LIBERTÉ
ÉGALITÉ
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THE END OF DEMOCRACY AS WE KNOW IT

Exclamation or question mark!?

The Accelerating Process of Democratic Backsliding

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Abstract

Liberal democracies are experiencing rough times. This is not only due to external pressures as a result of the new power play in the context of geo-political rivalry and the populist turn in Trumpian America, but also because of creeping internal democracy-undermining processes. In this book-sized essay, I reflect on what may explain the latter, developing the first building blocks of what I refer to as an ecological complexity perspective. Without ignoring other explanatory forces, my focus is on the subtle interplay between five interrelated mechanisms. The first mechanism involves the overregulation that signals the State's distrust in citizens, being partly driven by a regulatory reflex of the ruling elite to any incident or issue. The second mechanism has to do with the well-known explosive interaction between elected politicians and the hysteria-loving media. The third mechanism relates to the complacent anger that is easily triggered in a population pampered by a highly-developed Welfare State. The fourth mechanism is the well-established inequality-increasing impact of decades of neo-liberal policies. The fifth mechanism is driven by the isolating effect of the bubble-producing technology of social media. These five mechanisms are involved in a deadly embrace, interacting in producing a downward spiral that slowly kills the liberal democracy as we know it. This downward spiral is provided with lubricating oil by the behavior of the political class, specifically mainstream center right. Initiated by the far right, the new political discourse is characterized by brutalization and normalization, which is perfectly in line with the modern-day culture of immediacy – of a permanent quest for instant gratification.

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Fear, my dear

The world is turning upside down.
Intolerance promoted to the throne.
Wearing an ugly crown.
Civilization stripped to the bone.

Fear is the new guideline.
Fear for the other.
Favoring my own sister and brother.
Viewing marginalizing minorities as more than fine.

Roughness as the norm,
blasting as a storm.
Respect in disrespect.
This is a new fact.

Fear should return to the sideline.
Looking beyond what is mine.
Protecting minorities
as one of the key priorities.

But roughening and polarization
are the new normal.
Discriminating and segregating
is the new policy.

The far right is taking over
of what used to be
liberal democracies.
The far right is penetrating
the moderate center right through
a process of normalization.
The far right is moving
to the center of power,
promoting illiberal democracies.

Policies of revenge
on the seedbed
of polarization.
A fight against
the elite on behalf of
the will of the people.
Kill the free press,
the independent judiciary,
and evidence-based science.

Civilized dialogue and sensible compromise
deserve a comeback.
Human rights and decency
deserve to return.

Fear is a bad counselor.
Leading to horror.
Leaning in with the enemy.
No longer being free.

Respect should be the key norm.
Dialogue as the main communication form.
Empathy as the default.
Not being anxiously passive, but proactively bold.

Fear, my dear,
is stupidity in disguise,
is anything but wise.
Why is that not clear?

The world should turn around,
embracing tolerance,
avoiding intolerance.
Caring without an arbitrary bound.

0   An Opening Shot

Writing about an issue such as democratic backsliding could go on *ad infinitum*, in principle, as novel evidence is being produced all the time, with new pieces of research and new (post-)election outcomes emerging across the world on a very regular basis, if not in real time. Without any doubt, the world is in flux, certainly so in liberal democracies. In this context, the rise of the far right is the key eye-catcher in the 2010s and 2020s. This as such immediately underscores the seriousness and urgency of the issue involving the danger of democratic demise. Liberal democracies are clearly under threat. However, to indefinitely update this text is not an option. Actually, I initially decided to stop adding new information to this essay on the day (May 16 2024) that four populist and (far) right-wing political parties in the Netherlands published and presented their coalition agreement, two signaling more pride than two others, and about three weeks before the next EU election day – quite a symbolic stopping date indeed.

However, I soon found out that I could not stop myself from updating my text after yet another election-related event, such as the elections in Austria, the EU, France, India, the UK, and the US, after reading yet another piece of scholarly output, journalistic piece, or literary creativity, or after receiving yet other very insightful comments from yet another colleague. So, in all likelihood, I will continue expanding this essay-turned-into-a-book until the day before final publication, would such a day ever arrive. To set the scene for the rest of my argumentation, I briefly reflect on what the four Dutch political parties announced in their policy program titled *Hoop, lef en trots* ("Hope, courage and pride") in Box 0.1.[1]

Box 0.1: Hope, courage and pride
After six months of negotiations, four (center and far-)right parties succeeded in forming a new Dutch cabinet: the populist-conservative BBB, the right-centrist

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[1]   Permanent updating has many downsides, a prominent one being that inconsistencies and redundancies start to sneak in. This is a prize I am willing to pay for attempting to stay as close to modern-day reality as I can. Up-front, I want to apologize for the inconsistencies and redundancies that are very likely to annoy many readers.

NSC, the conservative-liberal[2] VVD, and the radical-right PVV[3] (these adjectives are mine, and mine only, and may hence be questioned, as much debate about "proper" adjectives pops up, time and again). The result will be the most right-wing cabinet that ever ruled the Netherlands since the introduction of universal suffrage. More importantly in the context of the current essay, for the first time in Dutch history, a far-right political party will not only informally support the government, but will also be the largest and leading party in the formal coalition, delivering ministers and secretaries.[4] We see the slippery slope of far-right normalization in full motion here. For many decades, the far right was banned from formal coalition formation. The first step toward normalization was the participation of Pim Fortuyn's populist-right LPF[5], after he was murdered, in the Balkenende I cabinet of 2002-2003, which lasted for less than a year, particularly as a result of LPF-internal chaos. The second normalization step involved PVV's formal support of, but not official participation in, the Rutte I government in 2010-2012, which collapsed after about two years when the PVV leader (and only party member) Geert Wilders could not agree with austerity

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2   The definition of "liberal" varies across the world when used with reference to political parties. In the US, for instance, "liberal" has a leftist connotation, linked to the Democratic Party with a social-liberal identity. In other countries, "liberal" is much more associated with the center right, such as in the case of the conservative-liberal FDP in Germany. In many countries, both types of liberalism are on offer, side by side. For instance, in the Netherlands, the conservative-liberal VVD co-exists peacefully next to the social-liberal D66. In this essay, I hope that the varying meaning of "liberal" and "liberalism" is clear from the context in which these terms are being used. And where appropriate, for the sake of clarity, I add the adjectives "conservative" or "social". A further complication is the order in which two terms are cemented together. For instance, is the VVD conservative-liberal or liberal-conservative? Actually, assuming that the dominant label should come first, this changes over time. Under the leadership of Ed Nijpels or Mark Rutte, liberal-conservative was more appropriate. But under Frits Bolkenstein's or Dilan Yesilköz' helm, conservative-liberal comes closer to reality. Hence, to signal this ambivalence, I decided not to aspire for consistency in this respect.

3   PVV stands for, quite ironically, *Partij voor de Vrijheid*, which translates into Party for the Freedom.

4   For Geert Wilders, finding capable and credible candidates turned out to be a bumpy road. During the negotiation phase, he nominated experienced politicians or civil servants from other political parties (even twice from the social-democrats, his natural enemies), after his first PVV nominee had to step down after one day due to a fraud case. He ended up nominating a civil servant as Prime-Minister (Dick Schoof, who until very recently was member of the social-democratic PvdA), and a series of highly controversial PVV loyalists as ministers and secretaries, many of whom openly expressing discriminatory opinions (mostly very anti-Islam) and conspiracy theories (specifically that regarding willful population replacement).

5   Listening to and reading of Pim Fortuyn's heritage make clear how brutalization has progressed immensely since the early 2000s. What was seen as shocking back then, would be considered very mild by now.

measures. Since then until Dilan Yesilgöz took over the VVD leadership from Mark Rutte in 2023, the far right was explicitly excluded from any formal or informal involvement in government, implying a *de facto cordon sanitaire*. This changed in the campaign of the national 2023 elections, when Dilan Yesilgöz announced that she was willing to negotiate with Geert Wilders to form a right-wing cabinet (see Box 2 on this).

The agreement among the four parties has the 19th century novel-like title of *Hoop, lef en trots* – or "Hope, courage and pride". Except for a few leftist policies to support the poor, the program breathes deep conservatism and nationalism, with far-right accents. For instance, many progressive measures of the Rutte IV government will be explicitly reversed, many of these involving climate policies and farming regulations. In the context of the current essay, two (sets of) aspired policies are particularly worth discussing. The first set of policies has to do with constraining immigration. This does not only involve an explicit reduction of foreign student inflow, but also an extremely strict package of measures targeting asylum-seekers. Regarding the latter, the new cabinet aims to announce an asylum crisis in order to legally introduce emergency measures. According to many legal experts, this implies that the cabinet will act against the rule of law – a first sign of democratic backsliding.[6] Because the other partners in the coalition are very well aware of the danger of democratic decline, particularly Pieter Omtzigt's NSC, the first six weeks of the cabinet formation talks were spent on agreeing on the need to safeguard the rule of law and to honor the Constitution. This as such is already a unique sign on the wall. This is even more striking knowing that each and every member of the Second Chamber must vow to act in line with the Constitution anyway. Apparently, this is seen as insufficient, signaling that the NSC and VVD probably believe that this vow involves an empty ceremony. In *Hoop, lef en trots*, this returns in the ambition to establish a Constitutional Court (the Netherlands never had one), which does require a lengthy process to change the Constitution. Clearly, even the non-far right involved in the new cabinet is afraid that by forming a government with Geert Wilders' extreme or radical-right PVV may well be associated with a serious democratic backsliding trap.

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6   In the end, the PVV had to back down, after weeks and weeks, if not months, of new negotiations behind closed doors. Rather than a crisis law bypassing Parliament, the compromise involves a *spoedwet*. Literally, this translates into a "speed law", which is a quicker route to new policies, but one that still involves both the First and Second Chamber. In return, Geert Wilders can refer to an even stricter policy package – *e.g.*, even before the breakdown of the Assad regime including the intention to repatriate Syrian asylum-seekers (with or without permit) to "safe" areas in Syria.

My bias to the Dutch case is not only understandable knowing that I am Dutch, but may also be extra revealing as many will agree that until very recently the Netherlands was seen as a classic example of an old and highly resilient liberal democracy. If even a country like that starts to slip, and quite dramatically so, we cannot but take the issue of democratic backsliding very seriously. Evidently, the reputation of the Netherlands as a uniquely liberal and tolerant nation-state can now be archived in the waste bin. The current government under the leadership of the far-right PVV is doing and saying things that seriously undermine the rule of law. Even more worryingly, the Netherlands is not an exception. The recent successes of the Austrian FPÖ and the German AfD are telling – winning elections in Austria and Thüringen/Germany, respectively, with about one fifth one third of the votes. Both parties are openly pro-Putin and xenophobic, adopting an Orbánian strategy to undermine the very foundation of the liberal democracy, not shying away from using Nazi-inspired language. For instance, the AfD-leader Björn Höcke in Thüringen promotes the idea of deporting millions of people without German roots to an unspecified abroad,[7] and the FPÖ's party leader Herbert Kickl aspires to be Austria's *Volkskanzler*, an ambition and term borrowed from Adolf Hitler.

Conspiracy theories are increasingly popular. A fresh one is that all these far-right parties collaborate across Europe in an orchestrated but secret attempt to kill the liberal democracy quickly by pushing parliament to the sideline by implementing a crisis law as soon as they are in the power position to do so. By extending this crisis law indefinitely, they can act however they wish without any effective democratic control. This is daily practice in Hungary by now for many years. In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders and his followers in cabinet and parliament were aggressively pushing for a crisis law as well. They permanently refer to an asylum crisis, arguing that this crisis can only be fought against effectively with the uncontrolled decisiveness legally permitted under a crisis law. However, all experts (but these are hostile members of the elite anyway, and hence do not have to be taken seriously) argue that a legal case for such a law is impossible to make (see footnote 6), as evidence for the "special circumstances" needed for that are nowhere to be seen. The asylum crisis is not due to a "tsunami" of asylum-seekers,[8] but the result of the "deliberately created" lack of sufficient reception capacity. This "deliberately created" is put between quotation

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7   Similarly, an AfD member of Saksen-Anhalt's parliament referred to the famous Bauhaus movement in architecture as an error and as inhumane, and to the Bauhaus artists as doubtful people promoting alienation. Particularly when listening to the original argument in German, the resemblance with the Nazi narrative of art being *Entartet* is crystal-clear.

8   Actually, the 2024 numbers are far below those of 2023.

marks, as this cannot be proven to be the case – and hence is part of yet another conspiracy theory. Clearly, expertise, facts, and "truths" (whatever that might be) are irrelevant in the current-day political theater. It is all about emotions and narratives. Many, particularly far-right, politicians promote one lie after the other among the electorate. In line with this, the Dutch Prime-Minister Dick Schoof is not referring to an asylum crisis *per se*, but to one that is experienced by the people. In the end, in the modern day and age of the populist far right, words do count as much or even more than deeds – before, during, and after elections. And this strategy is working out very well.

Indeed, PopuList data clearly reveal an increasing popularity of the far right across Europe (see https://popu-list.org). By mid-2024, about one in five European voters drafted their support for a far-right political party, growing from 17.3 to 20.5 per cent in one year, coming from about 4 per cent in 2008 – a substantial and steady increase indeed.[9] Knowing that the far right is not a fan of the liberal democracy as a nation's governance system, this immediately makes clear that we have a serious issue here – a puzzle that deserves systematic analysis to deeply understand why and how this is happening. Not surprisingly, the literature on this, across many disciplines, is massive. In this book-length essay, my aim is to bring these scattered insights together in an attempt to develop a comprehensive understanding of what goes on here. Only then, we can hopefully identify what may be effective remedies to stop or, preferably, reverse the creeping process of the erosion of liberal democracies.

[9]   The 2024 percentage is an update provided by the Dutch high-quality daily newspaper *NRC*, published on July 24 2024 on pages 5 and 6. The data include all EU Member States except for Malta, plus Great Britain, Iceland, Norway, and Switzerland. The data only involve national elections, and not municipality or regional ones, nor those for the European Parliament. PopuList provides a list of political parties classified as extreme or radical right. Recently established parties, such as Republika in Slowakia and Velichie in Bulgaria, are not yet included.

Reflection 1: The extreme right is right in the middle

Like most people, I always assumed that the extreme right (or radical right) is located at the extreme right of the political spectrum. This is why they are called the extreme right, right? Or far right, right? And they are more to the right than mainstream right, right? However, according to the extreme right themselves, I am completely wrong here. Paradoxically, in their view, they are located right in the middle. This is the reason why, if I understand their logic correctly: The extreme right divides humanity into two broad-stroke groups: producers and parasites. On the one (good) hand, producers are the hardworking citizens who produce goods – products and/or services – that keep the economy going, and that really contribute to society. They serve meals in restaurants, they build new houses, they brew beer, they care for the sick, they repair leakages, they construct cars, they milk cows, and much more. They are the ones who produce economic and societal value. On the other (bad) hand, parasites are all those in society not contributing or producing anything. Those are the ones who collect benefits. Those are the ones who are hanging in our streets. And many of those parasites are immigrants, with or without permits. But not only the non-contributing and non-producing poor are parasites, but the non-contributing and non-producing very rich, too. The latter earn money with their money, without really contributing or producing anything. Hence, society should not be visualized as a pyramid, but as a barrel. The barrel is thick in the middle, with many producers, and thinner at the bottom and top, with poor and rich parasites, respectively. Because the extreme right fights for the interests of the produces, they are located right in the middle. The extreme right is both anti-elite (the very rich, but also academics, civil servants, journalists, and judges) and anti-"scum" (the very poor, among whom many immigrants). Of course, the parasites metaphor is anything but new. It has a long history. But with the rise of modern extreme right, this highly discriminatory and inflammable discourse has made a comeback in the political arena in liberal democracies, after decades of taboo since the defeat of Nazism.

Source: HoSang, D. M. & Lowndes, J. E. (2019). *Producers, Parasites, Patriots: Race and the new right-wing politics of precarity.* Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

Alphabet of the far right in power

Giorgia Meloni, the rising star.
Outcompeting all others, by far.
Neofascism silenced into the unsaid.
Radical-right policies widespread.
The free press curtailed.
Family values hailed.

Giorgio Meloni, backtracking in time.
The modern rule of law as a crime.

Victor Orbán, the far-right veteran.
With Putin as his major fan.
The illiberal democracy as his masterpiece.
Supporter of a total progressive freeze.
And of Jewish-Christian norms.
In pre-historic forms.

Victor Orbán, backtracking in time.
The modern rule of law as a crime.

Donald Trump, fire-breathing aggressiveness.
Total lack of forgiveness.
Rambling revenge talk.
Capitol Hill walk.
Angry-looking criminal act.
Denier of any fact.

Donald Trump, backtracking in time.
The modern rule of law as a crime.

Geert Wilders, single-member party leader.
Discriminatory speech feeder.
All immigrants kicked out.
Much X filth spitted into the cloud.

Islamophobia his daily business.
Pureness instead of fuzziness.

Geert Wilders, backtracking in time.
The modern rule of law as a crime.

Backtracking in time with
Jimmi Åkesson
Jair Bolsonaro,
Tino Chrupalla,
Santiago Abascal Conde,
Nigel Farage,
Robert Fico,
Tom Van Grieken,
Björn Höcke,
Jaroslaw Kaczyński,
Herbert Kickl,
Javier Milei,
Marine Le Pen,
Riikka Purra,
Alice Weidel,
and many copycats,
celebrating national purity,
aggressive clarity,
and a world without facts.

1   The Slippery Slope

The case in Box 0.1 symbolizes what is happening across the world in liberal democracies. In modern-day[10] times, liberal democracies are in defense across planet Earth. Not only have many countries that seemed to have turned to democracy after the collapse of the Berlin Wall slipped back into a state of (full or semi-)autocracy, clear examples being Hungary, Russia and Slovakia (and, until recently, Poland), but also are established democratic institutions in quite a few countries slowly being eroded by populist-oriented regimes – a process being referred to as democratic backsliding (or decline or erosion). All those closely following the news are very well aware of this, being confronted with one bit of sign-on-the-wall news after the other on an almost daily basis.[11] This is not a development that kicked in only recently, but one that is already evolving in the form of a creeping process over decades. Telling is that a substantial literature has emerged on democratic backsliding within Europe, analyzing the slow erosion of the rule of law across (too) many countries within the European Union (see, *e.g.*, Christopoulou, 2022; Grumbach, 2023; Lobina, 2023; Pech & Scheppele, 2017; Sedelmeier, 2024). And this process of democratic decline is not restricted to Europe, the US being another, and very worrying, example (see, *e.g.*, Keck, 2024; Mickey, Levitisky, & Way, 2017; Waldner & Lust, 2018).

This is not only due to external pressures as a result of the new power play in the context of geo-political rivalry, but also because of creeping internal democracy-undermining processes. In this book-sized essay, I reflect on what may explain the latter, developing the first building blocks of what I refer to as an ecological complexity perspective. Without ignoring other explanatory factors, particularly three "external" forces (*i.e.*, the neo-liberal revolution, Internet technology, and economic globalization), my main focus is on the subtle interplay between a crucial set of five interrelated mechanisms. The first mechanism involves the overregulation that signals the State's distrust in citizens (and markets, paradoxically), being partly driven by a regulatory

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10   The meaning of "modern" may be somehow obvious in daily language, it is not in the academic literature. For one, what is modern today, is not-so-modern tomorrow. More importantly, there is a massive literature reflecting on the meaning of modernity, which is a moving target, too (see, *e.g.*, Beck, Bonss, & Lau, 2003; Beck & Lau, 2005). I briefly reflect on this issue further down the line. Inevitably, my use of "modern" is, therefore, time bound, referring to what is seen as modern in 2024 and 2025. Frequently, therefore, I use "modern-day" rather than "modern", to avoid any confusion (I hope).

11   For instance, read this and shudder: https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/19/magazine/stop-the-steal.html. For recent data on the declining appetite for democracy, see https://www.pewresearch.org/global/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2024/02/gap_2024.02.28_democracy-closed-end_report.pdf.

control reflex of the ruling elite to any incident or issue. The second mechanism has to do with the well-known explosive interaction between eligible and elected politicians, on the one hand, and the hysteria-loving media, on the other hand. The third mechanism relates to the complacent anger that is easily triggered in a population pampered by a highly-developed Welfare State. The fourth mechanism is the well-established inequality-increasing impact of decades of neo-liberal policies. The fifth mechanism is driven by the isolating effect of the bubble-producing technology of the social media. My claim is that these five main mechanisms are involved in a deadly embrace, interacting iteratively and non-linearly in producing a downward spiral that slowly kills the liberal democracy as we know it.

In this essay, after setting the scene by (a) waving with six red flags, (b) by reflecting on the meaning, position, and strategy of extreme, radical, and far right, (c) by introducing three key external forces, and (d) by briefly presenting democratic resilience as backsliding's target, I will first introduce and discuss each of these five mechanisms in turn, spelling out the underlying causal logic, illustrated with pieces of available evidence. Although cross-referencing is not fully absent, by and large, my focus is foremost on explaining each mechanism in isolation. Next, I will argue that in order to fully understand the interactive interplay among and between this set of five mechanisms (further fueled by external forces), we must adopt the comprehensive lens of what I refer to as ecological complexity, combining insights from ecology and complexity theories. In so doing, I emphasize the non-linear dynamics and higher-order interactions that characterize these democracy-eroding processes. Subsequently, I reflect on a few turns that might be instrumental in restoring democratic resilience, with specific attention to the ecological dynamics internal to the political system. After that, again taking this ecological complexity lens, I will briefly list a few promising future research opportunities, including an argument in favor of computer simulation and machine learning as highly suitable analytical tools.

Figure 1 visualizes a very simple scheme that helps to structure my line of argumentation. During the meandering development of my *ditto* reasoning, step by step, I will further complicate[12] this scheme in a few additional figures. To bring my argument to life, throughout this essay, I add boxes that illustrate my logic with real-world examples, primarily but not exclusively from the Netherlands, I include exhibits that introduce illustrative data, and I conclude chapters with free-floating reflections.

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12   Although I will try to restrain myself, I cannot promise that I will not further complicate what I have to say by inserting one hopefully informative footnote after the other. Actually, in this essay, quite a few subtle complications are hidden in these footnotes. Still, not being a legal scholar, I have good hopes that the number and length of my footnotes will stay below a manageable ceiling.

Moreover, after presenting the core of my argument, I will take a step back to reflect on a few broader issues that might well add further complexity to an already complex argument. Specifically, I will briefly think through the potential impact of deeper cultural change, as captured by the term of "immediacy", as well as the normative implication of cultural absolutism versus relativism.[13]

Figure 1: The ecological complexity model of democracy's demise

THREE FORCES

1 Neo-liberal revolution
2 Internet technologies
3 Economic globalization

+

FIVE MECHANISMS

1 Distrustful overregulation
2 Media hysteria backsliding
3 Complacent anger
4 Polarizing inequality inequality
5 Bubbling isolation

+ → Support for extreme and radical right

+ → Democratic backsliding process

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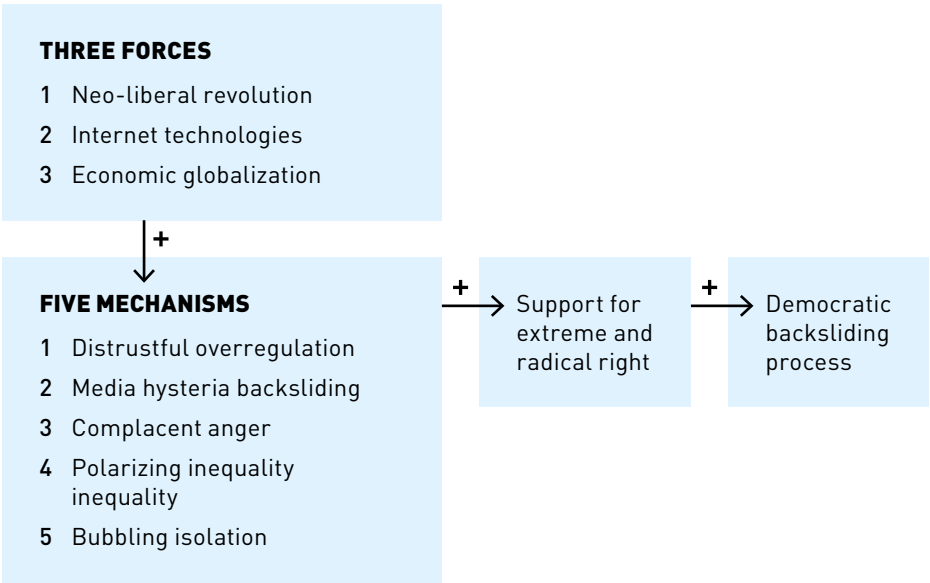
13 My argument is not without repetition, perhaps even to the extent that I might be accused of having included too many redundancies. However, I do this on purpose, not only to benefit from the power of repetition, but particularly so to signpost the many cross-relationships.

Reflection 2: It's all behavior, stupid

Clearly, a liberal democracy can only survive if the politicians and voters behave accordingly. In this essay, much text will be devoted to seemingly "hard" and "factual" arguments. For instance, I will discuss the rule of law's foundation, the *Trias Politica*, that is so elegantly backed up by institutional guardrails that seem to be solid proof on paper. However, in daily practice, politicians and their voters can quite easily transform such guardrails in puppet-like marionets that are not taken seriously at all, but are rather used as a pubic to hide the autocratic behavior that is actually ruling the country. On paper, countries such as Hungary and Russia still have all traditional guardrails of a liberal democracy in place. Elections are still organized, a Constitution is still written in beautiful language, a judiciary is still judging, newspapers are still printed on a daily basis, universities are still populated by students and teachers, *et cetera*. But behind this façade, the liberal democracy is absolutely dead (or *morsdood* in Dutch, a more powerful word). In the end, only actual behavior does really count. A liberal democracy does not come like manna from the sky. It needs permanent maintenance, by all involved, on a daily basis. It requires responsibility. Those in charge should behave with decency and respect. They should be willing to engage in dialogues. They must seek compromise. They should accept losses. Their language must be devoid of hostile aggressiveness. Facts should matter, as should expertise. So, a liberal democracy comes with a critical set of behavioral norms and values. Of course, emotions cannot be ignored. And of course, narratives and rhetoric are important. But key is to handle these carefully through the lens of liberal democracy's norms and values of compromise, dialogue, respect, and tolerance. When these norms and values are undermined by aggressive hostility, by fact-free rhetoric, by worshipping violence, and by disrespectful narratives, the end of liberal democracies can be celebrated (at least, by autocrats, and the far left and right), regardless of the rule of law's guardrails that are formally still in place. In the end, it's all behavior, stupid.

Tone of voice

The birth of brutalization.
The end of civilization.
Tolerance out of the window.
Democracy a lonely widow.

Politics in liberal democracies,
regressing to playground culture.
Mimicking autocracies,
behaving like a vulture.

Own country first.
Evidence last.
Revolution fast.
Insatiable hard-hearted thirst.

Brutalization as signature mark.
No spitting language too stark.
Personal attacks on opponents.
Orchestrated with proponents.

Fake parliament.
Criminal journalists.
Witch politicians.
Scum foreigners.
Woke lefties.
Lying scientists.
Self-enriching elite.

Nazi-echoes.
Umvolkung.
Lügenpresse
Volkstod.
Abwehrkampf.
Linksgrün versiff.
SS Helden.

Respectful dialogue killed.
Closet with enemies fully filled.
The rule of dictatorship.
The culture of personal worship.

The will of the people on top.
Minorities marginalized.
Foreigners criminalized.
On immigration a complete stop.

Politics in illiberal democracies,
Nullifying any opposition.
All very akin to autocracies.
The art of manipulation.

The birth of brutalization.
The end of civilization.
A world of discrimination.
The rule of frustration

2 Six Red Flags

In advance, I would like to make six remarks to clarify the nature of my contribution in order to avoid any misunderstanding. First, although I will try to come up with a positivist and objective analysis, based on (slices of) the factual evidence and theoretical logic I happen to be aware of, it cannot be denied that my normative and subjective position is very clear. As is the case in much of the social sciences, undoubtedly, my normative view will shine through my positivist reasoning, and frequently quite explicitly and fiercely so:[14] I regard the backsliding of liberal democracies as highly problematic, as any form of autocracy or illiberalism comes with sneaky damage to the fundamental human rights that we should cherish, in my view [and, but this of secondary importance, a damaging impact on the economy; see, *e.g.*, Bellodi, Morelli, & Vannoni (2024) on this].[15] Hence, those readers who do not like work that does not take a clear a positivist stance, or who prefer to see the opposite normative position being defended, are advised to put this essay aside.

Second, as far as I am aware, the full logic implied by my quite comprehensive (I hope) reasoning has not yet been theoretically developed or empirically tested before, along the way systematically accounting for all complex and subtle iterative and non-linear feedback loops. However, for sure, much evidence can be found out there in a variety of literatures across many different disciplines regarding many bits and pieces of the full set of causal chains and correlational associations. Hence, in this essay, I cannot but engage in cherry-picking by selectively referring to piecemeal chunks of evidence and theory, leaving a comprehensive development and test of the full theory for future research.[16]

Third, this is an essay, albeit a lengthy one, and not a standard research

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14   For instance, my use of quotation marks is oftentimes heavily biased, clearly signaling my normative stance on the matter.

15   Many across history and across the globe take a different normative view, preferring non-democratic governance regimes. Along the way, I will refer to one example after the other. For instance, an academic argument is that a country can be too large and/or may be home to too much heterogeneity for effective democratic ruling, from the perspective of both conflict avoidance and economic growth, implying that more can be expected from a benevolent dictatorship regime (see, *e.g.*, Ringen, 2016; Sen et al., 2018). And within the "democratic camp", Victor Orbán and his supporters would argue in favor of illiberal democracies, for reasons very different from the ones emphasized by proponents of liberal democracies (e.g., Gratton & Lee, 2024; Zakaria, 1997). In this essay, I start from a different normative platform, and will not directly engage with this wider debate in any depth. However, at the back end of this essay, I will briefly reflect on the issue of cultural relativism.

16   Even by applying this selective cherry-picking strategy I could not avoid that this book-sized essay includes a reference list that explodes beyond reasonable bounds.

report, as I would have drafted after a systematic modeling effort and/or a careful empirical study. In many of the social sciences, the format of the full research report is the dominant standard for many decades by now, oftentimes implying that the essay or *essai* has been pushed toward (or even beyond) the fringes of our scientific communities, not being considered to be a solid piece of research, but rather a belch of scientific journalism, at best. Indeed, an essay is very different in purpose and tone versus a standard research report, having a more playful and speculative character, not shying away from making strong or even speculative claims, which is also reflected in the style of writing that tends to be more literary, and occasionally even somewhat poetic[17] and provocative in nature (Wijnberg & van Witteloostuijn, 2024; van Witteloostuijn, 2024).[18] However, I cannot but agree wholeheartedly with Delbridge, Suddaby, and Harley (2016) that we should revalue the essay as a format complementary to the traditional research report. Doing so could well free playful creativity and solid speculation from the straitjacket of the rather boring standard, and highly regulated, research report.[19]

Fourth, my next red flag relates to yet another normative stance taken in this essay. My argument hinges on the assumption that the current process of democratic backsliding, particularly in the West, is caused by the extreme and radical right, jointly referred to as the far right.[20] This assumption is time-bound. In principle, the extreme and radical left is equally good at eroding the rule of law and liberal democracies (Polga-Hecimovich, 2022), as is religious extremism (*cf.* Fossati, 2024), as we can witness in countries such as Venezuela (Galavís, 2020) and Iran (Razavi, 2006), respectively. However, for reasons beyond the scope of this essay, the *Zeitgeist* is such that the role of the far left and religious extremism is marginal (albeit certainly not absent

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17   Poetic inquiry is a method of qualitative research in which writing poems is used to both collect and create data, and to produce a research outcome (see, *e.g.*, Faulkner, 2019a, b; Cloud & Faulkner, 2019; Geers, 2024). A specific category of poetic inquiry involves activism: "One reason scholars use poetry in their work is the power of poetry as a means to engage a political voice. Poetic inquiry can be an active response to social issues, a political commentary, and a call to action" (Faulkner, 2019b: xi; cited in Geers, 2024: 3).

18   As, given the modern-day culture of immediacy (see further down the line), I am not averse to a healthy dose of self-promotion, the number of self-references is cheeky high.

19   So, my ambition still is to come up with a string of arguments that signal, by and large, a degree of scholarly rigor after all.

20   And there are more labels circulating across the world, a prominent example being alt-right. To avoid a bombardment of different labels, only producing confusion without signaling meaningful differences, I try to stick to the adjectives extreme, far and radical.

altogether), at least in the West, whereas the influence of the extreme or radical right is very large, and increasing rapidly.[21] In that sense, the 2020s are very different from, say, the 1970s. Hence, in my argumentation spelled out below, the role of right-wing populism is key. Would I have written this essay in the 1970s, my anchor of the location of current extremist politics should have been different. Actually, what is meant by terms like "left" and "right" or "conservative" or "liberal" does change over time. For instance, one could well argue that the far right is anything but conservative, as they seek to radically break up the *status quo* of the liberal democracy.

Fifth, a follow-up remark has to do with a possible explanation as to why (extreme and radical) right-wing political parties are doing so well in so many elections across so many countries, and hence what might explain this *Zeitgeist* where left-wing (extreme and radical) parties have been pushed to the margin, by and large, notwithstanding widespread dissatisfaction with the economic circumstances (particularly increasing inequality, as discussed in detail below), which clearly used to be – and still is – their core selling point. Here, the recent study of Gildron (2022) is very insightful. In his extensive ten-country study of mass attitudes within Western Europe in the period from 1990 to 2017, he takes voters' left versus right-wing preferences regarding cultural and economic issues as the central pair of independent variables, with the actual vote as the dependent variable. Strikingly, he finds that voters tend to only support a left-wing party if they have a left-wing position on both sets of issues. Being right wing on just one of both sets of issues suffices, on average, to vote for a right-wing party.[22] *Ceteris paribus*, this implies that right-wing parties can benefit from a major competitive advantage in their fight against the left, explaining the overall tendency toward leaning to the right. When discussing the position and strategy of the far right and what can be done to stop the process of democratic backsliding further down the line, I will briefly return to this important finding.

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[21]   In a way, we see a cyclical pattern here. Many will argue that the dominance of the right comes after a period of dominance of the left. So, Donald Trump is a response to the disappointment in Barack Obama, or the neo-liberal revolution of the 1980s is a right-wing reaction to the left-wing dominance in the 1960s and 1970s. I briefly return to this cycle of responses to disappointment at the back end of this essay.

[22]   More can be said about this. For instance, the new electoral winning strategy of the populist radical right is argued to be a combination of welfare chauvinism, cultural conservatism, and anti-establishment rhetoric (see, *e.g.*, Rydgren, 2007). Doing so effectively splits the left-wing vote, drawing the working class to the radical (or extreme) right. This strategy has become even more effective with the increased salience of the cultural dimension of political competition. This new strategy of the radical right replaced the old one, which combined cultural conservatism with economic neo-liberalism (see, e.g., Kitschelt, 2007). I briefly return to this issue below.

Sixth, a final remark follows from my fourth reflection: In my argumentation below, democratic backsliding and the support for the far right frequently take turns as the key "dependent variable". This follows from the above, and this is visualized in Figure 1: The increased and increasing influence of extreme and radical right across liberal democracies, particularly when finding their way into government, is the "mediation variable" between the three external forces and five mechanisms, on the one hand, and democratic backsliding processes, on the other hand – at least, in the modern-day times of the 21th century, and in the West.[23] I use these quotation marks because this is an essay mainly using natural language as its analytical and communicative workhorse, so employing terminology from the quantitative empirical research tradition is, strictly speaking, not really appropriate.

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23   But there are exceptions to this rule, of course, where the extreme or radical left is driving democratic backsliding, Venezuela being an example. However, within modern-day liberal democracies, far-left parties generally (a) are marginal and (b) do not actively promote an agenda of democratic backsliding.

Righter than right

What is more radical than extreme?
What is more extreme than radical?
How radical is the extreme right?
How extreme is the radical right?
Is radical in fact extreme?
Is extreme in fact radical?
How far right is extreme right?
How radical is the far right?
How far right is the radical right?
How extreme is the far right?
How far should right be to be extreme?
How far should right be to be radical?

Questions looking for answers.

Academic questions,
Practical answers.
The extreme right is radical.
The radical right is extreme.
The far right is radical.
The far right is extreme.
All true on the ground.
All a fact of political life.
All with the same effect.
All creating the same deep wound.
An open wound in liberal democracies.
Fatal and deadly, perhaps.

Answers uninterested in questions.

Dividing society in two camps.
Friends, lured with simple nonsense.
Enemies, to be attacked personally.
Fake reality as philosophy.
Simplicity as logo.

Polarization as business model.
Shortsightedness as vision.
Brutal egoism as morality.
Aggressiveness as strategy.
Eroding democracy as mission.
Tolerance for violence as tactic.
Embracing the center right as KPI.

Facts eroding society.

3 Polarizing Right

3.1 Definitional ambiguity

The sixth red flag asks for further discussion. The issue that I reflect upon in this essay is very complex indeed, as I will argue along the way, time and again. It immediately starts with a subtle definitional issue. What is the difference between the extreme and radical right? And how do both relate to other forms and shapes of the political right, or to other political-social movements, such as fascism, nativism, Nazism, and populism? Mudde (2016) argues that the extreme right rejects the democratic rules of the game, whereas the radical right still plays within the boundaries of the democratic playground.[24] If I would adopt this pair of definitions, the theorized mediation link between the extreme right and democratic backsliding becomes close to tautological indeed. Still, I decided to use both adjectives – extreme and radical – in front of "right" interchangeably, referring to either and both as the far right, because distinguishing between both types of the right is not so easy in practice. Actually, a deep reflection on these definitional and classification issues would require an essay of its own (see, *e.g.*, Zaslove, 2009) – too much of a distraction in a book-sized essay that is already full of distractions anyway. In the context of this essay, key is the observation that both the extreme and radical right actively contribute to democratic backsliding as an important element of their political agenda (albeit oftentimes implicitly so).

Ironically, the use of the right adjective for the far right comes very precise, particularly within the camp of the far right itself – a delicate issue indeed. Take the case of the Dutch PVV, again (see Box 0.1). The recently elected Chair of the Dutch Second Chamber – Martin Bosma – is a prominent representative of the PVV fraction, being a member of the Dutch Second Chamber since 2006. In this new capacity of parliamentary Chair, he recently intervened in a debate to prohibit a member of the opposition (Volt's party leader Maurice Dassen) to refer to the PVV as extreme right, using the argument that this would incorrectly suggest a link with Nazism. However, the PVV's party leader regularly uses language that cannot but be seen as extreme right, squarely attacking the rule of law [*e.g.*, referring to the Second Chamber as a "fake parliament" (*nepparlement*), to journalists as "scum" (*tuig van de richel*), and to judges as being politically motivated through a social-liberal lens (*D66-judges*)]. Other

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[24] This relates to yet another definitional complexity: Is there agreement on the precise nature of these democratic rules of the game? For instance, Victor Orbán promotes the idea of an illiberal democracy, which is clearly opposed against the liberal variant. Below, I discuss my anchor: democratic resilience. In the context of this essay, this will hopefully suffice.

prominent examples are Giorgia Meloni in Italy and Marine Le Pen in France, and how they handle the discussion regarding the characterization and classification of their Italian and French political party, respectively.

Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia is yet another appearance, after yet another name change, of yet another political party that emerged from the fascist heritage of Benito Mussolini. However, notwithstanding the use of a fascist symbol in Fratelli d'Italia's flag, Giorgia Meloni forcefully and very vocally opposes against any association of her party with fascism.[25] Similarly, Marine Le Pen has not only changed the name of her political party from Front National into Rassemblement National, but also has expelled her father Jean-Marie Le Pen (the late founder of Front National) from Rassemblement National in an attempt to disassociate herself and her party from Nazism.[26] Recently, Marine Le Pen initiated the removal of the German *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) from the Identity and Democracy (ID) fraction in the European Parliament for the very same reason.[27] Generally, different parties within the broader far-right movement can be very different indeed. For example, the German AfD and Hungarian Fidesz are pro-Putin, which is against the sore leg of the French Rassemblement National and Italian Fratelli d'Italia. But in the European Parliament, the French Rassemblement National is member of the ID fraction, whereas Fratelli d'Italia is the leading party in the European Conservatives and Reformists (ERC) group.

Indeed, the fragmentation of the far right, internationally but also within many countries, is a roadblock to power in many nation-states. And even when in power, this fragmentation is a lingering threat for the far right. The case of Italy is illustrative, where competition between Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia and Salvini's Lega may well undermine the stability of the ruling coalition. Here, too, we observe large cross-country differences. For instance, in the US, Donald Trump can benefit from what is basically a far-right monopoly position. An interesting hypothesis is that the likelihood of democratic backsliding is negatively associated with the far right's degree

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25 Another prominent example is Donald trump. During the lead-up to his landslide victory early November 2024, he was accused of being a fascist by a few of his prominent employees during his first term. Subsequently, Kamala Harris echoed this accusation.

26 In many countries, the far right is extremely dynamic and fragmented. For instance, the cousin of Marine Le Pen, Marion Maréchal, was active in her aunt's political party until 2019, but switched to Éric Zemmour's Reconquête in 2022; in the Netherlands, Thierry Baudet's FvD succeeded in leapfrogging the PVV to a position even more extreme (or radical) on the left-right axis; Belgian Vlaams Blok had to change its name into Vlaams Belang after a judicial ban; *et cetera*.

27 This further added to the far right's fragmentation, as the AfD joined political parties such as the Hungarian Fidesz and Dutch PVV in a new (third far-right) family in the European Parliament.

of fragmentation. If so, a victory of Donald Trump may be much more consequential than Giorgia Meloni's ruling in Italy (even after correcting for both countries' different position in the world of global power).

In the context of the current essay, a key undercurrent of similarity characterizing this stream of far-right turbulence is essential: explicitly or implicitly, the far right handles the rule of law and the principles of the liberal democracy rather or very loosely. Telling is, euphemistically speaking, the critical attitude of far-right parties regarding the free press ("woke lefties") and independent judiciary ("liberal judges"). Indeed, along the way, I refer to many examples of the extreme or radical right eroding the free press and independent judiciary when in power, Hungary and Poland being "classic" cases by now. Through the lens of this essay's line of reasoning, this undercurrent suffices to further ignore, by and large, all the subtle arguments regarding the many differences and similarities within the far-right political family (or rather, far-right political families – plural). What perhaps may be referred to as "polarizing right" is evidently not a fan of the liberal democracy.

3.2 Fundamental advantages

A classic argument is that democratic backsliding could emerge in liberal democracies due to the failure of the political center (and left) to effectively deal with the deep worries of a large part of the electorate (see, *e.g.*, Grzymala-Busse, 2019; Mudde, 2016). The ruling elite lost touch with the labor or working class[28] – or "the will of the people", in the far right's narrative – and started to implement policies that served the rich(er) well at the expense of the poor(er), so this standard argument goes. In the political arena, cosmopolitism crowded out the local interests of a large majority in national societies. However, to me, this argument is way too simple, as will become clear whilst developing my full line of argumentation below. It is not that the center and left have no part to play in the explanation of democratic demise at all; they are not fully innocent – absolutely not. I will briefly reflect on this issue further down the line. However, due to at least two intrinsic characteristics of the far right, and one of the electorate, the "competitive battle" is highly asymmetric. In the terminology of business competition, the far right can benefit from a powerful sustainable competitive advantage (Barney, 2001). The advantage that originates at the side of the electorate, is already discussed above: Gildron's (2022) finding that voters tend to only support a left-wing party when they have a left-wing position on both cultural and economic issues. This leaves the

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28 "Labor" and "working" are both highly inappropriate adjectives in front of class, as if all those in other classes are not involved in labor or are not working, but these are standard labels across the literature and in daily practice. Hence, I stick to both as well, using them interchangeably.

pair located at the side of far-right political parties to be discussed here, briefly.

A first intrinsic characteristic of the far right is what Hannah Arendt (see, *e.g.*, Frazer & Hutchings, 2008; Villa, 2000) famously referred to as brutalization, specifically regarding the tone of voice. What is very worrying, is that the press quickly keeps up with the new and very brutal tone of the far right.[29] Shouting takes the place of listening. Aggressiveness crowds out politeness. Personal attacks are normalized. Threats are common, including ones suggesting that the use of violence is permitted. Democratic values are systematically discredited and undermined. Emotions push facts into the realm of irrelevance. *Et cetera.* The role of language cannot be overestimated. By persistently corrupting language society is receiving little doses of cultural arsenic, poisoning the political discourse by dismantling respect and tolerance – two essential behavioral and cultural ingredients of a well-functioning and resilient (liberal) democracy. What is currently happening in Germany, the country with a massive post-Nazism trauma, is a frightening example. The AfD and many smaller Nazi-loving parties aggressively promote the use of phrases and words such as *Lügenpresse* (lying press), *Volkstod* (people's death), *Abwehrkampf* (defense battle), *Wir werde sie jagen*! (we will hunt them down!), and *links-grün versiff* (left-green filth). In German, with echoes from the 1930s and 1940s, this horrible language is even more horrifying and painful than in English. But this does not imply that in countries with non-German languages the danger of brutalization should be disregarded as unlikely or relatively mild. Carefully listening to Donald Trump's language is a clear case in point, spreading hatred, ostentatious lies, and evident bullshit without any serious pushback from within his own Republican Party or right-leaning media. By now, even routinely criminalizing opponents seems to have been normalized, at least at the far extremes of the political spectrum.

The second intrinsic characteristic of the far right is disrespect for the rule of law (see, *e.g.*, Laurent & Scheppele, 2017; Mudde 2019). It is not only that they do not care; far more radical (or extreme), they promote to move away from key principles of this rule of law. With an appeal to the freedom of speech, far-right political parties

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29   There might be different reasons for this. An obvious one is that at least part of the press simply sides with the far right, believing in what they have to say (and how they express themselves). Another reason is more sneaky and subtle: They do so because they want to avoid the far right accusing them of being left "wokies" themselves, or of being left-wing prejudiced. It is not that this accommodation strategy is very effective, as the far right routinely launches such accusations regardless. Whatever the reason, the consequences can be very far-reaching. An interesting case is Brexit. During the Brexit campaign, the BBC gave Brexiteers like Nigel Farage and his followers about equal air time as mainstream "remainers" to create a "level playing field", although at the time the Brexit coalition was marginal in terms of the number of supporters.

consistently and repeatedly argue that many principles that form the foundation of a liberal democracy should be put in the bulky waste. Some parties are more extreme (or radical) in this respect than others, and some do so more explicitly than others, but the undercurrent is a creeping critique and undermining of the liberal democracy. Their incessant attacks on the free press, the independent judiciary, and critical science create a narrative of distrust in the key pillars of the liberal-democratic model of governance. Also, the far right frequently campaigns for policies that oppose the rule of law, such as discriminatory measures to curtail minorities (*e.g.*, immigrants, the Islam, or the LGBTQIA+ community). All this is mixed with other toxic ingredients, such as their steady undermining of the ruling elite and parliamentary codes of conduct. As the non-far right opposition cannot revert to a similar discourse without itself contributing to the erosion of the rule of law, they look toothless in the eyes of the right-leaning electorate.

