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Title

Democratic Backsliding and Foreign Policy

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Publication Date

2024-05-01

Data Availability

The data associated with this publication are within the manuscript.

Peer reviewed

Democratic Backsliding and Foreign Policy

Benjamin J. Appel, Sarah E. Croco

Abstract

In this paper, we argue that the consequences of democratic backsliding are not limited to the domestic sphere. Instead, we posit that democratic erosion generates strong incentives for leaders to engage in hostile foreign policy behavior toward other states. We estimate a series of models using event data from 2005–2018 to test our hypothesis. Our results consistently support our argument, even after using estimators that account for potential endogeneity issues. Leaders of backsliding democracies are more likely to behave in an aggressive way toward other countries. Our confidence in these results is strengthened by multiple robustness checks, all of which point to the same conclusion. This paper demonstrates that backsliding states are more likely than full democracies to engage in aggressive actions toward other states, which has important academic and policy implications for understanding the international ramifications of democratic erosion.

Keywords: democratic backsliding, executive aggrandizement, international conflict

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Suggested Citation

Appel, Benjamin J., and Sarah E. Croco. 2024. *Democratic Backsliding and Foreign Policy*. IGCC Working Paper No 2. http://escholarship.org/uc/item/8s31h6c9

These three reasons all increase the political cost of challenging leaders, which reduces their accountability. In turn, this makes it difficult for domestic institutional actors to curtail the leader's hostile foreign policy choices, while also reinforcing the incentives to continue risky behavior abroad.

Exploring the international consequences of democratic backsliding offers at least two related contributions. First, it demonstrates the importance of looking beyond new or otherwise fragile democracies when considering which liberal regimes pose a threat to international order.[2] Conventional wisdom holds that nascent democracies, or those that are undergoing the process of democratizing, are the most volatile. The historical lack of democratic norms and relatively weak institutions can serve as a tinderbox for both internal and external conflict. The dangers inherent in democratization are real, but this does not mean that established democracies are immune to internal challenges. As we will discuss, backsliding leaders can challenge and change the institutions from within to further solidify their hold on power. As we have seen in too many countries recently, long-standing institutions are largely powerless against a clever politician who knows how to lawfully and incrementally alter the rules of the game.

Our second contribution centers on how political scientists think about accountability. For many, a leader's accountability is defined by a state's institutions as these determine the proportion of the population whose support is essential for the leader to stay in power.[3]Absolute dictators, for instance, have total control and answer to no one. Democratic leaders must adhere to the preferences of large swaths of the electorate, or face losing office. Personalist dictators are beholden to a small group of elites, but can ignore the general public. These shorthand definitions of accountability based on prototypical leader types go a long way in explaining leader behavior and have produced valuable scholarly insights.[4]

What this line of scholarship misses, however, is the possibility that domestic political dynamics can change and render those structural constraints dangerously meaningless in democracies. As we have seen with many backsliding states, leaders are able to consolidate power through completely legal means (e.g., appointing new judges, changing electoral laws, etc.). They can also work to manipulate elements *outside* of political institutions—for example, owning or otherwise controlling the national media.

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[2]   For example, Mansfield and Snyder (1995); Mansfield and Snyder (2009); Cederman et al. (2010); though see Narang and Nelson (2009).

[3]   For example, Weeks (2008) and Weeks (2012).

[4]   For example, Colgan and Weeks (2015); Croco and Weeks (2016); Croco (2011).

This means the institutions themselves remain intact—multiple branches of government still exist and the rule of law still holds in theory—but the leader faces far less accountability than a prototypical democratic leader. While this has myriad domestic downsides, it also, as we argue here, has international implications. If leaders have a free hand domestically, this allows them to engage in risky foreign policy interactions or other aggressive pursuits. It also means the likelihood of leaders being punished for bad foreign policy outcomes is greatly reduced. This further emboldens the leader to challenge the international status quo.

To test our argument, we empirically assess whether backsliding states engage in more hostile interactions including both verbal (i.e., diplomatic condemnation) and military (i.e., military show of force) with other states compared to robust democracies.[5] We also recognize the potential for endogeneity given the nonrandom nature of backsliding. To alleviate these concerns, we utilize a new fixed effects counterfactual estimator[6] that accounts for this issue. Our results support our theory and remain consistent even when subjected to several robustness checks. Our findings constitute an important step forward in understanding the complex relationship between a state's domestic regime attributes and its international behavior. The consequences of backsliding are not limited to the domestic sphere. Indeed, the effects often spill over into the international realm in the form of threats, aggression, or even physical violence.

The rest of this paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 presents our theory as to why democratic backsliding should lead to aggressive international behavior. First, we briefly discuss how backsliding leaders work to centralize power and reduce domestic accountability. We then explore how these changes in the domestic sphere encourage leaders to stir up discord with other states. Section 3 outlines our research design, while Section 4 presents our empirical findings. Section 5 concludes with a discussion of the implications of our findings and potential avenues for future research.

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[5]   As discussed in greater detail later, we use event data (i.e., ICEWS) to test our hypotheses.

[6]   Liu et al. (2022).

2.0 Theory

Centralizing Power

Like many political phenomena, democratic backsliding does not have a single cause. Some scholars point to polarization as the primary culprit.[7] Others argue that a loss of public faith in the political status quo,[8] or an exogenous crisis, like an economic shock or massive demographic change, is what creates an opening for a would-be autocrat.[9] Still others maintain that populism is the root of the problem.[10] For the purposes of this paper, we are agnostic as to how a state ends up in the "backslider" category. Instead we are interested in the consequences of the centralization of power within the executive branch, sometimes referred to as "executive aggrandizement," and the consequent lack of accountability.[11] The specific backsliding process can take several forms. But the telltale sign is the systematic dismantling of democratic institutions and norms by executives that allow them to consolidate power. As we discuss in our research design, we use this idea of the lack of democratic accountability as the key criterion for identifying backsliding states. Following the important work of Bermeo our aim is to focus on states in which "elected executives weaken checks on executive power one by one, undertaking a series of institutional changes that hamper the power of opposition forces to challenge executive preferences."[12] We briefly explore the different possible aspects of this process next.

One step that is key to subverting democracy is weakening or eliminating the legislature's ability to check the executive. Indeed, as Haggard and Kaufman argue, we see this pattern of ineffective legislatures in 15 out of 16 countries that have experienced a democratic reversion.[13] Controlling the legislature is fundamental to autocrats keen on centralizing power, because it allows them to shut down one of the major checks on executive authority and, in many cases, create new laws that make it easier for the executive to stay in power.[14]

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[7]   Bermeo (2019); Haggard and Kaufman (2021); McCoy and Somer (2019); Svolik (2020); Vachudova (2020).

[8]   Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018).

[9]   Bernhard et al. (2001); Diamond (2008); Diamond (2018); Diskin et al. (2005); Mutz (2016).

[10]   Bauer and Becker (2020) and Norris (2017).

[11]   Bermeo (2016).

[12]   Bermeo (2016: 10).

[13]   Haggard and Kaufman (2021: 55).

[14]   Haggard and Kaufman (2021: 39–52).

These new laws could range from literally delegating more authority to the executive to changing voting laws to make it easier for the executive to win reelection. In Russia, for instance, Vladimir Putin's party, United Russia, "captured two-thirds of the seats in the Duma, giving the president unchecked control over legislation, appointments, and even constitutional amendments."[15] Likewise, in Turkey "the AKP's [Justice and Development Party's] strength in parliament provided the infrastructure for the 'quiet revolution' that Erdogan promised his supporters, enabling the passage of a record number of new laws (including more than five-hundred during his first two years in office)."[16]

Another branch that a would-be autocrat will seek to control is the judiciary. Control of the courts often starts with taking over the legislature, which is the body typically responsible for confirming judicial appointments.[17] A rubber stamp legislature can pack the courts with judges who are friendly toward the backsliding leader, or who are at least willing to turn a blind eye. Having a complacent judiciary means the executive will not face pushback while taking further steps to solidify power and weaken democratic institutions by altering the law. It also opens the possibility of weaponizing the court against political opponents who would dare to challenge the leader's autocratic advances.[18]

Examples of executives trying to control the judiciary for their own political gain abound among backsliding leaders. In Turkey in 2010, the legislature granted Recep Tayyip Erdogan the power to "name 14 of the 17 Constitutional Court justices," which gave him a huge advantage over opponents.[19] Likewise, in the United States, Donald Trump's Attorney General, William Barr "appeared to take crucial actions that helped shield the president from closer legislative and public scrutiny." In Venezuela, Hugo Chavez oversaw the expansion of the Supreme Court, "from twenty to thirty-two members and filled vacancies with political loyalists."[20] Finally, in Hungary, Viktor Orbán reduced the retirement age for judges from 70 to 62, allowing him the opportunity to install judges who supported his political goals.[21] He also increased the number of judges on the

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15   Haggard and Kaufman (2021: 66).

16   Bermeo (2016: 11).

17   Haggard and Kaufman (2021: 52–4).

18   Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018).

19   Bermeo (2016: 11).

20   Haggard and Kaufman (2021: 63).

21   Bayer (2020).

Constitutional Court from 11 to 17 and "packed the court with party loyalists in [an attempt] to control threats from secular establishments."[22] All of these moves to control the judiciary further insulated these leaders from potential domestic checks and helped them centralize power.

The next target on a backsliding leader's list is often the press. While not an institution in a formal sense, the press plays a critical role in democracies by disseminating information and providing a forum for public expression. The existence of a free press can undermine a leader's attempt to centralize power by exposing attempts to change voting laws, quash dissent, or weaken other aspects of democratic society. Given this, it is not surprising that would-be autocrats often try to vilify or discredit the press, portraying them as an enemy of the people. Those who are successful in doing so eliminate another potential check against them, making it easier to continue the backsliding process.

For some, this step may be quite easy to execute because the leader owns or otherwise controls major media outlets. See Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, for example, who rose to power largely because of his media conglomerate.[23] For other leaders, like Trump, controlling the media might take the form of dominating the national conversation by making inflammatory statements or calling into question the legitimacy of major news outlets. Still other leaders, like Putin, decide what the public sees by taking direct control over public media while silencing independent voices.[24] The overarching goal of all of these efforts is to provide the leader with the means to shape the national narrative, which makes it easier to rule with impunity.

