

EVIDENCE BRIEFER

# **POLITICAL PARTIES AND OPPOSITION TO DEMOCRATIC EROSION: EVIDENCE FROM A LITERATURE REVIEW**

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Political Parties and Opposition to Democratic Erosion: Evidence from a Literature Review

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Political parties can be key actors in the prevention and disruption of democratic erosion. Scholars have documented strategies political parties can implement to slow or reverse erosion. However, there is a dearth of guidance on which strategies are most effective, and the variation from one operating environment to another can undermine the application of this research in democracy and governance (DG) programming. To address this gap, the International Republican Institute (IRI) completed a literature review to investigate patterns of democratic erosion, the strategies political parties have used to oppose democratic erosion, and the factors that affect parties' opportunities to implement these strategies.

The literature review highlighted three key findings:

- 1. Democratic erosion is gradual, often led by elected individuals, and influenced by contextual factors.** Democratic erosion occurs when individual actors, typically elected leaders, undermine democratic institutions to enhance their own power, leading to the gradual breakdown of democratic institutions and principles. These individuals are termed "erosion agents." Contextual factors, such as the extent of democratic breakdown, institutions, polarization, and legislative supermajorities, influence the ability of an elected leader to erode democracy and the effectiveness of strategies to resist erosion.
- 2. Political parties play a critical role in the democratic erosion process and can use prevention, containment, and removal strategies to oppose erosion.** Political parties' unique role as mediating structures between citizens' preferences and the state provides them with opportunities to oppose or accelerate democratic erosion. Political parties' strategies include:
  - *Prevention strategies* avert the election of an erosion agent. This could include filtering out anti-democratic members from the party before they attain power.
  - *Containment strategies*, such as legislative oversight or electioneering, limit the actions of an incumbent with autocratic intentions.
  - *Removal strategies* seek to unseat an autocratic incumbent before their constitutional term is over, but can provoke a backlash and even accelerate erosion.
- 3. While the literature identifies types of DG programs that can support parties in combating democratic erosion, there is relatively little evidence on whether these approaches are effective, or what distinguishes effective programs from less effective ones.** No academic studies were found that either evaluated or suggested specific party assistance programming to combat democratic erosion. While political party assistance remains a core component of the DG sector, experimental, long-term, and comparative studies of party programming remain rare.

## METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE

IRI reviewed 90 unique sources, ultimately citing 33 of these articles in the literature review on democratic erosion and political parties' role in opposing democratic erosion. IRI reviewed academic sources and practitioner literature relevant to the DG sector. IRI prioritized articles from established journals and practitioners, such as *Democratization*, *Comparative Politics*, *Journal of Democracy*, and The United States Agency for International Development (USAID), among others.<sup>1</sup> IRI compared these academic and practitioner sources to identify common trends, disagreements among authors, and gaps in the literature.

This literature review is scoped in four ways. First, this review investigates the strategies political parties can implement to oppose democratic erosion. It does not include strategies that center on other actors like media, civil society organizations (CSOs), or the international community. However, there are instances where political parties implement strategies in conjunction with other actors. Second, this review summarizes strategies available to all parties, including those in government and the opposition. However, the literature almost exclusively tasks opposition parties with implementing containment strategies once democratic erosion is ongoing. The possible role of pro-democratic factions within incumbent parties driving erosion has only recently been discussed and, therefore, is not a focus of this review. Third, while some emerging literature examines the role of subnational actors in opposing erosion, most literature focuses on combating it at the national level. This has been noted where relevant. Finally, democratic erosion is a gradual transition from democracy to competitive authoritarianism, which falls within the spectrum of hybrid regimes rather than full-fledged autocracies. This is important to note because, under a competitive authoritarian regime, opposition parties still maintain the opportunity to participate and compete in elections to oppose democratic erosion.