To find ways to compensate for these three or four sources of the far right's sustainable competitive disadvantage – attacking the ruling elite, right-leaning electorate, hostile language, and rule of law disrespect – will be anything but easy. It is like watching a kickboxing match with one fighter wearing boxing braces and the other having to counter one brutal attack after the other with clean hands. The position of the center right is particularly problematic. After all, the further away from the far right on the left-right axis, the easier a political party can emphasize a very different and distinctive content-loaded narrative. Hence, particularly many center-right parties start(ed) to mimic the far right, in terms of content and style. However understandable this might be from the micro perspective of a center-right political party aiming for electoral victory and governmental power, this strategic slippery slope toward normalization of the far-right narrative and voice is killing through the macro lens of the liberal democratic political system. Further down the line in this essay, whilst discussing the behavioral dimension of democratic backsliding that is internal to the political system, I will extensively return to this dilemma.

Reflection 3: The far left in Latin America

As said, my focus on the far right is time bound. But not only that, as the far left is still doing very well outside the core of the West. So, my argument may seem to be location bound, too, but I would argue this is not the case, largely. A clear case in point is Latin America. For sure, in countries such as Argentina and Brazil, the far right pops up on a regular basis in its usual form and shape – aggressive, brutal, and democracy-eroding. However, in other Latin-American countries, the tradition of far-left ruling is very persistent, showing that the outcome is quite similar: A semi-democratic or outright autocratic regime acting out, according to their own propaganda, "the will of the people". There, we see that notwithstanding differences in the substantive agenda and ideological rhetoric, both the far left and the far right kill the liberal democracy (deliberately so, I would argue). Current examples are Colombia, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. The far left, too, can be extremist. They, too, curtail the judiciary, press, and sciences. Immigration might not be an important issue in Latin America (emigration is, but is not problematized by the far left in power). But other issues are, such as persistent corruption and stark inequality. These issues, too, are transformed by populists into anti-elite rhetoric, with the rule of law as their first victim. As my argument is rather Eurocentric, being a European in the middle of daily political turmoil in close to all European countries, my narrative is biased – no way I can deny that. However, I would argue that much of what I have to say applies equally well to those countries in the world in which the extreme left is in power[30] There, too, democratic backsliding resulted, and still does so, in the erosion – if not disappearance – of liberal democracies.

30 This "in power" is essential. Indeed, polarizing and radical language is not an exclusive feature of the far right; the far left is equally good at that. However, in liberal democracies in the West, the far left is not in the power position to engage directly in democratic backsliding.

Happy Town

Happy Town is a quiet and pleasant community in the middle of the very rural countryside of the United Happy Confederation (UHC). Since decades, Happy Town is ruled by a centrist coalition. Most of the time, this is a center-right one, but occasionally there is a four-year term with a center-left coalition. Not that this did and does make much of a difference, as policy-making in Happy Town is based on a respectful dialogue among like-minded, highly-educated, and well-to-do politicians. At the North side of the rail track, the population is relatively poor. They do survive, but not very comfortably so. Indeed, at the North side of Happy Town, people are ill more, and live shorter. At the South side of the rail track, people are much more affluent, living in grand houses on large plots of land, full of smoothly mowed lawns and colorful garden borders. Since time immemorial, by far the majority of the incumbent politicians are from the South. But still, there is no real animosity between the North and the South, with close-to-all Happy Town's families already living in this quiet and pleasant community for many generations. Immigrants are very rare. And people who do move in, assimilate and integrate very quickly, not being that much different from the local population anyway. All happily join in during all festivities, many of which are of Christian origin, and all youth spends their pocket money during the annual county fair in September. But since a few years, the normal quiet is seriously disrupted by a relative newcomer.

It all kick-started on Happy Town's Facebook account, shortly after the municipality's announcement that three empty apartments in the North were designated to three families of asylum-seekers. Across the country, a persistent shortage of places to live in for asylum-seekers with a permanent permit put pressure on many local communities, including Happy Town, to provide accommodation to at least a few of the many families-in-need. The then-current center-right coalition running Happy Town for slightly more than seven years at the time, after a short spell with a center-left municipal government before this seven-year period, decided to give in, after long deliberations. After all, human rights were supposed to extend to all people, including those who involuntary had to leave their home country due to conflict or harassment. The three families had nine members in total, all having fled from the Scorched Earth conflict in the Muslim country Babelia. One of the three families was still grieving, after two of their children had drowned during a dangerous boat trip on their way to freedom. The family members included a barber, a nurse, a dentist, and a paver. After about two years in different relief camps, the four children, aged 6 to 19, spoke the local language very well. As their parents had not been allowed to work during the asylum procedure, their mastery of the local language was still below par.

The first reaction posted on Happy Town's Facebook account was relatively mild. An anonymous citizen asked the question as to why the three empty apartments (which had already been idle for more than a year) could not have been allotted to three local families living a few streets further up North, as (s)he knew that these three families still had quite a few children in their overcrowded and rickety houses who would happily leave their parental homes immediately when offered housing. The mayor, herself being a lawyer from an affluent family of doctors, economists, and lawyers from the South, responded by pointing to the moral plight that a place like Happy Town should act upon the request to offer support in light of the national asylum-seeker crisis. It was not, she explained, that the number of asylum-seekers arriving at UHC's borders had peaked in the last years; certainly not, as the figures had actually been slightly below the trend. But rather that the crisis was one of lack of reception accommodation in combination with limited absorptive capacity across the country. Due to more than a decade of national austerity measures, the reception accommodation capacity had been scaled down substantially across the whole of UHC. She wrote that she was convinced that Happy Town's citizens would perfectly understand that it was morally culpable to have these poor people sleeping on the streets anywhere in UHC. Moreover, Happy Town had a shortage of labor in many areas, both low and high-paid. For instance, the local farmer community struggled to have a sufficient number of land workers to carry out all the leg work during the harvest season, and the local hospital was painfully affected by a lack of nurses.

The tiny far-right fraction in the municipality council jumped upon the bandwagon of the Facebook chain of nasty messages that subsequently emerged on Happy Town account's time line in reaction to the mayor's responses. Her rationality was crowded out by quickly thumbed messages from a small subset of Happy Town's emotional citizens. Many across Happy Town, from up North to deep South, joined forces to start a communication group on *X*, sharing information and news regarding the threat of immigration to the country as a whole and to local communities. For instance, a very popular piece of fake news reported that the first entry of asylum-seekers in a town was soon succeeded by a stream of so-called "follow-up travelers". This evidence was quickly shared and widely spread across Happy Town's community. Another example of a similar instance of misinformation that was equally widely shared claimed that a town's crime rates sky-rocketed after the arrival of asylum-seekers, particularly if the latter were young males coming from Muslim countries. Fake news or not, these messages turned into fuse in the spice barrel. After a few weeks, this happened to be literally the case, with a crowd of masked and torch-bearing protesters aggressively shouting "Babelians go home, with the mayor as your

travel guide" in front of the mayor's house. The crowd was headed by the local far-right fraction's leader, who later declared on *X* and in the local press that the mayor had brought this upon herself by importing criminals into Happy Town.

As local elections were coming up a few months after this incident, the far right seized the momentum by launching a very aggressive anti-immigration campaign that was persistently linked to a variety of imaginative or wicked issues, examples being rape threats and housing shortages. The far right's leadership was not interested in direct debates with representatives from any of the other parties, but rather focused fanatically on social media and street protests, supported by blaming claims and personal attacks in ads published in the local news, including radio and TV. They could pay for this after a large donation from a local millionaire, known for his ultra-conservatism. In their ads, the far right persistently blamed the mayor and her center-right coalition for purposely stimulating immigration into Happy Town in order to replace the local population by foreigners. In response to the increasing popularity of the far right in polls, the center right halfway the campaign started to mimic key messages from the far right's rhetoric. For example, the incumbent mayor gave a startling interview on prime time on the local TV channel in which she announced that, would she be re-elected, her first act in office would be to return the asylum-seekers to where they came from, refusing to explain how she would do this and where these asylum-seekers were supposed to return to. Moreover, in her party's manifesto security was the central theme, promising much more police on Happy Town's streets, only paying shallow attention to economic growth, entrepreneurial innovation, and infrastructure investment, which were the top-three priorities in the manifesto that got her elected four years ago.

The election outcome was a landslide victory for the far right, attracting close to 40% of the votes, up from 7%. They had already beaten the drum of anti-immigration and security for many elections in a row – in vain, but this time was very different. The far right's party leader became Happy Town's newly elected mayor, after only two months of negotiations with the center right. The center right joined a coalition with the far right in return for the post of deputy mayor and the agreement to invest heavily in revamping the local bridge across the river. Immediately after election day, the still incumbent mayor gave a press conference in which she announced that she was stepping down on the spot. She said that the main reason was not that her party and she herself had been punished by Happy Town's voters, but particularly that she and her family were threatened on a daily basis, particularly on the social media, to such an extent that her children had become too anxious for her to continue in her job. The straw that broke her camel's back was that her youngest daughter, aged 14, returned

from high school crying because she was seriously pestered by classmates for her mother's political identity. The mayor explained that she herself was resilient enough to not be affected by being called a witch who should be lynched, but that she could no longer see her family suffering so much. Center right's new party leader became Happy Town's deputy mayor instead.

The new mayor not only invested in intensified policing, but he also immediately cut subsidies for the local TV channel back to zero, and he scrapped the municipality's arts and culture program. In both cases, he explicitly expressed the argument that the municipality not only needed the money for other purposes, such as paying for more police officers on Happy Town's streets, but also that local government should not have invested a single penny in elitist and leftist woke hobbies anyway. Two other major policy measures involved closing down the local abortion clinic and prohibiting Happy Town's local gay pride parade. However, a disappointment was that the local court called to order the municipality's attempt to deport the three asylum-seeking families from their apartments in Happy Town's North. In response, the mayor aggressively announced that these judges should be kicked out of office in the coming autumn, when many official posts were up for election, including those in the local judiciary. In the months running up to election day, the far right maliciously campaigned against the incumbent judges, and supported loyalist candidates instead.

Guardian angels

Angels,
protecting guardians
of the good.

Elections, free and fair.
All can participate.
All can nominate.
All do care.
To freely express your preference.
Without any interference.

Independent judiciary.
Judges unbiased politically.
Not influenced fanatically.
Free to decide on their diary.
Political interference out of order.
A strict non-intervention border.

The free press controlling power.
Systematic public provision.
Independence as mission.
A robust tower.
Journalism of high esteem.
Political influence unseen.

Right of minorities protected.
The majority stepping aside.
Absence of fright.
Minorities not badly affected.
Trias Politica as a protective wall.
Tolerance as major call.

Safeguarded freedom of speech.
Preference for dialogues.
Absence of hate-spreading monologues.

Respectful disagreement always within reach.
Agree to disagree.
All free.

Guardian angels,
I would hope,
they do exist.

4 **Democratic Resilience**

4.1 Five guardrails

Before I can and will analyze democratic backsliding processes, I will first have to identify what the target is of these very processes of backsliding. The counterpoint is the resilience of a liberal democracy – or democratic resilience, for short. How could democratic resilience be safeguarded, if at all, avoiding democratic erosion (*cf.* Boese *et al.*, 2021; Holloway & Manwaring, 2023)? The backbone of a well-functioning liberal democracy is the *Trias Politica*, with the three separate powers of government, involving an executive, legislative, and judicial branch together safeguarding the rule of law. Hence, through an institutional lens, effective checks and balances are critical. In a liberal democracy, this is translated into a few essential principles: (a) elections should be free and fair; (b) the judicial system should be independent; and (c) the media should freely control those in power.

Underlying these key principles is that (d) the rights of minorities should be protected and (e) the freedom of speech should be safeguarded. Ignoring many additional subtleties, this set of five critical guardrails, hence this series of five "should's", is what characterizes healthy liberal democracies. Compromising on any of these five guardrails implies that illiberalism starts to slip in, and often surprisingly quickly so, as the well-known cases of Hungary and Poland illustrate disturbingly well. Below, I briefly reflect upon each of these essential guardrails through the lens of promoting democratic resilience. All what I have to say is rather standard, one might hope, and so well known that politicians and their parties that support the liberal democracy should be expected to consistently and persistently act accordingly. For whatever reason, however, they (too) often seem not to do so anymore in (too) many countries across the world. This makes clear that institutional guardrails can never protect a liberal democracy against behavioral misconduct by politicians adopting Constitutional vandalism (along the way, many examples of such vandalism will pass under review).

Elections should be free and fair.[31] Observing that democracies organize elections that should be free and fair seems to be an exercise in forcing an open door. However, with Vladimir Putin organizing presidential elections in Russia of 2024, we cannot but accept that elections come in many different forms and shapes,

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31   As Karl Popper has argued in his *The Open Society and Its Enemies (1945)*, an important consequence of this guardrail is that liberal democracies, in contrast with autocracies or illiberal democracies, can vote out bad or underperforming leadership.

including many in the grey zone of semi-democracies, such as Hungary, India, and Turkey (see, *e.g.*, Bishop & Hoeffler, 2016). These elections are neither fully free nor completely fair, but curtailed in many brutal and subtle ways, from banning critical candidates or parties from participating in elections altogether to aggressively oppressing the free press. In liberal democracies, elections are free and fair when these and other elements of coercion and manipulation are absent (Elklit & Svensson, 1997). This implies a challenge, because what to do with non-democratic parties that seek participation in elections in liberal democracies? Or more broadly, how should the tolerant handle the intolerant? Here, different liberal democracies can differ in their approach. For instance, in Germany, a party such as the Dutch PVV would not be allowed to enter into any election, being a non-democratic party with only one member (*i.e.*, Geert Wilders). Probably, the German strategy here is more aligned with promoting democratic resilience (although the increasing popularity of the AfD does seem to suggest otherwise).[32]

The judicial system should be independent. When politicians in power start to strategically appoint and fire judges in order to force their political views upon the judicial system and hence society, the rule of law will slip away quickly (see, *e.g.*, Mehmood, 2022; for the opposite view, see, *e.g.*, Fitzpatrick, 2018). The Trump administration in 2016-2020, for instance, took the opportunity to change the composition of the US's Constitutional Court so radically that American society will be deeply influenced by this drastic turn toward the minority view of old-fashioned conservatism for many decades to come.[33] This puts a permanent strain on society,

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32   Another sign of democratic resilience might be to prohibit extreme-right political parties altogether, an idea that circulates in Germany regarding the AfD. However, this measure goes against another guardrail – *i.e.*, the freedom of speech (and, related, the freedom of association). Hence, such bans are not so easily and quickly introduced in liberal democracies. And for sure, the case of Germany shows that this is not very simple, as the AfD is recognized as right-wing extremist by the *Verfassungsschutz* (a branch the secret services), and people vote for other Nazi-like parties such as the NPD, REP, and DVU. Also, banning one specific political party today may simply trigger the establishment of a copycat tomorrow.

33   This is why the then US President Joe Biden announced in July 2024 that a reform of the Constitutional Court would be his main priority in the last six months of his Presidency restricting the term of judges to 18 years (still a very long spell) and introducing a code of conduct. With a Republican majority in the House of Representatives, this will be a steep uphill battle. Indeed, with his Presidency ending so soon, this ambition came to nothing. Hence, Donald Trump can unleash his autocratic personality with the backing of the US's Constitutional Court.

harming the spirit of a liberal democracy.[34] And the cases of Hungary and Poland are self-explanatory. To me, this implies that the whole idea of appointing and dismissing judges politically is misguided. Rather, the political elite, whatever coalition or party is in power, should stay away from hiring and firing members of the second leg of the *Trias Politica* (but see below on the downsides of excessive technocracies).[35]

The media should freely control those in power. Oftentimes, one of the first moves of the extreme or radical right when in power is to constrain the free press, which is systematically accused of being a "leftist danger" protecting the elite, and imposing "woke" values upon society against "the will of the people". Here, the far right mimics the standard treatment of the press in autocracies (*e.g.*, Stier, 2015; *cf.* Guriev & Treisman, 2020). Largely, this can be and is done in two ways, and often through a combination of both, depending upon the national circumstances: either the top of the public media is replaced with political friends (see, *e.g.*, the case of Poland under the PiS regime), and/or unwanted media (commercial or public) are captured or closed down altogether (see, *e.g.*, the case of Hungary under the Fidesz government).[36] This in combination with controlling and manipulating the social media (and NGOs, for that

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34   A clear example is the Court's abortion ruling, which since then triggered an ongoing wave of unrest throughout the country. Another example is their verdict regarding Donald Trump's immunity, making many of the ongoing judicial procedures with regard to his presidential misconduct unlawful. Indeed, now he is the President again, the legal procedures quickly were abandoned or delayed, with Trump threatening to go after those in the judiciary who he sees as the architects of a political witch hunt.

35   Similarly, having prosecutors and judges elected by the people does not seem to be a very good idea either. With elections, judges are less independent, must take account of a constituency, and have a political color. The latter does not only imply that minorities will feel less represented, but also that judges are easily attacked for being politically biased (as, *e.g.*, Donald Trump does all the time, so further undermining the credibility and legitimacy of the judiciary).

36   There are more subtle ways to constrain the free press than these brutal interventions. For instance, in the new Dutch coalition agreement, with Geert Wilders' PVV as the leading partner, it is announced that the Dutch public media channel NPO can expect a budget cut of €100 million per annum (which is currently €900 million per year) plus an unspecified reform assignment. Another example is the very worrying case of the well-known Italian writer Antonio Scurati. When he was invited for a column by the public channel RAI, he was personally attacked and discredited by Giorgia Meloni via her Instagram account, reiterating a lie about his allegedly too high honorarium, as she does regard him as a leftist criticaster of her radical-right party and her government (Scurati is the author of three very successful novels in which Benito Mussolini is impersonated). Another example is Donald Trump's threat to withdraw the licenses of what he considers to be fake news media.

matter)[37] will suffocate any opposition in society, which cannot but move underground, largely paralyzing the media-based check on those in power.[38]

The rights of minorities should be protected. Perhaps surprisingly, a Google Scholar search for literature on "Democracy defined" generates close to 4.5 million hits (accessed in May 2024). Apparently, to define democracy is not that easy (but see, *e.g.*, May, 1978), let alone the quality of democracy (*e.g.*, Diamond & Morlino, 2004). Adding the adjective liberal gives more than three million Google Scholar hits (*ditto*). Essential is the argument that in a liberal democracy "each individual is entitled to participate in the government directly or through representatives" (Bollen 1993, p. 1209). Additionally, this implies that protection of minorities against the majority is key (*cf.* Ware, 1992).[39] Any discriminatory ruling of the majority, often referred to as "the will of the people", suppressing the rights of minorities is contrary to what a liberal democracy stands for. This very idea is rooted in the post-war emphasis, at least in the Western world, on human rights that are claimed to be universal (see, *e.g.*, De Azcarate, 1946). Clearly, any liberal democracy is intrinsically associated with a tension between majoritarian ruling and minority protection, which is an issue that I briefly reflect upon below.

The freedom of speech should be safeguarded. This one is tricky, too, as the freedom of speech should not be translated into the freedom to spread hatred. This gives an asymmetry in rhetoric that provides an intrinsic competitive advantage to extremists, including the extreme and radical right, in the political arena (see, *e.g.*, Brindle & MacMillan, 2017), as discussed above. Being extreme, far-right politicians (or far-left ones, for that matter) have a natural tendency to act and speak much more aggressively than their moderate counterparts. The former appeal (aggressively, of course) to the right of freedom of speech, whereas the latter have a hard time denying this as that is what they stand for in the first place. After a while, in response, moderates may start to become less tolerant versus extremists (Orazani, Wohl, & Leidner, 2020),

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37 Russia's law on foreign financial influence is a daunting example of the type of measures that can be launched to ban NGOs from society, silencing their oppositional voice. The Georgian government is planning to introduce a similar law, notwithstanding large protests, which is likely to turn out to be a roadblock in this country's negotiations with the EU for membership. The current far-right-leaning Dutch government mimics this strategy by reducing the budget for NGOs involved in foreign aid from 1.4 billion annually to 400 million.

38 Another classic extreme-right strategy is to either curtail or chase away universities, accused of being heavily biased bastions of leftish "wokism". For instance, Victor Orbán forced the Central European University out of Budapest, now in exile in Vienna.

39 And hence, as argued in a footnote above, "the people" should not elect judges.

which might well trigger a downward spiral in tone undermining the very liberal democracy that the moderates are trying to protect.[40] Clearly, to adhere to the Biblical adage "to turn the other cheek" is easier said than done, and not very likely to be overly effective in the context of a political fight featuring one-sided aggressiveness, with an audience-electorate observing this political theater from the side. And perhaps strikingly, a moderate politician responding to far right's aggressiveness by using brutal language, too, is accused by many of unjustified aggressiveness. An example is how Kamala Harris' accusation of Donald Trump being a fascist backfired, whilst Trump himself could unleash more and more outrageous brutality without experiencing any boomerang effect.

4.2 Intrinsic tension

So, if we refer to democratic backsliding, decline, or erosion, our target of analysis is the lack of resilience of a liberal democracy – a democratic governance system that I define as including this set of five guardrails. Democracies come in many different forms and shapes, but many cannot be regarded as liberal. This book-length essay only deals with eroding processes in what used to be or still are liberal democracies. This term involves two words that imply an intrinsic tension: liberal and democracy. Democracy, simply put, follows the one-person – one vote principle, and hence the fundamental idea of the ruling of the majority. Democracy is a majoritarian term. The liberal adjective puts bounds on the implied majority ruling by introducing checks and balances meant to protect minorities – or rather, to safeguard a set of human rights – if needed against the will of the majority. Thus, this "liberal" adjective (in this context, but not in others) is a majority-constraining, or minority-protecting, term. Hence, although perhaps (or rather, probably) not a *contradictio in terminus*, the governance model of the liberal democracy cannot avoid the minority-majority tension, and hence cannot but involve a permanent balancing act (*cf.* Przeworki & Sprague, 1986).

After all, strictly speaking, if an independent judiciary decides, in its role of guardian of the rule of law, to block a law, measure or rule launched by the elected

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40   Gidengil, Stolle, and Bergeron-Boutin (2022) explain why this may also happen within political parties, where partisans start to accept the democratic backsliding behavior and speak of their party leader. Striking examples of this type of behavior can be seen throughout the Republican Party in the US, with almost all leading politicians walking on Donald Trump's leash, persistently justifying whatever deed or utterance of their Great Leader, irrespective of its anti-democratic nature. This may be so either because these politicians are anti-democratic themselves, or because they act opportunistically in order to survive in Donald Trump's snake theater. An example is the Vice-President James D. Vance, who transformed from a Trump-critic to a fanatic loyalist, frequently even leapfrogging his boss's extreme outcries.

majority, the democratic majoritarian principle is violated. But this is done on purpose, by design. And here, we observe much variation across liberal democracies. For instance, an essential distinction is that between proportional versus first-past-the-post systems. In the first system, minority interests and views tend to be ingrained, at least in part, in the coalition nature of government, which cannot but involve many compromises[41] from the side of majority partner in the cabinet. Moreover, in parliament, minorities tend to have a voice by being represented by one or more of the many parties having seats roughly in line with their voter share. All this is not or much less so in the case of first-past-the-post systems, where relatively low voter shares tend to be translated in much higher seat shares in parliament. And this is only one, albeit very important, element of differences across liberal democracies. For instance, another is the role of the Constitution, which may or may not be associated with a Constitutional Court as the guardian-of-last-resort. For instance, the US has both, the Netherlands has only a Constitution but no Constitutional Court, and the UK has neither.

These are only examples, out of many. Although I will reflect on sub-issues relating to this intrinsic tension throughout this essay-turned-into-a-book, space is too limited to include a systematic comparison of different types of liberal democracy. For sure, this would be a very interesting exercise, which has to wait until follow-up work is completed. And of course, here too, much work has already been done on many puzzles of this multi-dimensional comparison. However, I am not aware of any study that rigorously investigates the relation of each and every different aspect of the liberal democracy of a country's governance model on the likelihood and nature of processes of democratic backsliding. But as said, as far as I know, I will discuss what we do have learned about different variation-explaining elements of liberal democracies along the way. However, in my main line of argumentation, I regard the liberal democracy as an ideal-type of governance model rather homogeneously defined by the five guardrails introduced above. And it is this governance model that is under attack, due to the rise of the far right across the Western world.

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41   The whole idea of having to compromise is out of fashion in many countries these days. Note that the very act of compromising can have a bad or good connotation, depending upon national culture and history. I experienced this recently when discussing my comments on a paper written by a British colleague. She claimed, without any further argumentation, that compromising in corporate top management teams is a bad thing, which is in sharp contrast with the deeply-rooted *polder* tradition in the Netherlands.

4.3 Minimalist view on democracy

The above five guardrails might be obvious through an academic lens, but they are certainly not in the eyes of a very large part of the general public. One poll after the other reveals that many voters across the globe believe that general elections are what defines a democracy, perhaps flanked by the freedom of speech, and not so much or not at all the protection of minority rights or an independent judiciary (see, *e.g.*, Nyhan & Titiunik, 2024; Shin & Kim, 2018). Actually, the current *Zeitgeist* moves away from the classic definition of a liberal democracy, as a large part of the electorate across liberal democracies sides with the far right, in one election after the other, in their dislike of an independent judiciary, traditional media, and (particularly foreign or non-heterosexual) minorities. If indeed the far right not only succeeds in rising to a position of power, but is also successful in implementing their anti-democratic agenda, democratic backsliding accelerates to worrying speed with the backing of a large part of the population.

This minimalistic definition of what a democracy entails, limited to the regular organization of an election, can thus be fatal for the broader conception of a democracy with the adjective liberal added in front, even if such elections are fair and free (which they tend not to be in illiberal democracies). After all, then democratic backsliding sets in as soon as the far right with their autocratic preferences uses their power position to erode a few of the key guardrails of liberal democracies (see, *e.g.*, Inglehart & Norris, 2019), without their electorate caring about this at all (quite the contrary). By the end of the day, therefore, the above guardrails are as strong as their human defenders. This implies that defending the liberal democracy requires the courage to withstand the aggressive and forceful populist pressure to give in – to accept "the will of the people" as a verdict of the majority that cannot be escaped from, but must be obeyed. During the time of writing these sentences, the jury is still out in countries such as Italy, the Netherlands, and the US.[42] Will the liberal democracy survive the far right's brutal attack on the essential guardrails of an independent judiciary, free press, and minority protection?

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42 In Italy, Giorgia Meloni, Matteo Salvini and their supporters are brutally attacking independent judges as Communists who should step down, in the meantime preparing a change in the Constitution undermining the judiciary's independency. In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders' permanent rhetoric regarding the need to de-naturalize and deport Dutch criminals (note that his definition of criminals implies a very wide net, basically targeting Muslim youth) brought Prime Minister Dick Schoof to the announcement that this will be investigated as a serious policy option. In the US, Donald Trump is lining up a little army of loyalists to implement his impressive revenge package. And more, much more.

4.4 Sham democracy and capitalist dynamics

An argument that persistently circulates in both the academic literature and the popular press is that, by the end of the day, the capitalist economy will crowd out the liberal democracy anyway. This moves far beyond Bill Clinton's "It's the economy, stupid", as here the narrative is that the state of the economy does not only determine election outcomes, but also that the inherent dynamics of (untamed) capitalism will ultimately kill the democratic governance system in the process. In a way, this is a Marxian-plus analysis, arguing that capitalism will not only inherently evolve to produce its own demise, but also that this evolution will come with collateral damage in the form of murdering the democratic governance system. A battery of arguments can be put forward to back up this claim. Here, however, I cannot but briefly reflect upon a few cherries from this impressive fruit bowl. Further down the line, further detail will be added when discussing potential economic reasons for democratic backsliding.

The main argument runs as follows (*cf.* Hertz, 2002; Reich, 2007; Wolf, 2003). Without targeted policy intervention, capitalism will inevitably produce increasing income inequality. If not tamed by the State, wild capitalism does make the rich richer and richer, without any substantial trickle-down externalities of the positive kind that benefit the poor. Quite the contrary, as the profit-maximization drive of capitalist enterprises will combine exploitation of labor with a monopolizing tendency, creating an oligarchic economic structure. This provides the rich with the forceful incentives to capture the country's decision-making power. Within a democracy, there are plenty of channels to press influence and execute power – channels much more open for the (very) rich than for the poor. The rich elite not only dominates a democracy's upper echelon, but can also own media, finance political parties and their candidates, empower lobby organizations, and more. Having a brief look at Donald Trump's inner circle, including his (nominees for) top positions in his administration, is telling.

The outcome is policies that benefit the (very) rich. If such benefits flow directly into the pockets of the (very) rich (*e.g.*, by preference treatments in procurement procedures), this is a case of nepotism. But much more frequently, the favorable treatment takes an indirect route. Clear examples are tax reductions for the rich, or (de-)regulation at the benefit of large enterprises. On both fronts, again, the second Trump administration promises to be a mind-blowing case in point. Oftentimes, the far right adds a few promises for the poor in their policy mix, such as job protection with tariff walls, anti-inflation measures, and reduced taxes. Together with the enrichment at the top of society's pyramid, this is very similar to a modern version of neo-corporatism. This process of creeping societal polarization (which may accelerate quickly and suddenly) in combination with the political attack on liberal democracy's

institutional backbone (*e.g.*, the judiciary and media)[43] will end with the collapse of this very liberal democracy. And as argued above, by keeping a few symbols of democracy afloat (such as national elections), the oligarchic top of society may throw sand in the eyes of the population, implying that the majority of the electorate is not aware of all this at all, believing in this sham democracy.

Note that this capitalism-will-kill-democracies narrative may seem to be opposite to a popular storyline in modern economics, specifically the institutional economics branch of political economy. Actually, in 2024, three figureheads of this branch of economics were honored with the Nobel Prize for Economics: Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, and James Robinson (see, *e.g.*, Acemoglu, Gallego, & Robinson, 2014; Acemoglu, Johnson, & Robinson, 2001, 2002; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2008). Their main argument is that economies will be harmed by exploitative institutions, and will benefit from their inclusive counterparts. Indeed, autocracies are the key example of the former, and (liberal) democracies of the latter. A country with an exploitative institutional structure will suffer from low economic growth (if any) and high (asset and income) inequality. But this is not in contradiction with the above narrative. That is, both arguments combined suggest the capitalist antecedents and the economic consequences of democratic demise, respectively. The key question then is why a majority of the electorate falls into this trap in the first place, by backing the far right against their own economic interest. Possible answers to this question are provided elsewhere in this essay.

4.5 Gilded age[44]

Liberal democracies have a history of being under threat. In this context, the 1930s are oftentimes referred to as the key historical example of how democratic backsliding came about and slipped into mass disaster, with the liberal democracy only being resurrected after the anti-democratic forces were beaten during a horrible war. Another case in point is the so-called Gilded Age in the US, as explained by Grinspan (2021). This age refers to the period between 1876 and 1910. Like today, politics were very volatile, with Democrats and Republicans taking quick turns in the White House. Another striking parallel is the normalization of political violence, with three assaults on incumbent or nominee Presidents, with James Garfield and William McKinley being

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43   Along the way, the institutional protection of the labor class is demolished as well, examples being the weakening of labor unions and the social-democratic establishment.

44   A great contribution of Annelien De Dijn in the Dutch newspaper *NRC* (on November 9 2024) inspired me to look into this intriguing period in the US's history.

murdered. And like today, intimidation and manipulation were widely deployed in order to hinder minorities to make use of their right to vote. The mass media were highly partisan, financially dependent upon either Democrats or Republicans, and not caring about factual correctness or objective analysis. For instance, in the Republican press, the Democrats' Presidential nominee Grover Cleveland was accused of sexual assault, as well as of fathering a child outside his marriage. However, this was countered in the Democratic media by accusing his Republican opponent James Blaine of corruption. In the end, all this seemed not to matter, with Grover Cleveland winning the election. Like Trump, Cleveland succeeded in his tumbler act by being re-elected in 1883, after having been kicked out of the White House in 1879. Actually, Cleveland and Trump are the only two Presidents in the US's history who had two interrupted terms – the disappointment cycle in full motion (see below for more on this).

Strikingly, the economic and societal undercurrent in the Gilden Age was very similar to what we see today. Industrialization and economic growth were accompanied by increasing inequality. The rich became richer and richer, without any trickle-down effects benefiting the poor. And like today, politicians blamed minorities for this persistent inequality, without implementing effective poverty-reducing policies. Back then, the favorite minority were Chinese immigrants. In 1882, this translated into a ban on immigration from China, which was only lifted after World War II. Given the persistency of the labor class's misery, many voices in the public debate started to de-legitimize democracy as an ineffective governance system, only producing bad leadership and *ditto* outcomes. Indeed, in the words of Grinspan (2021), the Gilden Age was an "age of acrimony", dominated by a national atmosphere of resentment and revenge. After decades of misery, however, the US's democracy succeeded in introducing reforms that increased the system's resilience, such as secret voting, referenda, female voting rights, and independent media. And importantly, slowly, the Welfare State was developed to lift the poor from their misery.

> ### Reflection 4: The locality of democracy
> The liberal democracy seems to be tied to the nation-state, and the Enlightenment's credo of "liberty, equality and fraternity" seems to apply primarily to the nation-state. This fraternity may be problematic, linked to this nation-state. Of course, on the one hand, one might hope that the nation-state's fraternity comes with all values associated with a liberal democracy – with respect, with tolerance, with responsibility, with togetherness, and all the rest. However, on the other hand, this nation-state has borders, by construction, which imply exclusion. Only those with a passport are included; all others are excluded. And in the narrative of the far

right, not all passports are equal. Through this lens, fraternity can quickly turn into nationalism and nativism. Not all are equal; actually, many are not. Liberty only holds for "the people". Minorities are seen as different, and hence should be treated differently. Even in the context of a nation-state's liberal democracy, the distinction between those who are part of the fraternity and those who are not, is an issue that is permanently on the table. For instance, only those holding the "right" passport can benefit from social benefits. Nation-states give out temporary permits to stay; after expiration, these strangers must leave. Foreigners without a permit are regarded as illegal. The liberal democracy that is associated with the nation-state is discriminatory by definition, due to the very nature of the nation-state (and due to the economic limits of financeability). Global and local arrangements such as the UN and the EU try to moderate this somewhat, but can only do so much (and less and less, in the modern day and age of geo-political rivalry and nationalist sovereignty). This is why, perhaps, we should be more creative regarding the locality of (liberal) democracy. On paper, a global liberal democracy, with a global government, might look ideal, but is extremely unlikely (if not impossible) to work in practice. Perhaps, therefore, we should take scaling down more seriously than scaling up. Perhaps, local communities are equally important – or even more important. After all, the *homo sapiens* is, on average, only capable of so much fraternity. We find it very hard to stretch our fraternity too much, beyond a scale that we can really embrace in terms of what we can do, and how we think and feel. If so, we should promote local democratic activities, varying from citizen initiatives and neighborhood organizations to local cooperatives and municipality councils, and we should do so much more frequently and much more seriously. Better a good neighbor than a distant friend. This could imply that we should invest much more in devolution. Perhaps, we should turn the modern-day-and-age democratic hierarchy upside down. For many spheres of life and domains of policy, priority should be given to local democracies, and not to that of nation-states. Hence, perhaps, we should start taking nation-states less seriously. Of course, there would still be a role for nation-states to play. We cannot organize everything at local scales only; we cannot ignore the essential influence of network externalities and scale economies. And we should organize solidarity also at levels higher than the local community. But still. Perhaps.

Radicalizing modernity

*Modernity was buffered
by restrictive norms
for centuries.
Collectivism preached
by Christianity.
Family values
constraining gender role options.
One money maker
per household.
Heterosexuality as the
singular norm.
The truth served
by each societal pillar.
Information and news
traveling slowly.
Revolutionary times
on an evolutionary seedbed.*

*The neo-liberal revolution,
far-reaching flexibilization.
Flexwork in
the gig economy.
Radical privatization
of public services.
Citizens as clients.
Market efficiency
as the Holy Grail.
Deregulation to free
forces of choice.
Individualism and consumerism
ruling the world.
Capital flowing freely
maximizing shareholder value.
Private equity and hedge funds.
The footloose multinational enterprise.*

The rise of Internet,
information traveling fast.
Google search and downloading.
Marginal cost
dropping to zero.
Facebook, Instagram, and Whatsapp.
Bubbling gratification,
immediate and quick
Web shopping and delivery services.
Amazon and Jeff Bezos.
Elon Musk and X.
Internet giants penetrating,
all over.
What is the next step?
Generative AI.
Prompt engineering.
Outsourcing creative tasks.

Economic globalization,
the demolishment of borders.
Outsourcing in search
of cheap labor.
China and India
leapfrogging to the top.
Global value chains
maximizing efficiency.
Planes, ships, and trucks,
congestion in the air, canals, and roads.
Labor migrating
to where the jobs are.
The earth is flat, metaphorically,
with drifting capital and labor.
Regulatory race to the bottom.
Multinational enterprises
outcompeting nation-states.

Radicalizing modernity,
accelerating the societal shake-up.
Certainties transformed
into uncertainties.
The individual,
the center of the universe.
A new underclass,
modern slavery.
Sovereignty undermined,
the nation-state under pressure.
Modernity's buffers
fatally evaporated.
Traditional values
fatally eroded.
Revolutionary times
on an evolutionary seedbed.
The clock is ticking.

5 External Forces Putting Pressure on Liberal Democracies

5.1 A changing world

Figure 1's five mechanisms are not operating in splendid isolation, not even as an interacting set, but are created and fueled by a few external forces, of which I believe an interrelated set of three are essential:[45] (a) the so-called neo-liberal revolution; (b) the emergence of Internet technologies; and (c) the process of economic globalization. On the one hand, in part, these external forces create the seedbed for the five mechanism to take root. On the other hand, in another part, these external forces produce critical circumstances further downstream in the causal chain. In this essay, I lack the space for a detailed and extensive analysis of external forces, which would imply the need for a historical journey taking us about half a century back in time, at least. But with reference to the massive literature regarding each of these three external forces, a brief introduction will suffice, particularly focusing on the nature of their interactive impact on the five mechanisms that take center stage in the current essay (see the, rather simplistic, visualization of the subtle and interactive influence of these three external forces in Figure 2 below).

Before discussing these three "external" forces, in turn, I would like to briefly explain why I use quotation marks here and the first time I referred to these forces in the Introduction (and, after this, not anymore). Essentially, one might wonder whether all three are really external to the political system, including the five mechanisms. I cannot but agree that this would be an unjustified assumption. Perhaps, the argument that the invention and penetration of Internet technology are external is largely defendable, as an innovation like this tends to enter into the political system from the outside. That is, such a break-through innovation is largely exogenous, and not endogenous, to the system under study. However, even this argument must be qualified, as policies initiated and implemented by public authorities tend to greatly impact the subsequent

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45   Again, by emphasizing this set of three, I (cannot but) engage in cherry-picking. For instance, I could have decided to include immigration as a fourth external force. However, I decided to not do so, as (im)migration is rather intimately associated with a few of the other forces and mechanisms, such as economic globalization and increasing inequality. I briefly return to this issue further down the line. A broader remark relates to my use of "external". In fact, much is not so external after all, as briefly noted in the main text. However, to be able to theorize, one has to simplify. As part of this unavoidable simplification, I transfer this set of forces to the "external" category, not denying that they are actually in part internal.

development of such new technologies.[46] This makes this subsequent development and influence of the new technology partially, or even largely, endogenous after all. For instance, the decision to leave the Internet space largely unregulated in liberal democracies is a political one, with a large impact on how Internet technologies, such as the social media, influence society, and hence affect processes such as democratic backsliding. Indeed, whilst discussing the five internal mechanisms, I will quite frequently refer to such "endogenous" forces. Clearly, the neo-liberal revolution and economic globalization are even more endogenous to the political system, as policies around the globe have shaped, and still do so, the intensity and nature of both forces. Still, I treat all three forces as if they are (largely) exogenous, to keep my already very complex argument within the boundaries of simplicity necessary to be able to cognitively process what I have to say in this book-length essay.

Firstly, the **neo-liberal revolution**,[47] as initiated by the liberal-conservative agenda of the UK Prime-Minister Margaret Thatcher and the US President Ronald Reagan in the 1980s,[48] has shaken up the economic-institutional rules of the game across the globe (for an introduction, see Duménil & Lévy, 2004). In essence, with a specific focus on tailor-made business deregulation (tailor-made, as the other side of this coin is massive regulation elsewhere; see below for much more on this), public

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46   Actually, the roots of the Internet are located in the US army and in the university world, hence with dominant input from the public sphere.

47   This includes the so-called Washington Consensus, which immediately points to an interrelationship with economic globalization, as discussed below. Economic globalization is another topic that is associated with a massive literature, again implying that here I can only engage in biased cherry-picking. Already David Ricardo was well aware in the late 18th and early 19th century of the pros and cons of economic globalization, and the emergence of losers and winners along the way, across and within countries (see, *e.g.*, O'Rourke, 2019; Rodrik, 2021).

48   One could argue that the Reagan-Thatcher revolution was a pendulum response to the overinvestment in the Welfare State in earlier decades. See also the footnote above regarding the cyclical nature of left and right-wing dominance. The *Zeitgeist* seems to move from an overoptimistic belief in the merits of the market to those of the State. But standard economics emphasizes that both markets and the State can, and often do, fail. Currently, after the financial crisis of 2007/8, the pendulum has swung back to a great belief in State intervention, further boosted by the renewed rise of geo-political rivalry. For whatever reason, striking a happy medium between the pros (and cons) of the market and those of the State is too much to ask for, as the *Zeitgeist* tends to reveal a clear preference for either extreme position (but see van Witteloostuijn *et al.* (2012) for a nuanced analysis). Note that many far-right politicians take a paradoxical stance here. Donald Trump is a prominent example of this. On the one hand, he supports the neocons' small State argument, seeking drastic deregulation and a retreat of the Federal State in many spheres of life. On the other hand, he does not care about massive budget deficits, and aims for a large influence of the Federal State on the economy by adopting outright Mercantilist policies.

service privatization, and governmental retreat, the neo-liberal revolution released forces that generated a specific form of capitalism, often referred to as shareholder capitalism, in combination with New Public Management (NPM; see, *e.g.*, Hood, 1995).[49] Inspired by economists like Milton Friedman and philosophers like Ayn Rand, believers in the neo-liberal revolution sought to create a specific type of economic freedom that should provide business the opportunity to generate (shareholder) value without being unnecessarily constrained by the State. For whatever reason, many neo-liberal policies were adopted by left-leaning political leaders as well, like Bill Clinton in the US, Gerhard Schröder in Germany, and Tony Blair in the UK.[50] Two of the many consequences of this neo-liberal revolution are key here: one, an unstoppable process of regulation to control the unleashed forces of deregulation (a paradox indeed; see below); and two, an equally unstoppable increase in economic inequality, particularly within countries (see below, too). Hence, the neo-liberal revolution gave birth to two of the five mechanisms central to this essay's argumentation (and gave a boost to economic globalization as well, as discussed below).[51]

Secondly, break-through **Internet technologies** radically changed many processes related to communication, information, and production (for an early and thorough analysis of the underlying economic principles, see Shapiro & Varian, 1999). On the one hand, this new set of technologies created a seemingly seamlessly accessible space for communication and information. Clearly, without this break-through technology (jointly with AI algorithms), the isolating effect of the bubble-creating social media could not have materialized – without the Internet, no smartphone, and no Facebook, Google, Telegram, TikTok, Truth Social, or *X*. On the other hand, not only

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49   To not complicate an already complex argument even further, I stick to this NPM label in the rest of this essay. However, as we know from the management fashion literature (Abrahamson, 1996), hypes come and go in subsequent cyclical patterns. Indeed, NPM was followed by New Public Governance (NPG) first and Public Values Governance (PVG) next (De Waele *et al.*, 2021). And without any doubt, the following hype is waiting around the corner to jump onto the center stage of the fad-and-fashion theater. My argument is that although the emperor changes cloths on a regular basis, her underwear remains unchanged. That is, whatever the subsequent label of the next fashion, the underlying NPM characteristics are highly persistent.

50   This became known as the "Third Way", inspired by Antony Giddens (see, *e.g.*, his 2013 book). This right turn of the (moderate) left is oftentimes blamed for the current trouble with democratic backsliding. I will reflect upon this argument further down the line.

51   Note that the critique of the neo-liberal revolution is anything but new, but already emerged in the 1990s, often in the context of national debates. Examples are Albert (1991) in France, Hutton (1995) in the UK, and van Witteloostuijn (1999) in the Netherlands. And this critique has not silenced, yet (see, *e.g.*, Wolf, 2023) – perhaps history does not, but critique does repeat itself.

were established industries shaken up, but also a large number of new industries were created. Basically, the Internet technology reduced the marginal cost of digital production to close to zero, and massively blew up network externalities.[52] This not only gave yet another boost to economic globalization, as discussed next, but also incited citizen-government reciprocal distrust, further fueled by the distance-creating digitalization of many of the government's services (which, in turn, nicely fits with the NPM philosophy).[53] This relates to yet another of my five key mechanisms.

Thirdly, **economic globalization** processes further created a larger and deeper asymmetry between capital and labor (used as defined in neoclassic economics, and not so much in the sense of Marxian class struggles: but see below). In a deregulated financial world, capital can flow freely to where highest profit can be earned, with labor still largely being caged within the borders of the nation-state (for a critical reflection, see Stiglitz, 2017; see also Box 4). The glittering symbol of this process of economic globalization is the footloose multinational enterprise (MNE), next to equity capital and hedge funds. Again, in tandem with national neo-liberal policies, this produced a growing gap between the rich and the poor (Tyler, 2015). For instance, in many Western nation-states, traditional industries were wiped out due to massive outsourcing to and foreign direct investment (FDI) in low-income countries with large supply of cheap labor.[54] In the US, for example, Hilary Clinton referred to the local victims of this process as the "deplorables" – quite an impressive act of electoral suicide.[55] How this became fertile soil for populism is common knowledge by now.

