THE POWER OF EXAMPLE. JUSTIFICATORY MECHANISMS OF THE DIFFUSION OF DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING

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Abstract: Diffusion of democratic regression occurs when incidents of democratic backsliding abroad increase the likelihood and magnitude of democratic backsliding at home. We have elsewhere found strong evidence that democratic regression diffuses on a global scale. In this paper, we develop two key domestic mechanisms of the diffusion of democratic regression. We argue that observing external precedent of democratic regression emboldens anti-liberal domestic actors by making anti-liberal reform appear more normatively appropriate (Ambrosio 2010). The mechanisms affect both political elites and voters, increasing the electoral supply of and demand for anti-liberal reform, and ultimately the likelihood and intensity of democratic regression. We focus on elites in this paper. We provide a mixed-methods analysis to bolster our argument. We estimate Bayesian spatial-x models to show the general effect of external backsliding precedent on anti-liberal electoral demand, i.e. the anti-democratic views and preferences among the electorate. In qualitative and computer-assisted (LLM) text analyses of parliamentary debate and state-of-the-union type speeches of heads of government, we trace narratives of appropriateness and effectiveness of external backsliding precedent and examine whether and how the two mechanisms appear in political justifications for reform that lead to democratic regression. We compare two most-likely and most-different cases to strengthen the generalizability of the mechanisms. Preliminary findings provide support for our argument that external precedent increases anti-democratic values among the population in processes of democratic regression.

Introduction

The growing phenomenon of democratic backsliding has garnered considerable attention in recent years, as nations once heralded for their democratic resilience have begun to exhibit troubling declines in democratic governance. While extensive research has explored the domestic drivers of democratic regression, the role of international factors—particularly the diffusion of democratic backsliding across borders—remains underexamined. This paper seeks to address this gap by investigating the mechanisms through which democratic backsliding diffuses between democracies.

Drawing on the rich body of literature on authoritarian diffusion, we adapt key theoretical insights to the study of democratic regression. Specifically, we argue that anti-democratic elites within backsliding democracies use external precedents of democratic regression to influence domestic perceptions, presenting such precedents as normatively appropriate. By framing examples of backsliding abroad in a positive light, these elites can shift public opinion, decreasing democratic values among the population and paving the way for the implementation of anti-democratic reforms.

This paper examines one particular mechanism of diffusion: the role of external precedent as a tool for justification. We propose that political elites strategically exploit instances of democratic regression abroad to legitimize anti-democratic practices at home. This process involves crafting narratives that highlight the appropriateness and success of backsliding measures witnessed in other countries. Consequently, these narratives contribute to the erosion of democratic norms and institutions domestically.

Our empirical analysis proceeds in two parts. First, we conduct a computer-assisted text analysis of parliamentary debates and major speeches by political leaders in backsliding democracies to trace how external examples of democratic regression are framed and employed as a rhetorical tool. Preliminary findings, focusing on Hungary, reveal that political actors actively shift the reference group of nations away from established Western democracies and towards other backsliding regimes, portraying these regimes as models of governance worth emulating. This analysis highlights the deliberate cultivation of positive narratives around external examples of regression to normalize anti-democratic sentiment.

Second, we employ Bayesian spatial-x modeling to quantitatively assess the effect of external precedents of democratic backsliding on domestic democratic values. Our findings provide robust evidence that exposure to global democratic regression correlates with a measurable decline in pro-democratic attitudes among the populace. Notably, the influence of global precedents appears stronger than that of regional or neighboring examples, underscoring the importance of broader international trends in shaping domestic outcomes.

By integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the diffusion mechanisms underpinning democratic backsliding. The remainder of the article is structured as follows: we begin by situating our work within the relevant literature, particularly on authoritarian diffusion and its adjacent fields. We then outline our theoretical framework and methodology, followed by detailed presentations of our qualitative and quantitative findings. We conclude by discussing the implications of our research for the study of democratic regression and its diffusion, highlighting avenues for future inquiry.