## FINDINGS

### **Democratic erosion is a gradual process often led by elected individuals.**

Democratic erosion is a process of democratic breakdown that occurs when an individual actor or actors undermine democratic institutions to centralize their own power, leading to the gradual breakdown of democratic institutions and principles.<sup>2</sup> Individual actors, typically democratically elected leaders, initiate the erosion process by exploiting democratic processes through actions such as promissory coups, executive aggrandizement, and strategic election manipulation to achieve their authoritarian ambitions. These gradual forms of democratic breakdown have increased in frequency since the Cold War and are more common than sudden forms of democratic decline like coups d'état, executive coups by elected leaders, and blatant election-day vote fraud.<sup>i</sup> The incremental nature of this process provides advantages to the incumbent by making democratic breakdown imperceptible to domestic and international democracy activists until democracy has eroded significantly.<sup>ii</sup>

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1 The list of sources and outlets consulted is, however, not exhaustive. Sources are limited to English-speaking authors, and articles published after May of 2023 were not considered. As such, readers are encouraged to use the contents of this review as a starting point to their own inquiries on the democratic erosion process, rather than an endpoint.

2 Different researchers and practitioners use different terms for the gradual breakdown of democratic institutions and principles. For the purposes of this research, we are using "democratic erosion."

### Political parties play a critical role in the democratic erosion process.

Researchers agree that political parties can leverage their unique functions to defend democracy. For example, Levitsky and Ziblatt focus on parties' ability to use their recruiting and nomination prerogatives to prevent individuals with autocratic intentions from becoming party candidates.<sup>iii</sup> Such a strategy may go against a party's electoral prospects given the popularity of candidates with autocratic ambitions. However, while rare, there are examples of parties putting democracy ahead of their own interests.<sup>iv</sup> For example, despite electoral incentives of aligning with far-right parties, Belgium's Catholic party instituted a filtering system to screen candidates with far-right views and expelled those they found were already radicalized.<sup>v</sup> On the other hand, authors make clear that democratic erosion can also be accelerated by parties depending on their behavior in their role as opposition. Using the example of Venezuela, Gamboa and Cleary and Öztürk show opposition parties participating in a coup against President Chávez only exacerbated autocratization.

### Political parties can employ three types of strategies to counter democratic erosion: prevention, containment, and removal. Prevention and containment have proved successful at combating erosion, while removal tactics may accelerate erosion.

Gamboa and Cleary and Öztürk classify the strategies political parties use to counter democratic erosion based on what parties aim to achieve.<sup>vi</sup> Each type of strategy produces a different outcome, as seen in Figure 1.

Type	Goal	Strategies	Outcome	Authors
<b>Prevention</b>	Actions taken to avert the election of an individual with autocratic intentions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Blocking Nominations</li> <li>- Emphasizing Autocratic Intentions</li> <li>- Addressing Grievances</li> </ul>	Can prevent erosion from beginning in the first place.	Levitsky and Ziblatt, Lührmann
<b>Containment</b>	Actions taken to contain the democratic erosion caused by an erosion agent.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Emphasizing Corruption</li> <li>- Legislating</li> <li>- Litigation</li> <li>- Electioneering</li> <li>- Protests</li> </ul>	Can slow or reverse democratic erosion.	Gamboa, Cleary and Öztürk, Somer and McCoy
<b>Removal</b>	Actions taken to remove an incumbent before the end of their constitutional term.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Coups</li> <li>- Impeachment</li> <li>- Protests</li> </ul>	Can accelerate democratic erosion.	Gamboa, Cleary and Öztürk

Figure 1: Party Strategies to Counter Democratic Erosion

Prevention strategies include tactics to avert the election of an individual with autocratic intentions.<sup>3</sup> Externally, political parties can prevent the breakdown of democracy by improving their capacity to respond to citizen needs or “grievances,” since democratic erosion originates in part from societal dissatisfaction.<sup>vii</sup> Within political parties, leaders can filter out or remove individuals with autocratic tendencies to prevent them from attaining any power.<sup>viii</sup>

### A United Front in Zambia

In Zambia’s 2021 presidential election, the opposition remained united in their backing of Hakainde Hichilema, the main opposition candidate and eventual winner. Opposition parties agreed to participate in the election despite the incumbent party’s manipulation of state resources, control of the judiciary, and censorship of the media.<sup>x</sup>

