

Democratic Backsliding and Authoritarian Resurgence in Latin America

Summary of Findings from an Expert Roundtable

On April 28, 2022, NORC at the University of Chicago, in collaboration with the Kellogg Institute for International Studies at the University of Notre Dame, convened a panel of experts on democratic backsliding to share insights with international development professionals. The panel featured Professors Matthew Cleary (Syracuse University), Javier Corrales (Amherst College), and Mneesha Gellman (Emerson College), and was moderated by Aníbal Pérez-Liñán (University of Notre Dame). The panelists defined backsliding and illustrated the process through the experiences of Venezuela (Corrales), El Salvador (Gellman), and Mexico (Cleary). Based on those experiences, the group discussed strategies that may succeed in reversing backsliding and warned against ineffective tactics.



Democratic backsliding is the gradual dismantling of democracy “from the inside” by popularly elected leaders.

Elected illiberal leaders capture state institutions —courts, oversight agencies, security forces —and then use state institutions to suppress the opposition.



WHAT IS DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING?



Democratic backsliding is not linear, involves great uncertainty, and can be hard to identify as it unfolds.

The process occurs gradually, through a series of incremental actions; while usually protracted, it can be swift and can be reversed, contained, or result in a transition to autocracy.



What Does a Typical Backsliding Pattern Look Like?

Illiberal leaders capture the executive branch.

They mobilize public support to win elections, often by significant margins.

Once in power, they activate two processes: capture state institutions and suppress the opposition.

These processes are reinforcing. Institutional capture reduces space for the opposition, and a weak opposition facilitates capture of new institutions.

When the two processes are very advanced, we observe a transition to autocracy.

But no outcome is predetermined; illiberal leaders can stop short of autocracy, and some backsliding episodes have been contained or reversed.

Lessons From Three Backsliding Experiences



Venezuela: Telltale Signs of Democratic Backsliding

The Venezuelan case under President Hugo Chávez (1999–2013) illustrates common backsliding patterns:

- Initial ambiguity of the process—i.e., reforms that undermine democracy are often paired with inclusive social policies.
- Promotion of intentional polarization.
- Capture of the legislature and the judiciary.
- Use of “camouflage” tactics—policies that expand rights for some segments of the population while undermining rights for the opposition—to disguise the autocratic goals of the government.



El Salvador: Conditions for Swift Backsliding

The Salvadoran case under President Nayib Bukele (2019–2022) illustrates the conditions for a swift backsliding process:

- High public approval rates for the president.
- Illiberal leaders’ pursuit of impunity.
- Use of legislative majorities to capture the judiciary and pass repressive measures.



Mexico: Stalled Backsliding

The Mexican case under President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018–2022) illustrates conditions for stalled backsliding:

- A populist president who attacks independent institutions and co-opts the military.
- An opposition that leverages institutional spaces and elections to contain the president.

RECOMMENDATIONS

What should democratic actors do?

- ✓ **AVOID** election boycotts, inflammatory language that denies incumbents their legitimate right to office, and radical strategies intended to unseat elected leaders through non-electoral means.
- ✓ **USE THE TOOLS OF DEMOCRACY** to remove an illiberal incumbent through elections, even when the electoral process is not entirely free and fair.
- ✓ **PLAY FOR TIME** to delay institutional capture until the next election.

What could international donors do?

- ✓ **INVEST IN DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS**—especially those responsible for conducting and settling disputes around elections—before backsliding takes place or during an illiberal leader’s first term in office.
- ✓ **SUPPORT CORRUPTION PROBES**, as corruption is likely to increase once incumbents capture domestic oversight bodies; corruption scandals have been important in reversing the popularity of illiberal leaders.
- ✓ **SUPPORT DEMOCRATIC ACTORS AND INDEPENDENT VOICES** combating corruption, denouncing abuses of power, and keeping reliable information flowing in their fight against backsliding.

Learn more about democratic backsliding and the three cases in this [brief](#).