

The International Context of Democratic Backsliding: Rethinking the Role of Third Wave “Prodemocracy” Global Actors

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We know much about “how democracies die”: elites and masses become polarized, and norms of mutual toleration, forbearance, and institutional restraint erode. But why do elites feel free to undermine these guardrails of democracy? What are the sources of backsliding? Answers to these questions have focused on the impact of economic and cultural change, and on autocratic meddling. I consider another potential source of backsliding around the world: the impact of the reconfiguration of global politics after the Cold War and 9/11 on politics in the main *prodemocratic* actors that Samuel Huntington highlighted in his book *The Third Wave*: the United States, the European Union, and the Vatican. Today, the international context gives leaders in these global powers relatively weaker incentives to stand up for democracy, even in the face of aggressive meddling from Russia and China. Changes in international politics has left democracy with weaker ideational support in the global arena, potentially facilitating backsliding.

The fate of democracy is a growing concern. We know a great deal about *how* democracies die: elected governments incrementally erode the formal institutions and informal norms of democratic governance (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). The question of the sources of democratic backsliding—or *why* democracies die—boils down to why voters and politicians have incentives to undermine these formal and informal “guardrails” of democracy (e.g., Singer 2018; Svobik 2019). Explanations of the sources of such motivations have focused on how

economic change wrought by deindustrialization and globalization, as well as cultural threats triggered by immigration and terrorism, encourage voters to view the world in terms of “us versus them” (Haggard and Kaufman 2021; McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018; Waldner and Lust 2018), and how politicians exploit those growing anxieties (Gest 2016; Goodhart 2017; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Rodrik 2018).

International politics offers another potential source of backsliding. Gunitsky (2017), for example, suggests that the international balance of material power between democratic and nondemocratic states helps to explain waves of regime change (see also Boix 2011). Meanwhile, Diamond (2019, chaps. 6, 7) highlights Russian and Chinese efforts to undermine democracy, which include state-sponsored information warfare and covert funding of extremist groups. (In a similar vein, see also Cooley and Nexon 2020; 2022).

This paper offers a different perspective on potential international sources of backsliding, by invoking Huntington’s (1991) insight that during the third wave of regime change key global actors—the United States (US), the European Union (EU), and the Vatican—all exerted prodemocracy pressure around the globe. I suggest that transformations in the international political context since the end of the Cold War have weakened domestic political incentives in these key powers to stand up for democracy, even in the face of Russian aggression and Chinese meddling. Altered international political

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circumstances today open the door to democratic backsliding—and might even foster conditions for a potential “reverse” third wave.

This argument implies that neither shifts in material power nor autocratic efforts to undermine democracy can fully explain shifts in the ability or willingness of pro-democratic powers to defend democracy on the world stage. For one, whether before or after the third wave, a focus on the material (i.e., economic and military) balance of power between democratic and nondemocratic great-power states cannot account for the ideational power of the Vatican, a materially insignificant microstate. A state-centric approach also cannot explain the influence of the EU, a nonstate actor with no military. It is true that smaller states’ expectation of material gain helps to explain how the EU promoted democracy during and just after the third wave, but participation in the EU is no longer a sufficient “carrot” to preserve democracy in the region, as recent cases of backsliding *within* the Union suggest. The balance of material power offers an incomplete explanation of how international factors contribute to backsliding today.

Likewise, while state-sponsored Russian and Chinese meddling is important for understanding threats democracies face today, we should also consider the flip side of this coin: whether political elites in prodemocratic powers today hold similar incentives to stand up for democracy as they did in the recent past. This paper suggests that international political change since the end of the Cold War has filtered through the domestic politics of the US, the EU, and the Vatican to undermine incentives to support democracy, at least relative to the heyday of the third wave. During that earlier era, major players’ support for democracy was partly a by-product of geopolitics itself, a tactical and instrumental tool in the service of the goal of fighting communism. That is, the Cold War generated incentives to promote democracy in each of the world’s major prodemocratic powers. A transformed international context in recent decades has reshaped these politics, undermining such incentives.

Just as Huntington noted that domestic political factors alone could not explain regime change across diverse third-wave countries and that international factors offered crucial context to explain the broader pattern, the same logic holds today. Democracy’s contemporary challenges are rooted not just in domestic politics but also in the fact that international politics no longer pressures global powers to defend and promote democracy to the same degree as it once did. This remains true even despite Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, which has failed to fully unite polarized elites or masses in democracy’s defense in either the US or Europe. For example, as of this writing (October 2022) it remains unclear where a second Trump administration (should one come to pass) would stand on the Russia–Ukraine conflict, given Trump’s

persistent praise for Vladimir Putin and his impeachment for attempting to obtain a quid pro quo from Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky of military aid in exchange for misinformation about Joe Biden. Likewise, despite apparent unity, cracks among European elites about Russia policy remain evident (Drea 2022)—not just in relatively peripheral Hungary but in Germany and France, cornerstones of the EU, undermining the EU’s ability to present a united front supporting democracy. In sum, threats to democracy come from both sides of the international political coin: Russian and Chinese meddling as well as a relative decline in incentives within democracies to come to democracy’s defense.