Political parties may fail to keep an erosion agent from elected office. This may be because political parties do not identify a candidate’s autocratic tendencies before they are elected, the elected official becomes more autocratic after being elected, or, when parties do identify an erosion agent, they do not effectively employ the preventative strategies above. Once he or she is in power, political parties can use containment strategies to slow or reverse the leader’s concentration of executive power, without causing an early removal of the elected leader. Containment strategies can delay or reverse autocratic actions or policies or result in the electoral defeat of an incumbent.<sup>x</sup> By calling for an erosion agent to cease their accumulation of power, parties avoid framing their actions as a rejection of the democratic process and the current leader’s electoral legitimacy.<sup>xi</sup> This framing has helped opposition parties reduce the risk of radicalizing the incumbent and losing popular support. Parties have successfully adopted several containment strategies to combat erosion, including emphasizing corruption, legislating to delay and tame erosive laws, litigation, peaceful protests, and competing in elections.

### Removal and Instability in Thailand

In Thailand, clashes between the government, ruled by Thaksin Shinawatra and his Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party, and a radicalized opposition resulted in a wave of escalating actions. The military removed Thaksin from power in 2006, but new elections resulted in the return of TRT to power and continued polarization between the government and the opposition. The instability caused by these ongoing clashes ultimately led the military to establish an autocratic regime in 2014.<sup>xii</sup>

Removal strategies are tactics to unseat the incumbent before their constitutional term is over. Once erosion begins, parties have been tempted to pursue strategies to remove an erosive leader as quickly as possible. However, these strategies usually accelerate democratic breakdown. Extralegal attempts to remove the incumbent are widely viewed as ineffective in the literature. Coups and violent protests, for example, can undermine the democratic credibility of the opposition and provoke extreme responses from the government.<sup>xiii</sup> However, a debate exists regarding the effectiveness of legal avenues of incumbent removal, such as impeachment procedures or recall referenda. Cleary and Öztürk argue any attempt to remove an autocratic incumbent before their constitutional term is over, whether legal or not, risks exacerbating

<sup>3</sup> Different researchers use different terms to characterize leaders who initiate erosion. In *Resisting Backsliding: Opposition Strategies against the Erosion of Democracy*, for example, Gamboa characterizes these leaders as having “hegemonic aspirations.” For the purposes of this evidence briefer, we are using “autocratic intentions.”

autocratization.<sup>xiv</sup> On the other hand, Gamboa argues legal attempts to remove the incumbent do not always hinder the opposition's attempt to safeguard democracy. Still, Gamboa recognizes legal removal attempts remain a "risky gamble" as they can provoke aggressive responses from the incumbent.<sup>xv</sup> Given the uncertainty surrounding attempts at removal, political parties should avoid extra-legal strategies and carefully consider the consequences and potential backlash of using legal strategies.

### **Certain contextual factors and institutions influence the ability of an erosion agent to undermine democracy and the effectiveness of party strategies to resist erosion.**

Political parties are not always free to choose between containment and removal strategies. Contextual factors constrain the behavior and choices of party elites and may incentivize opposition parties to choose removal strategies when reacting to erosion. These factors may also influence the ability of parties to implement other strategies effectively.

#### **Identifying Leaders with Autocratic Intentions**

Gamboa notes that leaders with autocratic intentions have no normative preference for democracy. They can be identified by the following actions:

- Expresses uncertainty or indifference toward democracy.
- Expresses hostility toward democratic institutions.
- Challenges the validity of democratic procedures when the results contradict their interests.
- Claims to be the sole representative of the people.
- Questions the legitimacy of or dismisses peaceful opponents as enemies of the people.
- Introduces programs of partisan indoctrination.
- Once in government, manipulates institutional rules to their advantage.<sup>xvi</sup>

**Extent of Democratic Erosion:** Democratic erosion is incremental, which provides advantages to the incumbent by making democratic breakdown imperceptible to domestic and international actors, including political parties, until democracy has eroded significantly.<sup>xvii</sup> When political parties recognize leaders with autocratic intentions early on, they have more options for implementing containment strategies.<sup>xviii</sup>

**Institutions:** Democratic regimes vary in their institutions, which are defined as the rules or customs in a society that shape human interaction.<sup>xix</sup> These variations may affect the success of political parties in opposing democratic erosion.

