

Populism, Polarization, and the Erosion of Democracy: A Political Sociology of Contemporary Backsliding

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Abstract

This paper examines the convergence of populism, affective polarization, and democratic backsliding as an interlocking sociological phenomenon rather than a set of isolated political events. Drawing on political sociology's theoretical traditions, from classical modernization theory to contemporary accounts of institutional erosion, the paper argues that democratic decline in the twenty-first century typically proceeds through incremental, often legally sanctioned processes of executive aggrandizement rather than sudden ruptures such as coups. It shows that this erosion is enabled by deeper social transformations: the hollowing out of intermediary institutions that once linked citizens to political parties, the restructuring of the public sphere by algorithmically driven digital media, and the psychological dynamics of status threat and identity-based sorting that make authoritarian appeals attractive to specific social constituencies. The paper further explores the gendered dimensions of contemporary far-right mobilization and situates recent global trends, drawing on 2025–2026 data from the V-Dem Institute and Freedom House, alongside illustrative national trajectories in Hungary, Turkey, India, Brazil, and the United States. It concludes that while backsliding has become historically widespread, it is not irreversible, and that political sociology's task going forward is to identify the social conditions, associational density, resilient independent media, and civil society mobilization, that make democratic resistance and recovery more likely to succeed.

Keywords: *political sociology; populism; democratic backsliding; polarization; authoritarianism; democracy; social identity; political institutions*

Introduction

Political sociology has always been concerned with the relationship between social structure and political power, but few periods in the post-war era have made that relationship as visible, or as urgent, as the present one. Across established and emerging democracies alike, scholars and international monitoring bodies report a sustained decline in the quality of democratic governance. The V-Dem Institute's most recent Democracy Report found that nearly a quarter of

the world's countries were undergoing autocratization in 2025, a pattern that includes states in Europe and North America once treated as consolidated democracies (V-Dem Institute, 2026). Freedom House's parallel assessment recorded similar erosion, while comparative political scientists have begun describing the pace of decline in some cases as unprecedented in modern history (Freedom House, 2026). These are not isolated national anomalies; they form a recognizable pattern that political sociologists have increasingly organized around three interlocking concepts: populism, polarization, and democratic backsliding.

This paper examines these three phenomena as a single sociological complex rather than as separate political events. It argues that contemporary democratic erosion is best understood not as a sudden institutional rupture but as a gradual, often legal, reconfiguration of political authority that is enabled by deeper social transformations: the fragmentation of the public sphere under digital media, the reorganization of collective identity around cultural rather than purely economic cleavages, and the psychological dynamics of status threat that make authoritarian appeals attractive to segments of the electorate who feel displaced by social change. The paper proceeds in six parts. It first reviews the theoretical foundations that political sociology brings to the study of democratic decline. It then examines populism as a sociological phenomenon rather than merely an electoral strategy, before turning to the specific mechanisms through which backsliding occurs. Subsequent sections address the role of digital media and the transformed public sphere, the politics of identity and status anxiety, and the gendered dimensions of contemporary far-right mobilization. The paper closes with a comparative discussion of current trends and a set of reflections on what these developments mean for the discipline going forward.

This paper's argument is not that democracy is everywhere in terminal decline. Rather, it is that the social conditions once assumed to protect democratic consolidation, rising education, economic development, and a broadly shared civic culture, have proven considerably less protective than mid-twentieth-century modernization theory predicted. Understanding why requires political sociology to look beneath formal institutions toward the associational life, media ecology, and status hierarchies that structure how ordinary citizens experience political change.

Theoretical Foundations of Political Sociology and the Study of Democracy

Classical political sociology, from Max Weber's analysis of legitimate domination to Seymour Martin Lipset's work on the social requisites of democracy, treated political stability as a function of underlying social conditions: economic development, cross-cutting cleavages, and

the density of civil associational life (Lipset, 1959). This tradition assumed that as societies modernized, democratic institutions would become progressively more resilient. The last decade has forced a revision of that assumption. Levitsky and Ziblatt's (2018) influential account of democratic erosion argued that the gravest threats to democracy in the twenty-first century no longer come from coups or revolutions but from elected leaders who use the very institutions of democracy, courts, electoral commissions, legislatures, to dismantle the checks upon their own power. This reframing shifted the analytical focus of political sociology away from formal constitutional design and toward the informal norms, such as mutual toleration and institutional forbearance, that sustain democratic practice in everyday political life.

