# WHEN VOTING ISN'T ENOUGH: THE HIDDEN EROSION OF DEMOCRATIC VALUES

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***Abstract.*** *This article examines the paradox of electoral majoritarianism — how elections, once regarded as the cornerstone of democracy, can be weaponized to erode its foundations. While democratic systems rely on electoral legitimacy, an increasing number of governments are using electoral mandates not to uphold democracy, but to weaken institutional checks and balances, restrict civil liberties, and consolidate power. Drawing on the works of scholars such as Cas Mudde, Fareed Zakaria and Yascha Mounk, this study explores the growing divide between democracy and liberalism, highlighting the risks of illiberal democracy, where electoral victories provide a façade of legitimacy while democratic institutions are systematically dismantled. Through case studies of Poland and Hungary, the article illustrates how elected leaders manipulate democratic procedures to entrench their rule, often under the guise of legal and constitutional reforms. The paper argues that democracy cannot survive on elections alone — it requires independent institutions, minority protections, and a robust civil society. By analyzing the subtle yet profound ways in which democratic erosion occurs, this study underscores the urgent need for stronger institutional safeguards and renewed civic engagement to prevent electoral majoritarianism from hollowing out democratic governance.*

***Keywords****: electoral majoritarianism, democratic backsliding, illiberal democracy, governance, electoral integrity*

## Introduction: the paradox of electoral legitimacy

Democracy, long celebrated as the ultimate expression of popular sovereignty, now faces a profound paradox: its greatest strength, the electoral process, can now also become its greatest weakness. The very mechanisms designed to empower the people — free and fair elections, essential to electoral integrity (Norris, 2014) [1] — are increasingly used to undermine the principles they were meant to uphold. Through this process,

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[1] Electoral integrity encompasses the overall fairness and impartiality of the voting process, ensuring that it effectively safeguards against threats such as election subversion and voter suppression. When elections lack integrity, it can lead to questions about the legitimacy of the results, diminished public trust in the democratic system, and decreased voter participation in future elections.

democratic mandates are used not to preserve democracy but to weaken institutional checks and balances, suppress minority rights, and consolidate power in ways that contradict liberal democratic values. The result is a governance framework that retains the outward appearance of democracy but lacks its substantive integrity.

This is not an attack on democracy from the outside - rather it is an erosion from within. Unlike traditional autocrats, today's authoritarian-leaning leaders do not abolish democracy; rather, they manipulate its mechanisms, weaponizing elections to achieve objectives that would have been the hallmark of open dictatorship in the past. They do not reject democratic institutions outright. Instead, they embrace them, leveraging the legitimacy that elections provide to secure and expand their power. This phenomenon raises urgent questions: *Can democracy survive when reduced to mere electoral procedures? Can the ballot box itself become an instrument of democratic decay?*

The above-mentioned decay of democracy, its increasingly abrupt and perceptible backsliding[2], is no longer an alarmist notion or a speculative theory — but a well-documented and observable process, recognized and analyzed by scholars and policymakers worldwide (Skaaning, 2020; Hyde, 2020; Lührmann, Lindberg, 2019). American scholar and journalist, Joshua Kurlantzick (2013), argues that the current wave of democratic regression is not merely a series of isolated cases but rather a reflection of a broader global crisis of democracy. He examines the underlying causes of democratic decline in various countries, questioning why, in some instances, the middle class — traditionally seen as a pillar of democratic stability — has turned against democracy and whether the global trend of de-democratization can be reversed. German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, in a way, likens the ongoing crisis of democracy — one that is increasingly recognized and widely discussed — to Cassandra's prophecy[3]. *Future historians* — he asserts — *will have to reconstruct how Western democracies collapsed — democracies that, after 1990 and even more so after 2001, seemed to have increasingly embraced a neo-authoritarian, partially neo-bellicist turn* (Sloterdijk, 2014). Sloterdijk puts forward a stark thesis: the traditional politics of consensus, once the foundation of democratic governance, is losing its significance. Instead, ominous contours of *neo-authoritarianism* are emerging, accompanied by an erosion of the

[2] Democratic backsliding refers to the gradual process of regime transformation toward autocracy, characterized by the increasing arbitrariness and repressiveness of political power. This process typically manifests in the shrinking space for political competition and public participation in governance. The erosion of democracy is closely linked to the weakening of key democratic institutions — such as the peaceful transfer of power and free and fair elections — as well as the restriction of fundamental individual rights, particularly freedom of speech, which serve as the foundation of democratic governance.

[3] The *Cassandra prophecy* refers to the mythological figure Cassandra from Greek mythology, the daughter of King Priam and Queen Hecuba of Troy. According to the myth, Cassandra was granted the gift of prophecy by the god Apollo but was simultaneously cursed—while her predictions would always be accurate, no one would ever believe her. In contemporary discourse, the term *Cassandra prophecy* is used metaphorically to describe situations in which an individual foresees impending danger, catastrophe, or crisis but whose warnings are disregarded or dismissed. It not only signifies the ability to predict negative events but also embodies the frustration and helplessness of those who attempt to alert others to looming threats, only to be met with skepticism or indifference. [B. B.'s note].

principle of non-violence. The growing prominence of violence, both symbolic and direct, has become a defining feature of late modernity. Sloterdijk argues that contemporary democracies are shedding the mask of consensus, replacing it with a politics driven by resentment, fear, and exclusion (Filipowicz, 2011). The increasing polarization of societies fuels not only ideological conflicts but also the normalization of political hostility, weakening the democratic culture of deliberation and compromise. In this climate (Koczanowicz, 2014), political arenas that once served as spaces for pluralistic debate and democratic decision-making are now turning into battlegrounds of deeply entrenched divisions. This transformation, according to Sloterdijk, marks a shift towards a culture of anger, where collective frustration, rather than constructive dialogue, becomes the dominant force shaping political interactions (Sloterdijk, 2014).