How have the shifting sands of international politics eroded incentives to stand up for democracy in the third wave’s key prodemocracy actors? Here I briefly preview the argument. In the US, democracy promotion abroad was partly a by-product of a need to deepen democracy at home, which was itself partly driven by foreign pressure. During the Cold War, the need to combat Soviet propaganda about the hypocrisies of American democracy contributed to bipartisan support for expanding civil rights at home as well as promoting democracy abroad. Such pressures vanished with the demise of the USSR, were in large part reversed by 9/11, and are not sustained by portraying Russia as a rival today. Partisan realignment in the US, which is rooted in a backlash against these Cold-War-inspired domestic liberalizing reforms, had already begun to fuel populist nationalism in the Republican Party by the mid-1990s. 9/11 then dramatically accelerated the rise of nativism and undermined incentives to promote democracy abroad in both parties. Today, while Democrats retain an interest in “defending democracy” at home because of the importance of minority voters to their national coalition, Republicans face weaker pressures to do the same—and neither party faces the same pressures from abroad as they did during the Cold War. To an important degree, geopolitical change has weakened incentives that generated bipartisan support for prioritizing democracy.

Changes in the international political context have also weakened the EU’s incentives to stand up for democracy. As it expanded into southern and eastern Europe, the EU made democracy a membership requirement. Yet as in the US, the end of the Cold War, terrorist attacks, and waves of refugees offered right-wing nationalist leaders and movements new opportunities to promote both fear of outsiders—non-European immigrants—and resentment against those who welcome outsiders and support the EU—cosmopolitan left-liberals. Today, even though right-wing nationalists vilify the EU, the latter appears unable to discourage such movements. Instead, the EU’s structure appears to *foster* extremism and limit the likelihood of sanctioning backsliding member states. The EU

has recently struggled to defend democracy within its own borders, sacrificing to some degree the legitimacy it cultivated as a bulwark of democracy during the third wave.

As for the Vatican, its advocacy for democracy during the Cold War was partly a means toward the more important end of defeating communism. In a word, the Church was always more antitotalitarian than it was prodemocracy. The demise of communism removed an immediate threat but did not eliminate the Vatican's long-standing ambivalence about democracy. Evidence of a shift away from defending democracy can be seen in the Vatican's global anti-"gender ideology" campaign, which provides a rallying cry for right-wing leaders, movements, and parties.

The remainder of the paper fleshes out these arguments, focusing on each of the third-wave prodemocratic powers in turn. Like arguments about Russian and Chinese meddling today—as well as Huntington's argument about the impact of prodemocratic actors during the third wave—I do not claim that the effects of international political factors on backsliding can be assessed precisely. Yet just like these other arguments, I suggest that the international context is an essential element of a multifaceted phenomenon. I seek to draw attention back to Huntington's idea that democracy's power in the global arena is not merely material, it is also ideational—but that to wield power on a global scale, ideas need motivated as well as powerful patrons. Today the idea of democracy is not just under attack; its defenders are simply not standing up for it as they once did.

The USA: The Irony of Democracy's Triumph

Even though democracy promotion remains officially part of US foreign policy, the US no longer plays the role of standard-bearer of global democracy. The relative downgrading of democracy promotion in US foreign policy is fruit of the interconnected domestic political consequences of the demise of the USSR and the aftermath of 9/11, both of which reduced incentives to defend liberal government both at home and abroad.

The Impact of the End of the Cold War

The defeat of Nazi Germany was a victory for both the capitalist and democratic USA and the communist and autocratic USSR. As Gunnar Myrdal (1944) famously noted, fighting and winning the war accentuated a dilemma for the USA: how to square expending vast amounts of blood and treasure to defeat racial and religious intolerance abroad with America's own entrenched racism. Both the US and USSR helped to discredit racist nationalism internationally, but their joint victory revealed that the US did not practice what it preached.

During the Cold War this dilemma acquired weighty implications for US foreign policy. The US confronted a Soviet system predicated on overthrowing social, political, and economic inequalities. This made it imperative to present American democracy to the world in the best possible light, as the US could serve as a beacon to those fighting Soviet totalitarianism only to the extent that it lived up to the principles it claimed to stand and fight for. The Soviets called out American racism in their propaganda, while US diplomats understood that their ability to promote democracy and capitalism in the (largely nonwhite) developing world depended on progress on racial injustice back home (Delton 2013). The extension of democracy at home thus became key to bolstering America's global prestige and influence (Borstelmann 2009).

