Democratic Decline in the United States:
What Can We Learn from Middle-Income Backsliding?

Robert R. Kaufman
Department of Political Science
Rutgers University
New Brunswick, NJ 08902
212-243-0080
(kaufrutger@aol.com)

Stephan Haggard
School of Global Policy and Strategy
University of California San Diego
858-534-5781
(shaggard@ucsd.com)

Robert R. Kaufman is Distinguished Professor of Political Science, Rutgers University. Among his recent publications, he is co-author with Stephan Haggard of *Dictators and Democrats: Masses, Elites, and Regime Change*, Princeton University Press, co-winner of the prize for Best Book by the Section on Comparative Democratization of the American Political Science Association.

Stephan Haggard is the Lawrence and Sallye Krause Distinguished Professor at the School of Global Policy and Strategy at UC San Diego.

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Abstract

We explore what can be learned from authoritarian backsliding in middle income countries about the threats to American democracy posed by the election of Donald Trump. We develop some causal hunches and an empirical baseline by considering the rise of elected autocrats in Venezuela, Turkey, and Hungary. Although American political institutions may forestall a reversion to electoral autocracy, we see some striking parallels in terms of democratic dysfunction, the nature of populist appeals, and the processes through which autocratic incumbents sought to exploit elected office. The outcome in the United States may be a significantly diminished democratic system in which electoral competition survives, but within a political space that is narrowed by weakened horizontal checks on executive power and rule of law.

Key words: democratic backsliding, populism, electoral authoritarianism, Donald Trump
The election of Donald Trump has challenged the widespread assumption that rich, “consolidated” democracies are invulnerable to subversion by autocrats who come to power through electoral means (Huq and Ginsburg 2017; Frum 2017; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Both in his election campaign and in his first year in office, Trump has stoked underlying ethnic and class divisions, demonized his opposition, attacked the media, and challenged the independence of Congress, the courts, and the law enforcement and intelligence apparatus. Is the United States in danger of incremental backsliding toward an “electoral autocracy,” a government that undermines constitutional limits and closes channels for meaningful political contestation?

This paper explores what we can learn about these risks from the surprising devolution of democratic politics in three middle-income countries: Venezuela, Turkey, and Hungary. Democratic institutions in Venezuela and Hungary had previously seemed relatively well entrenched, and Turkey’s democracy appeared embarked on a road to consolidation. All three countries, moreover, had reached levels of GDP in which the possibilities of reversal had once seemed highly unlikely (Przeworski et. al. 2000). The United States, of course, is far richer and its political system much more institutionalized. But comparisons with these cases underlines causal processes through which democracies can deteriorate even under relatively favorable conditions. They can thus illuminate both the vulnerabilities and strengths of the American political system.

**Theoretical Perspectives**

Prior to late 20th and early 21st centuries, postwar democracies typically fell to military coups rather than elected autocrats (Powell and Thyne 2011). Yet theories of why the military might intervene in politics seem less relevant to the question of how autocrats are elected to office and succeed in consolidating their power. Although our approach is partly inductive—comparing sequences of events in backsliding cases to the US—we are guided by two important strands of theoretical literature on regime change. One focuses on how reinforcing patterns of social conflict and regime dysfunction strain support for democratic rule. Political grievances driven by economic stagnation and/or high inequality have figured prominently in such discussions. (Przeworski et al 2000, Svolik 2008, Haggard and Kaufman 2016; Boix 2003; Acemoglu and Robinson 2006). But ethnic, racial, and religious cleavages can be equally if not
more relevant sources of instability. A second, highly influential perspective builds on the seminal work of Juan Linz on democratic failures in interwar Europe (Linz 1978). This work places less emphasis on social-economic challenges to democracy and more on elite polarization and institutional failures that open the way for extremists to win office (Ziblatt 2017, Capoccia 2005, Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).

These two perspectives are sometimes posited as competing approaches, but it is quite easy to see how they might work in tandem. In this paper, we incorporate both into a stylized causal pathway to authoritarian rule. We view this pathway as a nested set of probabilistic claims in which one set of conditions increases the likelihood that other causal processes will lead to the demise of democracy.

We group these claims into three causal “baskets.” The first centers on how intensifying class or identity cleavages undermine the legitimacy of democratic rule. Such conflicts can originate from above or below, stoked by political entrepreneurs or emerging from economic or cultural grievances in mass publics. Whatever their initial source, polarization weakens norms of tolerance and self-restraint among competing political elites and widens opportunities for anti-system populist appeals.

A second cluster of explanatory factors, and what might be seen as a second stage in the reversion process, centers on how electoral and legislative victories are used to concentrate political authority. In inter-war Germany and Italy, as well as in a number of contemporary cases, coalitions with established political forces (so-called “devil’s bargains”) gave autocrats the leverage to accrete power and ultimately shutter democratic processes (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). But in Venezuela, Turkey, and Hungary, autocrats rose to power through electoral victories that swept aside much-weakened opposition parties and allowed them to capture not only the executive but large legislative majorities as well. Control over the executive and legislative branch not only facilitated but legitimated “majoritarian” assaults on institutions of horizontal accountability and civil liberties.

The third phase in this process is the step-by-step subversion of these institutions and the liberties they are established to protect, with early moves facilitating later ones (Bermeo 2016; Huq and Ginsburg 2017). Autocrats typically target the judiciary and the press and seek to bring agencies of law enforcement and the police under their executive control. Control over the economic resources of the state and corruption play an important role both in building bases of
support and deterring opposition. The economic, legal and coercive resources of the state are subsequently used to intimidate or harass political challengers, repress civil society dissent, and corrupt the electoral process.

The incremental nature of backsliding makes thresholds of regime change hard to pinpoint. But the process we describe can ultimately tilt the playing field so heavily against the possibility of free and fair elections that regimes cannot be considered democratic even in the minimalist sense of the term (Levitsky and Way 2010). In all three of the middle-income countries we examine here, that line was clearly crossed. This outcome is less likely in the United States, but we suggest that Trump’s assault on institutions of horizontal accountability and civil and political rights, even if reflecting longer-run historical processes, may well have an impact even after he leaves the political scene.

**The Cases**

To identify the universe of plausible comparators, we drew on the Liberal Democracy Index of the V-Dem data set, which has a range from 0 to 1 (least to most democratic). The index combines indicators not only on the integrity of the electoral process—a prerequisite for minimal or “electoral” conceptions of democracy—but also respect for personal liberties, rule of law, and judicial as well as legislative constraints on the executive.

Unlike other datasets, V-Dem does not itself stipulate a democratic threshold, although it has been used by others to do so (Coppedge 2017; Lindberg 2016; Luhrmann, Lindberg and Tannenburg 2017; Mechkova, Luhrmann and Lindberg 2017). Broadly following these efforts, we identified all middle-income cases that had achieved a score of at least .5 for 8 years or more during the post-Cold War era (1992-2016). These selection rules eliminated low-income cases (nearly all of which did not in any case meet the .5 threshold). The 8-year threshold was designed to capture at least one turnover in government, and thus cases that had accumulated at least some democratic history.

