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# Democracy under Threat

How the Personalization of Political Parties Undermines Democracy

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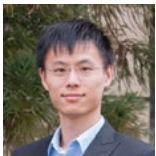
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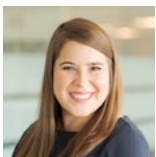
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## Acknowledgments

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>01</b>	<b>Introduction</b>
<b>02</b>	<b>Personalism and Its Rise in Democracies</b>
<b>03</b>	<b>The Impact of Personalization on Democracies</b>
<b>04</b>	<b>Pathways to Democratic Decline</b>
<b>08</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
<b>10</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>
<b>11</b>	<b>Appendix A: Measuring Personalism and Data Collection Approach</b>

## Introduction

In 1998, Viktor Orbán was elected the prime minister of Hungary in free and fair elections. He was supported by the Fidesz party—a movement he founded in 1988 that became a political party in 1990. After losing reelection in 2002, Orbán returned to the prime ministership in 2010 having internalized the lesson that surviving in Hungarian politics “requires strong leadership and absolute control over the party.”<sup>1</sup> From 2002 to 2010, Orbán increased his influence within Fidesz, including by changing the party constitution to give himself control of the selection of local party leaders, all parliamentary candidates, and the leader of the party’s parliamentary group. Orbán’s increasing influence within the party paved the way for his efforts over the next decade to remove checks on his power. His control over the party, along with Fidesz’s constitutional majority, enabled Orbán to change Hungary’s constitution in ways that weakened executive constraints, including from the Constitutional Court, the election commission, independent media, and civil society. Orbán’s disproportionate power within the political system allowed him to dismantle democracy in the years that followed, pushing Hungary into authoritarianism.

This pattern of democratic decay is not unique to Hungary. Freedom House reports that democracy has been in decline for the last 16 consecutive years, with much of the deterioration occurring in countries classified as democracies.<sup>2</sup> In some instances these declines left democracy compromised but intact (as in Poland). In other cases, the declines gave way to the onset of authoritarianism (as in Serbia). Importantly, along with the decline in democracy, there has been a clear change in the way that democracies are breaking down.<sup>3</sup> Before 2000, coups were the primary way that democracies failed. Since 2000, however, incumbent takeovers—or the ability of democratically elected leaders to dismantle democracy from within—have grown more prevalent. In the 2010s, 64 percent of the democracies that broke down did so due to incumbent power grabs, while only 36 percent of those that collapsed did so because of a coup.<sup>4</sup> Simply put, the greatest threat to democracy now comes from democratically elected leaders.

While research has documented the growing threats to democracy from within, much less is known about the

factors that enable such democratic decline. This report seeks to fill that gap. It summarizes new research by Erica Frantz, Andrea Kendall-Taylor, and Joseph Wright (Oxford University Press, forthcoming) showing that the personalization of political parties is fueling democracy’s decline.<sup>5</sup> All over the globe, leaders are increasingly coming to power backed by personalist parties—or those parties (often that the leader creates) that exist primarily to promote and further the leader’s personal political career rather than advance policy. Unique features of personalist parties make it difficult for party elites to push back against a leader’s grab for power, opening the door for democratic decline. Indeed, this has been a pattern across the globe. Despite the very different political and historical contexts in which democratic backsliding is occurring, there is one factor that many backsliding countries share: their elected leaders came to power with the backing of a personalist political party.

Using original data on personalism in ruling political parties in democracies from 1991 to 2020, this report summarizes research that documents the process linking party personalism with democratic decay.<sup>6</sup> Personalist parties lack both the incentive and capacity to push back against a leader’s efforts to expand executive power. As such, leaders backed by personalist parties are more likely to be successful in their efforts to dismantle institutional constraints on the executive. Such attacks on state institutions, in turn, have effects that reverberate throughout society, deepening political polarization and weakening supporters’ commitment to democratic norms of behavior. In these ways, ruling party personalism erodes horizontal and vertical constraints on a leader, ultimately degrading democracy and raising the risk of democratic failure. The election of leaders supported by personalist political parties, therefore, is an easily observable warning sign that democracy is at risk of decline.

The report proceeds as follows. In the next section, the report defines personalism and documents its rise in democracies. It then explains how ruling party personalism harms democracy, offering evidence that it raises the risk of both sudden breaks from democracy and the slow democratic degradation that has become so common today. The report summarizes the pathways through which this occurs. Finally, the report concludes with recommendations to counter the trend.