One of the most striking consequences of this transformation is the way elections — once seen as the ultimate expression of democratic will — are now being instrumentalized to deepen these divisions rather than resolve them. Instead of serving as a mechanism for collective decision-making and peaceful power transitions, elections are increasingly becoming tools of political entrenchment, used to validate exclusionary narratives and consolidate power. The rhetoric surrounding electoral campaigns often amplifies social and cultural anxieties, reinforcing an *"us" versus "them"* dynamic that erodes the legitimacy of democratic institutions. Moreover, the very function of elections as a safeguard of democracy is being distorted. While formally democratic, many elections now operate within frameworks that favor incumbents, weaken institutional checks and balances, and restrict meaningful political competition. Electoral processes, instead of ensuring accountability, are weaponized to entrench power - an evolution that fundamentally challenges the foundational principles of democratic governance.

Elections have long been regarded as the crowning achievement of democracy - the ultimate safeguard of freedom and public empowerment. But when distorted, they can become its greatest vulnerability. The paradox of electoral legitimacy lies in the fact that those who erode democracy do not reject elections; rather, they instrumentalize them. The ballot box is no longer merely a means of expressing the popular will — it is increasingly used to weaken institutional safeguards, sideline opposition, and entrench power. This process does not unfold with a sudden rupture, nor does it announce itself with the blunt force of an authoritarian coup. Instead, it advances quietly, step by step, cloaked in the familiar language of democratic procedure. The structures remain, but their substance is hollowed out. The principles of pluralism, representation, and transparency are steadily undermined, even as elections continue to be held. In this way, democracy does not die with a bang — rather it fades away, concealed behind the façade of electoral legitimacy.

## Weaponizing the ballot: when elections undermine democracy

Democracies are somewhat in a constant state of transformation — social tensions erupt, voters demand new solutions, and political landscapes experience sudden shocks and realignments. A system of governance once considered stable, almost eternal, is now teetering. *Until recently, liberal democracy reigned triumphant. For all its shortcomings, most citizens seemed deeply committed to their form of government. The economy was growing. Radical parties were insignificant* — as Yascha Mounk (2018),

a Germany-born political scholar of Polish descent, notes — *Political scientists thought that democracy in places like France or the United States had long ago been set in stone, and would change little in the years to come. Politically speaking, it seemed, the future would not be much different from the past.*

And yet, today's reality is strikingly different, bringing forth new threats that, at democracy's moment of triumph, were believed to have been permanently overcome. Authoritarian populists are gaining traction worldwide, even in places where democracy once seemed untouchable. Societies are expressing their disillusionment and frustration with current politics — many feel anger or even outright contempt, leading them to disengage from civic life and political participation altogether. While public dissatisfaction with specific parties, leaders, or policies is nothing new, today's trends suggest a broader rejection of liberal democracy as a system.

Until recently, liberal democracy appeared not only as the most legitimate but as the only viable system. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, it became the dominant model of governance, not just in Europe but globally. It spread rapidly into formerly autocratic regions, from Central and Eastern Europe to Latin America, and even to parts of Africa and Asia. There seemed to be no alternative — communism had failed, as the states of the former Eastern Bloc had painfully learned; the governance models of the Far East were ill-suited to European conditions, and the most dangerous regimes had collapsed. The future was supposed to belong to liberal democracy. This belief was championed not only byFrancis Fukuyama, who was later criticized as overly optimistic (Fukuyama, 1992)[4], but also by many political scholars at the time. Though somewhat naïve, this thesis seemed to find confirmation in the political reality of Europe and the world. The so-called *evil empire*, as the Soviet Union was often labeled (http://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu) [5], had collapsed, and the states of the so-called people's democracies were freeing themselves from communist rule (Schöpflin, 1990). These groundbreaking events led Western politicians and commentators to optimistic predictions that liberal democracy would flourish, and that its replacement of other forms of government — including the various dictatorships that had also plagued the Old Continent — was only a matter of time. Even those who did not take democracy's ultimate triumph for granted did not foresee a reversal of the liberal trend — quite the opposite. Some even predicted that humanity was on the cusp of further improvements, and that liberal democracy was merely a stepping stone toward an even more just and enlightened system of governance. That vision, however, has yet to materialize.

If elections were once the defining hallmark of democracy, today they are equally a means through which democracy is subtly but steadily undermined. The contradiction

[4] Here, one can primarily refer to Fukuyama's now-famous argument, in which he asserted that liberal democracy represents the ultimate outcome of states' institutional and ideological evolution. *What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such… That is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.*

[5] The term *evil empire* to refer to the USSR was coined by the U.S. President, Ronald Reagan. He first used it publicly in a speech delivered on March 8, 1983

of electoral legitimacy — where the very mechanisms designed to uphold democracy are repurposed to weaken its foundations — stands at the core of this transformation. It is not a process marked by dramatic upheaval but rather by incremental changes that, over time, hollow out the core of democratic governance. While elections continue to take place, their role shifts from ensuring representation and accountability to legitimizing exclusionary politics, consolidating power, and weakening the very institutions meant to safeguard democracy.

This phenomenon challenges long-held assumptions about the relationship between elections and democratization. Since the end of the Cold War, scholars and policymakers have often viewed free and fair elections as the cornerstone of democratic consolidation — a necessary step in the political evolution of transitioning states. What's also worth mentioning, the belief that economic development and the expansion of the middle class would naturally foster democracy was deeply embedded in Western foreign policy and the European integration project. This assumption rested on the idea that as the middle class grew, it would not only gain economic influence but also a stronger sense of agency in the political process, particularly through its participation in elections. However, the reality has proven more complex, suggesting that the relationship between electoral processes and democratization may not be as straightforward as once thought. And yet, also in Central and Eastern Europe, following the collapse of communism, states embarked on a long journey of democratic reform, undertaking significant political and economic transformations with varying degrees of success. However, more than three decades of democratic transition in the region have provided ample time to observe distinct patterns of change. In some states, democratization has led to the consolidation of stable and well-functioning democratic institutions. In others, the process has encountered significant obstacles, progressing in an inconsistent and often fragile manner. And in yet other cases, democratic transition has ultimately failed (Kubas, 2018: p.119). Despite the optimism that initially accompanied these reforms, only about 27% of the countries that undertook systemic transformations have successfully consolidated their democracies. The remaining states have settled into hybrid regimes that combine democratic and autocratic features, leaving them particularly susceptible to abuses of power — even by leaders elected through formally democratic means (Nowotarski,2012: p. 3).

