All Backsliding Is Global.
Diffusion Patterns of Democratic Regression

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Abstract. This paper examines the diffusion of democratic regression across national borders. Studies of democratic regression focus overwhelmingly on domestic-level explanations. However, clusters of backsliding democracies and well-documented ties between their leaders imply that individual cases of democratic regression are not independent from one another. Scholars studying authoritarian diffusion have highlighted diffusion between autocracies, but have yet to consider the diffusion of backsliding between democratic regimes. We argue that democratic regression diffuses across borders when domestic actors observe and emulate external precedents of regression abroad, and when these examples embolden domestic anti-democratic actors. Anti-democratic elites in democracies point to external precedent of democratic regression to convince the electorate that anti-democratic reform is normatively appropriate. We construct an original measure of democratic regression, as well as indicators of global, regional, and neighbourly external precedent of democratic regression, and use Bayesian Tobit Spatial Lag models to examine the effect of precedent on domestic regression. Our findings show that democratic regression does indeed diffuse across borders, and that the strongest effects occur in global backsliding diffusion. Contrary to much of the literature, we find that evidence of diffusion among neighbours and within the geo-political region is less compelling, and more sensitive to the selection of democracy indicators. We complement our findings with qualitative case evidence from Hungary after 2010, tracing positive references to backsliding examples from around the globe in state-of-the-union-type speeches by the prime minister.

Keywords: diffusion; democratic regression; democratic backsliding; external precedents; mechanisms; spatial lag models, Bayesian modelling

Introduction

Democratic regression is spreading like a virus. Countries as diverse as Hungary, India, Brazil, and the United States have been experiencing an ongoing decline in democratic quality in recent years. The global scale of backsliding and the seemingly simultaneous deterioration of democracy in many countries across the world raises the question whether individual cases are related, possibly even interdependent – if one case of backsliding affects another.

In this paper, we argue that one driver of the global spread of democratic regression is international diffusion. Diffusion of democratic regression is a process by which backsliding in one country increases the likelihood of backsliding in another (paraphrasing Strang 1991, 325). We argue that domestic anti-democratic actors are emboldened and empowered by external precedent of democratic backsliding. Elite change-agents can point to examples abroad and use them to try and convince domestic electorates that anti-democratic reform is normatively appropriate and acceptable. Anti-democratic actors employ the logic of appropriateness (Ambrosio 2010) to justify and advertise the roll-back of democratic institutions.

Scholarship on regime diffusion has analysed the diffusion of democracy and authoritarianism, but not fully embraced the diffusion of democratic backsliding. Newer studies highlight the diffusion of specific authoritarian institutions and practices, but often fail to demonstrate wider implications for democratic backsliding. They also often examine diffusion among autocracies, or from autocracies to democracies, but overlook diffusion between backsliding democracies.

By contrast, our study focusses on *democracy-to-democracy diffusion*, and the diffusion of regime *change*, rather than regime *type*. We expect that more external precedent of regression in democracies leads to higher levels of domestic regression in a recipient democracy. We also expect diffusion effects to be more pronounced if backsliding precedent occurs in countries closer to the destination – a standard assertion of diffusion research.

We devise a mixed-methods study to test these propositions. To our knowledge, we offer the first systematic quantitative analysis of the diffusion of democratic regression. Using data from the Varieties of Democracy project (Lindberg et al. 2014), we present a simple new indicator of democratic regression (see also Schmotz 2025), and measure backsliding precedent among countries' neighbours, within their geo-political region, and globally. We test the effects of precedent on regression using a Bayesian Spatial Lag Tobit model.

Our findings suggest that democratic regression does diffuse across borders. Much to our surprise, global diffusion appears to play a bigger role than regional and neighbour diffusion. The importance of global diffusion pertains when electoral and liberal aspect of democracy are differentiated. However, we see stronger regional diffusion effects when focussing on electoral regression, and stronger neighbour diffusion of liberal regression.

We complement our findings with case evidence to provide further support for our diffusion argument, i.e. that domestic anti-democratic actors are emboldened and empowered by external precedent of democratic backsliding. Hungary post-2010 constitute a largely undisputed typical case of democratic regression. We analyse how Hungarian prime minister Victor Orbán presents anti-democratic actors and developments in Western democracies in state-of-the-nation type speeches, spanning 15 years (2010–2025). We demonstrate that Orbán frequently refers to a range of notorious global backsliders in his speeches, that he presents these figures in a positive light, and that he uses them as examples to justify and garner (further) support for his own illiberal reforms vis-à-vis the public and political supporters. While Hungary can be expected to be an 'example to follow' for other backsliding democracies, being amongst the first in the current wave of democratic regression, we still find that Orbán is further emboldened and empowered by regression elsewhere, in particular in Western democracies, and uses this strategically to argue his policies for Hungary are both successful and right – both effective and normatively appropriate. This finding is evidence of the first two links in the causal chain making up the mechanisms of backsliding diffusion, differentiating it from authoritarian diffusion; that precedent is acknowledged and evaluated positively in communication to the public.

The paper proceeds as follows. We first review the literature on authoritarian diffusion, and point out its applicability towards and limitations regarding the diffusion of democratic regression. We then present our theoretical argument that rests on the mechanism of appropriateness of external backsliding precedent, and differentiates backsliding diffusion effects by proximity. We describe our new measures of democratic regression and external precedent, as well as the specifics of our model. We present and discuss our findings on global, regional, and neighbour diffusion of democratic regression across different aspects of democracy. Finally, we present our qualitative analysis of prime minister speeches in Hungary and show the positive framing of external backsliding precedent. We conclude discussing implications of our study and outlining an outlook to future research.

Literature: Authoritarian Diffusion and Democratic Regression

We follow colleagues who have defined democratic regression as the gradual dismantling of democratic institutions in democratic regimes carried out by government and state actors (for example Bermeo 2016; Waldner and Lust 2018). We use the terms democratic regression and democratic backsliding interchangeably. The definition sets democratic regression apart from democratic breakdown – the abrupt and full-scale abandonment of democracy and introduction of an authoritarian regime. It highlights that the scope of the analysis is restricted to democratic regimes and intra-regime change, until the point where eroding democracies are reversed to autocracies (Haggard and Kaufman 2021). By contrast, related concepts such as Lührmann and Lindberg's (2019) autocratization trace gradual deterioration of democratic features in all regime types, also autocracies. Importantly, the definition identifies democratically elected governments as the main culprits.

While there is a vast literature on international diffusion of political regimes and regime change, few studies have examined the diffusion of democratic backsliding, particularly from one backsliding democracy to the next. The literature on the diffusion of democracy has demonstrated how democracy travels across borders, and that a more democratic international environment makes it more likely for a regime to become democratic itself (Strang 1991; Brinks and Coppedge 2006; Gleditsch and Ward 2006; see also DiMaggio and Powell 1983). More recent research on authoritarian diffusion builds on this now classic work, and examines the transfer of authoritarian institutions and practices between autocratic regimes, less often from autocracies to democracies (for an excellent overview, see Tolstrup 2024). While much of authoritarian diffusion appears applicable to diffusion of backsliding between democracies, scholars have yet to acknowledge this important issue. In the meantime, the primary focus of authoritarian diffusion research is on autocracy-to-autocracy diffusion of authoritarian features, less about whether the adoption of such features make autocracies more autocratic. Authoritarian diffusion is not about autocratization. It is not about democratic backsliding either.

We build on the work on authoritarian diffusion, and therefore concentrate our literature review on this field. We also consider some relevant adjacent literatures, such as research on authoritarian learning and autocratic linkages.

A key conceptual contribution we draw on extensively in our theoretical argument below is Thomas Ambrosio's (2010) *Constructing A Framework of Authoritarian Diffusion.* Building on some the literature on democracy diffusion (Strang 1991; Brinks and Coppedge 2006; also DiMaggio and Powell 1983), and here particularly Elkins and Simmons' (2005) conceptual framework, Ambrosio distinguishes two broad mechanisms of authoritarian diffusion: *appropriateness* and *effectiveness*. Authoritarian diffusion is driven by appropriateness when previous adoptions of an authoritarian practice make later adoption more normatively acceptable. Authoritarian diffusion is driven by the effectiveness mechanism when previous authoritarian practices prove to be or are seen as successful. As we will show later, appropriateness and effectiveness can play a particularly important role in the diffusion of anti-democratic reform between backsliding democracies.

Empirical studies of authoritarian diffusion examine a broad range of diffusion objects. We structure our review of this literature along two dimensions: origin and destination regime types – autocracy-to-autocracy, autocracy-to-democracy, and democracy-to-democracy diffusion – and the object of

authoritarian diffusion – specific policies and legislation, more loosely defined authoritarian practices, and authoritarian norms, ideas, and narratives more generally.

