

Democratic Support Without Liberal Commitment? Explaining Tolerance for Institutional Backsliding

Book review: 'Democratic commitment: why citizens tolerate democratic Backsliding', by Natasha Wunsch, published in 2025 by Oxford University Press (Oxford).

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Abstract: This review analyzes 'Democratic Commitment: Why Citizens Tolerate Democratic Backsliding' by Natasha Wunsch (2025) and situates it within the literature on the microfoundations of democratic erosion. The book challenges explanations centered on polarization and material incentives by arguing that the key to institutional resilience lies in the degree to which citizens prioritize the liberal component of democracy. By combining survey data, focus groups, and conjoint experiments in Hungary and Poland, Wunsch identifies distinct voter profiles and shows that weak commitment to liberal principles helps explain tolerance toward illiberal candidates. The review highlights the book's main contribution — its integration of political culture, elite strategies, and electoral behavior into a unified framework — while also discussing scope conditions, such as the gap between normative commitments and vote choice, the modest role of partisanship, and unresolved issues of causal temporality. By restoring political culture to a central place in debates on democratic stability, the book offers an innovative and theoretically grounded account of contemporary democratic backsliding.

Keywords: Democratic backsliding; liberal democratic commitment; political culture.

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The recent erosion of democratic regimes has been widely analyzed in comparative political science literature under the rubric of democratic backsliding (BERMEO, 2016; HAGGARD and KAUFMAN, 2021). The concept denotes incremental processes of institutional weakening initiated by elected authorities without an overt constitutional breakdown. In such contexts, incumbents' continued tenure rests, at least partially, on the active endorsement or passive acquiescence of portions of the electorate.

Scholarship on democratic backsliding typically advances along two principal lines of inquiry. One tradition highlights macrostructural determinants, such as global economic transformations, the political aftershocks of the 2008 financial crisis, and cultural realignments linked to conservative reactions on social issues (HAGGARD and KAUFMAN, 2021; NORRIS and INGLEHART, 2019).

A second line of research shifts attention to the microfoundations of institutional erosion, contending that citizens deploy asymmetric evaluative standards toward copartisans and political adversaries, thereby fostering selective tolerance of normative violations (GIDENGIL, STOLLE, and BERGERON-BOUTIN, 2022; GRAHAM and SVOLIK, 2020; SIMONOVITS et al., 2022). From this perspective, both ideological and affective polarization attenuate the electoral costs of rule-breaking by recasting political competition as an existential confrontation with a threatening out-group, generating trade-offs between democratic principles and partisan allegiance (SVOLIK, 2020, 2019). This approach further underscores the relevance of material inducements and economic performance, positing that targeted benefits can weaken voters' propensity to sanction illiberal behavior.

In Wunsch's book (2025), this debate provides the point of departure for a central claim that offers an alternative reading of the microfoundations of institutional erosion. Rather than centering polarization or material inducements alone, she grounds her explanation in the heterogeneity of citizens' conceptions of democracy. The empirical investigation concentrates on Hungary and Poland, two paradigmatic instances of contemporary democratic backsliding.

Beginning from the apparent paradox between widespread declarative support for democracy and concurrent tolerance of institutional erosion, the author proposes a conceptual reframing of the debate on democratic backsliding. She does so by critically reengaging the political culture tradition, which maintains that regime stability depends on belief systems congruent with democratic institutions (ALMOND and VERBA, 1963) and on the diffusion of emancipatory values that sustain consolidation (INGLEHART and WELZEL, 2005).

This tradition, however, faces a fundamental limitation: its reliance on generic indicators of 'support for democracy', the meaning of which varies considerably across individuals, thereby weakening their substantive validity (FERRÍN and KRIESI, 2016). Moreover, the use of emancipatory values as a proxy for democratic commitment

circumvents the direct assessment of adherence to the liberal principles that underpin constitutional rule.

The author advances the debate along three principal fronts. First, she proposes a conceptual refinement by substituting the expansive notion of ‘support for democracy’ with a more delimited construct: commitment to liberal democracy. Proceeding from the premise that democratic regimes are inherently multidimensional and that liberalism, defined as the institutionalization of checks and balances and the protection of minority rights, represents only one of their normative components, she contends that institutional resilience depends less on abstract attachment to the democratic label than on the weight citizens assign to its liberal core.

Second, she advances an alternative microfoundation for democratic backsliding by relocating the analytical focus from aggregate correlations to individual-level orientations. From this perspective, heterogeneous conceptions of democracy inform electoral behavior that, when aggregated, may sustain elites with autocratizing inclinations. Institutional erosion can thus unfold even where declarative regime support remains high, as the underlying deficit resides not in an overt repudiation of democracy as such, but in a tenuous commitment to the institutional safeguards intended to restrain majoritarian authority.

Finally, she connects the demand and supply sides of democratic erosion through three core propositions: 01. citizens hold heterogeneous understandings of democracy; 02. political leaders strategically activate illiberal interpretations of the regime; and 03. the depth of commitment to liberal principles conditions whether such actors are electorally punished or rewarded. By integrating political culture, elite strategy, and voting behavior within a unified explanatory framework, the author reconnects this classical tradition to contemporary debates on institutional decline. In doing so, she demonstrates how individual normative orientations, when aligned with strategic incentives, can produce cumulative dynamics of democratic weakening.

