

Protecting Democracy From Itself: Plato's Lessons for Modern Democracies

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Remember Democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes exhausts and murders itself. There never was a Democracy Yet, that did not commit suicide.

– President John Adams to John Taylor, 17 December 1814.¹

[The term] illiberal democracy sounds perfectly good in Hungarian, although in English it sounds like a blood libel.

–Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, May 2015.²

And isn't democracy's insatiable desire for what it defines as the good also what destroys it?

–Plato, Approx. 380 B.C.³

¹ “From John Adams to John Taylor, 17 December 1814,” Founders Online (University of Virginia Press, n.d.), <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-6371>.

² Attila Juhász, Róbert László, and Edit Zgut, “Consequences of an Illiberal Vision up to the Present Day,” *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Büro Budapest*, September 2015, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/budapest/12522.pdf>.

³ Plato and G. M. A. Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)* (Hackett Publishing, 1992).

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Introduction: Plato's Challenge to Democracy

In 380 B.C., Plato warned that an excess of freedom leads to nothing but an excess of slavery. We live in an age with more freedoms than many of our ancestors could have ever imagined. And yet, in recent decades, many of the institutions that ensure these freedoms have come under attack. In a political moment marked by the resurgence of authoritarianism and threats to democratic governance, the age-old question of how to safeguard democracy has assumed renewed urgency. From universities to parliaments around the world, scholars and policymakers are grappling with the ever-daunting crisis of democratic backsliding. It turns out that a valuable perspective might be hidden in the very distant past.

It is true that Plato was no democrat.⁴ However, he provides a strikingly prescient analysis of the vulnerabilities of democracy in his dialogue the *Republic*. Plato's depiction of the inevitable slide from democracy into tyranny is of special interest in this time of democratic vulnerability: Plato's indisputably critical stance towards democracy, perhaps ironically, alerts us to ways we can protect it. Today's literature on democratic backsliding contains two key gaps. First, definitional inconsistency is pervasive in the literature on backsliding. Two different definitions of democracy are prominent in the literature: first, the minimalist conception of democracy, which contends that a democracy is defined by free, fair, competitive elections. The second conception is that a functioning democracy, the "liberal democracy," must include liberal

⁴ Scholars such as Jill Frank, Gerald Mara, and Arlene Saxonhouse have challenged the prevailing view of the *Republic* as anti-democratic. The literature that tries to make Plato a democrat relies largely on emphasizing the debate-driven, discursive structure of the *Republic* as evidence for Plato's democratic inclinations, and while there are varieties within this literature, these attempts generally overemphasize the democratic elements of Plato's thought. While there are many ways the *Republic* can be interpreted, there is no confusion as to the undemocratic nature of Plato's political thought. Jill Frank, *Poetic Justice: Rereading Plato's "Republic,"* 1st edition (Chicago London: University of Chicago Press, 2018); Gerald M. Mara, *Socrates' Discursive Democracy: Logos and Ergon in Platonic Political Philosophy,* First Edition (Albany, NY: State Univ of New York Pr, 1997); Arlene W. Saxonhouse, "Democracy, Equality, and Eidê: A Radical View from Book 8 of Plato's Republic," *The American Political Science Review* 92, no. 2 (1998): 273–83, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2585663>.

elements in addition to the electoral requirement: functioning civil society, protections for individual rights and freedoms, equality under the law, and so on. These two definitions of democracy—the minimalist and liberal—lie on either end of democracy’s definitional spectrum. Such inconsistency in the political science literature leads to erratic assumptions and quality judgments that complicate practical, prescriptive solutions to backsliding. The literature does not confront squarely the evidence showing that democratic erosion is increasingly done in the name of democracy. From Fiji to Thailand to Hungary, antidemocratic leaders justify expanding their power and attacking institutional checks and balances as a means to *improve* “democracy,” demonstrating the need for definitional consistency.

This difficulty with establishing a consistent definition may be partly due to the literature’s second key problem: those writing on democratic backsliding and ways to fight it overwhelmingly approach questions of democracy from a democratic orientation. By this I mean that most leading scholars on democracy are working from the assumption that democracy, however they might define it, is good, that it is something to aspire to. This position, while certainly reasonable, may blind many scholars and policymakers to democracy’s risks and weaknesses, especially the risks associated with overemphasizing some elements of “democracy” at the expense of other important elements of successful governance, such as liberal protections.

Plato lived in a direct democracy, which is distinct from the representative democracy practiced today. In a direct democracy, all eligible citizens voted on the decisions and laws of the city-state, as opposed to voting for representatives, like members of parliament or congress, who vote on those said laws on behalf of their constituents. It is inevitable that the direct nature of democracy in Plato’s time informed his specific stance on democracy, and very few (and

certainly no large-scale) instances of direct democracy are in practice today. Despite the mechanical differences between ancient Athenian democracy and representative democracy, Plato's claims about democracy's fallibility retain striking relevance and predictive power today. Unlike contemporary commentators, Plato is *not* a democrat, a perspective that allows for one of his key insights: the notion of *backsliding into democracy*. Plato places democracy as second-to-worst in his ranking of constitutions in Book VIII of the *Republic*. As the more just constitutions decay, the city eventually slides into democracy, and further, into tyranny. In Plato's depiction, democracy's inherent flaw—the fact that it leads to tyranny—is central to what makes it undesirable and unjust. This vulnerability of democracy in Plato's depiction demonstrates the dangers of a democracy without liberal guardrails. What happens to a democracy that is too democratic? Without protections against extremist but popular leaders? Without guards against factionalism and polarization? What happens to the “illiberal democracy?” Plato answers in Book VIII: tyranny.

In this essay, I contend that Plato's analysis of democratic decay offers valuable insights into the current crisis of democratic backsliding, in turn revealing the dangers of illiberal democracy. Further, I address two anticipated counterarguments to my application of Plato's writing to our contemporary political crisis. First, I object to the oft-cited claim that the political argument of the *Republic* was never intended to be taken literally but exists solely to extend the ethical argument of the dialogue and further Plato's arguments about justice and the soul. I argue that the political prescriptions of the *Republic* are more specific than would be necessary just to advance the dialogue's ethical claims, and further, that whether or not Plato intended his ladder of just cities to be taken as a practical proposal is irrelevant to the value of Plato's insights as a novel lens through which to approach recent thought on democratic backsliding.

The second counterargument that I anticipate, and perhaps the most obvious one, is concern about using Plato, who could not have conceived of contemporary liberalism and despised democracy, as a means by which to make suggestions for protecting today's liberal democracy. Since Karl Popper's infamous indictment of Plato in his 1945 *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (or even beforehand) most attempts to bring Plato into questions of present-day political thought result in some sort of judgment about the contemporary appeal of Plato's vision of the just city.⁵ Cinzia Arruzza puts it well in her book: "While almost all of Popper's specific interpretive claims have been refuted," she writes, "these refutations have failed to challenge his major assumption—namely, that modern liberalism is the definitive political doctrine with which to measure the thinkers of the past, who are therefore required to live up to the ideal of liberal democracy."⁶ In this way, the urge to compare Plato's depiction of the ideal city to contemporary liberal democracy is still the most tempting framework through which to read the *Republic* today. I hope to present a new framing, one in which it is Plato's very *undemocratic* approach that makes his work so important at this moment.

Drawing on insights from the *Republic* and engaging with contemporary scholars on backsliding, I apply Plato's warnings about democracy to the current political landscape, and suggest that Plato's writing should serve as a reminder about the importance of liberal institutions in protecting democratic stability.

⁵ Karl R. Popper, "The Open Society and Its Enemies," in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691212067>.

⁶ Cinzia Arruzza, *A Wolf in the City: Tyranny and the Tyrant in Plato's Republic* (Oxford University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190678852.001.0001>.

Chapter I: Defining Democracy and Democratic Backsliding

In the past two decades, the term “democratic backsliding” has been used to explain a swath of phenomena associated with the declining health of global democracy. However, as David Waldner and Ellen Lust point out in their 2018 article “Unwelcome Change: Coming to Terms with Democratic Backsliding,” scholars have not used the term democratic backsliding consistently, and thus, “efforts to explain backsliding remain inchoate.”⁷ At the root of this issue is the variance of approaches scholars have taken when defining democracy. Before noting—let alone explaining—its decline, defining democracy is a crucial first step. However, defining democracy is a complicated undertaking. David Collier and Steven Levitsky outlined the challenges facing researchers seeking to comprehensively define democracy in their article “Democracy with Adjectives.”⁸ On one hand, in what Fareed Zakaria has characterized as a “democratic age,” it is important for researchers to allow for increased analytic differentiation to account for the diverse forms of democracy that have appeared in the decades following the end of the Cold War.⁹ On the other hand, as Collier and Levitsky explain, the risk of “conceptual stretching” heightens as definitions of democracy expand to account for new types of government, and thus scholars are concerned with conceptual validity.¹⁰ Essentially, how should we define a term that increasingly means more and more things to more and more people without rendering it moot?

⁷ Waldner, David, and Ellen Lust. “Unwelcome Change: Coming to Terms with Democratic Backsliding.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 21, no. 1 (2018): 93–113. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-050517-114628>.

⁸ Collier, David, and Steven Levitsky. “Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research.” *World Politics* 49, no. 3 (1997): 430–51.

⁹ Zakaria, Fareed. *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*. Revised edition. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007.

¹⁰ Collier and Levitsky, “Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research.”

This chapter will provide an overview of several conceptions of democracy, highlighting a key problem in the search for a coherent definition: the relation between democracy and liberalism. I then discuss current approaches to the understanding of democratic backsliding. Backsliding today takes many forms, from clear regime changes such as promissory coups to more subtle—yet still highly dangerous—instances of executive aggrandizement. When backsliding can take forms both dramatic and gradual, and because definitional inconsistency with regards to democracy is so pervasive in the literature, it is challenging for policymakers to identify and intervene against backsliding in time. Furthermore, instances of promissory coups and executive aggrandizement, as Nancy Bermeo writes, are often spearheaded by leaders manipulating popular understandings of democracy to achieve their undemocratic ends. It is clear, then, that the conceptual inconsistencies that fill the literature on democracy and democratic backsliding, in particular the often blurry distinction between minimalist and liberal definitions of democracy, do not only pose an academic challenge, but a policy one.

Defining Democracy

“Future ages will wonder at us,” asserts Pericles during his famous funeral oration in Thucydides’s *History of the Peloponnesian War*, “as the present age wonders at us now.” Often called the “Athenian miracle,” fifth century B.C. Athens was the site of the near-simultaneous invention of legal justice as we know it, theater, and a new, peculiar form of government: *demokratia*, or democracy. *Demokratia*, a combination of *demos* (people) and *kratos*, (rule), was ambiguous in meaning even from the birth of the word. As Paul Cartledge explains in *Democracy: A Life*, the ambiguities of the word *demokratia* were not just

etymological, but practical.¹¹ *Demos*, “people,” could mean, very broadly, any politically defined group. Or, as Cartledge writes, *demokratia* could mean “demos in the sectarian, class sense of the majority of poor citizens— however precisely that majority might be identified, and of course in ancient Greece there was never any serious doubt that the citizens in question were always free adult males.”¹² The term *kratos*, too, raises questions:

Unambiguously, the word meant ‘power’ or ‘control’, being derived etymologically from the Greek verb meaning ‘to grip’ or ‘to grasp’; but what was it that the demos was supposed to be grasping or gripping, having within or under its power— was it the organs of state governance, or was it the minority of citizens who were not poor, the ‘few’ (oligoi, likewise variously defined sociologically, or both)?¹³

From its earliest conception, the meaning of and requirements for democracy have been a subject of constant disagreement and debate. In recent centuries, the term has taken on an even wider variety of meanings, some procedural, and some moral.

“It is the word that resonates in people's minds and springs from their lips as they struggle for freedom and a better way of life,” Philip Schmitter and Terry Lyn Karl write in their 1991 article, “What Democracy Is... and Is Not.”¹⁴ “It is the word whose meaning we must discern if it is to be of any use in guiding political analysis and practice.” Schmitter and Karl suggest the following definition of democracy:

Modern political democracy is a system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their elected representatives.¹⁵

The authors also recognize different *types* of democracy, whose “diverse practices produce a similarly varied set effects.”¹⁶ To Schmitter and Karl, a regime or government is a set of

¹¹ Paul Cartledge, *Democracy: A Life* (Oxford, United States: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2016), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/yale-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4705604>.

¹² Cartledge, *Democracy*, 3.

¹³ Cartledge, *Democracy*, 4.

¹⁴ Philippe Schmitter and Terry Karl, “What Democracy Is. . . and Is Not,” *Journal of Democracy* 2 (January 1, 1991): 75–88, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1991.0033>.

¹⁵ Schmitter and Karl, “What Democracy Is. . . and Is Not.”

¹⁶ Schmitter and Karl, “What Democracy Is. . . and Is Not.”

established practices that regulate who can hold public office, the nature of those eligible or ineligible, the tactics they might employ to attain office, and the procedures for enacting decisions that bind the public. These practices need to be routinely known, practiced, accepted, and, importantly, institutionalized. This combination of institutionalized practices is then given a label. “Democratic is one;” the authors explain, while others are “autocratic, authoritarian, despotic, dictatorial, tyrannical, totalitarian, absolutist, traditional, monarchic, oligarchic, plutocratic, aristocratic, and sultanistic.” Schmitter and Karl also separately define “liberal” and “social” democracy. The former advocates “circumscribing the public realm as narrowly as possible,” while the latter, a socialist or social-democratic approach to democracy, extends the public realm through subsidization, regulation, and collective ownership. “Neither is intrinsically *more* democratic than the other—just *differently* democratic.”¹⁷ Schmitter and Karl’s definitions are particularly interesting because they define democracy beyond the act of holding competitive elections, instead rooting democracy in accountability. Democracy, under this accountability framework (which also, by extension, emphasizes the role of a defined citizenry) has more flexibility to take diverse forms because of the variation of institutions that might fit in an accountability definition.

In “What is Democracy? A Reconceptualization of the Quality of Democracy,” Gerardo Munck challenges the practicality of a minimalist, electoral definition of democracy, advocating instead for including *democratic quality* in the definition of democracy:

What is at stake in discussions about the quality of democracy is nothing less than the revision of the minimal definition of democracy that has been widely accepted since World War II, in such a way as to narrow the gap between the ideal of democracy and what is demanded in practice of countries that aspire to be called democracies.¹⁸

¹⁷Schmitter and Karl, “What Democracy Is . . . and Is Not.”

¹⁸Gerardo L. Munck, “What Is Democracy? A Reconceptualization of the Quality of Democracy,” SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2299128>.