A first group of studies examines the diffusion of specific authoritarian policies or pieces of legislation. Most scholars here trace adopted passages in legislative texts on specific issues. Many find this happening in the post-Soviet space, with Russian laws being adopted by autocracies in the region. For example, Bader (2014) shows that electoral laws falling short of democratic standards have been adapted across nine post-Soviet autocracies from similar Soviet and Russian laws. Lemon and Antonov (2020) demonstrate how legislation on peaceful assembly, civil society, and participation is transferred among five post-Soviet authoritarian regimes, with Russian laws mostly serving as the blue print. Waller (2023) traces the spread of Russian anti-LGBTQ laws to post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Georgia. Kerr (2018) argues that the similar policies restricting internet use have diffused among states of the former Soviet Union.

A second group of studies is concerned with a more broadly defined set of authoritarian practices. These do not necessarily take the codified form of specific pieces of legislation, but draw from the larger tool-box of authoritarian practices. One practice that is frequently studies is repression. For example, Darwich (2017) shows the regional and domestic conditions under which Saudi Arabia's repression of the Muslim brotherhood spread to some autocracies in the region, but not to others. Olar (2019) shows in a quantitative study that institutionally similar autocratic regimes align levels of state repression, arguing that rulers learn and emulate from peers to overcome uncertainty about whether repression can be effective. Glasius, Schalk, and Lange (2020) show that the likelihood that a country adopts policies restricting Non-Governmental Organizations increases when more countries in the vicinity have previously introduced such restrictions. (Note however, that the authors do include autocracies as well as democracies in their dataset.) Similarly, Mataic (2018) analyses a mixed dataset to show that restrictions of religious freedom become more likely when other countries introduced them before.

A third group of studies highlights the diffusion of a broader spectrum of authoritarian norms, ideas, and narratives. For example, La Torre (2017) argues that leftist leaders and parties in Latin America emulated 'Bolivarianism' as promoted by Hugo Chávez, a mix of plebiscitary constitutional reforms and a state-controlled economy, media, and civil society – albeit only where domestic democratic institutions were vulnerable (in Bolivia and Ecuador). Roberts and Ziemer (2018) find evidence of the transfer of authoritarian norms and ideas regarding NGO and LGBTQ rights from Russia to Armenia (but not much policy convergence in other areas). Yilmaz, Morieson, and Shakil (2024) argue that Pakistani viewers of a Turkish historical TV drama adopt the authoritarian narratives and attitudes in it that reflect the views of the Turkish regime. In a noteworthy negative, Thomas Ambrosio (2012) in a media study of international media sources, finds little evidence that the China model of illiberal capitalism finds much traction in outlets outside China. (Note, however, that his media sample is taken from both autocratic and democratic regimes.)

Adjacent related research fields include authoritarian learning, autocratic linkages, and authoritarian International Organizations. While the work in these fields does often not directly address diffusion, the phenomena being analysed can be seen as facilitators of authoritarian diffusion. Sometimes the objects of this research are considered to be part of the mechanisms of diffusion in the diffusion literature. This is most obvious for scholarship on authoritarian learning (Hall and Ambrosio 2017; Heydemann 2024). Studies of authoritarian learning examine how autocracies observe other autocrats' behaviour and adjust their own actions according to the examples' success or failure (Heydemann and Leenders 2011; Koesel and Bunce 2013; Weyland 2016a). Learning is explicitly conceptualized as a mechanism of diffusion in the key theoretical contributions (Elkins and Simmons 2005; Ambrosio 2010).

Autocratic linkages – the sum of ties between two autocratic regimes – have been shown to stabilise autocratic regimes (Tansey, Koehler, and Schmotz 2017; Schmotz and Tansey 2018; Cameron and Orenstein 2012; see also Lankina, Libman, and Obydenkova 2016). Linkage can be understood as a condition for diffusion: only if there are linkages between two autocracies, authoritarian practices have a chance to travel between them. In diffusion studies, geographic proximity is often introduced as a short-hand for linkages, arguing that closer examples are more relevant for diffusion. But linkages can also entail more complex socio-economic ties between countries. For example, Vangeli (2019) argues

that the Chinese One Belt One Road initiative – while not calling it linkage – can serve as a vehicle for the diffusion of the principles of state neo-liberalism that make up the China Model. Joint membership in an IO can be understood as a particular form of linkage, and the cooperation of autocracies in these organization as a condition that facilitates authoritarian diffusion (Libman and Obydenkova 2018a, 2018b).

Fewer studies examine authoritarian diffusion to democracies. This line of research includes the diffusion of entire autocratic political regimes to formerly democratic countries. Here, a focus of research is the period between the two Wold Wars in Europe. For example, Møller, Skaaning, and Tolstrup (2017) argue that the shifting balance from democratic to autocratic great powers in the interwar years enhanced autocratic demonstration effects that led to democratic regression and breakdown in some of Europe's domestically vulnerable democracies. Similarly, Lutz (2017) argues that emulation contributed to the spread of autocratic regime changes in interwar Europe, and shows the effects of a range of diffusion variables in the 1930s (Lutz 2017). The interwar years align with Huntington's (1991) first reverse wave, and scholars have since described how autocratization occurs in historic waves (Weyland 2016b; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). However, diffusion is only one possible mechanism leading to a wave of autocratization (Gunitsky 2018). Assessing whether waves are caused by diffusion is often not the authors' aim.

Related to the literature on authoritarian regime diffusion is research on coup contagion (Li and Thompson 1975; Wilén 2024). This literature applies diffusion concepts and mechanisms to examine whether and how military coups spread. Given that the result of a coup is by definition the installation of an autocratic regime, this line of research can be understood as a version of autocratic regime diffusion. Note however, that recipient regimes are often, but not always, democratic. Also, there is some more recent evidence that diffusion is less relevant for the proliferation of coups (Miller, Joseph, and Ohl 2018; Singh 2022).

Beyond the diffusion of entire autocratic regimes, authors also examine the diffusion of authoritarian norms and ideas, policies, practices, and narratives to democratic regimes. These diffusion objects are similarly diverse as those examined in autocracy-to-autocracy diffusion studies. For example, Ambrosio (2020) demonstrates how anti-liberal reform in Hungary mimics the Russian blue print in the institutional areas it targets (the judiciary, electoral system, media, and civil society) and the methods by which it targets them (Ambrosio 2020). Huang (2019) argues that the decrease in Taiwan's press freedom is partly due to norm diffusion from autocratic hegemon China, facilitated by dense economic linkages to the country. Rivetti (2024) analyses Iranian and Italian social media accounts to show how the Italian far-right adopts authoritarian narratives from Iran, championing traditional values and anti-Trans-Atlantic sentiment, and facilitated by long-standing ties between the two.

There are also some notable null-findings of authoritarian-democracy diffusion: Ambrosio (2012) finds little evidence that the narrative of the 'China Model' of illiberal capitalism gains traction in media discourse in the US and other media around the world, as mentioned above. Chou, Pan, and Poole (2017) find little evidence of diffusion of authoritarian norms from China and Singapore to Australia. Buzogány (2017) argues that Hungary's backsliding was not emulated from Russia, but that the countries' relationship grew closer since 2010 due to mutual interests (see case discussion below and footnote 9).

While the literature on authoritarian diffusion offers great insight into when and how a plethora of authoritarian features are transferred to other autocracies and democracies, they fall short of explaining the diffusion of democratic regression between backsliding democracies. On the one hand, scholars for the most part direct their attention towards diffusion between autocracies, to a lesser extent from autocracies to democracies. While it seems plausible that many of the mechanisms apply to the diffusion of backsliding between democracies, empirical tests of this assumption are scarce. In fact, the closest we could find to a study of diffusion of democratic regression between backsliding democracies is Holesch and Kyriazi (2022) study of the recent cooperation between Poland and Hungary. The authors argue that the two countries can protect each other against EU sanctions; learn from each other's anti-democratic reforms; and use the respective other's example to legitimate their own policies domestically. Clearly, the two last points (albeit not the first) speak to diffusion mechanisms: learning

and legitimation through precedent can be understood as two of the key diffusion mechanisms (Elkins and Simmons 2005; Ambrosio 2010).

On the other hand, research on authoritarian diffusion is not about autocratization. Authoritarian diffusion often does not make autocracies more authoritarian. Rather, it describes the transfer of institutions and practices among similar authoritarian regimes, with no discernible effect on how authoritarian they are. The literature on authoritarian diffusion is about diffusion between autocracies, not about the diffusion of autocratization.

Theory: How Domestic Actors Use External Precedent to Justify Backsliding

We argue that democratic regression diffuses between backsliding democracies, and we employ and adapt theoretical arguments from the literature on authoritarian diffusion to make our case.

Our study makes two main contributions to the literature on authoritarian diffusion. First, we examine the diffusion of an authoritarian feature *between democratic regimes*. Research on authoritarian diffusion is mainly concerned with autocracy-autocracy diffusion, as we have shown in the previous section. Substituting a different regime type for both the origin and destination regimes of the diffusion process has important consequences for the diffusion mechanisms at play, because this shift introduces a new set of institutions and actors into the authoritarian diffusion process: elections and the electorate.