This work not only advances the scholarly conversation on democratic backsliding but also provides critical insights into how external precedents can be weaponized to undermine democratic institutions. In illuminating these dynamics, we aim to sharpen the analytical tools available for understanding and combating this escalating global challenge.

Literature

The role of diffusion processes in shaping political systems has been extensively studied in political science, particularly in the context of democratic transitions and authoritarian persistence. While the literature on democratic diffusion has long emphasized the transmission of democratic norms and practices across borders (Starr 1991; Brinks and Coppedge 2006; Gleditsch and Ward 2006), more recent scholarship on authoritarian diffusion has shifted attention to the ways in which autocratic

regimes replicate and reinforce illiberal institutions and norms (Ambrosio 2010; Tolstrup 2024). This emerging body of work examines the transfer of authoritarian features—including institutions, laws (Bader 2014; Lemon and Antonov 2020; Kerr 2018), practices (Darwich 2017; Olar 2019; Glasius, Schalk, and Lange 2020), and narratives (Yilmaz, Morieson, and Shakil 2024; Ambrosio 2012, 2020)—between autocratic regimes, as well as the limited instances where such features transfer from autocracies to democracies (Møller, Skaaning, and Tolstrup 2017; Ambrosio 2020; Rivetti 2024). Despite its relevance, the diffusion of democratic backsliding between democracies remains underexplored, an oversight that this paper seeks to address.

One notable gap in the existing literature is the limited attention paid to the role of the general public in diffusion processes. Authoritarian diffusion studies typically focus on elite actors who respond to external precedents set by other autocratic regimes, leaving little room for consideration of public opinion. This might appear appropriate when examining autocracies, where the general population has less influence over political developments. However, when diffusion processes are studied in the context of democracies, the electorate emerges as a key actor whose perceptions and attitudes can fundamentally shape the trajectory of democratic backsliding. By neglecting the electorate's role, the literature on both authoritarian and democratic diffusion fails to account for an essential mechanism of influence in democratic systems.

In adapting the concepts of authoritarian diffusion to democratic backsliding, this paper builds on Thomas Ambrosio's (2010) framework, which outlines two mechanisms of diffusion: the logic of effectiveness and the logic of appropriateness. According to the logic of effectiveness, authoritarian actors in recipient regimes learn from external precedents about which innovations may work and the strategies for their implementation. The logic of appropriateness, on the other hand, posits that external examples of authoritarian norms and practices render such measures more feasible and acceptable, altering the conditions for their adoption. While Ambrosio's framework primarily applies to authoritarian elites, we argue that the logic of appropriateness is highly relevant to understanding the diffusion of backsliding in democracies, particularly in relation to the electorate. Anti-democratic elites in democracies not only use external precedents to guide their reform agendas but also rely on these examples to persuade the electorate that anti-democratic measures are normatively appropriate, thereby facilitating their implementation.

Our theoretical contribution lies in introducing the electorate into Ambrosio's appropriateness mechanism and expanding its application to democratic contexts. In authoritarian diffusion, external precedents embolden elites and legitimize their actions by demonstrating the success of similar measures elsewhere. In the context of democratic backsliding, we argue that this dynamic is amplified by the need to influence public opinion. Anti-democratic elites must navigate the democratic imperative of electoral legitimacy, which necessitates a broader acceptance of backsliding measures by the general population. External precedents of democratic regression serve as a rhetorical and strategic tool for elites to convince the electorate that undermining democratic institutions is a viable and appropriate response to political challenges. By crafting narratives that emphasize the successes of backsliding regimes, these elites aim to normalize anti-democratic reforms and garner public support for their agendas.

Theory

In adapting the concepts of authoritarian diffusion to the context of democratic backsliding, this paper draws on Thomas Ambrosio's (2010) influential framework, which identifies two primary mechanisms of diffusion: the logic of effectiveness and the logic of appropriateness. The logic of effectiveness holds that authoritarian actors learn from external precedents—assessing which institutional innovations are likely to succeed and borrowing strategic approaches for their implementation. In contrast, the logic of appropriateness suggests that when similar authoritarian norms or practices are already established elsewhere, their adoption becomes not only more feasible but also increasingly acceptable, as external examples lower the perceived costs and risks associated with contentious reforms. While Ambrosio's schema is principally concerned with authoritarian elites, we argue that the logic of appropriateness

plays a critical—yet underexplored—role in democracies, particularly in shaping the attitudes of the electorate.