In this light, US civil rights reforms cannot be understood outside of the Cold War geopolitical context. Rivalry with the USSR strengthened US democracy, because international scrutiny and fear of unfavorable comparisons gave American voters and politicians incentives to support liberalizing reforms (Layton 2000). Democrats portrayed civil rights as part of the fight *against* communism, while Republicans, despite staking out the hardline anticommunist position, could also not escape the liberalizing pressures of geopolitical competition (Dudziak 2011). As Huntington (1991) described, such pressures eventually played out in foreign policy, which saw presidents of both parties put greater emphasis on protection of human rights and promotion of democracy. Most obviously, President Carter's liberal approach marked a substantial departure from Cold War realism. Yet Republican Ronald Reagan did not completely repudiate Carter's policies. Instead, he understood that fighting *against* communism meant fighting *for* democracy. He even *strengthened* Carter's policies in some ways, because doing so provided an opportunity to contrast Soviet hypocrisy against the United States' commitment to democracy (Sikkink 2018).

Anticommunist hysteria, particularly during the first decades of the Cold War, did generate illiberal attitudes and policies in the US. Yet the liberalization of civil rights at home and eventual US support for democracy abroad were both partly a product of the interplay between domestic and international politics. Great-power competition generated incentives to bolster democracy at home and drove bipartisan support for democracy-promotion efforts abroad. Such support was never fully consistent, but became a relatively more important element in US foreign policy by the mid-1970s and played an important role in many third-wave cases (Huntington 1991).

Such incentives are relatively weaker today. When the USSR collapsed, the threat that had motivated both US parties to support deepening democracy at home and

encouraging it abroad disappeared. This change in incentives was immediately apparent to those in power. For example, expressing nostalgia for the bipolar era, in 1993 President Bill Clinton quipped, “Gosh, I miss the Cold War,” because the absence of an ideological rival had eliminated a key rationale supporting democracy promotion abroad (Devroy and Smith 1993).

Today, despite its aggression and paranoia, the threat Russia poses to the US is both weaker and—more importantly for present purposes—distinct. As an idea, Soviet totalitarianism was more obviously at odds with American democracy than Russian kleptocracy is. This contributes to understanding former president Donald Trump’s persistent affinity and support for Russia’s president Vladimir Putin, even after Putin had initiated the first European war in 75 years (Bump 2022). It also helps to explain why this attitude is not limited to Trump: Republican congressional leaders today have acknowledged considerable reluctance to confront Russia within their own party (Mascaro 2022)—a significant reversal from the Cold War, when party leaders and voters alike tended to take a consistent hard line against the Soviet Union.

A similar logic characterizes contemporary US–China relations. Although a communist party still runs the country, China’s status as a rising power does not generate the existential dread that permeated the early decades of the Cold War. In fact, Western policy toward China, from the end of the Cold War until the Trump administration, sought not to contain but to “engage” it and make it a responsible stakeholder in the international system (Nathan 2017). To this end the US and its allies quickly forgave and forgot the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre of thousands of prodemocracy activists, sweeping issues of human rights and democracy under the carpet and allowing China’s government to consolidate power as it enacted economic reforms that spurred growth and integration with global markets (Lampton 1994).

Under President Trump, democracy promotion was almost entirely ignored in US–China relations (Heer 2018). Other US presidents had called out mistreatment of Uighurs, for example, but the virtual nonreaction to China’s dismantling of Hong Kong’s autonomy reveals the extent to which US–China policy has deprioritized democracy promotion. Even when drawing attention to its status as a potential economic or military threat, US officials draw little attention to the danger China’s *system of government* poses to American principles and practices (Link 2021). Despite renewed US focus on China’s growing influence, the scope and pace of its rise to superpower status has spurred nothing like the fear of global communism during the Cold War. China’s rise since 1990 has failed to generate incentives for US politicians to promote democracy at home or abroad relative to the highly ideological conflict of the Cold War.

Russia and China do represent threats to democracy. Yet democracy’s health worldwide depends crucially on whether geopolitical rivalries generate incentives for the US to defend liberal government. The relative lack of ideological content to international political competition today means that such incentives—*despite* Russian and Chinese aggression—are relatively weaker than during the latter years of the Cold War.

The Impact of 9/11

The end of the Cold War weakened incentives for both US parties to support democracy promotion abroad. 9/11 accelerated this trend by pushing foreign policy energy and resources toward counterterrorism, a goal deeply at odds with democracy promotion. In the US, the consequences of 9/11 quickly played out in foreign policy, as policymakers believed the threat of terrorism provided ample reason to trade liberal values for stronger “homeland security.” Just ten years after the end of the Cold War, terrorists had replaced communists as America’s bogeymen—and as with fighting communists, bipartisan support existed to defeat America’s self-declared enemies. This meant little debate about the price the country was willing to pay in the name of greater security. Instead, the danger of further attacks generated broad support for a multifront “War on Terror” both domestically and internationally.