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2. To qualify as a democracy, regimes must first fulfill a minimum threshold on the Electoral Democracy Index: a score of at least 0.5 on this index plus thresholds with respect to de facto multiparty elections, that elections are free and fair, and that they allow for substantial competition and freedom of participation. The “liberal” component of democracy is captured by further threshold requirements with respect to measures of respect for personal liberties, rule of law, and judicial as well as legislative constraints on the executive. For discussions of the constructions of these indicators, see Coppedge 2017; Lindberg 2016; Mechkova, Luhrmann and Lindberg 2017; Luhrmann, Lindberg and Tannenberg 2017)
3. More precisely, we considered all cases that had been middle-income in at least one year, although as will be seen all on the list in fact were middle-income for most of the period.
From that group, we then identified all countries that had seen a statistically significant decline from their peak score during the period, yielding a list of 10 cases: Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Macedonia, Nicaragua, Poland, Serbia, South Korea, Turkey, Venezuela. Among these ten, Brazil, South Korea, and Poland achieved liberal democracy scores above .75, but we do not consider them in this paper for several reasons. Despite the decline in Brazil and South Korea, neither fell below the .50 threshold and their electoral systems remained intact. Poland’s decline followed a path that resembled Hungary’s, although it occurred without the crises that characterized the other cases and was driven as much by political elites—and the Hungarian model—as mass publics. Most importantly, all three cases exhibited significant margins of error in the codings.

We do believe the arguments outlined here would pertain to the remaining countries. But we highlight Venezuela, Hungary, and Turkey because they appeared difficult cases that should be least likely to revert and thus the most plausible comparators to the United States. As noted, all three had reached levels of per capita income that make them anomalies for modernization theories. Both Venezuela and Hungary exceeded (adjusting for inflation) the famous $6055 threshold identified by Przeworski et al. (2000) as the point at which the probability of reversion approaches zero. Turkey had not reached that level, but was solidly in the upper middle-income category.4

Backsliding in these countries was also surprising because of prior democratic progress. Following the overthrow of a military dictatorship in 1958, Venezuela experienced four decades of continuous constitutional government, characterized by stable electoral competition between two deeply-rooted centrist parties and peaceful transfers of power between them. Hungary, firmly ensconced in the EU, also appeared to be a democratic success story. The uncertainties of the transition from socialism quickly evolved during the 1990s and early 2000s to a stable pattern of alternation between competing political parties.

4. In 1998 at the onset of the Chavez period, Venezuela’s per capita GDP stood at $11,299. Adjusting for inflation, that is about the same as the famous $6055 in 1975 dollars identified by Przeworski et al as a threshold of democratic invulnerability. In the late 2000s, when FIDESZ began to seize control in Hungary, the per capita income was $17,182 – also above the Przeworski threshold. Turkey’s level was somewhat lower in the late 2000s ($10,672), but it was still at a level that significantly reduced the odds of democratic backsliding.
Democracy in Turkey was the most problematic of the three backsliding cases. Electoral politics during the 1980s and 1990s was challenged by a tradition of military vetoes over politics, sharp divisions between secularists and religious Muslims, and conflict between the government and the Kurdish minority. In 2002, however, the election of an apparently moderate Islamist party, Erdogan’s AKP, appeared to launch the country on a highly encouraging democratic trajectory before it took a sharp political U-turn in the late 2000s.

In many respects, the three countries make good comparators precisely because they vary widely on a number of other potentially relevant parameters, from geopolitical position (for example, proximity to Europe) and dependence on oil revenue in the case of Venezuela. Nevertheless, all exhibit strong parallels with respect to the causal factors highlighted above: a prior phase of democratic dysfunction and polarization; a phase in which constitutional powers were fundamentally reshuffled by pliant legislatures; and the ultimate exploitation of executive power to eliminate horizontal checks on the executive and to weaken political rights and civil liberties.

**Democratic Dysfunction: Social Polarization and Political Strain**

The distinction between the legitimacy and effectiveness of political regimes has been a long-standing theme in the study of democratic stability (Lipset 1959: 86-98; Linz 1978: 20). But legitimacy is not unconditional, and all three middle-income cases saw reinforcing cycles of weak performance, political and social polarization, and declining support for democracy.

In Venezuela, increasing social conflicts broke primarily along class lines and can be linked directly to the failure of the two dominant parties to respond effectively to the debt crisis and oil price shocks of the 1980s. In the eleven years from 1980 to 1990, Venezuela experienced only two years of positive growth, with the sharpest decline of over 10 percent coming in 1989. Figure 1 tracks growth in per capita GDP for the three cases during the sample period, with vertical lines showing the inflection points in the V-Dem series after which each experienced a decline in the liberal democracy scores. As can be seen, the 1990s in Venezuela were not much better than the lost decade of the 1980s: there were three years of negative growth in the five-year period preceding Chavez’s election in 1998. Voters initially reacted by voting out incumbents, rather than by turning against the system itself. Over time, however, the legitimacy of the entire political system eroded. Class polarization became increasingly evident by the late 1980s (Dunning 2008), particularly after Carlos Andres Perez, (who had been elected president
on a populist platform in 1988), reversed course and attempted to impose a tough austerity program. The initiative triggered massive protests on the streets of Caracas and a bloody response by the police.

Several years later, a dramatic coup attempt catapulted Hugo Chavez into prominence as a populist critic of a corrupt and ineffective democratic regime. But the attempt was less a sign of the strength of the military as it was of the breakdown of elite consensus with respect to democratic norms. Although none of the political parties supported the coup attempt, few openly condemned it. Chavez was ultimately released from prison by Perez’s successor in 1995. Meanwhile, street protests continued, and Perez was driven from office before the end of his term by accusations of corruption and a vote for impeachment.

Electoral support for the two centrist parties--AD and Copei—also began to deteriorate rapidly during the early 1990s. Between the congressional elections of 1988 and 1993, their
combined vote share fell from 81 to 53 percent in the Chamber of Deputies and from 92 to 60 percent in the Senate (Dunning 2008: 171). The space vacated by the political center was filled by smaller protest parties and anti-establishment candidates. In the presidential election of 1993, the winner with only 31 percent of the vote was Rafael Caldera, who ran as an independent despite having formerly been a leader of COPEI. His government veered erratically between populist policies and austerity, and his term ended in 1998 with the economy and the political system in profound disarray. These developments in turn opened the way for Chavez to successfully contest for the presidency by deploying populist attacks on “neoliberal” elites. He won with 56 percent of the vote in a fragmented field, while the traditional party candidates could muster only 11 percent.