Munck writes that, since World War II, the resistance from scholars towards defining democracy has been motivated by a prevailing interest in developing theories about *democratization*, namely, why a country becomes a democracy, and why a country might stay a democracy. Munck thinks that a minimalist definition of democracy is limiting: “the statement ‘democracy is about more than elections,’” he writes, “captures a crucial insight that is by now common wisdom.”¹⁹ However, as many other scholars have noted, acknowledging that a minimalist definition of democracy may be limiting does not naturally give way to a more satisfying definition. Munck agrees that scholars “currently lack a broad concept of democracy that can rival the minimal definition of democracy.”²⁰ Instead, Munck recommends including democratic “additions” to a limited definition of democracy to ensure democratic *quality* is included in its very definition. These include not only institutions (“clean, inclusive, competitive elections”) and access to government decision making (legislative decisions made by elected representatives), but also a particular social environment of politics that is conducive to the aforementioned institutions and access. In Munck’s view, this social environment should include freedom of expression, association, assembly, and access to information, as well as prevention of the “conversion of socio-economic inequality into political inequality.”²¹ Munck’s definition, or proposed expansion of, democracy is notable in its explicit reference to the goals that many people implicitly have in mind when talking about democracy: something more than procedures or institutions. “Democracy,” Munck states simply, “is about the value of freedom.”²² By including standards for freedom in a definition of democracy, Munck attempts to inject elements

¹⁹ Munck, “What Is Democracy?”

²⁰ Munck, “What Is Democracy?”

²¹ Munck, “What Is Democracy?”

²² Munck, “What Is Democracy?”

of this ideal democracy into a definition that still maintains procedural clarity and practical requirements.

Beyond accountability-based or quality-based definitions of democracy, Tom Daly considers two conceptions of democracy: liberal constitutional democracy and self-sustaining democracy.²³ The former he defines by Tom Ginsburg and Aziz Z. Huq's 2018 requirements for democracy: "political rights employed in the democratic process, the availability of neutral electoral machinery, and the stability, predictability, and publicity of a legal regime usually captured in the term 'rule of law.'"²⁴ The latter, self-sustaining democracy, means that electoral competition continues in regular elections, where the government is not held only by one political party. In a self-sustaining democracy, leaders cannot simply abolish future elections. This self-sustaining conception of democracy contains a hedge against erosion built into its very definition.

These are only a few examples of the rich and varied approaches to and requirements for democracy that scholars are currently examining. It is clear, though, that whether focusing on accountability, quality, or political rights, each author tries to build additional elements into the most narrow definition of the word "democracy." Such expansion may be motivated by an assumption that democracy has to be *good*. This assumption leads many scholars of democracy to embed normative assumptions into their definitions. One way to categorize the various characteristics that these authors posit in their definitions of democracy is to consider them in two camps: the procedural and the extra-procedural (i.e., "liberal" protections and institutions). Minimalist conceptions of democracies avoid the latter, while the more expansive definitions

²³ Tom Gerald Daly, "Democratic Decay: Conceptualising an Emerging Research Field," *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law* 11, no. 1 (April 1, 2019): 9–36, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40803-019-00086-2>.

²⁴ Tom Ginsburg and Aziz Z. Huq, "How to Save a Constitutional Democracy," in *How to Save a Constitutional Democracy* (University of Chicago Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.7208/9780226564418>.

argue that the former is insufficient— that democracy is necessarily more than just elections. In any case, in order to identify vulnerabilities in democracy and propose solutions to democratic decay, it is important to make note of these distinctions.

Liberalism, Democracy, and Liberal Democracy

“Over the last half-century in the West,” writes Zakaria in his 2003 book *The Future of Freedom*, “democracy and liberty have merged. But today the two strands of liberal democracy, interwoven in the Western political fabric, are coming apart across the globe.”²⁵ Zakaria’s 1997 article “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy” was one of the first to consider the possibility of illiberal democracy: a system in which governmental institutions fit democratic procedural standards, such as holding elections, or having political parties, but exhibit characteristics that undermine the principles of liberal democracy, such as protection of individual rights and freedoms and the rule of law.²⁶ Zakaria’s prescient analysis, which discusses how democracy is susceptible to illiberal gains as politicians increasingly respond to popular demands, accurately describes one of the foremost challenges facing the world today. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has openly discussed his affinity for illiberal democracy, declaring in his now-famous 2014 Băile Tuşnad speech that “the new state that we are building is an illiberal state, a non-liberal state.”²⁷ In Turkey, where in the early 2000s liberalizing reforms and talks of European Union accession made it widely considered a democratic model to its neighboring countries, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) has ruled

²⁵ Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 17.

²⁶ Fareed Zakaria, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy,” *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 6 (1997): 22–43, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20048274>.

²⁷ Csaba Tóth, “Full Text of Viktor Orbán’s Speech at Băile Tuşnad (Tusnádfürdő) of 26 July 2014,” *The Budapest Beacon*, July 29, 2014, <https://budapestbeacon.com/full-text-of-viktor-orbans-speech-at-baile-tusnad-tusnadfurdo-of-26-july-2014/>.

since 2002, undermining civil liberties and individual rights and cracking down on political opponents so much that the nation is now considered “Not Free” by Freedom House.²⁸

Illiberal forces worldwide are gaining power, bringing with them increases in political violence and authoritarianism at the expense of human rights, checks on abuses of power, and equal treatment under the law—values that had been pillars of what is often referred to as the “liberal world order” since the end of World War II. Democracies worldwide have been the target of attacks from authoritarian governments from Russia to China, as well as illiberal actors within individual states and countries who have worked to encourage a turn away from democracy. Countries in transition are increasingly at risk of moving towards authoritarian rule, and even nations with established democracies are under attack as illiberal actors leverage political and structural deficiencies.

In *The Future of Freedom*, Zakaria writes that in “1900 not a single country had what we would today consider a democracy: a government created by elections in which every adult citizen could vote. Today 119 do, comprising 62 percent of all countries in the world.”²⁹ Zakaria describes that moment as a “democratic age.”³⁰ But in the nearly 20 years since *The Future of Freedom*, the problems Zakaria describes and predicts have only gotten worse. Erosion of freedoms, even within what might be described as democracies, is spreading, and it is clear that the basic institutions of democracy are not necessarily enough to stop the spread of illiberalism.

As we have seen, elections, or rule by the people, are central to commonly accepted definitions of democracy. Zakaria quotes Samuel P. Huntington in *The Third Wave*, who writes that:

²⁸“Turkey: Freedom in the World 2023 Country Report,” Freedom House, 2023, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkey/freedom-world/2023>.

²⁹ Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom*, 13.

³⁰ Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom*, 13.

Elections, open, free and fair, are the essence of democracy, the inescapable *sine qua non*. Governments produced by elections may be inefficient, corrupt, shortsighted, irresponsible, dominated by special interests, and incapable of adopting policies demanded by the public good. These qualities make such governments undesirable but they do not make them undemocratic. Democracy is one public virtue, not the only one, and the relation of democracy to other public virtues and vices can only be understood if democracy is clearly distinguished from the other characteristics of political systems.³¹

In Huntington's definition, elections stand alone. Basic democracy is distinct from liberalism or any other "public virtues," thus allowing for the possibility of an "illiberal democracy."

Huntington's stance is important in emphasizing that the moral aspect that often accompanies conversations about democracy is not innate to its construction or definition. As Zakaria writes, "To have democracy mean, subjectively, 'a good government' renders it analytically useless."³²

The distinction between democracy per se and other "public virtues" is important for precision when discussing democratic erosion—when we speak about attacks on democracy, are we always talking about elections? Often, it seems, observations about democratic decay refer to more than just behavior at the voting booth. Despite the practical importance of this distinction, though, not everyone agrees with Zakaria's conveniently neat categories of what is "democracy" and what is "liberalism." Marc Plattner, editor of the *Journal of Democracy*, the National Endowment for Democracy's academic journal, pointedly rebutted Zakaria's "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," in his own essay titled "Liberalism and Democracy: Can't Have One without the Other."³³ Plattner agrees with the basic distinction between liberalism and democracy, but not the assertion that they can thrive separately, as the classification "illiberal democracy" implies. Many democracies, Plattner writes, "even among those that hold

³¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1993).

³² Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom*, 19.

³³ Marc F. Plattner, "Liberalism and Democracy: Can't Have One without the Other," *Foreign Affairs* 77, no. 2 (1998): 171–80, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20048858>.

unambiguously free and fair elections, fall short of providing the protection of individual liberties and adherence to the rule of law commonly found in the long-established democracies.

As Larry Diamond has put it, many of the new regimes are ‘electoral democracies’ but not ‘liberal democracies.’³⁴ Even though these liberal and electoral elements may be distinct in theory, Plattner continues, they are not in practice:

On the whole, countries that hold free elections are overwhelmingly more liberal than those that do not, and countries that protect civil liberties are overwhelmingly more likely to hold free elections than those that do not. This is not simply an accident. It is the result of powerful intrinsic links between electoral democracy and a liberal order.³⁵

Political scientist Larry Diamond echoes Plattner’s argument that Zakaria is incorrect to see liberalism and democracy as separable. Diamond takes particular issue with the conclusion of Zakaria’s book—that the West should be less focused on promoting democracy than on promoting liberalism, and that liberalism should precede democracy. Diamond is uncomfortable with the concept of a “liberal autocracy” as it is conceived by Zakaria:

[Zakaria] values democracy as a form of government, but believes— with Montesquieu, Madison, Tocqueville, and other seminal democratic thinkers—that its darker impulses must be restrained by a cultural fabric of liberal norms, a social fabric of elite judgment, and a constitutional fabric of limited government and judicial supremacy. All of these take time to construct, and so Zakaria believes that transitions from extreme autocracy are best negotiated gradually, even through a long period of semi-authoritarian rule. . . . Here he identifies South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and Malaysia—and elsewhere, Pinochet’s Chile—as paradigmatic, glossing over the fact that under military and one-party dictatorships, human rights were seriously abused in these countries, even if there was a “rule of law” of sorts in the economic realm.³⁶

Diamond and Plattner converge on a central idea that democracy does better with liberalism, and vice versa. Both point out the risks associated with a so-called “liberal autocracy,” with Diamond writing that these risks cause us to “encounter the fundamental flaw in [Zakaria’s] thesis, raised

³⁴ Plattner, “Liberalism and Democracy.”

³⁵ Plattner, “Liberalism and Democracy.”

³⁶ Larry Jay Diamond, “The Illusion of Liberal Autocracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 14, no. 4 (2003): 167–71.

in many critiques of his Foreign Affairs article but hardly addressed or repaired in this expanded treatment. Zakaria implies that in a good number of countries today, government would be more liberal, more affirming of the rule of law, if it were less democratic.”³⁷

As it turns out, there is data to support that the procedural or electoral elements of democracy and the “liberal” elements of democracy—such as rights protections—are both deteriorating in quality, but not at the same rate. In their 2020 article “Democratic Decoupling,” Iza Ding and Dan Slater use data from V-Dem, an organization that aggregates detailed democracy ratings, to evaluate the distinction between electoral and liberal institutions. Their analysis found that there is a growing gap, or “decoupling,” between electoral quality and rights protections, with the former improving in many cases where the latter deteriorates.³⁸ Ding and Slater set the electoral and rights protections metrics on opposite axes, demonstrating that in the past 30 years, these two democratic components have grown further and further apart. Their analysis concludes with the acknowledgement that democracies weaken not all at once, but that different components of democracies can deteriorate as others hold. For example, free, competitive elections might remain while liberal rights decline. The data shows, they write, that “rights are receding in many cases where elections are still improving, and not only in cases where electoral institutions are also eroding. The 2010s have thus been a decade not only of democratic backsliding, but of democratic decoupling.”³⁹

This democratic decoupling challenges the notion that improvements in electoral processes necessarily correspond to advancements in liberal rights. As we consider the implications of these shifts and changes since the early 2000s, it becomes evident that the

³⁷ Diamond, “The Illusion of Liberal Autocracy.”

³⁸ Iza Ding and Dan Slater, “Democratic Decoupling,” *Democratization* 28 (November 23, 2020): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.1842361>.

³⁹ Ding and Slater, “Democratic Decoupling.”

interplay and perhaps separation between liberalism and democracy has practical implications. The ongoing discourse surrounding the relationship between these two concepts and the rise of illiberal democracy remains a critical focal point for scholars, policymakers, and advocates seeking to understand and address the challenges facing democratic governance in the 21st century.

Zakaria's insights from the early 2000s on the fusion and subsequent unraveling of democracy and liberalism are increasingly relevant in today's geopolitical climate. Whether or not one agrees that there can be true democracy without liberalism (or vice versa), contemporary cases such as Hungary and Turkey, where leaders openly endorse illiberal democracy, demonstrate the widening gap between procedural democratic norms and the foundational tenets of liberalism and the protection of rights. In the years since Zakaria's work, the erosion of freedoms within democracies persists, as do threats to the democracies themselves. These evolving dynamics underscore the need for a renewed focus on the relationship between liberalism and democracy in the face of 21st-century challenges to democratic governance.

This section by no means constitutes an entirely comprehensive review of all of the existing definitions of, or requirements for, democracy, or even problems posed to definitions of democracy. A further examination of the literature on backsliding will naturally include an encounter with more of these perspectives and definitions. However, it is clear that the idea of what constitutes "democracy" is complicated and much-debated, with many variants swirling throughout the literature on democracy and democratic backsliding. Thus, any discussion about threats to democracy and ways to stop those threats needs to acknowledge what, if any, conceptions and components of democracy are being considered in a given theory.

Beyond the nonetheless important distinctions between definitions of democracy, even supporters of the most minimalist definition would agree that democracy is being attacked all over the world. Freedom House's *Freedom in the World* Report, an annual assessment of global freedom and democratic trends, marks 2023 as the 17th year of consecutive democratic decline.⁴⁰ From Russia's invasion of Ukraine to repression in Thailand and Myanmar to destabilization in Peru, more countries are shifting away from democratic procedures and norms than are moving towards them. The complications associated with defining democracy discussed in this chapter are accompanied by a related set of diverse classifications of democratic backsliding, demonstrating the challenges that conceptual inconsistencies pose to being able to effectively combat it.

What is Democratic Backsliding?

The rise in the frequency of attacks on democracy has led to an associated rise in the usage of the term "democratic backsliding," highlighting concern about the erosion of democratic norms and institutions worldwide. As Waldner and Lust caution, the lack of consistent usage has left efforts to explain backsliding resting on a shaky foundation.⁴¹ Against the backdrop of varied definitions of democracy, this section will seek to give a brief overview of different understandings of backsliding, how it has evolved, and how attacks on democracy function today.

In her seminal 2016 article "On Democratic Backsliding," Nancy Bermeo offers an extremely useful taxonomy of different varieties of democratic backsliding that demonstrates not

⁴⁰ "Marking 50 Years in the Struggle for Democracy," Freedom House, 2023, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2023/marking-50-years>.