52   In the 1990s, the New Economy hype attracted much attention, until the balloon deflated due to the dot.com crisis (see, *e.g.*, van Witteloostuijn, 2001).

53   This digitalization of the government-citizen interaction gave birth to yet another hype: e-government (see, e.g., Reitz, 2006). Of course, such digitalization is not only associated with the disadvantage of citizen alienation (cf. Busch, Henriksen, & Sæbø, 2018), but comes with increased efficiency as well. However, my claim is that to the extent that this downside does emerge, this does substantially contribute to the web of processes that I hypothesize to drive democratic backsliding.

54   This FDI – cheap-labor argument is also relevant in the context of the current geo-political rivalry between China and the US, with the EU falling between the cracks. After all, China's rise to economic power was initiated by Deng Xiaoping's opening-up program, attracting FDI to benefit from China's massive cheap-labor force (Zhang, Jacobs, & van Witteloostuijn, 2007; Zhang *et al.*, 2011; Zhang & van Witteloostuijn, 2004).

55   Although we will never know for sure, Joe Biden's similar *faux pas* by referring to Trump supporters as "garbage" (after a sick joke by a Trump-supporting comedian using this term with reference to Puerto Rico) will not have helped Kamala Harris to lure moderate Republicans into her camp.

5.2 Reflexive modernity

The late German sociologist Ulrich Beck is known for his deep analysis of the evolution, or rather: revolution, of modernity.[56] He is not the only one, but one among many, another well-known example being Richard Sennett (see, *e.g.*, his 2017 book).[57] But here I take his work as my stepping stone to analyze how the above three external forces contributed to shaking up what Beck refers to as the epoch of first modernity. Instead, due to fundamental changes in society, this first modernity has transformed into an era of second modernity – in Beckian terminology: reflexive modernity. His *oeuvre* is so massive that I have to pick one publication that is representative for his line of argumentation. This is the 2003 publication, jointly with Wolfgang Bonss and Christoph Lau, on the theory of reflexive modernization (see also Beck & Lau, 2005). A quick-and-dirty introduction of the main line of argumentation should suffice here to provide a backdrop against which we can understand recent historical developments in broad strokes. Note that this little history is very Western-oriented, or Eurocentric (as admitted by Beck *cum suis*, too), which fits with this essay's focus on democratic backsliding in liberal democracies in the West.

First modernity developed in conjunction with the industrial revolution. A series of technological break-throughs radically changed societies, introducing mass production technologies and high-speed transportation modes. In this era, the nation-state gained prominence as the central unit of societal governance and organization. In many (particularly Western) countries, the emancipation of the population came with the introduction of the liberal democracy, cumulating into universal suffrage and the Welfare State. Efficiency, individualization, and rationality became leading principles, with an important role for science. The rule of law came into being, with the *Trias Politica* as the foundational backbone. All this is standard. But in this first modernity era, important societal building blocks remained traditional. Specifically, gender roles were clearly defined, full employment (of the male head of the family) was the norm, the social class structure was very stable, the traditional family was society's nucleus, separate pillars in society self-organized their caring, and the nation-state enjoyed sovereignty. All this cumulated into the neo-liberal revolution, fueling economic globalization.

Second or reflexive modernity emerged as first modernity started to hit the wall. The internal dynamic of first modernity is associated with increasing complexity,

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56 Plenty of analyses critically reflect on the evolution of capitalism, oftentimes through a neo- or post-Marxian lens (*e.g.*, Stanfield, 1989; Stiglitz, 1993). I prefer to focus on the analyses of modernity's evolution, of which capitalism is an essential element, but not the only one.

ongoing emancipation, and endless growth. Increasing complexity suffocates societies, emancipation produces population heterogeneity, and endless growth depletes nature. A backlash could be expected. Individualization was pushed to or beyond the limit, with the State treating citizens as consuming clients. Economic globalization undermined the dominance of the nation-state. Migration flows fragmented societies. Emancipation eroded the traditional family as society's nucleus. Gender roles became fluid. Policy reforms targeted labor market flexibilization. Endless growth produced the biodiversity and climate crises. *Et cetera*. According to Ulrich Beck and his colleagues, first modernity's evolutionary process's internal dynamic produced a historical discontinuity: "Or, in a world in which the premises of Western modernity seem to be everywhere dissolving? How, under such conditions, can we maintain that this historical break is still contained within the organizing principles of modernity that were developed in the 17th and 18th centuries? … the distinction between the first and second modern society is conceived of as an *historical discontinuity*" (p. 9; emphasis in the original). This was written in 2003.

In a way, the popularity of the far right and the illiberal democracy is the counter-reaction of conservative and reactionary forces, based on nostalgia and resentment, to this radicalizing modernity. The sentiment is that many people would prefer to return to first modernity, with certainties (*cf.* Beck's work on the risk society; see, *e.g.*, Sørensen & Christiansen, 2012) regarding gender roles, societal homogeneity, the traditional family nucleus, full employment, and the like. With Ulrich Beck *cum suis* (2003), I argue that this radical break toward reflexive modernization requires "an endeavor to disentangle these complex and intertwined causal relations" (p. 19), driven by what they refer to as the "non-linear individual", detached from the traditional institutions of the nation-state, class, nuclear family, and ethnic group. The far right responded to the many uncertainties associated with reflexive modernization by arguing in favor of a return to the old days of first modernity – traditional gender roles, the family nucleus, the nationalistic nation-state, and population homogeneity. And indeed, many people long back to this era in history, which they oftentimes have not experienced themselves and which may actually never has existed in the idealized form pictured by the far right.

Here, modern-day far right borrows freely from nativism (see, *e.g.*, Christley, 2022). The far right does so by either attacking minorities across the board, or by focusing on specific minority groups, such as those largely adhering to the Islam (Svraka, 2024). Nativism has a long history across Western societies (Friedman, 1967). In its 21th century manifestation, nativism is a critical ingredient of the far right's political discourse. The blunt argument is that these minorities are behaving

and thinking in ways that are contrary to the traditional values of the majority. As a result, the majority experiences a creeping process of the erosion of these traditional values, not only because the latter are crowded out by those of these minorities, but even by seeing these minorities organizing opposition against these traditional values. On top of this, far-right supporters observe that the left-oriented elite in society sides with these minorities in this opposition. In the Dutch context, the case of the anti-"Zwarte Piet" (Black Peter) movement symbolizes this sentiment, arguing that the classic "Sinterklaas" celebration is stripped of its old Dutch character. In other liberal democracies, similar clashes are signposts of the countermovement of nativist nationalism. The result is a feeling of aggressive resentment, pointing to the elite dictating the people how they are supposed to adjust their behavior and value system to the modern-day society of multiculturalism.

A final remark relates to the links of the far right with fascism and Nazism that many find notable, but which the far right often forcefully denies (see, *e.g.*, Castelli Gattinara & Pirro, 2019; Hermansson *et al.*, 2020; Mudde, 2019; Traverso, 2019). Ignoring the many differences between fascism and Nazism, as well as these between this pair and different forms of the far right, the argument is that the three (or four or five, would we distinguish the extreme from the radical right, and perhaps alt-right) have much in common. Particularly, all these ideologies share a focus on traditional family values, nativism, nationalism, anti-immigration attitudes, "will of the people" populism, tolerance for violence, anti-left rhetoric, aggressive language, and leadership worship. And most importantly, they all agree on their fundamental critique of liberal democracies (or democracy, generally).

5.3 Technocracy and the democratic deficit

One element of reflexive modernity is worthwhile emphasizing: the role and impact of technocracy. The central argument is that much of society's complexity is of our own making (*cf.* Hurka, 2023). Of course, this is not true across the board. For instance, an increasing and/or graying population generates additional complexities "exogenously". And indeed, we cannot deny that by advancing our knowledge of underlying complexities in a variety of areas that involve societal challenges (*e.g.*, regarding climate change and health care), it is hard not to develop more complex interventions that imply a closer match with these underlying complexities. But still, there is much more to society's increasing complexity than only this. As I discuss further down the line, societies have a persistent tendency to engage in overregulation, one obvious reason for this being that doing so is the natural reflex of policy-makers, bureaucrats and politicians alike, in response to any emerging incident or upcoming challenge (see, *e.g.*, Lax & Phillips, 2012).

In a literature related to that of the study of the (r)evolution of modernity, the role of complexity endogeneity is emphasized. That is, modern societies produce much additional complexity by introducing measures that give technocracies the free hand to intervene and to regulate in areas brought under their discretion (see, *e.g.*, Beiser-McGrath *et al.*, 2021; Berman, 2019; Gratton & Lee, 2024). This process of what may be referred to as "technocratization" is closely associated with the neo-liberal revolution (including the New Public Management philosophy) and economic globalization, both of which I briefly discussed in greater detail above, and extends beyond the boundaries of nation-states to an array of international bodies. This not only comes with a plethora of problems known to be associated with societal complexity, but also with a specific issue highly relevant in the context of the current analysis of processes of democratic backsliding: that is, by handing over so much societal controlling and interventionist power to technocracies, societies create a democratic deficit[58] that may well backfire by triggering distrust in society as a result of a widespread feeling that citizens are not, in any way, in control over many domains of their lives.

Basically, apart from the internal dynamic of rule production that I will discuss further down the line under the heading of distrustful overregulation, the neo-liberal policy mix in combination with the Washington Consensus handed over much controlling, interventionist, and regulatory power to non-democratic authorities, within and across countries.[59] With the wave of privatization programs heavily inspired by neo-liberalism, for instance, many countries decided to establish authorities that were supposed to control and regulate these privatized spheres in society, well-known examples being energy, health care, public transport, and telecommunication. Internationally, a similar trend toward independent control and intervention is witnessed within the EU and at the global level through a rich set of international bodies such as the European Commission, the European Court of Human Rights, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization. On top of this, international agreements (such as those regarding biodiversity and climate change) came, and still come, with an impressive – and again independent – controlling and monitoring apparatus.

As a result, more and more complexities are imposed upon societies that are of the latter's own making, producing judicialization as a by-product (*cf.* Hirschl,

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58   The debate regarding democratic deficits, within the EU or elsewhere, is anything but new (see, *e.g.*, Follesdal & Hix, 2006; Norris, 2011).

59   A classic example involves the dogma of central bank independence, implying that many monetary policies are outsourced to an essential but non-democratic institution.

2008; Loick, 2014). And much of this complexity is introduced and further developed outside the tentacles of democratic control. After all, the very idea is that independent authorities should be in charge of many implementation tasks, and hence that we should outsource much policy-implementing and -making to technocracies. This severely constrains the sovereignty of national democracies (and autocracies, for that matter), both from within and from abroad. In the new millennium, this fueled a movement across many nation-states in the world passionately arguing that "we should take back control". Clear examples of this movement are Brexit, Trumpian nationalism (including the return of the international trade war instrument), and anti-EU political parties.[60] In all these cases, the democratic deficit provides fertile soil for distrust among a large part of the population *vis-à-vis* the ruling elite, being composed of highly-educated and well-to-do politicians and technocrats working together to add complexity after complexity to society in non-transparent backrooms[61] in the world's capitals and international meeting places (of which "Davos" is a popular target), having lost their touch with the needs and wishes of "the people".

Again, the Netherlands provides an illustrative example (Bruff, 2003). In the 1990s, the unthinkable happened: The liberal-conservative VVD and the social-democratic PvdA, with the social-liberal D66 as lubricant, joined forces in what became known as the "purple" coalition (mixing the VVD's blue with the PvdA's red; I am not sure what the color impact is supposed to be of adding D66's green – none, apparently). Not accidentally, this then very unlikely combination came together with a growing political consensus regarding the merits of neo-liberalism. In an (in)famous speech in 1995, the then party leader of the PvdA and Prime-Minister of the purple cabinet (and the former labor union chairperson) Wim Kok embraced the Third Way by "shaking off ideological feathers", essentially arguing in favor of a neo-liberal reform of the Welfare State. As a result, differences within the broader center of the political spectrum, from the VVD's center right to the PvdA's center left, blurred to such an extent that political parties in the tails emerged that heavily criticized the "purple" policies, from the far-left Socialist Party (the SP, with Trotskist roots) to the far-right Lijst Pim Fortuyn (LPF, a right-wing populist movement). These "purple"

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60   This movement was further fueled by crises, such as the financial collapse in 2007/8 and the COVID-19 pandemic. During such crisis times, technocracies tend to shift gear into an overdrive of their overdrive (see, *e.g.*, Alexiadou & Gunaydin, 2019; Fetzer, 2019).

61   What adds to the feeling of unease is that we know very well from a large literature that this further increases the danger of "regulatory capture", which implies that much of what these formally independent authorities do is to informally protect the vested interests of other members of this elite they are supposed to control, monitor, and regulate (see, *e.g.*, Dal Bó, 2006; Stigler, 1971).

policies involved everything associated with the neo-liberal revolution, from heavy privatization to drastic flexibilization, establishing many new technocracies along the way. This little tour into Dutch political history already hints at why the (moderate) left should share in the blame regarding the rise of the far right, and hence the creeping democratic backsliding process (but see much more on this below).

Simultaneously, the European Union accelerated by launching one internal market measure after the other, inspired by neo-liberalism, too. The free movement of labor, goods (products and services), and capital should produce a large economy that would not only create much additional welfare, but which would also be at par with the US. In practice, this implied that much political power was transferred to "Brussels", with loss of national sovereignty as an inevitable consequence, because an internal market requires coordination and standardization across nation-states. The key turning point here is the 1992 treaty, signed in the Dutch city of Maastricht, which cumulated into the introduction of the Euro on January 1 1999 – the peak of the dominance of Washington Consensus and the neo-liberal revolution in Europe. EU Member States largely outsourced border policing to the EU, monetary policy-making was transferred to the European Central Bank in Frankfurt am Mainz, labor could move freely within the EU, national economic policies were tied to guidelines from Brussels, *et cetera*. Indeed, since then, the backlash set in, with anti-EU populism gaining voter share, with a few hiccups, in one election after the other, referring to the technocrats in Brussels as key members of the hostile ruling elite, next to all traditional national "cartel parties" in one cabinet after the other – all collectively working together against "the will of the people".

Reflection 5: *Jong Oranje's* football team

Nativism is increasingly popular among the far right and their electorate. Prominent extreme-right politicians like Thierry Baudet (this is a French name, by the way) in the Netherlands (FvD's party leader) and Herbert Kickl in Austria (FPÖ's party leader) explicitly and openly promote the ambition to homogenize the population. This should be achieved not only by keeping foreigners out, but also by deporting (they prefer to refer to this as re-emigrating) descendant of foreigners to where they presumably come from. However, as many citizens of countries such as Austria and the Netherlands have relatives from abroad in their family tree, this would imply that not many citizens will be left to run the economy. Take the names of football players in the Dutch national team for under 21 (called *Jong Oranje*), listed in alphabetical order:

Tyrese Asante	*Ibrahim Cissoko*	*Rome Jayden Owuso-Oduro*
Youri Baas	*Emanuel Emegha*	*Calvin* Raatsie
Ezechiel Banzuzi	*Kian Fitz-Jim*	*Youri* Regeer
Rav den den Berg	*Ryan Flamingo*	*Devyne Rensch*
Thom van Bergen	*Million* Manhoef	Robin Roefs
Ruben van Bommel	*Neraysho Meritchio Kasanwirjo*	*Anass Salah-Edinne*
Myron van Brederode	*Antoni Milambo*	*Kenneth Taylor*
Max Bruns	*Noah Ohio*	*Giivai Zechiël*

All names printed in italics would be considered non-Dutch by nativists. So, then, Jong Oranje could only field four players. If nativists would stroke their heart and decide to accept foreign first names, they could expand this number to ten, still below the needed 11.

And this is not much different for the country's main squad. In the 2025 national team, names like Nathan Aké, Brian Brobbey, Memphis Depay, Denzel Dumfries, Jeremie Frimpong, Cody Gakpo, Jorrel Hato, and Kenneth Taylor figure prominently – very non-Dutch names indeed. Moreover, Virgil van Dijk, Lutsharel Geertruida, Ryan Gravenberch, Justin Kluivert, Doyell Malen, Tijani Reijnders, Xavi Simons, and Jurriën Timber might have Dutch last (but frequently not first) names, but their looks are very different from the blond and blue-eyed Dutchman. In total, this sums up to more than 50% of the selected players for the Nation League matches in March 2025. This is not a recent development, with players like Ibrahim Afellay, Giovanni van Bronkhorst, Edgar Davids, Ruud Gullit, Patrick Kluivert, Frenk Rijkaard, Clarence Seedorf, and Aron Winter, to name just a few, having a prominent place in Dutch football history.

The enemy from within[62]

Distrustful overregulation.
The regulatory paradox,
sneaky as a fox.
Controlling regulation
of unleashed neoliberalism.
Countering individualism.
Fighting fraud,
and not only from abroad.

Media hysteria.
From incident
to incident.
Shopping in the cafeteria
of fake news and misinformation.
A deadly embrace, full of miscommunication.
Politicians feeding journalists, and vice versa.
Endless sequences of blah blah.

Complacent anger.
The pampering Welfare State
has always been great.
But now a rogue anchor.
Reform after reform.
Societal chloroform.
Said to be real must,
but mainly producing dust.

Polarizing inequality.
The rich richer than rich.
A shareholder capitalism pitch.
What happened to increasing equality?
Capital flowing into the pockets

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62 This poem's title was added to this manuscript many months before Donald Trump promoted this to yet another outrageous one-liner in his 2024 Presidential campaign.

of the rich standing on their sockets.
The poor being left behind,
anything but kind.

Bubbling isolation.
Echo chamber as a hideout.
Confirmation from my own crowd.
Splendid suffocation.
Always right, never wrong.
Feeling very strong.
The other side is mortally ill,
and can be blamed for bad will.

6 Internal Mechanisms Eroding Liberal Democracies from Within

6.1 Demand and supply-side forces

Internal mechanisms driving democratic backsliding can be located at the demand or supply side of the political theater. Scattered across the literature and within a variety of disciplines, a plethora of potential mechanisms have been identified. Supply-side explanations largely refer to features of the internal dynamics within the political system. For instance, by clustering together in political space, centrist parties are argued to have opened the gateway to newcomers in the tails of the political spectrum, which was further stimulated by the expansion of issue space (see, *e.g.*, Gethin, Martínez-Toledo, & Piketty, 2021; Hillen & Steiner, 2020). Here, not only the political behavior of these newcomers matters, but also the responses of incumbents, particularly since the evidence suggests that supply-side polarization among parties tends to precede the demand-side mimicking among citizens (*cf.* Moral & Best, 2023). I rather extensively return to this issue further down the line.

Demand-side explanations involve many subtle cultural, economic, and technocratic issues (see, *e.g.*, Crutzen, Sisak, & Swank, 2024; Guiso *et al.*, 2024; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). These, too, are rather extensively discussed below (and partly above, for that matter). But first, I would like to introduce five internal mechanisms that I consider to be essential, in no particular order: (a) distrustful overregulation; (b) media hysteria; (c) complacent anger; (d) polarizing inequality; and (e) bubbling isolation. As I will argue below, these five mechanisms tend to be driven by the subtle interplay of demand and supply-side forces – hence, locating such a mechanism as fully at either the demand or supply side would imply that we miss out on subtle complexities. Actually, in the end, they all are involved in an intricate embrace, among one another and with yet other drivers (such as the above three external forces, as well as the internal dynamic within the political system in combination with cultural changes). Actually, this is a key message of this book-length essay, cumulating into my plea for an ecological complexity perspective. But before spelling out how such a perspective could look like, I now first introduce this set of five critical internal mechanisms, one by one.

6.2 Distrustful overregulation[63]

Above, I already referred in passing to what may be called the "regulatory paradox". An important element of the neo-liberal revolution, flanked by the NPM philosophy, is the belief or conviction that the market is the default governance mechanism, as the State is argued to be inefficient and ineffective, in contrast to a market with private actors (but see van Witteloostuijn *et al.*, 2012). Hence, not only must markets and enterprises be able to freely engage in their efficient and effective allocation, innovation, and production activities, but also should many public services be privatized to benefit from the market mechanism's superiority (but see van de Mandele & van Witteloostuijn, 2013). All this involved an impressive deregulation and privatization program across many countries and within many sectors. Well-known examples are the deregulation of the financial world, globally, and privatization of public transport, nationally. Another important aspect of the neo-liberal revolution is to move many responsibilities from the State to citizens. The argument is that citizens should have the freedom to decide for themselves, rather than having the State doing that for them. This operates in tandem with the above, as now businesses and citizens could engage freely in mutually beneficial transactions of their own choice.[64]

Paradoxically, this impressive deregulation (and privatization) program became inextricably bound up with other types of tightened regulation. To me, at least two explanations can be offered here. The first explanation is that deregulated markets had to be controlled and monitored in one way or the other. Apparently, only radical neo-liberals trusted the private actors enough for them to do their work in complete freedom. This triggered the creation of many new regulatory initiatives, with the implementation oftentimes being delegated to newly established authorities (*cf.*

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63   For the sake of parsimony, I focus here on regulation, ignoring the role of self-regulation (see, *e.g.*, Ostrom, 1990; van Witteloostuijn *et al.*, 2012). Partly, this is captured in my argument through the reference to the regulatory cascade effect. Note that this relates to the critique of neo-liberalism as only recognizing the individual, market, and State, and hence ignoring civil society (as is clear from Margaret Thatcher's classic statement that there is no so thing as society). For instance, in the Christian-democratic tradition, this is very different, with much focus on precisely the self-regulatory capacity of the civil society (see, *e.g.*, Haidt, 2012; Rajan, 2019; van Witteloostuijn et al., 2012).

64   Through a neo-liberal lens, the assumption is that the more choice, the better. After all, then the decision-maker can decide to opt for the alternative that maximizes her or his utility. However, from the psychological literature, we know that too much choice may well give choice stress. In economics, models have been developed in the Beckerian utility-maximizing tradition showing that an individual's optimal decision-making may involve an *ex ante* commitment to an *ex post* restriction (see, *e.g.*, Becker & Murphy, 1988), which implies the conscious decision today to commit to limiting the choice space tomorrow.

the above discussion regarding technocracy). Organizing market surveillance is not so cheap and easy, and should have been included in the decision-making to deregulate *ex ante* (see, *e.g.*, Cochrane, 2014, for the case of financial market regulation). However, now these authorities are in place, they are very difficult to dismantle, oftentimes turning into impressive rule-making machines. In many cases, subsequently, a rule-making cascade started to stack one set of rules on the other throughout the regulatory chain [*e.g.*, Kaufmann and van Witteloostuijn (2018) report evidence for the case of the Dutch and European gas industry].

The second explanation involves the impact of increasing distrust. The shift of responsibilities to citizens in combination with the NPM philosophy not only increased the distance between the State and its citizens (and further dehumanized their interaction after massively introducing efficiency-enhancing digitalization; *cf.* Olsen, 2006), but also boosted the development of series of regulatory frameworks meant to control and monitor the acts of citizens to keep fraud in check.[65] This is an example of mimicking behavior, specifically by the center right, in response to the far right's rhetoric regarding the need to counter fraud with hard-hearted penalties (see below). In Box 1, I briefly describe an illustrative and revealing example of the excesses that came out of this attitude of the modern NPM-oriented State that accommodated the far right's obsession with fraud (particularly when conducted by foreigners and immigrants).

Box 1:   Dutch childcare benefits scandal
This blatant failure and violation of the rule of law is shameful. Dutch citizens have the right to receive childcare benefits in advance, on a monthly basis. Only later, the tax authority checks whether or not the childcare benefits have or have not been rightfully received. If not, they must be reimbursed. If this is not done in time or in full, a fine is added to the sum that has to be transferred to the tax offices. A specific tight control system was introduced in response to a fraud scandal involving Bulgarian migrants in 2013. An algorithm was implemented that was supposed to identify those with a higher likelihood of acting fraudulently. This algorithm

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65   Of course, there are many other reasons to launch new rules. And of course, some rules benefit society (or specific stakeholders in society), whilst others do not. Much has been written about the pros and cons of bureaucracies, as the spiders in the web of rule-making and -implementation. What they do or do not do to people, organizations, and societies, why they evolve the way they do, *et cetera*. At least since the classic contribution of Weber (see, *e.g.*, Adler, 2012), bureaucracies are a beloved topic in the academic (and popular) literature (see, e.g., Ginzburg, Weil, & van Witteloostuijn, 2024; Graeber, 2015). In this essay, I only focus on one specific aspect: the effect of overregulation – or over-bureaucratization – on democratic backsliding.

turned out to be very good at discrimination – *e.g.*, revealing a clear preference to select Dutch citizens from ethnic minorities.[66] The algorithm simply reproduced the discriminatory bias in the training data. Moreover, not only were many fines unjustly imposed upon innocent people, but also did the reimbursement claims stack up to such cumulative heights that many were unable to pay. This created family crises triggered by debt accumulation, with even child placements and parent suicides as a result. As of 2015, a series of investigation committees judged that the State, including the judicial system, had engaged in institutional racism. Early 2025, many of the horrible mistakes made still have not been corrected. The inefficient and fraud-sensitive benefit system is still widely applied, and not only in the childcare domain, and even though the tax authority does not have the capacity to handle this alien system well at all.[67]

The net effect of the regulatory paradox is an exponential increase in the number of rules. The habitual political response to any challenge or incident is to initiate the drafting a new set of rules (see, *e.g.*, West, 2005; West & Raso, 2013). The example of the European Union is a very popular target, certainly for the (far) right, accused of being a non-democratic regulatory monster. In Exhibit 1, I provide illustrative evidence regarding the birth of new EU rules per year over the 1990-2023 period.

Exhibit 1: EU rule birth

Preferably, I would here have presented impressive figures involving macro-level comparative data of the evolution of the rule stock since the 1980s for all major democracies and democratic blocs (and, ideally, autocracies as well). However, these data are either non-existent, very hard to find, or very difficult to compare. In the case studies I conducted with Gjalt de Jong and Wesley Kaufmann, as referred to in the main text, we collected longitudinal rule density data for Dutch competition, higher education, and gas energy law (and the latter for the EU, too), but his cannot count as comprehensive and generalizable evidence. By way of additional example, therefore, I downloaded data regarding the annual number of newly adopted basic or amended legal EU acts. This includes acts regarding ordinary legislative procedures, other legislative acts, delegated acts,

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66   The fraud here would have involved wrongly receiving benefits, so the argument went at the time.

67   This example is also a nice illustration of the accountability deficit and enhanced control issues (see, *e.g.*, Busuioc & Jevnaker, 2022; Schillemans & Busuioc, 2015).

implemented acts, and other acts, as recorded and reported by the UCLA School of Law. For the 2010-2023 period, I calculated the total rule birth for each year. By way of comparison, I add this number for 1990, 1995, 2000, and 2005 as well. All this is reported below.

Year	Rule birth
2023	3,234
2022	2,446
2021	2,382
2020	2,196
2019	2,299
2018	2,146
2017	2,234
2016	2,137
2015	2,155
2014	2,455
2013	2,228
2012	2,019
2011	2,209
2010	1,834
...	...
2005	2,017
...	...
2000	1,987
...	...
1995	1,970
...	...
1990	2,134

Clearly, the EU is a very productive rule-maker, year after year. The average number of new rules per annum was 2,172 in the 2010s, which increased to 2,565 in the first four years of the 2020s. As the number of scrapped rules is far lower than the rule birth figure, the accumulative rule stock is increasing all the time. Indeed, this cumulative effect is largely due to the low rule death rate, oftentimes producing exponential rule stock growth. Piecemeal evidence for countries confirms this pattern of exponential rule stock growth. For instance, in the Netherlands, year after year, many executive organizations that are supposed

to implement all these rules sound the alarm that the complexity, inconsistency, and size of the rule stock have increased (far) beyond feasibility. The capacity is simply lacking to seriously implement one new rule after the other. The childcare benefit scandal example in Box 1 illustrates the potential consequences of what may be referred to as the implementation gap: executive organizations are asked to implement the unimplementable.

Source: https://libguides.law.ucla.edu/europeanunion.

The average annual number of new EU rules may be only slowly increasing over time, but the cumulative impact on the rule stock is very large, given the very low rule death rate: Technocracies love to create rules, but have a hard time scrapping any. Clearly, the rule-creation machinery in Brussels is unstoppable, kicking off a rule-making cascade effect throughout all Member States. In all likelihood (bordering at certainty), this is not only true for the EU, but for many, if not all, democracies (and non-democracies, for that matter) across the globe (*cf.* Adam, Knill, & Fernandez-i-Marín, 2017).

In this context, research in the tradition of red tape and rule ecology not only provides much very convincing counting evidence regarding a wide array of cases, but also suggests a number of intriguing causal mechanisms. A very basic, and worrying, one is rule ecology's density-dependence hypothesis: The likelihood that a new rule will be introduced (in this literature referred to as rule birth, in contrast with rule death, which involves the scrapping of rules) is positively associated with the current size of the rule stock (van Witteloostuijn, 2003). Indeed, one study after the other reports evidence in support of this hypothesis (*e.g.*, March, Schulz, & Zhou, 2000; Schulz, 1998; van Witteloostuijn & de Jong, 2007, 2008, 2010; Kaufmann & van Witteloostuijn, 2011, 2012, 2018), which implies exponential rule stock growth, particularly in tandem with the fact that similar work on rule death is close to non-existent for the very simple reason that the number of observations is way too low (that is, rules are rarely scrapped, but rather seem to live forever).[68] The result of such exponential rule growth patterns are regulatory labyrinths – impressive not only in terms of their size, but certainly also with regards to their level of complexity and degree of inconsistency.

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[68] Another shivering example in the Netherlands is the regulatory labyrinth regarding childcare: https://www.kinderopvang-werkt.nl/sites/fcb_kinderopvang/files/2020-10/functieboek_cao_kinderopvang_2020_-_2021_0.pdf. And this is just one example out of many, across countries. Note that rule change is much more common than rule death (van Witteloostuijn & de Jong, 2008). Oftentimes, rule change is positively associated with rule expansion.

Importantly, my argument here is that the major impact of this exponential rule stock growth trend is two-fold. First, because underlying a substantial chunk of this rule-making hyperactivity is the State's distrust in its own citizens, the counter-reaction is increasing citizens' distrust in the State (see also Exhibit 3). This increasing reciprocal distrust triggers an upward regulatory spiral that develops from bad to worse, further fueled by one incident after the other (*cf.* Box 1's example). This provides fertile soil for the anti-elite and anti-State rhetoric of far-right populism. Second, in analogy to the cumulative suffocating effect of the use of pesticides on agricultural land, the ever-increasing rule stock suffocates society. A recent example in the Netherlands is that the number of rules regarding a large variety of different issues is so large (and inconsistent, collectively) that a farmer wishing to add other nature-friendly activities to her or his business, such as a mini-camping site or a bio-food shop, must hire expensive advice from consultancies to cut her or his way through this rule labyrinth to even then only receive formal permission, if s/he is lucky, after a five-year journey. Again, this suffocating effect of excessive rule-making is flammable fuel for far-right populism.

Take yet another piece of evidence. The Dutch *Staatscommissie staatsrecht* (State Committee for the Rule of Law) recently published a very critical report regarding how the Dutch State tramples underfoot the rule of law by launching way too many rules that are far too complex, producing a regulatory labyrinth in which Dutch citizens get lost without receiving decent support from civil servants (who tend to be lost in this labyrinth, too) (see https://www.staatscommissierechtsstaat.nl). What makes matters worse, is that now individual parties start judicial procedures against the State if they can make the case that this very State, acting on the basis of democratic legitimacy due to the majoritarian principle of any liberal democracy, is implementing measures or rules that hit against the wall of the Constitution, international agreements or any other legal guardrail. This is the tension of the liberal democracy in full motion, providing further ammunition for the far right's anti-elite discourse. Further down the line, I will provide more examples along these lines.

6.3 Media hysteria

The next mechanism involves the widely studied issue of the role of the media in hyping specific parties, politicians, and/or topics. Particularly at the interface of communication and political sciences, an impressive research tradition examines the reciprocal interplay between media and political actors. Evidence abounds that this interplay is reciprocal indeed, with media outlets influencing political actors (parties and politicians), and *vice versa*. For instance, by publishing extensively about a specific

incident or topic, the media heavily influences political agenda-setting (see, *e.g.*, Gilardi *et al.*, 2022), whilst political actors feed the media with spin messages that are picked up as newsworthy (see, *e.g.*, Somer-Topcu, Tavits, & Baumann, 2020). In tandem, both societal spheres create a bubble that subsequently impacts society by directing public opinion in one direction or the other. This influence is particularly salient in the months, weeks, and days before an election. But all this is of all times, really – nothing new here (*cf.* the above Gilden Age example). So, what might have changed in recent decades that can explain the creeping process of democratic erosion? Is the role of the media different in modern-day times?

Indeed, a few key changes emerged in the media landscape since, roughly, the early 1990s. Two are critical in the current context, I would argue. The first change happened in the slipstream of the neo-liberal revolution: the increasing commercialization of the media (McManus, 2009). The second change is due to the rise of Internet technologies: the emergence of social media (Kapoor *et al.*, 2018; see more on this below). The two are related, as the social media are the core of the business model of a few of the largest global enterprises. This commercial business model aspect is essential, because this implies that the majority of the modern-day media does what brings in money (except if forced into a regulatory straitjacket to act otherwise). And this is not serious journalism based on facts and fact-checking, but involves promoting incidents and emotions that attract the largest audience, using addiction-inducing algorithms (Sun & Zhang, 2021).[69] This has fundamentally changed the nature of the interaction with political actors in a way that favors populist rhetoric (Boulianne, Koc-Michalska, & Bimber, 2020). In modern-day politics, it is all about (emotional) perceptions, and how to manipulate these in a political party's or politician's favor (see, *e.g.*, Meeus, 2024). Exhibit 2 provides illustrative data regarding social media use, revealing a sharp upward trend, as expected – a real blessing for (particularly right-wing) populism.[70]

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[69]   And yet another step is to "reform" the electoral rules of the game, organizing elections that still can be "sold" as free, but are no longer fair. Victor Orbán is a master in this, combining this tactic with close-to-full control over the media. But this strategy is not restricted to illiberal democracies or semi-autocracies, with gerrymandering being an established practice in the US. Actually, particularly the Republican Party is worryingly active in trying to change election rules in its favor across the country.

[70]   Benito Mussolini was an *X*-genius *avant la lettre*. As a journalist, he used newspaper columns to promote his aggressive opinions and views in a compact and provocative style, without any appreciation of factual truth or internal consistency.

What further amplifies the eroding influence of the media is that a well-known first deed of a populist in power is to capture the public media[71] (and the next step is a similar move to "reform" the judicial system).[72] The cases of Hungary and Poland, among many more, are self-explanatory (see, *e.g.*, Christopoulou, 2022; Pech & Scheppele, 2017). In Italy, journalists from the public RAI channel went into strike in May 2024 to protest against increasing political influence (of the constraining type) on their work by the Meloni government. Strikingly, the four right-wing parties that have for about six months negotiated to form a new cabinet in the Netherlands seem to agree on the need for an aggressive, albeit yet unspecified, "reform" of the public TV channels. As can be expected, the radical-right PVV takes the most extreme position, pushing for a full closure of the public TV organization (known as NPO) altogether. The BBB (the populist-conservative farmers' party) is suggesting to reduce the number of public TV channels from three to two, and the liberal-conservative VVD wants to cut

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71   A popular alternative is to avoid all traditional media altogether (*e.g.*, Geert Wilders never accepts an invitation from a regular talk show), and to use a tailor-made channel of own making instead. For instance, the Dutch far-right political leader Thierry Baudet actively communicates through his own media channel, and Donald Trump fanatically airs one quick message, preferably printed in CAPITALS, after the other through his own Truth Social platform. Now Elon Musk has fanatically teamed up with Donald Trump, even joining his administration, we may soon expect Trump's return on *X*, with its much larger reach.

72   Occasionally, such support is emerging spontaneously, without any need for political intervention, as the case of Trump-supporter Elon Musk transformation of Twitter into *X* nicely illustrates. *X* is now a digital open free (hatred) speech space with very limited moderation.

€400 million from the current €900 million annual budget.[73] Hence, the traditional attack of the extreme and radical right on the "leftist-liberal" and "woke" public media, supported by the populism-captured right-centrists, is already benefiting from a forceful tailwind before the new Dutch cabinet even had shoot into action. In Box 2, I provide another example, again with a main role for the commercial media in the theater of national elections.

Box 2: Media response to polling outcomes

Polling during election time is booming business. And oftentimes, polling's role is criticized. In many countries, publishing polling results is no longer allowed a few weeks or days before the election date. In the Netherlands, no such ban is in place. The November 22 2023 election triggered a post-election debate about this even more intensely than after earlier elections, due to the sudden and unexpected victory of Geert Wilders' radical-right PVV. The PVV emerged with 37 seats as the big winner, far greater than the number two – the left-wing GroenLinks-PvdA combination with 25 seats (out of the Second Chamber's 150 seats in total). This case is particularly interesting seen through the lens of the conversation regarding the creeping rise of extreme and radical right within liberal democracies. For the Dutch surprise election outcome, many explanations have been put forward, including the counter-productive behavior of the conservative-liberal VVD. This behavior came in two steps. The first is that the retiring VVD leader and Prime-Minister Mark Rutte decided to trigger a cabinet crisis with reference to the need for stricter immigration policies, particularly in the area of family reunification of asylum-seekers, his party wrongly claiming that the country was flooded with thousands of extra asylum-seekers annually due to too lenient family reunification rules, whilst actually this figure counts in the dozens. As a result, this "immigration tsunami" theme dominated the election campaign, with the PVV being the traditional topic owner. The second move was the decision of Mark Rutte's successor as party leader – Dilan Yesilgöz – to open the door to post-election coalition formation talks with Geert Wilders early in the campaign, after more than a decade of Mark Rutte's strict no, effectively lifting a decade-long *cordon sanitaire*. This suddenly made the PVV a credible cabinet partner.

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73   As said, the compromise that ended up in the new coalition agreement involves a budget cut of €100 million annually in combination with an unspecified reform. Given that this compromise is located outside the "leftist" boundaries of what is defined by the policy proposals of BBB, PVV, and VVD, I assume that this is due to NSC's emphasis on the need to safeguard the rule of law. This is how coalition formation may dampen extremist tendencies, albeit only imperfectly so.

But still, as the PVV was in a too-close-to-call race with three other parties only one week before election day, this cannot be the full answer. Hence, many observers argue that the media promoted Geert Wilders to the winner status by the way they treated him, offering much air time in combination with handling him mildly, even launching Geert Milders[74] as a new nickname for the PVV leader. This triggered a leapfrogging game between polling and media attention in the final week before the election, the argument goes, attracting many voters to the PVV, which now was not only seen as *salonfähig* and as the immigration topic owner, but also as a very likely winner. And we know very well that many voters like to back winners. According to post-election analysis, the polling watershed was a very chaotic debate of the main political leaders in a show aired by a major commercial TV station (SBS6), in which Geert Wilders was given plenty of space to express his aggressive and pestering style of debating (*e.g.*, with a sneaky reference to Frans Timmermans' ongoing struggle with his weight – such very personal attacks are a classic far-right strategy).

A final example involves recent media-related turbulence in the US. For one, *The Washington Post* explicitly announced in the last weeks before the November 2024 Presidential election day that they, this time, would not endorse either candidate. The official argument was that this would imply a return to the old days of *The Washington Post*'s neutrality, but actually this is the result of the new own owner's interest to not turn against Donald Trump. As a Big Tech billionaire, Jeff Bezos will benefit from a good relationship with the 47th President of the US. Indeed, during his campaign, Donald Trump regularly lashed out aggressively against the traditional media, which he accuses of spreading fake news. If he turns this hate speech into action, this would imply an autocratic attack on the free press by withdrawing the licenses of the media, such as the traditional TV channels, that he considers to be part of the coalition of "the enemies from within" – a classic move of all (semi-)autocrats.

6.4 Complacent anger

Yet another mechanism has to do with what could be seen as a manifestation of "economic emotions", which I label here as complacent anger. In many liberal democracies, most voters cannot remember or have zero experience with the days in

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74 Indeed, Wilders tried to convince the electorate and the press that he had become less extreme, explicitly announcing that he had stocked a few of his most radical policy proposals "in the fridge". Well, the thing with a fridge is that what is stocked there is precisely put in the fridge to extend its shelf life for later use.

which the modern Welfare State was either absent altogether, or still in its infancy. In a way, one could argue that the electorate in the rich West is so much spoiled by the post-War II Welfare State that she is quickly disappointed by what this very Welfare State does, and is able to, offer. Such habituation comes with loss aversion and vested interests that may well undermine the stability of the democracies that are supposed to develop and maintain these Welfare States. This paradoxical tension may also affect trust in technocratic bureaucracies that both develop and implement the Welfare State's policies, as reflected in the mechanism of distrustful overregulation (see also the above argument regarding the role of modern technocracies). I briefly return to this disappointment argument further down the line.

Hence, voters in liberal democracies are used to being pampered by what the Welfare State has to offer.[75] Of course, this Welfare State is very different from one country to the other, in terms of both key policies as well as the general level of care, protection, and security. But for national elections, this is not relevant, as then voters anchor their economic emotions on what they are used to in their own national context. Given this benchmark, many voters experience any erosion of the Welfare State (see, *e.g.*, Busilacchi & Giovanola, 2023), often sold by politicians as a necessary "modernization" or "reform", as an attack on their economic protection turf. And undeniably, as a result of the neo-liberal revolution in combination with rougher international competition, the Welfare State has been pared down, step by step, since the 1980s or so, in many – if not all – liberal democracies. As a result, the size of the population experiencing economic uncertainty has increased substantially, now also encompassing the lower middle class (and beyond, in quite a few countries).

Specifically, the flexibilization-globalization tandem has reduced the resilience of many citizens in Western liberal democracies (and, again, not only there). I already briefly discussed economic globalization above, which came with the decline of traditional industries and the disappearance of traditional occupations. Here, I would like to add the role of flexibilization (*cf.* Kriesi *et al.*, 2006). In many liberal democracies, reforms of the labor market have been implemented since at least the 1990s, albeit no longer framed as such in the post-financial crisis period, that squarely fit within the neo-liberal tradition by making the labor market more flexible to boost

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75 Paradoxically, flexibilization of the labor market affects younger generations the most, which have least experienced first modernity's Welfare State. I would argue that, in a way, memories of the days of more certainties travel across generations through storytelling of the myth-creating kind.

the competitiveness of businesses (Gebel & Giesecke, 2011).[76] For labor, and hence for many citizens, these reforms tend to imply a step back (and for businesses, and hence for many capital owners, a step forward) by greatly reducing the incidence of fixed contracts, by adding to the downward pressure on wages, and by increasing the ease to fire employees.[77] In daily practice, this produced a large increase in the number of self-employed and flex arrangements, often referred to as the gig economy (Vallas & Schor, 2020). Not surprisingly, this type of flexibilization reduces labor and social security, and hence boosts feelings of uncertainty within the labor force, on average (Guiso *et al.*, 2024; Scheiring *et al.*, 2024).

The result of all this is a widespread feeling of vulnerability among the population, cutting across society along income class lines, amplified by increasing uncertainty as to what the future will bring, which further undermines trust in authorities and institutions, and the (bureaucratic and political) elite. Indeed, this is reflected in the drop in the Edelman Trust Barometer measure over time, by and large, as discussed in Exhibit 3 (see also the argument regarding the regulatory paradox as spelled out above). Particularly content with and trust in national governments (but much less so the EU, perhaps surprisingly) is under pressure, as is content with and trust in the media – a downward spiral indeed. And what makes this trust gap even more worrying, through the lens of the danger of democratic backsliding processes and the potential difficulties to reverse such processes, is that we know that trust comes on foot and goes on horseback. Winning back trust will be anything but easy.

Exhibit 3: Distrust in government (and media)

Based on survey measures administered among a representative sample of a country's population, the Edelman Trust Barometer seeks to quantify many aspects and foci of trust within a society, based on a subset of 25-30 nation-states across the world. For instance, annually, measures regarding trust (maximum

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76   Politicians often refer to the notion of the competitive advantage of nations, which is known to be nonsensical through the lens of Ricardian international economics (Samuelson, 2004). Another popular notion in this respect is that of "business climate", which basically implies a large set of business-friendly policies, such as lenient regulations, subsidy programs, and low taxes. Donald Trump is a strong believer in this Mercantilist approach, which will only produce lower economic welfare across the globe. This is basic textbook economics. Below, I will briefly return to this issue in greater detail.

77   Many economists would argue that this policy has an upside, too, in the form of many more jobs. So, without these types of flexibilization, the unemployment rate would have been substantially higher – yet another potential source of complacent anger. Actually, the latter was the case in the 1980s, which was one of the reasons why the neo-liberal revolution came off the ground in the first place. Clearly, although history may well repeat itself after all, it does so in different forms and shapes.

score of 100) and distrust (minimum score of 0) in government, business, and NGOs are published, as well as in view of different societal roles (e.g., citizens, journalists, judges, politicians, and scientists). Comparing across countries and over many years (the barometer runs since 2001) gives intriguing insight in cross-country patterns and longitudinal trends, if any. In subsequent recent reports, a worrying trend is signaled: Trust in government is low, and in decline in many countries, in conjunction with a similar pattern and trend regarding the media. For instance, in 2024, the global trust index with respect to the government is a mediocre 51, and that regarding the media an equally mediocre 50, both being at the bottom of the trust ranking in many of the countries included in the index (with business leading with 63 and NGOs being number two with 59). A quote from the 2022 report summarizes this process lucidly: "We find a world ensnared in a vicious cycle of distrust, fueled by a growing lack of faith in media and government. Through disinformation and division, these two institutions are feeding the cycle and exploiting it for commercial and political gain." Indeed, in the pre-corona 2018 report, the quickly eroding trust in the media is already noted. And perhaps surprisingly, this collapse of trust in government and media is particularly salient in Western democracies. Below, by way of illustration, I list the scores for a series of countries, for 2018, 2020, 2022 and 2024, with G indicating trust in Government and M trust in the media.