In contrast to Venezuela, Hungary appeared to be an economic as well as political success story well into the 2000s. But Hungarian society remained deeply divided between pro-European liberals and Social Democrats and more inward-looking conservative voters based in the rural areas and small towns. Viktor Orban’s FIDESZ party aggressively courted this conservative base, challenging his centrist adversaries with increasingly strident nationalist and ethnic appeals.

The Socialists and liberal parties lost to FIDESZ in 1998, but then regained office in 2002 and were reelected in 2006. However, their political support fell sharply, following a slowing of growth (Figure 1) and a corruption scandal that compounded underlying social cleavages. In 2006, a leaked tape of a private meeting of the Socialist party captured the admission by Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsany that he had lied repeatedly to the public about the strength of the economy. Then, in 2007, the economy was hit by the global financial shocks, and according to one observer (Meuller 2014: 16) “the public’s faith in democracy faded along with the economy.” As in Venezuela, economic crisis and political scandal left the incumbent parties discredited, divided, and unable to launch an effective defense against non-democratic challengers on the political right. After the leak of the tapes, FIDESZ and the ultra-right Jobbik party led violent street protests in 2006 and again in 2007. In the parliamentary election of 2010, FIDESZ won an overwhelming electoral victory with 56 percent of the popular vote. Because of electoral laws favoring the largest party, Orban was able to govern with a two-thirds supermajority in the parliament. As we shall see below, this provided him with the leverage not
only to move the system sharply toward the right, but to expand his control over other institutional centers of power.

In Turkey, the election of Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s AKP in 2002 also occurred against a fraught backdrop of economic instability that resembled Venezuela’s and increasing social polarization (see Figure 1). But unlike Chavez and Orban, Erdogan campaigned in 2002 as a moderate, and initially moved toward a strengthening of Turkish democracy. During his first term, he deepened ties to the EU, rolled back the secularist military’s historic veto power over Turkish politics and expanded protection of civil and political liberties. A strong rebound from the economic crisis, moreover, reinforced his political success.

These advances, however, occurred within a framework of democratic institutions that were considerably weaker than those in Venezuela and Hungary. Moreover, as in Hungary, deep cultural and religious divisions remained a latent source of polarization. Although the AKP provided clientelist benefits across this divide (Onis 2013: 116), the party appealed primarily to religious conservatives who had long been marginalized by secular forces within the political and military elite. Erdogan’s political ascendency came at the expense of these secular groups, with complex implications for the stability of Turkish democracy.

On the one hand, the taming of secularist forces within the military was a clear mark of democratic progress. Also marginalized, however, were the secular centrist parties that had dominated Turkish politics since the military dictatorship of 1980s. In the 2002 election, only the center-left CHP (Republican People’s Party) managed to win any parliamentary seats, in part due to relatively high thresholds that favored the AKP. By turning the tables on these parties, Erdogan weakened potential checks on his subsequent bid for power, freeing him to make increasingly intemperate attacks on secular rivals, Kurdish minorities, and civil society opposition.

Pairing Venezuela with Turkey and Hungary is instructive with respect to the polarizing nature of populist electoral appeals. Whereas Hugo Chavez identified with the political left and exploited class cleavages, Erdogan and Orban were right-wing populists; much like Trump, they appealed to rural over urban interests and targeted ethnic minorities and foreigners. But as Kurt Weyland (2001) has argued, “left” and “right” populists share more in common with each
other than they do with more programmatic parties. Both portray their oppositions as enemies rather than legitimate competitors and lay claim to being the unique voice of “the people.” And while right populists exploit cultural cleavages, they are also attentive to the economic concerns of their social bases. Orban and Erdogan, as well as Trump, scrambled the standard left-right cleavages on economic issues. Like Chavez, they advanced nationalist economic policies and rejected globalization while maintaining at least a rhetorical commitment to social policies favorable to their bases of support.

**Changing the Constitutional Balance of Power.**

In all three cases, converting votes into large parliamentary majorities proved a crucial step for autocrats and their parties to expand executive power and weaken horizontal checks. Majority control of the parliament both eliminated the legislature as a major source of oversight and accountability—because of their acquiescence to the executive—and provided the statutory foundation for the delegation of greater formal powers as well. Control of the legislature depended in part on disproportionality in the electoral system: features that magnified the legislative effect of the popular vote. And in the case of Venezuela, it required constitutional reforms that restructured the Congress itself. As we shall see in Venezuela and Turkey, moreover, the capture of legislative majorities does not preclude extra-constitutional threats to executive authority. But if legislative control is not a sufficient condition for backsliding, all three cases suggest that it may be necessary to the establishment of an electoral autocracy.

In Venezuela’s presidential system Chavez’s strong showing in the 1998 elections placed him in direct confrontation with a separately-elected legislative branch still controlled in part by opposition parties. But he had campaigned on a platform of “refounding” Venezuela’s constitution and quickly set about exploiting his political popularity to eliminate legislative opposition. In a referendum held in April, shortly after Chavez took office, over 87 percent of voters supported the election of a new constituent assembly, with a crucial provision for a nationwide vote that would magnify the impact of Chavez’s electoral majority (Corrales 2018). In August, the new Chavez-dominated Assembly seized the parliament building and deactivated the sitting congress, claiming authority to act in its place. Although opposition politicians protested these moves, their parties lacked the support to block them. The Supreme Court, intimidated by pressure from the popular Chavez government, reluctantly assented, although the Chief Justice was moved to resign in protest. The new constitution eliminated the Senate where the
opposition had a majority, increased the length of the presidential term, and granted the president vast new decree powers. Chavez loyalists gained 60 percent of the seats in the new unicameral legislature elected in August 2000, which then provided the president with a one-year authorization to decide economic and industrial policy by decree.

In 2005, Chavez gained 100 percent of control of the Assembly when opposition parties boycotted the vote, and in 2006 he solidified his control by reorganizing formerly separate Chavista factions into a new ruling party, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). The concentration of executive authority proceeded apace, and the government – with the assent of the legislature -- went on to seize control of the telecommunications, energy, banking and construction sectors, allowing it to deploy rents to crony capitalists and distribute government resources to clients. As in Hungary and Turkey, the construction of a network of private sector suppliers and distributors – named the “Bolibourgoisie” after the Bolivarian revolution – became a central pillar of the Chavez regime.

During the early 2000s, such measures generated strong, primarily extra-constitutional, reactions from groups associated with the old order: massive demonstrations, a business lock-out, a short-lived coup by senior military officers in 2002, a three-month stoppage by managers and technical workers in the critical petroleum sector in 2003, and a constitutional referendum in 2004 on his continuation in office. Chavez might not have survived these attacks if it had not been for a sharp upswing in petroleum prices in 2003-2004 (Figure 1), which permitted massive new expenditures in social programs and enabled the president to stave off defeat in the 2004 recall referendum.