## Personalism and Its Rise in Democracies

**A**ll over the globe, politics is becoming more personalized.<sup>7</sup> While personalism has been long observed in authoritarian settings—think Russia’s Vladimir Putin and Belarus’s Alexander Lukashenko—it is also on the rise in democracies. Examples include leaders such as Brazil’s former president Jair Bolsonaro, Hungary’s Viktor Orbán, and the Philippines’ former president Rodrigo Duterte. Because democracies feature effective checks and balances, personalism in democracies manifests itself in subtler ways than in authoritarian systems. Ultimately, however, the underlying concept is the same: personalist democratic leaders wield disproportionate influence vis-à-vis other institutional actors, such that politics reflects the leader’s preferences more strongly than it represents a bargaining process between the leader and these groups. Personalism can manifest itself in a variety of ways, but in democracies it is most commonly observed in the relationship between the leader and the leader’s political party. In a personalist system, the leader’s political party exists primarily to promote and further the leader’s personal political career rather than advance policy.

To measure personalism in democracies, Frantz, Kendall-Taylor, and Wright gathered original data on features of the political parties of democratically elected leaders around the globe in the 30 years since the end of the Cold War (amounting to 106 democracies from 1991 to 2020). These data capture the relative power balance between a political leader and his or her political party based on several indicators. Most importantly, they assess whether the leader created his or her own party. Additionally, the data capture a leader’s history of public service, including whether the leader had an unsuccessful bid for office as an independent, the length of the leader’s party experience prior to assuming office, and whether a leader held a national or local appointment or elected position with the party prior to being selected chief executive.

A leader’s support party—or the political organization,

civic association, or mass movement that mobilizes voters to help elect candidates to office—varies in levels of personalism.<sup>8</sup> Some leaders come to power backed by parties organized to advance policy goals, often where the leader gradually rose through the party ranks. Party personalism in these cases is usually low. Other leaders, by contrast, assume power backed by parties organized to advance their personal political career—parties that, often, these leaders themselves created. In these cases, party personalism is usually high. See Appendix A for more details on the data collection.

The data reveal that ruling party personalism in democracies has increased over time, particularly in the last decade. Figure 1 illustrates this trend. The red line shows that ruling party personalism decreased in the late 1990s and early 2000s before increasing in the 2010s. The higher levels of party personalism in the early 1990s reflect the fact that many countries, particularly in Eastern Europe and sub-Saharan Africa, transitioned from authoritarian rule to democracy in the 1990s; these new democracies tended to have high levels of party personalism because most parties were quite new, especially where opposition parties had been illegal under authoritarian rule. The newness of these parties increased personalism scores during this time. Adjusting party personalism scores by accounting for the age of democracy and the prior level of democracy (the blue line in Figure 1) shows that there has been a clear increase in party personalism throughout the period, with the largest increases in the past decade.<sup>9</sup> This rapid rise in (adjusted) party personalism in recent years corresponds with the well-documented declines in global levels of democracy.

FIGURE 1: RULING PARTY PERSONALISM OVER TIME<sup>10</sup>



*Ruling party personalism has increased over time, particularly in the last decade. The red line shows ruling party personalism over the past three decades. The blue line shows the personalism score adjusted for age of democracy and the prior level of democracy.*

Moreover, the rise in party personalism has been global. Rather than being driven by trends in particular regions—for example, regions with lower levels of economic development—the data instead show that party personalism is occurring across every region. Table 1 shows the average level of party personalism scores for democracies across geographic regions, listing both the basic party personalism score and the score adjusted for the age of democracy and prior democracy level.

**In a personalist system, the leader’s political party exists primarily to promote and further the leader’s personal political career rather than advance policy.**

Party personalism is highest in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and sub-Saharan Africa. The latter two regions are ones where many countries have transitioned to democracy since 1989. The lowest levels of party personalism are found in Western Europe and North America, regions home to the longest-lived democracies in the world. However, once the age of democracy and the initial level of democracy when a leader is first elected to power are adjusted for, there are few differences in levels of party personalism across different geographic regions. In fact, ruling parties in Western Europe are characterized by only slightly less party personalism, on average, than those in African democracies. By this account, ruling parties in the Middle East have the highest levels of personalism—largely driven by personalized parties in Lebanon and Turkey—and Asian democracies have the lowest levels of party personalism. Regardless, the data overall indicate that party personalism has a strong presence throughout the world and thus appears to be a truly global phenomenon.