In Chapter 03, Wunsch (2025) operationalizes her theoretical framework by constructing a multidimensional model to capture citizens' conceptions of democracy and the relative weight they assign to its liberal component. By relying on twelve survey items distributed across four normative dimensions — liberal, redistributive, majoritarian, and authoritarian — she estimates the comparative priority respondents attribute to liberal principles ‘vis-à-vis’ alternative understandings that place strain on constitutional constraints. Within this formulation, democratic commitment no longer equates to a rhetorical endorsement of the term ‘democracy’; rather, it denotes the precedence granted to institutional checks and individual rights, even when these come into tension with majority rule or redistributive claims.

By employing latent profile analysis (LPA), Wunsch (2025) identifies five distinct voter types. Strong liberal democrats (a minority comprising 12 percent in Hungary and 13

percent in Poland) consistently prioritize the liberal dimension above all others. Weak liberal democrats endorse liberal principles while simultaneously expressing substantive support for competing normative orientations. Ambivalent democrats report high levels of agreement across multiple dimensions, including the authoritarian one. The indifferent display low normative coherence coupled with greater political disengagement. Finally, illiberals repudiate the liberal component and instead privilege authoritarian conceptions of regime organization.

Chapter 04 deepens the demand-side analysis by supplementing survey-based measurement with focus groups conducted in Hungary and Poland, exploring how citizens articulate their understandings of democracy in everyday political discourse. Although many participants offer abstract definitions that approximate the liberal ideal, such statements coexist with critical evaluations of regime performance and a readiness to countenance executive interventions justified in the name of order or economic results. By incorporating these qualitative accounts, the chapter illustrates how divergent normative orientations shape citizens' willingness to defend institutional safeguards under conditions of political stress.

Chapter 05 shifts attention to the supply side by systematically comparing the discourse of governing elites in Hungary and Poland. In the Hungarian case, the Viktor Orbán administration advances an ideologically coherent narrative that equates democracy with national sovereignty and the primacy of state authority, while minimizing the importance of institutional checks and balances. In Poland, by contrast, the Law and Justice party relies on a more heterogeneous repertoire, centered largely on economic performance and social protection, and refrains from explicitly illiberal formulations.

In both contexts, political leaders craft interpretive frames that render support for governments curtailing institutional oversight normatively defensible. The chapter thus shows that democratic deterioration arises from the interaction between heterogeneous understandings within the electorate and elite strategies that activate the regime's non-liberal dimensions.

Chapter 06 subjects the book's central hypotheses to rigorous empirical evaluation by assessing whether distinct conceptions of democracy translate into observable electoral behavior. Drawing on conjoint experiments embedded in nationally representative surveys in both countries, the author demonstrates that liberal commitment sharply differentiates voters in their propensity to sanction candidates with authoritarian tendencies. Consistent liberals systematically penalize such profiles, whereas individuals whose attachment to the liberal dimension is weaker exhibit greater permissiveness, particularly when exposed to material incentives or majoritarian appeals.

The findings further indicate that these normative differences account for permissiveness toward illiberal candidates more robustly than partisan identification alone. The effect is especially pronounced when the conflict centers on concrete institutional issues, thereby helping to specify the scope conditions of the model's explanatory power.

The chapter also tempers strong claims regarding the primacy of partisan polarization. Although party identification and support for incumbents influence vote choice, particularly in Poland, there is no consistent evidence that co-partisans systematically excuse normative transgressions. Conditional analyses indicate that the penalty imposed on authoritarian positions is comparable in magnitude, irrespective of a candidate's partisan affiliation. The most durable cleavage that emerges is cultural: moral and identity-based values exert greater weight than party loyalty in structuring tolerance for institutional violations.

Chapter 06 brings her theoretical architecture to completion by integrating three previously developed components: 01. the identification of heterogeneous conceptions of democracy (Chapters 03 and 04), 02. their strategic activation by political elites (Chapter 05), and 03. their manifestation in electoral behavior (Chapter 06). By showing that variation in commitment to the liberal dimension systematically structures vote choice, Wunsch (2025) provides a comprehensive explanation for the persistence of democratic backsliding. In her account, institutional erosion is best understood as the outcome of an interaction between elite maneuvering and an electoral base whose attachment to liberal principles is uneven and frequently too fragile to generate the level of sanctioning necessary to arrest, let alone reverse, democratic decline.

A preliminary assessment indicates that, although the empirical evidence broadly supports her argument, certain findings circumscribe its explanatory scope. The proportion of respondents who behave as liberals in the experimental setting exceeds the share observed in real-world elections, suggesting that the translation of articulated normative commitments into effective vote choice is more contingent and context-dependent than the model initially assumes.

Moreover, the identified profiles predict electoral choices chiefly when anchored in concrete institutional issues, whereas abstract beliefs about democracy exhibit more modest explanatory power. This pattern mirrors a well-known challenge in the study of voting behavior: disentangling the causal impact of 'democracy' from the competing influence of economic evaluations, identity-based attachments, and partisan loyalties.

The book similarly moderates claims regarding the centrality of polarization, uncovering only modest effects in the experimental analyses. At the same time, the interaction between polarization and political culture, as well as the conditional

activation of normative dispositions under conditions of heightened conflict, remains an open and consequential question for future research.

This raises a broader issue of causal temporality: it remains unsettled whether conceptions of democracy independently shape vote choice or, alternatively, are recalibrated *ex post* to align with prior partisan attachments.

Notwithstanding these limitations, Wunsch (2025) makes a substantive contribution by restoring political culture to a central position in debates on democratic stability. By advancing an integrated model that connects normative beliefs, elite framing, and electoral behavior, she offers a compelling analytical foundation for future research on democratic attitudes under conditions of institutional erosion.

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