Yet Chavez’s claim to democratic legitimacy -- ratified not only by his own election but by support in the legislature--enabled him to face down these challenges. Backing for the 2002 coup faded quickly after its civilian leader, Pedro Carmon, announced that he would scrap the 1999 constitution and dissolve the National Assembly. Coup leaders dismissed Carmon and reconvened the National Assembly, which then ratified Chavez’s return to office (Corrales and Penfold 2015). Once back in power, Chavez consolidated control over the military establishment by purging its senior ranks and appointing loyalists in their place.

Congress also supported or acquiesced to Chavez’s strong-arm tactics in disarming other potentially fatal sources of opposition. He faced down the oil strike by abruptly firing most of top and middle management of the national oil company (PDVSA) and replacing them with
personal loyalists. Follow-up legislation eliminated the buffers that had previously insulated the company from executive authority and allowed the president to gain access to rents that could be deployed off-budget to loyalists and cronies, independent of congressional oversight. More generally, the expansion of presidential power at the expense of an independent legislature opened the way to attacks on other critical instruments of horizontal accountability that we take up in the following section: the courts, the attorney general, the comptroller general and ultimately the the Consejo Nacional Electoral (CNE), the electoral monitoring body (Corrales and Penfold 2015, 20).

In Hungary, FIDESZ acquired legislative dominance without the dramatic constitutional struggles visible in Venezuela. Nonetheless, a five percent threshold rule allowed FIDESZ to convert the 56 percent it won in the electoral vote into a 68 percent supermajority in the legislature. The opposition minority was both fragmented and polarized, with the Socialists retaining 15 percent of the seats and the far-right Jobbik party 12 percent. By this time, Orban had already gained a dominant leadership role within the ruling party and, through patronage and control of nominations, could count on the unwavering discipline of FIDEZ parliamentarians. The legislature was thus turned into a rubber stamp, both for constitutional reforms and ordinary laws; in the words of Janos Kornai (2015, 20), it became a “bill factory.”

As in Hungary, Turkey’s electoral laws—in this case a ten percent electoral threshold—magnified the AKP’s electoral victories into large legislative majorities. In 2002, the AKP captured 66 percent of the legislative seats with only 34 percent of the vote. The main opposition party, the CHP, gained only a third of the seats, while all of the parties that had comprised the previous government were shut out of parliament entirely (Muftuler-Bac and Keyman 2012: 87). Unlike FIDESZ, it fell short of the 60 percent mark in the 2011 elections. But the AKP electoral pluralities grew throughout the 2000s, and except for a few months in 2015 when a pro-Kurdish party surged over the 10 percent threshold, it continued to win significant parliamentary majorities that established the AKP as the dominant party in the system, with Erdogan as its undisputed leader.

The AKP’s power in parliament shaped ensuing struggles over constitutional design. One major struggle, however, occurred entirely outside the parliamentary arena: the so-called “Ergenekon” trials of 275 military officers and journalists alleged to have conspired to overthrow
the AKP government. Whatever the validity of these charges, the trials marked the end of threats posed by secularist and nationalist factions within the Turkish military establishment. Erdogan’s victory on this issue freed him to leverage his parliamentary power in ways that would enhance his personal control over the entire political system. In 2007, he sponsored a crucial constitutional amendment providing for the direct election of the president; and in 2014, he himself assumed that office while maintaining his AKP majority in parliament. This move dramatically increased Erdogan’s authority at the expense of parliament and other institutional checks and permitted an onslaught on political liberties and civil rights. We turn next to a fuller account of these crucial final steps in the backsliding process in Turkey and the other backsliding cases.

The Assaults on the Rule of Law, Political Rights and Civil Liberties

In all three backsliding cases, the dismantling of both horizontal checks and the weakening of political and civil liberties proceeded in a parallel fashion. The independent judiciary and media, however, were typically among the early targets because weakening them proved crucial to subsequent steps in the backsliding process. Elected autocrats also quickly sought to control the agencies of law enforcement and to turn them against opponents and dissenters. As already noted in the case of Venezuela, the absence of checks further tilted the political playing field by permitting corruption, which in turn allowed the executive to persecute private sector opponents while buying off cronies and clients. Most fundamentally for the survival of a competitive electoral process, leaders ultimately reshaped voting laws and undermined independent monitoring of elections to minimize the risks of electoral defeat.

The expansion of presidential power was built into the design of the 1999 constitution in Venezuela by its grant of extensive discretionary powers to the president and in the creation a new National Assembly. But the most concerted assaults on the judiciary and the press came after Chavez’s crucial victory over the political opposition in the 2004 referendum, and his smashing victory in the presidential elections of 2006. The courts, it should be recalled, faced pressure and intimidation dating back to the initial controversies over the constituent assembly’s assumption of legislative power. But following the recall victory, the remaining independence of the Supreme Court was destroyed by the appointment of twelve additional Chavez loyalists.
Pressure on the media also accelerated. The 2004 Law on Social Responsibility in Radio, Television, and Electronic Media (the Resorte Law) included vague prohibitions against content that “foments citizens’ anxiety or alters public order;” or “disrespects authorities.” In 2007, the government increased the pressure by withdrawing the broadcast license for RCTV, Venezuela’s largest independent news channel. And in 2010, it amended the media law to expand control over the internet, also granted sweeping powers to the Venezuelan National Telecommunications Commission (CONATEL)—controlled by Chavez appointments—to cripple networks associated with the opposition such as Globovision and RCTV (Freedom House 2013).

The government’s control over the press, the courts, the economy, and the electoral machinery created a highly uneven playing field that allowed Chavez to intimidate or disarm key opposition leaders when faced with serious challenges. For example, Manuel Rosas, who had contended for the presidency in 2006, was indicted for corruption in 2008 and effectively removed from the political scene.

After Chavez’s death in 2013, however, the gloves came off entirely as oil revenues declined and electoral support eroded. Chavez’s successor, Nicolas Maduro, has relied increasingly on the police and the military and other more openly authoritarian practices to stave off wide-spread popular unrest over sharply deteriorating economic conditions. When the opposition parties unseated the Chavistas in the legislature, winning a two-thirds majority in the 2015 elections, the democratic facade quickly fell away. The Supreme Court undercut the supermajority by invalidating the election of several opposition legislators; and when that proved insufficient, Maduro disempowered the Assembly entirely by engineering the election of a new constituent assembly that claimed legislative authority. Unlike Chavez in 1999, however, Maduro lacked the popular support to succeed in this maneuver without violent reprisals against demonstrators and the arrest of hundreds of political opponents. The long-term effectiveness of these reprisals remains uncertain, but it is clear that Maduro’s government has devolved into an even more openly authoritarian regime than its predecessor.