Last, but certainly not least, backsliding leaders will work to destroy the democratic norms that undergird liberal societies. While they are not formally codified in law, like institutions, or a visible part of everyday life, like the press, democratic norms such as tolerance, forbearance, and non-violence, are fundamental to functioning democracies.[25] A leader who is able to subvert these norms can undermine democracy from the ground up by creating an us-vs-them mentality among the electorate. Politics takes on a "winter take all" mentality and people begin to accept more extreme actions from the leader to further their side's chances of victory, even if said actions are inherently undemocratic. Under these conditions a leader might jail opponents, criminalize organized protest, or even take emergency powers under the guise of

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[22]   Lancaster (2014: 1683).

[23]   Ben-Ghiat (2021).

[24]   Haggard and Kaufman (2021: 65).

[25]   Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018).

"working for the people." What is most concerning about this loss of norms, however, is that it is often readily accepted by the public.[26] The fervor that comes with living in a hyper polarized environment or being led by leader who portrays every domestic political debate as a zero-sum battle enables people to turn a blind eye to the erosion of democracy.[27] The highly polarized societies of the United States,[28] Hungary,[29] and Poland[30] all serve as examples of this dynamic in action.

In sum, backsliding happens through a variety of mechanisms across several aspects of government and society at large. While the intent seems obvious in retrospect, it is important to note that nearly all of these anti-democratic actions are entirely legal. Backsliding is the result of very careful and *incremental* steps on the part of the would-be autocratic leader to quietly centralize power without arising suspicion.[31] Consequently, it is often too late for electorates to check their leaders before they realize that they have systematically weakened any political checks on their authority.

Implications for International Behavior

What does this lack of domestic accountability mean for international behavior? In this section, we explore how a lack of the threat of punishment at home both enables and encourages a leader to engage in risky, aggressive, conflictual foreign policy. There are at least three reasons why a backsliding leader would want to engage in more contentious international behavior. An important commonality to all three of these reasons is that they work to reinforce the leader's primary domestic goal of centralizing power. First, acting as a provocateur against other states reminds the support base of the leader's willingness to take dramatic action to serve their interests. Second, drawing attention to the international realm reinforces the executive's importance relative to other institutions, such as the legislature, as foreign policy is typically the executive's domain. Third, many conflictual interactions between states, especially those that involve actual physical violence, have the potential to create a crisis atmosphere domestically. Such situations are ripe for a rally effect, bolstering the executive's support, or, in extreme cases, could allow a leader to put "emergency powers" in place, further cementing control.

To be sure, stirring up international conflicts carries risks; the move could backfire, angering allies, or, worse spur another state to escalate the situation to physical

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[26] Bermeo (2016).

[27] Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018).

[28] Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018).

[29] Vegetti (2019).

[30] Burdeau (2023).

[31] Haggard and Kaufman (2021) and Bermeo (2016).

violence. What is important to remember, however, is that the lack of domestic accountability means the leader is largely protected from these risks. If no domestic actors can punish them, leaders have every incentive to provoke international discord and no reason to eschew it. We elaborate on each of these ideas briefly and then present our hypotheses.

Taking bold action against another state can serve as a way for leaders to remind supporters that working on their behalf is their primary focus and that they are willing to take risks to advance their interests. This allows the leader to be portrayed as a champion of the people by standing up to an international foe. One example that comes to mind is Trump's trade wars against China in 2019. Accusing China of unfair behavior, Trump declared, "Somebody had to do it…I am the Chosen One…I'm taking on China on trade, and you know what? We're winning." With a nod to his populist approach, he was quick to add, "I was put here by people. I was put here by people to do a great job. And that's what I'm doing."[32] The strategy of picking a fight with another country allows the leader to put themselves on center stage, reminding citizens and political elites alike that they are the one in charge of how the state interacts with other countries.

This leads to our second reason, which is the primacy of the executive in matters of foreign policy. While the legislative branch has some levers at its disposal, most if not all of its leverage centers on controlling funding.[33] The so-called "power of the purse," however, is not an easy weapon to wield given the political costs of doing so once a conflict is under way.[34] If a leader is making threats or otherwise antagonizing another state, there is little the legislature can do to stop it through withholding financial resources.[35] Executives also have control over the diplomatic corps, giving them direct access to established channels of communication. In many democracies, executives also serve as commanders in chief of the armed forces, which makes them the key decision-makers when it comes to deploying forces or engaging in physical conflict with another state. This asymmetrical jurisdiction over matters of foreign policy underscores the importance of the executive during international disputes. Executives automatically become the public focal points because they directly control the means of interacting with other states. The executive is, to quote former president George W. Bush, "the decider."[36]

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[32]   Breuninger (2019: 1).

[33]   Kriner (2010) and Howell and Pevehouse (2007).

[34]   Croco (2015: 155–67).

[35]   While other options are available—for example, impeachment—utilizing this option would carry high political costs to the point of being untenable.

[36]   Kreiser (2006: 1).

Third and finally, engaging in international conflict with other states not only draws immediate public attention but also has the potential to create a "rally round the flag" atmosphere, both of which are beneficial to leaders looking to strengthen their hold on power. If a leader issues a threat or responds to threats from other states, or escalates things further by mobilizing forces, the domestic media will devote considerable coverage to these events. The nature of these interactions, and the potential for interstate violence will naturally overshadow any domestic happenings, especially if the leader can portray the threat as existential. The leader benefits further if the interaction triggers a rally effect. Citizens will be supportive of the leaders' decisions to defend the state and their overall popularity will increase. This, in turn, puts pressure on domestic political elites, including those in the opposition, to stand united behind the leader against the foreign foe. This type of scenario is ideal for leaders of backsliding democracies, because it creates a situation where their power is not only underscored but also unquestioned in the eyes of the public.

Based on this discussion we expect that leaders of backsliding democracies will be more likely to engage in conflictual international behavior compared to their non-backsliding counterparts. The nature of international conflict, even if it does not escalate to physical confrontation between national forces, centralizes attention on the leaders and underscores their unique role in determining their state's behavior when interacting with other states. This suggests the following hypothesis:

H1: Leaders of backsliding democracies will be more likely to engage in conflict with other states compared to leaders of democracies that are not backsliding.

Research Design

We estimate our models on a global data set of politically relevant, directed dyads from 2005–2018.[37] In the primary models, we only include directed dyads in our sample when the first actor (side A) in the dyad is a democratic state.[38] These coding rules produce a data set with about 20,000 observations from 2005–2018.[39] We employ this empirical strategy for several reasons. We use directed dyads because it is necessary to assess whether a backsliding democracy is the actor that is engaging in hostile behavior toward the other state in dyad. It would be impossible to identify the state that is the instigator with a nondirected dyad unit of analysis. Second, we only include dyads when side A is a democracy because it is more relevant to compare backsliders versus robust democracies, as opposed to all states, because the literature has largely established that democratic states are, on average, more peaceful than autocratic states.[40] Put differently, this design enables us to isolate the foreign policy behavior of backsliders compared to robust democracies, our key theoretical focus. Nonetheless, the results are consistent (and even substantively stronger than expected) when we include all side A states rather than only democratic ones (see online appendix).

Dependent Variable

We hypothesize that backsliding states are more hostile compared to solidly democratic ones in their international relations. We need to measure foreign policy behavior to test our argument. It is, however, nontrivial to empirically test international cooperation/conflict due to the challenges of measuring these concepts. Many of the leading conflict data sets such as the Militarized Interstate Dispute data[41] only include rare events and rarely vary over time.[42] To avoid these limitations, we use data from the Integrated Crisis Early Warning System (ICEWS) to test our argument on backsliding and foreign policy behavior.[43]

ICEWS is an event data set that is compiled from about 275 local and global news sources that are in English or translated to English. ICEWS covers a wide range of events

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[37] We use countrycode (Arel-Bundock et al. 2018), peacesciencer (Miller 2022), and the tidyverse (Wickham et al. 2019) to create our data set. We also employ panelview (Mou et al. 2022) and Base R (R Core Team 2024) to perform exploratory statistics, as well as fect (Liu et al. 2022), fixest (Berge 2018), and panelmatch (Kim et al. 2019) to conduct our statistical analyses and dotwhisker to create the coefficient plots (Solt and Hu 2015).

[38] Side B states include both democratic and nondemocratic states. As a robustness check, we limit side B states to only democracies. The results are consistent with those in the main text.

[39] Specifically, we include states if they were a democracy any time after 2005.

[40] For example, Choi (2003); Gaubatz (1996); Leeds et al. (2009); Leeds (1999); Mansfield et al. (2017).

[41] Palmer et al. (2020).

[42] Minhas et al. (2016).

[43] Boschee et al. (2015).

related to political, economic, and social activities such as armed conflicts and battles, territorial disputes, diplomatic interactions, economic interactions, so forth. The data is collected using natural language processing and machine learning techniques to extract relevant events and information from these sources. Each news report is then coded based on the Conflict and Mediation Event Observation (CAMEO) scheme.[44] CAMEO categorizes events and actions related to conflict and cooperation in international relations and political events. This results in reports being tagged as involving the relevant set of actors with the interactions (i.e., an exchange of fire on a border) that took place between them.

To further categorize the relevant interactions, we draw on the so-called "quad" coding scheme that Duval and Thompson proposed several years ago.[45] The authors create four different variables based on CAMEO coding scheme to account for the different types of dyadic interactions. Given our interest in hostile interactions, we focus here on both verbal and material conflict.[46] Yonamine provides a definition of the two conflict variables[47]:

Verbal conflict: A spoken criticism, threat, or accusation, often related to past or future potential acts of material conflict.

The following are examples of material conflict in the data:

1. The United States (Actor 1) accuses Russia (Actor 2) of committing war crimes during the Russia-Ukraine War.

2. Lebanon (Actor 1) on Friday denounced Israel (Actor 2) for its repression of Palestinians.

Material conflict: Physical acts of a conflictual nature, including armed attacks, destruction of property, assassination, etc.

The following are examples of material conflict in the data:

1. Russia (Actor 1) engages in a military confrontation with Ukraine (Actor 2) along their shared border, resulting in armed clashes.

2. Israel (Actor 1) has carried out air attacks near Syria's (Actor 2) capital Damascus, wounding two Syrian soldiers.

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44 Gerner et al. (2009).

45 Duval and Thompson (1980).

46 While we find some evidence that democratic erosion is associated with less cooperation, the results are inconsistent. This is not surprising to us because, as argued earlier, we believe backsliding will be most linked with hostile interactions.