Our primary theoretical contribution lies in extending Ambrosio's mechanism to include the electorate as a pivotal audience in democratic settings. In processes of authoritarian diffusion, external precedents embolden elites, serving to legitimize their actions by pointing to the success of analogous measures abroad. However, in the realm of democratic backsliding, the process is heightened by the need to secure public buy-in. Anti-democratic elites must contend with the requirement of electoral legitimacy; thus, they employ external precedents as persuasive tools—using references to successful backsliding in other countries to convince the electorate that similar reforms are not only possible, but normatively justified. By constructing compelling narratives around the achievements of backsliding regimes, these elites seek to normalize anti-democratic measures and cultivate broad-based support for their agendas among the public.

By incorporating the electorate into the logic of appropriateness, our analysis provides a more nuanced understanding of how global precedents filter into domestic political communication and influence democratic trajectories. This framework not only advances the literature on diffusion mechanisms but also underscores the importance of public opinion in determining the fate of democratic governance.

Accordingly, we articulate our first hypothesis as follows:

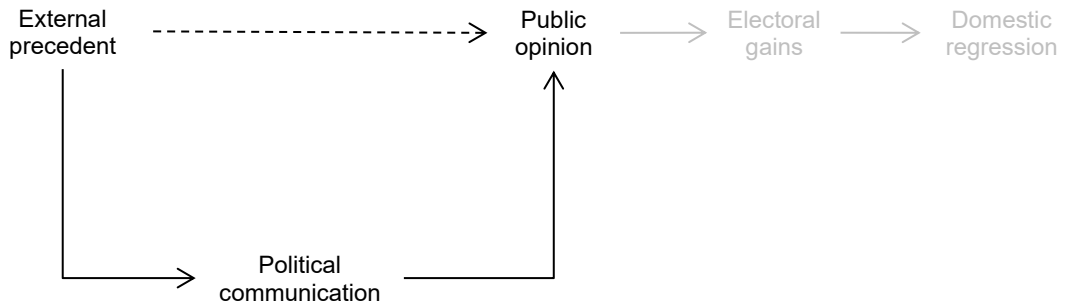
H1: The greater the prevalence of external precedent and concurrent domestic democratic regression, the more frequently political actors will refer to other backsliding countries positively in their political communication.

Furthermore, as a direct consequence of this strategic deployment of external precedent in elite political messaging, we should observe a macro-level pattern: countries exposed to more external examples of democratic backsliding will exhibit diminished public support for democratic values. In other words, as political communication increasingly normalizes anti-democratic reforms by appealing to foreign precedents, the general esteem for democratic institutions and practices is expected to decline at the societal level.

H2: The more external precedent of democratic regression, the lower the public opinion of democratic institutions.

Figure 1 illustrates our theoretical argument and shows the effect of external precedent on public opinion via political communication, that will ultimately result in electoral gains for anti-democratic parties and implementation of anti-democratic reform and democratic regression.

Figure 1: Electorate Mechanism of Backsliding Diffusion



Text Analysis

In this paper, we are interested in examining how political elites strategically deploy external examples of democratic regression as rhetorical tools to justify anti-democratic practices within their own

countries. In the textual analysis, our aim is to investigate how narratives of appropriateness of external backsliding precedent are being communicated to both the political elite and the public. Through a computer-assisted analysis of parliamentary debates and major political speeches, we analyse political discourse focusing on mentions of countries associated with democratic regression found within a large corpus of speech texts. This approach allows us to trace how external precedents of backsliding are framed and communicated by political actors, shedding light on the narratives constructed to legitimize the erosion of democratic norms.