Among its many consequences for democracy at home, 9/11 broadened what politicians and voters of both parties considered permissible government interference in citizens’ lives. The Patriot Act, for example, granted the government greater surveillance powers over American citizens. It also militarized local law enforcement, which was armed both literally and legally to hunt down security threats. Counterterrorism policies have had broadly negative implications for civil rights (Balko 2013). In addition, the War on Terror sparked fears of foreigners and immigrants in ways that the Cold War never did, contributing to polarization and chipping away at the informal norms of partisan competition in American democracy (Ackerman 2021).

The effects of 9/11 also played out in foreign policy, as the obsession with fighting terrorists undermined US support for promoting democracy, human rights, and the rule of law abroad (Rhodes 2021). During the Cold War the US promoted democracy inconsistently, but at least fighting communism and promoting democracy could be complementary rather than contradictory. In contrast, the War on Terror generated tension between promoting democracy and enhancing global security (Malley and Finer 2018). US interests in democracy promotion invariably took a back seat to finding and eradicating terrorists (Wilson 2005), and the priority given to military versus diplomatic action tended to conflict with principles of human rights protections. In

short, 9/11 immediately shifted US foreign policy priorities. Incentives to stand up for democracy had grown weaker with the demise of the Soviet Union, but 9/11 immediately put democracy promotion on a policy back burner.

Illustrating the Argument

The Cold War united US parties in the fight against communism, to democracy's benefit both at home and abroad. The Soviet collapse weakened geopolitical pressure on both parties to stand up for democracy. Still, the US did not simply abandon democracy promotion at the end of the Cold War. Evidence of the shift in US priorities became much clearer after 9/11, which weakened the United States' commitment to liberal values both domestically and in foreign policy. Following Huntington's (1991) approach, examples illustrate this point.

Consider first the place of democracy promotion in post-9/11 US Middle East policy. Although President George W. Bush stated that democracy promotion would be central to his foreign policy, in the end it did not figure prominently. Instead, the "Bush Doctrine" focused on aggressively combating terrorism and "rogue" states, and observers quickly noted that promoting democracy conflicted with the administration's prioritization of a military approach to combating terrorism and removing regimes that threatened US interests (Jervis 2005). The need for (often autocratic) allies around the globe for military bases and intelligence sharing also worked to push democracy promotion to the sidelines. Without 9/11, the Bush administration might have been both more willing and able to pressure autocratic regimes in the Middle East and elsewhere to liberalize. Yet despite its lofty rhetoric, prioritizing fighting terrorism meant that the administration never prioritized democracy promotion, whether in Iraq (Diamond 2005) or elsewhere (Mandelbaum 2016). For this reason, Carothers (2007, 5) concluded that President Bush's democracy-promotion policies "fell far short of his sweeping rhetoric."

President Obama vowed to take a different approach, promising in a speech in Cairo shortly after his first inauguration to make democracy promotion a cornerstone of his regional foreign policy (Crowley 2016). During the Arab Spring, he initially stuck to this pledge. For example, in May 2011, soon after protests forced the resignation of Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak, Obama not only publicly reiterated his commitment to democracy but also disbursed millions to Egypt in democracy-promotion aid (Crowley 2016). Staying on this path would have marked a noteworthy shift in US regional policy, which for decades had supported autocrats in the name of peace and oil price stability. Yet Obama soon reneged, sacrificing democracy for security (Lynch 2015). A year after Egypt's first democratic election handed its presidency to Islamist Mohammed Morsi, the country's

military deposed him—a clear case of not just backsliding but of collapse back into autocracy. Morsi's removal jeopardized \$1.3 billion in annual US aid, which US law prohibits sending to any country whose elected leader is removed via a coup. Obama chose not to sanction the Egyptian military and to continue the aid—sidestepping the legal proscription by refusing to call Morsi's removal a coup (Crowley 2016). After Obama abandoned democracy promotion in the region, Carothers (2016, 1) concluded that it was "no longer among the main areas of concern in US foreign policy."

One might expect the US to defend democracy more vigorously in regions with relatively less strategic importance, yet even where security concerns do not weigh as heavily as the Middle East the US has failed to act to prevent backsliding. In Latin America after 1990, for example, it seemed like that the US might maintain its role as standard-bearer of democracy. In 1993 the president of Guatemala attempted a self-coup. The Organization of American States (OAS) quickly condemned this move, as did the United States—President Clinton even threatened to impose broad economic sanctions (Arana 1993). Then, in 1999, Clinton traveled to Guatemala to apologize for supporting dictators during the country's long civil war, and to promise that the US would change its behavior in the region (Broder 1999).

However, after 9/11 the US has inconsistently supported democracy in Latin America, even though the strategic stakes are much lower. In fact, the US has not only done little to prevent backsliding, in some cases US policy has contributed to it. For example, in 2009 a coup removed Honduras's elected president Manuel Zelaya. The OAS again issued a condemnation, but the Obama administration voiced its approval (Frank 2018) and then supported Zelaya's replacement, whose term was marred by declines in the rule of law and increases in corruption—that is, by further backsliding (Frank 2021).