⁴¹ Waldner and Lust, "Unwelcome Change."

only the pervasiveness of backsliding, but the many ways backsliding may come to be.⁴² Bermeo takes a historical approach to the problem, writing that the characteristic coups d'états of the Cold War have been replaced by what she calls “promissory coups,” in which coup-makers frame their ousting of the elected government as a defense of democracy. Unlike the “open-ended” coups of the Cold War era, in which the seizure of power was typically seen as permanent, promissory coups usually include a promise to quickly hold elections and restore democracy. Thus, in a promissory coup, coup-makers try to legitimize their undermining of democracy as a defense of democracy.⁴³ Bermeo calculates that the share of “successful” coups that can be categorized as “promissory” has risen from 35% before 1990 to 85% afterward, and that few are ever followed by competitive, fair elections.⁴⁴ Overwhelmingly, these coups result in a deterioration of democracy.⁴⁵ Elections did not take place for over six years after promissory coups in Gambia (1994), Pakistan (1999), and Fiji (2006), to name a few.⁴⁶

Thailand, which Bermeo mentions, is an apt example of the risks that these types of coups pose to democracy. Prior to its 2006 promissory coup, Thailand was rated “Free” by Freedom House. After the ousting of democratically elected Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, the coup-makers held elections, demonstrating more commitment than most promissory coup-makers to their democratic promises and allowing some elected previous government officials to regain power. However, the military again seized power in 2014, this time making no promises to hold elections.⁴⁷ After five years of military dictatorship, Thailand inched back towards democracy in 2019, transitioning towards a military-dominated semi-elected

⁴² Nancy Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding,” *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (2016): 5–19.

⁴³ Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding.”

⁴⁴ Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding.”

⁴⁵ Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding.”

⁴⁶ Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding.”

⁴⁷ Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding.”

government.⁴⁸ But nearly two decades after the initial promissory coup, Thailand has not returned to the levels of freedom seen before 2006, and is currently rated “Not Free” by Freedom House.⁴⁹ “Unlike other forms of backsliding,” writes Bermeo, “promissory coups sometimes raise expectations at home and abroad, but these expectations are nearly always dashed.”⁵⁰

More common than promissory coups, or coups at all, Bermeo warns of another, perhaps more subtle, category of backsliding: executive aggrandizement. Executive aggrandizement is one of the most common forms of backsliding today, and occurs when an elected executive expands their power, often through existing legal means.⁵¹ Through institutional changes, often the disassembly of institutions that serve as checks on the executive, the executive can, like the promissory coup-maker, frame their undemocratic expansion of power as legitimate. Because the elected executive has a claim to a democratic mandate, their power-expanding decrees or referenda—even as they weaken democratic institutions—are often framed as “democratic,” too.

Turkey, one of the most frequently discussed victims of backsliding in recent memory, serves as a warning of the dangers of executive aggrandizement. Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) were elected in Turkey in 2002, gaining greater shares of the vote in subsequent elections. AKP’s power in parliament enabled the party to pass more than 500 new laws during Erdoğan’s first two years in office, and even more over the following decade.⁵² These laws, many of which targeted checks on the executive, included allowing for the criminal prosecution of journalists, limiting internet access, and censoring radio and television. Erdoğan also passed dozens of constitutional changes through referendums, granting him power to name a majority of Constitutional Court (the Turkish supreme court) judges, while removing thousands

⁴⁸ “Thailand: Freedom in the World 2023 Country Report,” Freedom House, 2023, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/thailand/freedom-world/2023>.

⁴⁹ “Thailand,” Freedom House.

⁵⁰ Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding.”

⁵¹ Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding.”

⁵² Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding.”

of other judges from their posts. Though executive aggrandizement had been going on for nearly two decades, in 2017 Erdoğan put the final nail in Turkey's democratic coffin: formally shifting Turkey away from a parliamentary system and towards a presidential one, Erdoğan took on a new role, an "enhanced presidency." The new office eliminated the office of the prime minister and granted even more powers to the executive, essentially eliminating all remaining traces of checks and balances: the president could now set the national budget, appoint cabinet ministers without approval from parliament, and select judges.⁵³ This expansion of the executive to remove checks from within the government, coupled with the repression of external media, has led Turkey, once a model of democratic and economic achievement, into authoritarianism, at the hands of a freely elected executive.

The key lesson that Bermeo highlights in her work is that these two forms of backsliding, both on the rise, each rely on incremental change. As Ding and Slater show, liberal democracy requires the functioning collaboration between numerous institutions, and just as these components must come together to make a democracy work, so too can they be taken apart component by component, slowly, to present great risk to democracy. Gradual institutional changes can lead to regimes that Bermeo calls "ambiguously democratic" or "hybrid." Consider, for example, the "illiberal democracy." In many cases, the less well-defined institutional weakening appears, the more difficult it is to identify and address.

This danger of democratic erosion by insiders is central to Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt's 2018 book *How Democracies Die*. Levitsky and Ziblatt situate the rise of Donald Trump in larger historical trends in the United States that put its democracy at risk: the decline of political parties as "gatekeepers" of extremists, and the rise of norm erosion, specifically the

⁵³ Kemal Kirişci and Amanda Sloat, "The Rise and Fall of Liberal Democracy in Turkey: Implications for the West," Brookings, February 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-rise-and-fall-of-liberal-democracy-in-turkey-implications-for-the-west/>.

weakening of the norms of mutual toleration and forbearance.⁵⁴ The former delineated that parties and candidates accept each other as legitimate rivals and, should they be elected, legitimate leaders. The latter, forbearance, asks for restraint, that “public officials use their institutional prerogatives judiciously.”⁵⁵ It is the weakening of these important pillars of American democracy that has facilitated the polarization and extremism of the past decade.

Bermeo, Levitsky, and Ziblatt each demonstrate something particularly dangerous about how backsliding functions today in their respective works: democratic erosion is often done in the name of democracy. Bermeo outlined how promissory coups and executive aggrandizement are usually coupled with promises of restored, even improved democracy, and often instituted by those who claim to defend democracy in the first place. Levitsky and Ziblatt warn of those that attempt to usurp democracy by pretending to protect it.

In the face of these ambiguities, and the weaponization of the language of democracy in order to accomplish undemocratic ends, it is clear that the definitional inconsistencies that characterize the literatures on democracy and democratic backsliding today present not just an academic challenge, but a policy one. In the past decades, slow reactions by Western democracies to democratic backsliding has led to delayed policy efforts, efforts that have often been too late to be helpful. As Thomas Carothers and Benjamin Press write in “Understanding and Responding to Global Democratic Backsliding,”:

The U.S. government was still lauding Erdoğan’s Turkey as a beacon of democracy in a Muslim-majority country well after the signs of serious democratic deterioration were apparent. Only twelve years after Orbán began dismantling Hungarian democracy has the European Union started to take potentially serious measures to oppose his autocratic project. And since Tunisian President Kais Saied carried out a presidential self-coup in

⁵⁴ Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018).

⁵⁵ Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*.

July 2021, U.S. policymakers have been slow to come to terms with the full extent of his antidemocratic intentions.⁵⁶

Further, policy recommendations to combat backsliding typically focus only on one element or the other—namely, focusing on election integrity and protections, or on strengthening liberal institutions, such as freedom of the press or the independence of the judiciary. The lack of acknowledgement in policy circles about the increasingly separate and decoupled elements of liberal democracy either leads to policy suggestions that are often underinclusive, such as recommendations that assume improving electoral quality will in turn lead to an improvement in rights quality. These imprecise policy prescriptions have significant consequences for the more than one-third of the world’s population who live in countries undergoing democratic decline.⁵⁷

In particular, the rise of the “illiberal democracy” should present a worrying policy puzzle for scholars and policymakers alike. The very persistence—and spread of—this new type of state demonstrates the fallibility of the premise that the electoral and liberal elements of a liberal democracy necessarily go hand in hand. It also forces a confrontation with a now-outdated faith in democracy’s intuitive appeal, its inevitable expansion, and its fundamental value. It is clear, then, that two fundamental dilemmas shape the literature on democratic backsliding. First, definitional inconsistency, not only with regards to backsliding, how it works, and its varieties, but also with regards to democracy itself, presents real problems for policymakers attempting to counter an ill-defined evil. Second, theorists and policymakers remain convinced that there is something special about democracy—that it is something to aspire to. Each of the writers mentioned so far has written about democracy’s inherent value in this way, especially when

⁵⁶Thomas Carothers and Benjamin Press, “Understanding and Responding to Global Democratic Backsliding,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 20, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/10/20/understanding-and-responding-to-global-democratic-backsliding-pub-88173>.

⁵⁷Norman Eisen et al., “The Democracy Playbook: Preventing and Reversing Democratic Backsliding,” Brookings, November 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-democracy-playbook-preventing-and-reversing-democratic-backsliding/>.

compared to other forms of government. And yet, global trends, especially the rise of the illiberal democracy, indicate that democracy and “good governance” do not always go together as scholars and politicians once hoped.

The idea of democracy as “best” is, ultimately, a recent idea. For thousands of years, humans experimented with many varieties of constitutions, each flawed in their own ways. As the complications of the backsliding literature reveal, the acceptance of a certain type of government as unequivocally exceptional can lead to blind spots in attempts to protect it. To discover what the current scholars and policymakers are missing in their attempts to identify and counter backsliding, we may have to return to a time long before democracy achieved this untouchable status.

Chapter II: Plato's *Republic* and Democracy

In May 2016, with Donald Trump inching closer and closer to winning the Republican nomination for president, Andrew Sullivan published an article in *New York Magazine* “America Has Never Been So Ripe for Tyranny,” with a bold subheading: “Democracies End When They Are Too Democratic.”⁵⁸ “As this dystopian election campaign has unfolded,” Sullivan writes, “my mind keeps being tugged by a passage in Plato’s *Republic*.”⁵⁹ In the passage he is referring to, in Book VIII of the *Republic*, Plato outlines different political systems and how they devolve into each other. In a discussion that would disturb many democratic theorists (Sullivan describes it as “surprising” and “unsettling”), Plato accuses democracy of inevitably begetting tyranny. Contrary to the dominant theories of backsliding in the literature today, Plato’s analysis presents a unique diagnosis about the ills of democracy: sliding too far *into* democracy, he argues, rather than out of it, as backsliding is typically characterized, is what leads to tyranny. In Plato’s depiction, the uninhibited freedoms of a democracy beget more freedoms, and lawlessness, polarization, and disdain for authority spreads. A tyrant, supported by a mob of anti-elite, anti-establishment supporters, emerges as a champion to represent the people in this increasingly anarchic mess, and with the tyrant’s rise, freedom and democracy under the constitution are dissolved. “Plato had planted a gnawing worry in my mind a few decades ago about the intrinsic danger of late-democratic life,” Sullivan writes. “It was increasingly hard not to see in Plato’s vision a murky reflection of our own hyper-democratic times and in Trump a demagogic, tyrannical character plucked directly out of one of the first books about politics ever written.”⁶⁰

⁵⁸Andrew Sullivan, “America Has Never Been So Ripe for Tyranny,” *New York Magazine*, May 1, 2016, <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2016/04/america-tyranny-donald-trump.html>.

⁵⁹ Sullivan, “America Has Never Been So Ripe for Tyranny.”

⁶⁰ Sullivan, “America Has Never Been So Ripe for Tyranny.”

Born a year after Pericles's death to a politically well-connected family and raised during the Peloponnesian War, Plato came of age in a time of great political turmoil in Athens. His adolescence was marked by political upheaval during the last years of the war as he watched oligarchic coup-makers, frustrated with how the democratic assembly had managed Athenian politics during the war with Sparta, overthrow Athenian democracy. Convinced that an oligarchic few could manage the war better than the assembly, the oligarchs established a government that stood for just over a year before being replaced by democracy once again.⁶¹ Democracy returned to Athens, but, as though bent on furthering Plato's disillusionment with Athenian politics, officials voted to execute Plato's teacher, Socrates, "the best and wisest and most righteous man."⁶²

Given the tumultuous moment in which Plato's political philosophy was fostered, his staunchly antidemocratic stance in the *Republic*, in which he outlines his ideal city, the Kallipolis, is understandable. While the hauntingly predictive nature of Plato's indictment of democracy in Book VIII has been taken up in brief by writers like Sullivan, the idea of backsliding *into* democracy, as Plato sets it up, is missing from the literature on democratic backsliding.

In his discussion of the just and unjust constitutions in Book VIII, Plato describes the different types of constitutions of cities: aristocracy, timocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny. Each is worse than its predecessor, and, Plato claims, each inevitably degenerates into its successor. In this sketch, Plato places democracy as the second-to-worst regime type, better only than tyranny. Plato's primary indictment of democracy lies in its lack of checks against poor

⁶¹ Thomas R. Martin, *Ancient Greece: From Prehistoric to Hellenistic Times*, Updated ed. edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

⁶² George Klosko, *The Development of Plato's Political Theory* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2007), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/yale-ebooks/detail.action?docID=415857>.

governance, its very susceptibility to devolving into tyranny. This is unsettling to the modern reader. What is democracy, if not something to aspire to? Is Plato missing something that we, enlightened by the millenia between us and Plato's Athens, understand? Or can Plato point us to a blind spot in our own reasoning on democracy?

The way Athenian democracy functioned in Plato's time was different in some key respects from mainstream understandings of democracy today. Slavery was widespread; in fact, there were at least twice as many enslaved people as citizens.⁶³ Only adult male citizens who had completed military service could participate in Athenian democracy, representing less than a quarter of the Athenian population.⁶⁴ Democracy also functioned on the level of the city-state, thus allowing for "direct" democracy in which all eligible citizens voted on given laws, rather than for representatives that represented groups of constituents. Important decisions, then, such as the execution of Socrates, were thus made by the assembly, the gathering of eligible citizens where matters of public policy, legislation, and other important issues were discussed and voted on. Yet, despite these differences, Plato's commentary on democracy remains a point of fascination, and, I will argue, the contemporary resonance of his identification of democracy's flaws offers an important shake-up of the literature. In this chapter, I will first analyze Plato's depiction of the four unjust constitutions outlined in Book VII of the *Republic*. Additionally, I will examine Plato's insights into the decay from one form of constitution into another, focusing particularly on Plato's warning about the inevitable transition from democracy into tyranny. Finally, I draw comparisons between Plato's depiction of the slide from democracy into tyranny and modern instances of democratic backsliding. These comparisons show how the slide too far

⁶³ Brian O'Boyle, "Plato's Philosophy Is an Aristocratic Attack on Democracy and Popular Rule," April 29, 2023, <https://jacobin.com/2023/04/plato-republic-athens-democracy-aristocracy-tyrants>.

⁶⁴ O'Boyle, "Plato's Philosophy Is an Aristocratic Attack on Democracy and Popular Rule."

into democracy, as it is depicted in the *Republic*, flows from a dangerous weakening of checks on power, and has resonant diagnostic power today.

Plato's Five Constitutions

Plato's Socrates begins Book V of the *Republic* by hinting at a task that will not really be taken up until Book VIII. Having spent the previous Books describing the just city and the just soul, Socrates wants to draw a distinction between this city's "good" constitution and an unjust constitution. "If this is indeed the correct kind," Socrates says, referring to the just city and just constitution, "all the others—whether as city governments or as organizations of the individual soul—are bad and mistaken. Their badness is of four kinds."⁶⁵ However, before Socrates can explain these four unjust constitutions, he is immediately interrupted by Polemarchus and Adeimantus who want him to elaborate more on the lifestyle of the guardians in the just city. Socrates resumes his discussion about the four kinds of unjust constitutions in Book VIII.