Second, our study traces the diffusion of *regime change* rather than a static authoritarian feature, such as a particular policy or practice in place elsewhere. Existing research on authoritarian diffusion examines the transfer of a particular fixed set of features, such as policies or institutions, as we have shown above. While such a transfer might imply change on the part of the recipient regime, this is not explicitly analysed by most studies. Highlighting the diffusion of change rather than status introduces a dynamic element into the diffusion process that has consequences for how diffusion mechanisms function.

We draw from authoritarian diffusion theory and adapt it to these two new elements. Particularly, we use Thomas Ambrosio's (2010) framework, and focus on his *mechanism of appropriateness*. Ambrosio argues that in authoritarian diffusion, external precedent of authoritarian features in other autocratic regimes makes it normatively more acceptable to adopt a similar feature in one's own regime. Ambrosio builds on Elkins and Simmons (2005) here who argue a key diffusion mechanisms is that precedent alters the conditions of adopting a particular feature for later countries. Precedent can in other words open a window of opportunity. Adopting becomes more appropriate, because others have successfully done so before.

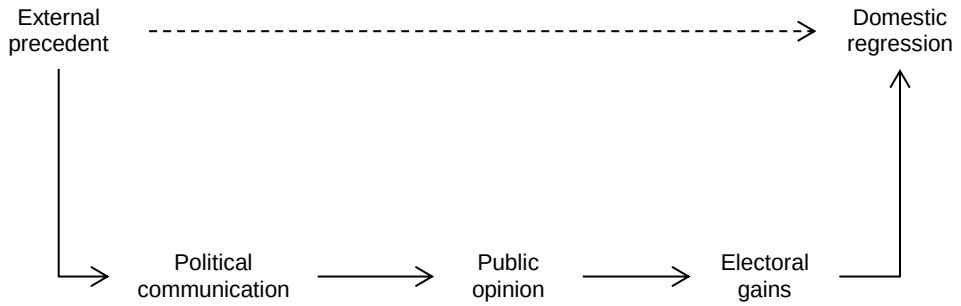

Figure 1: Electorate Mechanism of Backsliding Diffusion

Our first modification to Ambrosio's framework is that in the democracy-democracy diffusion of democratic backsliding, a new player enters the stage: the electorate. In a democracy, the electorate also has to consider backsliding appropriate in order for backsliding diffusion to happen. In Ambrosio's framework, and authoritarian diffusion studies more generally, the domestic actors responding to

external precedent are usually elite actors. Precedent changes not only the feasibility of adoption (the window of opportunity), but may also alter the perception and preferences of elite actors involved so that they consider adopting in the first place. By contrast, we assume that domestic anti-democratic actors for the most part already have a reform agenda they would like to pursue, and that external precedents inform and instruct them on how, when and what reforms to embark on. However, a key next step is to convince the public. Precedent can help them achieving this task. In this dual sense, external precedent of democratic backsliding both embolden and empower domestic anti-democratic actors, as it encourages them and serves as justification for their reform.

The second argument we add to Ambrosio's framework is that in democracy-democracy diffusion of backsliding, appropriateness is even more important than in authoritarian diffusion. On the face of it, implementing backsliding strategies is very inappropriate in a democracy – it is the intrusion of undemocratic features in a democratic regime, be this institutional reforms, policies, or narratives. The fact that origin regimes are *also democratic* helps generate normative appropriateness. This is particularly important for perceptions of appropriateness in the wider public and electorate. It is easier for anti-democratic leaders to point to other democracies embarking on similar (backsliding) reforms and make a case that the same should be done here. Diffusion from one democracy to another is easier than diffusion of an authoritarian feature from an autocratic regime to a democracy because the origin and recipient regimes are similar, and voters will consider an adoption of similar undemocratic reform more appropriate if it originates from a similar regime. The diffusion of backsliding from one democracy to another should be easier than from an autocracy to a democracy. We formulate the observable implications from these arguments in our first hypothesis:

H1 The more external precedent of democratic regression occurs in democracies abroad, the higher the level of domestic democratic regression in a recipient democracy.

We expect that more geographically proximate precedent will have a greater effect on domestic backsliding. This is very much in keeping with authoritarian diffusion research, and the diffusion literature more generally. Here, external examples are often differentiated by their distance to the recipient, often in by distinguishing precedent among neighbours and in a country's region from precedent further afield. The main reason for a premium on proximity in the literature is that proximity raises awareness of precedent, as information flows are denser between neighbouring countries. We follow this argument, and emphasize that awareness by proximity will be particularly important for the general public, who will have a better grasp of political developments in their home country's vicinity.

In addition, we argue that proximity also boosts appropriateness: Precedent of backsliding will be considered an appropriate option if it happens in countries nearby. Particularly in the perception of the broader public, neighbouring countries will often be seen as similar to one's own. This perception is often rooted in shared histories and parallel political developments. The similarity of regional neighbours makes political reform they undertake appear more fitting also for domestic political regime. If they undergo backsliding, they might have good reasons for it, and it might be the right choice for us, too. In sum, we formulate a second hypothesis that differentiates backsliding diffusion effects according to geographic proximity:

H2 The more proximate the external precedent of democratic regression, the larger the diffusion effect.

In order to succeed in their attempts to dismantle democratic institutions, anti-democratic elites in democracies have to convince the public to support them. They ultimately need to win elections to implement illiberal reforms. This is different from authoritarian diffusion, where public opinion in recipient autocratic regimes is less important for rulers than it is in democracies (albeit not fully irrelevant). External precedent of democratic regression can serve as an argument for backsliding elites to convince the public. They can point to examples abroad and make the case that democratic backsliding is an acceptable way to deal with political challenges – they can try to convince the electorate that anti-democratic reforms are appropriate based on other countries' adoption record. In order to influence public opinion, anti-democratic elites will draw on means of mass political communication. The importance of political communication is greater in democratic recipients of authoritarian diffusion.

Elites will draw on external backsliding precedent in public communication, for example in political speeches, and present these examples in a positive light worth emulating. This is a key mechanism of democracy-democracy diffusion of democratic backsliding, illustrated in Figure 1: external precedent is used in political communication to influence public opinion and ultimately generate the electoral gains necessary to implement anti-democratic reform. To test the first link in this causal chain, we formulate a third hypothesis:

H3 The more diffusion of democratic backsliding is observable on the macro-level in a particular case, the more positive evaluation of external precedent will be found in political communication directed at the electorate by anti-democratic elites.

Quantitative Analysis: Data and Methods

Diffusion claims are essentially claims about causal processes and mechanisms. Strong research design and methodological rigor is needed to support diffusion claims. The lion's share of studies on authoritarian diffusion has been largely qualitative and descriptive, often falling short of fully examining or proving diffusion mechanisms (Ambrosio and Tolstrup 2019). By devising an integrative multimethod research design, this paper complements a main quantitative regression analysis with a qualitative case study to support and substantiate our overall diffusion argument. While the quantitative analyses allow us to test our suggested associations between external precedent of democratic regression and domestic empirical implications (H1 and H2), a qualitative case study tentatively test the initial steps of our suggested diffusion mechanism (praise of precedent in political communication, H3). Our overall aim of this integrative multimethod design is to improve confidence in overall causal inference.

In the below, we explain further choices of methods and data. We introduce a new measure of democratic regression and explain operationalisation of DV and IVs. We then explain model specification and controls. Lastly, we justify case selection and present the text data analysed.

Dependent Variable: A Novel Way of Measuring Democratic Regression

We design a new measure of democratic regression that registers gradual downward shifts of democratic quality, but excludes sharp drops, stagnation, and upward movements. We restrict our analysis to democracies only. We therefore follow the most important definitions of democratic regression or backsliding (Bermeo 2016; Waldner and Lust 2018), and implement their key features in our measure: that democratic regression is a gradual deterioration of democratic norms and institutions, that it is distinct from democratic breakdown, and that it takes place in democracies.[1]

Previous measures have included both upward as well as downward changes (Brinks and Coppedge 2006), large drops (Meyerrose 2020), and autocratic regimes (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). While there are good reasons for these choices in the context of the respective studies, we believe the diffusion of democratic regression is best examined using our approach. Including changes in both directions opens the analysis to include both backsliding and democratization, but risks confounding effects on more backsliding with those on less democratization. Including large drops provides a more inclusive measure of regime deterioration, but risks confounding the causes and effect of democratic backsliding with those of democratic breakdown. Extending the analysis to include autocratic regimes offers a more comprehensive picture of developments across the spectrum of political regimes, but risks confounding democratic backsliding and autocratic deepening.

[1] For a more detailed description and discussion of our new measure of democratic backsliding, including a comparison to other indicators, see (Author 2025).