**The Impact of Personalization on Democracies**

The personalization of politics is bad for democracy. Party personalism facilitates leaders’ efforts to weaken constraints on their rule, ultimately paving the way for democratic decline, whether that occurs incrementally or sharply and whether it results in small erosions of democracy or total democratic collapse. First, consider the subtle erosion of democracy, as has occurred in El Salvador and Senegal. Using statistical models that control for several potentially confounding effects, this research finds that the marginal effect of party personalism over four years is to reduce democracy scores by roughly 14 percent. To put that estimate in context, consider that Ecuador’s democracy score fell by 15 percent during Rafael Correa’s presidency and Bangladesh’s fell by 14 percent during Sheikh Hasina Wazed’s most recent stint in power. Democracy declined in the United States by 8 percent from 2016 to 2020 and has decreased by 25 percent during PiS rule in Poland under President Andrzej Duda. Party personalism, in other words, raises the risk of the incremental erosion of democracy.

Party personalism also increases the chance of more dramatic democratic declines. Looking at sharp declines in democracy (defined as a decrease of 10 percent or more), statistical models show that party personalism increases the risk of such declines by 3.8 percent for each year a leader is in power. These results hold regardless of whether the country was highly democratic when the leader first entered office (as in the case of Polish President Duda) or was at an intermediate level of democracy (as in the case of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo of the Philippines). Notably,

TABLE 1: PARTY PERSONALISM IN DEMOCRACIES IS A GLOBAL PHENOMENON<sup>11</sup>

	Average Age of Democracies	Average Personalism Score	Adjusted Personalism Score
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	12	0.62	0.57
Latin America and the Caribbean	20	0.54	0.54
Middle East and North Africa	21	0.66	0.61
Sub-Saharan Africa	10	0.62	0.52
Western Europe and North America	78	0.34	0.49
Asia and Pacific	21	0.53	0.49
Total (Globally)	30	0.53	0.53

The rise in ruling party personalism is not just a feature of a few regions—it is a global phenomenon. This table shows the average party personalism scores as well as the score adjusted for the age of democracy. Once adjusting for age of democracy, there is little difference in personalism across regions.

though the majority of these sharp declines in democracy occurred in newer democracies in place for 20 years or less, nearly 30 percent of these rapid declines occurred in relatively consolidated democracies in place for more than two decades. Steep democratic decline is thus not simply the province of new or unconsolidated democracies.

Looking at the most serious form of democratic decline—the full collapse of democracy into dictatorship—there is a similar relationship. This research finds that party personalism leads to a 2.7 percent increase in the risk of democratic collapse per year. This is a large substantive effect, particularly given that the sample average risk of collapse is 1.4 percent per year.

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Of course, these three measures of democratic decline are often related. In some cases, a single leader presides over a steep decline in democracy that eventually gives way to democratic collapse. This was the case for Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, whose actions prompted a steep decline in democracy in 2000 and ultimately the collapse of democracy in 2005. In other cases, the steep decline and collapse occur in the same year, given that they reflect the same political event. This occurred with the Thai military coup in 2006 that ousted Thaksin Shinawatra. In other cases, leaders preside over periods in which democracy steadily erodes for many years but remains afloat. This was true in Ecuador under Correa, where the democracy score worsened in more than half of the years that Correa was president, yet democracy never fully collapsed. And, finally, in still other cases democracy declines slowly each year and ultimately results in democracy's demise, as occurred in Hungary under Orbán.

Personalist parties are fundamentally different from nonpersonalist parties in ways that are ultimately harmful to democracy. The next section will explain how the election of leaders backed by personalist parties in democracies sets in motion political changes that reduce constraints on the executive, thus paving the way for elected strongmen to dismantle democracy from within.

## Pathways to Democratic Decline

**P**ersonalist parties differ in important ways from their less personalist counterparts—differences that make them more prone to democratic decline.