- **Majoritarian vs Consensus Democracies:** Consensual institutions tend to foster connectedness between, and have better political representation of, all groups in society. These characteristics make consensual democracies more resilient to polarization as compared to their majoritarian counterparts.<sup>xx</sup> Majoritarian institutions consist of minimal-winning coalitions and two-party systems, offering less representation and fewer opportunities for cross-party networks. As a result, campaigns seeking to bring together formerly opposing groups of people may be easier to implement in democracies with consensual characteristics.

- **Parliamentarian vs Presidential Democracies:** In parliamentary democracies, prime ministers (PMs) wield control over both the executive and legislative branches. When combined with a supermajority, PMs can quickly curb the power of the courts, oversight agencies, and the legislature itself.<sup>xxi</sup> Conversely, in presidential regimes, different parties can exercise control of the executive and legislative branches at the same time, checking each other's powers. Due to the division of power in presidential systems, incumbents may have a harder time eroding democracy.<sup>xxii</sup>
- **Run-off Elections:** A run-off election is a second election held when no candidate in the first election meets the required threshold for victory.<sup>xxiii</sup> By requiring an additional election between the two candidates with the highest support, or the candidates who received more than a set proportion of votes, O'Dwyer and Stenberg find that run-off elections incentivize political parties to form cross-party alliances around a single opposition figure, which maximizes their chances of defeating an erosive incumbent.<sup>xxiv</sup>
- **Party System Institutionalization:** The successful implementation of gatekeeping strategies depends on the strength of the political party system. Strong party systems are characterized by political parties with stable membership, stable ideological positions, and key contenders across several election cycles. Strong party systems are better able to exercise gatekeeping and prevent individuals with autocratic intentions from gaining power than weak party systems that exhibit high volatility.<sup>xxv</sup>

**Polarization:** Polarization contributes to democratic erosion by creating zero-sum attitudes and heightened threat perceptions, which leads citizens and political actors to prioritize conflict over cooperation.<sup>xxvi</sup> McCoy and Somer argue that increased polarization contributes to a growing perception among citizens that the opposing party represents a threat to their way of life. Incumbents use this threat narrative to further repress the opposition. Similarly, opposition parties take advantage of threat perceptions among their supporters to justify the pursuit of removal strategies against autocratic incumbents. Both actions can accelerate erosion in the process.<sup>xxvii</sup>

As citizen preferences become increasingly illiberal, an environment where populism can gain momentum is fostered. Rising populism provides an advantage to political leaders with autocratic intentions because it allows them to more easily and openly delegitimize democratic institutions and individual rights without facing consequences.<sup>xxviii</sup>

When polarization and/or populism are present, political parties need to sacrifice short-term political gains made by capitalizing on polarization and populism for long-term strategies that reverse polarization and populism. These strategies include addressing underlying grievances and increasing accountability and consensus-building mechanisms.<sup>xxix</sup>



**Legislative Supermajorities:** An incumbent's successful concentration of power is contingent on the cooperation of the legislature, which is mainly accomplished through acquiescent ruling parties or coalitions.<sup>xxx</sup> Some containment strategies, such as investigating corruption or legislating to delay and/or modify undemocratic policies, are less feasible or effective when the incumbent has gained control over the legislature.

