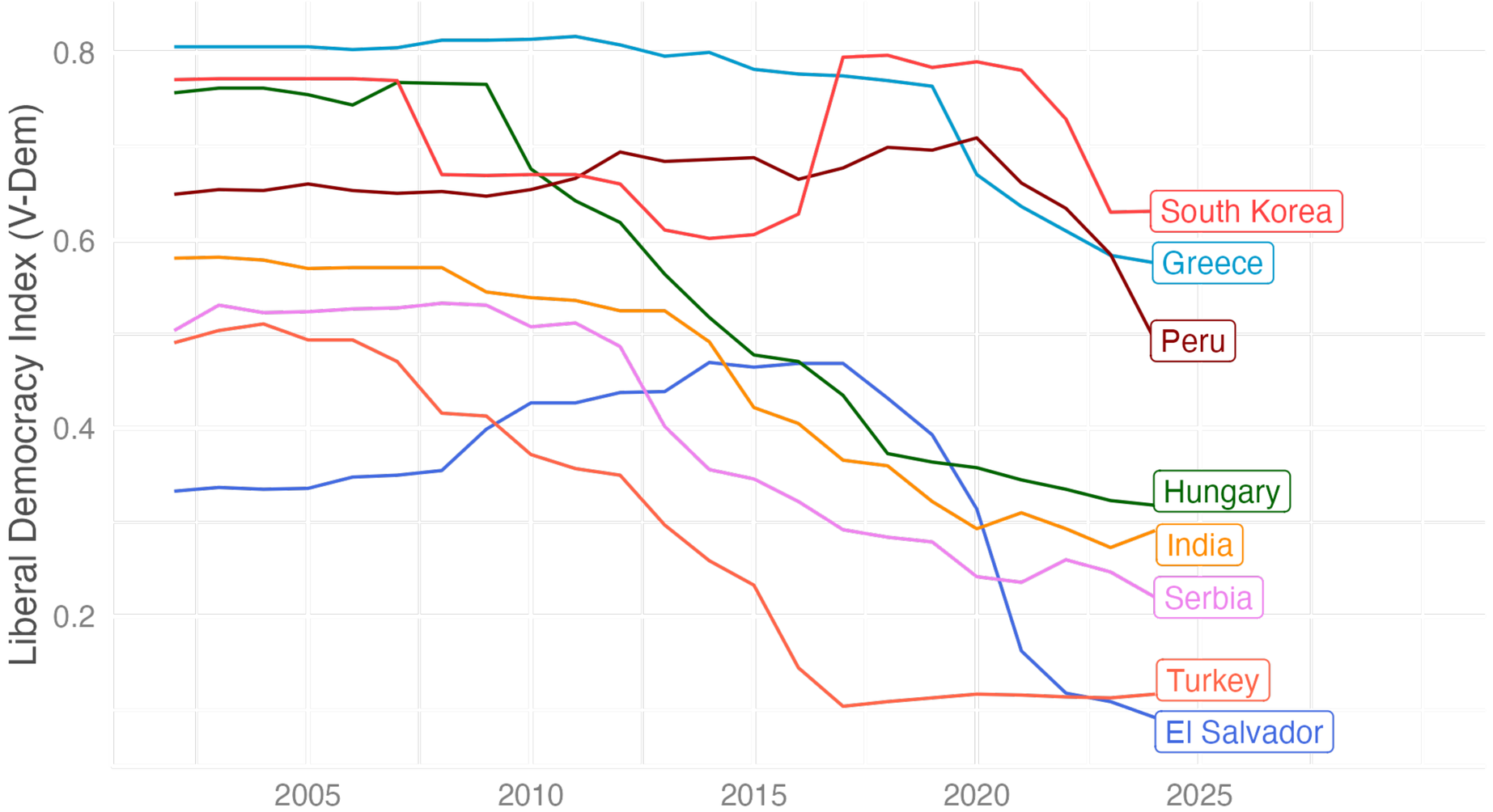

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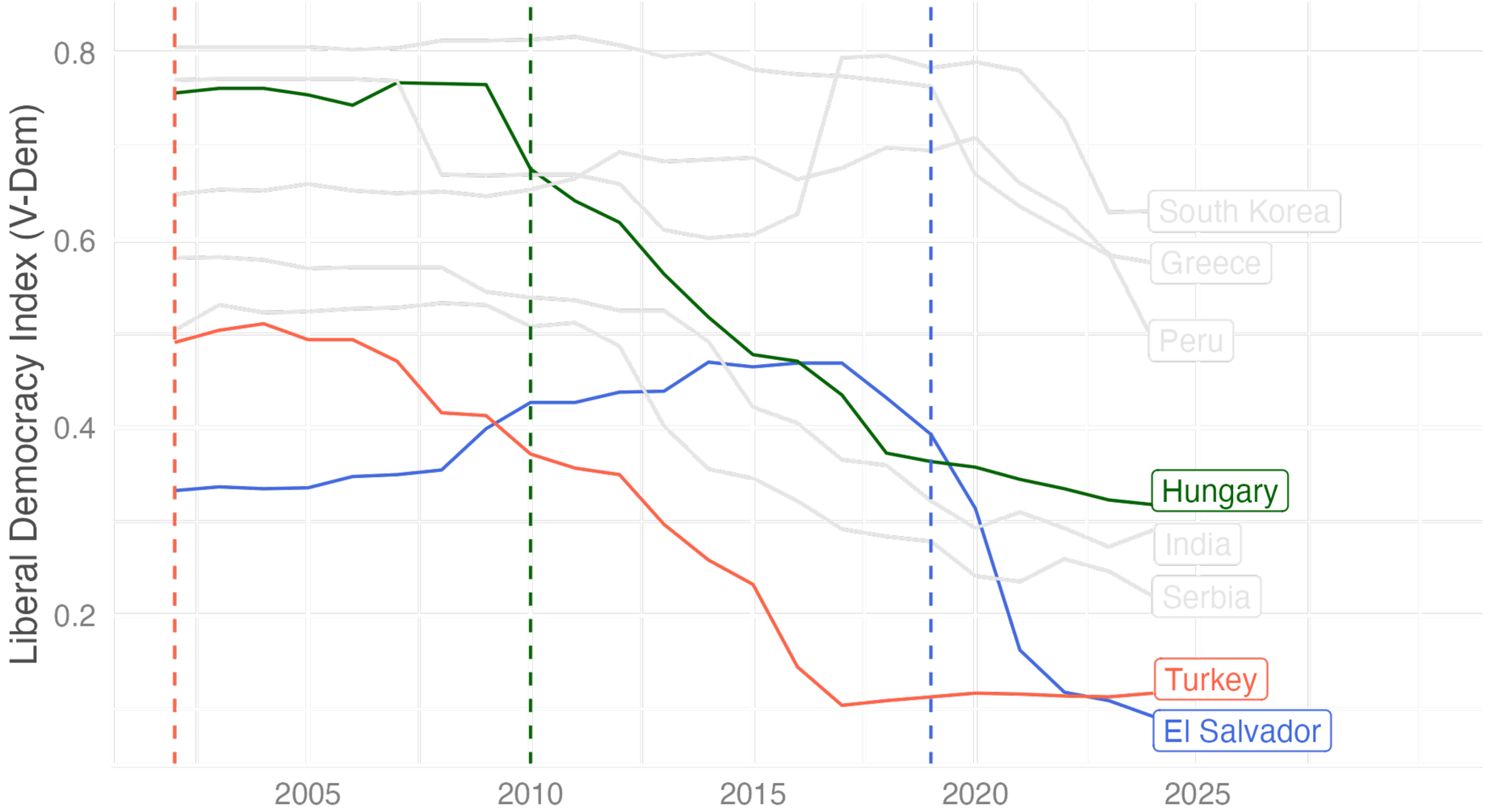

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Turkey's parliament passes law to restructure judiciary, bolstering Erdogan

Turkish lira plunges after Erdogan sacks central bank governor

Turkey's Erdogan fires statistics chief after inflation data shows 19-year high

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Turkey: Erdogan's most popular political rival sentenced to jail and banned from politics