47 Yonamine (2011).

Our unit of analysis is the directed-dyad year, which results in a time series of *summed* directed verbal and material hostile dyadic interactions for every year between 2005 and 2018. For example, if the United States engaged in 65 verbal conflictual interactions (or events) against Russia in 2016, the verbal conflict variable would equal 65 for the year 2016. Likewise, if the United States engaged in eight material conflict interactions in 2022, the material conflict variable would equal 8 for the year 2022. For the final variable used in the analysis, we create a "Conflict" variable that is the sum of the number of verbal conflict events and the material conflict events. Returning to the U.S.-Russia example, the final Conflict variable would equal 73 (65 + 8) for the U.S.-Russia directed-dyad observation in the year 2022. This measure provides a time-varying picture of the annual level of conflict between the relevant set of actors.

While there are certainly limitations to using event data such as ICEWS, it is also important to recognize its strengths. For example, as noted earlier, ICEWS allows for important variation over time, unlike other leading data sets that show little temporal variation, such as the International Crisis Behavior dataset.[48] Another advantage of ICEWS is that it creates a more multidimensional measure of dyadic ties because it includes information on security, economic, and diplomatic interactions. In contrast, most other data sets focus on a single dimension such as militarized conflict or trade agreements. Therefore, we agree with Minhas et al. who argue that, ICEWS "may enable the field to develop a richer understanding of how directed relationships between states evolve."[49]

In Figures 1-3, we present some underlying patterns in the data. First, the average value for the Conflict variable is 12, with the minimum of 0 and a maximum of 1000.[50] In Figure 1, we display the most conflictual dyads between 2005-2018. The most hostile ones include: U.S.-Russia. U.S.-Syria, U.S.-Iran, Israel-Lebanon, and U.S. Iraq. The results provide some face validity to ICEWS, as the most conflictual dyads in the data are in line with the conventional wisdom on the some of the more hostile interactions in the real world*.*

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[48]   Brecher et al. (2023).

[49]   Minhas et al. (2016: 497).

[50]   We exclude some outliers from the data. In the online appendix, we estimate a model with the full sample and the results are consistent.

Figure 1. Foreign Policy Behavior, 2005-2018
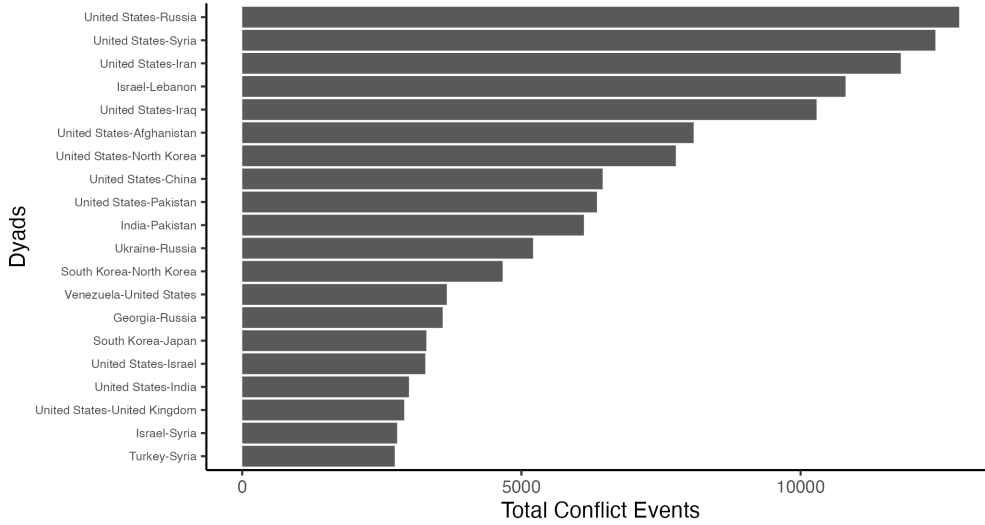
Independent Variable

We use the Electoral Democracy Index ("v2x_Polyarchy") variable from the Varieties of Democracy (V-DEM) data to code our theoretical variable of interest, democratic backsliding.[51] As defined, this index measures

> the electoral principle of democracy [that] seeks to embody the core value of making rulers responsive to citizens, achieved through electoral competition for the electorate's approval under circumstances when suffrage is extensive; political and civil society organizations can operate freely; elections are clean and not marred by fraud or systematic irregularities; and elections affect the composition of the chief executive of the country. In between elections, there is freedom of expression and an independent media capable of presenting alternative views on matters of political relevance.

This variable serves as a proxy for our concept of domestic political accountability, which serves as the keystone of our theoretical argument as to why backsliding leaders will engage in more conflictual behavior. The variable is an interval-level variable that ranges from 0 to 1 with higher scores indicating greater levels of political accountability.

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[51]   There are other variables that measure liberal democracy as opposed to political democracy, however we believe that it is important to focus on the specific theoretical concept posited in this paper, which is political accountability. Further, we also think it is important to distinguish between the concept of democratic erosion rather than the consequences of it such as human rights violations, which is why we focus on accountability rather than political and civil liberties.

For the final variable that we use in the analysis, we create a binary measure that equals 1 when the Electoral Democracy Index variable for the state in question has declined by at least 5 percent within the past three years and the state is a democracy,[52] and 0 otherwise. A state is no longer considered a backslider (i.e., it returns to 0 on this variable) if the polyarchy measure increases by at least 5 percent over the next three years.[53]

We believe that our measure of democratic backsliding is a reasonable measure of democratic backsliding for at least two reasons. First, democratic backsliding, as discussed earlier, is understood as a relatively small decline in democratic institutions compared to full-blown regime change, such as authoritarian reversal when a country becomes completely autocratic. Using a 5 percent decline captures this concept. Second, as discussed later, our variable produces results that are in line with the conventional wisdom on some of the leading backsliders today, such as Hungary, Poland, and the United States.

Importantly, we also estimate several robustness checks using different measures and coding rules for democratic backsliding that produce results that are consistent with the main set of results. In the online appendix, we estimate models that use different coding rules for backsliding as well as models that use different samples, estimators, and model specifications. Once again, the robustness checks produce results that are in line with the main set of results.

It is also important to address issues raised by Little and Meng in a recent article on global trends on democratic backsliding.[54] The authors raise questions about data based on expert surveys, such as V-DEM, due to time-varying expert bias. While we are sympathetic to this, we agree with Knutsen et al. (2023) and Miller (2024) who raise several limitations in the Little and Meng (2024) study. Furthermore, as noted earlier, we estimate several robustness checks that produce consistent results, and the basic patterns in the data provide face validity to our data. Furthermore, we employ Little and Meng's "Objective Index" as our measure of democratic backsliding in the online appendix and the results are consistent with those presented here.

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[52] We use V-Dem's Regimes of the World data to identify democratic states (Lührmann et al. 2018).

[53] In contrast to our approach, Kaufman and Haggard operationalize democratic erosion based on whether there has been a decline in a state's score from its most recent high. Jee et al. (2022) note, however, that this makes it difficult to identify the precise onset of democratic erosion.

[54] Little and Meng (2023).

Across the 20,000 observations in our data, the binary democratic backsliding variable equals 1 in 2,630 observations, or about 12 percent of the data. In Figure 2, we display the most frequent backsliders (i.e., those states that have the most years of backsliding from 2005–2018). Some of the leading backsliders include, as expected, Thailand, Mexico, Turkey, Hungary, and to a lesser extent, Poland, India, and the United States.
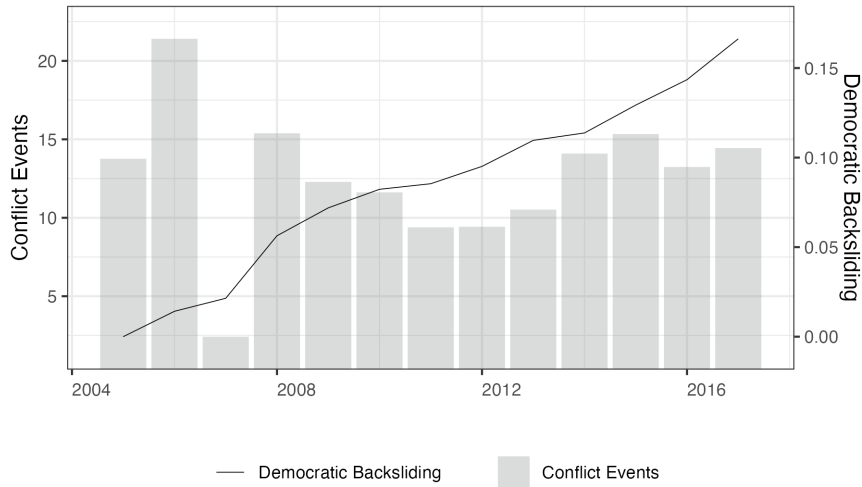
Figure 2. Top 20 Democratic Backsliders, 2005-2018
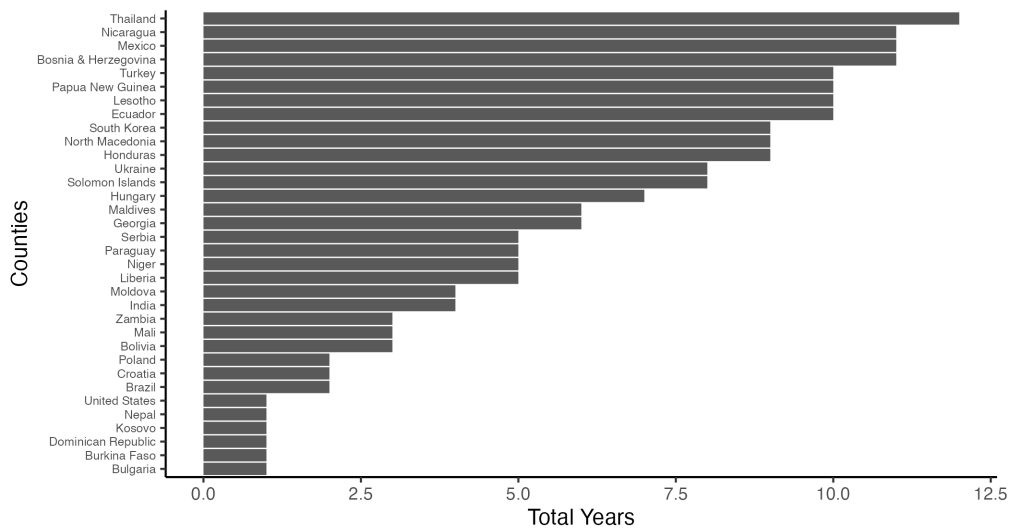
In Figure 3, we also plot the bivariate relationship between foreign policy behavior and democratic backsliding. As Figure 3 indicates, there has been a notable increase in the number of backsliders between 2005 and 2018. This is consistent with recent work by Lührmann and Lindberg.[55] At the same time, we also see an increase in conflictual relations between states. While there are some highly conflictual dyads in the early years of the 21st century, there is a general trend toward increasingly hostile relations over the past 10 years.[56] For example, the conflict variable averages between 3 and 15 per year from 2006 to 2012, but it averages between 13 and 15 in the following years. While there are similar highs earlier in the data, the range is much smaller in most recent years, suggesting more consistent hostility in the international system. Taken together, the data, at the aggregate level, indicate an association between democratic backsliding and more conflictual dyadic relations.