Likewise, in Bolivia US policy has arguably contributed to weakening the country's fragile democracy. After President Evo Morales expelled the US ambassador in 2008 for allegedly working to undermine his government, US democracy-promotion programs in the country, worth millions in programming, were in fact specifically directed toward that goal (Burron 2012). Such efforts were not funded by the CIA, as they might have been during the Cold War, but by the National Endowment for Democracy (Kinzer 2020). This effort bore fruit: the US supported allegations of voter fraud in Morales's 2019 reelection, and protests in the wake of such allegations forced Morales from office, a development that US president Trump praised. However, these efforts boomeranged, as a candidate from Morales's party won the subsequent presidential election—and after the allegations of fraud were themselves exposed as fraudulent, the anti-Morales coup leader was arrested, convicted, and jailed in

2022 for her role in Morales's ouster (BBC News 2022). The case of Bolivia suggests that US democracy-promotion aid can be correlated with backsliding, the opposite of its ostensible purpose.

Finally, consider Benin, another case from a region where the national security stakes appear relatively low. Benin democratized in 1991, and Freedom House ranked the country as fully "free" for almost three decades—a rare case of stable democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa. Yet since 2016 Benin has slid away from democracy. For example, President Patrice Talon has curtailed the rights of opposition parties to run candidates and contest elections; politicized the military, security forces, and the judiciary; and limited media freedoms (Campbell 2021). Indeed, Benin has experienced the largest decline in Freedom House's ratings for any country rated "free" in the last ten years (Freedom House 2022). Despite this, the US has had little to say about Benin's slide toward authoritarianism, apparently willing to sacrifice democracy in the name of the ongoing War on Terror even in countries with very little role in the fight, as Devermont (2021) suggests.

Huntington (1991, 93) argued that although democracy promotion occupied a subordinate position in American foreign policy during the early Cold War, during the third wave, administrations of both parties adopted similar (if still inconsistent) "moralistic" approaches to promoting human rights and democracy abroad. Today, the place of democracy promotion is different. As one leading observer (Carothers 2020, 115) has concluded, "At the center of the current crisis of international democracy support is the stunning abdication by the US of its role as the leader of this community." Changes in the international political environment have played an important role in driving this shift in US foreign policy priorities.

The European Union: Ironic Incubator of Illiberalism

Just as geopolitical shifts have altered domestic political incentives and reshaped US foreign policy since 1990, the same is true for the European Union (EU). Transformations in global politics have opened the door for illiberalism within the EU's own borders, challenging the EU's ability to stand as a regional bulwark of limited government and individual freedoms.

The EU's origins lie with an effort to demonstrate that open regional borders, a mixed economy, and democracy could prevent a return to the authoritarian disasters of the past. During the Cold War, its members' success contrasted starkly with Eastern Europe's stagnant economies and authoritarian polities. Given its growth and stability, the EU attracted new members like a magnet, and after 1980 the Union made membership contingent on adopting democracy. Once the Cold War ended, the EU quickly expanded eastward, helping to establish democracy in many former communist regimes.

Today, however, the EU does not play the same role supporting democracy as it did during the third wave. The EU's inability to defend democracy is most clearly seen, as numerous scholars have detailed (e.g., Kelemen 2020; Pech and Scheppele 2017; Sitter and Bakke 2019), in the well-known cases of Hungary and Poland, where despite clear violations to both the letter and the spirit of the EU's charter, the EU has taken insufficient action to prevent backsliding within its own borders.

The reason for this shift does not lie primarily with pressure from autocratic powers outside the EU. Instead, it lies with the way international political change has played out *within* the EU, given its own structure and built-in political incentives. As in the US, the end of the Cold War shifted the terms of debate about democracy in Europe not just by reinvigorating nationalism but by generating new questions about the tension between liberal norms and criteria for membership in national (and thus supranational) communities. Huntington (1993) had incorrectly predicted that the end of the Cold War would cause a "Clash of Civilizations." Instead, the end of the Cold War opened the door to a clash *within* the West, between liberal and illiberal visions of democratic citizenship (see, e.g., Gershman 1997; Kurth 1994; Nussbaum 2009). Without a concrete external existential threat, incentives to defend multiculturalism and the guardrails of liberal democracy clash with popular demands for immigration restrictions and greater security, and with illiberal movements' cries that the EU emasculates national power.

Once nationalism crises helped to shift the terms of the debate about democracy and citizenship, the EU's own structure has ironically fostered illiberal movements and coddled backsliding member governments. Incubation of illiberalism—an opposition to limited government and to the defense of minority rights—begins with the fact that the EU was not set up to explicitly promote and defend democracy. Integration was supposed to promote peace. Yet EU governance contains elements of both liberal internationalism and illiberalism, as Brussels emphasizes technical expertise in the efficient management of growth over democratic representation and accountability. As a result the EU's structure contains a built-in "democracy deficit" which lacks transparency—and the more power that unaccountable bureaucrats in Brussels accumulate at the supranational level, the weaker the ability of voters to hold their own democratically elected *domestic* governments to account (Berman 2019). This has inevitably incubated anti-EU sentiments among European voters. To vent their frustrations, many abstain from EU elections—while others turn to illiberal parties that profit from calling out the EU's own illiberal disconnection between voters and policy output.