[Note to the reader:] In this version of the paper, we focus parliamentary debates in Hungary only, but we will extend the number of analysed countries and type of political speeches in future versions. Our aim is to:

- Expand to examining political speech in several countries in a cross-national analysis
- Expand to examining narratives in different political speeches, including also "state of the nation" type speeches given by heads of government
- Inductively identify frames and narratives through a structural topic modelling (STM) (Roberts et al., 2019)
- Analyse what drives various frames of backsliding countries, like arguments of appropriateness and effectiveness (i.e. our identified topics), with multilevel modelling in order to test our Hypothesis 1 (*The greater the prevalence of external precedent and concurrent domestic democratic regression, the more frequently political actors will refer to other backsliding countries positively in their political communication*).

In the following, the text data and preliminary (descriptive) analysis of parliamentary speeches in Hungary will be presented.

Text data

In our preliminary study of one country, Hungary, we relied on text data provided in the *ParlLawSpeech* data (Schwalbach et al. 2025).[1] This dataset provides a corpus of parliamentary debates in Hungarian ranging from 1994–2022, with full text snippets already-translated to English and including information such as date, speaker, and political party.

In a next step, we will conduct a cross-national analysis of parliamentary debates in 29 European countries, made possible by the *ParlaMint* data (version 4.1) (Erjavec et al. 2024) which provides translated texts in English for all countries.[2] While the parliamentary speeches provided in the *ParlLawSpeech* data were translated using Google's Neural Machine Translation (NMT) system, the texts in *ParlaMint* are translated by an open-source NMT model. Commercial services for machine translation, like Google's, are expensive and limits reproducibility. The availability of multilingual and comparable datasets of parliamentary speeches is therefore a valuable resource for this study – especially in light of recent findings that commercial models are not necessarily performing better than open-source models for machine translations (Licht et al. 2024).

In building our text corpus, we focused on parts of speeches, i.e. sentences, in which politicians mention a country other than Hungary. We filtered the data to only include speeches given by politicians with a political affiliation, participating in debates. Our dataset comprises sentence-level textual segments drawn from the overall parliamentary debates and annotated with metadata including speaker identity, political party affiliation, date, and country mentions. In order to identify mentions of countries, we employed the *newsmap* dictionary within the *quanteda* R package (Watanabe 2018). Apart from specific country names and capital cities, this package dictionary identifies country mentions by other geographical words, such as names of political leaders, key ethnic groups, and even smaller cities, including spelling variants.

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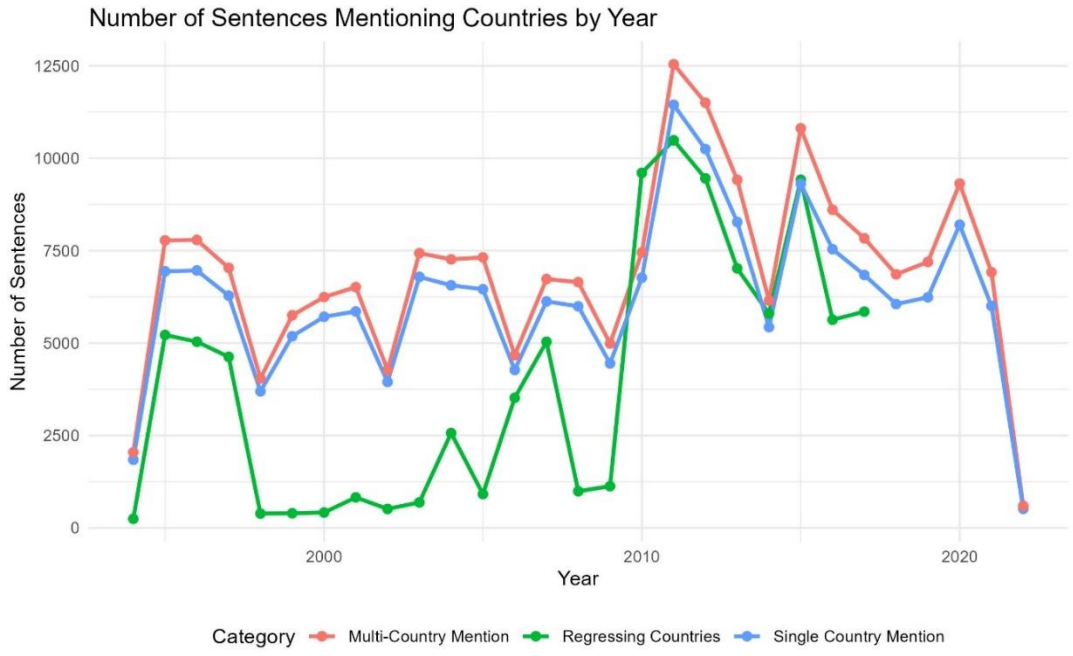
[1] See https://parllawspeech.org/data/.