[55]   Lührmann and Lindberg (2019).

[56]   Braumoeller (2021).

Figure 3. Foreign Policy Behavior and Democratic Backsliding

In Figure 4, we plot the bivariate relationship for the United States. Here, the data once again show a relationship between democratic erosion and conflictual interactions; the United States began to backslide in 2017, while its foreign policy behavior also became more hostile during this period, averaging over 40 since 2017.[57]

Figure 4. U.S. Foreign Policy Behavior and Democratic Backsliding

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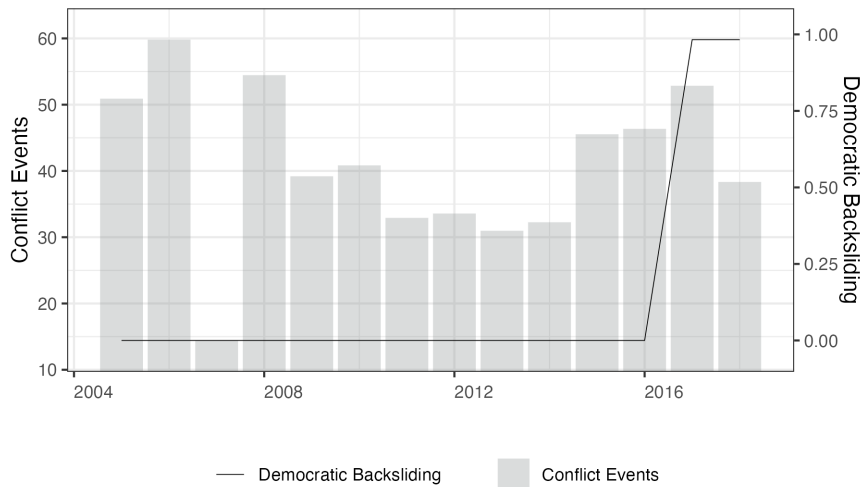
[57] While this coincides with the Trump presidency and the decisions made by his administration, it is important to remember that backsliding is a longer process. The circumstances that created the hyper-polarized environment that enabled Trump to win the election had been developing in American politics for several years (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).

Control Variables

We include several control variables drawing on the literature on foreign policy behavior.[58] First, we include two variables that proxy the nature of the relationship in the dyad: (1) alliance ties and (2) UN General Assembly Affinity Scores. We create a binary variable that equals 1 if the states in the dyad share a defensive alliance, and 0 otherwise.[59] We generate a measure of foreign policy preference similarity between states in the dyad using the ideal point estimation based on UN General Assembly voting from Bailey et al.[60] For each dyad we measure the distance between that states' ideal points, with a lower distance indicating greater similarity and higher distance indicating less foreign policy similarity. We also include a measure of the relative military balance in the dyad using the Composition Index of National Capability (CINC) scores from the Correlates of War data.[61] We create a variable that equals State A's CINC over the summed CINC score of both states in the dyad. This allows us to capture how strong State A is compared to State B.

Next, we include the KOF Globalization Index that serves as a proxy for the economic, social, and political dimensions of globalization for each country in the world per year.[62] The variable ranges from 0 to 100 with higher values indicating greater levels of globalization across the three dimensions in the relevant year. This is an important variable to consider because it is possible that globalization (and the potential backlash to it) is related to both democratic erosion and foreign policy behavior.[63] We also include a measure of political polarization (v2smpolsoc") of each state in given year from the V-DEM data that ranges from 0 to 100, with values closer to 0 indicating serious polarization and higher values indicating less polarization in society per year.[64] This is important to include in the model because research suggests that it is one of the leading causes of democratic backsliding[65] and research indicates that it is related to international behavior.[66]

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[58]   Summary statistics for the control variables can be found in the online appendix.

[59]   Leeds et al. (2002).

[60]   Bailey et al. (2017).

[61]   Singer at al. (1972); Singer (1987).

[62]   Gygli et al. (2019); Dreher (2006).

[63]   See, for example, Waldner and Lust (2018) for work that discusses the potential association between globalization and democratic backsliding. Several studies have suggested a link between globalization and conflict (e.g., Lee and Rider 2018; Oneal and Russett 2010).

[64]   Coppedge et al. (2023a and 2023b); Pemstein et al. (2023).

[65]   Meyerrose (2021).

[66]   Barbieri (1996).

We also include a binary regime type variable for State A that equals 1 if the state in question is an autocracy and 0 otherwise. The variable is based on the Electoral Democracy Index from V-DEM.[67] The inclusion of this variable ensures that we are always comparing backsliders to strong democracies in our statistical models. As noted above, while we only include states coded as a democracy during the time period under consideration (2005–2018) there are states that were coded as a democracy at the start of our data but then underwent a full authoritarian reversal and are no longer considered a democratic state (e.g., Burundi in 2015). Thus, there are some nondemocratic states in our sample and it is important to account for them in the empirical models. Finally, we include the Electoral Democracy Index for the second state in the dyad from V-DEM.[68]

Statistical Estimation

We are interested in the relationship between democratic backsliding and foreign policy behavior. We are aware that our key independent variable—democratic backsliding—is likely to be nonrandom. That is, states are not exogenously backsliding, but rather there are several factors that contribute to it while also potentially related to foreign policy decision-making such as economic globalization. This will lead to biased results when factors associated with backsliding are also related to foreign policy behavior. While we control for several of these variables in the empirical models, such as globalization and polarization,[69] we also recognize there may be some other factors that we are unable to operationalize and include in the regression. Our models therefore might suffer from omitted variable bias. In such situations, scholars often use two-way fixed effects (TWFE) to account for both time-constant and unit-level unobservable variables, thus minimizing omitted variable bias. Recent research, however, indicates that TWFE suffers from several problems under most reasonable situations. In particular, fixed effects will produce biased results when the treatment adopted by different groups is staggered over time and/or the average effects of the treatment vary over units and across time.[70]

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[67] Coppedge et al. (2023a and 2023b); Pemstein et al. (2023).

[68] Coppedge et al. (2023a and 2023b); Pemstein et al. (2023). It is also important to note that while it is common to include measures of contiguity, distance between states, and major power status, we are unable to include such variables in the next models because we use a fixed effects estimator which precludes the use of time-constant variables. Nonetheless, the unit fixed effects, of course, account for these factors.

[69] In the online appendix, we control for several other potential confounders such as opposition party strength and media restrictions. Our results are robust to the inclusion of these additional variables.

[70] For example, Goodman-Bacon (2021).

In light of this, we employ a new fixed effects counterfactual estimator (FECT) proposed by Liu et al. that seeks to overcome the limitations in traditional TWFE.[71] In short, the new estimator "… use[s] data under the control condition to build models and impute counterfactuals of treated observations based on the estimated models." The authors show that their counterfactual estimator does not suffer from problems associated with staggered treatments and treatment effect heterogeneity in traditional TWFE models. In particular, it includes four basic steps:

1. On the subset of **untreated** observations, the estimator fits a model that regresses the outcome on the treatment and covariates including year and dyad fixed effects

2. The estimator predicts the counterfactual outcome for each **treated observation** using estimates from step 1 including the fixed effects

3. The estimator estimates the individualistic treatment effect for each treated observation

    a. $Y_{(1)} - Y_{(0)}$ = Average Treatment Effect on the Treated (ATT)

4. Take the average across the dataset to obtain the sample ATT

This estimator has an important identification assumption. Namely, the parallel trends assumption, which is that in the absence of treatment (i.e., backsliders), the difference between the "treatment" and "control" group is constant over time. While it is impossible to test this assumption, the authors of this estimator provide several diagnostic tests to assess the validity of the model including tests for no pre-trend (a useful proxy for parallel trends) as well as other tests including placebo and carryover tests. The results in the models estimated next pass the diagnostic tests.[72]

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[71] Liu et al. (2022).

[72] We estimate three primary diagnostic tests: test for no pre-trend, a placebo test, and a test for carryover test. First, the no pre-trend test helps to assess the parallel trends assumption; while again, it is impossible to directly test the parallel trends assumption because it is a counterfactual, the pre-trend test is useful as it assesses the trends between pre-treated and control units. An F-test suggests no obvious pre-trend for the data across all four independent variables. Second, the placebo test is helpful because again it ensures the results are not an artifact of the estimator. Again, an F-test indicates the results are robust. Finally, we find no evidence of a large carryover effect for the treatment variables.

Empirical Results

We present the statistical results using coefficient plots with 95 percent confidence intervals.[73] A variable is significant at *p* < .05 level when the confidence intervals do not cross 0. We only present results for the primary variable of interest: democratic backsliding.[74] Before we discuss our main set of results, we estimate a baseline model that tests whether the foreign policy behavior of democratic states is significantly different from nondemocratic ones (Figure 5).[75] As expected, we see that the coefficient estimate for the democracy variable is negative (-6.27) and statistically significant (*p* = .048) This suggests that democratic states are less conflictual than nondemocratic states in their foreign policy behavior, which is in line with much of the conventional wisdom.[76] The results also provide some additional face validity to the ICEWS data. We now turn to our main set of results.