Plato justifies what he sets out to do in Book VIII almost like a warning. "You said," Socrates's interlocutor Glaucon asks, "if I remember, that there were four types of constitution remaining that are worth discussing, each with faults that we should observe...our aim was to observe them all."⁶⁶ Here, Glaucon earnestly asks Socrates to recount the types of unjust constitutions as if seeking a guide about what *not* to do. Socrates is happy to oblige.

First, there's the constitution praised by most people, namely, the Cretan or Laconian. The second, which is also second in the praise it receives, is called oligarchy and is filled with a host of evils. The next in order, and antagonistic to it, is democracy. And finally there is genuine tyranny, surpassing all of them, the fourth and last of the diseased cities.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 499a.

⁶⁶ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 544a.

⁶⁷ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 544c.

Then Socrates launches into his description of each type of city. Though not given much attention in Book VIII, having been the subject of most of the rest of the *Republic*, “the one that’s like aristocracy which is said to be good and just,” is first on Plato’s ladder of just cities. The rulers of this aristocracy, Socrates says in Books II and III, “must be the ones who are the best at guarding the city,” those who “seem most of all to believe throughout their lives that they must eagerly pursue what is advantageous to the city and be wholly unwilling to do the opposite.”⁶⁸ They must combine “[p]hilosophy, spirit, speed, and strength.”⁶⁹ In fact, in Book V, Socrates states to Glaucon that there can be no just city without these leaders, the “philosopher kings”:

Until philosophers rule as kings in cities or those who are now called kings and leading men genuinely and adequately philosophize, that is, until political power and philosophy entirely coincide, while the many natures who at present pursue either one exclusively are forcibly prevented from doing so, cities will have no rest from evils, Glaucon, nor, I think, will the human race. And, until this happens, the constitution we’ve been describing in theory will never be born to the fullest extent possible or see the light of the sun.⁷⁰

Having dedicated the bulk of the dialogue to describing the ideal city, Socrates pivots to describing the “inferior” forms of the city.⁷¹

First is Socrates’s description of the timocracy, the “honor-loving constitution.”⁷² Second to the aristocracy of philosopher kings in its justness, it “will imitate the aristocratic constitution in some respects and oligarchy in others, since it’s between them, and...also have some features of its own.”⁷³ The prevalence of private property is the timocracy’s first major flaw. The leaders of the timocracy “will desire money just as those in oligarchies do, passionately adoring gold and silver in secret...they’ll be mean with their own money, since they value it and are not allowed to acquire it openly, but they’ll love to spend other people’s because of their appetites. They’ll

⁶⁸ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 412c-d.

⁶⁹ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 376c.

⁷⁰ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 473d-e.

⁷¹ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 544e.

⁷² Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 545a.

⁷³ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 547d.

enjoy their pleasures in secret...⁷⁴ The leaders and citizens of the timocracy become stingy, secretive, and cunning, marking an end to an important element of the aristocracy of philosopher kings, namely, the illegality of the leaders owning property. The second major flaw of the timocracy, bringing it further from justice, is a culture of increased lawbreaking and inclination towards war. Citizens will “run away from the law like boys from their father...” and rulers will be appointed who “are more naturally suited for war than peace,” and thus the timocracy will “spend all its time making war.”⁷⁵

Next comes oligarchy, the “constitution based on a property assessment, in which the rich rule, and the poor man has no share in ruling.”⁷⁶ Socrates identifies several key flaws with this kind of constitution. First, which he demonstrates through a metaphor of a ship’s captain being chosen based on wealth as opposed to who might best steer the ship, is the dangerous possibility of poor leadership. Now two constitutions removed from the just rule of the philosopher kings, the oligarchy is ruled by money rather than wisdom. The second major flaw that Socrates points out about the oligarchic city is that by necessity, the oligarchy “isn’t one city but two—one of the poor and one of the rich—living in the same place and always plotting against one another.”⁷⁷ Further, Socrates reasons that in contrast to the honor-and-war-loving timocrats, the oligarchs will be unable to fight in a war or defend their city. “They’d be compelled either to arm and use the majority,” says Socrates, “and so have more to fear from them than the enemy, or not to use them and show up as true oligarchs—few in number—on the battlefield.”⁷⁸ While Socrates’ description of oligarchy might sound like an progressive condemnation of a ruling upper class, he is also unforgiving of the poor in the oligarchic city: the greatest of all evildoers, Socrates

⁷⁴ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 548a.

⁷⁵ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 547e.

⁷⁶ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 550d.

⁷⁷ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 551d.

⁷⁸ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 551e-d.

proclaims, are those who own no property, and are neither “money-maker, craftsman, a member of the cavalry, or a hoplite, but a poor person without means.”⁷⁹ To his great horror, “this sort of thing is not forbidden in oligarchies.”⁸⁰

There is a possible egalitarian reading of Plato’s description of these “drones,” as Socrates calls them, in that his picture of the just city (where wealth and private property do not afflict the rulers) involves no economic inequality and therefore no one is a “drone.” However, Plato’s Socrates describes the poor as “an affliction to the city.”⁸¹ In an oligarchy, Socrates says, “almost everyone except the rulers is a beggar,” and thus the citizens themselves afflict the city with a whole host of evils, including theft.⁸² Plato writes that the existence of beggars, thieves and “evildoers” is due to “a bad constitutional arrangement,” a moral denunciation of poverty that conveys not sympathy for the poor, but Plato’s conviction that conditions of economic inequality are incompatible with his picture of the just city.⁸³

While Plato’s attack on oligarchy is rooted in the city’s extreme inequality and the subsequent creation of the “two cities” of rich and poor, his criticism of democracy, the next constitution down on his ladder of just cities, clarifies that he does not see the solution to the inequality of oligarchy in democracy. The fact that Plato does not see a feasible solution to extreme inequality in a swing towards extreme equality is revealing: as much as he detests the oligarchy, the risks that accompany the democracy are *worse*. Plato’s discussion of democracy, which he defines as a constitution in which the citizens have “an equal share in ruling,” is distrustful from the very beginning.⁸⁴ Beyond his introduction of the democratic city as the second-to-worst on his scalar ordering from most to least just constitution, Plato also writes

⁷⁹ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 552a.

⁸⁰ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 552b.

⁸¹ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 552c.

⁸² Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 552d.

⁸³ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 552e.

⁸⁴ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 557a.

about democracy with a two-layered suspicion that is not present in his discussion of other types of constitution: not only concern with the constitution *itself* and the risk it poses to the city, as with timocracy and oligarchy, but skepticism about how democracy is *portrayed* as opposed to how it actually functions. Adeimantus, Socrates's interlocutor, asks of democracy: "First of all, then, aren't they free? And isn't the city full of freedom and freedom of speech? And doesn't everyone have it in the license to do what he wants?"⁸⁵

"That's what they say, at any rate," Socrates replies.⁸⁶

Socrates then establishes several key features of democracy. Under a democratic constitution, people will arrange their lives according to what pleases them. People of all varieties will be found in the democratic city, and they live lives that they deem pleasant and free.

To the modern reader, Adeimantus seems to ask Socrates all the questions that a contemporary democrat might: "it looks like," he says, "this is the finest or most beautiful of the constitutions...and many people would probably judge it to be so."⁸⁷ Socrates replies, no less cynical than before. "They certainly would."⁸⁸ Plato is careful to acknowledge what a reader, both ancient and modern, might see as the merits of democracy. The ultimate "good" as defined by a democracy, says Socrates, is freedom.⁸⁹ "Surely you'd hear a democratic city say that [freedom] is the finest thing it has, so that as a result it is the only city worth living in for someone who is by nature free."⁹⁰ An abundance of freedom, though, despite its central role in a democracy, is also what brings about democracy's downfall. As democracy persists, freedoms multiply: there is legal equality between men and women, and even animals expect to be able to roam freely. Citizens of a democracy become so "sensitive, that, if anyone even puts upon

⁸⁵ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 557b.

⁸⁶ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 557b.

⁸⁷ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 557c.

⁸⁸ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 557c.

⁸⁹ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 562b.

⁹⁰ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 562c.

himself the least degree of slavery, they become angry and cannot endure it, and in the end, as you know, they take no notice of the laws...”⁹¹ In Plato’s depiction, too much freedom leads to an ever-increasing intolerance for authority, and with it, hatred for political elites. In a democracy, writes Plato, political or philosophical expertise is not simply irrelevant to ruling the city, but spurned by its citizens.

Plato’s picture of the democracy-gone-too-far feels strikingly present. In a 2023 survey from the Pew Research Center, fewer than 20% of Americans reported that they trust the government to do what is in their best interest “most of the time.”⁹² Americans’ confidence in medical scientists, journalists, and education leaders is also plummeting.⁹³ Tom Nichols’s characterization of this rejection of elitism and expertise in his article “The Death of Expertise” echoes Plato’s description of what happens when freedom goes too far:

Today, any assertion of expertise produces an explosion of anger from certain quarters of the American public, who immediately complain that such claims are nothing more than fallacious “appeals to authority,” sure signs of dreadful “elitism,” and an obvious effort to use credentials to stifle the dialogue required by a “real” democracy... Having equal rights does not mean having equal talents, equal abilities, or equal knowledge. It assuredly does not mean that “everyone’s opinion about anything is as good as anyone else’s.” And yet, this is now enshrined as the credo of a fair number of people despite being obvious nonsense.⁹⁴

Nichols explains this erosion of respect for experts and authority much like Plato explains what happens when those other than the experts—in Plato’s case, the philosopher kings—are given too much freedom, and thus lose all respect for those who might put upon them “the least degree of

⁹¹ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 563d-e.

⁹² Pew Research Center, “Americans’ Views of Government: Decades of Distrust, Enduring Support for Its Role,” *Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy* (blog), June 6, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/06/06/americans-views-of-government-decades-of-distrust-enduring-support-for-its-role/>.

⁹³ Brian Kennedy, Alec Tyson, and Cary Funk, “Americans’ Trust in Scientists, Other Groups Declines,” *Pew Research Center Science & Society* (blog), February 15, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2022/02/15/americans-trust-in-scientists-other-groups-declines/>.

⁹⁴ Tom Nichols, “The Death Of Expertise,” *The Federalist*, January 17, 2014, <https://thefederalist.com/2014/01/17/the-death-of-expertise/>.

slavery.”⁹⁵ “I fear we are witnessing the “death of expertise,” Nichols writes. “A Google-fueled, Wikipedia-based, blog-sodden collapse of any division between professionals and laymen, students and teachers, knowers and wonderers – in other words, between those of any achievement in an area and those with none at all.”⁹⁶ Plato mentions this very inversion. In a democracy, “students despise their teachers or tutors,” whereas a teacher “is afraid of his students.”⁹⁷

This image of freedom as a double-edged sword, both central to the city and the source of its ultimate destruction, mirrors Plato’s unique rhetorical structuring of his description of democracy. Plato acknowledges the appeal of democracy, its allures and freedoms, but in doing so, he puts the reader in the role of the naive democrat. It is a radical move: he does not venture, for example, to list the ways in which oligarchy is naturally appealing. But by grasping onto his interlocutor’s (and reader’s) instinctive defense of democracy, his attack on the constitution is that much stronger: our instinct to believe that more freedom, and more participation in government, is necessarily *good* is exactly what, in Plato’s image, will cause democracy to stretch too far, beget too much freedom, and eventually devolve into the anarchic picture that ends Book VIII.

From this lawless city, tyranny is born. Like many contemporary autocrats, Plato’s tyrant rises to power by gathering a mob of loyal supporters. Much like Turkey’s Erdoğan, who in recent months has made even more intense moves to jail political opponents and critics, the tyrant spills “kindred blood,” brings citizens to trial on false charges and jails or executes his political enemies.⁹⁸ One might argue that Turkey’s elections, although unfair, are still real, and

⁹⁵ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 563d-e.

⁹⁶ Nichols, “The Death Of Expertise.”

⁹⁷ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 563a.

⁹⁸ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 565e.

there is some truth to that: Turkey holds elections and maintains a multiparty system, which provide some (dwindling) avenues for opposition and accountability. But so too did Erdoğan leverage nationalism to sow division and stoke factionalism and polarization, much like Plato's tyrant. Erdoğan, like Plato's tyrant who pledges to quell the chaos of democracy, pledged to restore order to Turkey.⁹⁹ While Turkey may maintain some of the trappings of democracy, the erosion of democratic norms and institutions under Erdoğan's leadership poses significant challenges to the country's democratic health, and the parallels to the rise of Plato's tyrant across millennia are too striking to be ignored.

In Book VIII, the tyrant is especially adept at playing up political and economic dissatisfactions. The city has slid so far into democracy, so focused on freedom that its citizens cannot tolerate any expertise, and the only leader they can bear is one who knows how to play to their discontents. The tyrant starts his reign by making promises about equality, land redistribution, and inclusivity, but soon exiles his enemies to protect his reign and intentionally starts war so that the citizens "feel the need of a leader."¹⁰⁰ In fact, Socrates argues that the tyrant must always be looking for war, either internal or external, to quell any "thoughts of freedom."¹⁰¹ The citizens become poor due to high war taxes and thus pay decreased attention to politics, and the tyrant exiles anyone who is "brave, large-minded, knowledgeable, or rich."¹⁰² "In the place of the great but inappropriate freedom they enjoyed under democracy," Socrates ends the Book, somberly, "they have put upon themselves the harshest and most bitter slavery to slaves."¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Kareem Fahim. "Erdogan Continues Harsh Rhetoric Following Victory in Turkish Election." The Washington Post, May 30, 2023. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/05/29/erdogan-post-election-harsh-rhetoric/>.

¹⁰⁰ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 566e.

¹⁰¹ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 567a.

¹⁰² Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 567b-c.

¹⁰³ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 569b-c.

The *Republic's* Constitutional Decline

Plato's description of these five types of constitutions and their associated cities rests on an important assumption: that each political state devolves into the next, falling from aristocracy to tyranny. Plato begins his description of the fall of the just city with the assertion that, even though it is difficult for the just city to change, "everything that comes into being must decay. Not even a constitution such as this [the just constitution of the aristocracy] will last forever. It, too, must face dissolution."¹⁰⁴ Plato does not see his just regime as infallible. The rulers of the just city will, as Plato demonstrates through a series of geometric proofs, inevitably have children at the wrong time. The older ruling generation will choose the best of their children, but the new rulers will eventually disregard important considerations (for music, poetry, and physical training) and allow for the mixing of different types of souls, the dangers of which Socrates describes in the myth of the metals in Book III. Thus begins a civil war between the types of people in the city: the remaining wise people "lead the constitution towards virtue and the old order," but the imperfect generation of rulers will "pull the constitution towards money-making and the acquisition of land."¹⁰⁵ This civil war ends in compromise: private property is distributed, servants who, in the just aristocracy, were free, are enslaved, and the leaders begin to occupy themselves with war.¹⁰⁶ Thus, the timocracy is born.

Now that injustice has entered the city, Plato depicts the transition into increasingly less-just forms of constitutions as inevitable. From timocracy comes oligarchy: the leaders, now able to hoard money under the timocracy, find more and more ways to spend it on themselves. Increasingly, they come to disregard all laws with relation to private property and, "the more

¹⁰⁴ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 546a.

¹⁰⁵ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 547b.