The EU's ability to defend democracy is also limited by its model of supranational governance, which is tethered to a norm of noninterference in domestic politics. As long as

member states do not violate the Union's broader economic and policy goals, the EU's leadership remains silent and passive. This means that the EU confronts a Catch-22: nationalists have much to gain but nothing to lose by blaming EU's influence for their country's ills, but the EU cannot afford to risk further fragmentation by abandoning its noninterference norm.

Another factor limiting the EU's ability to stand up for democracy is the fact that although it requires candidate states to adopt democratic rules and practices before becoming full members, the degree to which several Central and Eastern European states that gained accession after 1990 actually absorbed and adhered to the so-called "Copenhagen criteria" of stable democratic institutions, the rule of law, and protection of human and minority rights is open to question (Janse 2019). To be sure, the EU has powerfully influenced the political institutions and practices in its member governments, and even partial democratization represents a significant advance over the previous totalitarian systems. Yet candidate governments all have powerful incentives to tell Brussels what it wants to hear, and the EU's ability to promote deeper transformations—to push for the internalization of norms of mutual toleration and institutional forbearance and enforce adherence to formal democratic rules and procedures—is limited (*ibid.*).

The limits to the EU's ability to defend democracy are also built into its structure (Kelemen 2020). For one, Union funding props up backsliding governments regardless of their economic competence, because the noninterference norm, coupled with vague guidelines for expelling member governments, defang any threat to withhold such funds. Likewise, the Schengen principle of the free movement of people facilitates backsliding because it makes "exit" rather than "voice" an easy option for voters who oppose illiberal rulers. Finally, Europarties all have incentives to shield illiberal members who boost the party's seat total in the European Parliament (EP). Centrists fear critiquing extremists in their midst because kicking such members out would cost seats and draw unwanted attention to unsavory allies. Meanwhile, failing to sanction backsliders entails no costs, because EP voters are largely ignorant of the bases of EP campaigns in other countries.

As in the US, geopolitical shifts since the end of the Cold War provide context for understanding why the EU appears unable to combat the rise of illiberal movements and governments in its own midst. Externally, just like the US, the EU faces relatively weaker ideological pressure to support democracy today. Russia is a threat, but despite this a fully united Union response to Russian aggression in Ukraine has proven elusive—and in any case the EU is not responsible for European defense policy. Recent events such as Brexit and the failure to reach an accession agreement with Turkey further illustrate deep divisions within European democracies. As in the US, the EU also faces internal divisions about standing up to illiberal

leaders, parties, and governments. The closer member states bind themselves together in the Union, the wider they open the door to nationalist challenges, which are exacerbated by terrorist threats and immigration crises. As these challenges have arisen, illiberal forces have laid down roots within the heart of democratic Europe and the "cordon sanitaire" norm against antidemocratic parties entering governing coalitions has been breached.

The EU still supports democracy. Yet its inability to root out backsliding in its own midst in cases such as Hungary and Poland is a clear sign that its role as bulwark of democracy has shifted. Tolerance of illiberalism tells *existing* backsliders in the EU that they have yet to cross a line of no return and can keep pushing the envelope; tells *prospective* EU backsliders that there is no future cost to pursuing illiberalism at home; and signals to governments around the world that good relations with the EU will not depend on adherence to liberal democratic principles.

The Vatican: Defender of the (Democratic) Faith No More?

The Vatican possesses no economic clout or military might but wields tremendous influence worldwide. It boxes so far above its microstate weight class that Huntington considered it one of the most important actors promoting democracy during the third wave. How has its role changed since the end of the Cold War?

Up through the early twentieth century, the Church opposed the spread of liberalism, secularism, democracy, and other aspects of modernity. In the 1920s and 30s, the rise of an even more formidable threat—*anti* liberal totalitarian secular states of both the left and the right—pushed the Vatican to reassess this stance (Chappel 2018). Liberal governments at least left the door open to individual faith and freedom of worship, while totalitarian absolutism denied the existence of any power above the state. This threat pushed the Church, in fits and starts, to embrace antitotalitarianism.

In particular, the defeat of fascism in 1945 allowed the Church to focus on the communist threat. Thus, after World War II the Church took positions that aligned it with liberal government. In statements adopted at the Vatican II Council in 1965, for example, the Church highlighted its commitment to freedom of conscience and individual human rights. After the election of Pope John Paul II in 1978, it also invested effort in actively promoting democracy around the world. Hailing from a "captive nation" in Eastern Europe, John Paul II had great legitimacy as an advocate for democracy, and the election of a Polish Pope during the Cold War was no accident, as it highlighted the Vatican's fight against atheistic communism.