Figure 5. The Impact of Democracy on Foreign Policy Behavior

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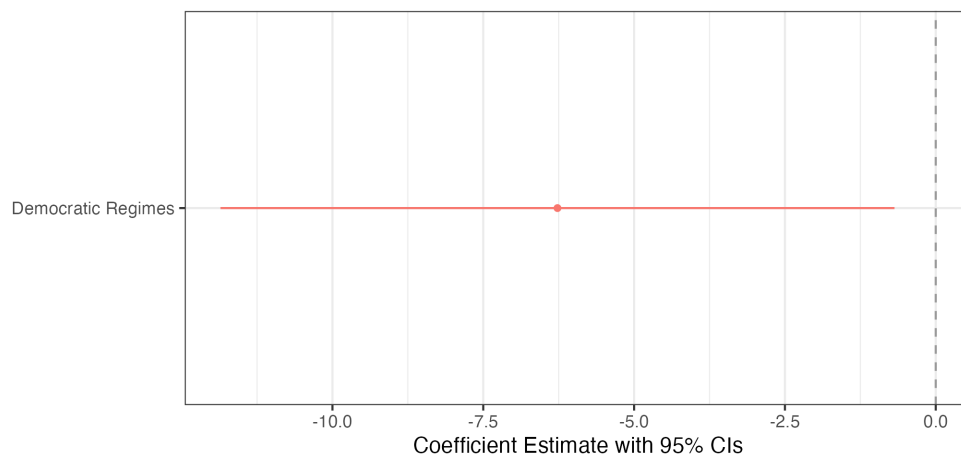
[73] The counterfactual estimator that we use here also produces ATTs for each pre/post treatment period. We focus on the average effect across all the periods.

[74] The total number of observations in each model is equal to the number of treated observations (excluding missing data), as the individual ATT is computed on the observations with the treatment and the counterfactual is imputed using the predictions from the control observations as discussed earlier.

[75] We use the regime type variable ("reg_type") to measure democracy in which the variable equals 1 for democratic states and 0 otherwise (Coppedge et al. 2023a and 2023b; Pemstein et al. 2023.

[76] Based on this result, we focus here on the comparison between democratic backsliders and robust democracies. Nonetheless, we find consistent results when we compare democratic backsliders versus all states (see online appendix).

As hypothesized, we expect that democratic backsliders to be more conflictual in their international relations toward all other types of states (i.e., both democratic and nondemocratic) than solidly democratic ones. We present the first set of results for this in Figure 6. In line with our hypothesis, we see that the coefficient estimate for our primary democratic backsliding variable is positive (6.59) and statistically significant (p = .007). This means that states that have undergone democratic backsliding in recent years engage in almost 7 more conflictual events per year compared to robust democracies. We combine verbal conflict and material conflict events to create the final Conflict variable. It would also be useful to disaggregate this variable to examine the specific relationship between verbal and material conflict and democratic backsliding. To that end, we first regress verbal conflict on backsliding; in the second model, we examine the effect of backsliding on material conflict. The statistical results, which can be found in Figure 6, lend additional support to our argument, as both models produce statistically significant results. Democratic backsliders are more likely to engage in both verbal and material conflict events compared to strong democracies.

Orbán in Hungary provides a good illustration of this logic. Despite being a member of the European Union (EU), the Hungarian leader has repeatedly blamed Western countries and specifically NATO expansion for the Russia-Ukraine War.[77] He also vetoed an $19 billion financial aid package to Ukraine in December 2022[78] and rejected the delivery of arms to Ukraine by refusing to allow the transit of weapons shipments through Hungarian territory.[79] Finally, he has repeatedly criticized the EU, claiming that Western sanctions against Russia have destroyed Hungary's economy.[80] These blatant norm violations have "provoked a backlash among Hungary's neighbors, exacerbating tensions and increasing anti-Hungarian sentiment."[81]
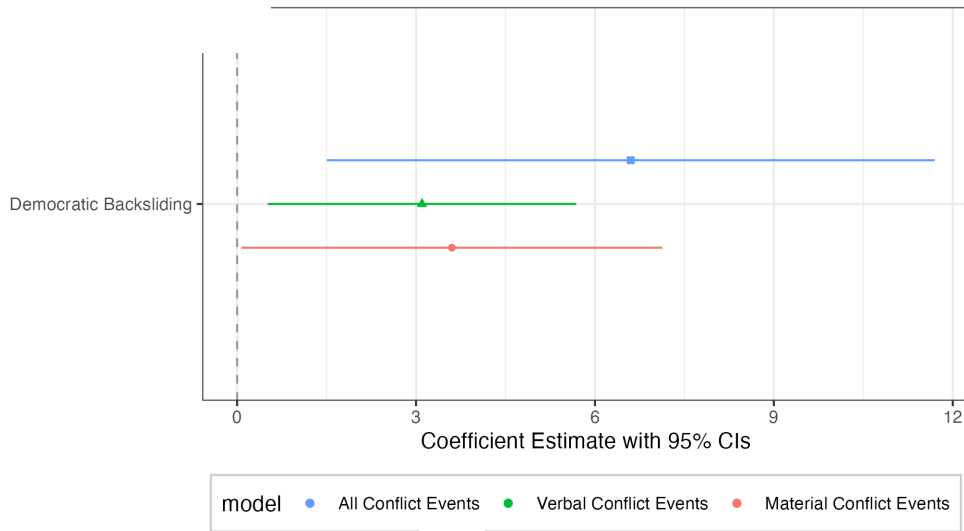
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[77]   Motyl (2023).

[78]   Casert (2022).

[79]   Ibid.

[80]   Motyl (2023).

[81]   Bergmann and Cicarelli (2020).

Figure 6. The Impact of Democratic Backsliding on Foreign Policy Behavior

Brazil's foreign policy under former president Jair Bolsonaro is another case of the relationship between democratic backsliding and hostile foreign policy behavior. For example, his "Brazil above everything" has brought Brazil into discord with several leading countries in the world according to a report from the Council on Foreign Relations.[82] As the authors of the report write, "(i)n contrast to his predecessors, Bolsonaro has embraced anti-globalist rhetoric and has said that international norms and institutions threaten Brazil's sovereignty…and has isolated former partners such as Venezuela."[83] Likewise, Erdogan has also ushered in a more aggressive foreign policy as he has consolidated his power domestically. Over the past few years, he has drawn the "ire of its neighbors and allies" as he has launched an assertive shift in Turkey's foreign relations by expanding their military and diplomatic presence abroad as well as launching military interventions in Azerbaijan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria.[84]

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[82]   Roy (2022).

[83]   Ibid.

[84]   Robinson (2022).

Robustness Checks

Our results provide strong support for the hypothesized relationship. Democratic backsliders are on average more conflictual compared to robust democracies in terms of both verbal and material conflict. At the same time, and due to debates surrounding how to measure (and conceptualize) democratic erosion, it would be worthwhile to assess the robustness of these results to provide greater confidence in our findings. We conducted a series of robustness tests to provide further confidence in the results.

First, we create a binary democratic backsliding measure based on the Polity II Score variable that ranges from -10 to 10, with lower values indicating strong autocracies and higher values corresponding to robust, consolidated democracies.[85] We follow the same aforementioned coding rules to create this variable. The measure equals 1 when the Polity II scores declines by at least 5 percent within the past three years and remains a 1 until the state in question's score increases by at least 5 percent within the next three years and is coded a democracy (7 or greater on Polity II scale).

We also create two additional variables that directly correspond to our argument on executive aggrandizement. First, we use the executive constraints ("xconst") variable from the Polity 5 data. This variable refers to "the extent of institutionalized constraints on the decision-making powers of chief executives, whether individuals or collectivities. Such limitations may be imposed by any 'accountability groups.'"[86] The variable ranges from 1 to 7, with 1 indicating unlimited authority and 7 representing executive parity or subordination. We then create a binary variable using similar coding rules to earlier.[87] Second, we use a variable that measures the degree of legislative and government agency constraints on the executive from V-DEM data.[88] The variable specifically asks, "To what extent are the legislature and government agencies e.g., comptroller general, general prosecutor, or ombudsman capable of questioning, investigating, and exercising oversight over the executive?" This interval-level variable ranges from 0 to 1, with higher numbers indicating greater constraints and oversight. Once again, we create a binary variable using the same coding rules from earlier.

[85] Marshall and Gurr (2020).

[86] Marshall and Gurr (2020).

[87] Due to the 7-point scale on the "xconst" variable, we use a 1-point decline over three years (instead of 5 percent) as the threshold to operationalize democratic backsliding. While we recognize that this equates to about a 14-percent decline, 1 point is the smallest decrease possible for this variable.

[88] Coppedge et al. (2023a and 2023b); Pemstein et al. (2023).

We present the robustness checks in Figure 7. Overall, they are consistent with those from the main set of results. First, the Polity II democratic erosion variable is positive (9.72) and statistically significant ($p < .001$), suggesting that backsliders, on average, engage in almost 10 more conflictual actions per year compared to strong democracies. Interestingly, this variable produces a stronger substantive result based on the coefficient estimate, providing even greater confidence in the relationship between democratic erosion and foreign policy behavior.

Figure 7. The Impact of Democratic Backsliding on Foreign Policy Behavior
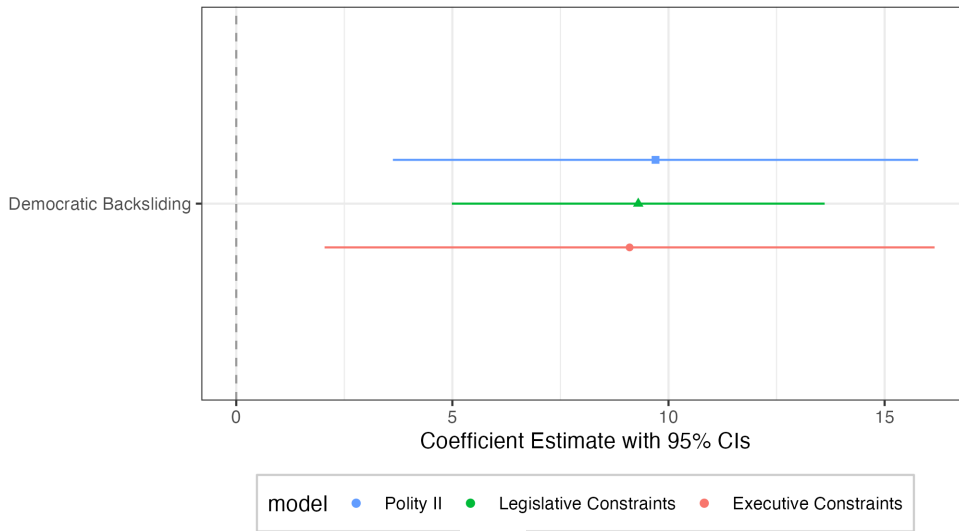
Both executive constraints variables produce results that are consistent with our main findings. In particular, the coefficient estimate on the Polity executive constraints is 9.3 and it reaches standard levels of significance ($p < .01$). This again suggests that executives with fewer constraints on them are more likely to be conflictual than leaders with more executive constraints. Likewise, the V-DEM legislative constraints variable is also positive (9.01) and statistically significant ($p < .001$). Once again, as we argued earlier, leaders who are less constrained by the legislative branch and government agencies are more hostile in their foreign policy behavior compared to leaders with more constraints from the legislative branch of government.