Turkey tightens internet censorship ahead of elections

New controls on VPNs underline Erdoğan's moves to curb freedom of information

Turkish court freezes opposition party's campaign funds ahead of elections

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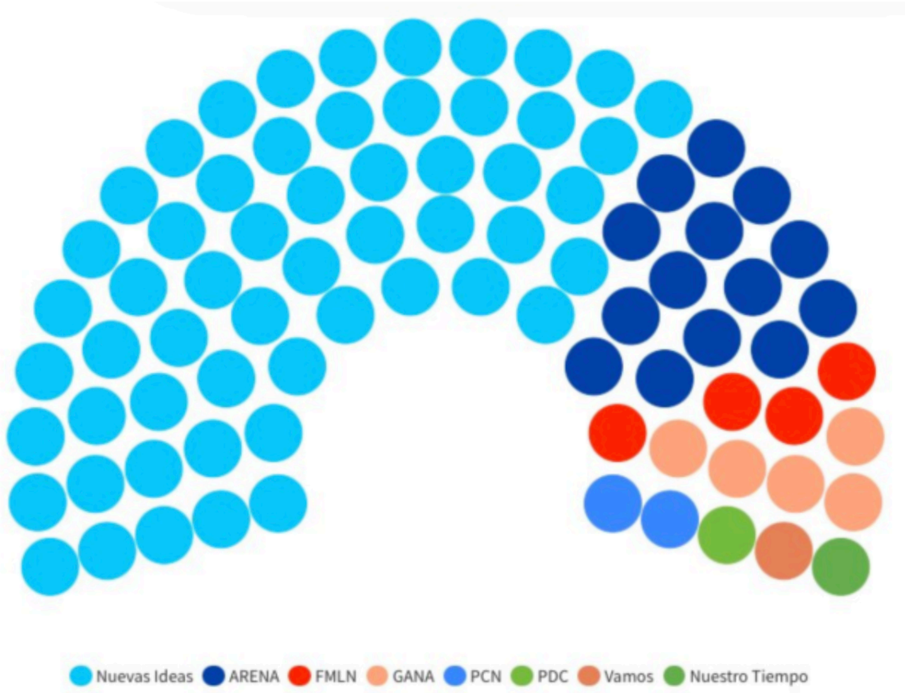

2021 Parliamentary election

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- Exploit perceptions of dysfunction and deadlock.

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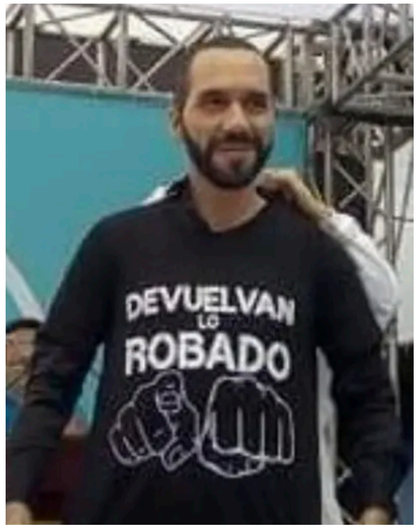

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Credits: Gabriel Bouys/AFP/Getty Images

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Forging: break substantially with a mainstream consensus without challenging the rule of law.

Bending: disabling of existing constraints in ways that are not procedurally illegal but that defy or subvert liberal-democratic norms.

Breaking: actions that are contrary to both domestic and international law.

Pirro, A. L., & Stanley, B. (2022). Forging, bending, and breaking: Enacting the "illiberal playbook" in Hungary and Poland. Perspectives on Politics, 20(1), 86-101.

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"Orbán and his party loyalists respond to criticism by pointing to some other democratic state that does just what they did […] The **Frankenstate** is made up of democratic rules. Each individual rule is, or can be, democratic, but the specific *combination* of them, creates an undemocratic regime." (Kim Lane Scheppele, 2013)

Scheppele, K. L. (2013). The rule of law and the Frankenstate: why governance checklists do not work. Governance, 26(4), 559-562.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do so many voters support political actors that undermine democracy, or at least don't seem to punish them?

2. Do you think there might be any common factors behind the recent episodes of democratic backsliding in countries as diverse as Turkey, El Salvador and Hungary?

3. How do we distinguish democratic backsliding from simply "governments we don't like doing things we don't like"?

Why Backsliding?

- Polarisation.
- Declining ‘delivery’ of democracy.
- Institutional factors.
- International Environment.

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- **Polarisation.**
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- Political divides merge into a single us vs. them dimension.
- Security dilemma: ‘if we don’t lock them out of power, *they* will lock us out of power and destroy all we hold dear’.
- Perception of illegitimate, dangerous opposition → Voters acquiesce to derogations from democratic procedures.
- Conventional democratic politics becomes highly dysfunctional, fuelling dissatisfaction with democracy.

Why Backsliding?