[2] The CLARIN ParlaMint project gathered parliamentary speeches for a number of countries and languages and compiled a comparable corpus with all multilingual speeches machine translated to English. See: https://www.clarin.eu/parlamint-project-information.

After identifying sentences which contained a country mention, we then categorised this according to whether this was a reference to a backsliding country or not, according to our own regression measure (see below; Schmotz and Selvik, 2025). We only performed this classification for those country mentions which only mentioned one country, potentially in addition to Hungary. We introduced a three-year lag to the measuring of democratic regression to reflect temporal sequencing between political events and discourse.

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of country mentions in our text corpus. This graph shows how there was a drastic increase in country mentions overall in 2010 (blue and red lines), but also that countries experiencing democratic regression were being discussed greatly increased relative to overall mentions. Note that the counts of multi-country mentions (red line) includes all sentences wherein other countries than Hungary is mentioned, whereas the single-country mentions (blue line) only include sentences where only one (other) country is mentioned. The count of regressing countries (green line) being mentioned is based on the blue line. The great increase in attention to regressing countries could therefore likely have contributed to this increased focus on other countries in parliamentary speeches. However, while illustrating attention in parliamentary debates, this is not very informative as to how these external cases of democratic regression is being discussed.

Figure 2 Mentions of regressing countries in Hungary (1994-2022)

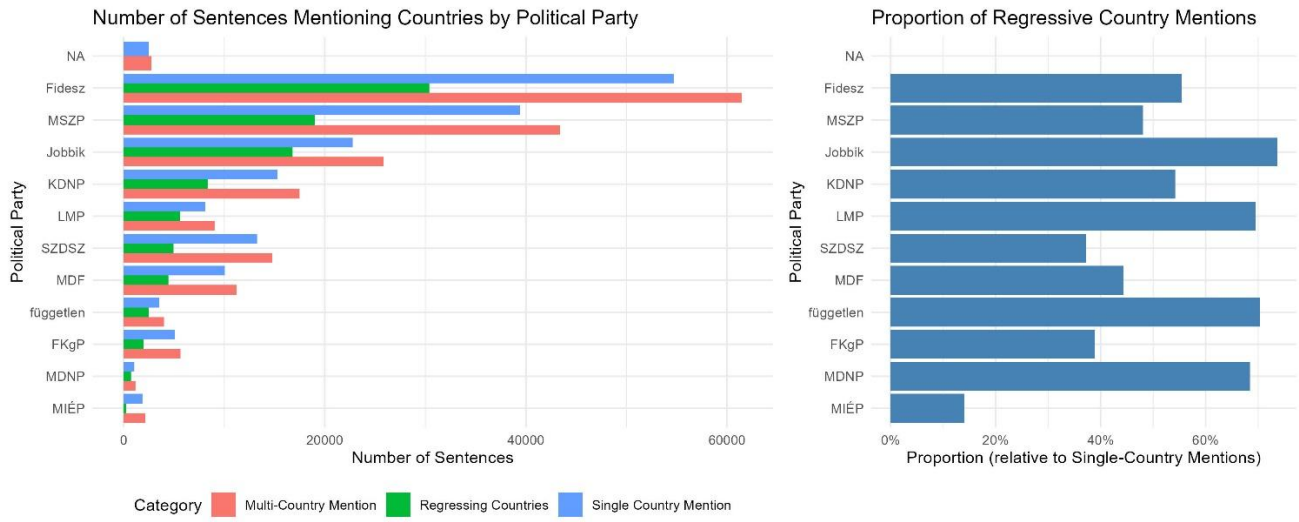


Note: The sharp increase and drop at the ends of the graph lines are due to the time span of the parliamentary speeches, from June 1994 to March 2022, producing relatively low counts for these years.