Country	G-2018	G-2020	G-2022	G-2024	M-2018	M-2020	M-2022	M-2024
Argentina	41	34	22	21	39	42	43	33
Australia	35	44	52	50	31	39	43	40
Brazil	18	37	34	42	43	44	47	45
Canada	46	50	53	49	49	53	52	51
France	33	35	53	39	33	37	38	40
Germany	43	45	47	42	42	49	47	46
India	70	81	74	76	61	73	66	67
Ireland	35	41	49	45	33	37	45	37
Italy	27	41	49	42	45	49	50	48
Japan	37	43	36	32	32	37	35	33
Netherlands	54	59	58	55	55	58	58	56
Spain	34	30	34	36	44	42	40	40
UK	36	36	42	30	32	35	35	31
US	33	39	39	40	42	48	39	39

Focusing on trust in the EU in twelve liberal democracies, six from inside (France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, and Spain) and six from outside the EU (Australia, Canada, India, Japan, the UK, and the US; note that the UK, of course, switched from an insider to an outsider after the 2016 Brexit referendum), we observe a different pattern. Perhaps surprisingly, trust in the EU beats that in national governments within the EU. For instance, in 2024, we see scores of 49 for France (versus 33 for trust in national government), 48 for Germany (42), 62 for Ireland (45), 55 for Italy (42), 57 for the Netherlands (55), and 56 for Spain (36). Strikingly, we observe a similar trust advantage of the EU versus national government in non-Member States such as Canada (50 versus 49 in 2024), Japan (43 versus 32), the UK (41 versus 30), and the US (42 versus 40) [but not in Australia (41 versus 50) and India (69 versus 79)]. Clearly, the absolute and relative distrust of national governments is widespread in the 2020s (and before, for that matter). In the 2020 report, evidence is provided that an important root cause of the gap is inequality, which is also mirrored in a within-country divide between the rich versus the poor (see below much more on this).

Source: Subsequent annual Edelman Trust Barometer reports (https://www.edelman.com).

A further sign of distrust in public authorities is societal unrest, as manifested in massive protest movements. Indeed, emotions associated with economic uncertainty, or complacent anger, increase the likelihood that people collectively rise up against the authorities they blame for their declining economic circumstances. Hence, the resistance to change does increase, easily triggering revolt-like protest movements (Jasper, 2014). In Box 3, I briefly illustrate this "complacent anger triggers emotional protest" argument with a recent example that turned Dutch politics upside down.

Box 3:   Tractors blocking highways

In March 2023, the Netherlands were shaken up by another massive election victory, roughly half a year before the one of Geert Wilders' PVV. Back then, the surprise act was the newcomer BBB, which obtained the majority of seats in each of the Dutch twelve provinces (succeeding the extremist right-wing party FvD of Thierry Baudet, which was the big winner in 2019 – so much for electoral stability). BBB stands for BoerBurgerBeweging, or Farmer and Citizen Movement. The BBB was established in the midst of the so-called nitrogen crisis. Dutch agriculture is

so intensive, housing so many animals, that the continuing emission of nitrogen is harming nature to a degree that goes against the agreed-upon aim to increase the quality of Dutch nature, as decided about by earlier Dutch governments and as codified in agreements within the EU. This nitrogen issue is anything but new, with already farmer-government fights back in the 1990s, but the crisis truly spiraled out of control in the early 2020s. Due to the legally binding need to reduce nitrogen emissions, judges started to block new initiatives elsewhere in society, with the stagnation of building new houses as the headline-hitting example. In response, the government launched new anti-nitrogen emission policy measures that were against the sore leg of the agricultural sector.[78] Basically, ignoring many details, these measures implied that the animal stock had to be reduced radically in the coming decade or so, implying that many farmers would be pushed out of business.

Perhaps not surprisingly, large numbers of farmers shoot into action, blocking highways with parades of tractors. The mediagenic highlight was the forced entrance with a tractor through the front door of Groningen's medieval Provincial House. The BBB was the key political voice of this revolt, extending their rhetoric to blaming the ruling elite for ignoring the needs of those living outside the North-Holland – South-Holland – Utrecht triangle, enjoying their Big City lives in the Randstad (with the Dutch largest cities, particularly Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, and Utrecht, plus the many surrounding suburbs and smaller cities), killing the countryside's traditional lifestyle along the way. As an important by-product of their landslide victory in the provincial elections, BBB now is the largest fraction in the First Chamber (with 17 of this Chamber's 75 seats), making them a crucial partner in the right-wing cabinet that was formed in 2024, notwithstanding their disappointing seven seats in the Second Chamber (with 150 seats, in total). The Dutch tractor revolt was later very successfully mimicked by similar farmers' movement across Europe, with the European Commission quickly backing down

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78 The "tractor revolt" was financially backed by the agri-industrial complex, which is very large, rich, and influential in the Netherlands. This involves large MNEs both down and upstream in the value chain, such as animal food produces and diary companies. Of course, such massive protest movements are not restricted to economic issues, climate change and pro-Palestina demonstrations being other prominent examples.

As we know from the literature, if voters experience economic vulnerability and uncertainty, further strengthened by the type of revolts illustrated in Box 3, they tend to turn to populist anti-elite parties that (a) aggressively argue against the *status quo*, blaming the ruling elite for all misery (*aka* Donald Trump's "Washington's swamp"), and that (b) drastically reduce real-world complexity by suggesting very simple solutions for prevailing and sticky problems (such as, and this is standard, the "tsunami" of immigrants "stealing our jobs", "occupying our houses", "undermining our Welfare State", and, even more malicious, "raping our women", with modern right-wing populism adding Islamophobic and anti-woke rhetoric into their toxic mix). Paradoxically, by voting such parties into power, these very same voters harm their own economic circumstances. After all, many studies have provided plenty of evidence that populists ruling the country is bad news for the state of the economy, on average, and for the poor(er) in particular (see, *e.g.*, Bellodi, Morelli, & Vannoni, 2024). Why voters still keep returning to these very same populists for their economic rescue is therefore an intriguing issue that is beyond the scope of the current essay (but see below for a brief remark).

An interesting case involves the role of economic issues in the recent victory of Donald Trump in the US's November 2024 Presidential election. Many analysts claim that, notwithstanding the aggressive rhetoric regarding illegal immigration and democratic erosion, this 2024 campaign implied a return to the old days of "it's the economy, stupid" in the 1990s (see, *e.g.*, https://www.forbes.com/sites/stuartanderson/2024/11/12/bidens-mistakes-on-the-economy-help-explain-the-2024-election/). By the end of the day, for many voters, inflation was the key reason to vote for Donald Trump. It might be that Joe

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79 The French are known for their revolutionary mindset, too, a recent manifestation being what became known as the movement of the yellow vests *(gilets jaunes)*. The yellow vests movement is an example of a worrying trend from the perspective of democratic backsliding that is referred to as "the tyranny of minorities". This is a form of militant populism (Lem, 2020) in which minorities organize aggressive protests to force the elected government to change policies in their favor, implying that these minorities do not accept democratically legitimized policy-making outcomes (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2023). Their aggression includes bodily harm, blockades disrupting economic and social life, and damage to properties. Other examples of tyrannical minority movements are *QAnon* in the US and *Querdenker* in Germany. Note that oftentimes such revolts emerge without the backing of a formal organization. This is true for the *gilets jaunes*, but also for the anti-immigrant riots in the UK in August 2024. Regarding the latter, we clearly see all the usual mechanisms at play (such as far-right rhetoric, social media hysteria, and fake news), but without any centrally organized governance. Of course, this phenomenon is not the exclusive domain of the far right, other examples being Black Lives Matter, me-too, and the massive protests against Israel's brutalities in the Gaza Strip.

Biden's (and hence Kamala Harris's, as his Vice-President) macroeconomic statistics are great, but this is not what people experience when they buy bread, tank gasoline, or look for a house. Inflation's psychological effect is both deceptive and dominant. This is referred to as the sticker shock: people are confronted with high prices time and again, each time they buy something, although inflation might have cooled down substantially. The level effect dominates its change counterpart. Ironically, Donald Trump's Mercantilist tariff wall policies will give another boost to inflation, but this subtlety is difficult to grasp by the majority of the electorate, taking Trump's convincing rhetoric of "bringing back jobs to the US" for granted.

6.5 Polarizing inequality

What is further adding to the mix is the undeniable and seemingly unstoppable increase of inequality in many, if not all, liberal democracies in the Western world between the (very) rich and the (very) poor (Zucman, 2019). As said, the type of policies introduced in the context of the decade-long popularity of neo-liberalism have been claimed to fuel an increasing gap between the rich and the poor in the West. This regional disclaimer is important to make, because economic globalization is related to decreasing global inequality, at the aggregate, by boosting the economies in developing and emerging countries (Lakner *et al.*, 2022). Exhibit 4 makes clear that this conclusion is too simple, however, revealing no or only very slow-moving trends for different parts of the world in terms of the evolution of the official Gini index. To the extent that the West is witnessing an increasing gap between the poor and the rich since the very day of the launch of the neo-liberal revolution and the boost of economic globalization, this is not so much manifested in an evident upward trend of the official Gini index.

Exhibit 4: Gini index

The Gini index is the standard measure of inequality. Country-level comparative data are constructed and provided by, *e.g.*, the OECD and the World Bank. The OECD defines the Gini index on their website as follows: "The Gini coefficient is based on the comparison of cumulative proportions of the population against cumulative proportions of income they receive, and it ranges between 0 in the case of perfect equality and 1 in the case of perfect inequality" [OECD (2024), Income inequality (indicator), doi: 10.1787/459aa7f1-en (accessed on 16 May 2024)]. Below, I provide the OECD Gini index for a selection of 20 countries for 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022 (if available; these data are oftentimes not available, or only after a substantial time lag).

Countries	2019	2020	2021	2022
Australia	0.318			
Austria	0.274	0.272	0.281	
Belgium	0.262	0.248	0.256	
Canada	0.300	0.280	0.292	
Czechia	0.248	0.255	0.255	
Denmark	0.268			
Finland	0.273	0.265	0.273	
France	0.278	0.298		
Germany	0.296	0.303		
Hungary	0.286	0.280	0.278	
Ireland	0.293	0.282	0.291	
Italy	0.325	0.331	0.330	
Korea	0.339	0.331	0.333	
Mexico	0.420			
Netherlands	0.312	0.295	0.297	
Poland	0.268	0.265	0.261	
Spain	0.320	0.329	0.320	
Sweden	0.277	0.276	0.286	
UK	0.366	0.355	0.354	
US	0.295	0.377	0.375	0.395

The differences across countries are not very large. A clear exception involves the prototypical Anglo-Saxon countries, particularly the UK and the US, which stand out for their high inequality. As the OECD Gini index is only available over a lengthy time spell for a limited number of countries, I can only provide longitudinal income inequality information for a few illustrative cases. Only Canada has an OECD Gini index time series going back to the 1970s, with a Gini index evolving from 0.303 in 1976 via 0.289 in 1990 and 0.293 in 1995 to 0.291 in 2021 – still water indeed. The set of time series becomes more fully packed as of 2004. Since then, we can observe that this is true across the board: Not much is changing over time at all, with the country differences being extremely sticky.

Looking at Gini index times series, perhaps surprisingly, not that much seems to have changed over the last decades at all in terms of overall income inequality.

Besides the improbable conclusion that the skyrocketing inequality narrative is actually an urban myth, I see two potential reasons for this. The first reason is that the Gini index's longitudinal flatness is not so much driven by the poor becoming richer, but by the middle-income group becoming poorer (see, *e.g.*, Doner & Schneider, 2016), whilst the very rich sprint away from the large peloton in terms of richness (see, *e.g.*, Ederer, Mayerhofer, & Rehm, 2021). Both are very salient trends, as the middle-income group really feels under financial pressure in many countries, whereas we can all observe the very rich acting out their very richness. The second reason is that Exhibit 4 refers, basically, to inequality measured in terms of income. As Piketty (2014) has showed very convincingly, the gap between the rich and the poor is much wider in terms of assets (or capital). The likes of Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, Elon Musk, and Mark Zuckerberg (indeed, an almost exclusive male club; inclusivity, and not only regarding gender, is still a fairytale) are salient examples of this phenomenon,[80] which is further amplified by the extremely asymmetric tax treatment of capital versus labor, as explained in Box 4.

Box 4: Taxing labor, sparing capital – The case of dividend taxation

Taxing labor is much easier than taxing capital, for the fundamental reason that the former is firmly rooted in national soil, whilst the latter is internationally footloose. This has three important consequences, at least. First, to avoid capital outflow and to stimulate capital inflow, countries tend to keep their capital tax rates low. In practice, this triggers a race to the bottom, with many countries *de facto* functioning as tax heavens (including the Netherlands). Second, capital is an active and very successful lobbyist. By threatening to leave the country, this lobby succeeds to have policies introduced and maintained in their favor. Third, as a result, governments around the world must find other income sources by taxing non-transferrable activities, of which labor is a prominent – if not the most prominent – example. Hence, labor tax rates are relatively (and often absolutely)

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[80]   Durand (2024) and Varoufakis (2023) argue that this new elite reflects a new form of ultra-rich capitalism, which frequently is referred to as techno-feudalism (*cf.* Morozov, 2022). These are just three examples out of many analyses that critically discuss the current phase of capitalism or modernity. Above, I opted to take Beck's argument regarding radicalized or reflexive modernism as a representative and illuminating example from this large stream of literature. They all take their own perspective, but many have a Marxian flavor by developing the claim that the internal dynamic of capitalism or modernity produces its own demise. A related literature expands this line of Marxian reasoning by looking beyond the Eurocentric and Western perspective, taking the lens of colonialism, feminism, and the non-white (see, *e.g.*, Kaepernick *et al.*, 2023; Mills, 1997; Taylor, 2017).

high.[81] Indeed, the practice of capital taxation is rather complex, as there are many different types of capital. Two examples must suffice here to illustrate the impotency and ineffectiveness of (inter)national capital taxation policies. One, although James Tobin already suggested to introduce a tiny tax on capital transactions in 1971, after the collapse of the post-war Bretton Woods system, all attempts to do so failed, due to the need to do this collectively across the globe – a classic Prisoners' Dilemma. Two, nationally, a revealing example is the successful lobby of the CEOs of major Dutch multinational enterprises in 2018 against the government's plan to introduce a dividend tax, threatening to move headquarters to the UK in response. Ironically, notwithstanding the fact that the government decided to pack this plan, the headquarters of Shell (with "Royal Dutch" removed as a result) and Unilever were moved to the UK after all. Note that now, in 2025, Shell is rumored to seriously contemplate the idea to leave the UK for the US. In the end, all this explains why the inequality gap is particularly large in (capital) assets, and less so (but still very large) in (labor) income. With economic globalization, the lobbying power of the many large MNEs from across the world became even more effective and vicious, which provides part of the explanation for the seemingly unstoppable upward trend in asset inequality. Also, cases like these do figure prominently in the anti-elite and conspiracy theories that circulate widely in the echo chambers of extreme and radical-right (and left, for that matter) politicians and voters (*cf.* Box 5 for an example).

So, a hypothesis might be that although not much is happening in terms of a country's income distribution as captured by the official Gini index, this is very different if we include assets. The increasing gap between the (very) poor and the (very) rich along the asset dimension is very salient indeed, hitting media headlines on a very regular basis. For inequality data comprehensively including capital, the impressive World Inequality Database (WID), initiated by Thomas Piketty, is an excellent source (https://wid.world/methodology/#library-key-reports). In WID's 2022 report, they summarize the key finding: "The richest 10% of the global population currently takes 52% of global income, whereas the poorest half of the population earns 8.5% of it. On average, an individual from the top 10% of the global income distribution earns

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81   But internationally coordinated action does happen, now and then. For instance, 140 countries agreed to introduce a minimum profit tax rate of 15% on MNEs. And recently, the Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva proposed, during the G20, to introduce a global minimum asset tax rate on the very rich of 2%. With Donald Trump having returned to the White House in January 2025, the latter is unlikely to materialize into any concrete action, for the time being.

€87,200 (USD122,100) per year, whereas an individual from the poorest half of the global income distribution makes €2,800 (USD3,920) per year." (https://wid.world/document/world-inequality-report-2022/; see p. 10 of this report). Behind this global picture, we see a decreasing inequality gap across countries, but a sharply increasing one within countries, certainly also within the West. Actually, we are back to the level of within-country inequality of the early 1900s, with nations becoming richer but governments poorer, and with an immense concentration of capital in the hands of few individuals. Clearly, figures and trends like these can add to the explanation of the anti-elite sentiment.

Inequality fuels polarization (Iversen & Soskice, 2015), and polarization is a boost for the extreme and radical right (Harteveld, Mendoza, & Rooduijn, 2022). Evidence abounds that when voters blame economic globalization and neo-liberalism for their (relative) poverty compared to the increasingly rich, and indeed they do so frequently, they turn to populism (Gest, Reny, & Mayer, 2018; Powers & Rathbun, 2023). The anti-elitist rhetoric of populists resonates well with an antipathy of the poor(er) against the rich(er), as the latter are clearly part of the elite. Indeed, members of cabinet and parliament in Western democracies are largely recruited from the highly educated and the well-to-do[82] (as are technocrats; see above), whom progress and survive nicely within a rather closed political system (van de Wardt *et al.*, 2021).[83] With populists, the poor(er) share a distrust of (bureaucratic and) political elites. Hence, not surprisingly, empirical evidence clearly reveals a positive correlation between income inequality and populists' vote share (Stoetzer, Giesecke, & Klüver, 2023).

Pástor and Veronesi (2021) explain why this turn to populism is particularly salient in rich countries. This relates to the mechanism of complacent anger and the external force of economic globalization, because the main losers of this globalization process are the poor(er) in rich countries (plus, in many countries, a sizable part of the middle-income class). On top of this, populists cleverly blame the ruling elite for implementing crazy climate change policies (whilst climate change is said to be a hoax

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82   Strikingly, the often elitist and rich background of the populists themselves does not seem to matter at all, the elitist Geert Wilders and the (very) rich Donald Trump being cases in point.

83   Applying an ecological lens, van de Wardt *et al.* (2021) provide convincing evidence of the pro-elite metabolism of Western political parties. Although many of these parties seek to promote diversity in the composition of their candidate list before new elections, they find that those parliamentary members representing minorities are by far the most likely to exit parliament before the end of their term. This mechanism operates on the lower educated members of parliament as well. This is a clear example of the classic sociological process of homophily (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001), arguing that groups of *homo sapiens* tend to operate as cloning machines, attracting likes and removing dislikes (see, *e.g.*, Boone *et al.*, 2004).

anyway) at the expense of "the people", hence widening the wealth gap (Lomborg, 2020). Within the EU, the Green Deal is an extra attractive target, being constructed under the leadership of the social-democratic European Commissioner Frans Timmermans (now party leader of GroenLinks-PvdA in the Netherlands, which is a new alliance between greens and social-democrats).

Many voters believe in the populists claiming that they will redistribute wealth from the rich to the poor when in power. However, the evidence for this is lacking. For instance, for the Caribbean and Latin American region in the post-1970 period, Strobl *et al.* (2023) find that populist power and income redistribution are not positively associated at all. Still, the poor's support for (right-wing) populism is persistent (Berman, 2021). As Meléndez and Rovira Kaltwasser (2019) argue, the reason for this persistency is that the loyalty of the supporters of populism is not so much rooted in "hard" economic motives, but rather in a "soft" emotional and anti-elitist identity, which is closely attached with the populist "we serve the will of the people" rhetoric. I would argue that economic grievance, or complacent anger, forges a strong bond with a "we are the will of the people"-like cultural identity to produce a Siamese twin that is so difficult to disentangle that right-wing populism can benefit from persistent momentum (see Noury & Roland, 2020). As a result, the poor(er) labor class in the West changed side, moving from the left to the (far) right.

Note that a complication is that perspectives on the meaning of (in)equality vary substantially. To illustrate, I would like to briefly reflect upon two subtleties, which might both add to our understanding of the success of the far right among the poor. The first issue is that people, and hence voters, may not care that much (or even not at all) about the rich being very rich, and/or the rich becoming richer and richer. This may be due to an aspiration effect: The poor aspire to become part of the rich elite as well, and they admire the rich for being rich. The myth of "the American dream" is a persistent symbol that still influences people's view on wealth.[84] Certainly, this benefits Donald Trump, who is seen by many as an admirable rich man (although he is rich by heritage, not due to entrepreneurial success of his own making – quite the contrary). The second subtlety can be explained with reference to the well-established Rawlsian take on justice (see, *e.g.*, Nagel, 1973; Chapman, 1975). In his theory of justice, John Rawls (1971) argues that key is not so much to make the rich poorer, but the poor richer. This, in combination with trickle-down economics, provides an attractive offer that the (far) right can promise to their (potential) electorate.

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84 Statistics are not really spent on much of the electorate. So, the persistent macro-statistical fact that social mobility in the US is far from impressive does not have much of an impact in the public debate, let alone on voting behavior.

6.6 Bubbling isolation

The introduction of the smartphone radically disrupted society's culture and structure (see much more on this further down the line). Modern-day social media may function as echo chambers, with filter algorithms producing partisan "clubs" with only like-minded members (see, *e.g.*, Kitchens, Johnson, & Gray, 2020), or epistemological bubbles (*e.g.*, Nguyen, 2021), with those inside the bubble happily and uncritically producing, consuming, sharing, and inflating fake news and misinformation aligned with their worldview (see, *e.g.*, Rhodes, 2022). In fact, the social media are oftentimes a rather asocial medium indeed, with Elon Musk's *X* leading the pack. The example in Box 5 illustrates how such echo chambers may give birth to large and influential digital communities promoting ideas and opinions that, in all likelihood, would have been a very freaky and tiny niche in the old days of non-digital communication and media.

Box 5:   The spiritual yoga bubble

In many Western countries, including the Netherlands, the vaccination rate is decreasing rather rapidly and worryingly. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), when the vaccination rate drops below 90 per cent, protection of the population enters into the danger zone, with an increased likelihood of a disease spreading quickly, perhaps even producing an epidemic. The case of measles is illustrative – a disease that can be banned from the world very effectively by (massive) vaccination. In 2024, for the first time in decades, the Dutch vaccination rate dropped below 90 per cent for infants younger than two years old. As a result, local breakouts of the disease emerged, even with infant deaths as a consequence. Similarly, whooping cough was enjoying a worrying revival in the Spring of 2024. A key reason for this worrisome trend is the increasing spread of misinformation and fake news by so-called health influencers via the social media regarding the dangers of infecting an infant with a fluid containing what is seen as unnatural and sickening material. Further triggered by unrest during the corona crisis, what is referred to as the "spiritual yoga bubble" is becoming more and more influential. Packed in spiritual vagueness, influencers in these bubbles argue that vaccination is toxic and unnatural. Instead, an infant will emerge stronger after going through an infection as this is the natural way to strengthen

the immune system.[85] Well, regrettably, it is not.

And, again, populists benefit from all this much more than do their mainstream counterparts [*cf.* Groshek & Koc-Michalska's analysis (2017) of Trump's 2016 US Presidential campaign]. People with extreme or radical-right sympathies are much more likely to distrust the traditional media, which is seen as a key member of the ruling elitist class, and instead rely on their social media echo chambers for (mis) information and (fake) news (*cf.* Exhibit 3). So, ignoring objective facts, members in such echo chambers wallow in their shared conviction that reptiles rule the world, that the election is stolen, that Soros is behind everything bad, that vaccines inject controlling devices, that migrants are purposely attracted to replace the original population, *et cetera*. Basically, this bubbling isolation further strengthens the eroding effect of societal fragmentation, with the disappearance of large base of shared experiences across society (see, *e.g.*, Roy, 2024).

Screen time reflects the degree of potential exposure to the gratifying echo in social media chambers. Exhibit 5 reveals that daily screen time is very substantial across all countries in the world (*cf.* Exhibit 2's very similar data regarding social media use). To further muddy the waters, extreme or radical-right traditional media, particularly TV channels, strengthen the echoing noise. For instance, Fox News is addicted to passing along Trump-favoring "facts" and "news" (Peck, 2023).[86] All this makes liberal democracies particularly vulnerable for cyberattacks from foreign geo-political adversaries, such as China, Iran, and Russia, aimed at manipulating elections

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85   Another worrying example involves the many male chauvinist echo chambers in which many, particularly young and white, males are brainwashed into old-fashioned and aggressive machoism. Andrew Tate (and his brother) prominently illustrate this phenomenon. Similarly, Donald Trump's machoism is apparently appealing to a large part of the electorate, including young males, Latino's, and a large share of white females.

86   A recent entrant into the UK is GB News, which too actively promotes (very) conservative and (far) right views (https://www.gbnews.com). For instance, until he stepped up as the party leader of the Reform UK party (the successor of the Brexit Party), Nigel Farage presented his own talk show on this channel.

and public opinion (*e.g.*, Hansen & Lim, 2019), because the introduction of strict policing and ruling is in violation of the essential freedom of speech principle (*cf.* Pope, 2018). After all, any form of State censorship strongly goes against core principles of liberal democracies.

Exhibit 5: Screen time

Across the world, people spend more and more time looking at their screens – on their laptop, smartphone, or otherwise – with an average of 6 hours and 40 minutes per day in the third quarter of 2023, globally. For US citizens aged 18 or above, this figure is even 8 hours and 34 minutes. South Africa leads the ranking with an average daily screen time of 9 hours and 34 minutes. In other liberal democracies, this average tends to be between five and six hours per day. And ignoring the peak during the lockdown times of the COVID-19 pandemic,[87] average daily screen time is persistently high throughout the 2020s, with no sign of dropping – quite to the contrary. Much of screen time is devoted to browsing and gaming, as well as participating on social media. For instance, as reported by *The Independent* (https://www.independent.co.uk/advisor/vpn/screen-time-statistics), average daily mobile screen time via handheld devices was 2 hours and 52 minutes in the UK and 3 hours and 28 minutes in the US in 2023. Globally, this figure is 3 hours and 46 minutes, two minutes up compared to 2022.

Source: https://backlinko.com/screen-time-statistics.

The case of *Ongehoord Nederland* (ON) is very revealing in this context. ON is a Dutch broadcasting association that was established in 2022 to give voice to the far right on the three Dutch public TV channels. ON gives ample room to extreme and radical-right politicians and opinion-makers to spread misinformation and fake news (of course, they argue that this is a typical critique from "woke lefties") without any push-back (but encouragement instead), including conspiracy theories of the *Umvolkung* type, often doing so in a very aggressive and offensive tone. Although many complaints arrived in the inbox of the public broadcasting organization (NPO), the social-liberal Secretary of State[88] at the time decided not to ban ON from broadcasting with reference to the

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[87] Many analysts argue that the COVID-19 pandemic in tandem with associated lockdown and vaccination policies were a watershed, after which anti-elitist sentiments gained further momentum.

[88] This a literal translation of *staatssecretaris*, which is referred to a minister in many Anglo-Saxon countries such as the US. For whatever reason, particularly in the US, the same word can have a very different, even opposite, meaning than elsewhere. Another example is "liberal".

freedom of speech principle. So, on the basis of a very fundamental democratic rule of law guardrail, non-democratic voices are allowed to continue to air fact-free rhetoric through public media channels. Further evidence of the process of the normalization of far-right extremism is that the chairwoman of ON, Reinette Klever, is the Dutch new cabinet's minister of Foreign Trade and Development Aid.[89] In a hearing in the Second Chamber, she refused to back down on her persistent reference to the conspiracy theory of replacement.[90]

Note that this fragmentation element of modern-day social media makes matters worse even without the spread of fake news and misinformation. The days of shared sources of information across the whole of society are long gone. The isolating effect of social media bubbles is an enemy of any well-functioning democracy, with contact between and dialogue across different cleavages and groups in society being a *sine qua non* for the latter. Without shared narratives and without a common ground, different cleavages drift apart, each living in its own world with its own facts and its own stories that are so different from those of others that constructive dialogue requires a degree of mutual empathy that is very difficult to develop and maintain. Rather, reciprocal misunderstanding is the rule rather than the exception. If traditional media are blamed to be the enemy of the people, and if even obvious facts are regarded as the product of a fake news-producing elite, animosity will kill the appetite for compromise and understanding that is so badly needed to keep liberal democracies afloat. On Truth Social or *X*, the other side is aggressively attacked as the enemy of the people, with far-right politicians being the pyromaniacs in the theater of hatred.

[89]   Again, as a typical signpost of normalization of the far right, Reinette Klever is an outspoken supporter of the idea to reduce the national budget for development aid to zero.

[90]   But ON also nicely illustrates the fragility of any far-right partnership, with a FvD (Thierry Baudet) faction fighting against a PVV-oriented group (Geert Wilders).

Interwoven interweaving

Folding and weaving.
Back and forth.
Up and down.
Squared circle.
Circular square.
Neither right nor wrong.

Convoluted complexity
of becoming.
Radical reflexivity
of being.

Ecological dynamics
of coming and going.
Non-linear mathematics
of interweaving.

Outcome multiplicity.
of high dimensionality
Equifinality
and fractionality.

Uncountable millions.
Thousands of zillions.
Moving and changing.
Sending and framing.

Antecedents of causes.
Causes of pathways.
Time that pauses.
Time that stays.

Loops full of feedback.
Reciprocally reversed.

Track after track,
more or less versed.

Chaotic determinism.
Frequentist probabilism.
Bayesian updating.
Econometric estimating.

Polynomial nonlinearities.
Irregular frequencies.
Plateaus and thresholds.
Waves and folds.

Instability in flux.
Chaos the crux.
An iterative embrace.
Often without a face.

Knowing what to know.
Knowing the unknown.
Knowingly not knowing.
Meaningfully unknowing.

What is that became
movement to tame.
What became faded away,
went astray.

Streaming and flowing.
Back and forth.
Up and down.
Squared circle.
Circular square.
Right and wrong.

7 **Ecological Complexity**

7.1 Timeline

With (at least) three external forces and five internal mechanisms, we cannot but face ecological complexity right in its face. After all, Figure 1's three forces and five mechanisms are mutually interacting in and over time, as I already explicitly or implicitly signaled above by including quite a few cross-references across and among multiple forces and *ditto* mechanisms, plus many auxiliary arguments. In Box 6, I illustrate this with a remarkable example – *i.e.*, how the behavior of the (bureaucratic and) political elite can damage the judicial system to such an extent that normally silent judges start to speak out in public, hence revealing how democratic backsliding can result from one leg of the *Trias Politica* undermining the other.

Box 6:   How pushing the law can undermine the judicial system

The highest organizational authority in the Dutch judicial system is the *Raad voor de Rechtspraak* (RvdR) – or Council for the Judiciary, in English. In 2024, in their annual report, this RvdR sounded the alarm, and the RvdR's chairperson gave interviews in the traditional media to emphasize the urgency and seriousness of the Council's worries. This is very unusual indeed, as representatives of the judicial system, including judges, strongly believe that they should stay silent in public regarding what they think of the rule-making political elite, as forcefully implied by the *Trias Politica* notion. Apparently, the water is on their lips, to use a saying highly appropriate in a Dutch context, as they now state that the law-making political elite is derailing to such an extent that this is undermining the judicial leg in the *Trias Politica*, implying serious damage to the functioning of the rule of law. The RvdR's argument is the following. More and more, citizens and organizations turn to the judiciary to ask for a correction of the State, as the latter (a) does not behave according to its own laws and rules, and (b) is pushing new laws and rules beyond the boundaries codified in the Constitution and international agreements (signed by earlier Dutch governments).[91] The cases discussed in Boxes 1 and 3 are examples of this worrying phenomenon. Another prominent example is the ground-breaking ruling against Shell, with the verdict that this MNE is not doing enough to

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91   Ironically, the very same RvdR is the weakest spot in the defense of the judiciary against direct influence on this leg of the *Trias Politica* by politicians in power, as the RvdR is hierarchically part of the Dutch Ministry of Justice.

behave in line with the Paris agreement regarding constraining climate change.[92]

Far-right politicians take full opportunity of this to claim that "leftist" and non-elected judges act against "the will of the people", as represented by elected politicians. For instance, PVV leader Geert Wilders and other PVV members of parliament have the habit of referring the Dutch judiciary as politically biased, populated by "D66 judges" (D66 is a social-liberal left-centrist party) and engaging in political trials. This is a clear manifestation of liberal democracy's intrinsic tension between the majoritarian principle and that regarding the rule of law. The PR campaign of the Council's chairperson had no effect at all. Actually, and even more worrying, the new government is preparing for a series of clashes with the judiciary, having announced policies that are clearly against the law, and even against the Constitution. I would argue that much of this, certainly so by the PVV and perhaps also by the BBB, is done on purpose, for two reasons. One is that would the judiciary block any of the planned measures (*e.g.*, regarding asylum or nitrogen), then the PVV can use this in its blaming game, arguing that these "D66 judges" act against the "will of the people". The other is that doing so is a natural strategy through the lens of Geert Wilder's ambition to step into the footsteps of Victor Orbán to create an illiberal democracy – a xenophobic, nativist, and nationalist island inside or outside the EU. But this is my interpretation of the PVV's agenda, which might be off mark (but other PVV politicians do and say things fully in line with this interpretation as well).

In Figure 2, I unfold Figure 1 by organizing a few of the potential causalities among the different forces and mechanisms by putting them on a timeline, with arrows indicating the main (but far from only) causal channels. Of course, clearly, this cannot be but a very painful simplification, ignoring the plethora of other iterative feedback loops and other reciprocal causalities that I could have included. But already this simple visualization makes clear that the explanation of democratic erosion is multi-faceted, interactive, and non-linear – and hence is very complex and dynamic.
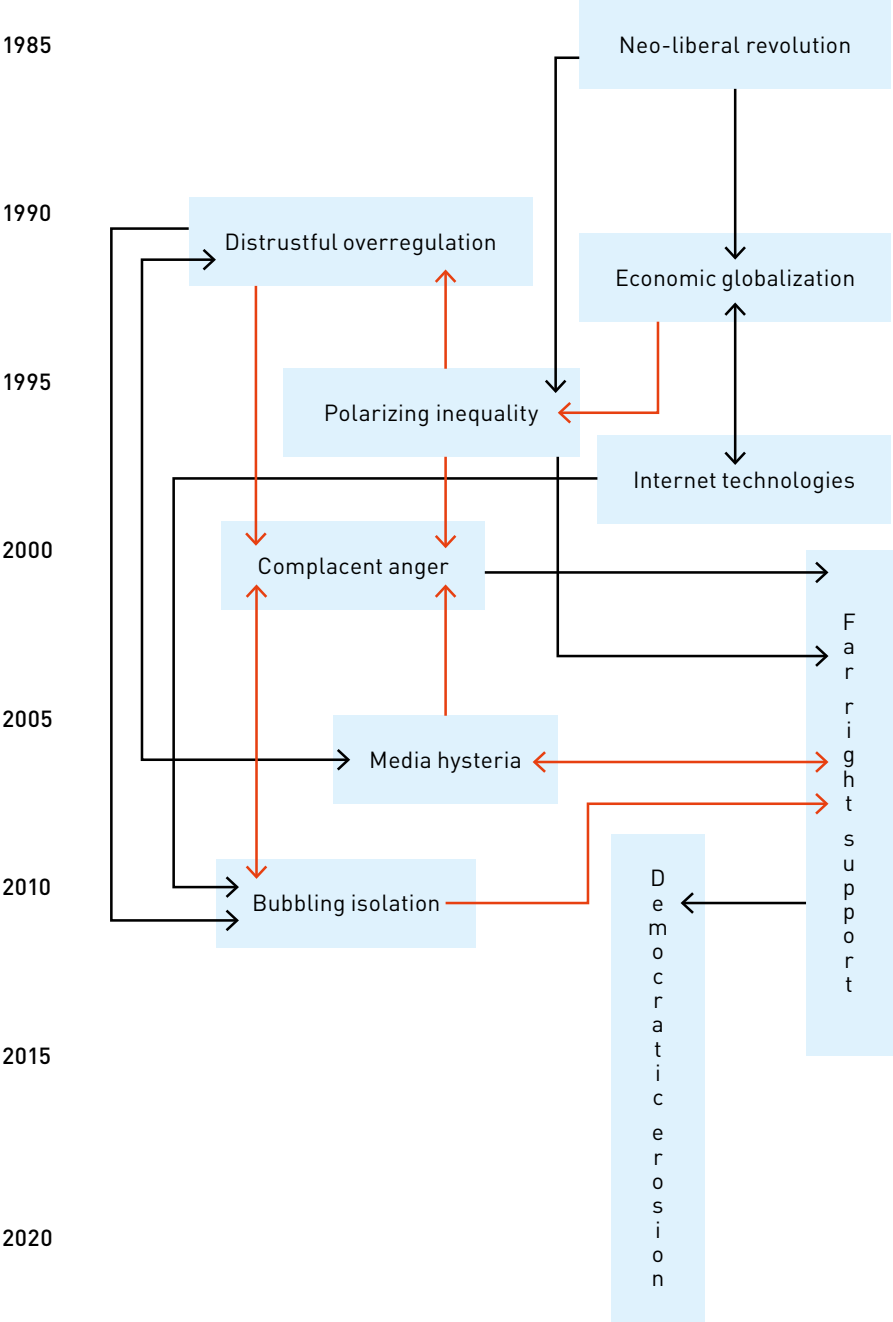
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92   In the appeal, the court retracted the earlier verdict of the lower court by arguing that they could not impose a precise target on an individual company such as Shell. However, as they confirmed the general obligation to act according to the Paris agreement, the door is open for many legal cases to come.

This is why I would argue that the ecological complexity lens is highly appropriate.[93] I will return to this below in greater detail, after first briefly reflecting on the timeline. Note that the location of a box in a specific year does not imply that this box's element stopped having an influence after that year – certainly not. For instance, the neo-liberal revolution evolved over about a quarter of a century, at least, only hitting a roadblock when the financial crisis came to an outburst in 2007 and beyond. And even then, the consequences of this revolution are still all over the place across the world.

What is clear immediately, is that Figure 2's visualization of my narrative is very chaotic indeed, with arrows drawn all over the place, back and forth, from left to right and *vice versa*, and up and down. And this still is a rather drastic simplification, as the precise nature of the linear or non-linear shapes of many relationships are ignored, as are the potentially very high-order moderation effects. But this is what it is: a chaotic pattern of multiple and multi-faceted causalities. And this is why I strongly believe that we need to invest seriously in developing an ecological complexity lens. Before I turn to briefly explaining what I do mean by that, and why I do believe that such a lens would be highly appropriate to further deepen our understanding of the processes that we still do experience today and that we are very likely to continue to experience in the foreseeable future, I first offer a snapshot reflection on Figure 2's timeline. In a way, by doing so, I provide an elevator pitch-like mini-history of this century's creeping process of democratic backsliding.

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93 For sure, as will become clear along the way, I am not suggesting that the lens I propose here is completely novel – it is not. In different disciplines, much exciting and intriguing work has been done and is ongoing that relates to the ecological and/or complexity angles that I argue are key to develop a deep understanding of processes of democratic backsliding. What I propose here is only novel, I tend to believe, in the sense of bringing together both angles in the context of a comprehensive perspective on these processes, suggesting an intricate web of interrelationships among many mechanisms.

Figure 2: Timeline of interacting forces

1985	Neo-liberal revolution
1990	Distrustful overregulation
1995	Polarizing inequality — Economic globalization
	Internet technologies
2000	Complacent anger
2005	Media hysteria — Far right support
2010	Bubbling isolation — Democratic erosion
2015	
2020	

The start of the sad process of today's democratic erosion is located in the 1980s, with the initiation of the so-called neo-liberal revolution by the UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and the US President Ronald Reagan.[94] The associated launch of an impressive policy program gave, on the one hand, a boost to economic globalization as a result of measures such as the deregulation of financial markets and the reduction of trade barriers. Within the EU, this globalization trend was embraced by developing a large internal market, (de)regulating the free flow of capital and labor, as well as that of products and services.[95] On the other hand, this program's "regulatory paradox" implies that this deregulation is inextricably bound up with technocratic regulation, the latter aimed at controlling and monitoring citizens and markets. This distrustful overregulation created complacent anger, particularly in combination with the polarizing inequality that was produced by neo-liberal policies within the rich Western liberal democracies. A large share of the complacently angry population retreated in isolating bubbles, turning to the extreme and radical right for their rescue. As Third Way politicians accommodated neo-liberal policies in their programs, these processes were mimicked in countries governed by left-wing politicians, such as Tony Blair in the UK, Bill Clinton in the US, Wim Kok in the Netherlands, and Gerhard

94   As with close to all terms, the discussion as to what the neo-liberal revolution (or evolution, to start with) entails exactly, will probably never be closed forever. What is important in the context of the current essay, however, is the economics associated with this (r)evolution. Part of that became known as supply-side economics (see, *e.g.*, Laffer, 1981; Lucas Jr, 1990), of which trickle-down economics (see, *e.g.*, Arndt, 1983; Watkins, 2014) is an extreme manifestation. Contrary to Keynesian economics, which was the mainstream in the West until the arrival of Ronald Reagan *cum suis*, supply-side economics is a modern revival of Say's Law, arguing that economic and fiscal policy should focus on supply (production), and not on demand (consumption), as new supply would 'automatically' attract new demand. In the extreme, the argument is that it is a good thing when the rich become richer and richer, as due to the trickling down of their richness throughout the economy, from top to bottom, society would greatly benefit as a whole, including the poor. For neither type of economics is there any empirical evidence, but still this argument is part of the rhetorical repertoire of ultra-conservatism, including Trumpism. Of course, this logic nicely aligns with their strong belief in a small State.

95   This is another source of the EU's regulatory hyperactivity, since the internal market can only function by launching rules to create standardization, or a "level playing field". This is a very technocratic process that feeds distrust against "Brussels", being accused of dancing to the tunes of industry and meddling with the private lives of citizens (see the above reflection on technocracy). The urban myth of the "bananas must be straight"-rule symbolizes this broad sentiment, warmly embraced by the far right.

Schröder in Germany.[96]

Due to the impressive progress of Internet technologies in the 2000s and 2010s, many processes were incited further. Retreating in bubbles is easier in the echo chambers of the social media. In interaction with the traditional media, the incidence and intensity of media hysteria hypes went up, frequently associated with derailing distrustful overregulation, further feeding the feeling of complacent anger. With one (alleged or real) immigration crisis after the other, spreading freely across Europe through the EU's internal market, nationalist and xenophobic rhetoric felt on fertile ground in many of these isolating bubbles, with populists not really getting qualms about spreading fake news and misinformation.[97] As mainstream parties responded by normalizing the extreme and radical right, copying their narratives and policies, and even forming cabinet coalitions with the far right, the structure of the political spectrum changed in the far right's favor. Since being conservative on either the cultural or the economic dimension (or both, of course) suffices to turn right, the *Zeitgeist* flipped toward an increasing popularity of the aggressiveness and simplicity of the extreme and radical-right discourse.[98] In the early 2010s, this already produced democratic backsliding and the erosion of the rule of law in East-European countries such as Hungary and Poland. In the late 2010s and early 2020s, this brought populists like Giorgia Meloni, Donald Trump, and Geert Wilders into power in the West, probably

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96   In France, President François Mitterand initially launched a very left-oriented social-economic program (involving, *e.g.*, nationalization of private enterprises). He found out the hard way that even back then economic globalization already put serious constraints on what a nation-state can do without being punished by the global financial world. Decades later, the UK Prime-Minister Liz Truss had a similar experience, which forced her out of office in just 42 days.

97   This is not to say that immigration does not come with many problems – it does (Koopmans, 2013). But rather than dealing with these problems directly and effectively, the simple anti-immigration narrative is oxygen for the far right. I will briefly reflect on this further down the line.

98   An excellent analysis of the erosion of the political discourse, rewarding aggressiveness and simplicity, in the Dutch context is Meeus (2023).

with (many) more to come.[99]

7.2 Ecology and complexity

My first argument is that an ecological lens is instrumental to really understand what is happening in liberal democracies across the world. An ecological or evolutionary perspective gives center stage to dynamic processes of metabolism, emphasizing Darwinian or Lamarckian survival-of-the-fittest battles.[100] An ecological lens is applied to a wide variety of social phenomena, including the emergence of organizational populations (*e.g.*, Ruef, 2000; Liu & van Witteloostuijn, 2020), the fate of public agencies (*e.g.*, Boin *et al.*, 2017; van Witteloostuijn *et al.*, 2018), the metabolism of top teams (Boone *et al.*, 2004; van de Wardt & van Witteloostuijn, 2021), the rise and fall of interest groups (*e.g.*, Hightower, 2024; Lowery & Gray, 1995), the growth of Islamic high school population (*e.g.*, Boone, Divarcı Çakmaklı, & van Witteloostuijn, 2018; Divarcı Çakmaklı, Boone, & van Witteloostuijn, 2017), and the evolution of rules (*e.g.*, van Witteloostuijn & de Jong, 2010; Kaufmann & van Witteloostuijn, 2018). Since about 15 years or so, jointly with excellent political scientists, I apply this ecological lens to analyze a variety of issues related to the evolution of political parties and party systems. Particularly, to date, we examined party density (Lowery *et al.*, 2010), issue space expansion (Lowery *et al.*, 2013), international mimicking (van de Wardt *et al.*, 2024), parliamentary exit (van de Wardt & van Witteloostuijn, 2021), and party system saturation (van de Wardt *et al.*, 2021).

Characteristic for this ecological lens is the systematic view of long-run dynamic processes of entry (coming) and exit (going), and decline (shrinking) and growth (expanding), many of the drivers of which are internal to the system at hand.

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99   Again, a statement like this might muddy the waters as to what makes the extreme right different from the radical right. For instance, can one really make a convincing case that Meloni and/or Trump is/are extreme right – *i.e.*, is/are willing to cross the boundaries between accepting the democratic rules of the game versus undermining these very rules to move toward (semi-)autocracy? For instance, some would argue that Meloni's roots in fascism and Trump's unwillingness to accept his electoral 2020 defeat (plus his role in the Capitol Hill riot) prove their extreme-right sentiments, whereas others would claim that this is misguided as Meloni explicitly distanced her party from fascism and since Trump did voluntarily leave the White House to make room for Biden, in the end. Clearly, this debate is still ongoing. With Donald Trump winning the November 2024 Presidential elections in the US, observing how his second term will evolve, is a litmus test for his extreme-rightist inclination. Although Trump claims that he does not know anything about the Project 2025 initiative (https://www.project2025.org), this does not bode well: Will the US's institutions be strong enough to keep a President with autocratic tendencies in check, backed by a full majority in the House and Senate (and a 6 to 3 conservative majority in the Constitutional Court)? The first months of his presidency gives no reason for optimism.