Democracy's survival, therefore, is not an inevitable consequence of modernization, nor can elections alone guarantee its endurance. In many instances, electoral processes have been strategically co-opted by leaders who manipulate democratic institutions to entrench their own rule. Where democracy has faltered or reversed, explanations often focus on national contexts — ranging from economic instability and security threats to external authoritarian influences. However, beyond these specific circumstances, a more fundamental issue emerges: the systematic misuse of democratic mechanisms, particularly elections, as tools of political consolidation rather than as genuine expressions of popular sovereignty. Another institution that — while originally intended to uphold the principles of liberal democracy by amplifying the people's voice — has increasingly posed risks to democratic standards is the referendum. In principle, referendums embody the ideals of democracy, as they allow the citizens not only to be heard but also to have a direct impact on decision-making

processes. However, in practice, they often give way to decisions that, from a political standpoint, are irrational or not always aligned with the interests of the nation and the state, leading to inconsistencies in public policies. While in the early 1990s, the fact that the demos could speak with a full voice in so many countries was enthusiastically welcomed, by the early 21st century, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to the question of how to rein in that voice (Mair, 2007; Gąsior-Niemiec, 2007; Antoszewski, 2017). Once regarded as the antidote to autocracy, elections have, in some cases, become the very instruments through which authoritarian tendencies take hold and thrive. Instead of ensuring pluralism and oversight, they provide a veneer of legitimacy while eroding the principles of democratic governance. This blurring of lines between democracy and authoritarian rule signals a profound shift — one in which the formalities of democratic procedure persist, but their substantive meaning is gradually hollowed out.

## The democratic mandate of anti-democratic leaders: the cases of Poland and Hungary

As discussed, the broader pattern of democratic backsliding has not spared Central and Eastern Europe. While elections have historically been seen as a milestone in the region's democratic consolidation, they have increasingly been leveraged as instruments of power rather than mechanisms of civic agency. Nowhere has this been more evident than in Poland (Sękowski, Pułról, 2021), where, after 2015, the electoral process not only legitimized but also facilitated an unprecedented restructuring of democratic institutions, tilting the balance of power in favor of the ruling party. That year marked an unprecedented shift in Poland's political landscape. The ruling party, *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (Law and Justice, PiS), won the parliamentary elections with a sufficient majority to govern alone, allowing it to exercise unchecked power for the following years (Koczanowicz, 2023). For the first time in post-1989 Poland, representatives of a single political camp controlled both the presidency and the parliament. Due to strategic miscalculations by left-wing parties, PiS was able to form a government without needing to engage in coalition agreements (Balicki, 2022: p. 19).

Such a concentration of power in the hands of one party poses a serious threat to democracy, which fundamentally relies on political pluralism and the coexistence of multiple, cooperating parties. In this context, respect for democratic constitutional mechanisms — and, more broadly, the principles of political and legal culture — becomes crucial. However, the Polish parliament of the 8th term (2015–2019) quickly became an arena of intense political disputes and controversies that undermined parliamentary standards and constitutional principles of governance (Balicki, 2022: p. 19-20). The ruling party rapidly initiated sweeping changes that affected nearly every aspect of political life. The first legislative project submitted to parliament proposed an amendment to the law on the Constitutional Tribunal[6], marking the beginning of a broader effort to curtail its independence. A key moment in this process was the unprecedented and unlawful annulment of previous parliamentary decisions regarding

[6] Parliamentary bill amending the Act on the Constitutional Tribunal (document no. 6) submitted on November 12, 2015.

the appointment of Constitutional Tribunal judges in November 2015 (Balicki, 2022: p. 20).)[7]. These actions laid the groundwork for systematically weakening constitutional bodies and the rule of law more generally (Bień-Kacała, 2015; Drinóczi, 2022). The ruling majority effectively disregarded constitutional norms regulating the functioning of state institutions, including the principle of legality, which also binds parliament. Instead, it asserted the primacy of its political will over legal constraints. This marked the beginning of a prolonged process aimed at systematically dismantling checks and balances, which are essential to liberal democracy and the protection of citizens' rights. In the following years, Poland's constitutionally defined system of democratic safeguards, with the independent Constitutional Tribunal at its core, suffered profound erosion (Sadurski, 2019). Other judicial institutions also faced extensive reforms — more accurately described as deformations — under PiS governance (both in the 2015–2019 and 2019–2023 parliamentary terms, during which the party maintained its majority).

From a liberal perspective, these developments echo the warnings of John Locke, one of the foundational theorists of republican government, which later evolved into modern democratic theory[8]. In *Two Treatises of Government* (Załęski, 2005), Locke famously argued that if a single ruler holds both legislative and executive power, no independent arbiter remains to provide justice or redress grievances. As he writes: *For he* [the prince — B. B.] *being supposed to have all, both legislative and executive, power in himself alone, there is no judge to be found, no appeal lies open to any one, who may fairly and indifferently, and with authority decide, and from whence relief and redress may be expected of any injury or inconveniency that may be suffered from him, or by his order. So that such a man, however entitled, Czar, or Grand Signior, or how you please, is as much in the state of Nature, with all under his dominion, as he is with the rest of mankind. For wherever any two men are, who have no standing rule and common judge to appeal to on earth, for the determination of controversies of right betwixt them, there they are still in the state of Nature, and under all the inconveniencies of it, with only this woeful difference to the subject, or rather slave of an absolute prince* (Locke, 1823: p.143-144). The absence of legal constraints effectively reduces governance to the arbitrary will of the ruler, placing society in a state of nature rather than under the rule of law. This principle is directly relevant to Poland's recent trajectory, where the erosion of judicial independence has weakened the judiciary's ability to function as a check on executive overreach.

[7] The Sejm, acting without legal basis and in clear violation of constitutional and statutory norms, adopted resolutions "declaring the lack of legal force" of the resolutions passed by the Sejm of the previous term, which had been the basis for the appointment of Constitutional Tribunal judges (Documents No. 42–46). Subsequently, the Sejm selected its own candidates for judicial positions that had already been de facto filled by judges who had been lawfully appointed by the previous Sejm but whose oaths of office had not been accepted by the President of the Republic of Poland

[8] Perhaps Locke's greatest achievement in political philosophy was the development of the theory of republican government, which reflected views characteristic of many other classical thinkers. Over time, the theory of classical republicanism evolved into the theories of modern democracies. [B. B.'s note].