### Legislative Capture in El Salvador

In El Salvador, President Nayib Bukele managed to significantly undermine democratic institutions in less than three years due in part to the legislative supermajority secured by his party in 2021.<sup>xxxi</sup>

**While the literature outlines types of DG programs to support parties in combating democratic erosion, there is relatively little evidence on whether these approaches are effective, or on what distinguishes more effective programs from less effective ones.**

The grey literature and IRI's experience offer potential ideas on how assistance programs can support parties in opposing erosion. Program approaches that support political parties in implementing the strategies identified in this research are listed below:

- Identifying and Addressing Citizens' Grievances: Training on citizen-responsive governance, support for public opinion polling, campaign consultations, and town halls between political parties or elected officials and citizens.
- Forming Cross-party Alliances: Political party exchanges, cross-party networks, coalition-building, or dialogue sessions.<sup>xxxii</sup>
- Developing and Passing Legislation to Prevent Undemocratic Policies or Reforms: Training and support to implement accountability mechanisms and legislative strengthening programs.
- Electioneering: Consultations, training on policy development, public debates to communicate platforms to constituents, campaign and strategic communications training, or support for public opinion polling.
- Emphasizing and Exposing Corruption and Efforts to Undermine Democracy: Training on anticorruption, monitoring corruption or performance, consultations with party leaders to advocate for accountability measures, or technical assistance for election monitoring.

Ideas on the kinds of programs that *could* support political parties are plentiful. However, there is little evidence on whether party assistance programs are effective, or on what distinguishes more effective programs from less effective ones. Experimental, long-term, and comparative studies of party programming remain rare.<sup>xxxiii</sup> INGO and funders have tended to move away from political party assistance to focus programming resources on other actors, such as civil society, providing fewer opportunities<sup>xxxiv</sup> for evaluating party assistance.

## CONCLUSION

Democratic erosion is a global challenge. The evidence suggests political parties, one of democracy's central actors, can successfully mitigate, slow, and even prevent democratic erosion. For this reason, the need to evaluate the effectiveness of party assistance programming is pressing. IRI is working to build an evidence base for approaches that can support parties to implement effective pro-democracy strategies. One initiative includes an evaluation series to understand how DG programs can effectively support political parties to address citizen grievances. IRI identified the steps parties can take to identify, prioritize, and respond to citizen concerns and will conduct an evaluation series to develop recommendations for practitioners supporting parties to address citizen grievances. Through efforts like these, IRI seeks to narrow the evidence gap on effective party approaches to counter democratic erosion and ultimately provide the DG sector with concrete tools to combat erosion agents worldwide.

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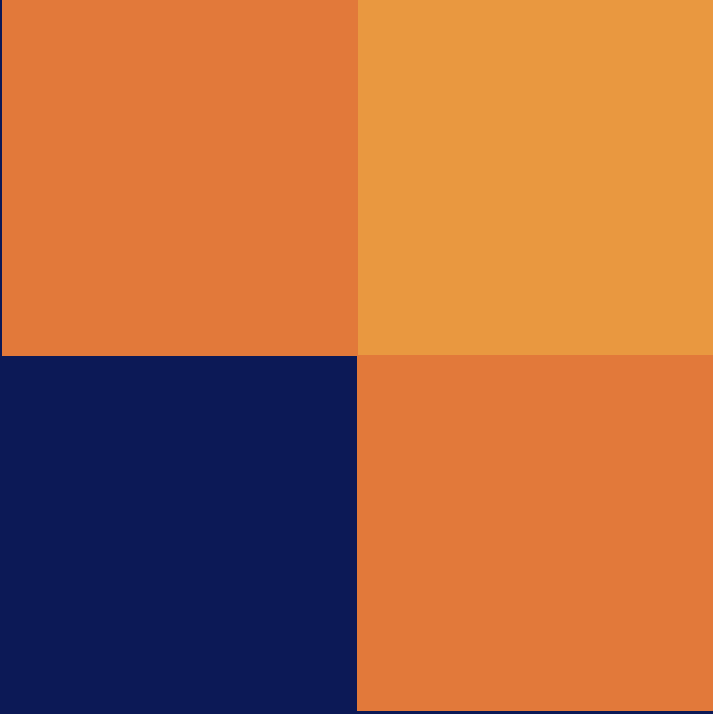
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