The robustness checks presented here are important for several reasons. First, they reinforce the main set of findings on the link between democratic backsliding and hostile foreign policy behavior. This should provide readers with greater confidence in the statistical results. Second, the executive constraints variables also provide support for the specific theoretical mechanism that we posit in this paper as it is specifically related to levels of domestic political accountability and leader punishment. That is, less constrained leaders can engage in more hostile dyadic interactions because they have less to fear from domestic actors if their policies go poorly in the international arena. Finally, in the appendix, we estimate several additional robustness checks based on different coding rules for the key variables, different samples, alternative estimators, and additional control variables. Overall, the empirical findings provide results that are consistent with the main set of findings, providing greater confidence that the empirical record supports the hypothesized relationship between democratic backsliding and more hostile foreign policy decision-making.

Discussion and Conclusion

We began this paper by arguing that the effects of democratic backsliding are not confined to the domestic sphere. Instead, we should expect the process of backsliding to create strong incentives for leaders to engage in aggressive foreign policy behavior. Our results uniformly support this hypothesis. Leaders of backsliding democracies are more likely to behave in an antagonistic way toward other countries. We found this pattern to be true for verbal interactions as well as material ones. Our confidence in these results is strengthened by multiple robustness checks, all of which point to the same conclusion as our main findings. Leaders of backsliding democracies behave in a fundamentally more aggressive way than their non-backsliding counterparts. As we saw in myriad examples discussed in the paper, these conflictual interactions can have profound consequences. Hungary and Poland's refusals to fall in line with the norms of NATO and the EU have led many to question whether other members of the blocs can restrain their increasingly illiberal co-members. Likewise, in the Middle East, Turkey has engaged militarily with neighboring states and has been increasingly hostile to Western states since they started to backslide under Erdogan.[89]

This work is important for at least two reasons. First, our results clearly show that democracies cannot be thought of as a homogenous group. While other scholars have pointed out the dangers inherent in nascent democracies, we show that even long-term, established democracies can slip into dangerous territory if the state backslides and the leader is not held accountable. Likewise, this paper also shows that domestic political

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[89]   Yackley (2020).

institutions can also change over time, even in consolidated democracies. This means that leaders can face less accountability, which allows them to engage in more risky and hostile international interactions. Finally, democratic erosion has significant implications for the international liberal order, which is already under threat from rising powers such as China. Ikenberry, for example, argues that democratic states make up the foundation for the current system.[90] The liberal order, therefore, will be put under greater pressure as more democratic states, especially leading ones such as the United States, erode.

Clearly, this is a topic worthy of further attention. One such avenue might be to investigate how backsliding countries' foreign policies change once the state begins to revert back to a more democratic nature. Do their international interactions grow more cooperative incrementally or do they change abruptly once a new leader is in power who faces more accountability? Second, while our work examines dyadic interactions, it would be useful to assess how backsliding countries engage international organizations, such as the United Nations or European Union. Although we do not explicitly test for the effect of backsliding on international institutions, the examples we have provided support other findings in this vein. For example, one form of hostile behavior is the decision to violate multilateral commitments, whether they be to the fundamental norms of the UN Charter or more specific commitments to regional organizations as is the case with Orbán in Hungary. Third, what strategies are most successful for other states to use when dealing with a backsliding country? Many of these democracies have long-standing alliances with each other. When one country undergoes an illiberal transition toward backsliding, what is the most effective way for other countries to deal with this? Do they engage with the leaders directly by calling them out? Or do they remain quiet in the hopes it will pass and a new leader will eventually come to power? These questions are worthy of scholarly attention as we see more of the world's most powerful countries fall victim to the perils of democratic erosion.

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[90]   Ikenberry (2020).

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Appendix

In this appendix, we estimate a series of empirical models to ensure that our results are robust to different factors. We also include diagnostic tests for the main model and summary statistics for the control variables after the robustness checks. Specifically, we estimate 35 robustness checks that include different estimators, coding rules, samples, and control variables. We also estimate the robustness checks on all four democratic backsliding variables from the main text: (1) Polyarchy, (2) Polity II, (3) Legislative Constraints, and (4) Executive Constraints. Overall, we find remarkably consistent results. With few exceptions,[91] we find that the results presented here are in line with the main set of results—specifically, we find that democratic erosion is consistently associated with more hostile or conflictual foreign policy behavior. We estimate the following robustness checks and describe each in turn below:

1. Alternative sample

2. Different coding rules for the democratic backsliding treatment

3. Additional treatment variables

4. Additional control variables

5. Different estimators

6. Alternative dependent variable

7. Control variables summary statistics

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[91] The Polity II-based democratic backsliding variable is positive as expected but fails to reach standard levels of significance in the Panel Matching model, while the V-DEM Legislative Constraints variable is positive but not significant in the model with the alternative dependent variable.

1. Alternative Sample

As discussed in the main text, we estimate our models on a sample of democratic states to allow us to focus on the comparison between backsliders and robust democracies. In the first robustness check, we assess our models on a sample of all politically relevant states, thus strong democracies as well as nondemocracies. As you can see in Figure R1, the results are consistent with those in the main text, as all four variables are positive and statistically significant.

Figure R1. The Impact of Democratic Backsliding on Foreign Policy Behavior, All PR States
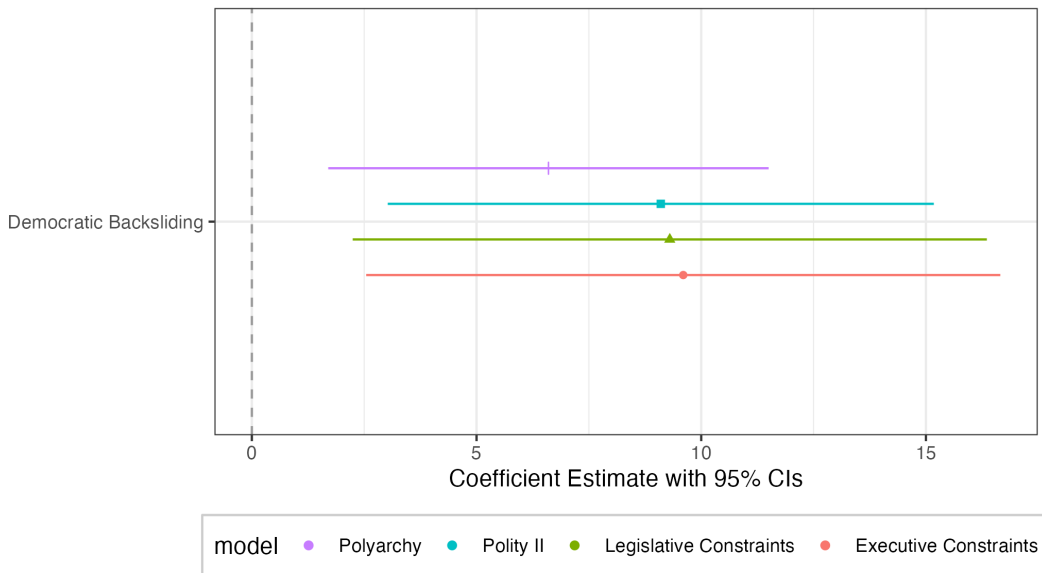
2. Different Coding Rules for Democratic Backsliding Treatment

We employ the coding rules in the main text that best reflect our conceptual understanding of democratic backsliding. As a reminder, the first state in the dyad is considered a backslider if its democracy score declines by at least 5 percent within the past three years. A state is no longer considered a backslider if its democracy score increases by 5 percent over a three-year period and the state is still considered a democracy. We recognize, however, that there is no universally accepted coding scheme to operationalize democratic backsliding. In the main text, we included three additional backsliding variables to help give readers greater confidence in the results, however, we also recognize that it would be useful to use alternative coding rules for the backsliding variables to ensure our empirical findings are robust to multiple coding rules. To that end, we employ three different coding rules here. We assess a 10 percent decline as opposed to a 5 percent decline. We also look at backsliding over a 10-year period, because some scholars argue that democratic erosion is a gradual process.[92]
As you can see from the Figures R2–R4, all the results presented here indicate that democratic backsliding is associated with more conflictual foreign policy behavior.

1. We code a state a backslider when its democracy score declines by 10 percent over a 3-year period. It remains a backslider until its democracy score increases by 10 percent over 3-year period and the state is still considered a democracy. Results are presented in Figure R2.

2. We code a state a backslider if its democracy score decreases by 5 percent over a 10-year period. It remains a backslider until its democracy score increases by 5 percent over a 5-year period and the state is still considered a democracy. Results are presented in Figure R3.

3. We code a state a backslider if its democracy score decreases by 10 percent over a 1-year period. It remains a backslider until its democracy score increases by 10 percent over a 5-year period and the state is still considered a democracy. Results are presented in Figure R4.

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[92]   E.g., Knutsen et al. (2024).