Before we turn to the content of parliamentary speech focusing on cases of democratic regression, however, we are also interested in whether attention to cases of democratic regression (i.e. mentions) is evenly distributed across the political spectrum in Hungary. Figure 3 shows the attention to regressing countries divided by political party, both in absolute terms and relative to mentions of any country. Indeed, we do see the two of the largest parties in Hungary topping the list (or the y axis) of mentioning backsliding countries in their parliamentary speeches, namely the governing and dominant Fidesz party, led by Prime Minister Victor Orbán, and the largest opposition party, Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP). The runners-up are the conservative and patriotic Jobbik party and the right-wing Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP), the other governing party in Hungary. While the left-side graph mostly reflects which parties speak more in parliament due to seats and speech time, it still gives an impression that certain countries dominate in mentioning backsliding countries. The right-side graph shows the proportion of mentions of regressing countries as opposed to countries overall. Next is to examine

whether different political parties use different narratives and rhetoric when discussing cases of democratic regression.

Figure 3 Absolute and Relative Attention to Regressing Countries per Political Party



While the results of the structural topic modelling (STM) are not ready to be presented, we provide some glimpses into some of the identified sentences in our text corpus for Hungary and how they can make up topics in parliamentary debates. For the topic displayed in the table below, we see that identified topics can contain contrasting views from political opponents. Still, this is an example of how we have constructed a textual corpus in order to capture the political discourse around external cases of democratic regression. [The STM models and diagnostics are still work very much in progress.]

Highest probability words:	way, case, political, point, interests, view, protect
Frequent words:	represent, gain, interests, demands, dealt, circle, joining
Example sentence 1	In political and media circles, there have long been whispers about regular secret meetings between Fidesz and the leader of the Law and Justice party currently governing Poland, exchange of campaign advisers and concerted anti-Brussels action. (MP from MSZP, 2017)
Example sentence 2	And his opinions criticizing the European Union and liberal democracy contributed greatly to the fact that PiS was able to win the election again in 2015, and a government based on Christian-conservative foundations was once again formed in Poland. (MP from Jobbik, 2016)

Quantitative Analysis

Model

The quantitative section of this paper delves into the impact of external precedents of democratic regression on public opinion concerning democratic institutions, specifically testing H2. These external precedents are conceptualized through three spatial variables that quantify democratic backsliding within direct neighbourhoods, regional contexts, and global spheres for each country-year over a preceding five-year period. To achieve this, democratic backsliding is operationalized as an annual decline in V-Dem's (Lindberg et al. 2014) Liberal Democracy Index while excluding sharp reductions

that culminate in a full autocratic regime (democratic breakdown). Upward movements, indicative of democratization, are excluded by assigning a value of zero to country-years on our backsliding indicator (Schmotz and Selvik 2025).

Public opinion of democracy is assessed using two key variables derived from the World Values Survey: the importance citizens place on democracy and their preference for a strong leader. These national averages have been robustly validated in previous studies as significant indicators of democratic values. By regressing these aggregated measures against the three external precedent variables, this study adopts what is referred to as a spatial-X model (Plümper and Neumayer 2010). This model provides a framework for understanding the spatial diffusion effects of external democratic regression on internal attitudes toward democratic governance.

The regression analysis utilizes Bayesian modelling, incorporating multilevel models to accommodate panel data while accounting for country- and year-fixed effects (Shor et al. 2007; Barreda and Silbert 2023; see also Meyerrose 2020). Bayesian models are increasingly recognised in Comparative Politics and IR for their efficacy in handling observational data that often deviate from randomised patterns (Brandt and Freeman 2006; Lynch and Bartlett 2019). To ensure robustness, two control variables—GDP per capita (development) and the number of years of democratic history—are included in all models. These controls are essential, as both development and democratic history are well-established predictors of democratic values and may also correlate with external backsliding precedents, rendering them potential confounding factors in the association under investigation.