We use data from the Varieties of Democracy project (Lindberg et al. 2014) to operationalize our measure. V-Dem indicators are (for the most part) coded on continuous interval scales, and are therefore sensitive enough to capture the small changes in democratic quality required to measure democratic regression. More specifically, or main analysis is based on the V-Dem Index of Liberal Democracy. The indicator draws on a more extensive concept of democracy, compared to their more minimal Electoral Democracy Index, including information on the rule of law and horizontal control (Coppedge et al. 2024, 417). The more complex index can pick up the fine-grained and multiple facets of democratic backsliding better than a more minimalist index. Tellingly, the V-Dem team themselves uses the Liberal Democracy Index as a main measure in their recent annual reports, highlighting trends of democratic regression and autocratic deepening around the world. It is also used in important contributions on the international factors influencing democratic backsliding (Meyerrose 2020).

Here is how we construct the indicator: For a given democratic country-year, as per V-Dem's Regimes of the World variable (Lührmann, Tannenberg, and Lindberg 2018), we compute the first difference, i.e., the annual change in liberal democracy by subtracting the current from next year's liberal democracy score. Where that number is negative, democracy levels decrease. We recode the variable to 0 where the first difference is positive, that is where democracy levels improve. We also code it to 0 where there is a breakdown: a sharp drop in democracy levels, accompanied by a change of regime type from democratic to autocratic, according to Regimes of the World. We define a 'sharp drop' as a downward shift in excess of two standard deviations more than the average negative change (excluding positive changes and stagnation) in a single country-year. This amounts to a threshold of .07 or above for a sharp drop. Finally, we invert the scale of the variable so that higher values represent more backsliding. We only compute democratic regression for democratic country-years.

Figure 2 illustrates how the indicator works, using the example of Turkey. The upper panel of the figure shows the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index in Turkey since 1900; it also shows the discrete regime types, closed and electoral autocracy, and electoral democracy, in grey shading of the line plot. The lower panel shows our indicator of democratic regression. It takes positive values where democracy levels decrease – but not where democracy breaks down in 1970 and 1980. Note that the lower panel is blank while Turkey goes through non-democratic periods, since we only code the variable for democratic country-years.

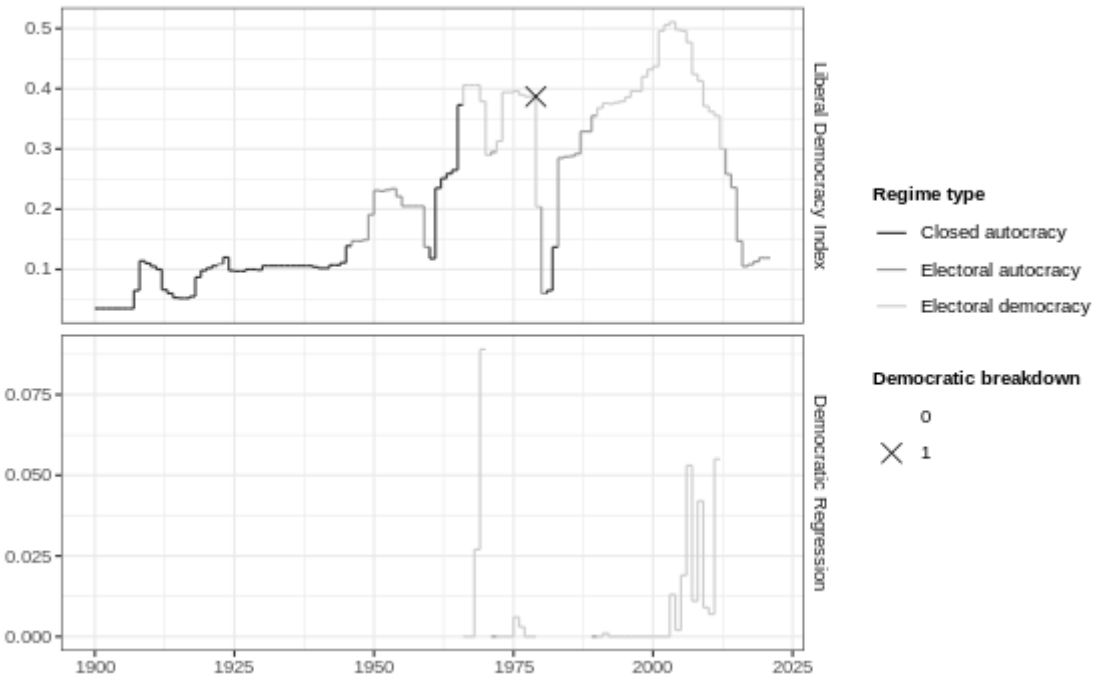

Figure 2: Democratic regression vs breakdown in Turkey

Note that for the analysis below, we have constructed two additional regression indicators, giving the downward shift over two and three year-periods, respectively. While it is common practice to compute annual regime change measures, observing a slow-moving phenomenon like democratic regression over longer time-spans can reveal important temporal patterns about of backsliding and its diffusion.

Independent Variables: Measuring External Precedent Through Spatial Lags

We construct three measures of external precedent to model the diffusion of democratic regression and test hypotheses H1 and H2: neighbour precedent, precedent within the geo-political region, and global precedent. For neighbour precedent, we sum individual levels of democratic regression (as per our indicator discussed above) across a country's democratic neighbours. We consider two countries neighbours if they are directly adjacent, or separated by water no wider than 50 miles.

Summing up individual backsliding levels (rather than, for example, counting external backsliding countries) implies that the severity of observed backsliding matters. Higher levels of regression abroad will lead to higher values on the precedent indicator, implying that more severe cases of backsliding will exert larger effects in the models. At the same time, the sum indicator increases if backsliding precedent occurs in several origin countries simultaneously. A single country with a lot of backsliding can lead to the same levels of precedent as would several countries with relatively less. In our models, the two scenarios will exert the same effect.

We construct the indicator of regional precedent correspondingly, totalling levels of democratic regression in a country's region (excluding the recipient country). We use a six-fold geo-political categorization of world regions following Teorell (2021), comprising Western Europe and North America (including Australia and New Zealand), Eastern Europe and the Post-Soviet space, the Middle East and Northern Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and Latin America and The Caribbean. The geo-political categorization carries the notion that geography is important in grouping countries into regions, but that some cultural and historical commonalities, particularly if they relate to histories of democratization, outweigh geographic distance, leading to exceptions from geographic assignment to regions, for example when New Zealand, the US, and Western Europe are joined together in a single category.

Finally, our global precedent indicator correspondingly sums democratic regression levels from around the world.

Note that our precedent variables do not consider regression in external non-democratic regimes. As we have pointed out above, the focus of this study is the diffusion of backsliding from one democracy to another. While regression in other, non-democratic regimes might well have an impact on backsliding in democracies, this process of autocratic diffusion to democratic regimes is distinct from what we examine here (and subject to future research).[3]

We construct three versions of the precedent variables, capturing annual precedent – external regression occurring from one year to the next –, as well as rolling sums of annual figures over the preceding three and five years. The varying time-frames and will allow us to analyse the more immediate and longer-term effects that account for the diffusion of democratic backsliding in closer detail.

[3] We make a small exception from this rule: if a country experiences democratic regression to the point where it crosses the threshold into autocracy, we continue to include it in the precedent measures for a period of five years, while gradually reducing the weight the respective country has in the indicator, from 1 in the first post-transition year, to 0 after six years. This coding reflects the assumption that a precedent country does not immediately disappear from the radar of any potential destination country once it has turned autocratic, but that it rather slowly fades away as a relevant example over a period of time. While the five-year period and the rate by which we let the precedent fade out is ultimately arbitrary, we think this is a more realistic approach than just dropping a precedent country from the index the moment it stopped being considered democratic by the V-Dem team. For more details on the precise implementation of the fade-out, please consider the commented replication code provided in the supplementary materials.

Note that by constructing the precedent indicators in this fashion, we effectively construct *spatial lag* variables.

Figure 3 illustrates the precedent indicators. The top left panel show Slovakia in 2020 – as an example – and its neighbours, with the neighbouring countries' level of democratic regression illustrated by grey shading. The top right panel shows Slovakia within its region, Eastern Europe. The bottom panel shows regression precedent the world over. Darker greys indicate higher levels of regression. Countries left white are missing a value on the indicator of democratic regression – in most cases because they are not democratic. Figure 3 shows that while the Czech Republic was the most prominent neighbouring example of democratic regression, Romania's development was an even stronger case of regression in the geo-political region of Slovakia in 2020. The global map also shows other cases of strong regression in democracies far away, notably in Mexico and Peru.

