

Stokes, Susan C. *The Backsliders: Why Leaders Undermine Their Own Democracies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2025. 239 pages. Hardcover, \$27.95.

While political scientists have always recognized external challenges faced by democracies, the specter of elected leaders purposely weakening their own systems is a relatively new phenomenon for academic study. Tapping her own background along with an array of analytical methods, author Susan C. Stokes investigates what she refers to as “backsliders,” or leaders whose words and actions hurt the very government they run. She focuses on the multitude of instances in the current century in which leaders of free nations violate the rule of law and centralize control to stay in office, but also offers prescriptions for stymieing would-be autocrats.

Serving as the Blake Distinguished Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, Susan Stokes chairs the Chicago Center on Democracy there. Her previous books have likewise concentrated on cross-national features of voting and democratic systems. The book begins with an introduction and initial chapter, then is aligned into three parts encompassing the seven remaining chapters.

Stokes indicates in the introduction that the purpose of the study is to focus on democratic erosion occurring in this century, and she defines and explains aspects of it in Chapter 1. Positioned “between the normal actions of elected governments and the military coup” democratic debilitation is perpetuated by incumbents who attack co-equal institutions as well electoral mechanisms (p.16). These backsliding leaders are motivated by many factors, but the overriding one is to stay in power. Using a familiar playbook, they encourage violence, and aggressively criticize everything from the press, to courts, to the election process.

Part I envelopes chapters 2 through 4. In chapter 2, catalysts for the recent wave of faltering democracies are explored. Possible reasons include seeing similar behavior by leaders

in nearby nations, the impact of large demonstrations, and even the influence of social media, though Stokes finds that unequal income distribution is the most significant variable. In chapters 3 and 4, recent threats to democracy from political parties on the right and left in various nations are covered. Utilizing contemporary experiences in countries like the United States, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, Stokes determines that right-wing ethnocentrism is likely to emerge in an environment of skepticism toward government's ability to help citizens. On the other end of the spectrum, left-wing populist parties are dissected in several Latin American nations; findings reveal that income inequality and institutional weakness are contributors to backsliding.

In Part II of the text, which includes chapters 5 through 7, Stokes turns to how leaders who damage their own country's democratic government nonetheless are able to secure and maintain public support. She refers to the two key strategies which backsliders employ as polarization and trash talk. The former takes advantage of divisions from partisanship, while the latter involves selectively pointing out flaws in institutions so as to denigrate them. Studies in several nations showed that both of the aforementioned strategies were equally persuasive and both have distinct benefits. Support for backsliders is also explored in psychological terms, with issues like bias, irrationality, and distrust considered.

Part III contains the final chapter of the book, which constitutes a call-to-arms against backsliders out to decapitate democratic institutions and governance. The ideas enunciated for resisting the creeping autocrat include depolarization, penalizing poor performance, encouraging confidence-building along with courage and creativity, and establishing academic courses to teach and train students on democracy. Although the hardball tactic of extraconstitutional removal of backsliders is broached, the more practical recommendation is to make democracy work better, according to the author.

Other studies on similar topics which cover the same period are becoming more prevalent. For instance, works by Daniel Cohen (2018) and David Pepper (2025) assess democratic threats by highlighting the Donald Trump presidency in the United States, whereas studies by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (2018), Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes (2020), and Anne Appleton (2025) are broader in scope. The concept of democratic backsliding has been previously introduced in research by Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufman (2021), Laura Gamboa (2022), and the duo of Melis Laebens and Marcin Slarzynski (2024).

There are several outstanding features of the current text which make it unique in the literature. First, Professor Stokes uses an impressive array of methods to study democratic erosion. These include her own visits to other nations, cross-university collaboration, use of survey data from experts and the public alike, media sources, secondary studies, and first-hand modeling and analysis of trends. Second, although others have described backsliding leaders generally, Stokes refines the trash talking feature as an additional weapon in their arsenal. Third, the suggestions for fighting the teetering tyrants found in the conclusion are more comprehensive than those offered elsewhere.

A few shortcomings are apparent. Given the subjects presented, the order of the introduction and chapter 1 could be reversed. Next, the author could have returned in the last chapter to repeat or expand on the benefits of democracy mentioned in the Introduction. Further, the author admits that even with close social scientific scrutiny, it is still difficult to assess whether polarization is a cause or outcome of backsliding. Finally, the book's concentration on the how—the manner by which democracy corroders operate—is just as important as the why mentioned in the book's title.

Though the author did not invent the backsliding concept, she has taken it to another level with an innovative and in-depth examination of features associated with it.

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