Building on this, Bermeo (2016) proposed a typology of backsliding distinguishing it from older forms of democratic breakdown such as coups and blatant election fraud. She identified subtler mechanisms, executive aggrandizement, strategic harassment of opponents and the media, and the manipulation of election administration, that erode democracy incrementally while preserving its outward appearance. This distinction matters sociologically because it implies that citizens often do not experience backsliding as a single dramatic event but as a slow normalization of practices that would once have been considered scandalous. Mounk (2018) extended this insight by arguing that liberal democracy itself can be decomposed into two separable components: liberalism, understood as constraints on power and protection of individual rights, and democracy, understood as the responsiveness of government to popular will. Backsliding, in his account, frequently proceeds by claiming to strengthen the democratic component (popular sovereignty, majority rule) while systematically weakening the liberal one (judicial independence, minority rights, press freedom).

Political sociology's distinctive contribution to this literature lies in insisting that these institutional dynamics cannot be separated from social structure. Scholars working in this tradition ask not only how backsliding happens but why publics in specific societies tolerate, support, or actively demand it. This requires attention to class realignment, the erosion of mediating institutions such as unions and religious congregations, generational value change, and the psychological experience of status loss, questions that fall squarely within the sociological rather than the purely institutional analysis of politics.

This move away from purely institutionalist explanations echoes a longer disciplinary debate about the relationship between structure and agency in political life. Where earlier

modernization theorists such as Lipset (1959) treated economic development as a near-automatic guarantor of democratic stability, contemporary political sociologists are more inclined to treat institutions as contingent settlements that must be continually renegotiated and defended by social actors. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the political field as a site of ongoing struggle over legitimate authority, and Michael Mann's account of the plural, overlapping sources of social power, both anticipate this shift: they suggest that democratic norms persist only as long as the social coalitions that benefit from them remain politically dominant, and that when those coalitions fracture, the norms themselves become vulnerable to renegotiation by newly ascendant actors. This theoretical move matters because it reframes backsliding as a symptom of deeper shifts in the balance of social power rather than as a discrete failure of constitutional design that could be corrected through institutional engineering alone.

Populism as a Political-Sociological Phenomenon

Populism is frequently treated in journalism as a style of rhetoric, but political sociologists more precisely define it as a thin-centered ideology that divides society into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite," and holds that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people (Mudde, 2004). Because this ideology is "thin," it typically attaches itself to a fuller host ideology, which is why populism appears on both the political right and the left, and why populist movements can differ enormously in their substantive policy commitments while sharing a common structural logic.

Sociologically, populism's appeal has been explained through two broad, and not mutually exclusive, accounts. The first is economic: deindustrialization, wage stagnation, and rising inequality since the 1980s produced constituencies who felt abandoned by mainstream parties committed to market liberalization, creating fertile ground for anti-establishment appeals (Rodrik, 2018). The second is cultural: Norris and Inglehart (2019) argued that the rise of populist-authoritarian politics reflects a "cultural backlash" among older, less educated, and more religious voters against the spread of post-materialist and progressive values, particularly around gender, immigration, and multiculturalism, among younger and more cosmopolitan cohorts. Their cross-national survey evidence suggested that cultural anxiety, rather than economic grievance alone, was the stronger predictor of support for populist parties in Western Europe and the United States.

These accounts converge on a sociological insight: populism thrives where established parties and institutions have lost their capacity to represent, or to be perceived as representing,

significant segments of the population. This representational vacuum is itself a social fact, produced by the professionalization and cartelization of mainstream parties, the decline of mass party membership, and the weakening of institutions, unions, churches, local newspapers, that once linked ordinary citizens to the political system (Mair, 2013). Populist leaders position themselves as capable of bypassing this hollowed-out intermediary layer and speaking directly to "the people," a claim that digital media, discussed below, makes considerably easier to sustain than in earlier eras.

It is important to note, following Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017), that populism is not intrinsically anti-democratic. It can operate as a corrective force, giving voice to groups excluded from elite bargaining, but it becomes a threat to liberal democracy specifically when it is fused with majoritarian and anti-pluralist claims that treat the "true people" as the only legitimate source of authority and cast institutional constraints, courts, independent media, opposition parties, as illegitimate obstacles imposed by a corrupt elite. This fusion is precisely what links populism, as a sociological phenomenon, to the institutional mechanisms of democratic backsliding.