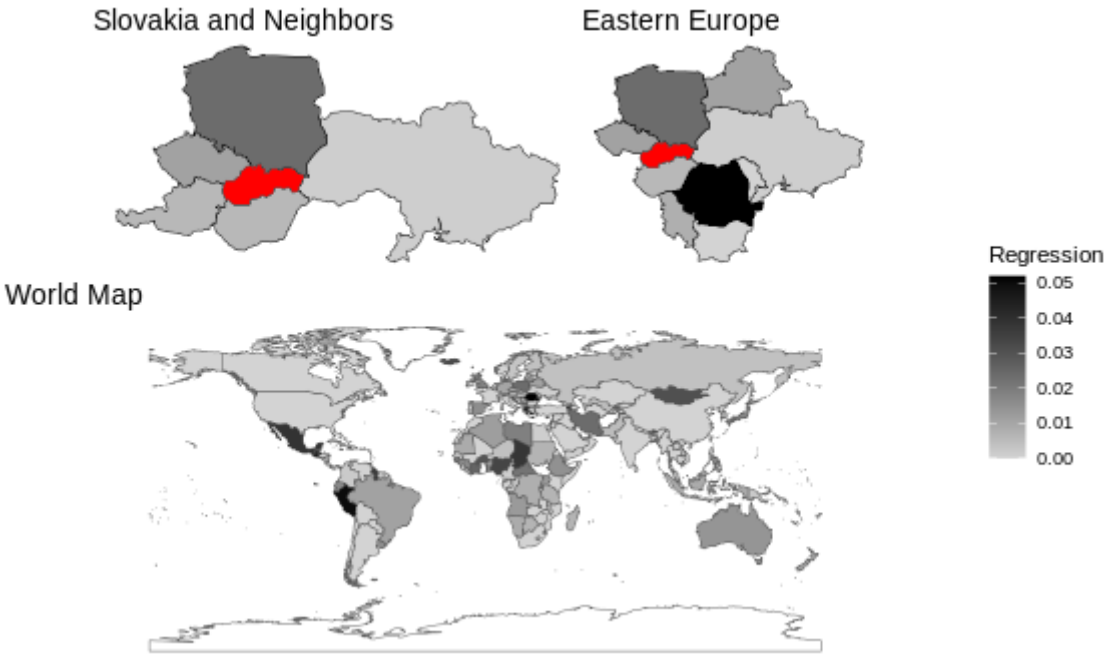

Figure 3: Neighbour, regional, and global regression precedent for example country Slovakia in 2020

Model Specification: A Spatial Lag in A Bayesian Tobit Multilevel Model

Our modelling approach has four noteworthy features: As the previous section precluded, we estimate (1) *a spatial lag model*, due to the way we operationalize the variables of external backsliding precedent. In addition, (2) we use *Bayesian statistics*, (3) implement a *Tobit model* to examine a zero-inflated dependent variable, and (4) use *multilevel modelling* to accommodate the panel structure of our time-series cross-sectional data.

Spatial-lag Model

Spatial lag models are a well-established tool to model diffusion processes (Franzese and Hays 2008; Plümper and Neumayer 2010; Neumayer and Plümper 2012). What makes our model a spatial lag model is the way in which we operationalize our main independent variables, the indicators of external precedent of democratic backsliding. A spatial lag model regresses the value of a variable in one unit on the values of that same variable in other units (hence the qualifier 'spatial') at an earlier point in time (hence the 'lag'). In our application, the dependent variable is democratic regression in a country, and the independent variables are based on previous democratic regression in other countries. This model specification aligns perfectly with the concept of diffusion we examine here, in which previous

democratic backsliding in other countries is expected to lead to backsliding in a country under investigation.

Bayesian Modelling

We use Bayesian statistical inference to examine the effects of external precedent on democratic regression. Bayesian statistics are becoming more widely used in the social sciences, and often appear the more appropriate model choice for non-random data analysed in Comparative Politics and International Relations (Brandt and Freeman 2006; Lynch and Bartlett 2019).

Tobit Model

We use a Bayesian Tobit model to accommodate our zero-inflated indicator of democratic regression (Tobin 1958; Smithson and Shou 2020). The indicator includes an excessive number of zeroes, due to the way in which we constructed it – remember, all positive annual shifts we set to zero, in addition to years without change that showed zeroes to begin with. One could see this distribution is extremely right-skewed. However, the commonly applied log transformation that is often used to approximate normal distribution of right-skewed data is not effective in this instance (see Figure 4): while log-transforming the variable will spread out the distribution of values close to zero and pull higher values closer together, the relative position of exact zeroes in the distribution is not affected. The distribution remains right-skewed, even heavily so.

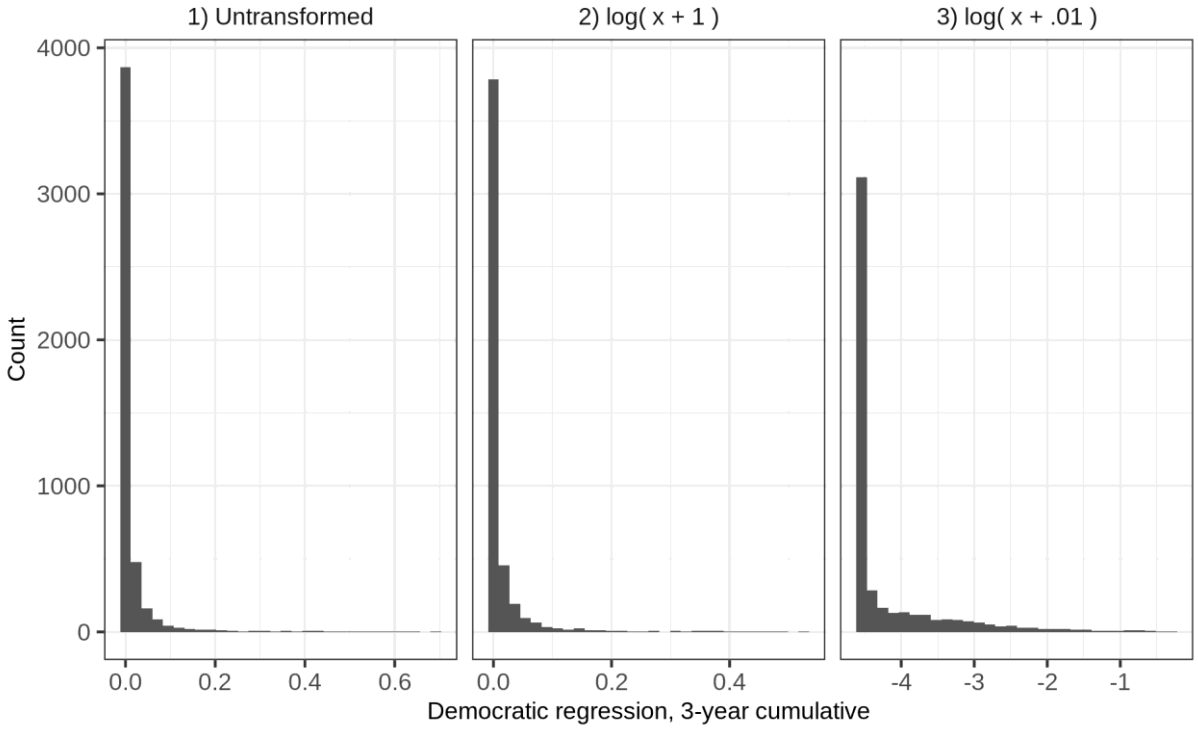

Figure 4: Ineffective log-transformation of zero-inflated indicator of democratic regression

The solution is a specialized method of analysis: a Tobit model. Developed by James Tobin (he of the Tobin Tax) in the 1950s, the method was designed to model zero-inflated household expenditure data (Tobin 1958). The idea is that there zero-inflated distribution is "censored": there is an underlying normal distribution, but it is artificially cut off at the lower end because of the way the data is generated.

This approach fits very well to the data generation process involved in the construction of our new measure of democratic regression. Here, too, the distribution is limited at the lower end: while the annual difference in democratic levels will observe a normal distribution - there will be positive and negative changes spread more or less symmetrically around a median of zero (no change) - we artificially censor

the bell curve by setting observations with positive shifts (i.e. democratization) to zero. As we have explained above, this is a deliberate move to isolate democratic regression form stagnation and democratization.[5]

Multilevel Model

To accommodate the panel structure of our data – multiple annual observations within multiple countries – we use multilevel models, nesting observations in countries and years (Shor et al. 2007; Barreda and Silbert 2023; for a topical application, see Meyerrose 2020). The multilevel framework offers a number of advantages over the conventional panel modelling strategy of estimating country and year-fixed effects, such as the ability to estimate the effects of country-level variables, and better accommodation of unit heterogeneity and heteroscedasticity. Given these advantages, combined with the superior capacity of Bayesian estimation to handle heteroscedasticity, we do not have to panel-correct standard errors, as is common in conventional panel modelling (Beck and Katz 1995). We do, however, include a lagged version of the dependent variable in all models to accommodate for serial correlation (Beck and Katz 1996; Beck, Katz, and Tucker 1998).[6]

We used the multi-level framework to group observations in countries and years, thereby allowing the intercepts to vary randomly in these groups. This procedure is analogous to estimating country-fixed and year-fixed effects – a common practice in panel regression. As a result, our models implicitly control for any unobserved factors that may vary systematically across countries and years. We think that this is the toughest test we can put our models to, and are therefore confident our findings are more robust than if we had not introduced these parameters.