Figure 2 summarizes this phenomenon. First, personalist parties make it easier for incumbent leaders to dismantle democracy because party actors have less *incentive* and *capacity* to restrain the leadership from decreasing executive constraints than do party actors in nonpersonalist parties. The actions that personalist leaders take to dismantle institutional constraints, in turn, increase polarization among voters and weaken societal adherence to democratic norms of behavior. Greater polarization decreases the prospect that the leader will face pushback from voters, because it makes party supporters more likely to tolerate abuses of power or the breaking of norms that keep the other party out of office. With both horizontal and vertical constraints to the leader's rule weakened, the stage is set for democracy to backslide.

**FIGURE 2: HOW PERSONALIST PARTIES ERODE DEMOCRACY<sup>12</sup>**



*Personalist parties erode constraints from both democratic institutions and society on leaders, raising the risk of democratic decline.*

### Reduced Horizontal Constraints

It is all but impossible to forecast which leaders, based on their personalities or ideology, will seek to expand executive power. This research therefore argues that any leader may try to do so, and that it will be those leaders who enter office with the backing of personalist parties that will have the most success in doing so. Personalist parties have unique structural characteristics that reduce the party's incentive and capacity to constrain the leader. First, personalist parties tend to feature elites with less party and governing experience, resulting in a loyal cadre of actors whose careers depend more on the leader and less on the party. Second, leaders of personalist parties are more likely to control party resources and nominations, resulting in top-heavy parties with weaker local organizations.

### INCENTIVES

Personalist parties are often created by leaders themselves. In such instances, leaders usually control key appointments in the party and select the party's candidates. In making these selections, they tend to eschew career politicians from the establishment, opting instead to fill high-level party positions with loyalists from their personal network, such as friends and family members, who are inexperienced in politics. In contrast to their peers in nonpersonalist parties, therefore, elites in personalist parties—particularly those that the leader creates—are unable to fall back on previous political experience and have fewer prospects for maintaining a political career in the leader's absence.

As such, elites in personalist parties often see their future as tied to that of the leader—should the leader's political career come under threat, so too will their own. This gives them a strong incentive to maintain the incumbent leader in power, even in the face of controversial policies aimed at executive aggrandizement. This incentive is only increased by the fact that many personalist parties do not survive long after the leader's departure from politics.<sup>13</sup> By contrast, elites in nonpersonalist parties tend to have greater potential to maintain their political careers independently of the

leader, as they have usually worked their way up the party ladder to secure their status within an established party. Nonpersonalist party elite therefore tend to be more invested in the party and its reputation, knowing they will have a political career regardless of the fate of any given party leader.

Finally, the top-heavy organizational structure of personalist parties provides additional incentive for party elites to stay in line with the leader and the leader's vision. As leaders often have outsized influence over appointments and nominations (both to party and government positions), high-ranking party elites are either friends or family or seek to remain in the leader's good graces to secure favorable posts in the future. This differs significantly from the case of nonpersonalist parties, where other actors (as well as rules) are more influential in such decisions. To illustrate, Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele founded New Ideas in 2017 to support his bid for the presidency. Bukele made Federico Anliker, one of Bukele's childhood friends, the first president of the party. The second

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and current president of the party is Bukele's cousin, Xavier Zablah Bukele. Other key posts in the party are occupied by friends and family of Bukele who do not have any prior political or government experience.<sup>14</sup>

Likewise, the AKP in Turkey at first could legitimately claim to be a representative party, including prominent politicians such as Ali Babacan, Abdullah Gül, and Bülent Arınç. However, Turkish

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan removed these veterans from the party as time went on, replacing them with inexperienced and obscure operators who are best described as his sycophants.<sup>15</sup> Finally, former Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš held notable sway over appointments in his party, Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO), which elevated his position therein. Ahead of the 2013 elections, for instance, Babiš and his closest advisors usurped the statutory authority of the party's regional coordinators to select candidates for the ANO lists. When Babiš won reelection as chair of the party in 2017, he took steps to further consolidate his control over the ANO candidate lists by altering the party's rules.<sup>16</sup>

## CAPACITY

In addition to having less incentive to constrain the leader and prevent executive power grabs, elite actors in personalist parties have less capacity to do so. While an ideal-type stylization of political parties views their *raison d'être* as a vehicle to solve elite collective action problems, not all political parties are the same in this regard.<sup>17</sup>

Compared with other parties, personalist parties tend to impede the collective action that is required to effectively constrain an incumbent leader. Thus, even if the elite within personalist parties prioritize executive constraints (or are otherwise motivated to restrain the leader), they may not have the capacity to do so.