¹⁰⁶ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 547b-c.

they value [money], the less they value virtue.”¹⁰⁷ As wealth is valued more in the city, virtue is valued even less, until the honor-loving citizens and leaders of the timocracy become “money lovers.”¹⁰⁸ Those who have wealth are praised and appointed as rulers, those who are poor are dishonored. From this increased value placed on wealth comes associated legislation: laws, Plato writes, are then passed that establish a wealth qualification for political participation and leadership, the final step into true oligarchy.

Oligarchy decays as money begins to be valued as much for honor as for actual material security or goods. Drones multiply in number, and they “long for a revolution.”¹⁰⁹ Economic inequality continues to grow, and so too does the resentment between the rich and the poor. The poor say to each other, referring to the rich, “These people are at our mercy; they’re good for nothing.”¹¹⁰ It is important to note that the transition from oligarchy to democracy—unlike from aristocracy to timocracy, timocracy to oligarchy, or even democracy to tyranny—is violent. The decline from aristocracy to timocracy is a transition that results from inevitable mathematical and genetic error, and the decline from timocracy to oligarchy involves reshaping the constitution as a means to *avoid* civil war and appease the increasingly powerful rich. When oligarchy decays, though, civil war breaks out, and the poor are victorious. The lower class kill some of the rich and expel the others, while some of the rich flee to protect their wealth.¹¹¹ Plato’s depiction of democracy thus begins with violent revolution and expulsion of the elites, foreshadowing the mob rule and tyranny that eventually emerge from the democracy. With the oligarchs dead or exiled, those who remain in the city are assigned an equal share in ruling under the constitution: democracy.

¹⁰⁷ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 550e.

¹⁰⁸ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 551a.

¹⁰⁹ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 555e.

¹¹⁰ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 556d.

¹¹¹ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 557a.

Plato's depiction of democracy's decay into tyranny reveals an interesting layer of his characterization of democracy's injustice. Unlike his depiction of the other regimes, democracy's fallibility, the very fact that it begets tyranny, is central to what makes it unjust. It is not characterized by the growing greed of the timocracy, nor the absolute inequality of oligarchy. In fact, Plato is remarkably willing to entertain the "goods" of democracy: democracy is, Plato writes, "a pleasant life, while it lasts."¹¹² A democracy is tolerant, and honors not those who have any specific set of virtues but he who "tells them that he wishes the majority well."¹¹³ Plato does not respect the democrats, whom he portrays as undisciplined, "yielding day by day to the desire at hand," but at the same time, he admits that "many men and women might envy [life in the democratic city], since it contains the most models of constitutions and ways of living."¹¹⁴ It is not in this lack of discipline or preponderance of types of people and constitutions that Plato sees the problem with democracy. Rather, it is democracy's very fall that dooms it in Plato's eyes, an argument against democracy that takes great priority in his description of the constitutional types and is strikingly relevant to contemporary readers. "Isn't democracy's insatiable desire for what it defines as the good also what destroys it?" Adeimantus asks.¹¹⁵ Socrates agrees. The democratic city will inevitably get "bad cupbearers for its leaders."¹¹⁶ When this happens, unless the leaders continuously grant more and more freedoms, they are punished by the city (in this case, the leaders are accused of being "accursed oligarchs").¹¹⁷

In this way, freedoms expand. All forms of hierarchy are abolished. The father behaves like his son, the son like his father. The teacher fears the student, the young imitate the old, and the old "stoop to the level of the young...imitating the young for fear of appearing disagreeable

¹¹² Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 558a.

¹¹³ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 558c.

¹¹⁴ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 561e.

¹¹⁵ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 562b..

¹¹⁶ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 562d.

¹¹⁷ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 562d.

and authoritarian.”¹¹⁸ As deference to authority disappears, the “citizens’ souls [become] so sensitive” that they cannot tolerate laws at all.¹¹⁹ It is in this moment of democracy, with freedoms stretched so far and elites totally despised, that the tyrant seizes power. “Extreme freedom can’t be expected to lead to anything but a change to extreme slavery,” Plato writes.¹²⁰ The tyrant first must gather supporters, a “docile mob.”¹²¹ He grows in popularity by making promises appealing to the people: canceling debts, banishing enemies of the city. He claims to represent the citizens and “stirs up civil wars against the rich,” and he charges the wealthy elites with being “enemies of the people.”¹²² More and more, the tyrant is able to position himself as the answer to the increasing chaos and lawlessness of democracy. He gains loyal supporters who “admire and associate with him,” even as the “decent people hate and avoid him.”¹²³ But increasingly, as the tyrant gains power, wages war, and limits the freedoms of the people, they grow frustrated: they had hoped that “they’d be free from the rich and the so-called fine and good people in the city.”¹²⁴ Rather than stamping out the last of the democracy’s elites, the tyrant himself becomes the elite, riding the wave of the democracy’s thirst for freedom.

This depiction of the rise of tyranny is as depressing as it is resonant. Plato portrays this slide as completely inevitable: not only does tyranny emerge out of no regime other than democracy, but democracy’s most central characteristic, its love of freedom, is what leads to its unavoidable fall into tyranny. Plato’s tyrant fosters a cult of personality: through rhetoric, charisma, and unfulfilled promises of increased freedoms, he not only wins the allegiance of the “docile mob” but is able to commission the citizens to serve him as protectors and bodyguards.¹²⁵

¹¹⁸ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 563a-b.

¹¹⁹ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 562e.

¹²⁰ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 563a.

¹²¹ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 565e.

¹²² Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 566c.

¹²³ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 568a.

¹²⁴ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 568a.

¹²⁵ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 566b.

He sows division and fear, polarizing those who put his safety above their own and those who plot to secretly expel him.¹²⁶ And yet, even those who try to rid the city of the tyrant cannot do so: the more he is hated, the more “trustworthy” drones and supporters he gathers to defend and protect him.¹²⁷

The formula Plato presents in Book VIII for democracy’s inevitable slide into tyranny feels eerily predictive when read today. Around the world, autocrats are emerging from withering democracies, often following a trajectory similar to the one that Plato presented over 2,300 years ago. In June 2022, the European Parliament voted that Hungary can no longer be considered a “full democracy.” Rather, the Parliament said, the situation has deteriorated into an “electoral autocracy.”¹²⁸ The story of Hungary’s democratic decline into autocracy is not unlike Plato’s depiction of the slide into tyranny. Viktor Orbán, the Prime Minister of Hungary, was elected for the first time in 1998. He governed then as a relatively mainstream conservative, and when his party, Fidesz, lost the 2002 elections, Hungary underwent a typical transition of power, and a new prime minister from Fidesz’s rival left-wing party took over. However, Orbán’s followers stayed with him, even when he stepped aside, blaming unfair media coverage and election fraud for his defeat.¹²⁹

After his 2002 defeat, Orbán changed course, embracing a more nationalist message and polarizing Hungarian politics.¹³⁰ Much like Plato’s tyrant, Orbán “managed, despite his enemies, to return,” campaigning on an anti-elite platform and increasingly gathering far-right support.¹³¹

¹²⁶ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 566a.

¹²⁷ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 567d.

¹²⁸ Arnaud Siad, “Hungary Can ‘No Longer Be Considered a Full Democracy,’ Says EU Parliament,” CNN, September 16, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/09/16/world/hungary-democracy-eu-parliament-intl/index.html>.

¹²⁹ Zack Beauchamp, “It Happened There: How Democracy Died in Hungary,” Vox, September 13, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/9/13/17823488/hungary-democracy-authoritarianism-trump>.

¹³⁰ Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, “The New Competitive Authoritarianism,” *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 1 (2020): 51–65.

¹³¹ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 566a.

“Orbán has no difficulty in presenting himself as an underdog fighting ‘the elites,’ preferably ‘shadowy’ ones that threaten the nation with their ‘globalist’ networks,” writes political scientist Jan-Werner Müller.¹³² As Plato writes, democracy begins to crumble when opposition leaders and former elites are “accused by the drones of plotting against the people and of being oligarchs.”¹³³ By framing his rise as the answer to this elitism, and to the corruption and financial problems that had plagued previous Hungarian governments, Orbán could position himself as an anti-establishment solution to Hungary’s democratic problems, not unlike Plato’s “special champion.”¹³⁴ And return he did: after winning a parliamentary supermajority in 2010, Orbán and Fidesz slowly but forcefully began dismantling and subverting Hungary’s democratic institutions.¹³⁵

Plato writes that in the “first days of his reign and for some time after,” the tyrant makes “all sorts of promises both in public and in private,” and goes around smiling, “saying that he’s no tyrant.”¹³⁶ Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, in their 2020 article “The New Competitive Authoritarianism,” note that this initial subtlety is also characteristic of Orbán’s rise. Orbán, they write, “began to subvert democratic institutions in ways that were devastatingly effective but also sufficiently subtle to limit blowback from the EU.”¹³⁷ He moved quietly but efficiently: Orbán’s government initially “locked in power without overtly violating basic civil liberties.”¹³⁸ Yet within months, parliamentary districts were redrawn to give a leg up to Orbán and Fidesz.¹³⁹ Fidesz rewrote whole parts of the constitution, expanding the size of Hungary’s constitutional

¹³² Jan-Werner Müller, review of *Homo Orbánicus*, by Paul Lendvai, *The New York Review of Books*, April 5, 2018, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2018/04/05/homo-orbanicus-hungary/>.

¹³³ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 565b.

¹³⁴ Beauchamp, “It Happened There”; Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 565c.

¹³⁵ Levitsky and Way, “The New Competitive Authoritarianism.”

¹³⁶ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 566e.

¹³⁷ Levitsky and Way, “The New Competitive Authoritarianism.”

¹³⁸ Levitsky and Way, “The New Competitive Authoritarianism.”

¹³⁹ Beauchamp, “It Happened There.”

court and filling the new seats with loyalists.¹⁴⁰ Orbán also forced judges to retire so he could fill their seats in addition to the new ones by claiming that the courts were secretly controlled by communists.¹⁴¹ Long-time government officials and civil servants were fired in large numbers. After these “impeachments, judgments, and trials,” to use Plato’s words, dealing with his “exiled enemies by making peace with some and destroying others,” Orbán effectively eliminated judicial checks on the prime minister’s power.¹⁴² By 2012, two years into his second stint as Prime Minister, Fidesz loyalists were “entrenched in every corner of the state—from the Constitutional Court, Budget Council, and National Judicial Office to the State Audit Office, Public Prosecutor’s Office, and National Bank. These loyalists ensure that there will be multiple choke-points at which Fidesz can stop anything that deviates from its preferences.”¹⁴³

Soon, the Orbán government gained control over much of Hungary’s media by buying up hundreds of outlets and forcing the closure of others, putting harsh pressure on opposition media outlets in particular. With neither judicial checks nor media coverage of their expanded antidemocratic practices, Fidesz eliminated parliamentary runoff elections and instituted a total ban on campaign advertising on non-state-run media outlets.¹⁴⁴ When writing his influential article on Orbán’s dismantling of Hungarian democracy, journalist Zack Beauchamp interviewed former member of the Hungarian parliament Zsuzsanna Szelény. “Most observers didn’t understand what Orbán was up to until it was too late,” Beauchamp writes. Szelény agrees. ““He benefited from the supermajority so quickly that no one really realized what happened,”” Szelény

¹⁴⁰ Beauchamp, “It Happened There.”

¹⁴¹ Levitsky and Way, “The New Competitive Authoritarianism.”

¹⁴² Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 566e.

¹⁴³ Miklós Bánkúti, Gábor Halmai, and Kim Lane Scheppele, “Hungary’s Illiberal Turn: Disabling the Constitution,” *Journal of Democracy* 23, no. 3 (2012): 138–46.

¹⁴⁴ Levitsky and Way, “The New Competitive Authoritarianism.”

says. ““I think Europe only opened their eyes in 2015. Five years later, they understood who this person was. But by that time, Hungary was completely changed.””¹⁴⁵

It’s hard not to see the parallels between Plato’s narrative of democracy’s slide into tyranny and the Hungarian case. Szelényi’s poignant sentiment echoes Plato’s depiction of the democratic citizens who realize they have enabled a tyrant: “the people will come to know,” Plato writes, “what kind of creature they have fathered, welcome, and made strong,” but only when it’s too late.¹⁴⁶ By then, “they have put upon themselves the harshest and most bitter slavery to slaves.”¹⁴⁷ By 2017, over 90% of all media outlets in Hungary were owned by a Fidesz ally or by the state itself.¹⁴⁸ To this day, Fidesz maintains its grip on Hungary’s previously independent and democratic institutions. The government uses smear campaigns to defame Orbán’s critics, intimidates and fires teachers, and judicial independence has continued to decline.¹⁴⁹ As of its most recent report, Freedom House no longer classifies Hungary as a democracy.¹⁵⁰

This analogy between the decline of democracy in the *Republic* and in Hungary could be repeated time and time again, from Poland to Thailand to Nicaragua. Some may argue that despite accusations of democratic backsliding, Orbán maintains meaningful popular support within Hungary. And this is true—in a 2022 poll, more than half of the Hungarian respondents surveyed reported that they supported Orbán, at least to some extent.¹⁵¹ However, considering the

¹⁴⁵ Beauchamp, “It Happened There.”

¹⁴⁶ Plato and Grube, *Republic* (Grube Edition), 569a.

¹⁴⁷ Plato and Grube, *Republic* (Grube Edition), 569c.

¹⁴⁸ Marius Dragomir, “The State of Hungarian Media: Endgame,” *Media@LSE* (blog), August 29, 2017, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/medialse/2017/08/29/the-state-of-hungarian-media-endgame/>.

¹⁴⁹ Zsuzsanna Végh, “Hungary: Nations in Transit 2023 Country Report,” Freedom House, 2023, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/hungary/nations-transit/2023>.

¹⁵⁰ Zsuzsanna Végh, “Hungary.”

¹⁵¹ Laura Clancy, “Hungarians Differ in Their Evaluations of Democracy under Orban’s Leadership,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), August 3, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/08/03/hungarians-differ-in-their-evaluations-of-democracy-under-orban-leadership/>.

aforementioned illiberal landscape in Hungary, the extent to which Orbán's popularity reflects genuine endorsement of his policies or is influenced by state-controlled media and political manipulation is a subject of debate. Further, the poll marks that as more people grow skeptical of Orbán's electoral tactics, the more his support declines, especially among young people, indicating that what support Orbán has may be waning.¹⁵² And while Plato's analysis clearly has salient parallels in today's increasingly precarious democratic landscape, Plato could not perfectly predict the future. Over the past several centuries, more and more states have embraced democracy with remarkable success and stability. Many democracies have remained remarkably resilient despite seeming at risk of a slide into tyranny: in just the past year, more transparent elections in Kenya, Lesotho, and Colombia led to democratic gains.¹⁵³ The United States survived attacks on the media, the courts, and the electoral process by President Donald Trump. French democracy persisted despite the populist movement of Marine Le Pen. Democracies worldwide are more stable, less violent, and more free than any other type of constitution, and the persistence of the "democratic age" is impressive.