- **Polarisation.**
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- Some evidence that *affective* polarisation (not *policy* polarisation) is conducive to backsliding (Orhan, 2022).
- But:
  - Is polarisation a cause or an effect here? Mass polarisation follows elites (Cinar & Nalepa, 2022).
  - Polarisation often by-product of legitimate instances → should these be sacrificed at the altar of cohesion? (Kreiss and McGregor, 2024)

- Orhan, Y. E. (2022). The relationship between affective polarization and democratic backsliding: Comparative evidence. Democratization, 29(4), 714-735. Cinar, I., & Nalepa, M. (2022). Mass or elite polarization as the driver of authoritarian backsliding? Evidence from 14 Polish surveys (2005–2021). *Journal of Political Institutions and Political Economy*, *3*(3-4), 433-448. Kreiss, D., & McGregor, S. C. (2024). A review and provocation: On polarization and platforms. *New Media & Society*, *26*(1), 556-579.

Why Backsliding?

- Polarisation.
- **Declining ‘delivery’ of democracy.**
- Institutional factors.
- International Environment.

- Citizens’ value of democracy (**process legitimacy**) is shaped by its outcomes (**performance legitimacy**).
- **Low growth**, **inequality** erode democratic support.
- Multidimensional performance failures: corruption, crime, control of immigration also figure heavily in the messaging of anti-democratic politicians.
- Timing checks out: ‘third reversal’ starts in the shadow of the Global Financial Crisis (2008).

- Fukuyama, F., Dann, C., & Magaloni, B. (2025). Delivering for Democracy: Why Results Matter. *Journal of Democracy*, *36*(2), 5-19.

Why Backsliding?

- Polarisation.
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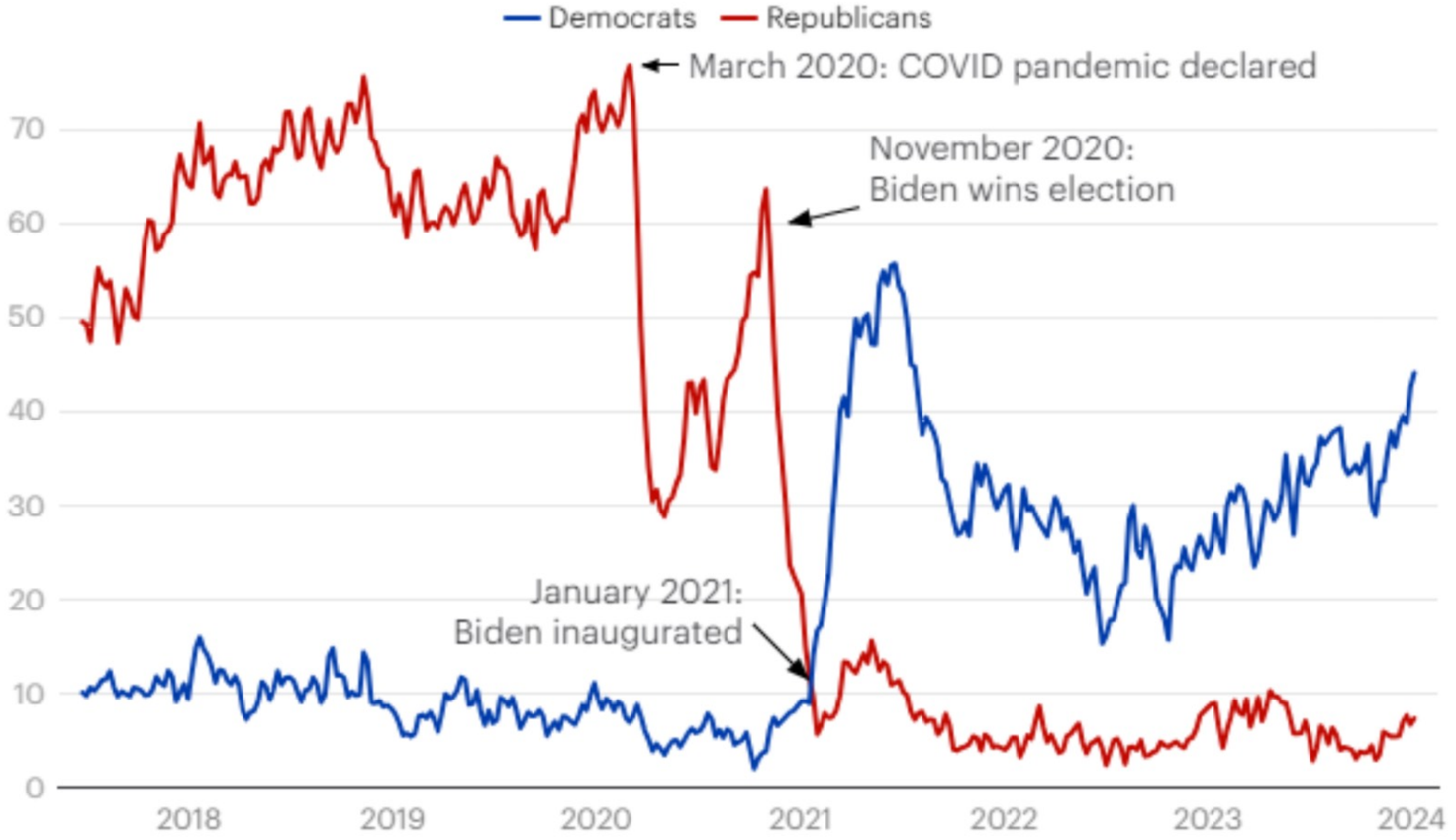
- …but cross-country variation does not:
- “In eight of the twelve cases under study, **inequality was trending downward** in the five years before the elections that brought to power leaders who ended up moving against democracy […]. With respect to poverty rates, the picture is similar: In five years before backsliding began, **poverty levels decreased** in nine of the twelve countries —substantially in some cases, such as India and Poland.” (Carothers and Hartnett, 2024)