By refining the methodology and incorporating advanced statistical techniques, this section offers nuanced insights into how external factors influence domestic perceptions of democracy. It provides a critical perspective on the interconnectedness of global political trends and citizen attitudes, highlighting the complex dynamics at play in shaping democratic values across diverse contexts.

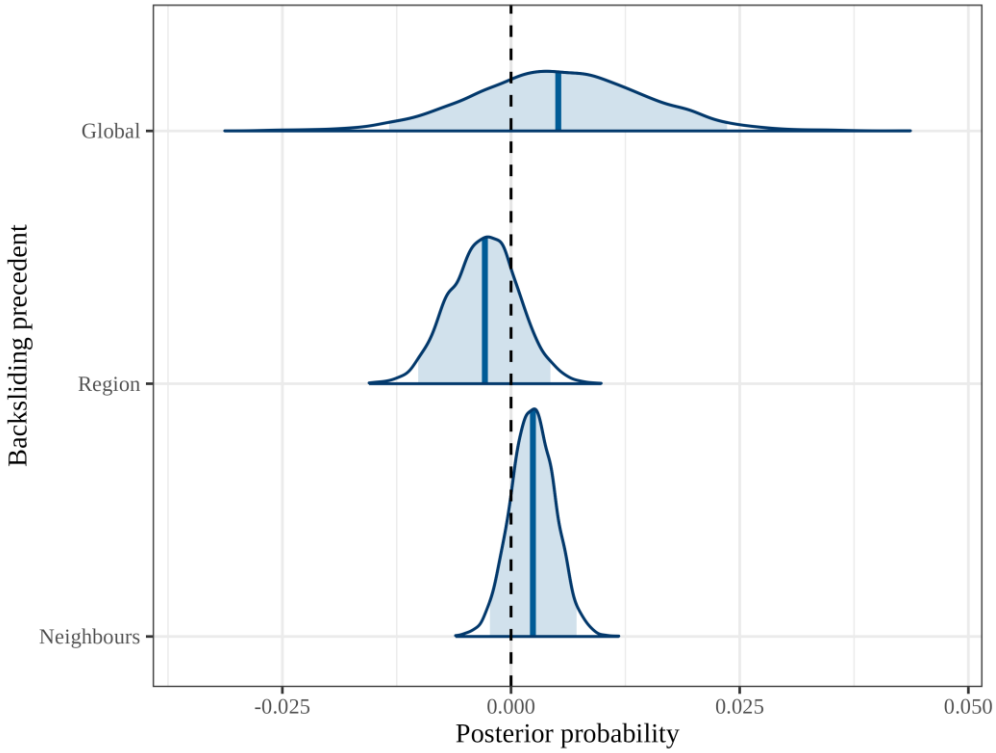
Findings

The results of the quantitative analysis offer a nuanced perspective on the impact of external precedents of democratic regression on public opinion regarding democratic institutions. The findings reflect both supportive evidence for the hypothesis (H2) and areas where the evidence remains inconclusive, thus enriching the discourse on global political interconnectedness.

Figure 4 illustrates the posterior distributions derived from the model testing the effect of three spatial variables—neighbour precedent, regional precedent, and global precedent—on the average levels of importance placed on democracy among the population. The hypothesis posited a negative association, suggesting that higher levels of external democratic backsliding would lead to diminished public opinion about the importance of democracy.

The analysis reveals varied tendencies among the three variables. Regional precedent demonstrates a negative association, aligning with the hypothesis, but the effect lacks statistical reliability as it incorporates zero within the Bayesian equivalent of the 95% confidence interval. Conversely, the indicators for neighbour and global precedents show positive tendencies, which defy the expected hypothesis. However, these effects also fail to meet the threshold of statistical significance. The findings suggest that while external democratic regression might influence public opinion, the relationship remains complex and dependent on the spatial context of the influence.