Hungarian backsliding was “softer” than in the other cases; outright coercion, threats, and police repression have played a less significant role. Nevertheless, Orban used the supermajority won in 2010 to implement measures similar to the ones we have seen in Venezuela, including accretion of executive discretion, pressure on the press and civil society, restrictions on opposition parties, and the use of prosecutorial and economic powers to repress dissent.
As in the other cases, the independent judiciary was an early target. In 2011, a new
constitution expanded the size of the Constitutional Court, packing the new seats with Orban
loyalists. Additional reforms in 2013 placed further restrictions on the Court’s constitutional
authority, allowing political appointees in the National Judicial Office to overrule previous
constitutional rulings.

With parliamentary authorization, the government seized control of formerly independent
auditing and law-enforcement agencies, enabling wide-spread cronyism within the private sector.
Corruption was widespread in Hungary well before the rise of FIDESZ, but the weakening of
checks and balances after 2010 paved the way to what Balint Magyar (2016) has termed a “post-
Communist Mafia State.” In this particular form of corruption, the ruling clique uses legal
authorities as well as blackmail and threats of prosecution to force the sale of private firms, the
returns from which are subsequently used to buy the support of lower-level government and
party officials.

Control of the legislature and courts permitted a series of electoral “reforms” aimed at
locking in Fidesz’s oversized parliamentary majority and placing its traditional rivals at long-
term or even permanent disadvantage. The new legislation included rules that encouraged the
formation of splinter parties to divide the anti-government vote, gerrymandered districts, and
provided for the transfer of “surplus” votes won in single-member districts to party members
competing in multi-member races. These measures were supplemented by an extension of
voting rights to ethnic expatriates in neighboring countries who vote overwhelming for Fidesz
and can provide the margins required to achieve supermajorities (Orenstein, Kreko, and Juhasz
2015).

Orban also placed considerable pressure on independent media outlets and on civil
society organizations. Shortly following the 2010 elections, the government withdrew
advertising to media outlets and required them to register with a regulatory agency empowered to
fine or even revoke licenses for infractions (Freedom House 2016a). Publishers and journalists
did not, as of 2016, face threats of imprisonment or physical assaults as was the case in Turkey.
As in Venezuela, however, they have been threatened with penalties for publishing content that
is not “balanced, accurate, thorough, objective, and responsible” (Keleman 2017, 12).

Similar legal tools have been deployed to harass civil society groups and NGOs, directed
especially at those with financial ties to George Soros, the liberal Hungarian-American
billionaire. At the same time, the government has generally turned a blind eye to hate crimes committed against the Roma minority, sometimes with the collaboration of the far-right Jobbik party or even FIDESZ politicians themselves (Cernusakova 2017). Migrants have suffered official detention and even more violent abuse, and in 2018, the government began to press for financial penalties against civil society organizations coming to their aid (Kingsley 2018).

An important puzzle is why the constraints associated with EU membership—a potential external check on the regime—did not impose more of a brake on Hungarian backsliding. Part of the answer, as Kelemen (2017) has written, is that FIDESZ votes enabled the conservative European People’s Party to maintain a majority in the EU parliament, providing Orban with powerful supra-national allies. Despite some criticism from Brussels, the Union has stopped well short of crippling sanctions, such as a halt in the dispersal of large financial transfers that flow into the Hungarian fisc, leaving the government free to pursue its illiberal course.

In Turkey, Erdogan’s initiative to move from a parliamentary system to a presidential constitution marked the beginning of a turn from a developing democracy toward a more autocratic system. With this initiative, Erdogan’s government became caught up in opposition charges of abuse of power and corruption, and to which he responded with increasing legal pressure on the judiciary, the press, and civil society opposition.

The independent judiciary and law enforcement agencies were early targets in this process. After his victory in the 2007 election—although won with only a plurality—Erdogan repeatedly made majoritarian arguments to justify his actions, including open criticism of the Constitutional Court (Dinçsahin 2012). Constitutional reforms, also ratified by a referendum in 2007, included measures to weaken the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors, crucial horizontal checks.

As in the other cases, the press was also an early target, with pressure brought to bear both through restrictive legislation and executive discretion. In 2006, anti-terrorism laws were revised to include jail sentences for journalists found to violate their provisions, with chilling effects on reporters. By the end of the 2000s, Turkey was one of the world’s leaders in the imprisonment of journalists. The Dogan company, the largest media group in the country, was subject to repeated attacks, large fines for tax evasion and forced divestiture of key holdings. Following the coup attempt of 2015, its offices were attacked by pro-AKP mobs, and prosecutors began investigations into allegations of “terrorism propaganda.”
The space for civil society protest also narrowed sharply. In 2013, Erdogan cracked down on wide-spread anti-corruption protests, leaving five demonstrators dead, over 8,000 injured, and nearly 5,000 detained. He also turned state power against rivals within the political and economic elite, launching bribery investigations against potential defectors within the cabinet and the private sector.

In 2016, the defeat of another military uprising provided an opportunity for Erdogan to consolidate his power even further. The coup was allegedly promoted by Fethullah Gulen, a rival within the Islamist movement, but it was badly organized and faced strong opposition both from other military factions and the mass public. Sweeping arrests in the wake of the coup caught up tens of thousands of people in the military, the civil service, and academic institutions, apparently drawing on an “enemies list” compiled prior to the coup. Exploiting this internal threat, the AKP and Nationalist Movement Party staged a constitutional referendum that substantially expanded the formal powers of the presidency. Although bitterly contested, the government’s control of both the electoral system and intimidation of the press allowed it to prevail despite widespread accusations of voting fraud. As was the case with Chavez and Orban, Erdogan had parlayed his electoral support and control of the legislature into autocratic control of the political system.

**Backsliding in America: The Trump Presidency One Year In**

What can we learn from the experiences of middle-income backsliders about the risks to democracy in the United States? One important difference stands out: Trump and his allies are unlikely to be able to mobilize support for the type of fundamental constitutional changes visible in Venezuela, Hungary, and Turkey. In the middle-income backsliders, formal constitutions lacked strong popular support and were far more malleable. Through popular referenda or even ordinary legislation, rulers could eliminate term limits, expand decree powers, alter the structure of the judiciary, and write entirely new constitutions. In the United States, the “stickiness” of the constitutional design with respect to parameters such as term limits, the bicameral legislature, and the federal nature of the system constitute significant barriers to the emergence of a full electoral autocracy.

But the strength of constitutional institutions depends fundamentally on whether political actors and the mass public have the interest and capacity to defend them from subversion of the
spirit as well as the letter of the law. In this respect, we see disturbing parallels with middle-income backsliders which we elaborate around the three-phase framework used to analyze those cases.