At the same time, the sweeping institutional changes were enabled by a decisive electoral victory, granting the party the ability to govern without coalition partners and legitimizing its actions. This democratic mandate was used to justify an extensive restructuring of state institutions, including changes to the legal system, increased control over the media, and constitutional amendments — transformations that gradually eroded democratic checks and balances while preserving the appearance of legitimacy. What began as a political victory soon translated into structural changes that weakened judicial independence, curtailed media pluralism, and sidelined political opposition — yet all of this was enacted under the banner of democracy, backed by the very mechanism designed to preserve it: elections.

Similarly to Poland, Hungary was once widely regarded as a consolidated liberal democracy two decades after the fall of communism. With a vibrant civil society and a growing economy, Hungary was seen as a "most likely case" for successful democratization — so much so that if democracy could not take root there, its prospects elsewhere in post-communist Europe would seem even more uncertain (. Bennett, 2004: p.29). For years, this prediction appeared accurate: the economy flourished, power alternated peacefully between parties, and independent media and civil society organizations thrived. However, this trajectory changed after the 2010 parliamentary elections, in which the conservative party Fidesz, led by Viktor Orbán, secured a decisive victory (Bozóki, 2012)[9]. The party leveraged its 53% vote share — translating into 263 parliamentary seats (five more than the required two-thirds constitutional majority), surpassing the constitutional majority threshold — to implement sweeping institutional changes. The party replicated this success in local elections later that year. In March 2011, the government introduced a new constitutional preamble, known as the "National Avowal", reinstating traditional Hungarian institutional names and changing the country's official designation from the "Republic of Hungary" to simply "Hungary".

At the same time, Orbán forcefully articulated a new vision of governance — one that openly rejected liberal democracy in favor of what he called "illiberal democracy" (Góralczyk, 2018). In an era of growing frustration with liberal democracy, populist leaders have sought to redefine democratic legitimacy, promoting exclusionary models of rule that prioritize majoritarian dominance over institutional checks and minority rights. Among them, Orbán emerged as one of the most vocal advocates of this shift, arguing that Hungary should move away from the constraints of liberal democracy and embrace a "hierarchical democracy", a system rooted in national identity rather than universal rights and pluralism. Under his leadership, Hungary was to become a new, illiberal state based on national foundations (Toth, 2014) — the archetype of this illiberal order, a system where elections remain but core democratic institutions are hollowed out. Hierarchical democracy, as envisioned by Orbán, allows leaders elected through

[9] Although it's worth mentioning that the victory of Fidesz was, in many ways, a societal response to the public's disillusionment with the Hungarian Socialist Party's rule, which, since 2002, had been marred by corruption, reckless spending, and superficial reforms. The release of a scandalous 2006 recording, in which then-Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány admitted to lying during the election campaign, further fueled public outrage. As a result, the strong support for Orbán should be seen less as a wholehearted endorsement of Fidesz's program and more as a determined effort by citizens to remove the discredited socialist elites from power.

democratic processes to implement the supposed will of the people according to their own interpretation, without needing to accommodate the interests of minorities. However, as Mounk points out, *its claim to being democratic need not be disingenuous. In the emerging system, the popular will reigns supreme (at least at first)* (Mounk, 2018: p.11). What differentiates it from true democracy, however, is the lack of respect for independent institutions, individual rights, and dissenting voices that do not align with the ruling party's agenda.

Orbán's conception of illiberal democracy was not just rhetoric — it became the guiding principle behind the systematic dismantling of Hungary's democratic structures. On April 25, 2011, the new constitution was formally adopted. This, however, was merely the first step in a series of sweeping legal and institutional transformations, many of which blatantly violated established political norms and legal principles. One of the earliest and most controversial changes was a new media law that significantly restructured media oversight. The newly established National Media and Infocommunications Authority was given the power to monitor "political balance" in media content and impose financial penalties on outlets deemed non-compliant. Additionally, electoral laws were revised to grant voting rights to ethnic Hungarians living abroad, but only for national party lists — a change that overwhelmingly benefited Fidesz. With its parliamentary supermajority, Fidesz also enacted constitutional amendments designed to entrench its power. One key provision changed electoral rules in a way that made it significantly more difficult for smaller opposition parties, such as the Hungarian Democratic Forum and the Alliance of Free Democrats, to surpass the 5% threshold required for parliamentary representation (Kubas, 2018). The government initially banned election campaign advertisements in commercial media, although this restriction was later overturned due to international pressure.

The judicial system underwent radical restructuring as well. The powers of the Constitutional Court were severely curtailed — new laws barred it from referring to case law established before January 1, 2012, and limited its jurisdiction to procedural matters only. Furthermore, a newly created National Judicial Office was granted authority over judicial appointments, further consolidating political control over the judiciary. Orbán's government also extended the terms of key state officials, allowing Fidesz appointees to retain influence long after electoral cycles. It passed restrictive measures targeting NGOs and civil society organizations, imposed burdensome regulations on foreign-funded groups, and even attempted to shut down the Central European University in Budapest (Kornai, 2015). Human rights organizations raised alarms over laws enabling local authorities to fine or imprison homeless individuals for occupying public spaces (Pająk-Patkowska, Patkowski, 2014). As one might deduce, the measures taken by Fidesz after seizing power thus covered almost all levels of socio-political life.

Despite these sweeping changes, there was no singular moment that marked the outright dismantling of democracy. Instead, democratic norms were gradually eroded, step by step, under the guise of legal and institutional reforms. As Hungarian economist János Kornai observed in 2011, *from 1989–1990 until the spring of 2010, Hungary was a democracy. It is no longer — an autocracy has taken its place* (Pająk-Patkowska, Patkowski, 2014). Crucially, however, all of this occurred through elections. Orbán's rise to power followed formal democratic procedures, legitimizing his leadership within

the framework of electoral democracy. The fundamental difference, however, was that he proved to be an inherently anti-democratic leader. Once in office, he systematically dismantled or co-opted institutions capable of challenging his rule, working to discredit and weaken the very mechanisms that could have exposed the populist illusion he was constructing. Through legal maneuvering and electoral engineering, he reshaped Hungary's democratic framework into what is now widely considered a hybrid regime — an illiberal system that retained the formal structures of democracy while hollowing out its core principles.