Mechanisms of Democratic Backsliding

Contemporary research identifies several recurring mechanisms through which populist governments translate anti-pluralist rhetoric into institutional erosion. The first is executive aggrandizement, in which incumbents use legal and quasi-legal means, emergency powers, court-packing, reorganization of electoral commissions, to concentrate authority within the executive at the expense of legislatures and courts (Bermeo, 2016). The second is the delegitimization and harassment of independent media and civil society organizations, often framed as necessary defense against "fake news" or foreign interference, which narrows the informational and organizational space available to opposition (Freedom House, 2026). A third mechanism involves the manipulation of electoral administration and district boundaries in ways that formally comply with law while systematically disadvantaging opposition parties.

Recent political sociology has emphasized that these mechanisms interact with mass psychology in ways that make backsliding self-reinforcing. Frantz et al. (2025) offered an important refinement to this literature by demonstrating that the relationship between polarization and backsliding is not simply one-directional. While much of the earlier literature treated polarization as a precondition that enables backsliding, their analysis showed that incumbent attacks on democratic institutions themselves generate increased affective polarization among

citizens, as elite rhetoric filters down into stronger negative feelings toward opposing partisans. This produces a feedback loop: polarization facilitates backsliding, and backsliding in turn deepens polarization, making subsequent acts of democratic erosion easier to justify and harder for the public to resist collectively.

The United States has become a widely studied case of this dynamic in the current decade. Multiple indices, including Freedom House's Freedom in the World assessment and the V-Dem Institute's annual report, recorded the country's sharpest single-year democracy scores since their respective series began, citing the use of federalized security forces to manage domestic protest, contested redistricting efforts, and pressure on the independence of the civil service and judiciary (Freedom House, 2026; V-Dem Institute, 2026). The Bright Line Watch survey of political scientists similarly found a marked scholarly consensus around concerns for continued erosion, placing the United States, historically treated as a paradigmatic consolidated democracy, in the same analytical category as states undergoing active democratic contestation. What makes the American case sociologically significant is precisely that it demonstrates backsliding is not confined to post-communist or postcolonial states with historically weak institutions; it can occur within societies possessing long democratic traditions, when the underlying social consensus that once sustained those traditions fractures.

These domestic mechanisms are frequently reinforced by transnational networks of illiberal cooperation. Comparative scholarship has documented how populist governments increasingly borrow legal templates, communications strategies, and even personnel from one another, producing what some analysts describe as a loosely coordinated illiberal international. Governments seeking to curtail judicial independence or restrict the operating space of non-governmental organizations frequently cite precedents set in other backsliding states as evidence that such measures are internationally normal rather than exceptional, a dynamic that political sociologists argue accelerates the diffusion of backsliding techniques across otherwise dissimilar national contexts.

Importantly, scholars caution against treating backsliding as an irreversible or linear process. Comparative work on backsliding, resistance, and partial recovery has shown that civil society mobilization, judicial resistance, and electoral defeat of incumbents attempting to entrench power can and do produce partial democratic recoveries in a range of national contexts (Riedl et al., 2024). This finding matters for political sociology because it redirects attention away from

purely structural explanations of decline and toward the agency of social movements, professional associations, and ordinary citizens in contesting authoritarian consolidation.

Digital Media and the Transformation of the Public Sphere

No contemporary account of populism or backsliding is complete without attention to the transformation of the public sphere produced by digital and social media. Where twentieth-century mass media, however imperfectly, operated through professional gatekeeping norms that filtered political claims for factual accuracy, contemporary social media platforms allow political actors, and increasingly, automated and algorithmically amplified content, to reach mass audiences without institutional mediation. This has two sociologically significant consequences.

First, it lowers the cost of populist mobilization by allowing leaders to construct a direct, seemingly unmediated relationship with "the people," bypassing journalists and experts whom populist rhetoric frequently casts as part of the corrupt elite. Second, platform algorithms that optimize for engagement tend to reward emotionally activating content, particularly content expressing anger, moral outrage, or in-group loyalty, which structurally favors polarizing and populist messaging over deliberative or compromise-oriented political communication. Political sociologists studying disinformation have therefore argued that the erosion of a shared factual baseline is not an accidental byproduct of digital media but a structural feature of platforms whose business models depend on maximizing attention (Freedom House, 2026, notes rising pressure on independent journalism as a component of contemporary backsliding globally).

The consequences of this transformed media environment extend to the psychological experience of citizens living through periods of democratic contestation. Recent psychological and sociological research has begun documenting the emotional toll of sustained political engagement during backsliding: citizens who actively oppose incumbent efforts to erode democratic norms report measurably lower happiness and life satisfaction even as their engagement remains vital to democratic resistance (Wu et al., 2026). This "happiness cost" of political opposition helps explain why sustained mass mobilization against backsliding is sociologically difficult to maintain, and why authoritarian-leaning incumbents may benefit from strategies that exhaust civic energy over time rather than confronting it directly.