Democratic Dysfunction, Social Polarization and Populist Appeals

Similarities are most striking with respect to the increasing polarization of American society around racial, ethnic, and economic grievances. Parties began to realign around racial divisions over the civil rights movement in the 1960s, with Republicans moving steadily toward uncompromising right-wing positions in subsequent decades (for example, Mickey, Levitsky and Way 2018; Mann and Orenstein 2012). Racial politics, of course, are deeply embedded in the specificities of American history, but bear at least a family resemblance to the religious and cultural cleavages visible in Hungary and Turkey.

As in these other cases, deep economic grievances compounded the intensity of these cleavages and eroded the legitimacy of the political system. Long-term, these grievances were rooted in the insecurities associated with globalization, technological change, and the concentration of wealth. More immediately, they reflect the devastating impact of the Great Recession. Wide swaths of the population were left out of the modest recovery of the Obama years, and studies have noted how the Trump vote was driven by factors such as exposure to trade (Autor et al 2018), the distinctive problems facing smaller metropolitan areas, (Florida 2016), social markers such as poor health, lower social mobility, and weak social capital (Rothwell 2017).

A cascade of “top-down” factors exacerbated grass-roots resentments over these issues and fostered popular perceptions that “government doesn’t work.” These included policy stalemates in Washington, the perverse incentives of the primary system, and the flow of big money into right-wing communications networks and political causes. But the divisive behavior and appeals of elite actors were targeted at a fertile “mass market,” characterized by long-standing racial and cultural divisions within the mass public and by a pronounced trend toward “tribal voting” (Aachens and Bartells 2016). With polarization, moreover, has come a sharp decline in public trust in American governmental institutions. In every Pew poll between 2007 and 2015, for example, trust in political institutions fluctuated between about 20 and 25 percent, the lowest level in more than 50 years (Pew 2015).
For candidate Trump, these conditions opened the way to a populist campaign that closely resembled those of his counterparts in Hungary, Turkey, and Venezuela. Like Orban and Erdogan, he exploited both cultural cleavages and economic distress. He appealed particularly to voters in depressed rural areas and small towns and to non-college white males. He openly stoked resentments against immigrants and blacks. Despite his own problematic personal behavior, he also posed as a champion of the “traditional values” of the evangelicals. There were also strong echoes of Chavez’s brand of “left” populism in Trump’s promise to restore national greatness, bring back industrial jobs through trade protection, and to “drain the swamp” of the Washington elite. He evoked the same “majoritarian” contempt expressed by all three populist counterparts for the institutional checks and the play of interests characteristic of a pluralist democracy.

In one important respect, Trump’s rise to power differed from that of other populist leaders: his electoral support was weaker and the electoral and legislative opposition more robust. Chavez and Orban were swept into power with significant electoral mandates, and Erdogan won a plurality victory in fragmented party system that left his rivals unable to launch an effective opposition. Trump won the presidency due to the disproportionality of the Electoral College, but he lost the popular vote. And despite disproportionality in the Senate and gerrymandering in the House, he faced a powerful Democratic opposition with strong support within the electorate and institutional bases within the federal system.

In a “tribal” political context, however, the depth and durability of Trump’s base of support offset its lack of breadth. As we will discuss in the following section, the continuing loyalty of strong Trump supporters, which is highly concentrated in Republican electoral districts, has provided the president with considerable leverage in sustaining the support of his party in Congress. Support from the base, moreover, is supplemented by the partisan loyalties of broader circles of Republican voters, reinforcing his hold over the party as a whole and marginalizing independent voices.

*Changing the Constitutional Balance of Power*

What is the danger that Trump will be able build on Republican control of the Senate and House to eliminate checks and expand executive prerogatives? The situation in the United States is much more complicated than in the backsliding cases, where legislatures were pivotal to the accretion of executive power. One important reason is that Republican majorities are not
assured, even in the short run. Unlike in the middle-income countries, a strong opposition party – the Democrats - remain a significant threat to retake the majority.

Even with Republican majorities in control, moreover, legislative support for the delegation of greater power to the president is far from guaranteed. Trump’s Republican allies face constituency pressures that sometimes encourage them to diverge from the president’s preferences. Unlike the populist autocrats, the president cannot count on the Congress to act as a rubber stamp. Inept management on the part of the White House and deep intra-party divisions have blocked important pieces of legislation backed by the president and the congressional leadership, most significantly in the prolonged failure over the course of 2017 to repeal Obamacare.

Despite these constraints, however, the Republican congressional majority provided Trump with considerable leverage over the formally co-equal branch of government during his first year in office. In an era of partisan polarization, both Trump and Congressional leaders share a strong interest in retaining a legislative majority. And although congressional Republicans have not always conformed to the president’s agenda, their interests are closely aligned around some key policy issues such as tax cuts. More fundamentally, the Republican majority has an interest in protecting the president from damaging oversight and collaborating in key political appointments and administrative actions that will help lock in political advantage.

One important area of Congressional acquiescence concerns the conflicts of interests within the executive branch. As long as the Republicans continue to control Congress, we cannot expect serious oversight of executive efforts to reward corporate friends—including foreign ones—or punish adversaries. It is unlikely, to be sure, that Congress would permit the President to engage in the unfettered cronyism and corruption that we saw in the middle-income cases; the American private sector is far more complex and powerful, and both tax and law enforcement agencies are arguably less susceptible to weaponization. But Congressional tolerance for manifest conflicts of interest and discretionary regulatory relief has enhanced opportunities for Trump to build alliances with powerful economic interests with direct stakes in tax law, federal contracts, and environmental regulation and trade policy. Indeed, the Trump family itself brings massive conflicts of interest into office.

By far the most consequential challenge to Congressional oversight, concerns the investigations into the possibility of the Trump campaign’s collusion with Russia during the
2016 election campaign. The encouraging news on this front is that, even under Republican control, the Congress has acted with greater independence than we might have expected in the middle-income countries. Although partisan conflicts have impeded congressional investigations, backlash over the firing of James Comey resulted in the appointment of Robert Mueller as special prosecutor; and leading Republicans have warned strongly against attempts to fire him. But Republican support for the investigation has wavered substantially as it comes closer to the Trump campaign and the president himself. The president’s congressional allies have abandoned bi-partisan initiatives to protect Mueller by requiring judicial approval of any attempt to dismiss him. And allies on the House Intelligence Committee itself have trafficked in innuendo and rumor in an attempt to cast doubt on the impartiality of the investigation. As more information emerges from the investigation, we will have a better idea of how Congress will respond to what could prove a constitutional crisis and even an existential challenge to American democracy.

The interests of Trump and Congressional Republicans, finally, converge much more definitively around executive and judicial appointments. At risk within the executive branch itself are agencies, formerly staffed on a bi-partisan or non-partisan basis, that had acted as an implicit check on executive claims. The list is long, and would include, most importantly, professional areas of the Justice Department, the Office of Management and Budget, the Census Bureau, and numerous other executive agencies established to collect and evaluate economic and demographic data and to conduct scientific research on the environment and public health.