The cases of Hungary and Poland illustrate how democracy can be eroded not through sudden ruptures but through a gradual, systematic dismantling of its core principles. Leaders like Orbán and Kaczyński have not rejected democracy outright but have instead exploited its mechanisms to consolidate power while maintaining a veneer of legitimacy. By presenting authoritarian measures as democratic mandates, they have weakened judicial independence, curtailed dissent, and reshaped institutions to serve their interests. This gradual approach to democratic backsliding makes it all the more insidious; when change happens incrementally rather than through abrupt disruptions, it often goes unnoticed or is dismissed as insignificant. Yet, by the time the full extent of democratic erosion becomes clear, the safeguards meant to prevent it have already been dismantled.

**Democracy without liberalism: the rise of hybrid regimes**

Constitutional scholars such as american researchers Aziz Huq i Tom Ginsburg distinguish between two primary threats to constitutional liberal democracy: authoritarian reversion, a rapid and wholesale collapse into autocracy, and constitutional retrogression, a slower yet significant erosion of democratic norms occurring within the framework of existing — albeit increasingly hollow — rule-of-law institutions. This shift is not merely a retreat from the standards of liberal democracy but a deeper transformation in the very conception and practice of democracy itself. Thus, the three pillars of democracy — competitive elections, the liberal right to political expression and association, and the rule of law as upheld by administrative and judicial institutions — are gradually undermined until they ultimately collapse. This process unfolds openly, in full view of society, yet remains almost imperceptible to the public, in stark contrast to a sudden authoritarian reversal (Huq, Ginsburg, 2018: p.83). While operating within certain "liberal margins" already poses a considerable risk to the democratic system, the situation becomes far more dangerous when democracy is stripped entirely of its liberal character.

Can a system still be called a democracy when its core liberal principles — individual rights and judicial independence — are systematically dismantled? As constitutional retrogression weakens these foundations, democracy itself is increasingly distorted, its very definition reshaped by those seeking to undermine it. The term "democracy" is now frequently co-opted to justify policies that contradict its original principles, turning it into a tool for legitimizing authoritarian rule rather than upholding genuine democratic governance. This deliberate obfuscation makes democratic backsliding particularly insidious—many leaders who erode democratic norms do so under the pretense of defending them, convincing the public that their rise to power

enhances rather than undermines democracy. As a result, even as democratic institutions deteriorate, political leaders continue to portray themselves as defenders of democracy — albeit in a form that has shed its liberal character. This manipulation of democratic language allows them to enact policies that are fundamentally anti-democratic while maintaining an illusion of legitimacy. The challenge, then, is not only to recognize and resist democratic backsliding but also to reclaim the very concept of democracy from those who have weaponized it for illiberal ends. This paradox of democratic legitimacy — where elections serve not as a safeguard of democracy but as a tool for its erosion — raises a fundamental question: can democracy survive when stripped of its liberal foundations?

For decades, societies have held onto the belief that liberalism and democracy are inseparable. However, growing concerns suggest that once one of these elements is abandoned, liberal democracy itself may not survive. Across democracies worldwide, two seemingly distinct trends are unfolding. On one hand, public attitudes are becoming increasingly illiberal — frustrated voters more readily reject minority rights and lose faith in independent institutions, which they perceive as ineffective. On the other hand, political elites, who now control the system, are working to weaken its foundations, becoming increasingly resistant to public accountability. *As a result, liberalism and democracy, the two core elements of our political system, are starting to come into conflict* (Mounk, 2018: p13). As Yasha Mounk emphasizes, while public sentiment leans toward illiberalism, elites are becoming more undemocratic, leading to a fundamental conflict between the two. In turn, this tension gives rise to two dangerous phenomena: illiberal democracy — a system in which elections remain, but rights and freedoms are eroded — and undemocratic liberalism, where legal rights persist, but democratic participation is hollowed out.This growing tension between liberalism and democracy is no longer an abstract debate but a tangible reality shaping contemporary politics. As democratic norms erode, a troubling question emerges: What happens when the very mechanisms meant to uphold democracy become tools for its subversion?

Yasha Mounk (2018) argues that safeguarding liberal democracy requires avoiding two opposing threats: illiberal democracy and undemocratic liberalism. The first leads to a scenario where populist leaders gain public support and ultimately take power by pointing to real weaknesses in the existing system. These anti-liberal politicians, invoking the will of the people, undermine the rule of law, restrict individual rights, and expand their own influence — yet they fail to address the very social issues they initially promised to resolve. As a result, populist rule often turns against the very people it claims to represent. Undemocratic liberalism, on the other hand, is based on the belief that a rational administration, rather than citizens themselves, is best suited to address political challenges. This weakens public agency, leaving citizens increasingly convinced that their interests are neither represented nor taken seriously.

Mounk also warns against the "arrogance of political elites," who often see their role as one of enlightened governance, dismissing public concerns as irrational (Sawczuk, 2019). In contrast, liberals must demonstrate that — unlike populists, who ultimately betray their voters — they can understand, respect, and seriously engage with people's grievances. The solution, Mounk suggests, lies in making democracy more liberal and liberalism more democratic (Sawczuk, 2019: p. 11-12).

This reality calls into question the longstanding belief that once democracy is established, it will naturally sustain itself. The increasing prevalence of democratic backsliding and the rise of hybrid regimes underscore a crucial truth: democracy is not merely about holding elections, but about ensuring the conditions that make elections meaningful. In fact, one of the challenges in identifying the crisis of democracy may stem from the very nature of liberal democracy itself — its essence is not only free elections, but also the rule of law and a set of political customs within institutions. Undermining these elements is therefore symptomatic of the contemporary crisis. Without robust institutions, constitutional safeguards, and a deeply rooted democratic culture, elections risk becoming instruments of legitimizing authoritarian drift rather than mechanisms for reinforcing democratic governance.