100   Donald Trump is the personification of this very survival-of-the-fittest attitude.

Above, many of my arguments have an ecological flavor, as will the below analysis of the extent to which long-run dynamics internal to the political system can (partly) explain democratic backsliding. In the ecological lens of political science (see the references above), large longitudinal datasets are created to study the metabolism of both party systems (particularly the entry of newcomers and exit of incumbents) and political parties (*ditto*, but then with a focus on membership and leadership), borrowing and adapting insights from the large literature on population or organizational ecology in sociology (see, *e.g.*, Hannan & Freeman, 1977, 1989). For instance, niche width theory argues that entry will decrease or increase with a downward or upward change in the niche's dimensionality (see, *e.g.*, Freeman & Hannan, 1983; García-Díaz, van Witteloostuijn, & Péli, 2008). Indeed, Lowery *et al.* (2013) provide evidence that adding issues to the political discourse is associated with new political party entry. In the context of the current essay, we see that the successful entry of far-right parties is linked to the increasing salience of new issues in political space, such as immigration and Islamophobia.

On top of this, and this is my second argument, understanding democratic backsliding requires seeing complexity right in the eye. Complexity theory[101] is certainly not unknown in economics (*e.g.*, Arthur, 2021), political science (*e.g.*, Cairney, 2012) and public management (*e.g.*, Eppel & Rhodes, 2018), and sociology (*e.g.*, Abbott, 1988). This complexity is manifested in the importance of non-linearities and higher-order interactions (see, *e.g.*, Bosma & van Witteloostuijn, 2024a). That is, many of the forces and mechanisms work together in non-linear and subtle ways, in and over time, to produce democratic backsliding outcomes. Non-linearities come in many different forms and shapes – in many more than just the hill and valley shapes that we are so used to in our traditional work. For instance, a threshold effect would imply that the correlation between X and Y is zero up until value m of X, to then suddenly jump to very negative or positive beyond this threshold value m. In the political world, such threshold effects abound [see Warwick (2005) for an example in the context of coalition

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101 To give credits to those earlier in history, I should acknowledge the contribution of cybernetics and systems theory, emphasizing the key role of similar mechanisms such as feedback loops and circular causalities.

formation].[102] For instance, only after the radical right reaches a certain percentage of the votes, and hence seats in parliament, will their impact spiral out of control due to the sudden response of mainstream parties in the form of policy narrative position mimicking (Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2020), with far-right normalization as a result. Similarly, in political science, we are used to thinking in terms of interaction or moderation effects, albeit limited to their two- or three-way form [*e.g.*, Sipma & Lubbers (2020) argue how unemployment and immigration may interact regionally to explain support for the radical right].

For example, with reference to Figure 2, economic globalization interacts with polarizing inequality to further increase complacent anger, which is reproduced in isolating bubbles – quite a mouthful four-way interaction indeed. Evidence abounds that different forces and mechanisms tend to work together to produce outcomes, a clear example being what is revealed by the survey measures regarding (dis)trust in the Edelman Trust Barometer (see Exhibit 3). Looking at these measures over the years, we observe that journalists and politicians are the least trusted, also in liberal democracies, being trapped in a mutual embrace that undermines trust in the system. In the 2023 report, for instance, trust in journalists and politicians across 27 countries are at the bottom of the trust ranking, with average scores of 47 and 41 [recall that the scale runs from 0 (complete distrust) to 100 (complete trust); by way of benchmark, scientists top the list with a score of 76].[103] This is just one example out of many illustrating how the set of different forces and mechanisms are part of a complex and moving web of reciprocal (and oftentimes non-linear) interrelationships.

To further put flesh to the bones of this rather abstract claim, I would like to briefly unravel two examples of complex ecological causal chains related to Figure 2, indicated with bold orange lines (I am Dutch, after all). Firstly, the rise of the far right does benefit from a threshold effect, a clear instance of a subtle non-linearity. An illustrative case involves the November 22 2023 national elections in the Netherlands, with a coalition formation and voter polling threshold effect. After the door for coalition

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102 Another example is chaos theory, as hyped in the 1980s and 1990s (see, *e.g.*, van Witteloostuijn & van Lier, 1990; Levy, 1994; Thietart & Forgues, 1995), of which the butterfly effect is a prominent manifestation. Here, the argument is that specific types of non-linearities are the root causes of deterministic chaos. In the social sciences, by and large, attention for chaotic non-linearities faded away (but not elsewhere, such as in climate science). Interestingly, my plea for applying computer simulation and machine learning may be instrumental in triggering a revival of chaos theory in the social sciences.

103 But in many circles, certainly among the far right, trust in science is under pressure as well, regarding any scientific finding to be just an opinion like any other (see, *e.g.*, Sturgis, Brunton-Smith, & Jackson, 2021).

formation with the far right was opened by the conservative-liberal mainstream party VVD, voters knew that the PVV had a credible executive potential. When during the election campaign, dominated by the anti-immigration rhetoric owned by the PVV, polling results in the final week before election day suggested a too-close-to-call race for election victory, the floodgates opened in the direction of the issue owner. Secondly, the four-way interaction of distrustful overregulation, economic globalization, polarizing inequality, and complacent anger, full of dynamic and subtle feedback loops, turned out to be flammable fuel of bubbling isolation, further facilitated by the social media with their echo chamber-promoting filtering algorithms. In a joint rat race game to the bottom, both journalists and politicians stoke fire in the pile of media hysteria incidents by actively using and responding to whatever emerged on their Twitter or *X* timelines, jumping on the bandwagon of extreme and radical-right narratives.

7.3 Computer simulation and machine learning

In all, we cannot but conclude that the toxic interaction between electoral volatility and party repositioning is harming our liberal democracies. This tandem does produce an interactive set of complex ecological processes that suggest an important research agenda. Taking an ecological lens and consulting Figure 2, my main argument here is that much of democratic erosion can be understood by carefully analyzing the long-term interaction between and interweaving of series of slow processes, but with sudden twists and turns and with different rhythms that change over time, whilst recognizing the crucial role of higher-order interaction channels in combination with non-linear feedback loops – really a mouthful of jargon, and a challenge indeed. Above (and below), quite a few examples of such ecological complexities are discussed, albeit oftentimes only briefly and non-comprehensively so. If we aspire to develop a comprehensive or holistic understanding of persistent democratic erosion, we must turn to another toolkit than natural language only. Also, taking traditional probabilistic statistics as our main empirical workhorse, which is standard across the social sciences, will not suffice.

Rather, I would argue that we have to turn to computer simulation to develop complex ecological theories, and conduct machine learning analyses to explain and explore complex ecological datasets (*cf.* Bosma & van Witteloostuijn, 2024b). Let me briefly illustrate why doing so is a promising way forward. Of course, this does not

imply that we should not use other research methods, such as rich case studies[104] and traditional regression analyses, in an orchestrated attempt to deepen our understanding of processes of democratic decline – absolutely not, because cumulative triangulation is key to produce progress in the context of any research program. However, my point is that computer simulation and machine learning are particularly promising methods in view of developing an ecological complexity perspective.

For one, the use of **computer simulation** is well-established in political science (Voinea, 2016), going back to the 1960s, at least (see, *e.g.*, Klahr, 1966). Particularly promising is agent-based modeling (see De Marchi & Page, 2014), spiced up with insights from the systems thinking tradition (see Armenia, Tsaples, & Franco, 2022). Appealing examples are Druckman, Jacobs, and Ostermeier (2004) on the manipulation of the issue agenda, Edmonds (2020) on how socio-cognitive dynamics influence the constructed beliefs guiding voting behavior, and Dornschneider-Elkink and Edmonds (2024) on State violence and political dissent. In agent-based simulation, individual agents' decision-making and behavior operate as interacting 'bots', in their interaction producing non-linear evolutionary processes that may or may not converge toward an equilibrium-like steady state (Garcìa-Dìaz, Zambrana-Cruz, & van Witteloostuijn, 2013). By playing with different parameter sets and conducting subsequent statistical analyses, multiple (and interacting) antecedents (*e.g.*, features of the agents or shocks to the system) can be linked to multiple consequences (*e.g.*, the fate of individual agents or the degree of stability of the process).

To illustrate how this could look like in the context of an ecological complexity analysis of democratic erosion, the following example must suffice here. The system is a country hosting voters (many) and political parties (few). The voter 'bots' are characterized by cultural and economic preferences on a left-right dimension, plus a voting decision rule. These preferences can be linked to the voter's position on the income ladder. Political party 'bots' feature a specific identity, reflected in their cultural and economic policy views, plus a strategic positioning decision-making rule. In elections, voters draft their support for political parties with a policy position closest to theirs, according to the standard proximity model of voting. To examine the impact of Gildron's (2022) asymmetry finding, different cultural versus economic dimensional

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104   Clearly, this essay fits within a positivist tradition. However, this does not imply that other epistemological perspectives, such as post-modernism, could not add complementary angles – they can. Bosma and van Witteloostuijn (2024a), for instance, argue how a "convoluted" perspective on complexity, inspired by the work of Gilles Deleuze, adds another layer to our understanding of the world. But to not increase this essay's inscrutability any further, I refrain from engaging with convoluted complexity or similar perspectives.

weight pairs can be simulated.[105] Moreover, sensitivity of election outcomes can be investigated by exposing the system to a shock in the form of an increase in polarizing inequality. This shock is modeled through a change in each voter's position on the income ladder, with a randomizing algorithm that is parameterized such that the country's income spread is hit by an upward jump. To introduce the impact of social media bubbles, voters are clustered in chambers in which chamber-specific (mis) information is echoed. Such (mis)information is only or mainly shared within a bubble, and not or much less so across bubbles, and generates within-bubble homogeneity regarding political preferences. In the simulation, another randomization algorithm now and then injects a subset of bubbles with fake news that either shifts the voters in that bubble to the right or changes the relative issue weights in favor of the cultural dimension. And so on and so forth. This example only reflects a slice of the full ecological complexity simulation model, but enough, I hope, to give a good impression of how this line of work could be developed further.

Additionally, in political science, the application of **machine learning** is becoming part of the standard toolkit (see, *e.g.*, the examples of Anastasopoulos & Bertelli, 2020; Bonica, 2018; Cranmer, 2019). This is a large step forward, because machine learning provides a powerful lens on data that is clearly complementary to that of classic frequentist statistics (Bosma & van Witteloostuijn, 2024b).[106] Specifically, in contrast to traditional probabilistic statistics, machine learning algorithms operate without assuming anything regarding the underlying data generation process.[107] Rather, using a very careful research process pipeline in order to avoid under- and

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105 Oftentimes, a simulation model is developed to mimic the empirical reality. A classic example is weather forecasting. In that case, a crucial step is the careful empirical calibration of all key parameters, frequently in combination with equally careful sensitivity analyses (see, *e.g.*, Zhan *et al.*, 2022).

106 Another toolkit for empirical analysis that is underused in many of the social sciences is the Bayesian branch of probabilistic statistics (see, *e.g.*, Certo *et al.*, 2024). Although this approach has the important advantage of systematically integrating accumulated empirical knowledge into the estimation machinery (through so-called priors), it also comes, similar to non-Bayesian probabilistic statistics, with the need to *a priori* impose specific assumptions regarding the 'true' underlying data generation process. Note that the machine learning toolkit does includes Bayesian algorithms, too, an example being Bayesian additive regression trees (BART; see Chipman, George, & McCulloch, 2010).

107 It is not that traditional probabilistic statistics is meaningless for the study of ecological complexity – certainly not. For instance, Parker and van Witteloostuijn (2010) suggest a way to handle higher-order interactions within the classic regression framework (see Dikova, van Witteloostuijn, & Parker, 2017, for an application). However, a great advantage of machine learning is that the need for *a priori* model specification plus a series of auxiliary assumptions can be avoided.

overfitting (by, *e.g.*, working with bootstrapping, bagging, cross-validation, and data splitting), machine learning algorithms such as gradient boosting machines, neural networks, and random forests learn iteratively from the data to identify prediction-optimizing patterns in these data. These patterns tend to feature (many) subtle non-linear relationships between and (many) high-order interactions among what are called 'features' (*i.e.*, variables) in machine learning. By applying the many metrics and visualizations in the tradition of Interpretable Machine Learning (IML), such as feature importance rankings, (individual conditional and partial) dependence plots, most frequent interactions, and SHAP values, machine learning's output produces transparent insight in the specifics of the actual, and not assumed, underlying data generation process, including an overview of all kinds of non-linear relationships and higher-order interactions among many features.[108]

In the context of the empirical study of democratic backsliding, the following example gives an idea of the opportunities. Machine learning algorithms are known for their capacity to handle Big Data well – Big in the sense of both millions and millions of observations, as well as many 'features' per observation (known as 'high dimensionality').[109] So, a first comprehensive study could combine as many different (multi-level) datasets, preferably at least one for each of the three external forces and the five mechanisms, as can be accessed through Open Science facilities, to subsequently conduct supervised[110] machine learning analyses, following the

108 More and more popular, also in political science, are so-called natural language-processing models (or NLP models; see, *e.g.*, Kang *et al.*, 2020; Németh, 2023; Oberski *et al.*, 2024). With such algorithms, text can be systematically explored and analyzed, with (bags of) words being the unit of analysis. A well-known example is topic modeling (see, *e.g.*, Haans & van Witteloostuijn, 2019; Walker *et al.*, 2019). These language-processing algorithms are the drivers of modern generative AI tools. Clearly, NLP techniques can be very fruitfully applied in the context of the study of democratic backsliding – for instance, by adding extra features to Big Data on the basis of the NLP-analysis of political party manifestos and parliamentary speeches. However, they are an ad-on, as my key argument here is a plea for using machine learning as an alternative (non-probabilistic, but algorithmic) approach to data analysis (Kolkman, Lee, & van Witteloostuijn, 2024).

109 Although an urban myth still circulates in the literature that suggests (or rather, claims) otherwise, note that machine leaning can handle "Small Data" very well, too (see, *e.g.*, Bosma & van Witteloostuijn, 2024b). Of course, as any quantitative empirical technique, power will be an issue if the sample size drops too much, but still machine learning can meaningfully engage in pattern-seeking in rather small datasets with not so many variables.

110 Supervised machine learning works with an outcome or target variable, similar to a dependent variable in traditional statistics; unsupervised machine learning does not, simply looking for any structure in the data, akin to clustering techniques in frequentist statistics (see, *e.g.*, Zaadnoordijk, Besold, & Cusack, 2022).

common careful research process pipeline, with far-right vote share as the target (*i.e.*, dependent variable, in classic statistics terminology). Such an analysis can be conducted for pooled data across a series of countries (then, country is one of the features), as well as per country. The output can be examined with the support of IML metrics and visualizations. For example, a random forest will produce a feature importance ranking associated with, per feature, a list of most frequent interactions. The latter IML metric indicates the other features with which the focal feature works together[111] to increase the algorithm's predictive accuracy. For instance, suppose that social media use tops the feature importance ranking, with the assets-inclusive Gini index, distrust in government, and liberal-conservative position change (to the right) listed as the most frequent interactions. This would suggest that social media use is key in explaining (or, in machine learning terminology, predicting) the far-right vote share, in interaction with bubbling isolation, polarizing inequality, and far-right normalization. And so on and so forth. Again, this example is only meant to give an idea of what can be done by applying machine learning in the context of our search for a comprehensive and deep understanding of the process of democratic backsliding. Evidently, exciting future work is waiting around the corner.

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111 What "works together" means exactly, is not so clear in machine learning (*e.g.*, mediation or moderation?). Kolkman *et al.* (2024) suggest to combine machine learning (algorithmically exploring first) with traditional regression (parametrically testing next) to come closer to what this meaning might be.

Political suicide

Downsian moves
like ballet-like dancing
along a line
from right to left
or left to right
with a center
to pass from one side
to the other
to mimic
or to leapfrog,
to converge
or to diverge,
to conform
or to deviate.

Looking at the audience
and seeing where
they move to,
and where
they stay
in what numbers
to then follow
in their footsteps
like sheep
in a row
in the hope
of getting
their applause
and appraisal.

Dancing the tango
artificially
not caring
about authenticity
but in search

of short-run gratification
by saying
what they
want to hear,
by promising
what they say
they want,
by mirroring
their wishes.

Losing credibility
by signaling fluidity,
by accepting the unacceptable,
by normalizing the abnormal,
by undermining trust,
by coopting the non-cooptable,
by mimicking rudeness,
by copying hardness,
by eroding authenticity.
By adopting aggressiveness,
by forming a coalition,
by justifying wrongdoing,
hence by committing suicide.

8 Can Genie Be Put Back in the Bottle?

8.1 Reversal of neo-liberal mistakes

In response to the complex environment and the difficulty to maintain democratic resilience, in a modern-day world full of dynamic interplay and fundamental uncertainty, voters' electoral volatility and parties' strategic sensitivity jointly create an extra layer of complex dynamics on top of what I already introduced above. Along the way, this dynamic interaction created space for the entry and growth of newcomers, including niche, extreme, radical, and single-issue parties. Particularly the entry and rise of extreme and radical-right parties implies fundamental change (Bischof & Wagner, 2019). In the 1990s, such parties were in by far the majority of liberal democracies either non-existent or marginally small. This changed drastically in the early 2000s until today. Given this, can Genie be put back in the bottle? That is, can democratic backsliding be reversed? And if so, how can this be done exactly?

The answer to this difficult question is multi-faceted. A large set of potential way-outs involves forces largely rooted outside of the internal dynamics within the political system (but see above and below), a few of the key ones extensively discussed above, such as the neo-liberal revolution and increasing inequality. Indeed, a reversal of the associated neo-liberal policies[112] might succeed in winning back voters to the center and left (Bordignon, Franzoni, & Gamalerio, 2024). To discuss what such a policy reversal might entail, is too much for an essay that is supposed to stay within the usual limits of the research paper format (admittingly, here I already cannot but agree that I failed dramatically and remarkably; but this would be even too much for an essay-turned-into-a-book). However, to give an idea, a few examples are provided in Box 7, organized along the five mechanisms discussed above.

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112 Note that any policy reversal, specifically those of the drastic or radical type, is very hard to realize, given vested interests and cemented positions. The example of Brexit illustrates this point. The UK's new Labour government explicitly announced that they do not intend to seek re-entry into the EU, not even in the current circumstances in which a majority of the British people regret the exit, in which the UK economy is persistently underperforming for close to two decades by now, and in which Trumpism quickly transforms into "the enemy from within" among the world's liberal democracies.

Box 7: Policy reversal

The neo-liberal revolution might be history by now, but its consequences are not. As argued in the main text, this revolution is likely to be one of the root causes of the current process of democratic backsliding, together with economic globalization and the rise of the Internet. Backtracking these three external forces to introduce measures to undo them is simply (close to) impossible.[113] [114] However, this is different, at least in part, with the five mechanisms fueled by this set of three external forces.[115] Below, I give one or two examples per mechanism to illustrate what this policy reversal might entail.

1. **Distrustful overregulation**. On paper, the easy way to correct distrustful overregulation is to engage in trustful deregulation. Quantitively, the key issue is to substantially reduce the current rule stock. This is easier said than done, as is clear from one failed program to reduce administrative burden after the other. An option might be to introduce one new rule: Anyone, in parliament or government, suggesting a new rule must also identify two rules that can be scrapped. Qualitatively, the smaller rule stock should start from the assumption of trust rather than distrust. Hence, the overregulation generated by a distrustful State should be scaled down substantially.

2. **Media hysteria.** Too often, the media are a firebrand. By and large, in a free society such as a liberal democracy, not too much can and should be done to constrain the independent media. Two measures might help to dampen the damaging media hysteria effect, though. One is to codify (perhaps even in the Constitution; see more on this in Box 8) that maintaining and safeguarding independent public media is a governmental task, implying zero or very limited political involvement and maintaining a public media system. The other is to introduce an obligatory period of media silence of

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113 This is why I decided to classify this set of forces as external" to begin with.

114 This is not unconditionally true, of course. Removing the Internet from the world altogether is indeed close to impossible, but heavily regulating the Internet is not (see, *e.g.*, the very restrictive practices in China and Russia). Similarly, reducing economic globalization to zero is indeed close to impossible, but severely constraining international trade is not (see, *e.g.*, the revival of Mercantilism and international trade wars). And clearly, much measures inspired by neo-liberalism can, in theory, be reversed relatively easily (but this is severely constrained by responses in the world of international finance).

115 Of course, much more can be done on top of and beyond these five examples. For instance, technocratic overshooting might be reversed to repair the democratic deficit.

at least a month before election day, including a ban on polling.

3. **Complacent anger.** Much (complacent) anger among large groups within society has to do with increasing economic insecurity in combination with a retreating State. Economic insecurity can be reduced by (re-)introducing or (re-)strengthening social security policies. The distance between the State and the population can be decreased by throwing many of the NPM policies out of the window, re-inventing government with a human face.

4. **Polarizing inequality.** Inequality should be reduced. This requires a major overhaul of the extant tax systems across many countries. Not only must the tax rate for the rich(er) be increased and that for the poor(er) be reduced, but also should measures promoting asset inequality reduction be part of the package. With capital being extremely mobile internationally, cross-country coordination would be ideal (at least within the EU), which includes tackling tax heavens, as well as the introduction of a Tobin tax on capital transactions.

5. **Bubbling isolation.** Social media are by now widely recognized as a threat to democracy, when left unregulated and fully in the hands of profit-maximizing commercial enterprises. Regulation is needed, as already recognized in both the EU and the US,[116] but finding a balance between State control, on the one hand, and freedom of speech (an essential feature of a liberal democracy), on the other hand, is anything but easy. Part of the solution is to codify in law what social media have to do in order to avoid the spread of damaging misinformation and fake news. The other part is strict monitoring and enforcement by authorities, including a daunting penalty system.

The above are only examples. My general argument is that, to the extent possible, a policy reversal weakening the five mechanisms will contribute to slowing down, stopping or even reversing the process of democratic backsliding. Indeed, as the neo-liberal revolution was essentially liberal-conservative and right-wing in nature, any policy reversal is likely to be leftist, on average. In all likelihood, however, this will not be enough. This is why I speculate in the main text as to what else might be done on top of this.

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116 With Donald Trump back in the White House, a major backlash will spread across the world, with Big Tech prominently figuring in his thinking and entourage.

8.2 Political endogeneity

Rather interestingly, quite a few other reasons relate to the internal dynamic within the political system. Being self-produced, they may suggest a way to put Genie back into the bottle, hence stopping or reversing the process of democratic backsliding. One internal dynamic involves the strategic positioning in electoral space by mainstream parties. This is the classic Downsian spatial argument (Downs, 1957), which is frequently put forward in different forms and shapes in the political science literature. For instance, evidence suggests that mainstream parties' tendency to converge around the center of the electoral space to attract the median voter opened up room in the electoral tails for entry of extreme and radical parties (*e.g.*, Spoon & Klüver, 2019). In an attempt to respond to the structural trend of dealignment, with drastically reduced ideological voter loyalty, political parties started to adjust their policy positions when they believe that citizens are doing so (Dassonneville, 2018). And because the right-wing side of the electoral space is growing and the traditional peak is shrinking, due to the fact that a voter only tends to draft a leftist vote when s/he is left wing on both cultural and economic issues (Gildron, 2022), this mainstream convergence was specifically beneficial for far-right parties.[117] On top of this, the dynamics of issue expansion – immigration and Islamophobia being prominent examples – opened up space for successful entry of far-right newcomers (see, *e.g.*, Garcìa-Dìaz *et al.*, 2013; Lowery *et al.*, 2013), followed by policy accommodation by centrist parties.[118] Regarding ways to put Genie back into the bottle, this suggests two potentially effective (but far from easy) remedies against the trend of democratic erosion.

The first route involves, again, political science's classic spatial theory. Perhaps, mainstream parties can start to diverge, backtracking from their earlier mistake, by moving away from the center, correcting the earlier convergence trend. However, this is very difficult, as voters prefer the original over the copycat in the case of divergence overshooting. This is one of the main reasons as to why the Dutch elections of November 22 2023 ended up in a large victory for Geert Wilders' PVV, as briefly discussed in Box 2. Indeed, we see this happening across many (liberal) democracies (and in the context of the EU elections, for that matter), with centrist parties starting to adopt the rhetoric that so successfully attracted voters to far-right parties. What

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117 We have an asymmetry here, as reversing this location strategy in an attempt to push far-right parties out is very unlikely to be effective. Now they are in, pushing them out will be anything but easy.

118 For sure, liberal democracies have seen many left-wing entries as well, a prominent example being a plethora of Green parties. However, by and large, these newcomers are not a direct threat to democratic resilience, although they might contribute indirectly to democratic backsliding by adding to polarization.

further accelerates the latter process is international mimicking behavior,[119] as the evidence is that parties learn from the successes of like-minded parties abroad (van de Wardt *et al.*, 2024). An interesting case is Poland, where we have seen a turn back to the center in 2023, albeit not in the form of a landslide victory. After all, PiS is still very large and influential, with still a PiS-loyalist as Polish President, who likes to veto whatever the Tusk government comes up with. Clearly, repairing the harm done to the liberal democracy whilst respecting the rule of law will be anything but an easy ride. And certainly, this first route is bumpier due to what I will discuss next in the context of the second route.

The second route relates to the asymmetric structure of mass attitudes in favor of the right. As Gildron (2022, p. 146) summarizes this argument, "it is enough to be conservative on one issue to turn right." As summarized above, analyzing survey data of ten West-European countries from the European Values Study, he provides convincing evidence that precisely this has happened across elections in the 1990-2017 period. There is absolutely no reason to expect that this has changed post-2017. Apparently, in general, when a voter favors a conservative view on either cultural or economic issues, this is sufficient to prefer the right. Here, Gildron distinguished market cosmopolitans (culturally progressive and economically conservative) from welfare chauvinists (culturally conservative and economically progressive). The question is how centrist or leftist parties can win back this pair of growing cleavages in many liberal democracies. This, too, will not be easy because many far-right parties cleverly add elements of progressive social-economic policies in their strategic mix.[120] An option is to mimic the Danish social-democrats, which successfully added cultural conservatism to their progressive social-economic policy set.

So, both routes imply an uphill battle: Genie is difficult to catch, let alone to be pushed back into the bottle. However, political polarization does and will harm society, by both stimulating cultural hatred and by damaging the economy. Here, political parties bear an important responsibility, as by fueling this polarization they can be blamed, at least in part, for this tragic development. However, regrettably, too many

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119   An example is the many non-US politicians who explicitly refer to Donald Trump as their source of inspiration (*e.g.*, Argentina's Javier Milei and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro).

120   This is what Trumpism, at least rhetorically, is doing very effectively, appealing to the lower class of hardworking Americans whilst simultaneously pampering the ultra-rich.

parties do not seem to care.[121] Actually, too many parties benefit from this increasing polarization, and actively promote this splitting of society. And many of these parties are precisely the ones that seek to undermine the liberal democracy. So, hoping that these political parties will contribute to the solution would be hopelessly naïve. However, other parties are different; they seem not to realize (or they do, but feel trapped in the polarization cage) that their own behavior is contributing to democratic backsliding. Moral and Best (2023) analyze aggregated survey data from 174 elections in 19 democracies from 1971 to 2019, and provide evidence that "citizen polarization follows party polarization" (p. 229), and not so much the other way around. Hence, as a first step, centrist and left-wing parties should perhaps stop fueling this trend toward further polarization by moderating their discourse, irrespective of their own location in electoral space. This relates to the wicked brutalization issue briefly discussed above. What liberal democracies certainly need to realize to boost their democratic resilience, is that de-brutalization is essential.

Interestingly, there are also voices of optimism. Although I cannot do full justice to these voices, I like to briefly reflect on two examples to add nuance to what I said so far. The first is Mudde (2016). He argues that the problem is not so much the far right, but rather the center, as discussed above, too.[122] Basically, the argument is that would center (and left-wing) parties have taken the worries of the electorate seriously, and would they have been able to come up with credible responses, voters would not have felt the need to turn to the (far) right (I rather extensively return to this issue below). I would argue that this may have been a plausible view back in the early 2010s, but not anymore, given the rise of the far right across liberal democracies, including blatant attempts to undermine the rule of law (but see more on this further down the line as well).

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121   Or more precisely, too many politicians do not seem to care. After all, political parties are composed of people. Without people, they cannot have any meaningful agency. The example of partisan behavior in the US Republican Party illustrates this observation, with many prominent and not-so-prominent Republican politicians backing Donald Trump, time and again, irrespective of the immorality of what he does or says.

122   Interestingly, the (far) right persistently blames the left for everything they argue went wrong, even when the left was not in the position to really have much of an impact at all. For instance, Geert Wilders aggressively and consistently blames political parties like the greens (GroenLinks) and the social-democrats (PvdA) for everything that goes wrong in society, whilst the former has never been part of any Dutch national government at all, and the latter not since 2012. The PVV's electorate seems to happily buy this reproach, however distant from reality this might be. We are living in a world quite similar to Alice's Wonderland.

Still, Mudde may well be right, but in a different way. Indeed, a few critical moves of the political center may well have been a gift for the far right – extreme or radical. As hinted at above, two stand out, as far as I am concerned. First, particularly many center-right parties accommodated specific policies and views of the far right, a prominent example being the discourse regarding immigration, generally, and asylum-seekers, particularly. This normalized these policies and views, directing the electorate to the original. Second, quite a few center-right parties have been willing to either form a government coalition with the far right or to accept their parliamentary tolerating support, with the same normalization effect as a compromise. Neither of these policies succeeded in stopping the erosion of the political center. Hence, hopefully, these centrist parties learn from this disappointing experience, and return to the position where they belong, and where their authenticity is more likely to be believed by the electorate.

The second example of a hopeful voice is Rovny (2023). He expresses the optimistic view that democracies with active and politically mobilized ethnic minorities are less likely to experience democratic backsliding. Regrettably, witnessing what is happening in Western Europe and the US, I have a hard time sharing his optimism. In many Western European countries, large ethnic minorities are a persistent and large cleavage in society now for decades, oftentimes due to a colonial heritage and/or labor emigration in the 1960s and 1970s, strengthened by low(er) birth rates among the majority in combination with further emigration in the decades after the establishment of the EU's internal market. For instance, in the Netherlands, the large Moroccan and Turkish minorities established their own political party, called DENK ("THINK"), in 2015 as a split from the social-democratic PvdA. Notwithstanding the option to vote for DENK (and, since 2016, BIJ1), the PVV is by far the largest fraction now in the Second Chamber (with 37 seats), much larger than DENK (3 seats) and BIJ1 (0 seats). Here, the Netherlands is not unique, as a successful mobilization of ethnic minorities by establishing tailor-made parties has not really been successful anywhere in Western liberal democracies, as far as I know.

The above hints at a deeper problem: With many liberal democracies featuring sharply increasing (specifically ethnic) heterogeneity, organizing nation-wide solidarity becomes more difficult. This is a macro variant of the micro-level in-group versus out-group theory. From zillions of studies in the behavioral economics and social psychology traditions, we know that people are less willing to contribute to a public good the more dissimilar the others are who will benefit from this act of solidarity (see, *e.g.*, Brewer,1999; Levin, van Laar, & Sidanius, 2003; Wang, Heine, & van Witteloostuijn, 2023). This mechanism is well-known in political science as well (see,

e.g., Amira, Wright, & Goya-Tocchetto, 2021; Jardina, 2021). The so-called pillarization of the 1950s and 1960s crumbled in the 1970s and beyond, due to secularization in combination with immigration. This not only resulted in dealignment, and hence reduced ideological voter loyalty, but also undermined the support base within society for the cross-group solidarity that is so inextricably bound up with the Welfare State. Indeed, the evidence is that the Welfare State is less developed in countries featuring high population heterogeneity (see, *e.g.*, Hjerm & Schnabel, 2012; Koopmans, 2010). So, part of the weakening of the liberal-democratic Welfare State, and hence increasing complacent anger and income inequality, might be an indirect consequence of increasing population heterogeneity in many liberal democracies.

In Figure 3, by way of summary of the above, I draft another set of arrows and boxes that can be added to Figure 2's simplified visualization of the ecological complexity perspective on the creeping process of democratic backsliding. By doing so, I put another layer of complexity on top of my argument by emphasizing the role of what may be referred to as the political endogeneity effect, reflecting the impact of the internal party-voter dynamic within the political system of liberal democracies. Basically, the ad-on complexity involves interweaving Figure 3's arrows and boxes into Figure 2's scheme of (inter)relationships. For instance, economic globalization, including European integration, gave a powerful boost to immigration, polarizing inequality is a key element of societal heterogeneity (and distrust in government), and media hysteria increases political parties' strategic sensitivity – quite a toxic mix indeed.

This closes the ecological complexity circle indeed, at least in the context of this book-sized essay (but more than enough to do in future work), making escaping from the associated process of democratic backsliding even more difficult. I briefly return to this issue in my afterword, adding hope to this pessimistic conclusion.

Figure 3: The political endogeneity effect
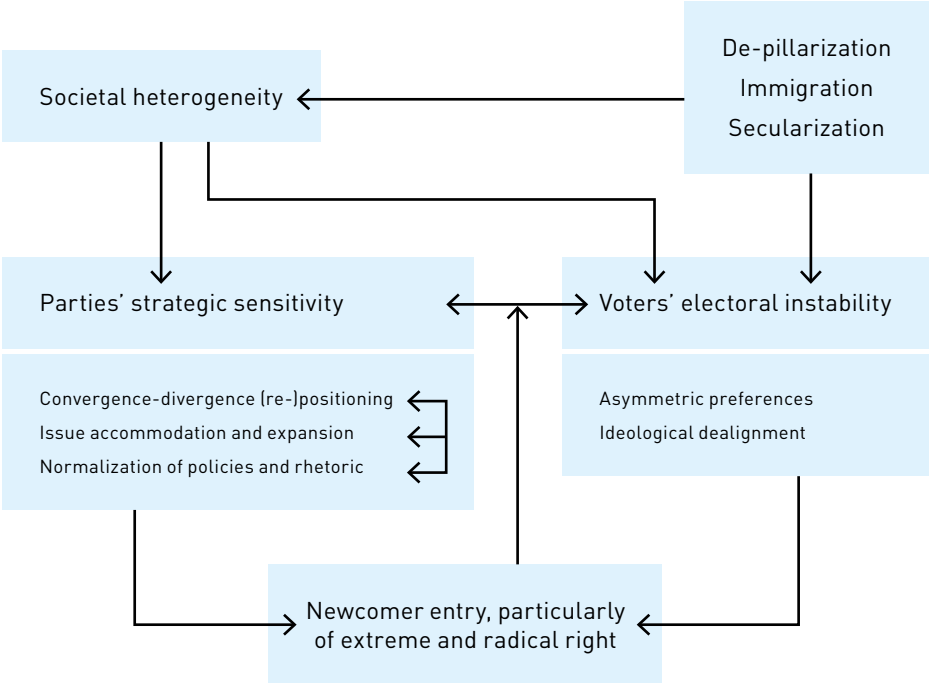
Reflection 6: Image of humanity

Since forever, the undercurrent view of mankind or humanity, or the human condition, can be negative and pessimistic, or positive and optimistic. Traditionally, the former was the dominant position of the right, and the latter of the left. Conservatives considered the *homo sapiens* to be bad, in essence, and progressives believed they were good, in their core. This is a strawman categorization, of course, but still. But how is this in the modern-day-and-age world of the rise of the far right? Is there any "philosophy of mankind" or of the "human condition" that can be clearly associated with the far right? Generally speaking, in line with their aggressive anti-elitism, the far right cannot be accused of over-intellectualism. This is not to say that far-right populists are not inspired by intellectual pieces of work – they are. Examples of such far-right intellectual "heroes" are Albert Camus and Carl Schmitt. But that said, compared to other political families, the far right's intellectual heritage is rather thin. Reading this type of literature, listening to what modern populists have to say, and absorbing the rambling prose

in their manifestos, I fail to trace much that can be categorized as positive. Fun, humor, joy, and love are not words that I would easily associate with the far right. It is all rather grim, with much doom and gloom. The apocalypse is waiting around the corner; the world is being destroyed by woke lefties, full of Communists and socialists. It is all very unloving; it is all full of hatred.[123] Fear rules, and hope takes the nasty character of promising to destroy the enemy (of which there are many). The Christian-Jewish culture (whatever that might be, exactly) is in decline, hordes of Muslims are ready to flood into our countries (replacing "our people"), the ruling elite is a woke-leftist corrupt clan actively trying to destroy our civilization, and many more troubles are argued to spoil the lives of "the people". And "the people" is a small group of cultural and ethnic lookalikes.[124] All other people not belonging to our "people" are enemies, waiting in the wings to attack, and to destroy our traditional way of life. Clearly, what the far right radiates is not very cheerful. But still, for reasons I discuss in this book-length essay, many voters find such negativity attractive after all.

123 Immediately after his victory, Donald Trump started to appoint far-right loyalists, one being even more aggressive and radical than the other. For instance, his initial nominee for the Department of Justice Matt Gaetz is known for his excessive hate speech, in which he brutally dehumanizes what he sees as his enemies. Even many Republicans were shocked by this nomination. He was supposed to become Donald Trump's puppet at the helm of the judiciary world to purify the latter of woke lefties, and amputating this leg of the *Trias Politica* (see Project 2025 on this as well). Although Matt Gaetz had to withdraw his nomination after too much controversies, his nominee successor Pam Bondi is equally loyal to Trump. Clearly, the US's democratic checks and balances will be seriously tested indeed. The fact that the Republican Party holds the majority in both the House and Senate for about close to two years with mid-term elections in November 2026 to come does not bode well, as bravery is needed to oppose Donald Trump, with his preference for revenge and his strategy of public repudiation.

124 This doom and gloom are entering my university's campus, too. The far right is active in the form of a new student movement, slowly gaining seats in the university's student council. To give an idea of what this implies, the following example is revealing. A far-right student asked to have a poster printed by the university's reproduction office that advertised the following "poem": *Geen gekanker // Nederland moet // blanker* (in literal translation: "No complaining // The Netherlands has to be // whiter". After approaching him with the question as to why he thought this was a good idea, he apologized, claiming it was all meant as a joke. So, apparently, even the jokes are gloomy and unloving.

Puzzling bricolage

A puzzle with more
than thousand pieces.
A puzzling bricolage.

Why does the electorate vote for backsliding?
Is this a case of misguided free-riding?
A cry for strong leadership?
A need for worship?

Why does the center right accommodate demise?
Is this a case of misguided sleaze?
A naive hope to push the far right over the edge?
With own victory as the main catch?

Why does the institutional break fail to function well?
Is the rule of law a misguided hard sell?
Brute aggressiveness the ultimate winner?
The people the willing sinner?

Is the left still left?
What is left of the left?
Large, but righty?
Small, and tiny?

Is the right still right?
What is left of the right?
Large, but the center abandoned?
Small, but radically transformed?

Anti-immigration sentiment?
Strangers as unwished increments.
The desire for purity.
Longing for homogeneity.

The dream of a great past.
With an impressive historical cast.
All these blinding heroes.
Much better than these modern-day zeroes.

The Holy Grail of the nation-state.
Protecting our shared fate.
Of sovereign greatness.
Abroad as the monster of Loch Ness.

A puzzle with more
than thousand pieces.
An endless bricolage.

Trump about sharks and snakes

We can't get the boat to float. The battery is so heavy. So then I start talking about asking questions. You know, I have an, I had an uncle who was a great professor at MIT for many years, long, I think the longest tenure ever. Very smart, had three different degrees and, you know, so I have an aptitude for things. You know, there is such a thing as an aptitude.

A floating boat. A battery of floating thoughts. Answers without questions. Logic without order. Being in control. Of the uncontrollable. Saying without thinking. No saying, no thinking. Talking to become. Being tenured for centuries. Smarter than smart. Meet MIT. MIT is me. All about me. Apt to aptitude. Dude. Attitude of aptitude. A degree of degrees. Having and knowing.

I said, 'Well, what would happen if this boat is so heavy and started to sink and you're on the top of the boat. Do you get electrocuted or not?' In other words, the boat is going down and you're on the top, will the electric currents flow through the water and wipe you out?

Sinking heaviness. Of guilt and sin. Of responsibility. Of being on top of the monkey rock. Drowning from heaviness. From importance. The battery of electricity. Hanging on your neck. Sinking with you. An embrace. A deep moment of forever togetherness.

And let's say there's a shark about 10 yards over there. Would I have to immediately abandon, or could I ride the electric down? And he said, 'Sir, nobody's ever asked us that question. But sir, I don't know.' I said, 'Well, I want to know, because I guarantee you one thing, I don't care what happens. I'm staying with the electric, I'm not getting over with it.'

An ocean full of sharks. Of the sharp kind. A sharp shark. Nearby, looking up at me. Observing me. Should I fly? Collect courage? Attack, full force? Spit electricity? That is the question. To spit, or not to spit. I spit. I stay. I persevere. I keep going. Sure Sir. No way I will care. About nothing. Shark or electricity. Boat or battery. I do not care. I will persevere.

So I tell that story. And the fake news they go, 'he told this crazy story with electric.' It's actually not crazy. It's sort of a smart story, right? Sort of like, you know, it's like the snake, it's a smart when you, you figure what you're leaving in, right? You're bringing it in the, you know, the snake, right? The snake and the snake. I tell that and they do the same thing.

Storytelling about narratives. Fake news about sharks, and electricity, and a floating boat, with a battery. With me on top. I am always on top. Real, not fake. Smart, not crazy. The snake attacking the shark. Suffocating me. All the same. One snake after the other. It is they. It is always they. The fake-inventing they. But I am too smart. Always. Everywhere.

(Black font copied from *The Washington Post* of June 24 2024, in a column from Eugene Robinson, literally transcribing a Trump speech; in red, my flow of consciousness, as triggered by Trump's creative genius.)

9 Missing Pieces

9.1 A few further bricks

Of course, I cannot do justice to the many complexities and subtleties that would have been worth discussing if this essay could have expanded toward multi-volume length. Clearly, there is much more I could have done to spice up my analysis and argumentation, which points to evident limitations of my line of reasoning. For instance, another stream of literature emphasizes the role of the cry for strong leadership,[125] and differences in leadership personalities and styles (see, *e.g.*, Bernhard, 2020; Caiani, 2019; Mols & Jetten, 2020), and yet another tradition underlines the impact of nationalism (Eger & Valdez, 2019; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2019). But given lack of space, I could not but engage in cherry-picking. In future work, these and other elements can and should be integrated in Figures 2 and 3's ecological complexity framework. By way of conclusion, before finishing off with a few final thoughts, I like to briefly reflect on three key issues, out of many, that deserve further attention in future work. Admittingly, this involves yet another, and unavoidable, exercise in subjective cherry-picking (luckily, I do like cherries very much). So, this is my subjective list of priorities.

First, the very simple left-right dimension is often argued to be outdated. Cross-positioning in issue space is happening all the time. For example, the Danish social-democrats copied an aggressive anti-immigration stance from their radical-right competitors, and the Dutch radical-right PVV adopted a few eye-catching leftist social-economic policies (Harteveld, 2016).[126] Similarly, niche and single-issue parties shake up the electoral landscape, creating political fragmentation (Pildes, 2021), particularly so in the left tail of the electoral space, hence fragmenting the leftist movements in many liberal democracies (see, *e.g.*, Surridge, 2018). Clear examples of the latter are the many Green parties, as well as Animal parties that bite in the market share of traditional social-democratic parties. This fragmentation blocks the

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125 Recent survey information from the Open Society Barometer suggest, on the basis of data from about 36,000 respondents across 30 representative countries worldwide, that about one third is supportive of a strong leader who ignores essential democratic principles (such as elections and parliaments), peaking at 35 per cent among the group aged 18 to 35 (https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/uploads/e6cd5a09-cd19-4587-aa06-368d3fc78917/open-society-barometer-can-democracy-deliver-20230911.pdf) – so much for graying population as a key explanation for the rise of the far right.

126 Not all campaign rhetoric translates into actions. For instance, Geert Wilders promised to reduce the own-risk contribution in health care to zero immediately, but the coalition under his informal leadership will only cut this contribution by half in 2027.

road toward left-leaning dominance, as the largest party tends to be centrist or right-wing (see, *e.g.*, Durovic, 2023).[127] Prominent examples are Macron's centrist movement in France, and Meloni's radical-right majority in Italy.

Second, the role of the many specific features of the political rules of the game requires deeper analysis. By and large, my arguments and examples referred to multi-party systems, with or without easy new party entry. But is the dynamics different in *de facto* two-party systems, such as the UK and the US? Given recent histories in this pair of very prominent liberal democracies, I would argue that the similarities by far dominate the differences. The key difference is that much of the ecological dynamics take the form of factional within-party processes. The examples of the American Republicans and the British Tories are telling (Bogaards, 2017). For instance, the factional fights within the Republican Party gave birth to first the Tea Party and next the rise of Donald Trump and his populist rhetoric, cumulating (to date) into the storming of the Capitol in 2021 (*e.g.*, Goldstein, 2021) and a landslide victory in the November 2024 Presidential elections. And in the UK, Tory-infights produced a misinformed Brexit campaign under the leadership of Boris Johnson (*e.g.*, Dorling, 2018). All this is not so different from the process of democratic backsliding in liberal democracies with multi-party systems. In 2024 and 2025, plenty of elections across (liberal) democracies, including two-party countries such the UK and the US, as well as the multi-party nation-states such as France and India, have and will produce further evidence as to the current state of democracy as we used to know it, providing further insight into potential differences and similarities across different political systems.[128]

Third, although I frequently referred to the role of a powerful anti-immigration sentiment, oftentimes mixed with Islamophobia, along the way, I decided to not offer this important aspect a place on the central podium in my ecological complexity framework as a fourth external force or a sixth internal mechanism. Indeed, the literature on the relationship between immigration (and Islamophobia), on the one hand, and the far right, on the other hand, is massive (see, *e.g.*, Bohman & Hjerm, 2016;

127 But here, the far right is struggling too, with many divides setting apart different extreme and radical-right parties. For instance, some are anti-Putin, but others are pro-Putin. Indeed, this is reflected in the European Parliament, with three far-right families that are unlikely to merge into one, although that would clearly boost their joint power position.

128 Similar political systems can produce radically different outcomes (see below for more on this), which is another marker that we need to develop an ecological complexity perspective that brings many pieces of the puzzle together. For instance, French national elections are organized by a first-past-the-post system, similar to that of the UK and the US. But contrary to the latter pair, France is characterized by many parties in parliament, and by much party entry and exit dynamics. I briefly return to this issue further down the line.