Control Variables

Another key feature of our analysis is that we include all three spatial precedent variables in the same model. Previous diffusion analyses have sometimes only used one. In other words, the three variables serve as mutual controls. Only by including all three can we distinguish which of the three spatial precedents – neighbour, regional, or global precedent – takes precedence.

In addition, we include two substantive control variables in all our main models that have been identified in the literature as two of the main alternative explanations of democratic regression: *populism* and *polarization*. Populism spurs people's resentment of the political class and established democratic institutions that are seen as corrupt, and populist leaders often hold anti-democratic views. The presence of strong populist forces in a country has been shown to foster backsliding (Weyland 2020; Vachudova 2020; Bessen 2024). Polarization can make opposing political views incompatible and unable to compromise, and obstruct the democratic hand-over of power or cooperation across the aisle (Haggard and Kaufman 2021; Arbatli and Rosenberg 2021; McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018). We operationalize populism and polarization using V-Dem's party data, and compute the combined vote share of parties

[5] A similar problem befalls our main independent variables, measuring the precedent of democratic regression abroad. Given that these variables are derived from the zero-inflated indicator of democratic regression, they also show right-skewed distributions. However, since the variables are aggregated across many countries and over several years, the bias in the distribution is less pronounced. In most cases, taking the logarithm will achieve the desired transformation of the distribution. The exception are the group of indicators capturing external regression among neighbouring countries. In order to test the robustness of our findings against this anomality, we run a model including a dummy variable that takes a value of 1 for values larger than zero on the neighbouring precedent variable, and 0 otherwise. Results of these models can be inspected in our online appendix; the inclusion of the dummy does not alter the findings presented here and our interpretation of it.

[6] To probe the robustness of our findings, we also estimate a set of models including more conventional country and year-fixed effects, as well as a set without the lagged dependent variable. We also re-estimate all models using variables based on V-Dem's liberal democracy index - rather than the polyarchy index presendet here. All of these additional models can be inspected in the online appendix.

scoring high on its variable capturing a party's populist discourse, and employ their variable on overall societal polarization.

Beyond being important predictors of democratic backsliding in and of themselves, populism and polarization are also proliferating in the world, making them a possible confounder of external backsliding precedent and domestic backsliding. In other words, it might be populism or polarization that diffuses, rather than democratic regression itself, and only once these phenomena have crossed country lines, backsliding starts to happen in the recipient country. This process would look like the diffusion of backsliding, but it would actually be the diffusion of populism and polarization. By including the two variables as controls, we safeguard our models from leading us to this biased conclusion.

We run a series of robustness checks in which we include additional control variables beyond populism and polarization. We present the findings of these models in the online appendix. Our main findings reported here are very robust to the inclusion of these additional controls: GDP per capita, GDP growth, a country's world region, the level of democracy, and the number of years a country has been democratic.

We also implicitly control for unobserved unit and period effects by modelling country and year fixed-effects.

Quantitative Analysis: Findings

Figure 5 illustrates our main finding. It shows the effects of external precedent on democratic backsliding, differentiated into neighbour, regional, and global precedent. The effects are presented as posterior distributions of coefficients from our main Bayesian Tobit model. (The full regression table can be found in the online appendix.) The figure shows effects of three-year cumulative precedent on two-year backsliding – we discuss alternative time-frames we have operationalized below (see Figure 6).

The first finding to report is that external precedent does indeed influence domestic backsliding. In other words, we find considerable support for our most general hypotheses H1. All three indicators of external precedent display posterior distributions with positive tendencies and median posterior probabilities, indicating that higher levels of precedent are associated with higher levels of regression. However, only global precedent has a 95% credibility interval (indicated by the grey areas under the distribution histograms) that excludes zero, which is analogous to the conventional standard of statistical significance at the 5%-level.

Particularly the effect of regional precedent is much less credible (i.e. not significant), which calls at least one element of our second hypothesis H2 into question: that geographically more proximate precedent has larger and more reliable effects. By contrast, we see in Figure 2 that the effect of regional precedent is in fact smaller and less reliable than the effects of both neighbourly and global precedent. The finding that regional precedent has less of an effect than global and neighbourly precedent is unexpected.[8]

The effect of precedent among neighbours appears larger and more credible than regional precedent. However, the effect of neighbour precedent, too, is smaller than that of global precedent, and it is more uncertain that there is a positive effect at all, given that the 95% credibility interval contains zero. We believe that the considerable portion of the posterior distribution that is above zero should not be ignored just because of the arbitrary conventional 5%-threshold, but the effect is certainly less clear than that of global precedent.

[8] Note that we include log-transformed precedent indicators, making effect sizes commensurable: Coefficients of a log-transformed variable give the effect of a one-percentage change – rather than a one-unit change, which relies on variable scales and might not be directly comparable (in absence of standardized variables).

By contrast, the largest effect is actually exerted by global precedent – not by the geographically more proximate regional or neighbour precedents. This finding is somewhat at odds with much of the diffusion literature which emphasizes the importance of a country's region in international diffusion processes. This further highlights the utility of our differentiation of spatial (effects of) diffusion. It also supports our overall contribution in this paper, that the international diffusion of democratic regression should be studied in its own right, as a particular phenomenon with differing patterns and mechanisms from diffusion of democracy or autocracy.

In sum, we find that external precedent does credibly influence domestic backsliding (supporting H1), but that global precedent has the largest effect, followed by a less credible and smaller neighbour effect. Regional precedent, much to our surprise, appears to have a negligible effect.

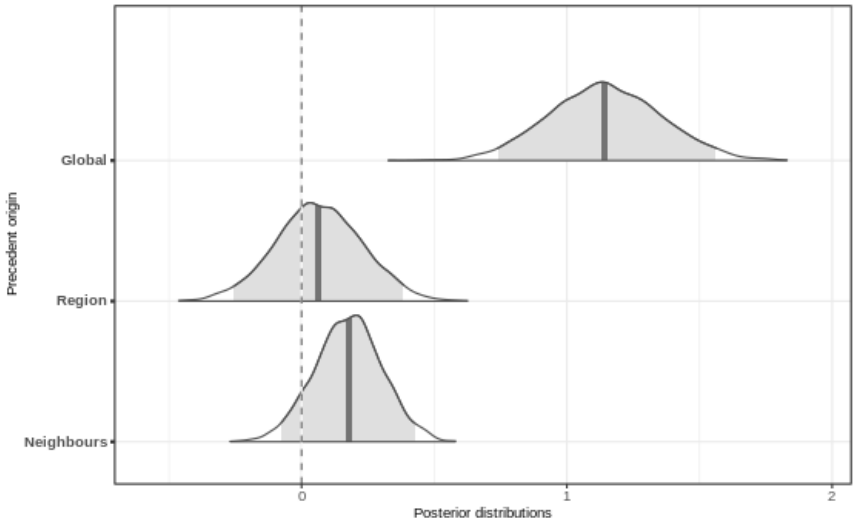

Figure 5: Bayesian Tobit regression coefficient posterior distributions

This finding is robust to a range of different operationalizations of the time-frame of the dependent and independent variables. The main model presented above employ two-year democratic regression as the dependent variables, and three-year cumulative precedent indicators as the independent variables. Figure 6 below shows the results of models based on all permutation of regression indicators covering annual, two-year, and three-year regression, and precedent indicators cumulating precedent over one, three, and five years. The results of these robustness tests support the main finding presented here.

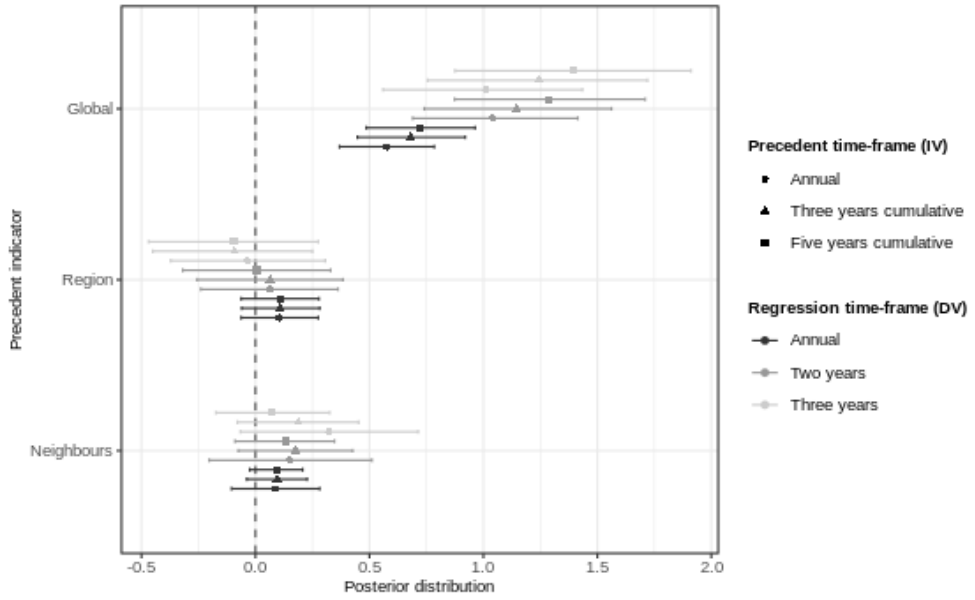

Figure 6: Various time-frames of the dependent and independent variables

One possible explanation for overplaying regional diffusion effects may be that colleagues often do not include global and neighbour levels of precedent as controls (for example, Strang 1991). Regional precedent levels are in part driven by global and neighbourly levels. To discern which effect holds, all three categories should be included in the model and effects estimated simultaneously.