The most serious threat posed by Congressional collaboration on appointments, however, is the opportunity it offers to reshape the judiciary. In the middle-income countries, as we have seen, such initiatives were an essential component of the authoritarian playbook. In the next section, we examine how this threat might play out in the United States.

*The Assault on the Rule of Law and Civil Liberties*

Unlike in the middle-income countries, the American judiciary has so far pushed back strongly against presidential attacks on lower court decisions and the integrity of individual jurists. Most notably, district courts consistently ruled against his signature efforts to block immigration from Muslim countries. We should not, however, underestimate the potential for Trump and his congressional allies to increase the politicization of the judicial system over the
long run. With the elimination of the filibuster rule for judicial appointments, the Senate approved the nomination to the Supreme Court of Neil Gorsuch by a simple majority, decisively restoring the strong right-wing tilt that temporarily ended with the death of Antonin Scalia. But this may be only the beginning. At the start of his term, vacancies and expected retirements placed Trump in a position to fill an estimated 38 percent of district and appellate court positions, significantly more than any predecessor going back as far as Ronald Reagan. With further retirements, Trump will conceivably be able to appoint half of the federal bench during his first term (Katz 2017). As with Gorsuch, the nominees will come from candidates put forward by the Federalist Society and other far right interest groups and backed enthusiastically by Republicans.

It is important to note that the capacity of these new appointments to determine judicial decisions will be limited by prior lifetime appointments of both liberal and mainstream conservative judges made by Obama and his predecessors. Unlike his middle-income counterparts, Trump cannot totally restructure the system or purge his opponents, and this in turn means that many policy initiatives favored by Trump and his congressional allies are likely to remain entangled in legal challenge. Even so, there is a serious threat that a constitutionally-created branch of the government—one that is already deeply divided along partisan lines—will become even more politicized and delegitimated. Among other things, the judiciary could tilt even more heavily than it has toward an expansion of presidential powers over national security, a further relaxation of controls over campaign financing, and a friendlier attitude toward the allies of—and donors to—right-wing causes.

The most direct threat to American democracy in this regard is likely to be judicial acquiescence to restrictions on voting rights and gerrymandering. Trump’s intentions in this regard seem transparent and are closely aligned with the interests of the Republican party. He has continued to insist that millions of “illegal aliens” provided Clinton with her margin of victory in the popular vote and – with Republican backing--followed through with the creation of the “Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity” charged with uncovering evidence of electoral fraud. Even though this effort was subsequently abandoned, at minimum, presidential and Republican claims about voter fraud will serve to undermine the legitimacy of the electoral process, and provide incentives for contending parties to discredit the victories of
their opponents. At worst, these claims—and attendant judicial appointments—could have the effect of expanding voter suppression initiatives at the state level.

Initiatives to impose such restrictions, of course, were underway well before Trump appeared on the scene. During the Obama presidency, conservative justices on the Supreme Court voided a provision of the Voting Rights Act that required states with a history of discrimination to obtain pre-approval by the Justice Department for any proposed change in voting laws. And Republicans at the state and local levels have long supported registration and voter ID requirements that effectively tilt the playing field against minorities, low-income voters, and urban populations. As in the middle-income countries, the manipulation of the electoral system—in this case through effective disenfranchisement--can potentially place opposition parties at a serious, long-term disadvantage and would constitute one of the clearer signs of authoritarian regress.

We turn, finally, to the assaults on political rights and civil liberties that have accompanied these institutional changes. In these areas as well, Trump’s behavior fits the pattern of autocratic behavior that we saw in Venezuela, Hungary, and Turkey. As we might expect, however, there has been much greater push back in the United States, indicating some important constraints on an outright electoral autocracy.

Trump’s rhetorical attacks on the press – “fake news,” “enemies of the people” – is unprecedented in the United States, as is his practice of calling out specific networks and even individual journalists for intimidating criticism. More recently, in a move that resembles the economic pressure brought to bear in the middle-income countries, the Trump administration suggested it might deploy anti-trust laws to punish media critics, hinting that a merger between AT&T and Time Warner would require spinning off CNN. Though the media has fought back, devoting ever greater resources to checking the president’s penchant to bend the truth, it is far from invulnerable to such pressure. As Ronnell Andersen Jones and Sonja R. West (2017) have argued in a New York Times editorial, the long-term economic difficulties faced by network television and print journalism have increased their vulnerability to such pressures.

As both a candidate and as President, Trump has demonstrated a masterful ability to manipulate and exploit these vulnerabilities, thus weakening a crucial check on the executive. As in the other cases of backsliding, recourse to the “big lie” has contributed to the growing
confusion about, or indifference to, verifiable facts. This practice can have corrosive effects on the constitutional order.

Despite these grave challenges, it is doubtful that Trump’s assault on the media can fully suppress its critical independence. The major news outlets are more diversified and less dependent on the government than those in the middle income countries, and they are less likely to succumb to pressures for self-censorship. Moreover, the multiplicity of news sources, both on cable and online, would make it hard for the government to control the flow of information to the same extent as in Venezuela, Turkey, or Hungary.

The larger threat is an acceleration of trends toward the segmentation of social media and cable TV consumers and attendant social and political polarization. Trump’s personal appeal exploits and reinforces a decades-long division of the political community into separate cognitive worlds, with radically different understandings of the challenges facing American society and the range of viable solutions. For a significant portion of American society, the mainstream media may be able to push back against the unfounded claims of the Trump’s government, and limit his ability to expand his political reach. But it lacks the credibility to penetrate the alternative communications networks that service Trump’s supporters. In short, the mainstream media may be strong enough to defend against electoral autocracy, but unable to contain deepening tendencies toward cognitive polarization.

What about efforts to dampen the voice of civil society? Daron Acemoglu (2017) has written that the weakness of institutional checks and balances leaves civil society as the last line of defense against the aggrandizement of executive power in the United States. There is reason to believe that the country’s vibrant landscape of advocacy organizations, civil rights groups, unions, and other social organizations would help avert the fate of these organizations in the middle-income backsliders. Organizations of this kind not only provide a counter-narrative but can more directly check abuses of power through strategies ranging from information collection and dissemination, to the use of courts and the mobilization of protest. An indication of these possibilities was provided by the outpouring of over a million protesters across the country in the Woman’s March on the day after the presidential inauguration. Such protests—as well as quieter types of lobbying and litigation—have long been a part of the American political repertoire, and it is unlikely that they can be suppressed as thoroughly or as violently as in the middle-income countries.
On the other hand, in both Venezuela and Turkey, backsliding governments were able to withstand large-scale and sustained mass mobilizations. Moreover, autocrats in all three middle-income countries also engaged supporters in counter-mobilizations or in individual acts of intimidation against critics, for example in the recent attacks on press offices in Turkey. In his boisterous political rallies and his winks toward the extremist protesters in Charlottesville, Trump has also encouraged thuggish behavior. Rather than civil society acting as an effective check, the mobilization and counter-mobilization of civil society forces could extend the country’s polarization into the streets, even providing opportunities for the invocation of “law and order” tropes or even national security rationales for curtailing civil liberties.