There are various reasons for this collective action problem. First, personalist parties tend to be weak, top-heavy, and superficial organizations, such that it is difficult for party actors to coordinate an effective challenge to a power-hungry leader. This lack of infrastructural depth and breadth limits the party's capacity to function as an internal counterbalance to the leader. In addition, the absence of active local-level networks prevents the type of information transmission and coordination that can be critical to mobilizing support to challenge a leader.<sup>18</sup> Burundi provides an example. Ahead of the country's 2015 electoral crisis, former President Pierre Nkurunziza controversially began to campaign for a third term. This led to a power struggle between Nkurunziza and other members of the ruling CNDD-FDD party. Due to the CNDD-FDD's weak, decentralized structure, Nkurunziza succeeded in consolidating power and ultimately creating autocratic rule in Burundi.<sup>19</sup>

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The lack of political experience of the elite within personalist parties also decreases the party's capacity to curtail the leader's ambitions. These elites typically do not have a history of repeatedly interacting with one another in the political arena, such that they tend to have less skill in organizing and mobilizing activities needed to push back against a leader's efforts to expand power.

This is in stark contrast to elites in nonpersonalist parties, whose repeated interactions over time build mutual trust that facilitates coordination. Without this trust, elites in personalist parties face greater difficulty in acting collectively—independent of the leader—to counter incumbent attempts to concentrate control.

Finally, leaders of personalist parties often have control over party funding, either indirectly through their personal networks of family and friends or directly through their own personal wealth. This contrasts with nonpersonalist parties, where party funding typically comes from a more diffuse set of backers with varied interests, creating more space for competing ideas and power centers within the party. When party resources are controlled by a single individual or concentrated network linked to the leader, it reduces the breadth of voices in the party with the potential to wield influence over the leader's choices, reducing constraints on a leader.

## Reduced Vertical Constraints

Not only does party personalism facilitate the erosion of horizontal constraints on a leader's power, but such attacks on state institutions also lessen the chance that leaders will face checks on aggrandizing behavior from below. There are two mutually reinforcing explanations for why voters become more likely to go along with an agenda that undermines democracy, even when voters purport to value and support democracy. The first is political polarization, which incentivizes voters to accept democratic subversion when it prevents their opponents from securing control. The second is a shifting view of democratic norms and a lower bar for what acceptable behavior in democracy looks like, which ultimately weakens supporters' own commitment to adhere to democratic norms. Both dynamics are exacerbated by ruling party personalism: when partisan elites allow a leader to attack state institutions, they tacitly (and sometimes not so tacitly) endorse this behavior, signaling to supporters that it is compatible with healthy democracy.

## POLARIZATION

A wide body of existing research demonstrates that polarization often accompanies democratic erosion.<sup>20</sup> Much of the literature on polarization attempts to explain this correlation by suggesting that polarization enables the success of anti-democratic leaders. One key argument in this literature holds that polarization increases the risk of democratic decline by incentivizing voters to accept efforts by incumbents to undermine democratic principles to advance their partisan interests. According to this view, polarization is an existing societal condition that incumbent leaders leverage to subvert democracy.

Yet there is good reason to suspect that the polarization does not arise exogenously in society but is rather driven or worsened by the actions of political leaders. In support of this, empirical analysis reveals that a leader's efforts to weaken institutional checks increases polarization. Attacks on state institutions are socially divisive, generating concerns about the future of democracy among opponents while hardening defense of the leader conducting such actions among his or her supporters. Given that leaders of personalist parties face fewer horizontal constraints from party elites in their efforts to expand executive powers than do those of nonpersonalist parties, it follows that party personalism will set the stage for greater polarization in society.