During his papacy John Paul II intervened around the world, delegitimizing authoritarian rulers and supporting regime change. However, antitotalitarianism never transformed the Church or the Pope into political liberals. Indeed, neither Vatican II nor the Church's support for democracy

during the third wave fully reversed centuries of Catholic organizational, doctrinal, and political conservatism. In an important sense, the Church's antiauthoritarianism during the latter years of the Cold War fostered only *tactical* alliances with liberalizing forces. Once the USSR had disintegrated, the rationale for such alliances in many countries disappeared—but the Church's historical ambivalence about democracy remained.

The Church has long believed it faced dual threats from both liberal and illiberal versions of leftist politics (Pappin 2021). Decades before John Paul II, popes had cautioned against the cultural, political, and technological changes associated with modernization and had decried the West's materialism, individualism, moral relativism, and spiritual vacuity—all of which the Church feared sapped the vitality of religious belief and the strength of adherents' ties to the Church. It is true that the Church embraced human rights and democracy at Vatican II and that John Paul II was the first pope to unambiguously advocate for regime change. Yet the Church engaged in this activism *despite* its ambivalence about democracy, because it believed that communism represented a far greater threat (Chappel 2018).

The Church has never fully reconciled its tenets with democracy, which represents a threat to the faith because majorities can empower politicians who implement policies that violate Catholic doctrine. The Church has taught, and continues to teach, that violations of basic morality must be resisted and overturned if possible. If those violations persist, democracy loses moral legitimacy. More fundamentally, the Church's understanding of both individual rights and political community is rooted in religiously inspired principles of morality and the common good, not any secular and individualist notion of politics (Carozza and Philpott 2012). The issue is not simply that the Church fears society's eroding moral foundations as it turns away from natural law conferred by God. It is that Catholicism is in tension with, or even rejects, liberalism's core tenet of individual rights. According to the Church, for example, secular notions of autonomy can lead to excessive individualism at the expense of the community, to the potential suppression of the Church, and to reification of the state over God. Despite his role as advocate for democracy, John Paul II offered no support for a liberal philosophical grounding of democracy and human rights (Shortall and Steinmetz-Jenkins 2020). Instead, he sought to articulate a *religious* and specifically *Catholic* conception of human rights, one rooted in natural law (Weigel 2001).

Vatican II did not completely reconcile this tension between Catholic and secular justifications for democracy (Oftestad 2018). Given this, the Church viewed supporting democracy during the third wave as efficacious because it would bolster alliances with secular actors who opposed regimes that violated both religious *and* secular notions of freedom. However, once the Cold War had ended, this tension reemerged. Fighting communist dictatorships

made supporting democracy a moral crusade, but only in the service of defending moral truths. The Soviet collapse did not complete the Church's mission; rather, it changed it, replacing an immediate existential threat with another that predated the Russian Revolution: modern culture, liberal individualism, and democracy. With communism dead and buried, the Church had to return to defending its truths, which are in important respects in tension with core democratic principles.

The Vatican's long-standing historical ambivalence toward democracy is important background for understanding why liberalism has replaced communism as a Church bogeyman (Pappin 2021), and why in recent years the Church has begun to encourage and offer institutional support for illiberal movements and governments. Specifically, the Vatican's support for democracy has grown less clear as it has devoted increasing institutional attention, energies, and resources toward combating what it regards as central problem of contemporary liberalism: "gender ideology," a pejorative term for progressive policies surrounding gender, sexuality, and reproductive freedom.

Opposition to "gender ideology" builds on long-standing Catholic principles (Kováts 2017); Pope Benedict gave official Church sanction to the anti-gender ideology movement in 2012. Since then, the Vatican has produced numerous official public statements devoted to combating gender ideology (Graff and Korolczuk 2022, 40). This effort is organized globally (Case 2016), includes organized and well-funded efforts to roll back gender and sexual equality policies, and has clear affinity with the ideals of illiberal populist movements (Case 2019; Corredor 2019).

The Church's turn away from relatively clear support for democracy in recent years is particularly evident in Eastern Europe, the region Huntington (1991, 76) identified as the center of the "Catholic democratic wave." Unlike in other regions, here the demise of communism instantly curtailed the Church's incentives to ally with liberals. In this new environment, Church leaders across the region have openly identified with and supported illiberal leaders and backsliding governments. Indeed, Pope John Paul II's homeland offers an illustrative case of how the Vatican's focus has shifted away from defending democracy and toward defending a specifically Catholic vision for society that is in tension with liberal ideals—and how, in some national contexts, this change has contributed to democratic backsliding.