- Carothers, T., & Hartnett, B. (2024). Misunderstanding democratic backsliding. Journal of Democracy, 35(3), 24-37.

Whether Americans say the economy is getting better reflects which party holds the White House

Overall, do you think the economy is getting better or worse? (% who say the economy is getting better)



Note: Responses of "about the same," "not sure," and "getting worse" are not shown. Lines reflect a two-week rolling average.

YouGov

Chart: David H. Montgomery • The Economist/YouGov | June 24, 2017 - January 6, 2024

Why Backsliding?

- Polarisation.
- Declining ‘delivery’ of democracy.
- **Institutional factors.**
- International Environment.

- **Presidential democracies** are more prone to breakdown: *personalisation* of parties, politics and executive power; elections turn into ‘winner-takes-all’ contests.
- **Disproportional electoral outcomes** associated with onset of backsliding in parliamentary systems.
- **Personalist** parties, low levels of internal accountability; unstable party systems.
- Helps explain the *where*, but not the *when*…

- Ganghof, S. (2024). How forms of government shape models of democracy and their vulnerability to backsliding. In Handbook of Comparative Political Institutions (pp. 395-409). Frantz, E., Kendall-Taylor, A., Nietsche, C., & Wright, J. (2021). How personalist politics is changing democracies. *Journal of Democracy*, *32*(3), 94-108.

Why Backsliding?

- Polarisation.
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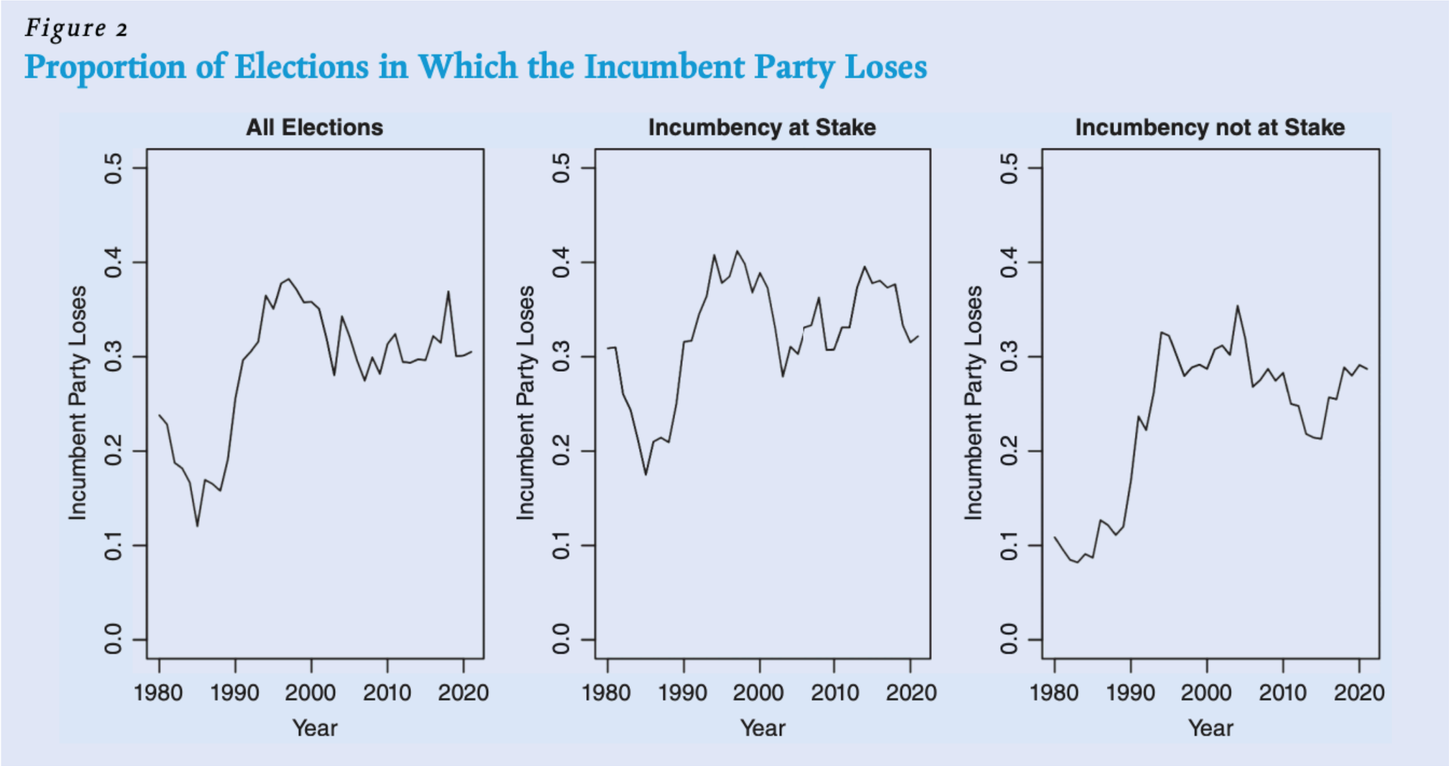
- **International Environment.**