To demonstrate, Figure 7 compares the above findings (faded-out in the background) with results from three models with only one of the three precedent variables each (colour-coded). We can see that when neighbour, region, and global precedent are estimated individually, *all three* are significant. When they mutually control each other, like in our main model, the global and neighbour effects prevail, while the regional effect disappears.

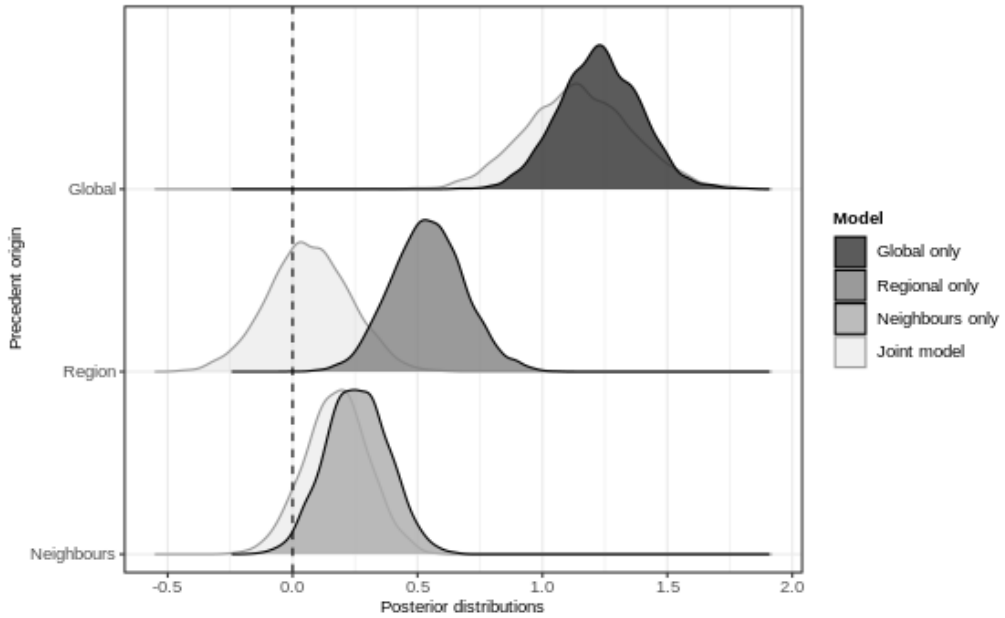

Figure 7: Modelling spatial categories individually

Another reason for the unexpected weakness of neighbour and regional precedent may be that they are less relevant for the diffusion of *liberal* democracy and its regression. Employing a different democracy

concept, or examining the diffusion of different aspects of democracy, rather than a more general concept, may yield very different results. We repeat our analysis, disaggregating the concept and index of liberal democracy into its liberal and electoral parts. V-Dem data allows us to do this using two of their many democracy indicators: electoral democracy, and the "liberal component". The liberal democracy index we use in our main analysis is composed by these two sub-indices.

Figure 8 below shows the results of this additional analysis, organized analogously to our main analysis above. There are three main findings to note. First, global diffusion appears to be as relevant for the components of liberal democracy as it is for the composite index. The effect of global precedent is large and credible on both, electoral democracy and the liberal component of liberal democracy. Second, while regional precedent plays a similarly small role for electoral democracy, it appears more important for the liberal component. The effect of regional precedent of backsliding on the liberal component is positive and significant. Third, for neighbour precedent, the pattern is the other way around: neighbour precedent affects the regression of electoral democracy, but not regression of the liberal component of liberal democracy.

More discussion…

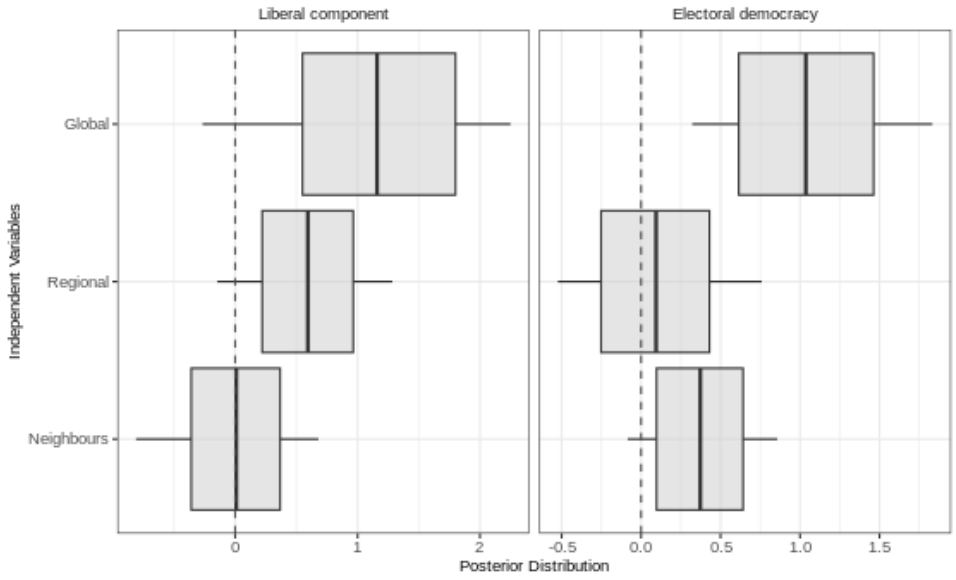

Figure 8: Liberal and electoral democratic backsliding diffusion

Case Study: Appropriate Precedent in Victor Orbán's Speeches

We complement our regression analysis with a brief case study to tentatively test our proposed diffusion mechanism that domestic anti-democratic actors are emboldened by external precedent of democratic backsliding and uses this to justify their political reforms vis-à-vis the public and political supporters.

Our case selection is motivated by the consideration that Hungary post-2010 is a largely undisputed and typical case of democratic regression. In a data-driven approach, we also found that Hungary scores high on both the independent (external precedent) and the dependent (regression) variable, as is recommended for a case study in multimethod research (Goertz 2016) As a disclaimer, when studying diffusion patterns, it would be logic to expect Hungary to be a strong 'sender state' as well as a 'receiver state' of backsliding diffusion. Hungary under Viktor Orbán's government has been an early mover in the backsliding landscape, as the country saw its sharpest democratic decline in the years after Orbán came to power in 2010. Orbán implemented what he calls the "Hungarian model" and expresses numerous times in the analysed speeches how this model can be an example to follow by others. Indeed,

he expresses that his ambition is to lead by example, hoping other countries will follow the example of Hungary. Nonetheless, Hungary has been on a steady trajectory of democratic decline until time of writing, and the country therefore features in our sample both as an external precedent for others but also as a country prone/vulnerable to diffusion effects from other backsliding countries. In our analysis we focus on how external precedents feature in Orbán's speeches and communication to the public and political supporters.

A close-read of all state-of-the-nation type addresses spanning 15 years, from 2010 until 2025, enables us to examine how the Hungarian prime minister makes references to foreign governments, events, and political movements within other countries and how he uses this to garner and bolster support for his own political reforms at home. While this case study cannot 'prove' diffusion within the scope of this paper,[9] we treat Orbán's statements in these speeches as pieces of diagnostic evidence for how he sees democratic regression elsewhere and uses this to justify his own political reforms (ex ante or post ante facto).

Orbán has given 14 official annual evaluation speeches (*évértékelő beszéde* in Hungarian) since his re-election in 2010, every year with the exception of 2021 due to the covid-19 pandemic. We have analysed a corpus of 12 speeches translated to English, available from government websites, missing only official translations for 2012 and 2015 (see full overview and sources in appendix). [Working on translating the last two.] The choice to analyse the annual evaluation speeches, as opposed to other speeches Orbán gives during a year, is based on the rationale that these texts are regular, covers a wide range of topics (much to the discretion of the prime minister), and that their messaging is aimed at both political elites and the wider public simultaneously.

To provide further support for our proposed argument, that external precedent of democratic regression abroad influences developments of democratic regression at home, we present illustrative case study evidence from Hungary post-2010 and Prime Minister Victor Orbán's *State of the Nation* addresses between 2011–2025.