During the latter years of the Cold War, the Polish Church lent essential moral and organizational support to the communist regime's liberal opposition. Standing up to totalitarianism reinforced the Church popular legitimacy. Yet the end of communist rule also destroyed the rationale supporting the alliance between Church and secular activists. As the post-Cold War divide between liberals and conservatives deepened, clashes about the role of the Church soon flared. Taking advantage of this split, in the early 2000s

leaders of Poland's Law and Justice (PiS) party began promoting a conservative-nationalist appeal rooted in Catholicism (Matlak 2016). The national Church reciprocated, supporting PiS governments—for example, it actively campaigned for the PiS candidate in the 2020 presidential election (Gera and Scisłowska 2020). Ties between the Church and far-right political groups have also deepened over the years, as both seek to exploit the historical Polish connection between religion and national identity (Novena 2019; Ojewski 2018). The relationship between the Church and PiS is mutually beneficial, as both fear secularization and cultural change brought by opening to the West. The Church's embrace of a narrow vision of citizenship has potentially grave consequences for Polish democracy—as it does elsewhere, given that one sees similar alliances between national dioceses and would-be backsliders across Europe (Kovács 2017; Kunar and Paternotte 2017).

In particular, the Church and PiS have found common ground in their joint effort to combat “gender ideology,” which they deride as an EU-imposed foreign import. The Polish National Bishops' Conference officially approved the effort to combat “gender ideology” in 2013 (Graff and Korolczuk 2022, 73). This involved lobbying to further restrict abortion, to eliminate antidiscrimination policies, and to exclude sex education and principles of gender equality from school curricula. The synergy between Church mobilization and government policy has also energized a virulent anti-LGBT campaign. For example, by 2020 over 80 local Polish governments, covering a third of the country, had officially declared themselves “gay-free zones” under the pretense that “LGBT ideology” threatened children and families (Graff and Korolczuk 2022, 53). The connection between the Church and PiS has opened the door for activists and Church leaders to institutionalize opposition to progressive gender and sexuality policies in all state agencies, from the legislature to the bureaucracy and the judiciary.

In sum, in recent years the Vatican's energies have turned away, relatively speaking, from clear, vocal support for democracy in the name of the liberal principles of freedom of religion and freedom of conscience. Just as geopolitical transformations weakened politicians' incentives to stand up for democracy in the US and EU, the demise of communist totalitarianism eliminated a key motivation for the Vatican's third-wave prodemocratic activism. The Vatican today does not “oppose democracy,” and the positions of national dioceses vary from country to country, but in important respects the focus of the Vatican's energies has shifted toward support for ideas and movements that are deeply at odds with liberal principles and institutions. An important factor enabling backsliding today in countries with large Catholic populations is the return of the Church's historical ambivalence about the impact of liberalism and democracy on society's political, cultural, and moral evolution. Despite its third-wave activism, in key respects the Church remains a deeply

conservative institution that espouses values in tension with the core principles of democracy.

Conclusion

Domestic economic and cultural change facilitates the rise of politicians who undermine democratic norms and rules. Yet a changed international political context since the end of the Cold War also contributes to the context of democracy's contemporary malaise. When the global environment favors democracy, politicians with weak commitments to liberal principles and government must hide their true preferences. Yet when the world's most powerful actors no longer have incentives to vigorously defend democracy either at home or abroad, would-be autocrats can show their true colors. Change in the international political context has reshaped the menu of options for politicians and voters—what is considered acceptable or unacceptable rhetoric and behavior, vis-à-vis the “guardrails” of democracy.

Global democracy is certainly in better shape today than it was during the height of the Cold War. Indeed, the Cold War had a negative impact on democracy in many parts of the world. And to be sure, democracy has taken roots in many unexpected places. Yet despite this, the end of the Cold War has not been wholly positive for democracy around the world. Democracy's prospects were, perhaps ironically, relatively better in a geopolitical context that gave leaders incentives to deepen democracy both at home and abroad (as in the US and EU), or simply (as in the case of the Vatican) a context that gave leaders powerful incentives to stand up for religious freedom and oppose nondemocracy. Such pressures carried powerful symbolic weight and had concrete tactical implications for both those who fought for democracy and for those who worked against it. Defending democracy on the world stage appears to require a particular form of geopolitical competition—one predicated on ideological rather than material competition. Given this, today's international political context generates weaker incentives for the third wave's prodemocratic actors to stand up for democracy on the global stage.

The sources of backsliding are multiple and complex, and this story is still being written. International factors are hardly the only factors at work potentially undermining democracy's prospects around the world. Nevertheless, arguments about the roots of contemporary backsliding should consider the international political context, in addition to other economic, cultural, and domestic political factors. Cold War geopolitical dynamics had momentum that continued in the 1990s but faded with the impact of 9/11, the rise of China, and the reconsolidation of central political authority under Vladimir Putin in Russia. The consequences of these events and processes have taken time to flow through the domestic politics of the US, EU, and the Vatican, and their impact continues to evolve. It is possible that the US and Europe will eventually articulate a heartier response to Russian aggression and Chinese meddling. However, events

since the end of the Cold War have weakened the incentives that the international political context used to generate in the world's major prodemocratic actors to defend democracy at home and support its spread abroad.

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