But Plato's warnings, especially in the face of recent backsliding, are powerful. To return to the *Republic*'s analysis, it is not necessarily that democracy itself is always poisonous, but rather, that it is most vulnerable to devolve into the worst of all regimes. For nearly 20 consecutive years, more countries experienced democratic declines than became more democratic.¹⁵⁴ This data is clear, and it is alarming—democracy is not infallible on its own. As impressive as the democratic achievements of the past two centuries are, the diagnostic power of Plato's millenia-old theory of constitutional decline should be taken seriously: tyranny can, and,

¹⁵² Clancy, "Hungarians Differ in Their Evaluations of Democracy under Orbán's Leadership."

¹⁵³ Yana Gorokhovskaia, Adrian Shahbaz, and Amy Slipowitz, "Marking 50 Years in the Struggle for Democracy," Freedom House, 2023, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2023/marking-50-years>.

¹⁵⁴ Yana Gorokhovskaia, "Reflecting on 50 Years of Freedom in the World," Freedom House, March 9, 2023, <https://freedomhouse.org/article/reflecting-50-years-freedom-world>.

as ample contemporary evidence shows, often does, emerge from democracy. And the ways that it does so—subtly at first, but effectively, often facilitated by the apathy of what Plato calls the “docile mob”—are not, it seems, new.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁵ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 566b.

Chapter III: Plato and the Risks of Illiberal Democracy

Liberal Guardrails Against Plato's Democracy

As we have seen, to Plato, a key weakness of democracy is its susceptibility to sliding into tyranny. The contemporary examples of this slide are striking. However, as demonstrated in the first chapter of this paper, “democracy,” as it is used today, commonly refers to some melange of two theoretically separate elements: procedural democracy and liberal norms. No concept of the latter existed in Plato's Athens. In this chapter, I argue that without liberal guardrails, illiberal democracies are particularly vulnerable to sliding into authoritarianism, much like Plato describes in Book VIII. Evidence shows that many instances of democratic backsliding begin with the dismantling of liberal protections, and that this more subtle form of erosion, as opposed to, say, coups or blatant election manipulation, is underrepresented in the literature on backsliding. I thus argue that Plato's depiction of democracy's slide into tyranny, when coupled with evidence that shows a trend of illiberal democracies devolving into autocracies, should serve as a warning about the risks of underemphasizing the importance of liberal protections for democratic health. I then address questions about the validity of using the *Republic* to draw political prescriptions but reject the assertion that the *Republic* should only be read for its ethical claims. Finally, I argue that Plato's warnings can provide us with insights for strategies to *prevent* backsliding. Thus, not only does Plato's description of democratic descent into tyranny in the *Republic* point us to the risks associated with illiberal democracy, but his detailed depiction of democracy's fall offers suggestions for how we can prevent democratic backsliding today.

Illiberalism in Athens

There were few checks and balances or constitutional guarantees to bound the Athenian assembly. As Plattner writes:

The fact that democracy and liberalism are not inseparably linked is proven by the historical existence both of nonliberal democracies and of liberal nondemocracies. The democracies of the ancient world, although their citizens were incomparably more involved in governing themselves than we are today, did not provide freedom of speech or religion, protection of private property, or constitutional government.¹⁵⁶

Some writers, such as Josiah Ober in his 2017 book *Demopolis*, argue that despite the lack of liberal institutions in Athens, ancient Athenian democracy was remarkably stable, and that accountability measures built into the structure of the Assembly provided for checks and balances as well as norms protecting individual rights:

Athens' democracy lasted, with two brief oligarchic interludes (410 and 404 BCE), until 322 BCE. For 180 years, Athenian political culture evolved and Athenian government proved itself to be highly adaptive. Athenians grew increasingly sophisticated in their understanding and practice of democracy. The fundamental conditions of freedom in respect to public speech and association, equality of votes and opportunity for office, and civic dignity as immunity from humiliation were robustly supported by formal rules and related behavioral norms. The Athenians regularly adjusted the institutional mechanisms of their government.¹⁵⁷

Ober's central argument is that basic—namely, non-liberal—democracy can still provide a durable foundation and even protections for qualities (like freedom of speech and association) that would today be considered liberal norms. And Ober is careful to emphasize that Athens was not under any real definition liberal, even if the structure of Athenian democracy may have provided a foundation for qualities akin to liberalism in Athenian political culture.¹⁵⁸ In this way, Ober's argument is the opposite of Zakaria's in *The Future of Freedom*: Ober makes the case that Athens demonstrates the potential for a stable illiberal democracy, and further, that qualities of

¹⁵⁶ Plattner, "Liberalism and Democracy."

¹⁵⁷ Josiah Ober, *Demopolis: Democracy before Liberalism in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

¹⁵⁸ Ober, *Demopolis*.

liberalism might emerge from this basic democracy, such as political dignity. But it is difficult to demonstrate that Athens, which experienced two oligarchic revolutions in fewer than 200 years and losses in virtually every war fought against major Greek powers (from Sparta to Syracuse, with Persia as the primary exception), should be a model for political stability.¹⁵⁹ Additionally, Ober underemphasizes the unfiltered power of the majority in Athens, as political scientist Daniela Cammack writes in reply to Ober's book:

[D]espite Ober's apparent protestations to the contrary, the historical form of 'basic democracy' arguably did mean majority rule, both within institutions (since decisions were made by majority vote) and in broader sociological sense (since those who acted collectively, i.e. the *dêmos*, were a majority in the community).¹⁶⁰

This force of the majority represents one of Plato's primary concerns with democracy, and the fact that basic democracy may have lasted, even with revolutionary oligarchic lapses, in ancient Athens does not disprove the instability created by this political system. In *A Wolf in the City*, Arruzza asserts that Athenian democracy maintained some liberal *qualities*, but nevertheless was decidedly non-liberal:

Athenian democracy did have features that may qualify as *liberal*. In Pericles' *Funeral Oration*, for example, we find notions akin to tolerance and a defense of privacy. Athenian democracy, however, was fundamentally a specific form of government, the core of which was popular rule and the sovereignty of the Athenian *demos*, both in the Assemblies and in the Courts. The freedom that was central to its ideology can hardly be decoupled from the key tenet of popular rule as the absence of a master. But it is precisely the principle of popular rule that Plato attacks over and over again in the *Republic*. His treatment of tyranny is meant to show that popular rule "naturally" breeds tyranny and creates tyrannical figures.¹⁶¹

It is true that Athenian democracy could not be characterized as adhering to a set of inalienable rights. However, as Arruzza writes, Plato's depiction of freedoms gone too far in a

¹⁵⁹ Brian Fitzgerald, "Athenian Democracy an Imperfect System That Led to Mob Rule," B.U. Bridge, February 2005, <https://www.bu.edu/bridge/archive/2005/02-04/athenian.html>.

¹⁶⁰ Daniela Cammack, "Liberal Ends, Democratic Means? A Response to Josiah Ober's *Demopolis*," *Polis* 36, no. 3 (2019): 516–23, <https://doi.org/10.1163/20512996-12340248>.

¹⁶¹ Arruzza, *A Wolf in the City*.

democracy is less focused on individual rights and far more concerned with the lack of checks on popular will and the removal of political elites. In fact, it is the very lack of the “undemocratic” elements characteristic of most contemporary liberal democracies—judicial supremacy, for one—that lead to the democratic spiral into tyranny in the *Republic*. This is, perhaps, what makes the “illiberal democracy,” uniquely concerning. Without liberalism, what makes an illiberal democracy any better than Plato’s image of a democracy in its susceptibility to authoritarian slide? Perhaps it is the very erosion of liberal protections, often while—as Bermeo demonstrated, weaponizing the language of democracy—that makes illiberal democracies, from Hungary to Turkey, so vulnerable to sliding into autocracy.

Liberal Protections and the American Constitution

Over 2,000 years after Plato wrote the *Republic*, a new government an ocean away from Greece recognized the importance of these undemocratic elements in building a stable democracy. In Federalist 10, one of many papers he wrote in defense of the nascent United States Constitution, James Madison aimed to address the dangers of factionalism and the threat it posed to the stability and integrity of the newly formed American government. Madison, standing at the threshold of a new era of politics, echoed Plato. Recognizing the danger that factionalism posed to a democracy, especially a democracy that values freedom, he sought to explain how the new Constitution provided checks on majoritarianism gone too far. “Liberty is to faction what air is to fire,” he writes, “an aliment without which it instantly expires. But it could not be less folly to abolish liberty, which is essential to political life, because it nourishes faction, than it would be to wish the annihilation of air, which is essential to animal life, because it imparts to fire its

destructive agency.”¹⁶² Madison’s proposal for how to counter factionalism without infringing on liberty is to step back from what he calls “pure democracy,”—a system that, like Plato, Madison saw as dangerously uncontrolled:

...[I]t may be concluded that a pure democracy, by which I mean a society consisting of a small number of citizens, who assemble and administer the government in person, can admit of no cure for the mischiefs of faction. A common passion or interest will, in almost every case, be felt by a majority of the whole; a communication and concert result from the form of government itself... Hence it is that such democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths. Theoretic politicians, who have patronized this species of government, have erroneously supposed that by reducing mankind to a perfect equality in their political rights, they would, at the same time, be perfectly equalized and assimilated in their possessions, their opinions, and their passions.¹⁶³

Madison’s republican proposals for how to maintain stability in the face of different preferences, then, might be seen as some of the least democratic elements of the Constitution. For instance, Madison advocates for government to be delegated “to a small number of citizens elected by the rest.”¹⁶⁴ The delegation of government helps “refine and enlarge the public views by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens”—citizens whose “wisdom,” Madison believed, “may best discern the true interest of their country, and whose patriotism and love of justice, will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations.”¹⁶⁵ The parallel between Madison’s political elites—those justice-loving patriots—and Plato’s philosopher kings—those who have “proved to be best” in justice and wisdom—is clear.¹⁶⁶ In both cases, these elites are meant to be a sieve through which populist opinions get filtered, and dampened: a check on the will of the people that, if taken too far, seems to lead to chaos.

¹⁶² Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, “The Federalist Papers No. 10,” Text, December 29, 1998, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed10.asp.

¹⁶³ Hamilton, Madison, and Jay, “The Federalist Papers No. 10.”

¹⁶⁴ Hamilton, Madison, and Jay, “The Federalist Papers No. 10.”

¹⁶⁵ Hamilton, Madison, and Jay, “The Federalist Papers No. 10.”

¹⁶⁶ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 543a.

While Madison intentionally constructed the American constitution with these careful, stability-enhancing protections in mind, it is the erosion and weakening of these safeguards put in place to limit pure democracy that has allowed for backsliding in the US. The electoral college is a prime example of Madison's attempts-gone-awry. In a system invented to enhance the power of the elites and filter the views of the people, the popular vote loser has now won the presidency in two of the past five presidential elections. While this could be seen as evidence of Madison's invention working, the electoral college has ultimately entrenched the power of political parties, a system that Madison didn't predict and wouldn't have endorsed. A vote from Wyoming carries 3.6 times more influence than a vote from California.¹⁶⁷ Laws around the census and redistricting leads to a similar problem: whichever party is in power during a particular redistricting cycle gets to effectively select its own voters for the next decade. That is hardly the election of the "fittest" representatives "whose patriotism and love of justice" Madison believed would prevent them from sacrificing their country's interest "to temporary or partial considerations."¹⁶⁸

Even the direct election of senators, a bold departure from the selection of senators by state legislatures, as was the case until 1913, has had surprisingly undemocratic consequences for what might seem like a democratic move. In an article commemorating the 100th anniversary of the 17th amendment, which allows for the direct election of senators, political scientists Darrell West and Beth Stone write that "today's senators are no more responsive to constituent needs than their counterparts elected indirectly by their state's legislature."¹⁶⁹ Further, they argue, the

¹⁶⁷ Dale R. Durran, "Whose Votes Count the Least in the Electoral College?," *The Conversation*, March 14, 2017, <http://theconversation.com/whose-votes-count-the-least-in-the-electoral-college-74280>.

¹⁶⁸ Hamilton, Madison, and Jay, "The Federalist Papers No. 10."

¹⁶⁹ Darrell West and Beth Stone, "A Century Later: The Adoption of the 17th Amendment on Direct Election of Senators," *Brookings*, May 31, 2013, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/a-century-later-the-adoption-of-the-17th-amendment-on-direct-election-of-senators/>.

new electoral arrangement has worsened political polarization, and the flooding of the election process with campaign money from special interests mitigates much of the “opening” effect that direct election of senators was supposed to have in increasing political participation.¹⁷⁰ This paper does not seek to argue for repealing the 17th amendment, but it is worth noting that even the most obvious attempts to make governmental processes more democratic can often have neutral—or even negative—effects.

From a partisan Supreme Court to the ruling in *Citizens United* allowing corporations to spend unlimited amounts on elections, the list of mutations in the modern American political landscape that Madison couldn’t have predicted is endless. While voter suppression remains a tremendous issue in the US today, electoral access has expanded exponentially since Madison’s time. Millions of people—women and Black people, in particular—did not have the right to vote when Madison wrote. And while in the past decade states such as Florida and Texas have passed restrictive laws that limit voting access, this was made possible not by foul play at the ballot box, but by the weakening of an important liberal tenet: judicial independence. For example, the controversial decision that gutted the 1964 landmark Voting Rights Act, *Shelby County v. Holder*, has made it significantly easier for state legislators to add obstacles for minority voters to vote.¹⁷¹ *Shelby County* is widely viewed as a highly partisan decision detached in important respects from the Constitution, the product of an increasingly politicized Court.¹⁷² While fair elections, the “procedural” component of liberal democracy in the US, are being eroded via voter

¹⁷⁰ Darrell West and Beth Stone, “A Century Later.”

¹⁷¹ Matt Vasilogambros, “Polling Places Remain a Target Ahead of November Elections,” archive.ph, May 3, 2020, <https://archive.ph/5k86r>.

¹⁷² Jasleen Singh and Sara Carter, “States Have Added Nearly 100 Restrictive Laws Since SCOTUS Gutted the Voting Rights Act 10 Years Ago,” Brennan Center for Justice, June 23, 2023, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/states-have-added-nearly-100-restrictive-laws-scotus-gutted-voting-rights>.

suppression, it is the initial weakening of liberal protections that are supposed to be upheld by an independent Court that allowed for this slide to begin.

Undermining Liberalism: The Path to Democratic Erosion

This—to use Ding and Slater’s term—“decoupled” erosion is even more stark in illiberal democracies.¹⁷³ As Bermeo outlined, forms of backsliding such as executive aggrandizement are becoming increasingly more common than backsliding events like coups.¹⁷⁴ The backsliding literature is undeniably (and perhaps reasonably) focused on “weakly institutionalized, new democracies.”¹⁷⁵ However, focusing on the more obvious procedural erosion that happens in those cases as opposed to Bermeo’s (and Ding and Slater’s) emphasis on more subtle forms of liberal norm erosion that are occurring even in some of the world’s oldest and most stable democracies has led some observers to put too much emphasis on electoral quality as a benchmark for backsliding. By underemphasizing the importance of liberal protections in stable democracies, it is easy to lose sight of key factors in maintaining and promoting that electoral quality.