This aligns well with Professor Adam Przeworski's observation that democracy cannot be defined merely by elections but also by the accompanying institutional structures and political norms. While elections remain the only effective mechanism for holding politicians accountable, democracy is more than just the process of voting—it requires a framework of checks and balances that ensure its integrity. Przeworski cautions that attaching adjectives such as *electoral*, *liberal*, *constitutional*, *representative*, or *social* to democracy can create conceptual tensions, as these characteristics do not always coexist harmoniously. For instance, defining *constitutional democracy* as a system that limits majority rule and upholds judicial independence implies that the erosion of judicial autonomy may lead to violations of liberal rights and disruptions in the electoral process. The more qualifiers are added, the more complex democracy becomes as a concept, increasing the risk of internal contradictions and democratic crises. Thus, the defining attributes of democracy should not be taken for granted but rather tested empirically to assess the necessary conditions for sustaining electoral competitiveness, safeguarding rights, and preserving the rule of law. Only by ensuring these foundational elements can democracy function as more than just a formal electoral process but as a resilient system of governance [10].

This gradual erosion makes democratic backsliding particularly difficult to counter, as each step appears legally justified. By the time the full extent of institutional decay is recognized, key safeguards have already been dismantled. What emerges is not outright autocracy but a hybrid regime — an illiberal democracy where elections persist but no longer ensure genuine political competition. These developments underscore the urgent need to address the incremental threats to democracy before they become irreversible. These developments underscore the urgent need to address the incremental threats to democracy before they become irreversible. History has shown that democracy does not die overnight; it fades under the weight of manipulated legal norms, weakened institutions, and eroded political culture. The challenge, therefore, lies not only in diagnosing democratic decline but also in fostering societal and institutional resilience.

If the rise of hybrid regimes in Poland and Hungary, as well as in many other states of the region and worldwide, should serve as a warning, it is that democracy cannot

[10] Adding more qualifiers to democracy increases its complexity and exposes it to greater risks of crisis. However, this can also be a useful analytical tool — as Przeworski suggests, we can treat this list as a set of hypotheses, empirically testing which conditions are necessary to preserve electoral competitiveness, uphold fundamental rights, and maintain the rule of law.

be sustained through procedural elections alone — it requires an active commitment to liberal principles, constitutional safeguards, and a political culture that values pluralism and accountability. Without these foundations, even the most established democracies risk hollowing out from within, gradually losing the very essence that makes them democratic in the first place.

**Winning the vote, losing democracy: the threat of electoral majoritarianism**

The growing tensions between liberalism and democracy, between majority rule and institutional constraints, reveal a fundamental challenge of our time: *Can democracy survive without the liberal norms that have historically supported it?* If democratic legitimacy becomes synonymous with unrestrained electoral majority rule, ignoring constitutional checks and civil liberties, then democracy risks becoming an empty shell, serving not the people but those in power. The answer to this challenge lies not in abandoning democracy but in reinforcing its foundational principles — ensuring that elections remain competitive, independent institutions are protected, and civic engagement thrives. As Przeworski (2022)and other scholars remind us, democracy cannot be reduced to the mere act of voting — it must be an ongoing political and social commitment to pluralism, accountability, and the rule of law.

*Suppose racists, fascists, or separatists win in free and fair elections* — said American diplomat Richard Holbrooke, referring to Yugoslavia in the 1990s — *that is the dilemma* (Zakaria, 2017). Holbrooke's statement is not limited to the former Yugoslavia but remains highly relevant in many contemporary states. As discussed earlier, the global push for democratization, even in historically repressive countries, such as those within the Islamic world, can sometimes lead to the legitimization of regimes that actively undermine democratic principles. Across the world, democratically elected governments — often re-elected multiple times or reaffirmed through referenda — are systematically violating constitutional limits on their power, stripping citizens of fundamental rights, and eroding the very foundations of liberal democracy. Many scholars have examined this phenomenon, and Fareed Zakaria provides one of the most in-depth analyses. Building on the concept of illiberal democracy already discussed in this article, he extensively explores hybrid regimes — those that maintain electoral processes while simultaneously dismantling the rule of law and institutional checks and balances (Zakaria, 2017: p.21-22).

Although these regimes continue to conduct electoral processes, they disregard essential components of liberal democracy, such as the rule of law, the separation of powers, and the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms, often referred to as “constitutional liberalism”. The severance of constitutional liberalism from democracy paves the way for authoritarian rule, as leaders who secure electoral victories proceed to dismantle the very institutions meant to restrain them. Democracy may still appear to thrive, but without the freedoms that it is meant to guarantee. Throughout history, elections have facilitated the rise of dictatorial regimes, exacerbated socio-political conflicts, deepened economic crises, and heightened ethnic tensions. In some countries, where elections have not been held at all, introducing them, as Zakaria suggests, would not necessarily lead to democratic progress. Instead, the result might be the

empowerment of even more intolerant, reactionary, anti-Western, and antisemitic regimes than the autocratic rulers currently in place (Zakaria, 2017: p.21).

Zakaria identifies these dysfunctions primarily in the Arab world and less developed nations, particularly those of the so-called "Global South," where fragile democracies face severe structural challenges. However, new democracies in Europe confront a different but equally formidable threat: the rise of *facade democracy*, which breeds disillusionment, chaos, and, ultimately, a new, often unnamed, form of tyranny. Yet, as Zakaria argues, the response to these challenges cannot be the abandonment of elections. Instead, it must involve a deeper inquiry into the root causes of democratic decay and strategies to counteract it. This discussion inevitably returns to Joseph Schumpeter's conceptualization of democracy as primarily an electoral process. This concern aligns with Samuel Huntington's argument that democracy is best understood in procedural terms. According to Huntington, political systems can be classified as democratic to the extent that their primary decision-makers are chosen through free, fair, and regular elections, in which candidates compete openly and all adult citizens can participate (Huntington, 1995: p17).