Figure 4: Effects of Backsliding Precedent on Importance of Democracy



In contrast, the results are more robust when analysing the preference for a strong leader as the dependent variable. Figure 5 presents the posterior distributions of the same three spatial variables in relation to average preferences for a strong leader within a country. Here, neighbour precedent emerges as a strong and statistically significant positive factor. This indicates that democratic regression among direct neighbours increases the population's preference for a strong leader, reflecting a shift towards values that might contradict democratic principles.

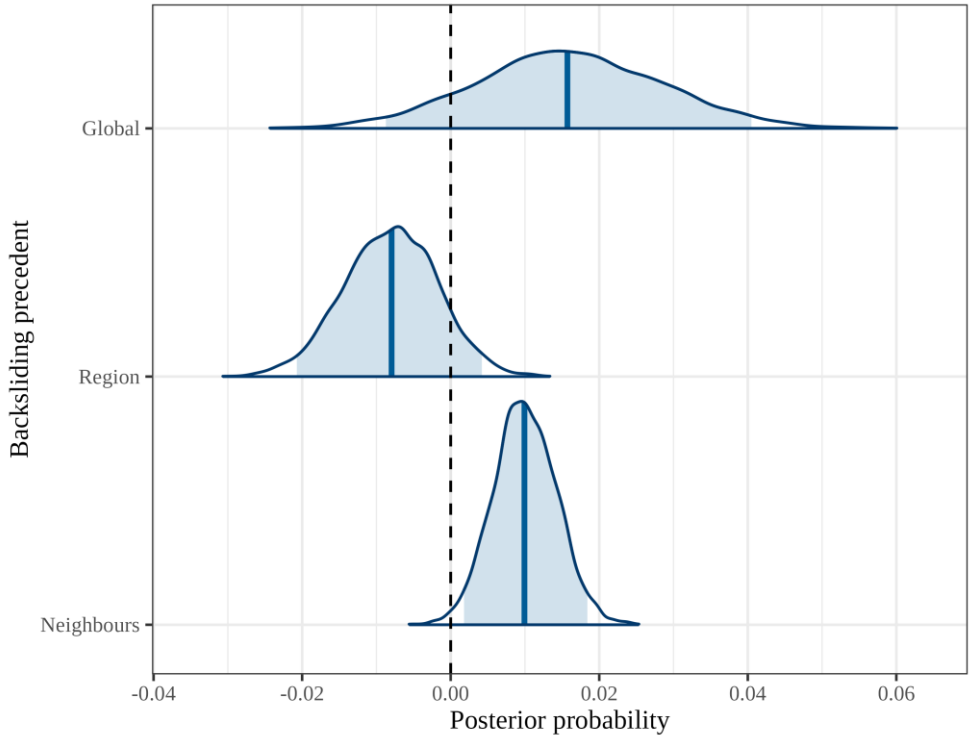
Global precedent similarly shows a positive tendency, albeit without fully clearing the Bayesian 95% confidence interval. Interestingly, the regional precedent exhibits a negative tendency in this context, opposite to the findings concerning the importance of democracy. However, this effect, too, is not statistically significant, underscoring the complexity of the relationship between external democratic regression and internal attitudes.

In sum, the findings provide considerable support for the hypothesis, particularly in relation to the preference for a strong leader. Prior research has suggested that the strong leader variable may serve as a more reliable indicator of actual democratic values, as it circumvents the socially desirable bias often associated with responses to questions about the importance of democracy. This methodological nuance could explain the stronger results observed in the preference for a strong leader compared to the importance of democracy.

Furthermore, the findings highlight the significance of spatial context in understanding the diffusion effects of democratic regression. Neighbour precedent, for instance, emerges as a consistently influential factor, suggesting that the proximity of democratic backsliding can exert a tangible impact on public attitudes. This reinforces the interconnected nature of political trends across nations and regions.

While the results provide compelling evidence in support of certain aspects of H2, they also call for caution and further exploration. The interplay between external democratic regression and internal public opinion is evidently multifaceted, shaped by spatial variables, historical context, and inherent methodological challenges. These insights contribute valuable knowledge to the broader understanding of democratic values and their susceptibility to external political dynamics.

Figure 5: Effects of Backsliding Precedent on Preference for Strong Leader



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