Figure R2. The Impact of Democratic Backsliding on Foreign Policy Behavior, 10 percent, 3 years
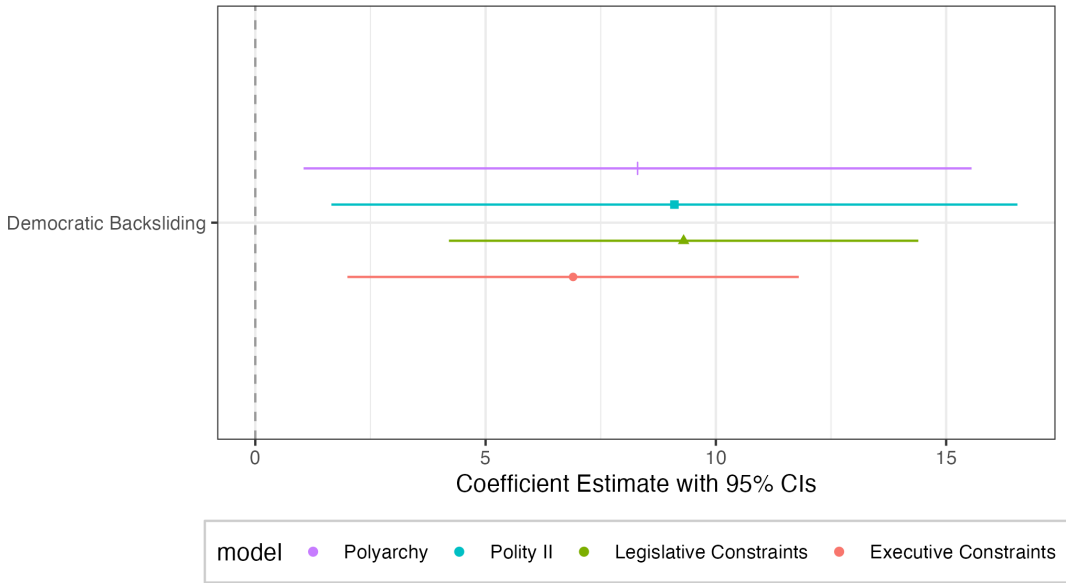

Figure R3. The Imact of Democratic Backsliding on Foreign Policy Behavior, 5 percent, 10 years
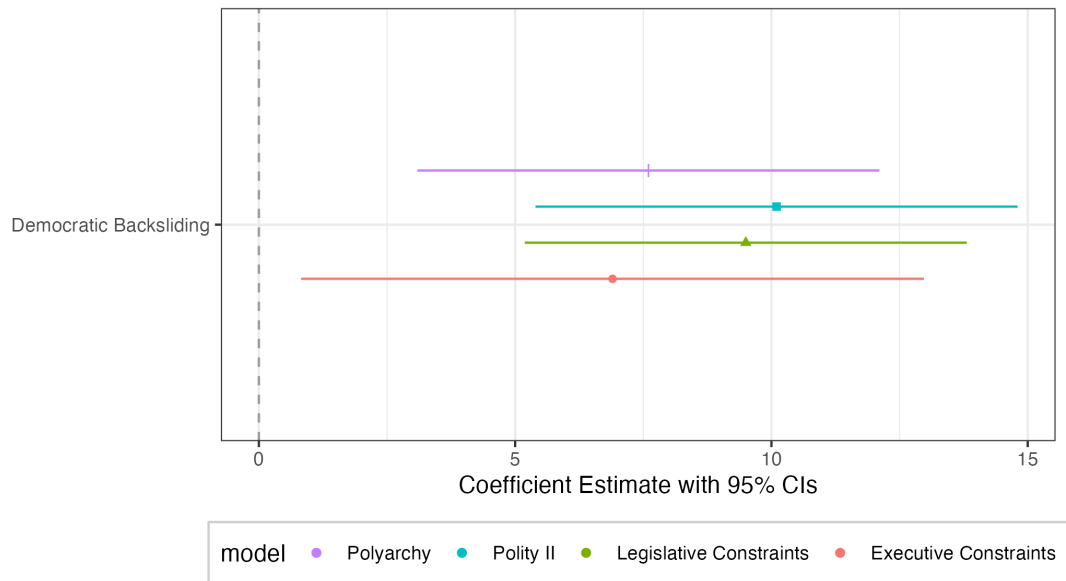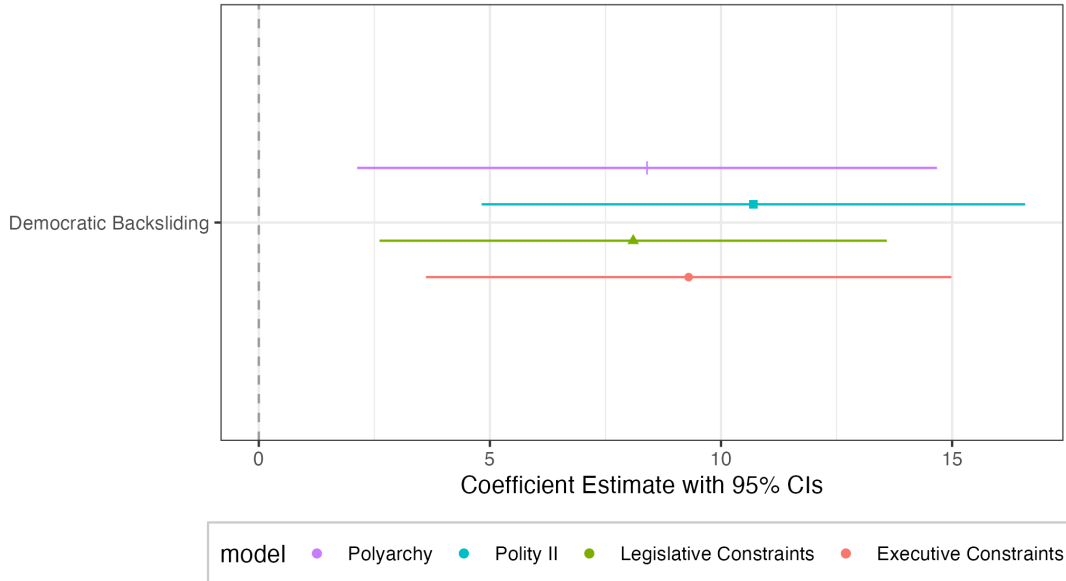
Figure R4. The Impact of Democratic Backsliding on Foreign Policy Behavior, 10 percent, 10 years

3. Different Treatment Variables

In this series of robustness checks, we assess our argument using different coding rules for the democratic backsliding variables. Again, the purpose is to ensure readers that our empirical findings are robust to different coding schemes for our treatment variable. In particular, we draw on coding schemes from the literature to measure democratic erosion. As you can see in Figure R5, the three new variables all produce results that are consistent with our hypothesis and those from the main text.

First, we use the "Objective Index" developed by Little and Meng in their recent work on trends on democratic backsliding.[93] The authors argue that more objective measures of democratic erosion such as succession rules provide a better measure of backsliding than more subjective, expert-survey based measures that are often employed the literature. The Objective Index is an index based on a combination of 14 variables including suffrage, multipartyism, competitiveness measures, whether the leader can be dismissed, whether a leader-succession rule exists, and a count of major process violations. The coefficient estimate for democratic backsliding is positive and significant, indicating that backsliders are more likely to engage in hostile foreign policy behavior.

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[93] Little and Meng (2024).

Second, we draw on the same coding rules from the main text with one major change. In the main text, a state is considered as backsliding if its democracy score declines at least 5 percent within the past three years, and a state is no longer considered a backslider if its democracy score increases by 5 percent over a 3-year period. Here, we only include states that are consolidated democracies or those that have been democracies for at least three years. This helps to ensure that we are not simply capturing unstable regimes that switch back and forth between regime types, but rather we only assess the impact of backsliding on states that are robust democracies. In line with the main text, the results here indicate that democratic backsliders are associated with more conflictual foreign policy behavior.

Third, we assess the new event-based measure of democratic backsliding from the Democratic Erosion Event Dataset.[94] The data sets assembled by a team of researchers created a data set that includes democratic erosion events such as executive attacks on civil society/media for democratic states from 2000–20023. Based on this count variable, we create a binary variable that equals 1 if the state experienced any backsliding events in the corresponding year and 0 otherwise. Once again, the Democratic Erosion Event Dataset variable is positive, which suggests that leaders from states that have democratic erosion events are more inclined to engage in hostile interactions with other states.

**Figure R5.** The Impact of Democratic Backsliding on Foreign Policy Behavior

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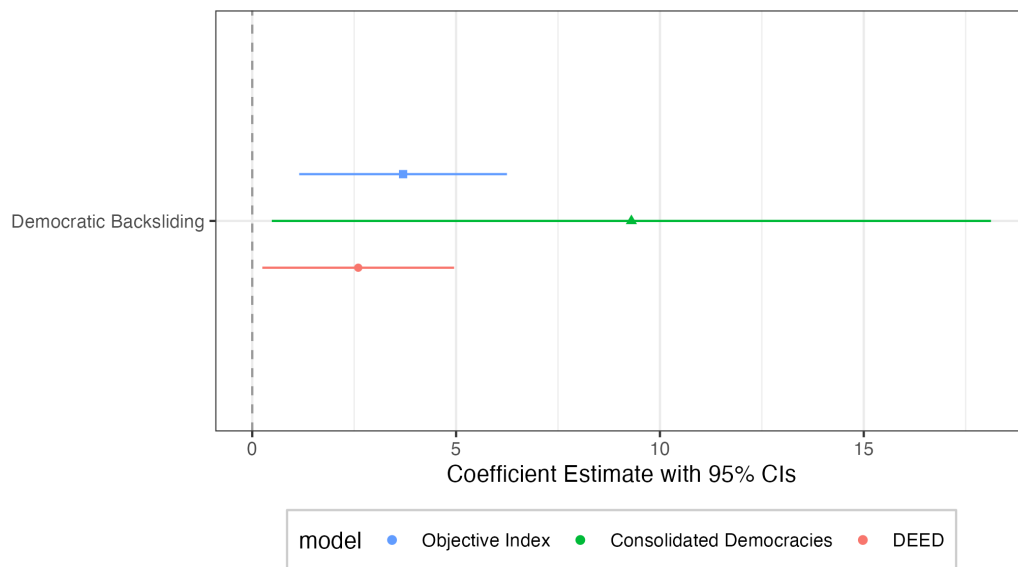
94   Baron et al. (2024).