Mudde, 1999; Stockemer, 2016). Without any doubt, this sentiment is very important to understand the electoral success of the far right in liberal democracies. However, I would argue that this impact is indirect. Immigration is of all times. For instance, in the 1960s and 1970s, labor immigration into Western-European countries was very substantial, and countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the US are built on immigration. All in all, although immigration from a specific part of the world does peak on a regular basis (oftentimes due to a local conflict), this is not associated with a clear upward trend. or a clear economic backlash (*e.g.*, De la Rica, Glitz, & Ortega, 2015).

So, it is not so much immigration as such that drives the increased popularity of the far right, I tend to believe, but rather the way the salience of the issue is exploited in the public debate and connected with a nativist discourse (see, *e.g.*, Green-Pedersen & Otjes, 2019),[129] in line with the argument that citizen polarization follows political polarization (Moral & Best, 2023).[130] One disclaimer is in order, though. That is, because immigration has a cumulative effect on the host country's population, this drives the increasing (ethnic and religious) heterogeneity that harm's a society's willingness to invest in the public domain, undermining across-group solidarity, as briefly discussed above. Thus, a flow effect must be distinguished from the stock impact, with the latter potentially influencing processes of democratic demise after all. Moreover, the more different immigrants are from the incumbents (*e.g.*, Muslim versus Christian, or non-white versus white), the more likely it is that in-group – out-group sentiments enter into the political discourse. I will return to this issues further down the line.

In all, the above research agenda is quite ambitious indeed. A key challenge is to reliably identify causalities. Causal identification with observational data is a bottleneck anyway, in the absence of randomized controlled experimentation (see, *e.g.*, Athey & Imbens, 2017; Imbens, 2024), but is even more challenging in the context of an ecological complexity framework of high dimensionality that is full of non-linearities, feedback loops, and higher-order interactions. Hence, falsification as the key feature of the Popperian philosophy of science may not be satisfied so easily,

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129 A classic strategy of far-right populists is to blame one crisis after the other to immigration, generally, and asylum inflow, particularly, ranging from housing shortages and health care strain to street crime and unemployment.

130 Victor Orbán introduced the concept of an illiberal democracy as a contrast with the liberal democracy characterized by multi-culturalism, individualism, and consumerism. In an illiberal democracy, society features mono-culturalism (of the white and Christian-Jewish type), implying that immigration and minority rights are seen as societal threats. This is a classic nativist backlash response to the challenges of reflexive modernity, as discussed above.

if at all (van Witteloostuijn, 2016, 2020). This essay is not the place for an extensive epistemological reflection, but certainly we cannot but try to cut the Gordian knot of ecological complexity by using at least two knifes. The first knife involves the computer simulation and machine leaning techniques that are very good at exploring complex webs of relationships, as suggested above, albeit perhaps not so good at identifying causalities (but see Feuerriegel *et al.*, 2024). The second knife concerns cutting slices from the ecological complexity framework that are small enough to conduct the usual statistical causal inference analyses, focusing on Popperian falsification (*cf.* Kolkman *et al.*, 2024). Of course, this assumes a positivistic approach, which may be complemented with different methodological lenses (*e.g.*, Cornelissen & Kaandorp, 2023; Gerring, 2017).

9.2 A little wall

With bricks, one might hope to build a wall, or another construction looking like a part of a building. From the above, I would like to highlight how two bricks might work together to create a little wall, producing particular political outcomes, including democratic backsliding. This is a specific example of an important interaction that should be part of an ecological complexity framework of democratic erosion processes. One key brick involves the institutional rules of the game defining the political system; the other is how political actors behave within the context of the codified political system. To what extent might both elements work together, in whatever way, to produce specific political outcomes? The main message here is two-fold. The first message is that key characteristics of the political system may impact the experience with, likelihood of, and success of coalition formation that requires the need to compromise. The second message involves how within the boundaries of very similar political systems, as defined by the codified institutional rules, the political outcomes can be very different as a result of the culturally ingrained behavioral rules of political conduct. That is, "hard" institutional rules are easily crowded out by "soft" behavioral norms.

Firstly, a critical institutional difference is the one between proportional versus first-past-the-post electoral rules, with great consequences for the incidence and acceptance of compromises, as well as the representativeness of parliament (see, *e.g.*, Blais, Dobrzynska, & Indridason, 2005; Horowitz, 2003; Lijphart, 1991).[131] In a proportional system, depending upon the height of the electoral threshold (which may be close to zero, like in Israel and the Netherlands), each political party receives roughly

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131 Of course, proponents of the first-past-the-post system will emphasize what they see as an important benefit: strong governments that do not have to compromise on their manifesto.

the percentage of seats in parliament that is in line with its electoral voter share. As a result, many political parties tend to pass the threshold; and, more importantly, rarely any party will capture a simple majority. Hence, post-election coalition formation does routinely involve making compromises. This may be something that more and more voters do not like to see in modern-day liberal democracies, expressing a strong (and oftentimes aggressive) preference for purity (see below for more on this), but compromises are inevitable. After the election, the parties ending up in the coalition government cannot but have watered down what they rhetorically claimed to stand for in pre-election campaigning times. This holds true for the far-right parties, too, except if they succeed in collecting 50%-plus seats in Parliament.

Perhaps because of this increasing preference for purity among modern electorates, we may observe the rise of a different type of compromise, squarely in line with the modern culture of immediacy (see the next chapter). That is, traditionally, political parties stroke a deal per policy issue, ending up with a series of per-issue compromises. By and large, per policy domain, any radicality was moderated by taking a more moderate position by mixing perspectives from different coalition partners. In these modern day and age, however, we see government coalitions agreeing on compromising on which political party can aim for purity for which issue. In the current Dutch government, for instance, the BBB is in charge of agriculture, and the PVV of immigration, aiming to implement radical policies in both domains. The problem with this modern style of coalition compromise is two-fold, at least. One, this makes it much harder to obtain polity coherence across issues. This implies that *ex post* conflict is ingrained *ex ante*. Two, purity looks perfect on paper (that is, for those liking this particular type of purity), but tends to be very hard to realize in political practice. As a result, the *ex post* disappointment of the electorate is ingrained *ex ante*, too.

In the first-past-the post system, this is very different. Then, frequently, a party that only attracted a minority voter share, may have a large majority in parliament. For example, in the US, two third of the senators come from States housing one third of the population, and in the recent 2024 elections in the UK, the Labour Party's 34 per cent of the national voter pie translated into more than 400 seats in the 650-seats parliament. Hence, in first-past-the-post systems, coalition governments are very rare, implying that the politicians' willingness to compromise (and the voters' willingness to accept such compromises) is minimal. Also, political parties with a substantial voter share (*e.g.*, the Greens or the far-right Reform UK party in the 2024 UK elections) are minimally represented in parliament (*e.g.*, the Reform UK party has only 4 seats out of 650, but 14% of the general vote), reducing the voice of their constituency to close to zero. The lack of representativeness implies that voter disappointment is waiting around the corner.

Moreover, as such disappointment triggers electoral volatility, the next election is likely to come with a radical move away from the current government by positively responding to the opposition's appeal for radical change. Indeed, this is more and more common in more and more liberal democracies. Whether correct or not, any disappointment frequently translates into electing the opposition into power. For instance, an argument is that the Biden Administration in the US was (incorrectly) blamed for inflation, with many voters turning to Trump in response to his promise for radical change in economic policy (of the Mercantilist kind that will only give a further boost to inflation). As a result, longitudinal policy consistency is hard to obtain, as the opposition subsequently delivers on their promise to opt for radical change. Intertemporal policy inconsistency is not only harming the economy, as transactional reliability is a *sine qua non* for the confidence needed to be willing to invest in the future, but also undermines the trust in the liberal democracy as the country's governance system. If policy reversal is the norm, happening in a four-year cycle (or shorter, as coalition governments tend to collapse before the end of their term), the liberal democracy is subject to a creeping process of endogenous legitimacy erosion.

Secondly, to illustrate how political conduct can differ across countries with a roughly identical political system, I briefly discuss three countries operating a broadly similar political system, but with dramatically different outcomes (*cf.* Karp & Banducci, 2008): France, the UK, and the US. All three feature a first-past-the-post district electoral system.[132] But along a few important dimensions, these three countries could not be more different in terms of behavioral conduct in the political theater. In France, coalition formation frequently occurs before rather than after elections. Given the two-round nature of elections, parties tend to work together to avoid Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National's candidate passing a district's post as the winner by strategically deciding to pull back candidates in the second round. By doing so, the votes of multiple anti-Rassemblement National candidates are combined after a voting advice of the retreating candidate(s). Indeed, the collaboration among anti-Rassemblement National parties pushed this party from the first place in the first round (in voter share) to the third place in the second round (in seat share) in the 2024 snap elections for the *Assemblée*, in the latter ending up with three roughly equally-

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132 Of course, even although these countries share this essential characteristic of their political system, they reveal important institutional differences as well. For instance, France and the US have a Presidential system, whilst the UK is a Monarchy, and only France operates a two-round election procedure. Even in the context of this book-length essay, exploring what such differences might imply for the nature of political conduct is too much to ask for, with the exception of an example here and there.

sized political families. This implies that a stalemate is permanently looming around the corner.

In the UK, the need to form coalitions is close to zero.[133] The winning party close-to-always has a safe majority of seats in the House of Commons, and has a monopoly on government and policy-making (with backbenchers being promoted to frontbenchers[134]). As explained above, the recent 2024 national elections are a clear example of this, with the Labour Party winning more than 400 of the 650 seats in the House of Commons on the basis of only 34 per cent of the popular vote. In the US, very frequently (particularly after mid-term elections), Parliament's majority (in the House and/or Senate) is of a different color than that of the President and his (the first female US President is still waiting to be elected into office) government.[135] As a consequence, wheeling and dealing is daily practice in US politics, even to such an extent that policy-making deadlocks are a frequent event, with temporary closures of the bureaucratic Federal apparatus as a result.

The above translates into two Anglo-Saxon first-past-the-post systems with radically different political practices. In the UK, compromise is very rare. After all, only very seldom does the election system **not** produce a simple majority in the House of Commons for either the Conservatives or Labour. Behind the façade of a very entertaining and lively debate in this House, the government can basically ignore what the opposition has to say, but only must navigate internal-party disagreement, if any. In the US, compromise is very common. One President after other has to, oftentimes after mid-term elections, deal with a Congress that is fully or partially dominated by a majority from the other side. For instance, both Donald Trump in his first term and Joe Biden had to face a Congress majority from the rival party after mid-term elections. Then, in many policy domains, dealing and wheeling is unavoidable, as either the Democrats (with a Republican President) or the Republicans (with a Democratic

133 The not-so-successful Conservatives-LibDems coalition under David Cameron's leadership in the early 2010s was a very rare post-World War II exception indeed.

134 This is another typical aspect of the UK's political system: Only members of Parliament are promoted to a place in the cabinet, moving from the backbench to the frontbench. A key disadvantage of this practice is that this severely restricts the pool of potential candidates for such very important and influential posts. A key advantage is that all those in government have a transparent democratic legitimacy. Note that the incumbent government can use a roundabout route to appoint an outsider in the cabinet by providing a seat in the House of Lords. As the latter sit in the House of Lords until their death, this is one reason as to why this House is expanding to an unmanageable size. A recent example is the former Prime-Minister David Cameron, who was appointed in the House of Lords to be able to act as the UK's Minister of Foreign Affairs.

135 This outcome is relatively frequent in France, too, being referred to a *cohabitation*.

President) can block Congress' decision-making. Actually, large minorities still can benefit from a weaponry to force the government to seek compromise, the filibuster toolkit in the Senate being a prominent example.

Beyond the examples discussed above by way of illustration, there are many more. Basically, they all make clear how the formal institutional rules of the political game interact with the informal code of behavioral conduct to produce specific types of political outcomes, whilst excluding others. This generates a deeply ingrained political culture that translates into what the electorate regards as normal and acceptable. For sure, each political system and each set of political rules have their own advantages and disadvantages. However, because changing the formal institutional rules of a political system in a liberal democracy is very hard to do (oftentimes requiring a time-consuming steeple chase to change the Constitution),[136] and because no system perfectly fits with the circumstances forever, much of the adaptation occurs in the realm of behavioral conduct.[137]

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136 We have another Baron von Münchhausen effect here, as this would require that the political elite succeeds in reforming the very system in which they can operate as the elite.

137 This makes the adaptability of politics very different from close to any other type of institutions, which tend to be much more flexible in how they are structured. For instance, in the study of organizations, the literature about adaptation and change is massive – see, *e.g.*, the *Journal of Organizational Change*, which is fully dedicated to this important topic (see, *e.g.*, Romme & van Witteloostuijn, 1999; van den Oord *et al.*, 2017).

Reflection 7: Transmitter without receiver

Another biased reflection of this old-ish and white member of the elite (not ruling, and I have no aspiration in that direction at all, but still) is that modern-day people are excellent in transmitting whatever they seemingly so urgently want to transmit, but that they have a hard time to listen to what the other side might have to say (or write). Sending and talking are what makes a modern-day life worth living; receiving and listening is a waste of time, except if what the other is sending or saying squarely fits within the receiver's frame anyway. All this is a caricature, I know. Many of us are not like this. Or rather, all of us are a little bit like this most of the time, and this has always been the case. The noble(wo)man at the medieval Burgundian Court were probably not that different from the entourage in modern-day's Kremlin. And the shopkeeper in a Beijing or London alley in, say, the 12th century might not be very different from a 21th century shopkeeper in the same alley (assuming, for the sake of the argument, that this alley is still in place – extremely unlikely indeed). So, I am talking averages and trends here. And these averages and trends are pushed toward an egocentric perspective in the modern day and age of echo chambers in the social media. This new communication technology is too recent to be sure about the evidence, but I would argue that the trend is clear. We scroll and we type, with earplugs in to keep the rest of the world out, and we do so in contact with likeminded lookalikes (or at least, we aspire to be lookalikes – an issue associated with yet other troubles, which are out of scope here). We do so quickly, with a short concentration span. Reading a book is too much to ask for – let alone a complex and thick pillar (such as the *Alkibiades* book I make use of in this too lengthy essay further down the line). Reading a daily newspaper, and doing so daily, from front to back end is a very old-fashioned activity. To the extent that the modern-day citizen still reads a daily newspaper, this is done quickly, scrolling through the digital version on the lookout for pieces that confirm what s/he believes in anyway. If we engage in a dialogue, we listen carefully, but only in order to time our interruption, to start our own contribution to what is in essence an exchange of monologues. Listening with empathy, being more interested in what the other has to say than in what I might add to the dialogue, is a rare capability. Perhaps, practicing such listening should be made an obligatory course in any educational program, from *kindergarten* to PhD teaching. I know that all this is a strawman. Indeed, I opted for this stylistic form on purpose, to transmit my message very clearly and lucidly to the receiver – that is, to anyone with the courage and stamina to read this book-length and rather complicated essay. But even if I am right for about ten per cent, this modern-day average and trend can be expected to strongly influence what is happening in the political theater. And as far as I am concerned, this is not a positive influence.

Immediate immediacy

Later today is too late, as now is just in time.
Having to wait is a crime.

Tomorrow is far away.
Keep the future at bay.

Pureness without compromise.
Stupidity, rather than wise.

Emotional experience.
Impulse obedience.

The self-indulged individual.
I, me, mine as ritual.

Direct gratification.
Immediate satisfaction.

Forceful opinions.
Biased ominions.

Feeling, not thinking.
Long toes, without blinking.

I-ness, not we-ness.
Collective emptiness.

Personalized identity.
Intrinsic fragility.

Hyperflowing.
Hypernowing.

Limited empathy for the different other.
Why bother?

Immediate immediacy.
High reward frequency.

10 Cultural Rooting

The above argumentation might miss an even deeper layer – an undercurrent of additional ecological complexity: the role of cultural change. My semi-final thought therefore involves a brief reflection on this issue. Here, my source of inspiration is a recent book of the literary scholar Anna Kornbluh (2024), titled *Immediacy, or the Style of too Late Capitalism*, although I could also have taken a deep dive in the history of philosophy back to at least the days of Descartes (*e.g.*, Taylor, 2007).[138] The target of her argumentation is the arts, but I would like to claim that what she has to say expands to modern Western culture in the sense of the customs, ideas, "memes", and social behavior in society, broadly.[139] This is what I will put forward in this first afterword as an important avenue for future research: To what extent, and how, is democratic backsliding rooted in deeper processes of cultural change? My intuitive answer is: to a very large extent, as the very same mix of forces and mechanisms central to my essay dances an intimate tango with cultural change. And if that would indeed be the case, the task for the ruling class becomes even more daunting, as changing a society's culture is a slow process that is very difficult, if at all, to orchestrate by the State. This stylized fact is well-known from the large literature on national culture (see, *e.g.*, Beugelsdijk & Welzel, 2018; Hofstede, 1984). Cultural change is a very slow evolutionary process largely emerging from bottom-up changes rather than being orchestrated top-down.

The key term to characterize modern day's cultural change is immediacy, as in Anne Kornbluh's book title, I would argue. A whole series of characteristics of modern Western culture (and beyond, globally) come together in this catch-all term. The modern Westerner takes life extremely personal. Essential is any emotional experience that gratifies the individual's identity, and that does so immediately. If this is not the case, the self-indulged individual is hurt. Key is feeling, not thinking. This comes with forceful opinions and views that do not blend well with any form of compromise. Pureness is what matters, and not anything hybrid or mixed. This

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138 Clearly, turning to issues of cultural change across societies in broad strokes does involve opening yet another Pandora's box. After all, the literature on culture is massive, full of jargon that is specific to the disciplinary focus of the theoretical perspective at hand. So, all I can do here is to offer a brief look into this box by taking the specific lens of immediacy, which I believe can be instrumental to shed light on what might well be the heart of the problem. Of course, in later work, much can be added by mobilizing all these different lenses, from the anthropology of tribes to the dimensions of national culture.

139 In so doing, I freely improvise by writing down the outcomes of a stream of consciousness triggered by thinking through the very notion of immediacy in light of processes of democratic backsliding.

individual's truth is the real truth, supported by (mis)information and (fake) news that is in line with this truth, and discrediting any contra-information and news as fake and false. The modern individual is addicted to immediate satisfaction – to rewards in the now. The long term does not count that much; what really matters is a series of (very) short runs. It is all about "I-ness", and not "we-ness". Typical symbols for this modern Western culture are the acts of streaming and making selfies. Take a look at people in the streets of a modern Western city (and anywhere else, really), and observe that they seem to be glued to their screen, quickly scrolling through their timeline or quickly typing a message with both their thumbs. This screen is their reality, and not what is happening around them. In a way, life involves "hyperflowing" and "hypernowing", and particularly so in the digital world of likes, of hearts, of thumb-ups, and of dozens of other emicons – a world of addictive instant gratification.[140]

An interesting argument can be applied to relate the culture of immediacy with the influence of the social media on how we view the world. This argument is rooted in the thinking of Marshall McLuhan, promoting the idea that the media is the message (McLuhan, 1975). Prior to the rise of the social media, messages based on linear logic and rationality were dominant. With the social media, this rational way of communication transformed into associative non-linear messaging. Social media strive on short messages, full of visuals. Emotion and intuition are key. Longer narratives, logically flowing from cause to effect, are extremely rare. If people are addicted to social media, largely using the likes of Instagram and TikTok to stay informed about the world, they start to view the world accordingly. This worldview fits squarely with what populism has on offer. Facts are irrelevant. Meandering is prominent. Information comes in associative bits and pieces. Argumentation can jump from pillar to post and back (or not), without any suspicion of perhaps not reflecting reality. The rule of law, founded on linear rationality, implies a misfit with this associative and emotion-driven worldview in search of instant gratification.[141]

Of course, the above reads like a strawman characterization of modern-day people in the West (and elsewhere, for that matter), ready to be attacked and crumbled into pieces by any clever scholar.[142] For many individuals, after all, it is not like this at all. And even for those who are like this, largely, it is not like this all the time, or

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140   To be honest, all my evidence is second hand, as I miss any experience with the social media. I only have a LinkedIn account (actually, I seem to have two, at least, after my move from one university to the other), but even still water is more dynamic.

141   If all this is correct, my essayistic style is highly appropriate (Adorno, 1958 / 1984).

142   And by the supporters of illiberalism, like Victor Orbán, strongly arguing against individualism.

regarding all aspects of life. But still, in essence, modern-day Western culture has moved, and is still moving, into this direction.[143] And this is so in conjunction with the very three external forces and five internal mechanisms central to this essay. Hence, I could further complicate Figures 2 and 3's ecological complexity framework by adding arrows and boxes relating to this process of cultural change, featuring additional non-linearities, feedback loops, and high-order interactions. For the sake of completeness, this is what I do in Figure 4. Again, as with Figure 3, Figure 4 can be interwoven into Figure 2 to add further ecological complexity.

Figure 4: The role of cultural rooting
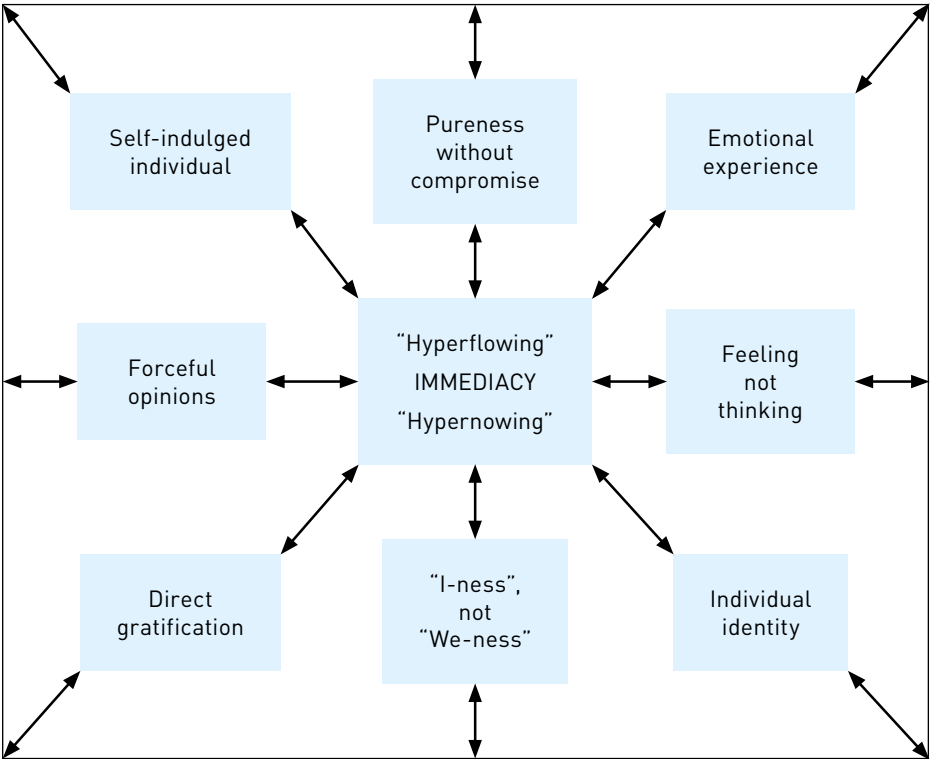
143 Evidence suggests that this culture of "immediacy" may have worrying effects on the youth – *e.g.*, revealing a shorter attention span (see, *e.g.*, Alonzo *et al.*, 2021; Van Der Schuur *et al.*, 2015) and higher bubble sensitivity (Sirola *et al.*, 2021; Wiard, Lits, & Dufrasne, 2022).

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Many culture pessimists have argued that the age of Enlightenment was buried with the neo-liberal revolution, with since then a dominant focus on consumerism and individualism in a world of free choice where people engage in private transactions on commercial markets, full of enterprises that seek to maximize shareholder value (see, *e.g.*, Klein, 2000), and where people interact with the State that handles and views citizens as "clients", in line with the bureaucratic and technocratic NPM philosophy. In this world, the State is run like a commercial enterprise as well, adopting business practices according to the NPM guidelines. Many relationships outside the spheres of family and friends have turned transactional. Along the way, the sense of community and solidarity is sacrificed, implying the erosion of the public domain. It is this modern-day Westerner that politicians, in one way or another, must relate to – quite a challenge indeed.[144]

This modern-day "neo-liberalized" individual expects to be served by these politicians like on any other commercial market – and not tomorrow, but today. Immediacy rules modern-day politics as well. With individualism and widespread commercialization, loyalty to a political party is eroded. The result is ideological dealignment, in tandem with electoral volatility (Dassonneville, 2018). The voter does give support to the party of the day that promises to serve her or his personal needs well. In the process, s/he seeks immediacy and pureness, and hence a party that or a politician who sells the message that the voters' issues will be handled easily and quickly when in power. When this subsequently does not materialize in the muddiness of actual politics, full of compromises, inertness, and wicked problems, this voter will turn elsewhere at the next election, disappointed by the lack of (immediate) gratification.[145] In one of the many isolating bubbles in the social media, further fueled by media hysteria regarding the next political savior on the block, she finds her next Messiah. In this search, cultural identity is dominant, as this fits with modern day's obsession with personal identity. The further to the right on the political spectrum, the more emphasis is put on cultural identity, and on the many "attacks" on this identity by the left and by foreigners. Hence, this voter is very likely to support the (far) right, as the modern I-focused culture implies that economic issues play second fiddle in the emotional assessment of many voters. This is Gildron's (2022) asymmetry.

And so on and so forth. Of course, as said, the above is a strawman. And many people, and hence voters, are not like this. But a large part of the electorate

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144 Seen this way, Donald Trump's personality may well involve a perfect fit with modern-day's culture, which may explain his appeal to so many voters.

145 Again, as pointed out in an earlier footnote, the far right takes this to the next level by consciously adopting a sophisticated blaming strategy.

is, with the main undercurrent in modern-day Western society not being that much different from this little narrative, I would argue. The root causes of modern-day cultural change, and hence the voting behavior of the modern citizen, and the move toward democratic instability are exactly the same. The neo-liberal revolution that boosted economic globalization in times of Internet's progression is the seedbed of the five mechanisms that interactively produced the toxic mix of societal insecurity and electoral volatility. Hence, to avoid further democratic backsliding, the political elite must change their behavioral repertoire and policy package to accommodate and counter both. To me, key is a policy reversal as illustrated in Box 7, moving away from neo-liberalism, in combination with the refusal to engage in polarization, as we know that political polarization is mirrored by the electorate in search of immediacy and pureness (Moral & Best, 2023). In Box 8, another policy suggestion is introduced, involving a constitutional brake.

Box 8:   Constitutional brake

The modern-day political style of polarization in an attempt to offer immediacy and pureness is eroding the liberal democracy. But as explained above, current politics is like Baron von Münchhausen. Like him, they are very unlikely to be able to escape from the swamp without any support from an outsider. So, what could this support involve? I am not a legal scholar, nor a political scientist. Hence, what I suggest here may be a dead end, or might well be hopelessly naïve. Or my suggestion may well already have been implemented or suggested without any effect. But returning to the notion of democratic resilience, I can imagine that these five guardrails – and a few more, perhaps – should be legally institutionalized such that they are very difficult to change by those who happen to be in power. Of course, in a democracy, change should not be blocked altogether, but changing or harming the guardrails may be made more difficult than is currently the case. In most liberal democracies (but not in all; *e.g.*, the UK lacks a written Constitution), they are already codified in the Constitution for many decades or even centuries, oftentimes with infrequent modifications to stay in tune with modern times. Additionally, many – if not all – liberal democracies have a Constitutional Court or another institution (*e.g.*, the Netherlands has a *Raad van State*) that keeps an eye on the alignment of acts of the State with the Constitution (and international agreements). But apparently, this does not suffice to avoid democratic backsliding. The case of the US is illustrative, with a (former and current) President who could not only drastically change the composition of the Constitutional Court in his favor, but also has been campaigning as a convicted criminal for a re-election notwithstanding

his support for a riot that is not that much different from a failed coup.

My idea is that, apart from avoiding political influence on hiring and firing judges, the hurdle to implement laws that are anti-constitutional can be substantially increased. Take the example of the Netherlands. Changing the Constitution is a complicated, difficult, and lengthy process. For instance, a simple majority in the Second Chamber does not suffice. Rather, a two-third majority must back the change in both the First and Second Chamber across two cabinet terms. Why not expand this extra hurdle to any change in any law – hence, not only the Constitution – that according to the Constitutional Court (or a similar body, such as the Dutch *Raad van State*) violates the Constitution? With an extra break, the ruling political elite cannot crack liberal democracy's guardrails easily and quickly – at least not as long as they stay away from a coup-like intervention or have not obtained a landslide majority. For example, suppose a next Dutch cabinet Wilders I [146] submits a bill to demolish public broadcasting altogether, then this would be subject to a double two-third majority threshold across two cabinet terms, provided the *Raad van State* declared this bill to be against the Constitution. [147]

Box 8 provides just one example. The general idea is that democratic guardrails should be propped up by a regulatory framework that ties actors in the political theater to essential democratic principles. Other examples are an obligation for political parties to have members operating within a party-internal democracy, or restrictive rules regarding the extent, source and transparency of external funding

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[146] As the four party leaders who formed the new cabinet decided that they would stay in the Second Chamber, leading and controlling what they refer to as an "extra-parliamentary" government from a distance, they had to find an outsider as the new Prime-Minister. They nominated Dick Schoof, a top civil servant with much experience in the judicial and security domains, as their candidate. Hence, Wilders I does and will take the shape of Schoof I. This is not Geert Wilders' preference, certainly not, but NSC and VVD could not accept Wilders as the new Prime-Minister, probably because of his extremist reputation (a step too high on the normalization ladder) and worries about the country's international reputation. The advantage for Geert Wilders of this construction is that he can continue to spit his unfiltered opinion on X, which he indeed does all the time.

[147] Another brake might be to impose term limits on prime-ministers and/or presidents. But as full and semi-autocrats like Vladimir Putin and Recip Tayyip Erdogan show, changing the Constitution is an escape route. And even if the Constitution is an unmovable political rock, the interpretation of this Constitution can be so flexible that much is possible anyway. The US is a case in point: No institution whatsoever seems to be capable of keeping Donald Trump in check. As said, now he has won from Kamala Harris, we can follow a litmus test in real-time in full motion.

of both political parties and thinktanks.[148] For instance, a critical issue with the US democracy is the large influence of big money, and of the ultra-rich (Steinzor, 2024). Both candidates jointly financed their 2024 Presidential campaigns with massive donations, summing up to about $15 billion. This weakens the proper functioning of the US democracy through two channels, at least. One, the entry barrier for any newcomer is unsurmountable, implying a stiffened party system that will be dominated by two established political parties until eternity. Two, the ultra-rich are far too influential, implying a damaging *quid pro quo* political culture fueling distrust in the "Washington swamp".

All this is anything but easy, as repairing the damage done by acting against the tide of modern-day culture is not evident, but without doing so our foreland may well be a continuation of the creeping process of democratic backsliding.[149] And in this context, we must recognize that rules alone cannot do the job, however protective they might look on paper: By the end of the day, actual behavior in the political theater can bow and bend, and even change, these regulatory guardrails to such an extent that democracy starts to erode after all, as the cases of Victor Orbán and Donald Trump painfully illustrate. It is to this issue that I now turn.

> **Reflection 8: The crisis law instrument**
> With a crisis law, Parliament is moved to the bench. After all, in times of crisis, decision-making has to be quick. Otherwise, society will be hit harder by the very crisis that triggered the crisis law. A crisis can be a deadly and quickly spreading

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148 A specific issue in the Dutch context is the erosion of the tradition to have political manifestos financially evaluated on their economic effects by the Central Planning Bureau (CPB). More and more political parties, and certainly the far right, refuse to do this. As a result, they can easily come up with empty or cheap promises, which are either impossible or very difficult to finance, or will not have the claimed economic effects. If some parties do and others do not participate in this credibility-increasing activity, the political battle is made highly asymmetric. Of course, one might hope that voters would pierce through this, but that would be highly naïve.

149 Another potential break might be found in the behavior of governmental bureaucracies, in line with the parody in the BBC series *Yes minister*, which ran from 1980 to 1984. The vagaries of the ruling political elite are moderated or even stalled in the "swamp" of bureaucratic implementation: technocracy rules after all, in the end. True this may be, this is apparently insufficiently forceful to avoid democratic backsliding. Moreover, this implies a democratic deficit that goes against the very principles of a liberal democracy. Actually, in Trumpian populism, this deep State narrative resonates very well with large parts of the electorate. This is why the Project 2025 has been launched to be better prepared to crack the "deep State" the second time around. Immediately after Donald Trump's inauguration, Elon Musk and his Ministry of Government Efficiency (DOGE) started with an aggressive approach to drain Washington DC's swamp, perfectly in line with Project 2025.

pandemic, or a devastating hurricane or flood. And an obvious crisis is a war. In such times of urgency, democratic decision-making is too time-consuming, with too many back-and-forth procedures of advice and debate. Hence, liberal democracies have established the option to put essential elements of democracy on hold during times of crisis.[150] Of course, the first hurdle is still democratic. That is, it must be democratically decided to activate a crisis law that will put key elements of democracy on hold. Indeed, many liberal democracies made use of this option during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was considered to be a crisis by many. [151] And naturally, when the crisis is over, democracy must return to the Parliamentary heart of the decision-making process – at least, this is the case in a liberal democracy. This is why the end of the crisis associated with the activation of the crisis law should be clearly defined. In an illiberal democracy, all this is very different. Victor Orbán brought the crisis law instrument to an advanced level of perfection. Hungary is, apparently, permanently in crisis, as the country acts under a crisis law now for many years in a row. The nature of the crisis does change over time, but each time the next crisis happens to have emerged around the corner just in time to replace the prior one. For instance, the corona crisis law was smoothly followed by the Ukrainian war crisis law. Hence, although even Hungary's illiberal democracy still has a Parliament that should have substantial power, at least on paper, this is not the case in practice. Due to the permanent activation of a crisis law, the Hungarian Parliament is sitting on the bench permanently.

Many critics of the current Dutch government, under the informal leadership of Geert Wilders, argue that the PVV is copying Victor Orbán's strategy by insisting on the urgent need to implement a crisis law due to the stream of asylum-seekers [152] who not only cannot be housed adequately, [153] but also by rhetorically pointing to asylum-seekers as the root cause of a whole series of other crises – *e.g.*, those

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150 This is quite similar to the option in antiquity's Athens to democratically switch to an oligarchy.

151 But many others did – and still do – disagree. As a result, paradoxically, the democratic activation of a crisis law gave a boost to anti-democratic sentiments among a large segment of the population in liberal democracies. And again, particularly the far right has benefited from this. And still does so, as is clear from the victory of FPÖ's Herbert Kickl in the recent Austrian election. Herbert Kickl turned up at almost every manifestation to protest against corona policies.

152 Strictly speaking, this involves a crisis clause within the asylum law.

153 The factual reason for the latter is not that the peak of asylum-seekers is exceptionally high (it is not, neither through a longitudinal lens nor in comparison with other EU countries), but rather the substantial downsizing of asylum detention and housing capacity over many years.

on the housing market and in the health care sector. Apparently, the crisis law instrument is gaining popularity as the way to establish an illiberal democracy by effectively silencing the Parliament in otherwise liberal democracies. PVV's coalition partner NSC is aware of this. This is why they openly state they will only support the activation of this crisis law if a watertight legal case can be made. The responsible Ministry of Migration and Asylum has been busy for many months to produce such a case, which then should have been submitted to the *Raad van State* for advice. Legal experts, inside and outside the Ministry, agree that this case is simply impossible to make. Hence, activating a crisis law will be an illegal act. The reason is (a) that the number of asylum-seekers is not peaking at all and (b) that any evidence of causality regarding these other "crises"[154] is missing. But for months in a row, Geert Wilders was aggressively clear (preferably on *X*) that he will not back down: As agreed in the coalition agreement, a crisis law must be implemented – full stop.

Very much against normal practice, to not disincentivize but rather protect the ministerial support apparatus, confidential documents prepared by civil servants of a number of the involved Ministries were publicly revealed on request of the Second Chamber (opposition plus coalition partner NSC). Notwithstanding public statements of the responsible Minister Marjolein Faber of Migration and Asylum suggesting otherwise, all ministerial documents were extremely skeptical about the legality of activating the crisis law. After months of struggling, a compromise was reached involving a set of even stricter anti-immigration measures, albeit now no longer in the form of a crisis law. For instance, asylum-seekers should return to safe areas within Syria (of which there are none, according to NGOs, the UN, and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs). [155] So, for now, counterforces from the opposition and, particularly, coalition partner NSC avoided the government to openly act against the rule of law. However, I am sure Geert Wilders is waiting for a next opportunity to launch his next attack on what the liberal democracy stands for.

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154 The crisis label is subject to so much inflation, certainly so in the Netherlands, that close to everything is perceived to be a crisis these days. Strikingly, the Dutch Prime-Minister Dick Schoof does not refer to a crisis *per se*, but to a perceived crisis.

155 Al this predates the collapse of the Assad regime.

Shortsighted narcissism

In the end, institutional guardrails are powerless.
Unable to counter forces of populism.
Institutions matter less.
Put aside by the power of narcissism.

Behavior is what really makes a difference.
Too many parties taking for granted
what they never wanted.
Bankruptcy through indifference.

Should we mimic the abnormal?
Should we accept brutalization?
Should we accommodate normalization?
Should we promote the far right to being normal?

Leg weakness kills the rule of law.
This is what we saw
in millennia of history.
An act of felony.

Priming the short run
of mirroring the far right.
Seemingly bright,
but similar to a suicidal gun.

The center right panicking.
Opening the gateway,
not keeping the far right at bay.
Surrendering to mimicking.

Polarization the new standard.
Aggressiveness the new weaponry.
Social media shoots as the new cavalry
How awkward.

11 It's All Behavior, Stupid!

11.1 Shortsighted normalization

Regrettably, as Levitsky and Ziblatt argued convincingly back in 2018, legal guardrails alone will not suffice to protect the rule of law against manipulative and opportunistic politicians, of whom Victor Orbán and Donald Trump are two revealing examples. With Trump back then in the White House, their analysis attracted a lot of attention, also in the popular press. Their key argument is that modern liberal democracies are not so much killed as a result of an attack from the outside, but rather due to the erosion of political norms and values from the inside by elected politicians in power. Modern far-right populists roughen the political discourse, introducing an aggressive and manipulative style, adopting Scorched Earth politics, tolerating violence, deriding opponents as criminals, killing the primary norms of mutual tolerance and institutional forbearance, spreading fake news and misinformation to damage the credibility of not only their political opponents, but also of the political system at large, *et cetera*. Again, this is brutalization in full motion. When in power, they use this very same aggressiveness to undermine the free press and the judiciary, capturing both to further suffocate oppositional voices. Would they fail to deliver on all their promises, which is inevitably the case, they simply blame these very same oppositional forces for this, further undermining the rule of law and the credibility of the elite [the "Washington swamp", in Trump's (in)famous words].

Levitsky and Ziblatt's analysis was published in 2018, in the midst of Trump's first period in power. By now, in March 2025, we know that Trump made a landslide comeback, winning the November 2024 election against Kamala Harris, to enter into a second term in power in January 2025. He does so whilst being in the middle of a series of legal battles, of which he has already lost two. But even if he would have ended up in prison before November 2024's election day, he could have granted himself pardon

immediately, after winning from Kamala Harris.[156,157] Along the way, his tone of voice is becoming ever more aggressive, populist, and rambling, apparently to the liking of a large part of the US electorate. This further proves that Levitsky and Ziblatt were right in 2018: The codified rule of law guardrails cannot protect a liberal democracy against democratic backsliding when politicians push the norms and values guiding their political behavior into a far-right populist ravine. And for whatever reason, conservative and center-right moderates tend to normalize this brutal attack on liberal democracies – oftentimes a fatal mistake indeed. So, without these moderates taking a turn away from normalizing what they should not have normalized to start with, democratic erosion processes will be very difficult to reverse indeed.

The democratic backsliding trap might be even more difficult to escape from as a result of what might be referred to as the disappointment cycle, as already hinted at above: The overpromise voiced during electoral campaigning times cannot but result in underdelivering whilst in power. Grillo and Prato (2023) develop a subtle expectation-based reference point theory that implies that democratic backsliding will even start to undermine liberal democracies in which the majority of the electorate opposes this very democratic backsliding. This relates to the broader

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156 Apparently, this pardoning strategy will not cover all cases, as a few are in jurisdictions outside the President's direct power. Note that the likelihood that Donald Trump would have ended up in prison before election day has always been close to zero, and that quite a few of the important legal cases are delayed (in theory, forever) or scrapped anyway (in light of the Constitutional Court's verdict regarding Presidential immunity). After a very aggressive campaign, he has been re-elected to become the 47th US President. Since then, he announced the nomination of one ultra-conservative and far-right loyalist after the other, in line with Project 2025, including a very controversial candidate for the post of Attorney General and Minster of Justice. Although this latter nomination had to be withdrawn, his replacement is as loyal to Trump and his anti-democratic program as he is. I do not know enough of the US's institutions, but perhaps Donald Trump will try to crack the system to obtain a third term (following in Vladimir Putin's footsteps, whom he admires anyway). The two-terms limit was only introduced in the early 1950s. Given his age, much more than a third term may turn out to be difficult to achieve, as even Donald Trump will lose his fight against nature, but another option might be to pre-sort the Republican Party and/or the system to have one of his kin as the next President. To start with, the July 2024 National Convention of the Republican Party revealed clear evidence of a bombastic dynasty-building Trump family spectacle.

157 And this pardoning act is not the only move toward a semi-autocracy. An interesting, and worrying, sign is the preparation of a major overhaul of Washington known under the name of Project 2025. Key elements of this project are (i) to demolish of the Federal Ministry of Education, (ii) to bring the Federal Justice Department directly under the authority of the President, and (iii) to replace about 50,000 Federal civil servants by conservative Trump loyalists. For more, see https://www.project2025.org. In public, Donald Trump said that he does not know anything about this project (which is headed by prominent Trump loyalists). However, as President-Elect, he act fully in line with Project 2025. The mandate given to Elon Musk and his DOGE is telling.

issue of democracies organizing their own disappointment, as politicians tend to promise the unachievable, particularly during campaigning times. From at least the 1970s to the early 2000s, this implied that after being disappointed by the left, the electorate tended to turn to the right, and *vice versa*. However, the far right avoids to be the victim of this cyclical disappointment scenario by *a priori* adopting a clever blaming narrative in campaigning times, and by *posteriori* taking the path toward democratic backsliding when in power.

Already in the decades leading to the World War II disaster, many argued that this process of disappointment endogeneity is fertile soil for the birth of resentment and revenge-based political movements such as fascism and Nazism. Hence, the recognition of this intrinsic weakness of democracies, with their short election cycles full of electoral competition and overpromising, dates back more than a century. In the Netherlands, Menno ter Braak was an early "warner" in this respect (see, *e.g.*, van Krieken, 2019). So, notwithstanding that much is new in the 2020s compared to the 1920s, the analogies are striking, too. Of course, times are different. A key difference is that many former enemies are now operating under the roof of the EU. We may hope that the EU is a guardian of the rule of law. Regrettably, the democratic backsliding literature extensively discusses the cases of Hungary and Poland to argue that the EU is a rather weak guardian. In part, this is due to weaknesses in the EU's architectural structure – for instance, the EU cannot force Member States out, would they fundamentally and persistently violate rule of law principles. In another part, this involves lack of political courage or will to really act in time against Member States that undermine their liberal democracies. With the European shift to the (far) right, it becomes even more unlikely that the EU will emerge as a strict guardian of the rule of law anytime soon. Note that EU intervention in the democratic process in Member States is fundamentally problematic, as this may triggers accusations regarding technocratic ruling and the democratic deficit.

Moreover, as said, what is different since the 2010s, is the very clever electoral win-win strategy of the far right to persistently blame the rule of law for any failure of their own making. On the one hand, if the far right in power succeeds in living up to their promises, they will be the likely winner of the next election, as they can then claim that they have delivered on what they have promised. On the other hand, if they underdeliver because they cannot solve societal issues as simply as they announced during their electoral campaign, they point to the judges, journalists and other members of the

elite for blocking their way to success.[158] Victor Orbán is a master in this strategy, adding "Brussels" and "Soros" to his list of external enemies. Indeed, the new cabinet in the Netherlands, with Geert Wilders' PVV as the leading coalition partner, already anticipated this strategy by announcing that they will push anti-immigration measures to the extreme limit (hence, with a high likelihood of judges putting spokes in the wheel)[159] and that they want a series of opt-outs from the European Commission in not only this area, but also in that of environmental protection and agricultural externalities (hence, with a high likelihood of "Eurocrats" frustrating their policy package). This blaming strategy is out of reach for moderate political parties that are unwilling to attack the rule of law. Hence, again, we must conclude that the far right can benefit from a fundamental competitive advantage.

11.2 The (moderate) left's blindness

An often-expressed argument, both in academia as well as in the popular press, is that the (center) left is to be blamed for the rise of the far right. This argument might perhaps be largely misguided or made too easily (see below), but this does not mean that the (center) left can wash their hands in innocence – certainly not (*cf.* Muis & Immerzeel, 2017). To further understand the current popularity of the far right,[160] and hence modern processes of democratic backsliding, a little tour into the history of the (moderate) left since the 1990s is insightful. But first, I have to briefly reflect on the usual definitional subtleties, as I also had to do above when discussing the meaning of the far right (March, 2012). For my purposes, I simply distinguish the moderate from the far left. The moderate left includes, primarily, social democrats and *ditto* liberals. These are left-wing parties not too far removed from the center that regularly join

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158 This makes Macron's snap election strategy very high risk indeed. He now has to navigate a way out in a very much divided parliament, being forced to accept cohabitation either from the left or the right. Shortly after the summer, Macron appointed the former Brexit dealmaker Michel Barnier as his Prime-Minister, opting for a shift to conservative-right. Soon, the Barnier government hit the roadblock in the *Assemblée*. Since then, veteran François Bayrou is engaged in a battle to survive. Whether or not this escape route will turn out to be sustainable, very much depends upon the (lack of) willingness of the far-right Rassemblement National to support this government. The first signs are gloomy. Just to illustrate, the Barnier government's first budget was hit by more than 3,000 amendments.

159 Specifically, as I discuss in one of my reflections, Geert Wilders insisted on launching a crisis law, and was not open to discuss any alternative, much to the dislike of the opposition and coalition partner NSC. As said, I would argue that this is an essential part of his blaming strategy, as well as of his Orbánian agenda.