Incumbent behaviors that degrade democracy deepen individual-level polarization by increasing negative affect toward other parties, or—more simply—the tendency of partisans to like members of their own party and dislike members of the opposing one.<sup>21</sup> When these relative affective attitudes change for many citizens, macro (or mass) polarization results. In Poland, for instance, the rise of the personalist PiS, which sought to consolidate control and expand its influence, created a new cleavage between “liberalism” and “solidarism” in society. By pitting these two groups, which previously lacked strong self-identification as such, against each other, the PiS drove an increase in negative affect from the top down, leading to an uptick in polarization in Polish society.<sup>22</sup>

This increase in negative affect occurs among both opponents and supporters of the ruling personalist party. Opponents see attacks on state institutions as threatening the quality of their democracy. They react with shock, appalled by the leader's actions and fearful for the future of the country's democracy. Concurrently, supporters of the incumbent respond to opponents' concerns over democracy with defiance, digging their heels in to back the leader and his or her agenda. The expansion of executive power also raises the stakes of elected office, increasing fear among the incumbent party elite about overreach in the case that their leader

loses power. The signals sent by political elites (who initially enabled these attacks on state institutions) further encourage incumbent party supporters to defend the leader's behaviors as “normal.”

Leaders of personalist parties do little to bridge the societal divide. Instead, they often see the intensification of polarization as politically advantageous and seek to split voters into two camps: those who support them, and everyone else.<sup>23</sup> In trying to generate support for their rule and prevent defections from their party and the electorate, they intentionally splinter society.<sup>24</sup> Evidence from Hungary and Turkey is consistent with this, where both Orbán and Erdoğan used inflammatory rhetoric to justify their concentration of power, resulting in increased polarization.<sup>25</sup> Such leaders work to shape politics into a single, reinforcing cleavage that pits “us” against “them.” As such, political adversaries become not only competitors but enemies or even traitors.<sup>26</sup>

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In these ways, party personalism both triggers and amplifies societal divisions, increasing negative affect for both supporters and opponents of the incumbent party toward the other group. The resulting polarization harms democracy, compelling voters to tolerate a leader's abuses of power if it means keeping the other party out of office.<sup>27</sup> When polarization is high,

the incumbent's supporters understand that punishing the incumbent for undemocratic behavior by not voting for her amounts to supporting a challenger they detest, increasing tolerance for democratic manipulation. Consistent with this, surveys from Latin America show that individuals are more likely to turn a blind eye to democratic erosion when the party they support is in power.<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, citizens can continue to strongly support democracy, but their disdain for the “other” camp means they are willing to tolerate democratic abuses if it means keeping the other side out of power. In this way, polarization decreases the chance that leaders who manipulate and weaken democratic systems will face a check on such behaviors from below. It is a tool through which leaders aim to influence the electorate and weaken vertical accountability to accumulate power.

## NORMS

Attacks by personalist leaders on state institutions also shift their supporters' perceptions about norms of acceptable democratic behavior, making them less likely to oppose attempts to consolidate power. After leaders take specific actions to challenge democratic norms, voters must decide whether to continue to support them. How supporters respond, in turn, influences decisions by leaders about whether to escalate their anti-democratic efforts. As this feedback loop progresses, supporters' own commitment to democratic norms of behavior tends to weaken as well, making them less likely to hold leaders accountable from below. Party personalism reinforces this dynamic, as the partisan elites who endorse rather than constrain the leader's undemocratic inclinations send cues to supporters to get in line behind the party's agenda.

Though formal institutional constraints on executive power exist in democracies, informal social norms are also critical to the health of democracy. To be effective, these norms must be accepted by both elites and the wider citizenry. Personalism in the incumbent party, however, makes it less likely that these norms will be respected in practice. First, ruling party personalism facilitates attacks on state institutions, and those attacks degrade democratic norms among supporters. Second, elites in personalist parties are more likely to stay in line with the leader's agenda than are elites in other parties, providing partisan cues that influence citizens' perspectives of actions that threaten democracy.<sup>29</sup>

Citizens often have context-dependent preferences, such that their reference points for healthy democracy and acceptable behavior may shift in response to the actions of incumbent leaders. In this way, a leader's attacks on state institutions may make supporters more tolerant of future attempts to do the same.<sup>30</sup> For instance, when Bolsonaro asked Brazil's Senate to impeach judges who were investigating fraud among his family members, he accused the judges of "going beyond constitutional limits with actions," pointing to a constitutional provision allowing the legislature to fire judges who are convicted of crimes.<sup>31</sup> In making this accusation, Bolsonaro conveyed to his supporters that his baseless attack on the judiciary—impeaching contrarian judges who were never indicted, much less convicted of crimes—should be considered business as usual in Brazil's democracy.