A further structural feature of the digital public sphere concerns the fragmentation of shared informational reference points. Where a mid-twentieth-century citizen in most democracies encountered a relatively narrow range of broadcast and print outlets operating under common

professional norms, contemporary citizens select from an effectively unlimited menu of sources curated by personalized algorithms. This fragmentation makes it considerably easier for competing political camps to inhabit not merely different opinions but different factual universes, each reinforced by its own information ecosystem. Political sociologists studying this phenomenon note that it undermines a precondition long assumed necessary for democratic deliberation: a shared factual baseline against which competing political claims can be evaluated. Without such a baseline, appeals to objective institutional wrongdoing, contested election results, judicial rulings, journalistic investigations, lose much of their power to constrain incumbent behavior, since substantial segments of the electorate may simply decline to accept the underlying factual premises.

Identity, Status Threat, and Polarization

A further contribution of political sociology has been to reframe polarization not simply as disagreement over policy but as a form of identity-based sorting in which political affiliation becomes fused with other social identities, race, religion, geography, education, and, increasingly, media consumption habits. This "mega-identity" sorting means that political disagreement is experienced less as a debate over competing solutions to shared problems and more as a conflict between fundamentally opposed social groups, each perceiving the other as an existential threat (Mason, 2018).

Underlying this affective polarization, several scholars have pointed to the sociological dynamics of relative status threat. Individuals and groups who perceive themselves as losing relative social standing, whether due to demographic change, economic restructuring, or shifts in the prevailing normative consensus around race, gender, and national identity, have been shown to be more receptive to authoritarian and exclusionary political appeals, particularly when they perceive themselves as being displaced from a position near, but not at, the bottom of the social hierarchy (Kukharkin et al., 2026). This "last-place aversion" dynamic helps explain why populist-authoritarian mobilization is often strongest not among the most economically deprived groups but among those whose relative position feels newly precarious.

A related mechanism concerns the selective application of moral and political accountability. Lalot and Abrams (2025) described a phenomenon they term "transgression credit," in which partisans extend forgiveness to co-partisan leaders for ethical or legal violations that they would unhesitatingly condemn in political opponents. This asymmetry in accountability is

sociologically significant because it undermines one of the core mechanisms, electoral punishment for institutional violations, that is supposed to constrain incumbents from engaging in the aggrandizing behaviors described above. When transgression credit is widespread, backsliding behaviors carry a lower political cost, further incentivizing their use.

Not all groups respond to democratic decline with disengagement. Longitudinal research on minoritized populations, notably a multi-wave study of LGBTQ+ adults conducted between 2017 and 2025, found that as perceptions of progressive social change declined, group identification, collective efficacy, and the desire to preserve group identity increased rather than decreased, a pattern the authors termed "identity vigilance" (Morton & Salvatore, 2026). Stronger group identification appeared to buffer these individuals against some of the negative emotional consequences of perceived democratic decline. This finding complicates any simple narrative in which democratic backsliding produces uniform demobilization; for some social groups, perceived threat appears instead to strengthen collective political engagement.

Gender, Authoritarianism, and the Far Right

Political sociology has increasingly emphasized that contemporary populist and authoritarian movements are not gender-neutral phenomena. Cross-national research consistently finds a substantial and persistent gender gap in support for radical-right and populist parties, with men, and particularly younger men, more likely than women to support such movements in most Western democracies (Off, 2023). Scholars have linked this gap to a broader backlash against feminist and LGBTQ+ rights gains, framed by many radical-right movements as part of a wider "gender ideology" that they claim threatens traditional family structures and national culture.

This gendered dimension of backsliding is not incidental but structural. Movements that construct national identity around a defense of "traditional" gender roles frequently combine this cultural agenda with efforts to restrict reproductive rights, curtail protections for sexual minorities, and reassert patriarchal authority within both family and state, positioning these efforts as a restoration of a threatened natural order rather than as a novel political project (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). Because these appeals operate simultaneously at the level of intimate, everyday social relations and at the level of formal state policy, they illustrate with particular clarity political sociology's central claim: that the erosion of democratic institutions cannot be understood apart from struggles over the organization of social life more broadly.