Serbia, for example, which was considered “free” by Freedom House in 2018, is now considered only “partially free” after years of media pressure, corruption of the courts, and threats against opposition parties led by president Aleksandar Vučić.¹⁷⁶ In December 2023, Vučić’s party SNS secured a majority of seats in Serbia’s National Assembly after a campaign dominated by media bias, misuse of Vučić’s increasingly consolidated public resources and

¹⁷³ Ding and Slater, “Democratic Decoupling.”

¹⁷⁴ Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding.”

¹⁷⁵ Markus Hinterleitner and Fritz Sager, “Political Challengers and Norm Erosion in Advanced Democracies,” *European Journal of Political Research* 62, no. 4 (2023): 1301–19, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12571>.

¹⁷⁶ “Serbia: Freedom in the World 2024 Country Report,” Freedom House, 2024, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/freedom-world/2024>.

institutions, and pressure on public officials to support the incumbents. Without strong institutions to check Vučić's power, or a free media environment, electoral erosion was next, but only after these important liberal protections were weakened. In the December election, Freedom House reported "numerous procedural deficiencies including group voting, breaches of voting secrecy, and inconsistent application of safeguards meant to protect the integrity of voting and vote counting."¹⁷⁷ Serbia's is a key case of executive aggrandizement. Vučić, taking advantage of Serbia's lack of institutional guardrails, increasingly consolidated power, and was subsequently able to effectively dismantle Serbia's electoral protections. And when it came time for elections, there were no longer any institutions to stop his election interference: the Serbian courts have effectively been under Vučić's control for years, the media environment in Serbia is dominated by Vučić allies (with others forced out or facing threats), and opposition parties are given little (if any) media coverage and frequently harassed.

Hungary and Turkey followed similar trends, with an expanded executive eroding liberal norms before making elections increasingly unfair. While these instances demonstrate cases of decoupling, they also demonstrate something potentially more worrying: the liberal indicators erode first, and it is their decay that in many cases enables the democratic backsliding more broadly. The "illiberal democracy" achieves its legitimacy by assuming that liberalism plays no role in ensuring a democracy remains democratic. But overwhelmingly, we can see that that is not true: as political psychologists Jan-Erik Lönnqvist, Zsolt Péter Szabó, and László Kelemen demonstrate, a populace's tolerance of authoritarianism increases after eight years under an

¹⁷⁷ "Serbia."

illiberal democracy.¹⁷⁸ Plattner characterizes “Orbán-style illiberal democracy” by its “tendency to slide into authoritarianism”:

I doubt, however, that illiberal democracy is a stable regime form. Although it can move back toward liberal democracy (as appears to be happening in Ecuador), it often becomes a way-station for authoritarianism, as it clearly has been in Russia, Venezuela, and Turkey.¹⁷⁹

This trend of illiberal democracies devolving into autocracies should be deeply worrying, even to theorists like Ober who argue for the hypothetical stability of the illiberal democracy. In a 2017 interview revisiting his famous 1997 article on illiberal democracy, Zakaria doubled down on the importance of liberal institutions keeping democracies healthy. He characterized the United States as a particularly worrying case:

The Constitution was designed as a check against the dangers of democracy turning illiberal. The Bill of Rights, after all, is a list of things the government cannot do, regardless of what the majority wants. It is a check on democratic majoritarianism; it is saying that no matter what the majority may think, you cannot abridge the freedom of speech, you cannot abridge the freedom of religion, you cannot abridge the freedom of association. And so the Bill of Rights is a perfect example of the kind of liberal constitutional check that was placed on democracy, and that’s always been the way in which liberal democracy has distinguished itself...My concern is precisely that the checks that the founders baked into the system have gradually eroded. Let’s remember that the founders put in very strong checks against tyrannical majoritarianism: The Senate was not directly elected, the electors were meant to curb demagogic characters, and so on. All of that has gone away, along with the informal nongovernmental and nonpolitical buffers, and so when you look around for the checks today, it’s not clear where they are or if they exist at all.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁸ Jan-Erik Lönnqvist, Zsolt Péter Szabó, and László Kelemen, “‘The New State That We Are Building’: Authoritarianism and System-Justification in an Illiberal Democracy,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (September 6, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.703280>.

¹⁷⁹ Marc F. Plattner, “Illiberal Democracy and the Struggle on the Right,” *Journal of Democracy*, January 2019, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/illiberal-democracy-and-the-struggle-on-the-right/>.

¹⁸⁰ Sean Illing, “Fareed Zakaria Made a Scary Prediction about Democracy in 1997 — and It’s Coming True,” *Vox*, January 18, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/conversations/2017/1/18/14250364/democracy-liberalism-donald-trump-populism-fareed-zakaria-europe-fascism>.

In his article “Why Democracy Survives Populism,” political scientist Kurt Weyland analyzed cases of populist governments in Latin America and Europe between 1985 to 2020.¹⁸¹ Of the instances that led to authoritarian rule—he focuses on Peru’s Alberto Fujimori, Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez, Orbán, Erdoğan, Bolivia’s Evo Morales, Ecuador’s Rafael Correa, and Nayib Bukele’s El Salvador—it was the failure of “institutional checks, balances, and opposition mobilization” that allowed for their authoritarian takeovers.¹⁸² In the dozens of other cases of populist governments in which democracy survived, it was those very liberal institutions that protected democracy. “The weaker institutions are, the more latitude personalistic leaders will have for achieving undemocratic hegemony,” Weyland writes. “In other words, institutional weakness increases the chances for populist strength.”¹⁸³ And while Weyland commends the strength of liberal institutions in guarding democracy against the threat of authoritarianism, he does acknowledge, in an echo of Plato, what happens if such a leader comes to power without the necessary checks and balances:

“[P]opulism, if left unchecked, will distort, abridge, and eventually destroy democracy. These pernicious impulses arise from the very nature of populism, which in my definition revolves around personalistic, plebiscitarian leadership. Accordingly, populist leaders revel in self-importance, impetuosity, and charisma. They act with supreme self-confidence in pursuing their goals. Moreover, they base an eager quest for unconstrained power on direct, plebiscitarian support from a heterogeneous, amorphous, and largely unorganized mass of followers. In other words, dominant “big men” govern as they see fit. As a justification, they invoke their electoral victories and their popularity ratings. In most cases, they do not bother with trying to build firm, well institutionalized parties. Instead, when faced with opposition, their first impulse will be to mobilize their plebiscitarian mass support to push aside obstacles to their hegemonic ambitions.”¹⁸⁴

Down to the importance of the docile mob and the tyrant’s bodyguards in the form of

“plebiscitarian mass support,” Weyland’s description of the rise of authoritarianism in a

¹⁸¹ Kurt Weyland, “Why Democracy Survives Populism,” *Journal of Democracy* 35, no. 1 (2024): 43–58.

¹⁸² Weyland, “Why Democracy Survives Populism.”

¹⁸³ Weyland, “Why Democracy Survives Populism.”

¹⁸⁴ Weyland, “Why Democracy Survives Populism.”

democracy without protective institutions matches Plato's description of the tyrant in Book VIII of the *Republic*. No court was there to stop the tyrant's expanded power, no guarantors of free speech and viable opposition parties stopped him from expelling his enemies and stringing up others on false charges. No institutions are mentioned in Book VIII that would have ensured opportunities for those opposed to the tyrant to speak, and be protected when they speak. If illiberal democracies are an unstable government and a step towards autocracy, then the key protections against them are the liberal norms that Plato's conception of democracy in ancient Athens lacked. If this is the case, is the relevance of Plato's diagnosis not necessarily that democracy always slides into tyranny, but that *illiberal* democracy slides into tyranny?

The *Republic* and the Illiberal Democracy

Plato writes of the transition into democracy that just as “a sick body needs only a slight shock from outside to become ill,” the unhealthy city is particularly vulnerable to influence from unjust actors.¹⁸⁵ It seems clear that, today, the weakening of liberal protections in a state leaves a constitution vulnerable to democratic backsliding in a similar way. As Gabriele Gratton and Barton Lee Liberty write in “Security, and Accountability: The Rise and Fall of Illiberal Democracies,” an analysis of the factors that lead to and sustain illiberal democracies, that “cycles of illiberalism are short-term symptoms of a long-run tendency towards authoritarianism.”¹⁸⁶ Thus, if illiberal democracy overwhelmingly sets states on a path towards autocracy, it seems that Plato's warnings—made about a democracy without liberalism—apply

¹⁸⁵ Plato and Grube, *Republic* (Grube Edition), 566e.

¹⁸⁶ Gabriele Gratton and Barton E Lee, “Liberty, Security, and Accountability: The Rise and Fall of Illiberal Democracies,” *The Review of Economic Studies* 91, no. 1 (January 1, 2024): 340–71, <https://doi.org/10.1093/restud/rdad030>.

aptly to the risks associated with illiberal democracy today, a warning that, across millennia, remains pressingly important.

At this point, it feels important to discuss an important question associated with any reading of the *Republic*: did Plato mean it? Namely, is the *Republic* truly a work of political philosophy, or does Socrates simply introduce the ideal state in the *Republic* to advance the dialogue's larger questions about justice and happiness? And further, if the ideal city, and subsequently Socrates's depiction of the other inferior constitutions, including democracy, are advanced in the *Republic* only to clarify the dialogue's ethical stances, how seriously should we take something as tangential to the dialogue's central argument as Plato's writing on democracy?

No clear answers exist to this question. Some scholars argue that indeed the dialogue is primarily focused on the ethical question, and that the discussion of the just and unjust cities in Book VIII are meant to advance the dialogue's arguments about justice in the individual. Closely related to this argument is the question, famously put forth by Leo Strauss in *The City and Man*, of whether or not the just city, Plato's Kallipolis, is even depicted as a realistic (or desirable) possibility in the *Republic*, and thus whether Socrates is presented as taking the political arguments of the dialogue as seriously as the ethical ones.¹⁸⁷ For example, as Julia Annas writes in "Politics in Plato's Republic: His and Ours," "the work is structured by the moral argument, not by a concern with politics. This, and the smallness of the part of the work devoted to the 'ideal state' show right off that there is something peculiar about a view that...sees the work as primarily intended as a contribution to political thought."¹⁸⁸ Annas argues that the ideal city is brought in to further Socrates's arguments about the soul:

¹⁸⁷ Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (University of Chicago Press, 1978).

¹⁸⁸ Julia Annas, "Politics in Plato's Republic: His and Ours," *Apeiron* 33, no. 4 (December 1, 2000): 303–26, <https://doi.org/10.1515/APEIRON.2000.33.4.303>, 305.

The state is brought in to illuminate the soul, because justice in the state is supposedly easier to discern...once we have read the answer there, we can go on to apply it to the individual...Of course, if it is to be a model for morality in the individual, the ideal state must be clearly acceptable to the reader as an example of morality in its own right; and this has always proved to be the weakness of the analogy, since Plato utterly ignores contemporary political thought in insisting that the authoritarian and elitist structure of his ideal state embodies morality or justice. Nonetheless we have to accept that Plato does think, though without good argument against contemporary political ideas, that his ideal state will be accepted as embodying the structure of a moral state; otherwise the argument that the would-be moral person must internalize and live by this structure would have no force.¹⁸⁹

While Annas advocates for a separation of the ethical and political elements of the *Republic*, many other scholars argue that the *Republic*'s level of detail in proposing the social order of the Kallipolis (particularly with regards to property, gender roles, family, and education) goes beyond what is needed for the ethical argument, and that therefore the work must be, at the very least, about *both* ethics and politics.¹⁹⁰ In *Plato: Political Philosophy*, Malcolm Schofield advances this argument, that the ethical and political arguments of the *Republic* cannot be separated and the dialogue's claims should be taken seriously in their own right, not simply one as a vehicle for the other.¹⁹¹

Perhaps it is the bias of this project that leads me to this interpretation, but I am inclined to agree with the latter argument: Plato's arguments for the social and political qualities of each city are detailed and valuable, and play a serious and important role in the text's arguments. And even if Plato simply developed the just and unjust constitutions as a method for exploring their associated qualities in the soul, must we dismiss the relevance of the lessons Plato's constitutions present? This paper has attempted to make the connection between Plato's depiction of the deterioration into and out of democracy to today's democratic backsliding, the existential issue of

¹⁸⁹Julia Annas, "Politics in Plato's Republic," 306-311.

¹⁹⁰Antonis Coumoundouros, "Plato: The Republic," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2023, <https://iep.utm.edu/republic/>.

¹⁹¹ Malcolm Schofield, *Plato: Political Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

our time. Metaphor or otherwise, it is clear that the lessons and vulnerabilities that Plato expertly laid out in the *Republic* reveal blindspots in contemporary thinking about the infallibility of democracy and the natural association between democracy and liberalism. Further, even if we were to prioritize the *Republic*'s ethical lessons over its political ones, one of the *Republic*'s central moral prescriptions is the pursuit of wisdom, and further, that if one cannot themselves become wise, they should follow the wisest guides that they can find.¹⁹² Thus even this moral stance functions as an argument that prioritizes checks on unearned power, as liberal institutions like courts and viable opposition parties have been shown, time and time again, to be the best tools available for maintaining wise leadership.

Now What?

Despite its array of specific prescriptions for the Kallipolis, the *Republic* offers little with regards to viable policy solutions once the tyrant has taken hold, or even once the illiberal democracy has set off on its destructive path. What practical suggestions Plato puts forth to best prevent against the decay of the ideal city are in its initial construction: an emphasis on virtuous leadership, on fostering rationality and wisdom over personal desires, on careful guardianship of the laws. Beyond these preventative measures, Plato does not suggest a path for the city to rise back up out of tyranny. And while this may not be the most hopeful message to bring into a contemporary political environment faced with democratic backsliding, this is another instance in which Plato might help those who are concerned about democracy today think about its protection in a new light. Overwhelmingly, efforts to counter backsliding start when the

¹⁹² Eric Brown, "Plato's Ethics and Politics in The Republic," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2017 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2017), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/plato-ethics-politics/>.

backsliding becomes obvious. Despite the aforementioned challenges with identifying backsliding in many of its early stages due to its varied and often subtle forms, a set of policies that focus too heavily on trying to rescue failing democracies can overlook urgent steps that should be taken to firm up existing ones. This is not to say that we should let democracy in illiberal democracies or hybrid regimes in general dwindle and fail, but that there may be earlier opportunities for intervention when focusing on the importance of liberal institutions. Bermeo puts it well in “On Democratic Backsliding:”

Social science has focused mostly on clear cases of democratic collapse—paying “scant attention” to the “incremental” regime changes that color many countries’ histories. Research on “hybrid” regimes has been a step forward, but we need to know more about how the slide backward into hybridity takes place. Focusing on democratic erosion will require more scholars to see that democracy is “a collage” of institutions crafted and recrafted by different actors at different times. It is put together piece by piece, and can be taken apart the same way. Politicians who engage in executive aggrandizement and strategic electoral manipulation already know this. Political scientists must learn it too, or risk their own slide into irrelevance...At a more general level, slow slides toward authoritarianism often lack both the bright spark that ignites an effective call to action and the opposition and movement leaders who can voice that clarion call. Executive aggrandizement takes place precisely where a majority that supports it is already taking root.¹⁹³

In an environment without this “bright spark,” or any obvious key moment when the backsliding “occurs,” Plato’s preventative approach seems especially useful, and, ironically, offers us perhaps the best way to avoid his picture of inevitable decay. Democratic backsliding is not like an unpredictable natural disaster, something that can only be responded to after the fact. Rather, evidence like Weyland’s shows that the best protections against backsliding are preventative institutional measures.¹⁹⁴ Bermeo does point to robust civil society mobilization as one way to counter illiberalism once backsliding has taken hold. At the same time, though, she

¹⁹³ Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding.”