160 As briefly discussed in one of the reflections above, this is not true across all countries and continents, with Latin America being a clear exception.

government, either alone or in a coalition. Examples are the Parti Socialiste in France, the SPD in Germany, D66 and the PvdA in the Netherlands, Partido Socialista in Spain, the Labour Party and LibDems in the UK, and the Democrats in the US. The far left is further removed from a centrist position, and rarely joins those in power, instead staying in opposition. Many Green Parties are part of the far left in many countries, as are parties with explicit or implicit Communist roots.

The far left, since they never or only rarely join the ruling elite, only indirectly contribute to the rise of the far right by providing the counterpoint in the polarizing discourse. Here, therefore, I focus on the moderate left, which directly have an impact by having done what they have done whilst in power. Above, I already hinted at the Third Way, as signified by prominent leftist politicians in power who, in the 1990s, started to embrace the essence of the neo-liberal revolution. Basically, the likes of Tony Blair in the UK, Bill Clinton in the US, Wim Kok in the Netherlands, and Gerhard Schröder[161] in Germany started to adopt policies that used to be associated with conservatism and liberalism, particularly by launching impressive deregulation, flexibilization, privatization, and Welfare State reform programs, explicitly inspired by the prophecies of neo-liberalism (see, *e.g.*, Kuisma & Ryner, 2012).[162] With such leftist politicians in power following the neo-liberal hype of the day, key international organizations had an easy ride, producing the so-called Washington Consensus (see, *e.g.*, Williamson, 2009). This added the force of economic globalization to the national neo-liberal mix.

So, two of the three key external forces were actively promoted by the (center) left, ever since the 1990s: the neo-liberal revolution and economic globalization. The traditional focus on national issues related to the emancipation of the working class[163] were traded for a modern cosmopolitan emphasis on the Earth as a global marketplace. With this, as I will briefly explain below, came a turn to meritocracy (see, *e.g.*, Bogdanor, 2016). In this spirit, the moderate left adopted a series of policies that worked against the interest of the traditional working class. In this book-length essay, a few examples,

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161 Gerhard Schröder is a special and rather enigmatic case, as he was already very pro-Russia and pro-Putin during his time as *Bundeskanzler*.

162 Oftentimes, the reason offered for this turn was reference to a TINA-like logic (TINA = "There Is No Alternative"), following into the rhetorical footsteps of the UK's Prime-Minister Margaret Thatcher. Then, the key argument is that in modern times of international competition, the national Welfare State is too expensive and too rigid, undermining society's entrepreneurial spirit, or similar words along these lines.

163 Class is a complex notion, with subtle differences across societies. Here, I use the term working class to refer to the lower educated in society destined to work in lower-paid jobs (or to be out of work altogether).

as already extensively discussed above, should suffice to back up this claim (and see above for many more). A first example is labor market flexibilization in combination with shareholder capitalism facilitation. This tandem seriously undermined the power of labor versus capital. A second example is the reform of the State in the spirit of NPM. This dramatically increased the distance between the State and its citizens, particularly the lower-educated, giving a boost to the technocracy accusation. A third and final example is the stepwise retrenchment of the Welfare State. This drastically reduced security of the non- and unemployed, and at the lower end of the labor market. These neo-liberal twists within the realm of social-economic policies were combined with a (very) progressive agenda regarding cultural, environmental, and ethical issues. This further undermines the position of the moderate left in the eyes of the working class, as the latter tend to be rather conservative on these three sets of issues.[164] Given the electorates' tendency to only draft a leftist vote when favoring a left-wing position on both the cultural and economic dimensions, this does not bode well for the (center) left's competitive position.

On top of this, the neo-liberal agenda in combination with economic globalization is inextricably bounded up with a lenient position regarding immigration – an issue to which I return in greater detail further down the line. Actually, in principle, an essential part of the neo-liberal doctrine through an economic globalization lens is that both capital and labor must move freely across the globe to come together and to combine in any location where economic value can be maximized. This is a Ricardian logic pushed to the extreme, promoting a global division of labor that maximizes global welfare. Of course, in practice, there will be winners and losers, as well as costly downsides,[165] if correcting measures are put aside altogether (see, *e.g.*, Intriligator, 2004). This correction principle, often forgotten or implemented half-limbed, is part of the Washington Consensus doctrine as well, implying that the world should obey to any rulings of international authorities such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) – yet

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164 For instance, the left promotes an energy transition too costly and too rapidly for many without or in low-paid jobs.

165 The corona crisis and geo-political rivalry revealed another downside of economic globalization: the vulnerability of global value chains (see, *e.g.*, Brakman, Garretsen, & van Witteloostuijn, 2020). For instance, the EU is highly dependent on China and India for critical intermediate products, such as medical ingredients and rare metals. In reaction, a new industrial policy is being developed in Brussels with the aim to bring back the extraction and production of critical products to the European continent. Note that this can also undermine economic globalization indirectly, as different countries or regions start to compete for local extraction and production. A clear example of this is semiconductor production, which both the EU and the US seek to stimulate locally with heavy subsidies.

another example of a takeover by technocracy.[166]

Moreover, the people losing out locally should be supported by national measures in the context of a well-functioning Welfare State, with a social safety net in place. However, although all this can work brilliantly well on paper, this is very hard, if not impossible, to realize in daily practice. For instance, the persistent influx of lower-educated immigrants accepting low-paid jobs were seen as a good thing in the context of the cosmopolitan neo-liberal policy agenda, but as a clear threat by whom Hillary Clinton referred to as the "deplorables". Indeed, this immigration agenda exploded right in the face of those in charge of the cosmopolitan neo-liberal policy agenda, including the left-wing moderates joining the ruling elite in liberal democracies. As a result, many among the traditional working-class electorate of moderate left-wing parties felt abandoned and ignored.[167]

Furthermore, and related, I tend to believe that an extremely important element of the misguided (in my view) turn of the (center) left to what emerged as the neo-liberal consensus involves their view on societal inequality, and what should be done about this. This relates to the Welfare State reform agenda. Traditionally, the left emphasized equality in terms of outcomes, but the modern-day (moderate) left-oriented view relies on equality in terms of opportunities (see, *e.g.*, Roemer & Trannoy, 2016) – yet another turn toward a more conservative and liberal position. It is not to say that opportunity equality is not worth aiming for, but believing that this will automatically, over time, produce outcome equality is naïve, at best (see, *e.g.*, Phillips, 2004). Actually, this shift in focus may make matters worse as far as the moderate left's credibility in the eyes of the working class is concerned, for at least two reasons. The first reason is that many measures aimed at decreasing opportunity inequality tend to have not much of an effect at all, if any. The gateway to opportunity equality is education (see, *e.g.*, Blanden, Doepke, & Stuhler, 2023). A superficial analysis of the educational system in liberal democracies suffices to reveal that, in practice, education

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[166] As a sign of the relatively recent turn to economic de-globalization, triggered by Donald Trump's aggressive trade war strategy (targeting not only China, but the EU as well) during his first term as US President, the influence and power of the WTO has plummeted to under zero. The expectation was that Trump during his second term would be likely to engage in full-blown Mercantilism. Indeed, this is what is happening in full speed.

[167] In response to this backlash, many moderate parties start(ed) to mimic far right's anti-immigration agenda. In the German 2025 campaign, the later winner Friedrich Merz acted precisely in this way, even relying on AfD support in the *Bundestag* to promote tougher anti-immigration measures. In response, he and his CDU/CSU were accused of breaking down the *Brandmauer*, which is meant to isolate the far right from political influence and power.

is a class-reproducing institution.[168] The second reason is that opportunity equality is not positively correlated with outcome equality – quite the contrary. A revealing piece of evidence is the highly persistent discriminatory working of external and internal labor markets, with unequal outcomes (in terms of, *e.g.*, career and income) even after correcting for any educational differences (see, *e.g.*, Lang, & Manove, 2011).

In all, we should not be surprised that the traditional working class started to feel abandoned and ignored by the moderate left, particularly by social democrats (or liberals, in US terminology). Hilary Clinton's reference to the "deplorables" captures this sentiment perfectly well. Personally, I have a hard time understanding why the moderate left, and particularly so the social democrats, took this turn to start with – but they did. Was the key reason that they thought they could not win elections without mixing in with the neo-liberal *Zeitgeist*? Or were they convinced that all these neo-liberal policies would really benefit the traditional working class too, through miraculous trickle-down processes? Or, perhaps, is the educational gap between the leading political class and their traditional constituency so wide, also within left-wing circles, that the former simply no longer understood (and understand) the latter? Whatever the reason, in the end, the result is clear: The far right lured the traditional working class into their camp by emphasizing, time and again, that they were ready to fight their battle against the cosmopolitan elite, as personified by "woke lefties". And they not only backed up this claim by aggressively promoting anti-globalization nationalism of the nativist type, but also by adopting social-economic policies with a leftist connotation. In so doing, they cleverly benefited from the profile-blurring impact of the moderate left adopting a large centrist and right cosmopolitan neo-liberal policy agenda – hence no longer serving the interest of their traditional working-class electorate, the latter being caged within the boundaries of the nation-states which they happen to live in. No wonder that this abandoned electorate started to look elsewhere for their rescue.

Interestingly, Donald Trump seems to have adopted a similar strategy. On the one hand, in his rhetoric, he serves the interest of the lower and middle classes that feel squeezed by international competition in the era of globalization. With his Mercantilist policies, Trump promises to bring industries and jobs back to the US. The idea is that by imposing massive import tariffs, foreign companies (particularly from China and the US) will feel forced to move production capacity to the US to avoid this tariff wall. Of course, to the extent that they will not do so, inflation will be imported

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168 Self-evident examples involve the discriminatory access to Grand Écoles in France, Oxbridge in the UK, and the Ivey League universities in the US, notwithstanding scholarship programs.

into the US, traveling with the associated products and services. Moreover, any forced re-allocation in capital cannot but decrease global efficiency and welfare. On the other hand, being ultra-rich himself, Donald Trump is very friendly for the rich, as well as big business. A clear manifestation of this is his plan to substantially reduce taxes for both, still (incorrectly) arguing that trickle-down economics will imply that the not-so-rich will benefit from this as well. With Big Tech siding with Donald Trump, we witness the sudden emergence of an old-fashioned oligarchy in the leading nation-state among the liberal democracies.[169]

11.3 Alkibiades

Hunting for insightful treasures in the massive archives of history to learn lessons for the future can be an enlightening endeavor. Regarding democratic backsliding, these archives have indeed much to offer. Above, I particularly used references to telling examples from the 1930s and the 2010s to make the case that history might well, camouflaged in new disguises, repeat itself after all (see also the Gilded Age example, as briefly summarized above). Similarly, fiction may be instrumental as a supporting treasure hunting field. To further clarify what may be happening in the 2020s and what might be happening in the near future, I decided to turn to a recent novel that does both: analyzing history with the full-blown help of the impressive toolkit of literary fiction. This is Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer's 2023 novel *Alkibiades*. In this historical novel, Pfeijffer brings this prominent historical figure from Athens' antiquity to life by fictionalizing his memoires.[170] After the death of the legendary Perikles, Athens felt back to decades of turbulence full of challenges that undermined the city's unique form of democracy – perhaps not liberal, but still. Reading these fictional memoires makes very clear that the modern day's processes of democratic backsliding are anything but unique in the world's history. Below, by way of illustration, I

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169 A striking illustration of what this implies, is Amazon's Jeff Bezos intervention at *The Washington Post*, the daily newspaper he owns since 2013. On the opinion pages of this proud traditional newspaper, only contributions celebrating free speech and the free market will be publishes as of March 2025. The head of the opinion section resigned in response, but this does not bode well for the independent press under Trumpism – another clear sign of democratic backsliding.

170 Alkibiades left no written traces himself, but many contemporaries did. Before starting his very successful career as a full-time novelist, Pfeijffer was lecturing antiquity studies at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands. Indeed, in his novel, he includes about 170 pages of notes and references to cement his fiction in historical and philological sciences regarding the Greek antiquity. This is also why he spells Alkibiades and Perikles (and many other names) with a k rather than the English c, to remain closer to the original Greek rather than the later Latin spelling. Note that I read the original novel in Dutch, which is Pfeijffer's mother tongue, rather than the translation into English. So, my translation from the original Dutch may differ from the published English translation.

briefly cherry-pick examples from the *Alkibiades* novel in order to illustrate why I believe modern day's liberal democracies might well, in their own modern-day way, mimic the mistakes of Athens' society in 500-400 BC.

Alkibiades was a prominent politician in one of the oldest known democracies with traces in writing[171] in the world, Athens from the 6th (508) to the 4th (322) century BC, dismantled after the Macedonian invasion. The Greek word *demokratia* literally means people power. Back then, this form of direct democracy was limited to male citizens of Athens (including Attica) of 18 years and older. Children, females, foreigners, immigrants, and slaves had no voting rights. Over time, the Athens' democratic system was changed somewhat, and interrupted by two spells of oligarchic rule in 411-410 and 404-403 BC, but in essence the rules of collective decision-making were rather stable. In the Assembly, decisions were made on the basis of majority votes, after extensive deliberation. Also, holders of important positions, such as judges and generals, were elected by the Assembly, or were punished by the Assembly if found guilty of offences. Alkibiades experienced both, being elected as general (*strategos*) multiple times, as well as being convicted for blasphemy with the death penalty as his punishment (but he escaped to Sparta, Athens' eternal rival during Hellas' antiquity, and subsequently to the Persian empire, this other eternal rival).

Interestingly, Athens' democratic system was regularly eroded or even abandoned due to processes very similar to what we see in modern-day liberal democracies. Here, a pair of enlightening examples should suffice. One, once in a while, the people were captured by a demagogically talented populist. Probably the prototypical Athens' populist is Kleon. He and his many future clones (*e.g.*, Androkles, Hyperbolos, Kleophon, Kritias, and Phrynichus, to name just a few) brutalized the debate, aggressively launched personal attacks, manipulated the "will of the people", blamed the elite, spread fake news, demonized foreign enemies, *et cetera*. Two, once in power, these populists revealed a preference to replace democracy by autocracy (in the form of an oligarchy). Athens' two brief spells of oligarchy in 411-410 and 404-403 BC are cases in point. Athens was a very small community to modern-day standards and antiquity's technologies were impressive at the time, but highly primitive through 21th century's eyes, but the mechanisms of democratic backsliding were not that much different. Kleon would have admired Trump as a likeminded spirit, employing very similar tactics. So, against the *communis opinio*, I would argue that history does blatantly repeat itself, again and again, albeit in then-modern forms and shapes (at

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[171] In their excellent and intriguing monograph of 692 pages, the late Graeber and living Wengrow (2021) serve one striking example after the other of very old and long-gone societies that were very likely governed democratically, too.

least, as far as processes of democratic backsliding are concerned). The populist emperor does change clothes over time, in line with the fashion of the day, but s/he still is a populist emperor.[172]

11.4 The role of arrogance, complacency, and humiliation

The "deplorables" utterance of Hillary Clinton stands for more than just a thoughtless slip of the tongue – for much more, and fundamentally so, I would argue. Allow me a few paragraphs of speculation on the quicksand of the psychology of the cold ground, without any reference to the academic literature (of which there is plenty, certainly, I am sure).[173] This is what I think is extremely important: mainstream arrogance and complacency feed – unintentionally, one might hope – the feeling of humiliation among a large part of the electorate. No wonder that this electorate turns to a self-proclaimed Messiah explaining in direct and simple words that s/he will solve everything, after removing the ruling elite. What mainstream politicians radiate, time and again, is that

172 The third spell of autocracy was fatal, for both Athens' dominance in Hellas and for Alkibiades. After Sparta finally, after decades of war, defeated Athens (by the way, largely due to the very ineffective policies introduced under the *de facto* leadership of Athen's populist Kleophon), autocracy was installed under the leadership of The Thirty, headed by Kritias, a poet and former friend of Alkibiades. With Alkibiades still alive, living in exile in what is now Turkey (inland, in a village called Melissa, waiting for the King of Persia to arrive in the nearby city Kelainai), hopes that he would return to remove the autocrats in order to re-introduce democracy were still alive and kicking. To smother this lingering opposition, Kritias hired a small group of Spartans (indirectly, by contacting the Spartan admiral – or *strategos* – Lysandros, residing at Turkey's west coast) to murder Alkibiades at the age of 46, and very successfully so.

173 My face with the mask of a native speaker was already unmasked on the first page, I assume, but this clear example of a metaphorically derailing sentence removes the last straw of my pretense. This sentence is a literal translation of what I would have written in Dutch: *op het drijfzand van de psychologie van de koude grond*. That language matters in any democracy – or rather, any society – is one of the key arguments in this essay-turned-into-a-book. And perhaps, this is even more true in a multilingual context. Not only do I have to turn my thinking in Dutch into writing in English, a translation challenge indeed, but also does this come with a few side-effects typical for working in multiple (two, in my case) languages. Let me mention one. Culture and language are a chicken and an egg. Language mirrors culture, and the other way around. What I can and observe, how I can and do interpret the world, what I can and do imagine, and how I can and do express myself are all inextricably bound up with my language (this is a variant of the (in)famous Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (see, *e.g.*, Akkermans, Harzing & van Witteloostuijn (2010); Haans & van Witteloostuijn (2024); Urbig *et al.*, 2016). A typical illustration of this is the simple fact of life that each language has words that cannot easily or not at all be translated into another language. There is not much that can be done about this. I as a writer and you as a reader cannot remove this unmovable filter. We should only be aware of its existence. But who knows does my Duglish produce words and sentences here and there that, to a very limited degree, enrich English somewhat, this derailing sentence perhaps being an example.

they know better, and that all they need to do, really, is to explain, again and again, why that is so. Hillary Clinton is not the only producer of such slips of the tongue; many other mainstream politicians are guilty of this very same sin, across (liberal) democracies. In the Netherlands, key representatives of the classic left seem to have lost touch with their traditional constituencies. What might explain this, above and beyond what has been said above, and what can hence perhaps be done about this?

The modern-day leader of the ruling mainstream elite is far removed from this very mainstream's grassroots. The examples of Tony Blair, Hillary Clinton, Emmanuel Macron, and Frans Timmermans, to name just a few, are revealing. All are highly educated, oftentimes in expensive elitist institutions, all are very well off, and all have traveled across the world. Even if their parents were labor class, such as in the case of Frans Timmermans, they have nothing in common anymore with the low and middle class that they are supposed to represent. The distance has grown so large that their empathy is no longer capable of really understanding the world of what should be a large part of their constituency. A clear sign on the wall is the way in which they talk. Not only do they tend to speak in long and complex sentences, but their accent is also elitist – either due to their upbringing in elitist circles or because of their later upper-lip education and top-notch career. What they say, neither in substance nor in voice, fails to resonate well, if at all, with these traditional constituencies. What they radiate, clearly to be seen by their (potential) electorate, is arrogance, complacency, and superiority: Without saying this in so many words explicitly (they are not that stupid), they signal that they know better. Their superiority humiliates many among their (potential) electorate, time and again. Their traditional voters feel ignored, with the elite not taking care of their worries. Above and below, I discuss the example of immigration as a case in point – how this is seen as highly problematic by many among the mainstream parties' traditional electorate, but handled through an elitist cosmopolitan lens by these mainstream parties, up until today or for a very long time.[174]

Take the case of Donald Trump. Each time that he is being humiliated, this fuels further his energy – and his radiation force toward a large crowd of supporters. These supporters identify with what they see as the grandeur of Trump, his bling and *kitsch*.

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[174] Going squarely against the decade-old advice of Lakoff (2014), many mainstream parties are now engaging in overshooting in an attempt to push back the far right's popularity by adopting the frame of the far right, hence not only normalizing their discriminatory discourse, but also suggesting that they have to admit that the far right has always been right all the time after all. This classic mistake – not only by the conservative right, but also by the moderate left – is particularly mind-blowing in the context of the anti-immigration and anti-asylum rhetoric, which is now widely promoted across the political spectrum as the root cause of close-to-all wicked problems in liberal democracies.

They aspire to be like him – to be rich, opportunistic, and without any scruples. They identify with his hateful revenge narrative, with the idea that the traditional elite is the enemy. When they see him being attacked by representatives of this elite, they join him in his resentment against this elite. As this elite is topping the pyramid of democracy, they do not care at all that fighting against this elite will imply collateral damage to this very democracy along the way. Quite to the contrary. Fighting the elite implies, in a way, fighting democracy. Hence, if this elite warns the electorate that supporting Trump involves a threat to democracy, this is regarded as a recommendation by a large part of this electorate, rather than as a reason to turn to Joe Biden, Kamala Harris, or whoever is his main elitist opponent of the day. With his populist charisma, and with his decade-long brutal presence in the US's popular culture, Donald Trump is a master in fueling and benefiting from this powerful force of hateful resentment – of exploiting the feeling of humiliation, of being ignored and to be looked down at. And he is not alone in this. Another example was the Italian populist Silvio Berlusconi, who could benefit from a similar appeal for many decades.

And what is striking, and worrying, is that the rhetoric evolves from extreme to more extreme, to even more extreme. And the populists' supporters love this, as this is what they consider to be their right of the freedom of speech – the right to say what you think, to file political correctness in the archive of irrelevance. During the mass events in the final weeks before November 5 2024, the US's Presidential election day, Donald Trump's rhetoric became more and more outrageous, full of racism, sexism, and xenophobia, and with launching one personal insult after the other. Bullshit and lies were a main part of the menu. And among his loyal supporters, no-one cared. They were more than happy to be his applause machine – his echo chamber of aggressive brutalization. It is as if these mass events were meant to top those of the Nazi's in the 1930s. The process of normalization accelerated to such an extent that close to nothing is seen as abnormal.[175]

The deeper issue is that the rationality of mainstream parties is not, and never will be, effective versus the emotional gut feeling of much of the electorate: Emotions

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175 Although Donald Trump is exuberant, we see similar processes of excessive brutalization and normalization elsewhere in other liberal democracies. A more modest example is Geert Wilders, who is a master in pushing the rhetoric beyond the next boundary of political correctness, time and again. And now he is factually in power, this quickly translates into policy measures that move from extreme to more extreme. For instance, the Dutch far-right cabinet's compromise regarding "the strictest asylum-restricting package ever" now includes the measure to return Syrian asylum-seekers, even those with a permit to stay, to "safe" areas in Syria. With the Italian Prime-Minister Giorgia Meloni, he was in favor to open talks with Bashar al-Assad about this. The PVV's Minister of Foreign Trade and Development Aid, Reinette Klever, expressed a similar interpretation of what is "safe" by suggesting to put asylum-seekers into camps in the friendly and hospitable (her wording) country of Uganda.

rule many voters' decision-making, and not careful and systematic rational analyses. As explained above, associative feelings have replaced rational arguments in the world of social media This is one of the explanations as to why fake news that ignores facts can be so effective. Facts live in the domain of rationality, and fake news in that of emotionality. Without overestimating the rationality of the higher educated (after all, the *homo sapiens* is not that rational anyway), we can expect that rational reasoning is even less effective among the lower educated. Hence, if a higher educated mainstream politician argues, time and again, rationally that s/he is right and the lower educated electorate is wrong, this will only be extra fuel for a crackling anti-elite sentiment. So, on paper, the remedy is simple: Mainstream parties should recruit and promote politicians which whom their traditional constituency can identify seriously. That is, politicians with their background, speaking their language, liking what they like, and radiating sincere empathy. In practice, the opposite seems to be happening. *Quod erat demonstrandum*.

Reflection 9: The truth as democracy's victim

As of page 568 of his *Alkibiades* novel, Pfeijffer reimagines a dialogue between Alkibiades and Sokrates in which they discuss, after not having seen one another for eight years, the role of the "non-tangible" truth in democratic politics. Their conclusion is worryingly cynical: the truth will always be defeated by the lie. This "non-tangible" between parentheses is important, because this is different from physical law-like truth. To the extent that such truths are discussed in politics (they are not, usually), the conversation, if any, can and will be closed quickly if a tangible truth is being discussed. It is not politically controversial that a square has four corners, or that the distance by high-speed train between Amsterdam and Paris is about four hours, if not interrupted. But this is very different for any truth that is based on what cannot be seen, and what cannot but refer to physical proxies or social constructs. The reason for this is two-fold, at least. For the sake of the argument, I assume that an objective jury would indeed decide that there is a single truth – say, that Haitians in Greenfield in the US have not eaten pets of the local population, or that economic growth during the current Biden regime outperforms that under the earlier Trump administration.

Firstly, the truth is rigid – it is what it is. A politician defending the truth cannot rhetorically make what s/he has to say more convincing or compelling by adding lies to the truth. In contrast, the lie is highly flexible. The politician pushing for lies can add or change lies as seen fit to lure the electorate into her or his camp. Here, different from the old days of Athens' empire in antiquity, the social media provide ideal channels for further feeding the discussion with one appealing

lie after the other. In the absence of a tangible truth, an anchor for indisputable assessment is lacking. It is very difficult to come up with the uncontestable truth that not a single Haitian in Greenfield in the US ever has eaten a pet from the local population, and no-one has ever seen economic growth passing through the street where s/he lives. As a result, in cases like these, what is perceived as likely wins from what is actually true. Politics in a democracy is not about what is true, but about what the electorate can be convinced of as being more likely.

Secondly, because of the slippery status of the "non-tangibles", whatever is being said is turned into an opinion. This also holds for the truth. The truth is an opinion as any other, and hence must be confronted with any other opinion that is promoted in the political theater. It may be that Boris Johnson's claim during the Brexit campaign that the UK pays £350 million per week to the EU is outrageous, but still what he has to say deserves equal airtime as the Remain truth. It may be that Trump's Haitian pet-eating story is malicious and nonsensical conspiracy promotion, but no fact-checking can remove this narrative from the debate. [176] For this pair of reasons, the truth is a prime victim of the democratic debate.[177]

But it can be even worse. Lies, at least, relate to a counterpoint that reflects a piece of truth, in one way or the other. At least, a "non-tangible" truth can be opposed against an equally "non-tangible" lie, as two opinions that relate to a shared yardstick, in one way or another. That is, lies are defined against the counterfactual of the truth. Modern populists, of which Donald Trump is a prime example, use a rhetoric that not only involves lies, but also utter bullshit. Such bullshit is a world on its own, without any relation to any truth, or any reality. According to Harry Frankfurt (1986), bullshit is a larger enemy of the truth than lies. Reading the prose of Donald Trump as reproduced in this book, includes plenty of examples of bullshit – of narratives that lack any relation to the real world.

Yet another *quod errat demonstrandum*.

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176 Another example is the recent turn in the nitrogen debate in Dutch politics (see box 3). The new far-right government scrapped all measures of the former government, but not the ultimate goal to reduce nitrogen disposition to protect nature, as agreed within the EU. New measures are yet to be launched, but one is already announced by the new BBB minister of Agriculture, Fishery, Food Security and Nature, Femke Wiersma (recall that the BBB is a new political party established during the nitrogen crisis to represent the farmers' voice): The current model used to measure nitrogen disposition must be replaced by an alternative measurement that produces lower values. As a side note, the adding of "Fishery, Food Security" to the Ministry's name is telling, as is moving "Nature" to the back end.

177 In an autocracy, facts and truths are irrelevant entities anyway, and bullshit lives a happy life, both in politics as well as in the (social and traditional) media.

Riding against the wall

but there is always hope.

*hope that voters
will come to their senses,*

*hope that overpromising
will transform into a boomerang,*

*hope that underdelivering
will be seen through,*

*hope that aggressiveness
will no longer be tolerated,*

*hope that fake news
will be seen as misleading,*

*hope that the free press
will continue fighting,*

*hope that the center right
will regain their authenticity,*

*hope that the center-left
will develop an appealing narrative,*

*hope that simplicity
will backfire,*

*hope that the wish to be free
will prevail,*

*hope that minorities
will be embraced,*

hope that people
will get tired of hatred,

hope that voters
will turn their back to aggressiveness,

hope that empathy
will beat egoism,

hope that solidarity
will override self-interest,

hope that the liberal democracy
will turn out to be resilient,

hope that the far right
will be kicked out after all,

hope that the far right,
will ride against the wall.

there is always hope.

12 Can We Climb the Slippery Slope?

The process of democratic backsliding is like sliding from a slippery downward slope indeed, implying that finding our way up back to the top of this slope is anything but easy. This is the pessimistic conclusion from my ecological complexity argument. After all, the persistent and subtle democratic backsliding processes fueled by the three external forces, five internal mechanisms, internal political dynamics, cultural roots, and behavioral erosion, as visualized in Figures 2, 3 and 4, are associated with mutual feedback loops that in their visualized form are akin to the deadly embrace of a Medusa-like group of serpents. However, the recent examples of Poland, Turkey, and the UK suggest, in different degrees, that a turnaround may not be impossible after all. In the UK, the Tories were kicked out in one local election after the other, which translated into a landslide victory of the center-left Labour Party in July 2024's national elections. In the US, Joe Biden succeeded to remove Donald Trump out of office in 2020 for a while, hoping for a rehearsal of this Houdini act in the Autumn of 2024 (notwithstanding his seriously reduced agility; just before the finish line, he retreated in favor of Kamala Harris). In Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan's AKP was replaced by the opposition across many cities and provinces in the country's 2024 local election race. The most hopeful event was the PiS ousting by an oppositional coalition headed by former EU President Donald Tusk in Poland in the 2023 national election.

But the US illustrates that any such victory may well turn out to be temporary. As a tumbler, Donald Trump succeeded in bouncing back after four years in the political desert. And he is not alone in this. Many far-right populists have a comeback talent, or keep on trying for decades. For instance, PiS may well beat Donald Tusk in Poland next time around, and Marine le Pen is slowly progressing toward majority support ever since 2011. This may not only be due to the fanatic and stubborn character of the politicians involved, but might also be explained by the brutalization and blaming strategy of the far right in combination with the disappointment cycle that is so typical for the modern-day electorate. That is, whatever political coalition or family is in power, they are very likely to disappoint a large part of the electorate, as explained above. As the far right excels in aggressively blaming the elite for everything that goes wrong, their comeback potential is very large indeed.

Thinking about this, one might wonder whether Donald Trump simply echoes the move of a large part of the electorate to the far right, or the other way around (*cf.* the discussion above: what is the more powerful force, the voice of the political elite or that of public opinion?). Already after Donald Trump's 2016 victory, Achen and Bartels (2017) argued in favor of the latter. Would the Republican Party not have embraced

Donald Trump, and would they have pushed him aside after his first term that ended so dramatically with the Capitol Hill riot and his electoral fraud conspiracy rhetoric, US politics would have looked very different in 2024. However, within about a decade, the Grand Old Party transformed, for whatever reason, into a sect with Trump as the infallible leader. To paraphrase Bill Clinton, "It is all politics, stupid." Of course, this is too simplistic, as the influence of societal undercurrent cannot be dismissed, as extensively explained above, but still.

An interesting question is one of cause and effect. Is Donald Trump the cause of democratic backsliding, if any, or is he the effect of a process of democratic backsliding that is already underway for quite some time? In support of the latter, some observers point to the wide distrust in the US's democracy among large parts of the population long before the rise of Donald Trump. That is, many considered Washington DC to be an elitist "swamp" long before Donald Trump appeared on the political scenery, full of the rich and the powerful manipulating politics in their own interest (as witnessed, *e.g.*, by the massive financial support for both parties from the extravagant rich, as well as the hidden but large influence of lobbying organizations representing the capitalist top).[178] The rich and famous rule American politics, the argument goes, against the interest of the poor majority (to illustrate, in 2024, the richest 130,000 Americans own as much as the poorest 117 million Americans). Ironically, this poor majority turns to a very rich man known for his narcissism for their savior. This may be why US President John Adams words in 1814 might turn out to be true after all – that each democracy, in the end, will commit suicide due to the blindness of "the people" for the need to protect this very democracy. The reason, though, then will be opposite to what John Adams thought at the time: it is then not because of the dominance of interests of the poor, but rather the contrary.

However, this may be so in the US, but other countries are very different, both culturally and institutionally, with very different path dependencies (another key complexity notion). In this context, another very interesting counterfactual is Wallonie, the French-speaking part of Belgium. Due to a very strict *cordon sanitaire*, enforced by both journalists and politicians, the far right is basically absent altogether in their political arena. Instead, the far left joins the Parti Socialiste in attracting votes that flow to extreme and radical-right parties in many other liberal democracies, but without any sign of democratic backsliding. This cannot be attributed to Wallonie's

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178 In her 2024 book, with Joe Biden still be solidly in power, Rena Steinzor predicted what is happening in the US during the early days of Donald Trump's second term. She convincingly describes how six far-right forces in the US are working toward this outcome since decades – big business, the House Freedom Caucus, the Federalist Society, Fox News, white evangelicals, and armed militias.

economic strength or success (as this region is economically struggling now for many decades), or to a lack of immigration crises (Belgium, including the French-speaking part, receives at least as many immigrants per capita as the Netherlands). Hence, political analysts take the Walloon case as evidence for the effectiveness of a strict *cordon sanitaire*.[179] However, I am not sure whether re-erecting such a *cordon sanitaire* is an option after the gates have been opened toward the normalization of the far right.

So, by way of stock-taking, what is the current state of democratic backsliding versus resilience? Answering this question is anything but easy, and cannot be more than a snapshot on the day the shot is taken. By the end of June 2024, we have seen elections in the EU and India. Confusingly, through the lens of democratic backsliding, this pair gives both a factual and a counterfactual. And even more puzzling, the EU election outcomes provide very different clues across countries. On the one hand, the Indian elections turned into a surprising disappointment for Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu-nationalist BJP. Only with the support of allies, he can start with his (unique) third term as India's leader. Clearly, the opposition's campaigning strategy of emphasizing the danger for India's democracy of a landslide victory of BJP paid out well. So, perhaps, the Indian process of democratic backsliding came to a standstill. On the other hand, we cannot but conclude that a further shift toward the far right has emerged in the EU elections, overall. Actually, the Chair of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, herself a center-right politician from the German Christian-democrats, already kick-started the process of far-right normalization before election day, signaling that she might be willing to collaborate with Fratelli d'Italia's fraction in the European Parliament (the European Conservatives and Reformists group);[180] a further sliding along the slippery slope of democratic demise is happening in plain sight.

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179 In Belgium, too, this *cordon sanitaire* is slowly crumbling into pieces, with the Flemish Vlaams Belang now being in power in a few municipalities. Similarly, the EU is leaning in to the far right, with not only the European Parliament being more open for collaboration with the far right, but also with the far right being represented within the European Commission.

180 Indeed, a member of Meloni's far-right Fratelli d'Italia was nominated by the European Commission and accepted by the European Parliament as European Commissioner.

In Box 2.0, I briefly reflect in greater detail on the recent outcomes of the 2024 elections for a new European Parliament, which produced many data that nicely map the complexity of the political landscape. All figures in this table are from June 10 2024, when the counting was still ongoing in many European countries. So, although the difference will be small, the final allocation of seats may deviate somewhat from what is provided here. Note that I focus on broad strokes in Box 0.2, adding detail and nuance in a series of footnotes.

Box 0.2: Closing sigh

Indeed, as expected, extreme or radical-right political parties such as the Austrian FPÖ (from 3 to 6 seats), the Dutch PVV (from 1 to 6), the French Rassemblement National (from 18 to 30), the German AfD (from 9 to 15), and the Italian Fratelli d'Italia (from 10 to 24) have performed (very) well.[181] In the European Parliament, the net effect is that the center's limited loss (with the 9 winning seats of the Christian-democratic family being insufficient to compensate for the Liberal family's loss of 22 seats) implies that a *cordon sanitaire* keeping the winning far right (jointly, both far-right families gained 13 seats) away from the gravity of power can still be maintained.[182] However, this seemingly clear picture hides many per-country or per-region subtleties, of which I here list a few that I believe stand out from the crowd (in no particular order):

1. The key signal of the danger of democratic erosion comes from the European Big Three. In France, the projected large win of Le Pen's Rassemblement National translated into a huge victory at the expense

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[181] In seats, the interpretation of the 2024 versus 2019 outcomes is rather fuzzy, given the initial reduction of the total number of seats in European Parliament from 751 to 705 (an afterburner from Brexit), and the subsequent increase to 720 seats in the new parliament. But by and large, the changes give a good idea in terms of the patterns across and within countries.

[182] Much is still unclear, though. Not only will much depend upon the political strategy of the center (will they maintain this *cordon sanitaire*, or will they move further toward the far right – either formally by cementing alliances or informally by mimicking far-right policies?), but also may future family formation outcomes reshuffle power positions in the European Parliament. Will both larger far-right fractions merge into one large family, and where will the many newcomers end up? A merger would create a far-right family with 131 seats. This could have expanded further when a share of the 53 unaffiliated seats joins the far right, but a few far-right parties decided to establish a third far-right family (with, e.g., the Dutch PVV, German AfD, and Hungarian Fidesz).

of Macron's Renaissance party. [183] In Germany, notwithstanding a series of scandals, the AfD jumped to second place, behind the Christian-democrats. [184] In Italy, Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia was not punished for two years in government, as normally is the case, but was able to consolidate its voter share *vis-à-vis* the latest national elections, which translates into a big jump in the European Parliament.[185]

2. In the second tier of large Member States, the far right turned out not to benefit from the overall pro-populism sentiment at all. In Poland, Donald Tusk's center-right coalition increased their number of seats from 16 to 20, with the far-right PiS shrinking from 25 to 20 seats. [186] In Spain, the left and right-centrist leading pair – the social and Christian-democrats,

[183] As expected, President Emmanuel Macron's troubles translated into a landslide victory for Rassemblement National (with a jump from 18 to 30 seats) at the expense of the Renaissance party and allies (dropping from 23 to 13 seats). The latter partly explains the losses of the liberal Renew Europe family in the European Parliament. Another nuance is that at the left-wing tail of the French spectrum the social-democrats and like-minded parties gained seats, too (increasing from 13 to 22 seats). Macron's response to his party's expected electoral disgrace – announcing snap national elections for early July – was quite a gamble indeed. This could have speeded up the process of democratic erosion by catapulting the far right to a majority position in the French parliament. Indeed, in the first round, the far right roughly performed as well as they did in the EU elections (with approximately 33% of the votes). With a strong leftist block (with about 28% of the votes) and Macron's centrist movement still sizeable (just above 20% of the votes), the gamble moved quickly into the second round of the pop-up national elections for a new parliament. In this second round, the usual collaborative strategy among the anti-Rassemblement National parties turned out to be successful, relegating Len Pen's Rassemblement National to the third place in terms of the number of seats in parliament. Although we now know that by working together the center and left have been able to push the far right to the third place, we have to wait and see how the conservative-right coalition of first Michel Barnier and next François Bayrou will impact French politics.

[184] The current coalition is the big loser, which is yet another proof of the observation that many European elections take the shape of a national referendum (France being another clear case in point). Perhaps strikingly, the Christian-democrats of the CDU/CSU have weathered the storm, keeping their seats (30, in total), and ending up in an impressive pole position in this national referendum (attracting twice as many votes as the number two AfD). However, nine months later, the AfD attracted more than 20 per cent of the votes in Germany's 2025 national elections – again, so much for electoral stability.

[185] Again, nuance is needed, as the rise of Meloni is associated with the fall of Salvini, with his Lega dropping from 22 to 8 seats. Also, the social-democrats performed surprisingly well, increasing their number of seats from 15 to 20.

[186] The Polish result is no guarantee that the reversal of the process of democratic backsliding is succeeding, as PiS and far-right allies are still very large, and since Tusk's coalition partners did not perform well at all. Note that also in other East-European countries, smaller far-right parties gained significantly, such as in Bulgaria and Czechia.

respectively – jointly collected 42 seats (from 33 in 2029), albeit changing position (with now the Christian-democrats leading the pack with 22 seats, up from 13 in 2019); both far-right parties – Vox and Junts – failed to gain any seat, staying at 7 jointly.[187]

3. Sentiment in the three Baltic countries is clearly dominated by the Russian threat, refueled by the war in Ukraine. In Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, the far right was and is not very influential, and the broad center is very stable. Only in Estonia, a party that is member of the far-right Identity and Democracy family gained a seat; and in Latvia and Lithuania, the 2 and 1 seats for a member party of the far-right European Conservatives and Reformists family maintained their position.

4. In the rest of Eastern Europe, next to the Baltics and Poland, Hungary and Slovakia stand out as interesting cases, as both countries have a Prime-Minister acting as far-right politicians.[188] In both countries, the opposition performed (very) well. In Hungary, the sudden and surprising rise of Fidesz spinoff Tisza, headed by Orbán's former employee Péter Magyar, gained 7 seats, with Fidesz dropping from 12 to 10 seats. In Slovakia, the oppositional PS party leapfrogged Fico's Smer, with 6 and 5 seats, respectively.

5. In Scandinavia, by and large, the far right turned out to be unable the gain any ground. In Danmark, the Danish People's Party could not improve upon 2019's single seat; in Finland, the far-right PS dropped from 2 to 1 seat; in Sweden, the 3 seats of both Swedish members of the far-right European Conservatives and Reform family are now still 3, albeit in the hands of the Swedish Democrats only.

6. In the low countries, the election outcomes were much more moderate than expected. In Belgium, the projected jump of the far right failed to materialize, with Vlaams Belang neither wining nor losing, and having

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187 An interesting question is why the far right faces a hard time to gain a foothold in the other Mediterranean Member States of Greece and Spain. What can explain the difference vis-à-vis France and Italy? All these countries must deal with similar challenges (specifically regarding climate change and immigration), neutralizing these as potential explanations. Note that Portugal saw a substantial increase in the support for the far right, with roughly 18 per cent of the votes.

188 Both run a party with very different roots, with Victor Orbán's Fidesz having Christian-democratic and Robert Fico's Smer social-democratic origins. This illustrates how parties triggering democratic backsliding can do so on a variety of official political banners. Interestingly, neither Orbán's aggressive and sneaky personal attacks on Péter Magyar, nor the physical assault on Fico have turned out to be game changers in far right's favor.

to share the pole position of 3 seats with the center-right parties in both Flanders (NV-A) and Wallonie (MR, being the only one in the top three winning a seat). In the Netherlands, the performance of the far-right PVV was below expectation, ending in second position with 6 seats after the left GroenLinks-PvdA alliance with 8 seats. [189]

Of course, much more can be said beyond this quick-and-dirty analysis that would create further ambiguity, which I do partly in a series of footnotes, but this mixture of factuals and counterfactuals confirms the need for ecological complexity analyses of processes of democratic demise. We still must invest heavily in understanding the precise (interaction between) conditions driving, stopping or even reversing processes of democratic backsliding.

To explain how all this may relate to this book-sized essay's ecological complexity perspective is too much to ask for as my argument has already expanded far beyond the usual paper length. This has to wait until after the outcomes of another series of crucial elections are known. By now, certainly the outcome in the US does not bode well for the future – or rather, does bode well for the future of the far right.[190] Future elections will produce even more data, including counterfactuals, that can be fed into a comprehensive machine learning exercise (see also the recent election outcomes in Austria, the EU, France, Germany, India, and the UK). Are these and other counterfactuals temporal hiccups in a long-run trend of democratic backsliding

[189] As the Dutch 2023 national elections triggered a shock wave throughout Europe, this case is particularly interesting. For whatever reason, the Dutch electorate revealed yet another manifestation of volatility by "punishing" the partners in the new government coalition. Not only is PVV's performance far below that in the 2023 national elections, but the conservative-liberal VVD drops from 5 to 4 seats, whilst the BBB and NSC only gained 1 seat each (both being new parties that hence were absent in the European parliament until now). Moreover, much of the PVV's gains are due to the extreme right FvD's massive losses (from 4 to 0 seats), whilst two very pro-European and left-leaning parties – D66 and Volt – jointly increased from 2 to 5 seats. So, what does this mean through the lens of democratic backsliding?

[190] In the Austrian September 2024 national elections, the far-right FPÖ emerged as the winner, with about 29 per cent of the votes, the Christian and social-democrats coming second and third with roughly 26 and 20 per cent. However, because the FPÖ party leader Herbert Kickl is known for his extreme-right speak and his very pro-Putin stance, the other parties initially erected a *cordon sanitaire*. Although the FPÖ was, after failed negotiations, excluded from the coalition, they are clearly seen as a legitimate partner. Note that the F in FPÖ means *Freiheit* or freedom, a label that is kind of appropriated by the far right in the 21th century.

associated with the persistent increase of the far right's popularity, or is the *Zeitgeist* ready for its next transformation? If we take a really longitudinal perspective, we cannot but conclude that what we consider to be the benchmark of progress today, may well take a very different shape tomorrow.

We are not like ants or bees, to mention two other pro-social species, which are driven by unchanging "moralities" and "values" over a history of millions and millions of years. Even during the much shorter history on Earth of the *homo sapiens*, we have seen amazing variation in "moralities" and "values" across space and over time. I put "moralities" and "values" between quotation marks, because both terms can have very different meanings for many different people – again, across space and over time. We in the modern West are very different from the Greeks and Romans populating the Earth thousands of years ago, and we do not agree on much with current-day China, Iran, or Russia.[191] And within the West, the now much better prepared Donald Trump is acting as "the enemy from within", seeking an alliance with Putin and attacking the Western coalition (as symbolized by the NATO). This implies a form of cultural relativism that makes any normative argument hard to sustain against any form of critique voiced through a different cultural or normative lens.

As said in the Introduction, I cannot escape from such a normative benchmark. I passionately believe in the universality of the post-war invention of human rights. Would the majority of the world's population vote for the establishment of an autocracy or an illiberal democracy, I still will wholeheartedly argue that this is a mistake – a normative standpoint indeed, and probably even an outing of cultural superiority in the eyes of many. This anti-democratic voting behavior is not a *contradictio in terminus*. The Greeks and Romans could vote for a temporary switch to a dictatorship (albeit only a small minority of the population had voting rights), and the majority in many of today's liberal or illiberal democracies does express their dislike of specific human rights, time and again – hence denying their universality.[192] Hence, I really hope that the pessimistic conclusion that seems to follow from my ecological complexity argument will prove

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191 The Ukraine conflict made this painfully clear, with many outside the West not openly backing or even officially opposing the Western coalition in their fight against Russia. And by now, the West is even more isolated, with the US turning sides.

192 Through this lens, the far right actively promotes an outright regressive agenda, catapulting societies back to the old days of the dominance of the teachings of the Church in areas such as abortion, gender (in)equality, LGBTQIA+ rights, and family values. Much of this agenda is even very conservative through the eyes of a modern-day center-right conservative. See the above discussion as to how this relates to, *e.g.*, fascism and nativism. Or in the terminology of Ulrich Beck: many people seem to prefer the first to the second (reflexive) modernity.

to be wrong, and that the recent counterfactuals turn out to be the first signs of yet another change of the *Zeitgeist*. In that regard, I decided for myself to be optimistic that my pessimism will turn out to be misguided, in the end. That is, perhaps, the majority of the electorate across many countries will, after a while, become so depressed from the doom and gloom rhetoric of the far right that they will return to moderate alternatives after all. Of course, a *sine qua non* is that the democratic resilience of the system of checks and balances will prove to be strong enough to avoid irreversible democratic erosion in the meantime. Fingers crossed.