This gendered lens also helps explain the generational dimension of contemporary radical-right mobilization. Survey evidence from multiple European democracies indicates that the gender gap in radical-right support has widened among younger cohorts even as it has narrowed or remained stable among older ones, a reversal of earlier patterns in which radical-right support skewed toward older men specifically (Off, 2023). Scholars attribute this shift to young men's distinctive exposure to online communities organized around grievance narratives concerning changing gender relations, alongside young women's continued and, in many countries, strengthening alignment with progressive and feminist political movements. The result is a generational realignment in which gender, rather than class or age alone, increasingly structures the underlying cleavage between populist-authoritarian and liberal-democratic political coalitions.

Illustrative National Trajectories

The abstract mechanisms outlined above take on distinctive forms depending on national institutional legacies and social cleavages. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán's government has been widely studied as a template for legalistic backsliding: constitutional amendments, electoral redistricting, and the reorganization of public media ownership were each carried out through parliamentary majorities, allowing the government to claim democratic legitimacy for measures that comparative scholars classify as substantially eroding pluralism (Bermeo, 2016). Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan illustrates a related but distinct pathway, in which a genuine popular mandate and periods of economic growth provided the political capital for subsequent purges of the judiciary and civil service following the 2016 coup attempt, demonstrating how crises, real or perceived, can be leveraged to accelerate institutional concentration that might otherwise proceed more slowly.

India offers a further variation, in which majoritarian appeals organized around religious and national identity have been used to marginalize opposition-led state governments and press freedoms while formal electoral competition continues largely unimpeded, a pattern that some scholars describe as "competitive authoritarianism" rather than outright autocracy. Brazil's experience under Jair Bolsonaro, followed by a contested but ultimately successful institutional and electoral pushback, illustrates the comparative literature's emphasis on the role of courts and electoral commissions as a final line of defense: Brazilian judicial and electoral institutions retained sufficient independence to resist attempts to overturn the 2022 election result, a case

frequently cited as an example of partial democratic recovery in the framework proposed by Riedl et al. (2024).

Taken together, these trajectories underline a central claim of contemporary political sociology: backsliding is neither a uniform process nor confined to a single region or level of economic development. It is instead a family of related strategies, adapted to local institutional configurations and social cleavages, unified by a common logic of concentrating executive power while preserving the formal appearance of democratic competition.

Comparative Reflections on Current Trends

Comparative evidence from 2025 and 2026 suggests that democratic backsliding has become a genuinely global phenomenon rather than a regional anomaly. The V-Dem Institute's Democracy Report 2026 found that close to a quarter of the world's states were undergoing autocratization, spanning established democracies in Europe and North America as well as newer democracies in other regions (V-Dem Institute, 2026). This global spread is significant because it undermines earlier assumptions that democratic consolidation, once achieved through decades of economic development and institutional maturation, would render backsliding unlikely.

At the same time, the comparative record cautions against fatalism. Case studies of resistance and partial recovery demonstrate that judicial pushback, sustained civil society mobilization, and, crucially, electoral defeat of incumbents attempting institutional entrenchment can reverse or slow backsliding trajectories in specific national contexts (Riedl et al., 2024). Political sociology's task going forward is therefore not only diagnostic, explaining why backsliding occurs, but also comparative and practical, identifying the social conditions under which democratic resistance succeeds. Emerging scholarship on public administration suggests that even the technical, seemingly apolitical machinery of the state, civil service protections, procurement rules, statistical agencies, has become a contested terrain in this struggle, since populist governments often target bureaucratic independence as a precondition for further institutional capture (Schiffers, 2025).

Conclusion

The convergence of populism, affective polarization, and democratic backsliding represents one of the defining challenges facing political sociology in the current decade. This paper has argued that these phenomena are best understood not as isolated political events but as expressions of deeper social transformations: the hollowing out of intermediary institutions that

once linked citizens to political parties, the restructuring of the public sphere by algorithmically driven digital media, and the psychological dynamics of status threat and identity-based sorting that make authoritarian appeals attractive to specific social constituencies. Backsliding, as contemporary scholarship demonstrates, rarely announces itself as a single dramatic rupture; it typically proceeds through the incremental, often technically legal, erosion of institutional constraints, a process that is easier to enact, and harder for citizens to resist, once affective polarization has taken hold.

Yet the comparative record also offers grounds for qualified optimism. Democratic backsliding is not unidirectional or irreversible; resistance from courts, civil society organizations, and mobilized electorates has produced meaningful recoveries in multiple national contexts. For political sociology, this suggests a research agenda that extends beyond documenting decline to systematically identifying the social conditions, associational density, cross-cutting solidarities, resilient independent media, that make democratic resistance more likely to succeed. As global indices continue to record historically unusual rates of autocratization, understanding these conditions is not merely an academic exercise but a pressing practical concern for the future of democratic governance itself.

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