- Weaker international engagement, credibility and clout by Third Wave pro-democracy actors (US, EU, Vatican), vis-á-vis rise of ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ power of **China** and **Russia**.
- The ‘**Authoritarian international**’: cooperation, learning, institutional sabotage in backsliders’ foreign engagement.
- **European Union**’s ‘authoritarian equilibrium’: strengthens executives, serves as an ideal target of grievances, funds autocrats but refrains from domestic interference.

- Samuels, D. J. (2023). The international context of democratic backsliding: Rethinking the role of third wave “prodemocracy” global actors. Perspectives on Politics, 21(3), 1001-1012. Kelemen, R. D. (2021). The European Union’s authoritarian equilibrium. In Strategic Responses to Domestic Contestation (pp. 153-171). Routledge.

Is the trend even real?

- Provocative recent contribution by Little and Meng (2024):
- They take issue with subjective measures of democracy, and look at an ‘objective’ indicator instead: **incumbent loss**.
- No clear recent uptick.



- Little, A. T., & Meng, A. (2024). Measuring democratic backsliding. PS: Political Science & Politics, 57(2), 149-161.

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Figure 4

Are Elections Competitive?

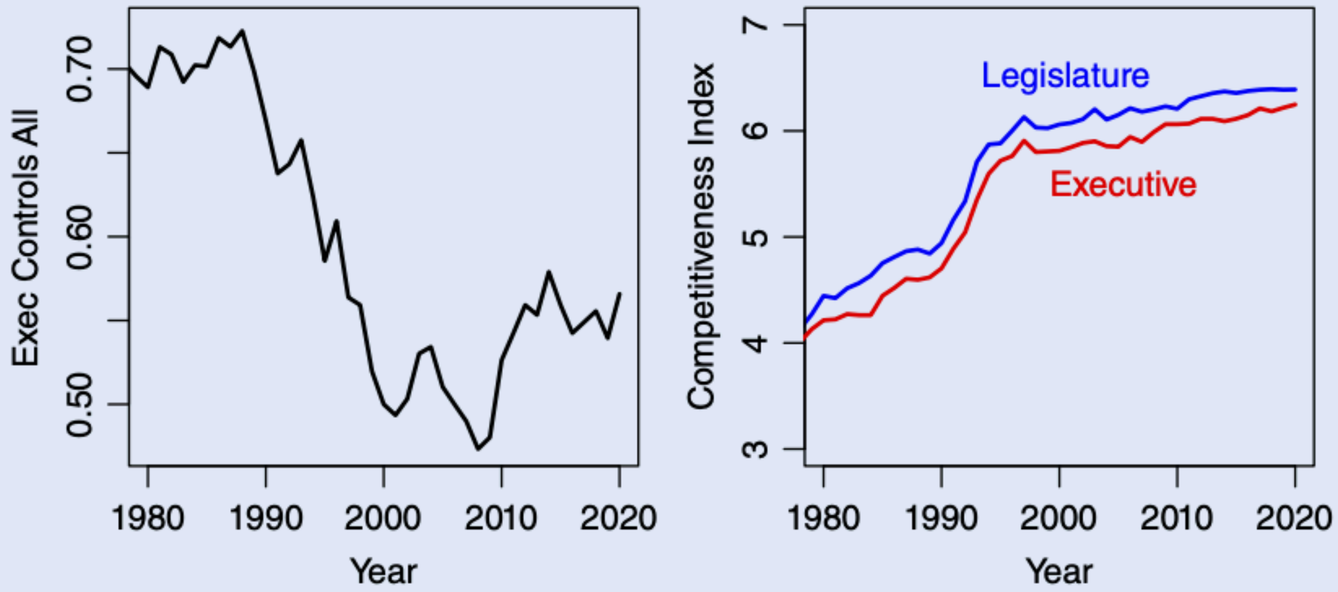

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Figure 9

Subsetting by Regime Type

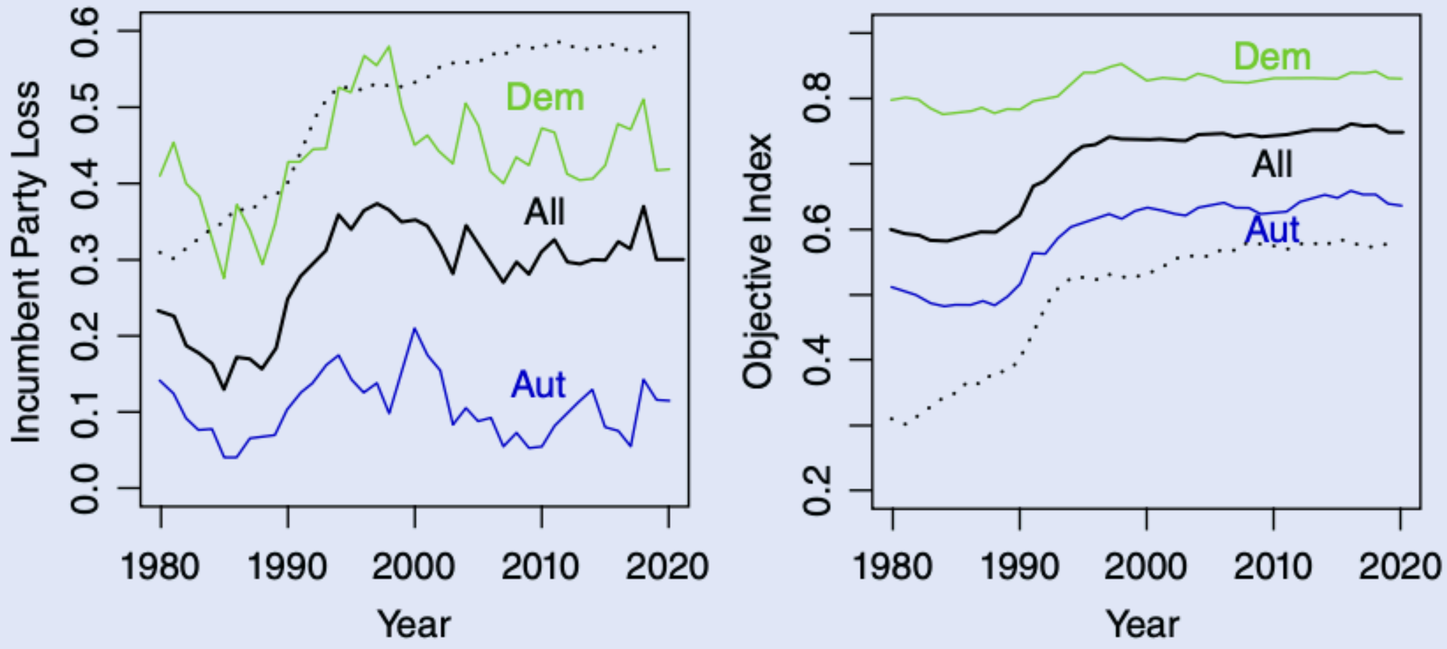