¹⁹⁴ Weyland, “Why Democracy Survives Populism.”

recognizes that due to the increased frequency of antidemocratic leaders justifying illiberal moves by using the language of democracy, as explored in the first chapter of this essay, credibility can pose a problem when trying to combat backsliding as it occurs. “Changes in laws governing elections, communications, or even associations occur routinely in established democracies and are not, in themselves, antidemocratic,” she writes. “Defending institutions that shield corrupt politicians, ruthless media moguls, or associations that perpetrate hatred may or may not foster democracy in the long run, but will surely weaken the defenders’ credibility in the short run.”¹⁹⁵

Given the challenges associated with recognizing backsliding early, the incremental nature of recent democratic erosion, and the limited tools available to combat it once it is recognized, what preventative measures should be taken to shore up liberal democracy where it still can be protected? Plato outlines the slide from democracy to tyranny in several key steps, each with its own warnings about democratic decay. By examining these steps one by one, we can draw out practical ways we might prevent their modern equivalents. The first step towards tyranny from democracy in the *Republic* is freedom gone too far, freedom and “the neglect of other things” that “change this constitution and put it in need of a dictatorship.”¹⁹⁶ Freedom is prioritized above all else, and certainly at the expense of any checks on freedom run amok. This prioritization of freedom above all other virtues might be compared to the post-Cold War underemphasis on liberal checks that Zakaria warned of in *The Future of Freedom*. “As Giovanni Sartori, Columbia University’s great scholar of democracy, noted about the path from constitutional liberalism to democracy,” Zakaria writes, “the itinerary is not reversible.”¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁵ Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding.”

¹⁹⁶ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 562e.

¹⁹⁷ Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom*.

Zakaria describes democratization without liberalism as “premature democratization,” and writes that a majority of developing countries who “proclaimed themselves democracies immediately after their independence, while they were poor and unstable, became dictatorships within a decade.¹⁹⁸ Emphasizing, as does Plato, the importance of these “other things” for the stability of a government, Zakaria explains how many elements beyond elections contribute to the health of a democratic state:

The democracy we have lived with in the West has always...had an elected government, to be sure, but also constitutional laws and rights, and independent judiciary, strong political parties, churches, businesses, private associations, and professional elites. Political democracy was an essential, indeed crucial, element of the whole—the people had ultimate power— but the system was a complex one with many parts, not all of them subject to elections. Indeed the purpose of many of these undemocratic institutions and groups was to temper public passions, educate citizens, guide democracy, and thereby secure liberty.¹⁹⁹

To Plato, the first step towards tyranny from democracy is prioritization of freedom over virtues of wisdom and justice, a prioritization that leads to the election of unwise leaders. Our best protections against this freedom-gone-too-far, the first step in the slide, as we have seen, are liberal institutions, including the ones Zakaria outlines, that can provide important guardrails for who a democracy might elect, and more importantly, what the elected official can do when in power.

Consideration of the next step in the decay, increased political dissatisfaction and factionalism, also brings us towards helpful modern solutions. Plato describes three main factions emerging in a democracy: the drones, who are particularly fierce in a democracy because they are the dominant political force, a second class, the wealthy, and a third class, those who work with

¹⁹⁸ Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom*.

¹⁹⁹ Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom*.

their hands, and are uninvolved in politics.²⁰⁰ The drones pit the two other groups against each other by painting the rich as oligarchs “even if they have no desire for revolution at all.”²⁰¹ The drones “refuse to tolerate the opposition of another speaker,” and, with the other groups pitted against each other, there are “impeachments, judgments, and trials on both sides.”²⁰²

Factionalism, as Madison foresaw it, and political polarization, pose a daunting threat to the stability of liberal democracy today. In “The Anatomy of Democratic Backsliding,” Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufman argue that political polarization is a central cause of democratic backsliding, and that “political polarization contributes to government dysfunction and lack of trust in institutions, and it increases the risk that incumbent parties will move toward extremes or that new anti-system parties will gain traction.”²⁰³ They note that countries with high levels of polarization revert into a political culture with “stark ‘us-versus-them’ contests, a common feature of populism—a majoritarian conception of democratic rule that is ultimately illiberal.”²⁰⁴

Polarization lays the ground for autocratic leaders, much as Plato puts it, by creating internal disarray that leaves room for extremism:

In polarized settings mainstream parties are more likely either to be captured by extremist elements (as in the United States, Hungary, the Dominican Republic, North Macedonia, Nicaragua, Poland, Russia, Serbia, and Ukraine) or displaced by new populist political movements arising from either the right or left (as in Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Greece, Turkey, Venezuela, and Zambia).²⁰⁵

Just as liberal institutions can intervene to stop Plato’s first step of democratic decay, freedoms gone too far, so too can another important norm come into play to combat polarization:

²⁰⁰ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 564e-565a.

²⁰¹ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 565b.

²⁰² Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 564d, 562c.

²⁰³ Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufman, “The Anatomy of Democratic Backsliding,” *Journal of Democracy* 32, no. 4 (2021): 27–41.

²⁰⁴ Haggard and Kaufman, “The Anatomy of Democratic Backsliding.”

²⁰⁵ Haggard and Kaufman, “The Anatomy of Democratic Backsliding.”

mutual toleration. In the first chapter of this paper I noted that Ziblatt and Levitsky point to the weakening of mutual toleration as a key cause of backsliding in the United States. But so too can reinforcing it help firm up democracy against polarization and subsequent vulnerability to extremism. Ziblatt and Levitsky define mutual toleration as the idea that “as long as our rivals play by constitutional rules we accept that they have an equal right to exist, compete for power, and govern.”²⁰⁶ This is clearly absent from Plato’s depiction of a democracy, in which the drones refuse to tolerate the opposition of any other speaker. And this lack of mutual toleration is extremely dangerous—as Ziblatt and Levitsky write, “in just about every case of democratic breakdown we have studied, would-be authoritarianism—from Franco, Hitler, and Mussolini in interwar Europe to Marcos, Castro and Pinochet during the Cold War to Putin, Chávez, and Erdoğan most recently—have justified their consolidation of power by labeling their opponents as an existential threat.”²⁰⁷ We can add Plato’s drones (and eventual tyrant) to that list. Restoring mutual toleration, as Ziblatt and Levitsky (and others) have recommended, will require good-faith efforts not just from opposition groups but from those currently in power. The defeat of leaders deemed threatening to democracy—Ziblatt and Levitsky focus primarily on Trump—should be achieved only through democratic avenues: Congress, the courts, and elections. Defeating “would-be autocrats,” to use their term, by using, rather than subverting, liberal democratic institutions, strengthens those institutions, rebuilds mutual toleration, and combats polarization.

In the final step of the decay into tyranny, the chaos and polarization of the democracy engender the “habit of setting up one man as their special champion,” the rise of the tyrant.²⁰⁸ In

²⁰⁶ Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*.

²⁰⁷ Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*.

²⁰⁸ Plato and Grube, *Republic (Grube Edition)*, 565c.

Arruzza's analysis, Plato's indictment of tyranny and the tyrant is simply an extension, an important part of, his critique of democracy. This "champion of the demos" who becomes Plato's tyrant, Arruzza writes, would be "a leader of the democratic faction," a politician who sought to "present himself as the protector of the whole city or of the demos understood as the city's popular sector."²⁰⁹ In this final step of democracy's end, then, the language of the protection of the city is being used to justify the leadership that will lead to its demise. This trend, as we have seen, continues today, especially in the context of what Bermeo identifies as two of today's most common forms of democratic backsliding: promissory coups, in which the coup-makers justify their antidemocratic coup under the guise of protecting or restoring democracy, and executive aggrandizement, in which an elected official undemocratically expands their power, typically justifying the expansion as a necessary protection of democracy. In this way, contemporary tyrants often gain power by using this same trick that Plato's tyrant did. "The promised improvement of democracy," as Bermeo puts it, is a new and worrying tactic used by antidemocratic actors, and something that preventative protections should be in place to guard against.²¹⁰ In this way Plato points us to another important hole that preventative measures should fill: holding fast to constitutional procedures and checks and balances, even when the prospect of "more democracy" (or "more freedom," as Plato describes it) is dangled before us.

For this, we can turn to Ziblatt and Levitsky's second key norm necessary for a democracy's survival: institutional forbearance, which they define as avoiding actions that may be legal or popularly supported but violate the spirit of the law, threatening the democratic system. "The opposite of forbearance is to exploit one's institutional prerogatives in an unrestrained way," they write. "Legal scholar Mark Tushnet calls this 'constitutional hardball':

²⁰⁹ Arruzza, *A Wolf in the City*.

²¹⁰ Bermeo, "On Democratic Backsliding."

playing by the rules but pushing against their bounds and ‘playing for keeps.’ It is a form of institutional combat aimed at permanently defeating one’s partisan rivals—and not caring whether the democratic game continues.”²¹¹ Just as Plato’s late-democratic leaders allow for more and more freedoms as the people ask for them at the expense of the protection of the city’s constitution, eventually allowing for the rise of the tyrant, and just as contemporary autocrats, especially democratically elected figures like Erdoğan, often use legal means to expand their power beyond restraint, without institutional forbearance, the idea of democracy can be weaponized by its opponents to tyrannical ends. These trends indicate that defenders of democracy can no longer rely on forbearance to protect a democracy’s health. What were once unwritten rules can no longer function without being formalized: the more institutional limits and guardrails are set in stone, so to speak, the more they can be depended on to survive those who try to upend them.

One implication that scholars have drawn from similar arguments concerning the importance of liberal institutions which will not be taken up in this essay is about *sequencing*. Huntington and Zakaria, for example, both argue that certain qualities, such as rule of law, should *precede* democratization in order for a democracy to be functional and stable.²¹² It would take a separate project to reflect upon the last several decades and adjudicate between Huntington, Zakaria, and their critics on the sequencing question. While this debate is important for answering questions regarding democratization and development, here I just mean to emphasize the importance of liberal protections in and of themselves, and the risks that come with undervaluing their role in safeguarding democracy. Plato’s lessons are especially useful for

²¹¹ Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*.

²¹² Huntington, *The Third Wave*; Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom*.

protecting against backsliding before it occurs, but this is not to claim that the strengthening of liberal institutions in an established democracy, even one with historically weaker liberal norms, is somehow out of order or impractical.

Plato's description of the rise of tyranny from democracy, explored in more detail in the previous chapter of this essay, contains many twists and turns but can be divided into three key phases: the prioritization of freedom over institutional guardrails, factionalism and polarization, and the rise of the tyrant from the dying democracy. Each of these steps, familiar to the contemporary observer of democratic backsliding, alerts us to opportunities for preventative action that can hedge against these steps by using liberal institutions and norms: checks, balances, and institutional guardrails, tolerance and mutual trust to counter polarization, and the formalization of liberal democratic norms into legal constraints all provide important defenses against the steps that Plato saw as leading to tyranny, steps that are hauntingly echoed today.

Many scholars and policymakers have presented a rich array of possibilities for how backsliding can be fought, the depths of which cannot be covered in full in this paper. However, evidence demonstrates that the best protections against backsliding are preventative. Plato, with his step-by-step analysis, can illuminate not only the dangers of democracy without liberalism, but also specific moments in the slide that robust liberal guardrails can shield democracy against. In this reading, Plato's depiction of democratic decay not only reveals the risks associated with illiberal democracy, risks identifiable over two millennia ago, but also nudges us towards important solutions to the crisis of backsliding today.

Conclusions

This paper is an attempt to inject a new—or, perhaps more accurately, extremely old—perspective into arguably the most important policy conversation of our time: how to confront the crisis of democratic backsliding. I argue that Plato’s analysis of the deterioration of democratic systems offers valuable insights into the risks associated with illiberal democracy and the necessity of robust liberal institutions to safeguard modern democracies. The first chapter of this paper outlines various definitions of democracy, from the birth of the term *demokratia* in ancient Greece to contemporary definitions, including those that emphasize accountability and quality.

The most important question in the current landscape of conceptions of democracy is this: whether or not democracy can function without liberal institutions and protections, and vice versa. This separation between liberalism and democracy has legitimate practical consequences, as demonstrated by recent evidence of “democratic decoupling.”²¹³ Nancy Bermeo offers crucial guidance in pointing to two forms of backsliding that justify attacks on democracy through democratic means: promissory coups and executive aggrandizement. She shows that backsliding, as it functions today, relies primarily on incremental weakening of liberal institutions that can be taken apart one by one, leading to eventual decoupling and thus the creation of “hybrid regimes” such as illiberal democracies. Building on Bermeo’s work, I have argued that the underemphasis on the separation between liberalism and basic democracy, and a lack of attention paid to the incremental, initially-democratic way that much of today’s democratic backsliding works, is problematic from a policy standpoint. The problem is exacerbated by two key holes in the literature: First, definitional inconsistency—especially with regard to the inclusion of liberalism in discussions of democracy—leads to inconsistent assumptions and quality judgements that make

²¹³ Ding and Slater, “Democratic Decoupling.”

practical, prescriptive solutions to backsliding a challenge. Additionally, most scholars and policymakers approaching the problem of democratic backsliding are (small-d) democrats, potentially blinding them to democracy's weaknesses, especially the dangers of democracy without liberalism.

When I turned to Plato in Chapter II, I outlined the five constitutions he presents in his *Republic*, and how they decay into each other. I argue that one of his central indictments of democracy is its susceptibility to turn into tyranny, and further, that his picture of sliding too far *into* democracy has prescient contemporary equivalents, such as Órban's Hungary and Erdoğan's Turkey. In Chapter III, I reconnect Plato to contemporary politics more directly. I argue that Plato's analysis of democratic decline serves as an apt warning about the risks of illiberal democracies turning to authoritarianism, and further, that research shows that strong liberal institutions offer the best protection against democratic backsliding.

While no ancient Athenian will solve our problems today, I do think Plato's diagnosis might have implications for countering the current crisis of backsliding. I divide Plato's description of the transition from democracy to tyranny into three primary steps: freedoms gone too far, the rise of polarization, and the rise of the tyrant. I then propose contemporary solutions available in recent research to counter and safeguard against each of these steps, namely institutional guardrails, mutual toleration, and the formalization of liberal norms, respectively.

The *Republic* contains many lessons, ethical, artistic, and political. This essay has focused on only one of the many questions Plato tackles in the dialogue, his depiction of democratic slide. In what I hope can be an enduring dialogue between ancient wisdom and modern challenges, Plato's warnings about the fragility of democracy call our attention to the

vulnerability of democracy without liberal protections and the importance of securing these institutions to protect a just future.

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