Huntington's definition frames elections — provided they are conducted openly, fairly, and equitably — as the *sine qua non* of democracy. He even argues that: *governments formed through elections may be ineffective, corrupt, short-sighted, irresponsible, dominated by interest groups and incapable of adopting policies necessary for the public good. These features may make such governments undesirable, but they do not make them undemocratic* (Huntington, 1995: p.20). This approach to democracy encompasses two key components: competition and participation, both of which imply the existence of civil liberties and political freedoms, such as freedom of speech, press, assembly, and association, that are essential for political debate and electoral campaigns. According to Robert Dahl, this definition makes it possible to isolate the indicators necessary to evaluate a political system (Dahl, 1971: 1-10). Following Huntington's logic, if a country holds multiparty elections, it is often classified as democratic. To a large extent, this approach appears justified: if the term "democratic" were restricted solely to countries that guarantee a specific set of civil, political, economic, and religious rights — each of which is interpreted differently by various observers — the concept of democracy would risk losing its meaning. As Fareed Zakaria argues, assigning the term a subjective value judgment, equating it with a "good" political system, renders it analytically useless. Hence, the procedural definition of democracy is proposed, establishing the existence of electoral processes as an indisputable foundation of a democratic system. But is this truly sufficient?

The contemporary understanding of democracy, often reduced to the concept of majority rule established through regular universal elections, is widely accepted both in the media and in Polish academic discourse (Szymanek, 2013; p. 24; Szymanek, 2005). In this view, democracy is a system in which political power is delegated through elections, with decision-making ultimately concentrated in the hands of the electoral majority. However, democracy cannot be reduced solely to majority rule. The assumption that the mere existence of a recurring electoral process, through which leaders are selected, automatically qualifies a state as a genuine, consolidated democracy has proven to be deeply misleading. While elections are crucial, they are neither a

necessary nor an adequate condition for classifying a political system as democratic. Liberal constitutionalism is not about *how* power is acquired, but about *how* it is exercised.

This reduction of democracy to the mere act of casting votes also provides a new framework for describing hybrid regimes, a category I examine in my doctoral research under the term electoral majoritarianism. As discussed earlier in this text, this system is characterized by a ruling majority that, having secured electoral legitimacy, grants itself the authority to implement policies that may directly undermine democratic principles. Under the guise of a popular mandate, electoral majoritarianism enables governments to erode judicial independence, silence opposition, and weaken institutional checks and balances, all while maintaining the outward appearance of democracy. In such regimes, democracy ceases to function as a mechanism for protecting pluralism and fundamental rights and instead becomes a tool for consolidating power. Governments operating under this system invoke electoral legitimacy, the authority of the ballot box — that is, they justify their actions solely through electoral victories — allowing them to undermine fundamental rights and freedoms. As a result, democracy is reduced to a mere façade, upheld not by genuine pluralism but by the procedural repetition of elections. Electoral majoritarianism refers to a situation in which political parties or candidates who win a majority in democratic elections subsequently disregard the core principles and institutions of democracy. While the electoral process itself may formally adhere to democratic standards, in practice, the ruling majority often restricts civil liberties, manipulates the media, exerts control over the judiciary, and suppresses political opposition. By citing their electoral victory, those in power claim a mandate to override legal safeguards, ignore checks and balances, and erode the fundamental tenets of democratic governance (Levitsky, Way, 2002; Miller, 2017; Seeberg, 2018; Gandhi, Lust, 2009).

Thus, what emerges is a democracy in name only — a system in which the majority's will is used as a tool to centralize power, marginalize opponents, and gradually strip citizens of their rights and freedoms. As a result, electoral majoritarianism can lead to the steady deterioration of democratic institutions, transforming states into hybrid regimes or even autocracies, where a single party or leader monopolizes control over the political system. This phenomenon underscores the critical flaw in equating democracy solely with electoral legitimacy. The mere fact of securing a majority in elections does not guarantee political pluralism, rule of law, or the protection of minority rights — elements essential to a functioning democracy. Academic literature and reports from international organizations such as Freedom House and Amnesty International have extensively analyzed this issue, highlighting how reducing democracy to elections alone facilitates democratic backsliding and the erosion of political freedoms.

Democracy, particularly in its liberal form, which is intrinsically linked to the above-mentioned concept, promises that power will ultimately rest in the hands of the people. But who are these people, and how will they serve their country and society? As history has shown, even fascist leaders have often come to power through democratic elections, only for their commitment to freedom to end the moment they assumed office. Their professed dedication to liberty, which encompasses both electoral rights and the broader principles of liberal democracy, was, in reality, a commitment to restricting

freedoms and enacting laws that often served only the particularistic interests of the regime.

This phenomenon is evident not only in the experiences of communist-era Central and Eastern Europe but also in 20th-century totalitarian regimes. Adolf Hitler, for example, became Chancellor of Germany through an electoral process despite his open hostility toward parliamentary democracy. In *Mein Kampf*, he contrasted it with what he called "true German democracy" — a system in which the people freely elected a leader who, in turn, would assume absolute power and total responsibility for all decisions. In reality, he was describing an autocratic, one-man rule, in which democratic elections merely served as a tool for legitimizing dictatorship (Stanley, 2018: p.127-131; Mees, 2008, p. 112-113). This was somewhat a blueprint for dictatorship, concealed behind the veneer of democratic legitimacy. The ideals of liberal democracy, including the electoral process, were reduced to mere tools for subverting democratic governance. The logic of democracy was reversed: instead of elections serving to hold leaders accountable, they became instruments of authoritarian control — where it was not the politicians being judged, but society itself (Treisman, Guriev, 2022).

This illustrates a critical point: democracy cannot survive if its core elements are eroded. A system where citizens make decisions collectively must also ensure that the powerful cannot oppress the weak. A system that protects minority rights and guarantees free political expression enables people to hold leaders accountable. Without these safeguards, democracy risks degenerating into the *tyranny of the majority.* Conversely, rights without democratic participation risk creating an elite-dominated system in which ordinary citizens are excluded from decision-making. Ensuring the coexistence of liberalism and democracy is essential to safeguarding both. There is legitimate concern that liberal democracy cannot endure if either element is abandoned. A system where the people hold power prevents elites from overriding the rights of the less privileged, just as a system that guarantees individual rights, a free press, and institutional checks ensures that elections remain genuinely competitive and fair. In this sense, democracy and liberalism are deeply interdependent. However, their mutual reliance does not guarantee stability. In fact, the fragile balance between the two means that dysfunction in one can quickly destabilize the other.

Democracy without rights risks descending into the tyranny of the majority, a danger long feared by constitutional framers. Conversely, a system that upholds rights but lacks democratic accountability can easily become dominated by economic elites and technocrats, who, over time, may seek to further limit public influence in governance. *This slow divergence of liberalism and democracy may be exactly what is now happening* — explains Mounk — *and the consequences are likely to be just as bad as one would predict* (Mounk, 2018: p.6).