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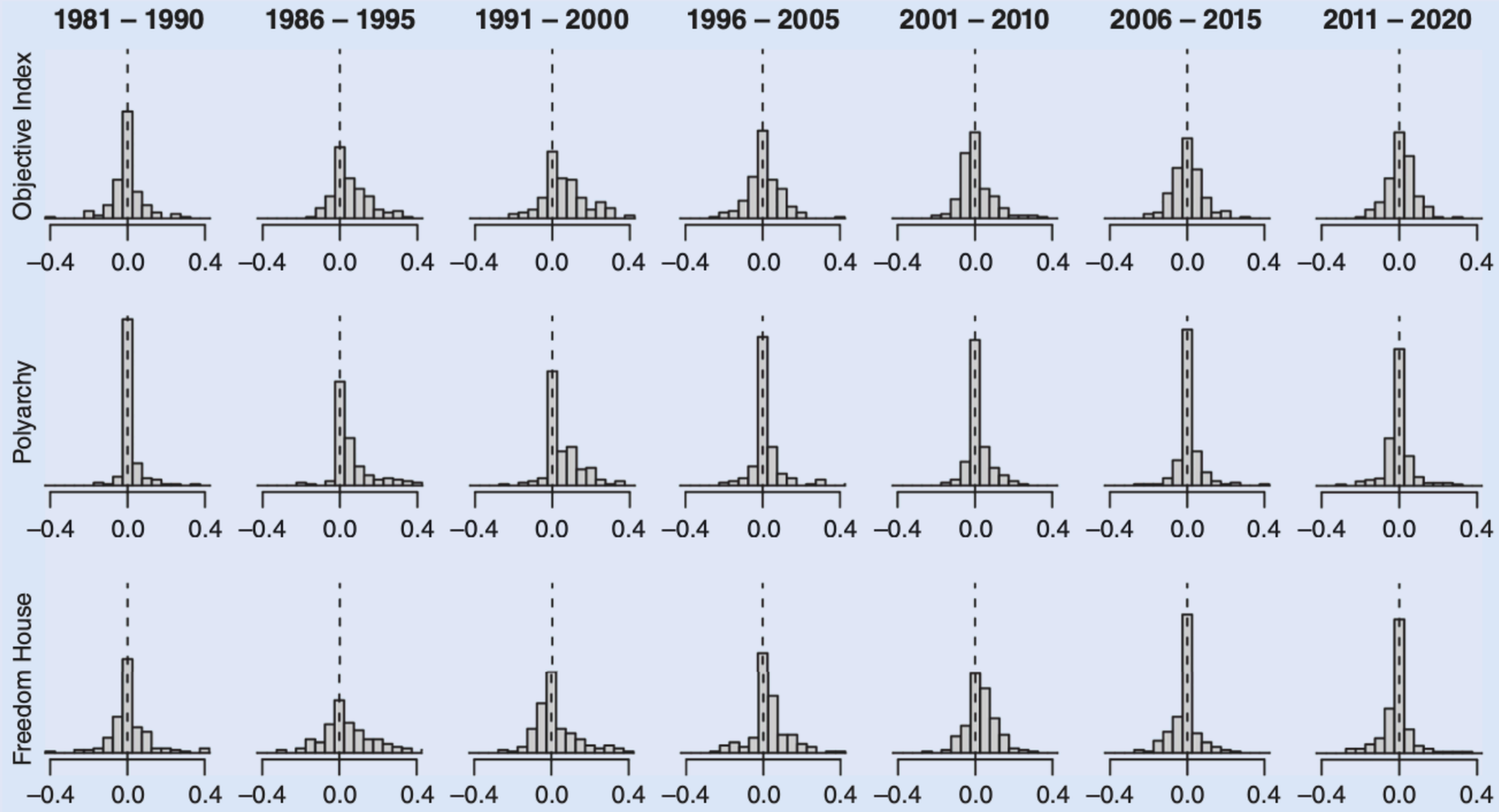
Figure 10

Distribution of Changes Over Five-Year Periods Across Decades



In-Class Quiz Next Week

- Weeks 2 (patterns of democracy), 3 (democratisation) and 4 (backsliding).
- Revise: everything in the **slides** and **required readings.** Dip into recommended readings only if you don't remember what was discussed in class with respect to something mentioned on the slides.
- Things to know: consensus-majoritarian dimensions, consociationalism, waves of democracy, modernisation theory, preference falsification and 'tipping points' in regime breakdown, bottom-up/top-down transitions, definition, anatomy and causes of democratic backsliding.
- Be in class on time and bring a pen.