4. Additional Control Variables

In the main set of models, we include leading confounders to help mitigate concerns related to omitted variable bias. In this appendix, we include several other control variables to further ensure that our empirical results are robust to concerns related to selection effects; specifically, we include measure of opposition party strength, media restrictions, and internet restrictions. We largely do not include these variables in the main models because they would likely induce post-treatment bias in our results. Nonetheless, as you can see from Figure R6, the results are robust to the inclusion of these variables in the models.
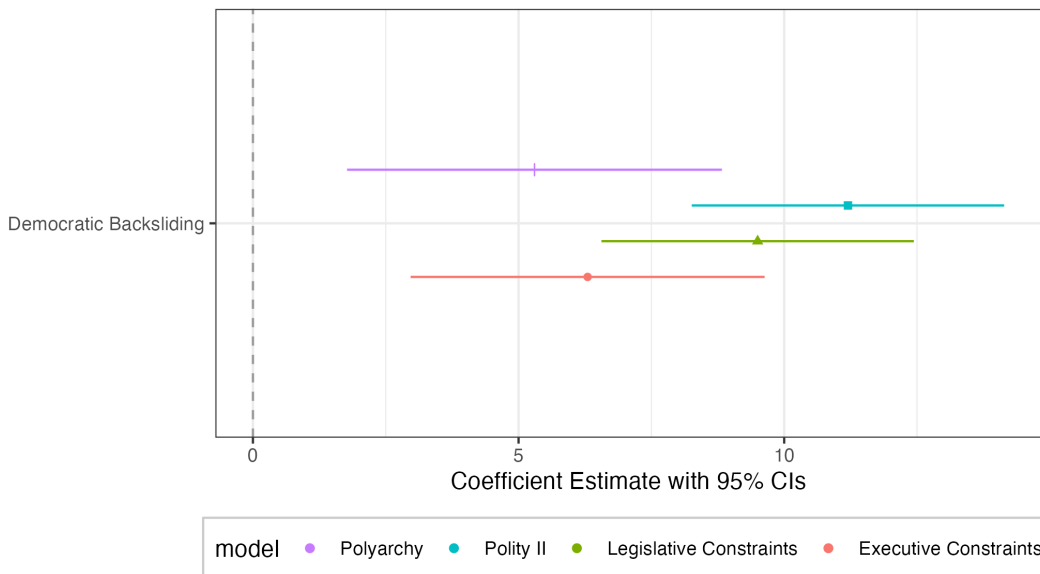
Figure R6. The Impact of Democratic Backsliding on Foreign Policy Behavior, More Controls
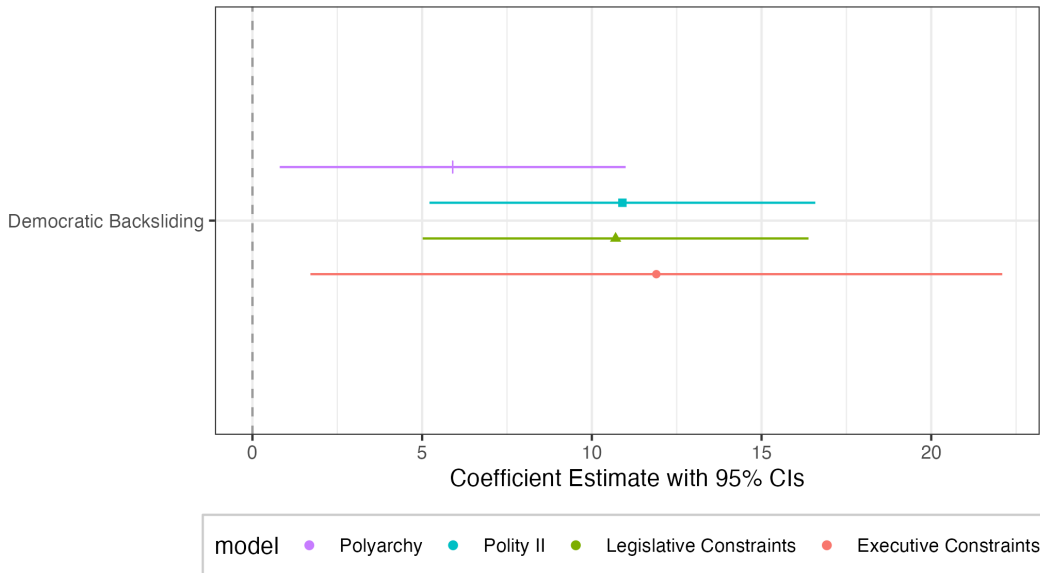
5. Alternative Estimators

As a reminder, we employ the new fixed effect counterfactual estimator proposed by Liu et al.[95] While we are confident that the estimator is the most appropriate one for our analysis here, we assess our models using two different estimators to again ensure the robustness of our results: standard TWFE and Panel Matching. First, while scholars have identified some limitations in TWFE, we think it provides a useful robustness check to make sure that our results are not simply an artifact of the new estimator that we use in this paper. Second, we use the Panel Matching estimator by Imai et al.[96] The estimator is a useful robustness check because it is based on a different set of assumptions, mainly sequential ignorability that permits past information to affect today's treatment but importantly requires no omitted variables. In this model, analysts create a matched set that matches each treated observation with untreated observations from other units in the same period that have similar treatment histories. Second, analysts then refine the matched set using any matching or weighting methods. We use Mahalanobis matching as our matching procedure in this appendix. Finally, the ATT is computed on the refined set. The TWFE models produce results that are consistent with the main set of results. In the Panel Matching models, the Polyarchy, Legislative Constraints, and Executive Constraints-based backsliding variables are in line with the main text. In contrast, the Polity II-based democratic erosion variable is positive as expected but its statistical significance is weaker.
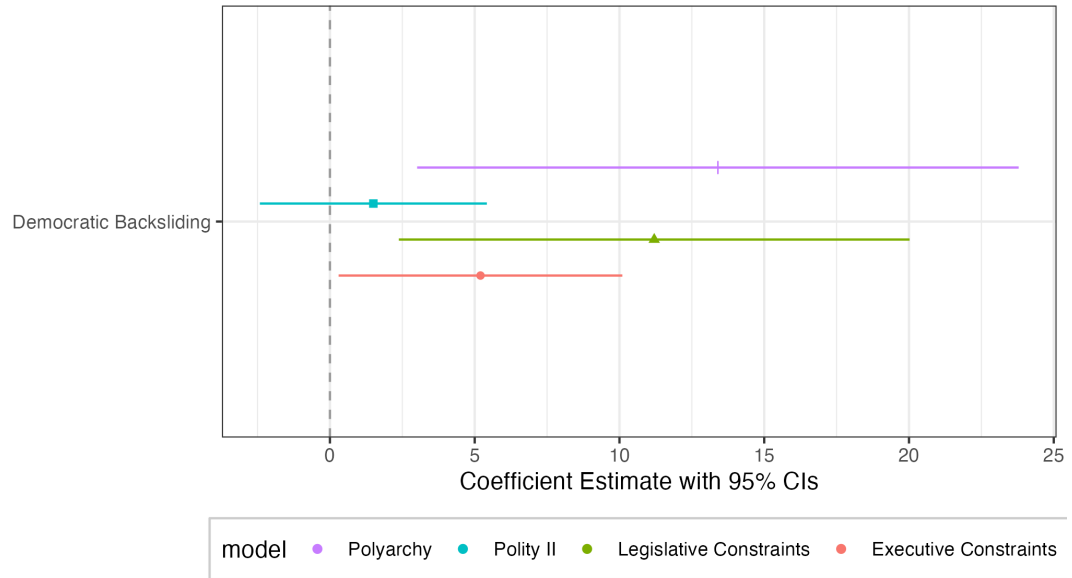
Figure R7. The Impact of Democratic Backsliding on Foreign Policy Behavior, TWFE

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95   Liu et al. (2024).

96   Imai et al. (2023).

Figure R8. The Impact of Democratic Backsliding on Foreign Policy Behavior, Panel Match

6. Alternative Dependent Variable

In the main text, we use ICEWS as the outcome variable to test our hypotheses. While we think this is the best measure available to us to proxy foreign policy behavior, we recognize that event data is not without its issues. As a result, we employ a new dependent variable here to ensure that the results are robust to different dependent variables. We create a binary variable that equals 1 if the first state in the dyad initiates a militarized interstate dispute (MID) using the Gibler-Miller-Little MID data.[97] The analysis covers 2005–2011 due to the availability of the MID data. Also, it is important to note that the FECT estimator assumes a continuous dependent variable but here we employ a binary one. While this is not ideal, it nonetheless still provides a useful robustness check for the ICEWS data. It is also akin to a linear probability model. As you can see in Figure R9, the results indicate that three of the backsliding variables including the primary Poylarchy variable are associated with an increase in MID initiation. The Legislative Constraints-based backsliding variable is positive as expected but the confidence intervals cross 0.

Figure R9. The Impact of Democratic Backsliding on Foreign Policy Behavior, MIDs

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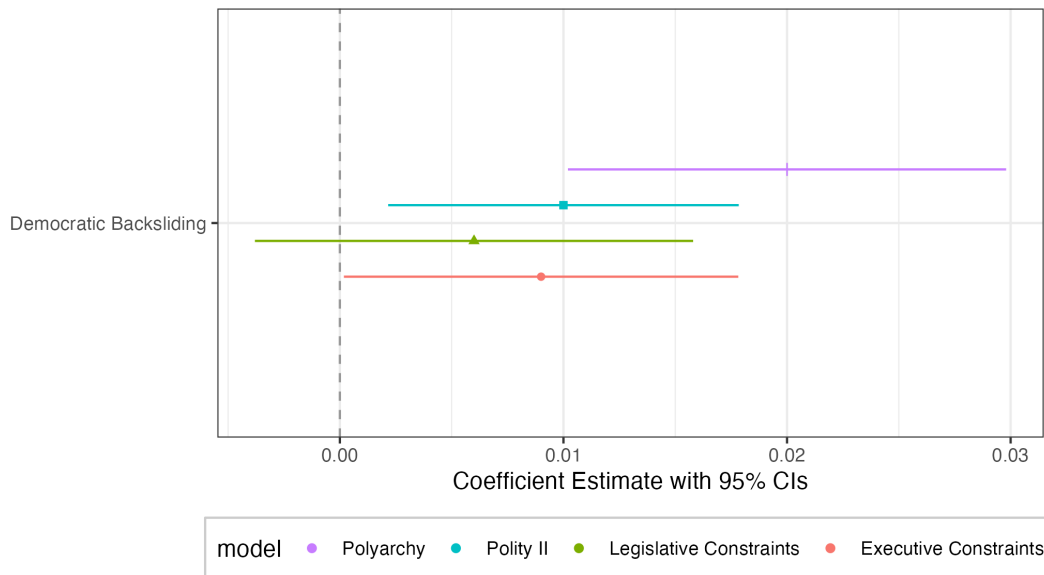
97   Gibler et al. (2016).

7. Control Variable Summary Statistics

Variable	Mean	Median	Minimum	Maximum
Autocracy	.4	0	0	1
Alliance	.2	0	0	1
UNGA Affinity	1.3	1.16	.00004	4.81
Polyarchy	.6	.7	.015	.92
Polarization	.12	-.122	-3.01	4.33
CINC Ratio	.5	.5	.000005	.999999
KOF Globalization	68.3	56.0	25.0	91.1

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