Much will ultimately depend on the balance of power between anti- and pro-Trump forces. On the one hand, civil society opposition to Trump has clearly been energized, both in the streets and in the courts. But pro-Trump forces supportive of the president have considerable advantages in resources and political connections. Conservative think-tanks and advocacy groups have expanded their power through contributions not only to favored candidates but through support for grass roots organizations such as the Tea Party movement and networks of think tanks and lobbying organizations. Some important social organizations have faced structural constraints, most notably unions. Thus, despite wide-spread political mobilization, it is far from clear that civil society will necessarily act as a meaningful check on executive discretion.

**Conclusion: Looking Ahead.**

The purpose of this paper is fundamentally comparative. We outlined a set of causal antecedents that appear to be associated with reversion from democratic rule and examined them in the context of three prominent middle-income examples. We then reviewed the extent to which similar patterns were visible in the first year of the Trump presidency. What might we glean looking forward?

First, although we consider it unlikely, we should not dismiss the possibility that the United States might descend into electoral autocracy in which the opposition is effectively marginalized. An “autocracy scenario” becomes more likely under the following conditions. First, Republicans overcome the president’s political disabilities and low poll numbers and manage to keep the Senate and House in 2018. This would not only sustain his legislative base, but forestall an impeachment initiative and allow the administration to sustain its efforts to
remake the courts and to restrict voting rights. Second, Trump is able to claim credit for a continuing or increased upturn in the economy (as was the case in Venezuela and Turkey), allowing him to win a second-term victory in 2020 over a divided Democratic opposition. Following the middle-income playbook, these developments would potentially not only enable the government to increase its control over the other branches of government, but would—as in the middle-income cases—enhance the capacity to deploy tax, regulatory, and police powers against political opponents.

But our comparisons also highlight important institutional and political checks in the United States that make it less likely that it would follow the middle-income backsliders into outright competitive authoritarian rule. Unlike in the middle-income countries, Congress continues to exert at least a weak check on the executive. And the courts, the bureaucracy, media and civil society have not rolled over. These institutions and other multiple centers of power are still likely to provide significant road blocks to autocratic initiatives.

In the immediate future, the likelihood is for a continuation of the democratic dysfunction we have seen in the first year of the Trump administration, characterized by legislative stalemate emanating from within his own party and the failure to reach bipartisan compromises, fraught confrontations with the press and civil society, and palace intrigue associated with the byzantine alliances and rivalries within the president’s inner circle. This stalemate is likely to be exacerbated by the looming constitutional crisis that is likely to attend the last stages of the Mueller investigation as politicians and the electorate grapple with information that—as we already know from the public record—is not likely to be fully exculpatory.

But even if Trump’s power is further circumscribed by damning findings on the part of the special prosecutor or Democratic victories in the 2018 midterms, it would not necessarily imply that the American system will somehow “snap back” to a liberal democratic ideal of principled competition and political compromise. Current emphasis on the “abnormality” of the Trump presidency, although well-founded in many respects, tends to obscure the fact that Trump’s ascendancy is as much a symptom as a cause of the long-term division and stalemate that increasingly plagues American politics. As the case of Venezuela shows, such dysfunction can undermine support for even relatively robust democratic systems. The demise of the Trump administration will not automatically reverse these trends in the United States.
It is also clear that the post-Trump era will also bear the marks of long-term damage incurred during his term of office. As we saw in the other backsliders, fundamental changes in existing party systems seem to have been an important precursor to the rise of illiberal populists. Reconfiguration of the American party system will also pose serious challenges going forward. Trump’s “takeover” of the Republican party has left it deeply divided and programmatically incoherent. The defeat of Hillary Clinton has increased the conflicts between the moderate and more militant wings of the Democratic party as well. The experience of the middle-income countries shows that division and defeat within established parties rendered them unable to launch an effective opposition that would serve as a check on autocratic tendencies.

As discussed above, the most enduring institutional damage is likely to be to the legitimacy and integrity of the judicial system, and this can have serious implications for civil liberties and the electoral system. The credibility of the media has also suffered a serious blow that limits its traditional role as the fourth estate.

Perhaps most important, the Trump experience has accelerated the erosion of norms that had long been a bulwark of democratic stability in the United States (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). At the elite level, the discourse of the Trump era bears a striking resemblance to what we saw in the middle-income backsliders. It has erased the boundaries that prevented open appeals to racial and ethnic animosities and the conventions that deterred politicians from portraying their competitors as enemies and crooks (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). At the mass level, Trumpian populism has deepened the polarization of American society, increasing the tendency of competing “tribes” to set a lower priority on fair democratic procedures than on preventing a victory of the other side (Aachen and Bartels 2016; Svolik 2017). As we noted at the outset, such polarization is itself a crucial precondition for the backsliding seen in the middle-income cases and we cannot be sanguine about the longer-term effects of its exacerbation.

The erosion of institutions and political norms may not extinguish “free and fair” electoral competition, as it did in the middle-income backsliders. But it does imply a significant weakening of the rule of law, accountability, and political rights commonly associated with “liberal democracies.” Regimes that hold competitive elections but fall short on other constitutional norms have been variously termed “electoral democracies (Mechkova et. al. 2017),” “illiberal democracies (Zakaria 1998)” or simply “feckless (Carothers 2002).” Although the specific definitions of such systems may vary, they share a number of features outlined by
Carothers (2002). There are “alternations in power between genuinely different political groupings, but…political elites from all the major parties or groupings are widely perceived as corrupt, self-interested, and ineffective [and the] alternation of power seems only to trade the countries problems back and forth from one hapless side to the other.”

Carothers and the others just cited focus exclusively on relatively new democracies in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and the post-communist world, as we do as well. But their concerns are clearly relevant to trends in the United States. Even after Trump’s political exit, there is a genuine danger that competing parties may lack the capacity to alter the existing distribution of political privileges and economic rents, that a plurality of special interests will become increasingly entrenched in various institutional centers of power, and that the state will prove increasingly unable to provide legal protection and services to vulnerable sectors of the population. Such systems are not necessarily vulnerable to executive aggrandizement or mass mobilization from below. But as Carothers (2002, 10) also suggests, the “public is seriously disaffected from politics, and while it may still cling to a belief in democracy, it is extremely unhappy about the political life of the country.” In the absence of a more effective and accountable democracy, American society will become increasingly vulnerable to alienation, incivility, and decentralized forms of interpersonal aggression and violence. These more subtle changes are not always well-captured by current democracy metrics, but they are important if underappreciated components of the concept.
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