The contemporary fear of anti-liberal leaders gaining power does not stem from an imminent threat of totalitarian rule, as in Nazi Germany or Soviet Russia. Rather, it lies in the systematic dismantling of democratic principles by modern populists. These leaders exploit the mechanisms of parliamentary democracy to secure electoral legitimacy, only to erode democracy from within. As Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt argue, most modern attempts to dismantle democracy occur through legitimate means — approved by legislatures, upheld by courts, and often presented as necessary reforms.

*Many government efforts to subvert democracy are "legal," in the sense that they are approved by the legislature or accepted by the courts. They may even be portrayed as efforts to improve democracy — making the judiciary more efficient, combating corruption, or cleaning up the electoral process. Newspapers still publish but are bought off or bullied into self-censorship. Citizens continue to criticize the government but often find themselves facing tax or other legal troubles. This sows public confusion. People do not immediately realize what is happening. Many continue to believe they are living under a democracy* (Levitsky, Ziblatt, 2018: p.11). Because there is no single moment *— no coup, declaration of martial law, or suspension of the constitution —* in which the regime obviously "crosses the line" into dictatorship, nothing may set off society's alarm bells. These changes, initially subtle, may go unnoticed until it is too late. Democracies around the world have often facilitated the rise of authoritarian figures by failing to notice early warning signs.

Recognizing these seemingly subtle phenomena can help identify potential autocrats before they come to power. In practice, however, this proves difficult. Many democracies currently in crisis have, in a way, left the door ajar, allowing aspiring autocrats to step through. As Levitsky and Ziblatt point out, even departing democratic leaders have often played a role in this process — such was the case with Hitler, Mussolini, and Chávez in the years preceding their rise to power. Despite significant differences between these leaders, their paths to power followed a strikingly similar pattern. Each of them rose to prominence due to the failure of establishment politicians to recognize crucial warning signs—either by handing over power directly (as in the case of Hitler and Mussolini) or by paving the way for their rise (Chàvez) (Levitsky, Ziblatt, 2018: p.21). Once in office, despite vastly different national contexts, all three employed remarkably similar strategies to dismantle democratic institutions and consolidate authoritarian rule.

Levitsky and Ziblatt highlight historical examples of democratic leaders unwittingly opening the door to autocrats, whether by directly transferring power, as in the cases of Hitler and Mussolini, or by creating political conditions that enabled their rise, as with Hugo Chávez. Despite differing national contexts, these leaders followed strikingly similar trajectories: capitalizing on democratic mechanisms to undermine democracy itself. When an authoritarian leader assumes power through democratic elections, the fate of democracy hangs in the balance. Demagogues and populists can emerge in any democracy, yet multiple factors determine whether, and how quickly, they are identified and ultimately removed from power. In some cases, this never happens; in others, authoritarian tendencies only become evident too late, after the leader has already consolidated control (Linz, 1978). Such was the case with above-mentioned Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his party, Fidesz. In the late 1980s, at the outset of his political career, Orbán appeared to be a liberal democrat. Even during his first tenure as Prime Minister (1998–2002), he governed within the framework of democratic norms. However, his authoritarian turn — which took both Hungarian society and the international community by surprise — occurred only after his return to power in 2010, marking a fundamental shift toward autocratic governance. This demonstrates why electoral majoritarianism is one of the most insidious threats to modern democracy — not because it abolishes elections, but because it hijacks them. Unlike past dictators,

contemporary authoritarian leaders understand that democracy itself can serve as their greatest alibi.

## Conclusion: protecting democracy from its own mechanisms

The evident exhaustion of the liberal democratic model has led to the emergence of above-mentioned “hollow states” — political entities that outwardly resemble the systems we once recognized but have fundamentally transformed. Kim Lane Scheppele introduces the concept of the *Frankenstate* to describe this phenomenon. She argues that contemporary illiberal politicians no longer orchestrate dramatic coups, making their actions harder to confront with unequivocal criticism. Instead, through a series of seemingly legal maneuvers — often legitimized, including through elections — they construct a *Frankenstate*: a regime composed of ostensibly democratic elements that, in reality, is neither truly democratic nor committed to the rule of law (Scheppele 2013). Modern authoritarianism thus presents itself in a deceptive guise, positioning states in a gray zone between governance models — not yet outright autocracies, but no longer functioning democracies.

Safeguarding democracy requires more than preserving its outward form — it demands a commitment to its core principles: pluralism, institutional checks and balances, and the protection of fundamental rights. The rise of electoral majoritarianism highlights a dangerous paradox: when electoral victories are treated as an unrestricted mandate, democracy itself becomes a tool for its own erosion. A system where leaders claim legitimacy solely through the ballot box — while dismantling judicial independence, suppressing opposition, and weakening the rule of law — ceases to function as a true democracy. History has shown that democracy does not collapse overnight; it fades through incremental distortions that, at first, may seem legally justified. This slow erosion makes it all the more insidious, as leaders present themselves as defenders of the people's will while hollowing out democratic institutions from within. The challenge, then, is not only to recognize these threats but to resist the normalization of majoritarian rule unchecked by liberal constraints. As scholars like Cas Mudde, Fareed Zakaria, and Yascha Mounk and many more, remind us, democracy’s survival hinges on more than the periodic act of voting. It requires an informed and engaged citizenry, a vibrant civil society, and institutions capable of resisting executive overreach. In an era where democratic backsliding is increasingly subtle, disguised in the rhetoric of reform and popular mandate, safeguarding democracy demands renewed vigilance.

True democracy is not just about winning elections — it is about governing with restraint, accountability, and respect for the rights of all citizens, not just the majority. Without these safeguards, democracy risks devolving into an empty procedural exercise, where electoral legitimacy is weaponized to justify authoritarian consolidation. Preventing this requires constant vigilance, institutional resilience, and an engaged civil society willing to defend democracy beyond the ballot box. If democracy is to endure, it must be protected from those who seek to use its mechanisms to dismantle its essence. The future of democratic governance depends on ensuring that elections remain not just a means of choosing leaders, but a guarantee of pluralism, justice, and shared power — not a license for dominance.

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