Hungary post-2010 is a well-established and well-researched case of democratic backsliding. Numerous single-case and comparative studies have examined the backsliding strategies of Orbán's second government (2010–present), consisting of his own party, the right-wing populist and national-conservative Fidesz and the right-wing Christian democratic KNDP. Scholarly work has analysed processes and strategies of backsliding in terms of executive aggrandizement, strategically manipulating the electoral system, and restricting political civil liberties/liberal rights (see for instance Ambrosio 2020; Auerbach and Kartner 2023; Bakke and Sitter 2022; Roggeband and Krizsán 2021).

There are also a few notable scholarly contributions on the question of whether mechanisms of authoritarian diffusion have been at play in shaping Orbán's backsliding strategies. Ambrosio (2020) and Buzogány (2017) have both examined whether Hungary post-2010 represent a case of authoritarian diffusion from Russia to Hungary, emulation or adaptation of the 'Putin model'. They both focus on domestic policy choices within Hungary, as a receiver state, but reach contradictory conclusions due to their different approach to diffusion mechanisms regarding the sender state.[10] Important for this study, these discussions show how autocratization has the potential to transmit to a democratic regime, but also how this can be domestically contested and difficult to justify in a democratic regime. For instance, Ambrosio (2020), citing Hegedüs (2016), notes that one hindrance in Orbán turning completely towards

[9] See Ambrosio and Tolstrup (2019) for methodological requirements needed to justify diffusion claims.

[10] Buzogány (2017) rejects the thesis of authoritarian diffusion, that Hungary is emulating Russia, because there was no active cooperation between the two governments in the beginning of Orbán's rule and because the increasing embracement of 'authoritarian great powers' by the Hungarian government was not based on ideology but opportunism. Ambrosio (2020) argues that Russia provides demonstration effects, through the concept of 'authoritarian gravity centers' (Kneuer and Demmelhuber 2020), because the steps taken by Russian President Vladimir Putin to shift Russia towards a full authoritarian regime became a blueprint for Hungarian leaders to follow and adapt.

Russia, is how the Fidesz party members are balanced between pro-Russia and pro-United States. In that case, highlighting Western backsliding cases as examples may work better to sway/persuade those "West leaning" party members (and population).

Even though Hungary has already embarked on reforms to counter liberal democratic principles in governance, Orbán still uses events abroad to further legitimise his reforms, old and new, and make them seem (more) normatively appropriate vis-à-vis his electorate and political supporters.

He does this in two ways: One the one hand, by devaluing and changing the reference group, i.e. the countries that Hungary 'should look to' when it comes to ideals for democracy and societal development. On the other hand, by connecting to and translating narratives from like-minded Western political actors and governments pursuing similar sovereigntist and/or illiberal policies as himself, such as the Brexit campaign in the UK (2016) or the first Trump administration in the US (2016-2020). These ways of presenting examples from other democracies combined is intended to show how the Hungarian model proposed by Orbán and Fidesz is both efficient and normatively appropriate.

To the first, Orbán presents a narrative of Western liberal democracies in decline and uses examples from Western democracies to argue that "their form of democracy" is no longer attractive to the Hungarians. He explains Western demise with countries losing confidence in their modern liberal project and that "they have serious doubts about their future" (Orbán 2017, 2). His rhetoric seems aimed at bolstering the belief that Hungary is on a better course than the Western democracies, building national pride and dealing with an 'Eastern European inferiority complex'. He continues: "Until now, we have been taught that mature Western democracies are of a higher quality than Central European democracies, (…) This may once have been true, when the European democracies were at their zenith" (Orbán 2017, 3). Indeed, the first part of his 2017-speech is devoted to presenting his view on developments in Europe and Western (liberal) democracies, especially on the topic of immigration. His recurring arguments evolve around how the concept of 'open societies' and political correctness has ruined democracy, which is why Hungarians should no longer think that the West are superior societies:

> A few years ago democracy in the European Union was still based on argument: the careful weighing of pros and cons, openness of speech, free thought and free association of ideas, and an intellectual life that threw the new and the vibrant to the surface. This is one reason it was also so attractive to us Hungarians, who like to meet friends and shoot the breeze in bars and coffee houses. The new political system known as the "open society" did away with all this. Democracy based on argument was replaced by democracy based on correctness. From an ideological perspective this means that liberal ideology turned against the ideology of democracy, the latter being the ideal of a community organised on a majority basis, according to the will of the majority (Orbán 2017, 3).

This narrative is more about changing normative understandings of democracy and, in a sense, countering democratic diffusion, by shaping public understanding of what is happening elsewhere in a way that undermines and devalues liberal democratic politics. Orbán argues that developments, crises and scandals in established Western liberal democracies 'prove' to the Hungarian people that his government's policies for Hungary are better suited to solve the people's problems in a way that liberal democratic politics cannot.[11] Furthermore, if Western democracies are no longer at 'their zenith', this is altering the conditions for illiberal policies and backsliding strategies globally.

Relatedly, Orbán argues that Hungarians should look beyond Europe, i.e. to change the reference group. He often highlights the importance of including other perspectives than the dominant Western understanding of the world. He repeatedly underscores that Hungarians should not only look to the West, which is no longer an attractive reference point. In 2023, Orbán reflects on how to overcome domestic challenges due to the war in Ukraine and inflation: "Let us look beyond Brussels. (…) Let us not isolate ourselves from the level-headed part of the world. The Hungarian viewpoint is an exception only in

[11] As exemplified in the 2013-speech: "I am able to report to the attentive Hungarian public, that Hungary is performing better than previously and is more effective in finding a solution to the economic crisis than most European nations. This is Hungary's success" (Orbán 2013, 3).

Europe –across the world it is the norm" (Orbán 2023, 5). In this lies the notion that the West has lost all sense and meaning while the rest of the world represent level-headedness and common sense.

Third, Orbán highlights the importance and significance of established democracies pursuing similar sovereigntist and illiberal policies as Hungary. When it comes to justifying his visions for Hungary, Orbán often gives examples and compares to political events elsewhere. While he mostly cites developments in Western countries and actions of state leaders as examples of 'Western decline', Orbán applauds and sends strong signals of support towards populist leaders, either in office or during their electoral bid for office. He clearly sees populist leaders in countries such as France, Italy, the UK, and the Netherlands, as like-minded politicians with the same worldview and visions for their countries and with whom he can forge strategic alliances with. Beyond mere strategic interactions and shared interests, however, we argue that the way in which he presents these examples to the public serves a legitimizing purpose. Orbán often boasts the successes of what he calls the Hungarian model, and draws parallels from Hungary to the nationalist projects of populist figures in places like the United States and United Kingdom: "In my decades in politics, I have observed that every success story – the success story of every rising nation – begins with the strengthening of self-esteem. Just think of the two most recent Western examples: Trump's America and the success of Boris Johnson" (Orbán 2020, 2). By juxtaposing developments in established Western democracies with his own visions for Hungary, Orbán connects his own political agenda to similar developments in established Western democracies in order to make them more normatively appropriate.

In the case of the Trump administrations in the US, we found evidence that Orbán borrows and translates a political slogan into his own context. Speaking clearly to 'learning' and 'borrowing' diffusion mechanisms, Orbán translates Trump's re-invigorated political slogan "America First" into "Hungary First". By transferring the slogan, Orbán highlights how Trump is following a similar line as Hungary in prioritising the well-being of the nation and emphasising national sovereignty. He contrasts this to the 'globalist view' in today's liberal world order, in which "if someone speaks about the cause of the nation, they're often censured" (Orbán 2018, 4). He continues his defence of patriotism: "in spite of attacks and mockery, patriots deserve recognition for again and again lowering this anchor: for telling us to our face, time and again, that the homeland comes before all else. Or, in an updated form, borrowed from the Americans: 'Hungary First'." (Orbán 2018, 4). Orbán continues to use this translated slogan in the context of EU election as well.[12]

Before the re-election of the Second Trump administration, Orbán repeats his support and states that "[w]e would very much like to see President Donald Trump return to the White House" and that "[i]t is time for another "Make America Great Again" presidency in the United States" (Orbán 2024, 7). Connecting this to the Hungarian presidency of the Council of the European Union, he continues: "We ourselves are preparing for a presidency. I am talking about the Hungarian EU Presidency. Make Europe Great Again! Over there MAGA, over here MEGA." Orbán is clearly transferring the US slogan into a European and Hungarian context. Aligning himself and his viewpoints to those of the US President, the Hungarian PM is arguably attempting to impress upon his listeners, the Hungarian public, that his non-interventionist and sovereigntist stance is normatively appropriate.

Conclusion

To be continued...

[12] Orbán repeats it in his 2020-speech when commenting on the European Parliament-elections in 2019: "We also learned that Europe is not in Brussels. Europe is us, and we do not have to measure up to the tired Brussels elite, who will soon be disillusioned even with themselves. We used to think that Europe was our future; today we know that we are the future of Europe. (…) Our nation knows this: Hungary comes first." (Orbán 2020, 6)

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