Reflection 10: Kamala Harris or Donald Trump

Early October 2024
This final reflection box is inserted in this text on a Wednesday in early October 2024, about a month before the US's Presidential election day. The race is tight – perhaps tighter than ever, at least according to one poll after the other. Donald Trump looked certain to win until Joe Biden suddenly, and at a very late stage, stepped out of the election, recognizing that his age and fragility were an unsurmountable barrier after being criticized for his disastrous performance in a widely televised debate. The Democratic Party quickly came together to back Kamala Harris as his replacement. On November 5 2024, the outcome of the election is very likely to be decided in seven swing States. The outcome of this selection, including its aftermath, will be an important factual or counterfactual in the context of what I have argued on the many pages above. So, by the time the outcome and aftermath have crystalized, I will return to this reflection to add an interpretation as the final word of the main body of this book-length essay.

Early November 2024
This is what I do now, on November 6 2024 – another Wednesday, a month later. After a dramatic campaign, full of unprecedented rhetoric of aggressive far-right nature, the outcome is a clear victory for Donald Trump, who will hence be inaugurated as the US's 47th President on January 20 2025. This second term will be very different from his first term, in all likelihood. He is now well prepared, he will no longer be kept in check by experienced veterans in his cabinet and within the Federal bureaucracy (*aka* what is laid down in the Project 2025 document), and he will benefit from a Republican majority in the House and Senate (for sure). So, in theory, he can introduce a whole battery of non-democratic measures, would he indeed aspire to do so. Soon, we will know whether his rhetoric is just that, rhetoric, or whether he

will indeed unleash his authoritarian and dictatorial impulses. And in the latter case, we will find out to what extent the US's institutional checks and balances will or will not be able to avoid or slow down processes of democratic backsliding.

Indeed, during his campaign, Donald Trump's words were full of the usual extreme-right and anti-democratic rhetoric. For instance, he announced he would fight against "the enemies from within" when in power, these enemies from within being the "Communists" of the Democratic Party, and he threatened to silence the fake news-producing traditional media (*e.g.*, by withdrawing their licenses).[193] His speeches were full of hateful revenge talk, explicitly or implicitly promoting the use of violence against all those (which are many) he considers to be his enemies. Apparently, for reasons explained in this book, the majority of those who took the trouble to vote (60% of the population, with slightly more than half of these backing Trump – hence, 40% apparently does not really care anyway), see no issue in voting a narcissistic populist with authoritarian aggressiveness into power. For them, he is the Messiah who will stop the invasion of immigrants, who will force prices down, and who will make America great again, repairing the economic damage done by Joe Biden cum suis. In the four years to come, the US and the world will experience whether or not – and if so, to what extent – democratic backsliding will kill the US democracy as we used to know it.

Early March 2025
By now, Trump's second term is underway for about a month. In this very short period of time, the world order is quickly turned upside down. On a daily basis, the Trump administration actively undermines what was left of the coalition of liberal democracies. Setting aside the horror of executive orders meant to radically transform the US into a semi-autocratic State, of the stream of policy announcements the series of tariff strikes is the least shocking and surprising.

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193 Quite a few of these veterans said in public that they consider Donald Trump to be a fascist (which was subsequently used by Kamala Harris against Donald Trump, but clearly in vain). Not surprisingly, Trump will not involve such veterans in his second government anymore, but rather turn to his impressive peloton of loyalists. Note, by the way, that his victory has the upside that the US's democracy will not be immediately put to a stress test. After all, would he have lost the election, he already indicated that this could only be due to massive fraud – the same type of fraud that caused him to be beaten by Joe Biden in 2020. Hence, in that case, he and his supporters would have aggressively attacked the democratic outcome through all means, including the spreading of conspiracy theories and an ongoing judicial battle. Now he has won, this threat to trust in democracy has suddenly evaporated, knowing that the Democratic Party is very unlikely to adopt a similar democracy-undermining strategy post-election.

More mind-boggling are the idea to transform the Gaza Strip into a Riviera-like resort, the direct intervention in British and German politics in an brutal attempt to support the far right, and to give away close to everything to Putin to quickly strike a deal regarding peace in the Ukrainian war. And this is only the beginning. If I am right, all this part of a "flooding the zone" strategy, as promoted by Trump's first-term ideologist Steve Bannon. This strategy fits perfectly well with the culture of immediacy, blowing away any rational opposition by launching a tsunami of social media-friendly political acts, all in line with the scenario predicted so convincingly by Steinzor (2024). So, if the other side fails to mobilize an effective opposition, we are witnessing the end of the US democracy as we used to know it.

Democratic demise

It might just be me,
but I want to be free.
No democracy
implies autocracy.

Luckily, many are like me.
Horror of the nightmare of the far right.
Killing what is right.
The Messiah wannabee.

Meloni, Le Pen, Orbán, Farage,
like an aggressive heavy metal pit.
A crazy barrage
of frightening bullshit.

History is repetitive
in a society that is not reflective.

When in power
they attack what should be precious.
Referring to "the will of the people",
they suffocate the free press,
they capture the judiciary,
they demonize woke lefties,
they venerate disrespect,
they discriminate minorities,
they close the borders,
they love hatred,
they cherish feelings of revenge,
they create polarizing divide,
and they willingly kill our liberal democracy.

Centrist parties normalizing what is abnormal,
when they feel under threat.
Referring to "the will of society",

they mimic far-right narratives,
they collaborate with anti-democrats,
they contribute to polarization,
they join the blaming game,
they adopt extremist policies,
they simplify complexities,
they embrace roughening their languages,
they turn into look-alikes,
they collapse in the process,
and they unwillingly kill our liberal democracy

The future can be different,
as long as we are not indifferent.

Hungary, model nation.
Putin, illiberal hero.
Politics of frustration.
Immigration to zero.

The elite as strawman,
guilty of everything wrong,
because they belong
to a world that the far right seeks to ban.

It might be just me,
but I want to be free.
No autocracy,
but democracy.

Stepping Stone for a Manifesto of a New Broad Center Party

Writing this book-length essay was quite an endeavor indeed, involving massive reading and much thinking, trying to connect many dots with oftentimes meandering lines, after first identifying which dots to include in the first place. It made me realize that even the liberal democracy I grew up with in a relatively peaceful and evidently very wealthy country such as the Netherlands is not as resilient as I always had assumed – implicitly so, the latter, but still. This realization was further deepened by the surprise victory of Geert Wilders' PVV and the formation of a new cabinet under, *de facto*, his leadership. This raises two questions, at least. The first question is: So what? Perhaps, the liberal democracy is outdated anyway; perhaps, it is time for another country-level governance model. But what could that be, perhaps, without sacrificing the strengths of the current liberal democracy that I believe are worth cherishing? The second question is: What could or should the established elite do to avoid the demise of the liberal democracy, provided any alternative will imply societal regression? Is there anything they can sensibly do from which we could expect that it perhaps might work? Two Big Questions indeed, with a lot of perhaps's. Regarding the first question, I cannot but agree with Winston Churchil: "Many forms of government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that [liberal: AvW] democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed it has been said that [liberal] democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time" (parliamentary speech on November 11 1947).

Of course, (liberal) democracies come in many different forms and shapes. These forms and shapes are crystalized in the specifics of the country's rules of the political game. As a non-expert, I would need more time to investigate what is out there to start with, and what might or might not work in specific circumstances, particularly those associated with radicalized or reflexive modernity. Is a multi- or a two-party system to be preferred? With or without a district system? And with a proportional or first-past-the-post election rule? Does a voting percentage threshold make any sense? And if so, at what level? How many members of parliament is an optimal number, and how much should be invested in parliamentary support? Is it wise to have one or two parliamentary chambers, and what should be the exact role of each? Should members of both chambers be elected through a similar procedure, or must members of the law-quality controlling chamber be selected differently? Is the political party as the key political organizational actor still viable? If not, what can be the alternative? What should be the term of both chambers, and should both be recomposed in different rhythms? What other formal institutions must operate alongside parliament with which roles in a well-functioning liberal democracy, such

as planning bureaus, research units, audit offices, and the like? Should forms of direct democracy be introduced much more widely? These and many other political governance questions, as said, should be answered by knowledgeable actors, such as experts and politicians. Would I have to provide answers, too, I need considerable time to do my homework first. Hence, I leave this at peace, for now.

So, here I only reflect on the second question. A few potential answers to this second question have been discussed above, to some extent. But is there more to say about this, perhaps? Let me reflect on this second question by assuming that I write the rest of this little note as the stepping stone for a to-be-written manifesto as the to-be party leader of a brand-new to-be-established broad center party in a liberal democracy. I do so without any references to any literature (but with pointed name-dropping) – and hence without any back-up in the form of empirical evidence or theoretical lenses. Hence, this is a personal note indeed. In a way, this is an idiosyncratic essay at the back-end of an academic book-sized one in the form of just a rambling written monologue in an attempt to come up with what might be a somewhat meaningful and easy-to-comprehend actionable wrap-up of a lengthy and rather complex line of argumentation. And indeed, my essayistic meandering style may well fit nicely with the modern-day culture of immediacy. Hence, with a bit of luck, what I have to say here may go viral in the digital global world of the social media. But probably, this hope is way too optimistic, as the lack of appealing videos and visuals is a clear and killing weakness.

This new broad center party is established with a mission: To shake-up the established party system in an attempt to save the liberal democracy from backsliding. So, this new party, and the to-be party leader, are not inhibited by any lack of ambition. What could this new member of the future elite do? The first set of actions relates to this very concept of the elite. This is an important problem. Karl Marx (and Friedrich Engels) popularized the idea of the class struggle between the *bourgeoisie* and the proletariat. After about 175 years, it might be so that we tend not to use this pair of terms anymore to refer to the key classes in our radically modernized society (but Hilary Clinton came close when she spoke of "the deplorables", and Joe Biden of "garbage"), but in essence not that much has changed since then, really. In the modern-day discourse, initiated and popularized by the far right, we refer to "the people" and "the elite" (nothing new under the sun here). And in this context, the far right does claim to stand up for the interests of "the people" against "the elite", a claim very similar to the one of Communists and socialists earlier in history. Maliciously, the far right points to "the elite" as the enemy from within of "the people" – a very effective polarizing rhetorical trick; but, again, this is not so different from the far left in the 19th

and early 20th century referring to "the *bourgeoisie*" as the enemy of "the proletariat". Of course, the proclaimed Messiah has radically changed side, from the far left to the far right. And with this shift, the suggested solutions radically changed color as well. But even so, both far extremes share a deep dislike of the liberal democracy. Indeed, it may be that history does not repeat itself in great detail, but the broad strokes are quite time-persistent after all.

Marx already lucidly analyzed the root causes of the class struggle. And again, the similarities are striking. In his analysis, the internal dynamics of capitalism were predicted to produce outcomes that could not but lead to a fatal revolutionary class struggle. Roughly, these internal dynamics would create a growing gap between the capital-owning *bourgeoisie* and the labor-providing proletariat, particularly so in a capitalistic system that would expand internationally in search for ever-more profit. This gap would be even deeper due to the alienation effect of then-modern mass production technologies. I leave it to the reader to spell out in greater detail the analogies with the modern-day processes of radicalized modernization and modern-day AI-based technologies, but to me these are more than obvious: With the terminology of neo-classical economics, modern-day economists like Thomas Piketty and Joseph Stiglitz came up with a surprisingly similar diagnosis. Neo-liberalism and globalization in tandem produced a capitalistic dynamic that made the rich elite richer and richer (certainly in asset terms), leaving many poor people behind in survival-of-the-fittest mode. In Western liberal democracies, the focus in this book-length essay, the latter materialized in three forms, by and large: disappearing industries and jobs due to outsourcing to cheap-labor countries, ongoing flexibilization of labor market arrangements, and inflow of immigrants in search for a decent living. In parallel, the asset-owning elite is footloose, moving to where-ever they can keep most of their money in their pockets.

Clearly, with perhaps the exception of the roughly three decades of the build-up of a well-established and fine-grained Welfare State after the Second World War, the poor(er) labor-delivering masses always stood at the wrong side of history, with the capital-owning rich(er) elite at the other side being perfectly able to take care of accumulating their own richness. The industrialists are not so different from the modern-day's tech oligarchy. The poor(er) class are, by and large, chauvinists caged in their local nation-state; the rich(er) class are, essentially, footloose cosmopolitans considering the Earth as their home. After about 175 years, and assuming that we have a hard time to believe that the way-out offered by the far right is to be preferred (I do not, for sure), we might have lost our fate in the Marxian solution of Communism (I do, certainly so), but we may still have to search for ways forward that might turn

out not to be that different after all. In line with this book-length essay's analysis, too, key still is to reduce the inequality gap between the rich and the poor, and dampen the latter's complacent anger by providing economic security across the board (see Box 7 above for policy examples). However, given the dominance of emotional identity issues, this is unlikely to suffice. Hence, any political party that seeks to lure the electorate away from the far right back to their original political home turf in the broad center (or center left, for that matter) must relate to the wicked issue of immigration.

Regarding asylum-seekers, there is only so much that a nation-state in the West can do; completely closing borders is attractive-sounding rhetoric, put simply impossible in practice, as is sending asylum-seekers back home. This is a no-brainer, one would expect, although many seem to think otherwise, given the popularity of the "grand deportation" rhetoric. The broad center should honestly explain that this is the perhaps hard reality, and that hence we should opt for (a) investing in the troubled regions where these asylum-seekers come from, (b) implementing efficient and fair decision-making procedures, (c) striking return deals with safe countries, (d) taking care of sufficient reception accommodation, and (e) facilitating integration of those who stay. This is easier said than done, and there is much more to it, but I fail to see a clear alternative to what the far right has on offer here. Regrettably, much of this involves biased framing as well, creating a crisis atmosphere in the (social) media even when the real figures are not very shocking, and by blaming asylum-seekers for abuses they have nothing to do with (such as housing shortages). The broad center should not step into this blaming game and framing trap, but instead honestly stand for the actual facts and reasonable policies. But, again, this is unlikely to suffice, as a large part of the electorate wallows in nativist dreams. I come back to this further down the line, as I first turn to the main source of immigration: labor inflow.

Labor migration is where the cultural and economic dimensions of political preference meet, if not clash. Labor migration is by far the dominant source of foreign people inflow. In many industries in many liberal democracies, labor immigration is badly needed to keep production afloat. By and large, this involves two types of labor immigration. The first type is knowledge immigration. For instance, in high-tech industries, local supply of knowledge workers is insufficient to keep up with increasing demand. In the Netherlands, the chip-production machinery multinational enterprise ASML is a clear example. The Dutch (technical) universities cannot deliver graduates in sufficient numbers to fill the impressive flow of new vacancies at ASML and other enterprises in the local value chain. The second type has to do with cheap-labor immigration. For instance, in the agri-industrial cluster and product delivery logistics, local societies in the West simply lack the labor supply to get all jobs done. Evidently,

in the labor migration influx, we observe a similar split in two classes: the elite of well-paid high-education knowledge employees on fixed contracts (often referred to as expatriates) versus the mass of low-paid low-education production workers in flex arrangements. Clearly, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels would not have been surprised at all.

Policy-wise, in this context, this new broad center party is advised to therefore adopt a two-pronged approach. The inflow of knowledge workers should be facilitated, as otherwise the wished-for knowledge economy will be seriously harmed. And for reasons of economic prosperity, now and in the future, this would backfire to the whole society, including the people currently supporting the far right. This should be carefully and patiently explained, time and again. This is the relatively easy leg of the two-pronged policy approach. The other leg is much harder to tackle. What to do with cheap-labor immigration? Here, to start with, choices have to be made: Which (niches in) industries are important enough seen through the macro lens of societies to accommodate and facilitate cheap-labor immigration, and which are not? By making restrictive choices here, cheap-labor immigration can be dampened. Of course, there will always be winners and losers. But if no choice is made, cheap-labor immigration will only grow even further, and evidently beyond society's absorptive capacity. Additionally, to the extent that the broad center argues in favor of cheap-labor immigration, two flanking policies are needed. One, to avoid deprivation of immigrants and neighborhoods, employers must be obliged to take care of decent accommodation. Two, exploiting harsh flex arrangements has to be banned from the employers' opportunity set.

But as said, rational arguments focusing on the economic benefit or even necessity of immigration is unlikely to do the trick, as much of the anti-immigration sentiment can be attributed to nativism. Nativism and discrimination (if not blatant racism) are close cousins. The longing back to a time in history in which we all shared similar backgrounds and *ditto* values is a state of mind that easily slips into classic in-group versus out-group thinking, with the out-group being full of people with roots in other countries and/or other traditions. This is Victor Orbán's Hungary for the Hungarians, Nigel Farage's Taking Back Control, or Donald Trump's America First. This narrative is so appealing to so many people that this is a hard nut to crack. Hence, the new broad center party must develop a clear and attractive alternative for this narrative. Simply celebrating the upsides of multiculturalism will not do, as this is seen as the cosmopolitan elite's hobby. I am not an expert here, but I would argue that the broad center should try to strike a happy medium between recognizing the worries of a large part of the electorate (and offering correcting policies), on the one hand, and

underlining the need for and upside of tailor-made immigration (see next), on the other hand. As far as the worries are concerned, a policy set has to be developed that takes these concerns very seriously.

This fact of political and societal life is perhaps a real shame, depending upon the color of a left-centrist or liberal political lens, but I do not see much leeway to change that. Sure, we could argue that Willem van Oranje, widely regarded as the founding father of the Netherlands, was basically a French-speaking German in Spanish service, or that the Batavians at the Rhine border of the Roman empire were essentially a tribe from Germany that probably originated from Baden-Württemberg, but the likelihood that this story will resonate among the Dutch electorate is close to zero, particularly in these radicalized modern-day times of emotional immediacy. This will not be different for equivalent evidence-based stories tailored at other liberal democracies. Similarly, referring to recent figures regarding Dutch people of different color born in the Netherlands in first or second-generation colonial or labor immigration families is equally unlikely to receive much applause, nor is DNA-based evidence that many Dutch have African or Asian roots. So, rather than promoting a truth that many voters will wash away in an attempt to avoid cognitive dissonance, this policy package I now already have referred to multiple times must be developed in a form and shape widely seen as accommodating people's worries.

So, what could such a policy package look like? Again, being neither a politician nor a policy-maker, all I can do is to throw a few probably very obvious ideas into the mix. One argument that is frequently ventilated, is that the country is full, with too many people living on too limited square miles. This could be a valid argument, of course, but my intuition is that quantity is not really the key issue here. After all, would I plea for a policy that, say, five million native Dutch (however that is to be determined; not so easy at all, as explained above) should be nudged to emigrate to other places in the world, perhaps joining the millions of Dutch descendants in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United States, and elsewhere (as long as this elsewhere is located abroad), the quantity issue would be solved, but the underlying anti-immigration sentiment would be very unlikely to have evaporated. Hence, in the end, it is the lack of the population's homogeneity (again, however determined) that is the lump in the throat of many people, fully in line with the obsessive preference for purity in today's culture of radicalized modernity. Stripped from its conspiracy angle, I would not be surprised if many among the electorate actually believe in the population replacement theory.

Hence, we are back to square one, again: How could a credible and effective broad center policy package look like, given all this? My hunch is that a first step is to

solve the problems that are frequently associated, however unjustified that might be, with immigration. Top of mind here is housing. In many liberal democracies, including the Netherlands, a by-product of decades of neo-liberalism is a shortage of affordable places to live, which is a painful lump in the throat of many voters. Perhaps to the surprise of the supporters of neo-liberal housing market policies, the liberalized housing market has been great in generating profit for property owners, but not in producing social housing to the degree necessary to accommodate population growth. Hence, the retreat of the State has to be reversed, investing in planning for (affordable) housing for the future. This is happening now in quite a few countries, but this is too late to produce quick results, particularly in an epoch in which the depletion of nature competes for policy prioritization, too. And even if this will produce a solution, it will take quite a while before this will materialize to such an extent that voters are pleasantly affected by this policy reversal. In the meantime, the broad center should consider the implementation of tax-related policies that aim to increase mobility in the housing market, specifically targeting freeing capacity at the entry side of the housing pyramid.

This is just one example out of many in the realm of solving problems that tend to be incorrectly attributed to immigration by many, including politicians from the broad center. For instance, another mind-boggling one is access to care and cure, as the current health systems across liberal democracies (and beyond, for that matter) have great difficulty to accommodate increasing demand without excessive cost increases. In a graying population, this is an urgent challenge anyway, as we cannot afford to have one third or so of a society's population being employed in the health system. Another persistent attribution is linking increasing criminality to immigration, whilst in fact the crime rate is dropping in many liberal democracies, year after year. To avoid that this personal note starts to outflank the rest of this essay, I refrain from discussing these and other examples. Basically, as quite extensively discussed in the main text, a series of policies reversing the damage done by an overshooting of the neo-liberal revolution provides a necessary seedbed for slowly appeasing a deeply polarized and unsatisfied society, we might – naively perhaps – hope. But, again, this will not suffice.

Acknowledging that backtracking the future into a past with high(er) population homogeneity may not be a viable option, except in the far right's imaginative dreams, what else can be done? Logically, I would argue that only three options are available here: (a) turning heterogeneity into (a perception of) homogeneity; (b) countering the disadvantages that are (perceived to be) associated with population heterogeneity; and/or (c) boosting the advantages that are (seen to be) linked to population heterogeneity.

Without deportation, as suggested in circles of the AfD and Donald Trump, turning heterogeneity into homogeneity is a mission impossible. In liberal democracies, for a variety of reasons (particular the colonial heritage and purposeful labor immigration), large minorities are there to stay. Given this, only the perception of heterogeneity may be changed. For instance, many of these countries field national football teams in which colored fellow country(wo)men are the majority. This does not prevent the fans, many of whom are likely to support the far right, to stand behind their team during (the qualification for) European or World Championship tournaments. From tons of studies, we know that the best way to establish reciprocal appreciation among different groups is to meet, to talk, and to work together. Hence, the more inter-group contact is promoted, the higher the chances are that a feeling of togetherness, of some kind of homogeneity of a shared culture, will emerge – incrementally and slowly, as such processes take much time, but still.

Additionally, policies could be directed at improving the balance of advantages versus disadvantages of population heterogeneity. Integration of minorities is key here. This is very well known, of course, but far from easy to achieve. Actually, second or third-generation migrant descendants seem to feel more distanced from society than their first-generation (grand)parents, probably due to increased discriminatory hostility in society. In many liberal democracies, heterogeneity is associated with fragmentation, with many minorities living close together in particular neighborhoods, with a self-organized tailor-made tissue of events and organizations. This comes with more segregation into similar structures of minorities from specific national origin in immigration countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States. For instance, in these countries, Dutch immigrants frequently maintain a close-knit network of ties, including celebrating shared events (*e.g.*, "Sinterklaas") and meeting in Dutch-minded organizations (*e.g.*, "Oranjevereniging"). One reason for this is that the distance of the new minorities in many liberal democracies (*e.g.*, Moroccan and Turkish) to the incumbent majority is perceived as large, with the Islam being a malicious and wicked faultline in 21th century liberal democracies. Gap-closing policies, forcefully sanctioning discrimination, in tandem with contact-stimulating measures is all that can be done, probably.

Effective policies are one thing, but the current crisis of liberal democracies is largely rooted in political behavior. In line with many other time watchers, I extensively argued above that the brutalization of the political discourse is an essential ingredient of the cause set of democratic demise. Here, in a way, the broad center more and more mimics the behavior of the far right. And really, they should stop doing so. This is a disastrous road – a dead end, quite literally. By normalizing the abnormal, the

broad center digs its own grave. Not only do voters prefer to support the original, but also is the then-triggered process of democratic backsliding very hard to reverse. Broad center parties and their politicians should stay close to what or whom they really are: Authenticity is more resilient than opportunistic mimicking behavior – a battle the broad center can only lose. Adopt reversal policies, counter the downsides of immigration, and behave decently. And yes, perhaps shaking off the edges of over-elitism might help, too. But only then, I would argue, does the broad center stand a good change to effectively push back the far right in the extreme and small niche of the political spectrum where they, I would hope, do belong.

A final and related remark involves a pair of essential ingredients of the far right's appeal, and how to respond to this from a centrist perspective: frame and tone. This is key, as modern day's culture of emotional immediacy and the bubbling isolation of the social media imply that frequently perception does crowd out reality. The far right's narrative is negative, and its tone is aggressive. To accommodate this by adopting a similar negative frame and aggressive tone has proved to be counterproductive. When a center (right) political party adopts this accommodation strategy, normalization accelerates to full speed. Then, many voters prefer the original rather than the copycat, with not-so-surprising gains for the far right as the outcome. So, the new broad center party should opt for the opposite strategy – by the way, not only instrumentally, but also out of principle. A political party that accommodates the frame and tone of an opponent not only contributes heavily to digging its own electoral grave, but also compromises equally heavily on its own authenticity. This is politics as a theater play, in which actors play a role, rather than behaving like who they really are. I have never understood why any politician really believing in her or his party's message and mission, out of principle, is willing to do this. Politics should be about principled beliefs – about a clear vision on how society should look like – and not about what a party thinks that voters might believe this party should believe. This is an evident manifestation of a sad Escherian "Droste" effect[194] that does not stand a chance to produce any sustainable success.

Thus, the new broad center party's message should be positive, expressed persistently with a positive tone – and consistently so, though all media, including does that are misleadingly labeled as social. Actually, the word "frame" should be removed from our vocabulary altogether, immediately suggesting that it is all about appearance, and not about reality. The far right's hatred and resentment, emphasizing

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194 The "Droste" effect is known in art as an example of *mise en abyme* – *i.e.*, the effect of a picture recursively appearing within itself, in a place where a similar picture would realistically be expected to appear.

the upcoming demise of civilization due to (Islamic) immigration and "wokism", will be countered by a message underscoring the great benefits of variety and togetherness. Hatred will be set against love. Revenge will be replaced with understanding. This may sound like the hippies' message from the late 1960s and early 1970s, but the difference is that these messages will be combined with honesty – with a transparent explanation of all complexities and tradeoffs that any political party cannot ignore when in power. For instance, yes, we strongly believe that immigration comes with many upsides **and** yes, we do realize that we have to counter the inevitable downsides. The world is a complex place in which simple solutions will only produce disappointments. Regarding the tone, we will always be respectful. We should not lower ourselves to the far right's brutal aggressiveness. Will this work? I really do hope so.

Hopeful reading

Take stock of what we already know.
Let your mind experience a blow.

To read is to think.
To read is to learn from collective thinking.
Without reading, the mind will be sinking.
Without reading, society will be at the brink
of de-civilization,
of giving up on autonomy,
of surrendering to autocracy,
of debilitation.

To read is to enrich.
To read is to nurture empathy.
With reading, we feel sympathy
for others not so rich
as we ourselves.
With reading, we expand our imagination,
develop fascination
for all these other selves.

Reading is thinking.
Thinking involves reading.
Knowledge of factual realities.
Rather than believing in phantasies.
Dig deep in history.
Dismantle any mystery.
Giants have shoulders to stand on.
Treasure their thoughts as a bonbon.

Disciplinary boundaries are artificial.
Looking beyond is beneficial.
From economics to sociology.
From law to psychology.
Constructivism and positivism.

Pessimism and optimism.
Quantitative diagnosis.
Qualitative analysis.

Benefit from what is out there.
It is really everywhere.

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This reference list is too lengthy – too much too read; too much too grasp. And indeed, I cannot deny that I have not read each and every book (chapter) or article from the first to the last word. Quite frequently, a quick look at the abstract, a mindful reading of the introduction or a careful glance at the regression table turned out to be enough. Nevertheless, I decided in favor of what borders at completeness – of exhaustion, really. After all, by doing so, each reader can engage in her or his own cherry-picking – in further reading of what s/he is particularly interested in. And even then, there is much more to read than what is listed below. My list hopefully offers a gateway into many niches across many disciplines. After entering, any reader can find much more in the wonderful world of academia.

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Biography

Arjen van Witteloostuijn is Professor of Business and Economics at the Vrije Universiteit (VU) Amsterdam and Dean of the VU School of Business and Economics in the Netherlands. Additionally, he is affiliated as Research Professor in Business, Economics and Governance at the Antwerp Management School in Belgium. In the 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s, he was affiliated with the University of Groningen, University Maastricht, Tilburg University and Utrecht University (all four the Netherlands), University of Antwerp (Belgium), and Cardiff University and Durham University (both in the United Kingdom), and he visited New York University (the US) and Warwick Business School (the UK). He holds degrees in Business, Economics, and Psychology. In 1996-1998, he was Dean of the Maastricht Faculty of Economics and Business Administration. He is (former) member of the editorial board of, *e.g.*, the *Academische boekengids*, *Academy Management Journal*, *Bedrijfskunde: tijdschrift voor modern management, Cross-Cultural and Strategic Management, Economisch statistische berichten, British Journal of Management, Industrial and Corporate Change, Journal of International Business Studies, M&O: tijdschrift voor organisatiekunde en sociaal beleid, Organization Studies* and *Strategic Organization*. Additionally, he was/is member of the Economic Advisory Council of the Dutch Parliament and the Royal Netherlands Academy of Sciences (KNAW). Apart from many (chapters in) books, and articles in Dutch dailies and journals, he has published widely in such international journals as the *Academy of Management Executive, Academy of Management Journal, Academy of Management Review, Accounting, Organizations & Society, American Journal of Political Science, American Journal of Sociology, American Sociological Review, Economica, Economics of Education Review, European Journal of Political Economy, History of Political Economy, Human Resource Management Journal, Industrial Relations, International Journal of Industrial Organization, Journal of Business Ethics, Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization, Journal of Economic Psychology, Journal of International Business Studies, Journal of Management, Journal of Management Studies, Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, Management Science, Metroeconomica, Organization Science, Organization Studies, Party Politics, Personality and Individual Differences, Public Administration Review, Strategic Management Journal* and *Weltwirtschaftliches Archiv*. Already in 1999, he published a critical analysis of neo-liberalism and the Dutch "poldermodel": *De* anorexia*strategie: over de gevolgen van saneren* (Amsterdam / Antwerpen: De Arbeiderspers) for which he received the Book of the Year 2000 Prize of the Dutch Society of Management Consultants (Ooa) and the Reader Prize 2000 of the Dutch Association of Consultancy Firms (Roa).

Acknowledgements

Disclaimer

This is essay is like preaching to my own parish, I am afraid. Those who do agree with what I have to say (or rather, write) will nod and put up a thumb; those who do not agree will either not read this "propaganda" anyway, will ignore the message altogether, or might wish me dead on the social media (which I never consult, luckily). Would my essay attract much attention, which is highly unlikely, they may well (certainly because I was so lucky to be born in the Netherlands) emerge in front of my house with torches and attacking slogans. I am a male, so witch will probably not do, but they will come up with another damaging but inventive swear word. I would be very disappointed if they fail to do so. This would further provide evidence for one of my key arguments: The far right is unwilling to engage in a respectful dialogue with the other side, whom they discredit as "woke lefties" and "enemies of the people" anyway. And they are right. I cannot deny that I am a member of the elite. I am an academic, I became a Full Professor at the age of 31, and hence I am very wealthy. The fact that I am the first and only one, to date, at the father side of my family tree to finish university is fake news, I gather. So, in the end, I only wrote this book-sized essay by way of indulgence (would I have been Catholic, which I am not) or for fun and out of concern (which is indeed the case). And then, preaching for your own parish is not a bad thing to do anyway, I might hope.

Make America Great Once Again
A spoken word performance of Donald Trump

This is my excerpt from the Great Donald Trump's acceptance spoken word act at the Republican National Conference, performed on July 18 2024 shortly after a failed assassination attempt, to formalize his nomination for the November 2024 Presidential elections in the US. This excerpt is a very selective series of lines from his 90-minutes marathon spoken word act. My source is the literal and full transcript of Donald Trump's performance as published online by the *New York Times* on July 19 2024. My editing was limited to selecting only about ten per cent of the *New York Times* transcript, and adding blank lines. I did not change a word, nor did I change the order of the sentences. Note that, at the time of his great performance, Donald Trump still assumed Joe Biden would be his opponent. Would he have known that Kamala Harris would step in to replace Joe Biden soon after, his act might well have been even greater. Regrettably, we will never know this.

Thank you very much. Thank you very, very much. Thank you.

Four months from now, we will have an incredible victory, and we will begin the four greatest years in the history of our country.

Together, we will launch a new era of safety, prosperity and freedom for citizens of every race, religion, color and creed.

The discord and division in our society must be healed. We must heal it quickly. As Americans, we are bound together by a single fate and a shared destiny. We rise together. Or we fall apart.

Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you very much.

The assassin's bullet came within a quarter of an inch of taking my life. And yet in a certain way I felt very safe because I had God on my side. I felt that. I'm not supposed to be here tonight. Not supposed to be here. I stand before you in this arena only by the grace of almighty God.

Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you.

And we must not criminalize dissent or demonize political disagreement, which is why the Democrat party should immediately stop weaponizing the justice system and labeling their political opponent as an enemy of democracy. If Democrats want to unify our country, they should drop these partisan witch hunts, which I've been going through for approximately eight years. They've got to stop that because they're destroying our country.

We have to work on making America great again, not on beating people. And we won. We beat them in all. We beat them on the impeachments. We beat them on the indictments. We beat them. But the time that you have to spend, the time that you have to spend. If they would devote that genius to helping our country, we'd have a much stronger and better country.

Together, we will lead America to new heights of greatness like the world has never seen before. Under our leadership, the United States will be respected again. No nation will question our power. No enemy will doubt our might. Our borders will be totally secure. Our economy will soar. We will return law and order to our streets, patriotism to our schools, and importantly, we will restore peace, stability and harmony all throughout the world.

But to achieve this future, we must first rescue our nation from failed and even incompetent leadership. We have totally incompetent leadership. Under the current administration, we are indeed a nation in decline.

We also have an illegal immigration crisis. It's a massive invasion at our southern border that has spread misery, crime, poverty, disease, and destruction to communities all across our land. Nobody's ever seen anything like it. I will end the illegal immigration crisis by closing our border and finishing the wall, most of which I've already built. We have to stop the invasion into our country that's killing hundreds of thousands of people a year. We're not going to let that happen.

I will end every single international crisis that the current administration has created, including the horrible war with Russia and Ukraine, which would have never happened if I was president. And the war caused by the attack on Israel, which would never have happened if I was president.

If you took the 10 worst presidents in the history of the United States. Think of it. The 10 worst. Added them up, they will not have done the damage that Biden has done. Only going to use the term once. Biden. I'm not going to use the name anymore. Just one time. The damage that he's done to this country is unthinkable. It's unthinkable.

Together, we will restore vision, strength, competence and we're going to have a thing called common sense making most of our decisions actually. It's all common sense.

Just a few short years ago under my presidency, we had the most secure border and the best economy in the history of our country, in the history of the world. We had the greatest economy in the history of the world. We had never done anything like it. We were beating every country, including China, by leaps and bounds. Nobody had seen anything like it.

But in less than four years, our opponents have turned incredible success into unparalleled tragedy and failure. It's been a tremendous failure. Today, our cities are flooded with illegal aliens. Americans are being squeezed out of the labor force and their jobs are taken. By the way, you know who's taking the jobs, the jobs that are created? One hundred and seven percent of those jobs are taken by illegal aliens.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you very much.

Inflation has wiped out the life savings of our citizens, and forced the middle class into a state of depression and despair. That's what it is. It's despair and depression.

With proper leadership, every disaster we are now enduring will be fixed - and it will be fixed very, very quickly.

Under this administration, our current administration, groceries are up 57 percent, gasoline is up 60 and 70 percent, mortgage rates have quadrupled, and the fact is it doesn't matter what they are because you can't get the money anyway. Can't buy houses. Young people can't get any financing to buy a house. The total household costs have increased an average of $28,000 per family under this administration.

Republicans have a plan to bring down prices, and bring them down very, very rapidly. With numbers that nobody has ever seen and we will reduce our debt, $36 trillion. We will start reducing that. And we will also reduce your taxes still further.

And next, we will end the ridiculous and actually incredible waste of taxpayer dollars that is fueling the inflation crisis. They've spent trillions of dollars of things having to do with the Green New Scam. It's a scam. And that has caused tremendous inflationary pressures in addition to the cost of energy.

We have long been taken advantage of by other countries. And think of it, oftentimes these other countries are considered so-called allies. They've taken advantage of us for years.

We lose jobs. We lose revenue and they gain everything and wipe out our businesses, wipe out our people. We will not let countries come in, take our jobs, and plunder our nation. They come and do that. They plunder our nation. We're going to get them all back. We're going to get them all back, every single one of them.

Under my plan, incomes will skyrocket, inflation will vanish completely, jobs will come roaring back, and the middle class will prosper like never, ever before and we're going to do it very rapidly.

But no hope or dream we have for America can succeed unless we stop the illegal immigrant invasion. The worst that's ever been seen anywhere in the world. There's never been an invasion anywhere. Third world countries would fight with sticks and stones not to let this happen. The invasion at our southern border, we will stop it and we will stop it quickly. At the heart of the Republican platform is our pledge to end this border nightmare, and fully restore the sacred and sovereign borders of the United States of America. And we're going to do that on Day 1. That means two things on Day 1, right? Drill, baby, drill and close our borders.

We ended all catch-and-release. We shut down asylum fraud. We stopped human trafficking and forged historic agreements to keep illegal aliens on foreign soil. We want them to stay on their soil.

Under the Trump administration, if you came in illegally, you were apprehended immediately and you were deported. You went right back. The entire world is pouring into our country because of this very foolish administration. The greatest invasion in history is taking place right here in our country. They are coming in from every corner of the earth, not just from South America, but from Africa, Asia, Middle East. They're coming from everywhere. They're coming at levels that we've never seen before. It is an invasion indeed, and this administration does absolutely nothing to stop them. They're coming from prisons. They're

coming from jails. They're coming from mental institutions and insane asylums. Meanwhile, our crime rate is going up, while crime statistics all over the world are going down. Because they're taking their criminals and they're putting them into our country.

But we have become a dumping ground for the world, which is laughing at us. They think we're stupid. That's why, to keep our family safe, the Republican platform promises to launch the largest deportation operation in the history of our country. Even larger than that of President Dwight D. Eisenhower, from many years ago. Tonight, America, this is my vow. I will not let these killers and criminals into our country. I will keep our sons and daughters safe.

We are Americans. Ambition is our heritage. Greatness is our birthright.

America's future will be bigger, better, bolder, brighter, happier, stronger, freer, greater and more united than ever before.

And quite simply put, we will very quickly make America great again.

Thank you very much. Thank you very much. Thank you very much, everybody. Thank you.

The Great Accelerator[195]

It is now a few months down the line since I closed this book's file in the cloud linked to my laptop's software.[196] As of January 20 2025, the Great Accelerator is back, in the US and in the world's power theater. Clearly, by "flooding the zone", Donald Trump and his gang frantically attack close-to-all strongholds of the US and international liberal-democratic institutions on a daily basis. This process of democratic decline has been creeping its way into almost all (former) liberal democracies for decades, but that process is now accelerating to a frightening speed. Because I have been concerned about this for a long time, I started writing an essay a year ago that has expanded to this considerable book almost twelve months later. The reason was the then upcoming Dutch coalition agreement with the PVV as the largest party. The firewall around the extreme or radical right-wing movement in the Netherlands was about to collapse with the formation of the most right-wing cabinet in the post-war decades under far-right leadership. That implied a turning point in Dutch history. My essay was a frantic attempt to find a comprehensive explanation for this, so that on the basis of a sound diagnosis I could try to determine how this development, which in my opinion is extremely worrying, could be reversed. The result is the ominously titled book *The End of Democracy as We Know It!?*

The answer to the question part of the title is a painful yes, as far as I am concerned. With the re-election of Donald Trump, a frightening acceleration of democratic backsliding is taking place. This time he is excellently prepared – read *Project 2025* and shudder – to turn American liberal democracy into an extreme and radical right semi-autocracy at an astonishing pace and with surprisingly little resistance. As if that were not bad enough, established liberal democracies are simultaneously being attacked with brutal verbal and policy violence, including blackmail strategies, spreading lies, and spitting bullshit. The ideologies of Putism and Trumpism show great similarities, both with an aversion to liberal democracies in general and those in Europe in particular. The American initiative to force peace upon Ukraine via an American-Russian brotherhood is characteristic. The American dealings with Ukraine, including the rude treatment of Volodymyr Zelensky by Donald

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[195] This afterword, or "nabrander" in my mother tongue, was originally written in Dutch, as about two third of a piece introducing my book on *Me Judice* – a Dutch platform for analyses and opinions regarding the state of economics and the economy. I copied this text in Google Translate, after which I edited the output. Hence, these few pages are AI-supported.

[196] As the observant reader will have noticed, I could not resist myself to not engage in limited updating throughout the main text.

Trump, are of an unashamed and mendacious coarseness that few saw coming. It is telling that European politicians such as Giorgia Meloni, Viktor Orbán and Geert Wilders are enthusiastically praising the American performance on the world stage, notwithstanding blatant lies and cynical hypocrisies. Meanwhile, the open interference in the political struggle in Germany is going beyond all bounds.

As indicated, I stopped writing *The End of Democracy as We Know It!?* in December 2024, after months and months of reading, processing, organizing, and typing. Donald Trump had just been elected as the new president of the United States, but he had yet to get off the ground. All the warnings I expressed in my book are now gaining urgency at an accelerated pace. The diagnosis I make has only become more relevant. The diagnosis starts with a somewhat arbitrary distinction between exogenous and endogenous forces that are pushing open societies towards democratic decline. These exogenous forces are neo-liberalism, globalization, and digitalization. Of course, these forces are also endogenous. And of course, they did not fall like manna from the sky. But in the context of my argument, these three "external" forces are the driving mechanisms behind five "internal" others that are more directly related to the unstoppable rise of the extreme and radical right: (1) distrustful overregulation; (2) media hysteria; (3) complacent anger; (4) polarizing inequality; and (5) bubbling isolation. These forces reinforce each other as common causes of sentiments that fuel the extreme and radical right.

In light of the explanation for the success of the extreme and radical right in *The End of Democracy as We Know It !?*, I cannot but conclude that it is high time to take action. After all, it is far from impossible, or even highly likely, that things will not automatically get back to normal – on the contrary. It is important to make dissenting voices heard loud and clear. With mine, I hope to make a modest contribution to that chorus of dissenting voices. In order to spread that voice as much as possible, *The End of Democracy as We Know It !?* is available for free as a freely distributable PDF document. The journey of that document begins as a publication of *Me Judice*. Hopefully that will be the starting signal for a world tour in the form of a strategy that can be characterized as "flooding the digital world." That is why the book is also written in English (unlike this short "The Great Accelerator" contribution, originally published in Dutch on the *Me Judice* platform). And that is why my book also deviates from what is standard in academic literature – in style and form. The style is loose, at times emotional – intended to reach a non-academic audience as well. The same applies to the form. Although the core of the argument has characteristics of scientific prose, that core is interspersed with deviant stylistic devices such as poetry, journalistic examples, a short fictional story and a pamphlet-like political program. My hope is

that my argument will find its way into the liberal-democratic world community via all kinds of social media. That may be - or perhaps undoubtedly is – wishful thinking, but nothing ventured, nothing gained.

Unfortunately, writing to explain and warn is an important first step, but it should not stop there. Certainly, words matter, as daily political rhetoric shows time and again, but the influence of words in books is extremely limited, especially at a time when the majority of the population only scrolls for their daily portion of (dis)information on social media in search of instant gratification. I therefore hope, possibly against my better judgment, that many liberal democrats in countries that are confronted with democratic decline will join the membership of centrist parties that have gone astray in large numbers. Through their party membership, operating as an enemy from within, they can seek to change the course of these parties from the bottom up. Normalization of the extreme and radical right is the beginning of the end, also in countries where the majority of the population does not want to do away with the rule of law at all. If the will of the people indeed prefers a (semi-)autocracy over a democracy, any attempt to return to liberal-democratic normality by forcing derailed centrist parties back to where they came from, will then of course be a dead end. After all, in that case, that majority will eventually vote away liberal democracy regardless of the re-positioning of centrist parties. However, I suspect that this majority does not exist in almost all, or perhaps even all, liberal democracies. If I am right here, the real will of the people still stands behind the post-war construction of the liberal-democratic society in which the rights of minorities are also respected.

It is time for action.

As of January 20 2025, the Great Accelerator is back, in the US and in the world's power theater. Clearly, by "flooding the zone", Donald Trump and his gang frantically attack close-to-all strongholds of the US and international liberal-democratic institutions on a daily basis. Evidently, liberal democracies are experiencing rough times. This is not only due to external pressures as a result of the new power play in the context of geo-political rivalry and the populist turn in Trumpian America, but also because of creeping internal democracy-undermining processes. In this book-sized essay, I reflect on what may explain the latter. My focus is on the subtle interplay between five interrelated mechanisms. The first mechanism involves the overregulation that signals the State's distrust in citizens, being partly driven by a regulatory reflex of the ruling elite to any incident or issue. The second mechanism has to do with the well-known explosive interaction between elected politicians and the hysteria-loving media. The third mechanism relates to the complacent anger that is easily triggered in a population pampered by a highly-developed Welfare State. The fourth mechanism is the well-established inequality-increasing impact of decades of neo-liberal policies. The fifth mechanism is driven by the isolating effect of the bubble-producing technology of social media. These five mechanisms are involved in a deadly embrace, interacting in producing a downward spiral that slowly kills the liberal democracy as we know it. This downward spiral is provided with lubricating oil by the behavior of the political class, specifically mainstream center right. Initiated by the far right, the new political discourse is characterized by brutalization and normalization, which is perfectly in line with the modern-day culture of immediacy – of a permanent quest for instant gratification.

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Apart from many (chapters in) books, and articles in Dutch dailies and journals, he has published widely in such international journals as *the Academy of Management Journal, Academy of Management Review, Accounting, Organizations & Society, American Journal of Political Science, American Journal of Sociology, American Sociological Review, Industrial Relations, International Journal of Industrial Organization, Journal of International Business Studies, Journal of Management, Journal of Management Studies, Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, Management Science, Organization Science, Public Administration Review,* and *Strategic Management Journal.* On a regular basis, he is involved in consultancy and training activities for private and public organizations.