As a result of these evolving preferences, incumbents who degrade democracy can remain popular, even among citizens who value democratic norms of

behavior. This is especially likely when leaders lack well-defined ideologies or policy agendas—as is often the case with personalist leaders.<sup>32</sup> By gradually undermining democracy, leaders slowly lower expectations for their behavior among supporters, who unwittingly uphold democratic erosion by failing to perceive their party's efforts at democratic subversion as sufficiently problematic to merit the withdrawal of their support.<sup>33</sup> Messaging from the government justifying its actions reinforces this dynamic, signaling from the top down that such actions are compatible with democracy. This entire process makes leaders less likely to lose backing for their rule as a result of further anti-democratic behavior, facilitating continued backsliding.

## Recommendations

**T**he election of leaders backed by personalist parties is detrimental for democracy. Yet, policymakers do not currently recognize party personalism as a warning sign of democratic decay. To safeguard democracy, policymakers must recognize how the modes of democratic backsliding are changing and the factors that are facilitating it. The dynamics discussed in this report suggest the following actions will better position policymakers to turn the tide of democratic erosion:

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*Include party personalism as an early indicator of democratic decline.*

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Policymakers and democracy-focused organizations such as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the National Endowment for Democracy, Freedom House, the International Republican Institute, and the National Democratic Institute should view the election of leaders backed by personalist parties as an early warning sign of democratic backsliding. The election of personalist parties should, in turn, prompt enhanced scrutiny and even greater allocation of resources to counteract the dynamics this report describes. Within the transatlantic community, the European Commission launched the Rule of Law mechanism to monitor developments in EU member states, including an annual rule of law report monitoring the health of democracy in each EU member state. The European Commission should add the election of leaders backed by personalist parties, especially those that are majority partners in a governing coalition, as a risk indicator in these reports.

*Strengthen political parties.*

While political party development has been a longtime focus of democracy support, the research presented in this report underscores that aid and civil society organizations should continue to prioritize such initiatives and adapt them to enhance parties' resilience to the dynamics this report describes. Such efforts should include:

*Strengthen parties' connections to local communities.*

Research shows that partisan dealignment—or the process through which voters become less connected to their political party—has contributed to the personalization of politics.<sup>34</sup> Political parties and politicians must therefore work to bring politics back to the local level, including through increased grassroots mobilization and community events, such as town halls.

*Strengthen local party leaders.* A strong incumbent support party can help restrain a power-hungry leader. Investing in organizational depth of political parties—particularly in strong local-level infrastructure—can constrain opportunistic leaders. Experience from the U.S. 2020 election illustrates this. At the local levels, then-President Donald Trump sought to overturn the presidential election results in his favor, alleging fraud despite no evidence of foul play. Though many Republican Party elite at the national level did not push back against this power grab, particularly those with upcoming primary electoral campaigns, many local-level Republican officials spoke out in key states such as Michigan and Georgia. Two state-level Republican leaders in Michigan asserted the victory of his competitor even after a personal visit with Trump, and key Republican electoral officials in Georgia directly contradicted Trump's false claims about election malfeasance and refused to adjust the vote tallies to give Trump the win.

*Simplify party messaging.* Campaigns run by personalist candidates often do not center on policy issues, but rather a candidate's "cult of personality." At the same time, evidence suggests that mainstream candidates use "barely comprehensible language to communicate their policy positions."<sup>35</sup> Not only does this weaken their message, but research shows that voters are often unable to place parties on the ideological spectrum—contributing to partisan dealignment and the attractiveness of personalist leaders.<sup>36</sup> To better compete against candidates backed by personalist parties, mainstream party leaders should use simpler language to communicate their policy positions.

*Educate and support civil society, democracy watchdogs, and media on personalism.*

Democracy practitioners and aid organizations should fund the education of democracy watchdogs, the media, and other relevant local civil society organizations on the rise of personalist parties and how they degrade democracy. Raising awareness of the heightened risk of democratic decline associated with party personalism is critical to stemming democratic backsliding. Such actions include:

*Facilitate the sharing of best practices.* Liberal democratic actors operating in countries led by personalist parties should share information on tactics used by personalist leaders to better understand the challenge they pose. They should also exchange best practices and strategies to push back on the actions of leaders of such parties. Democracy practitioners should facilitate the sharing of these best practices.

*Focus on small changes to party constitutions and political party rules.* Party constitutions and political party rules are often dismissed as arcane, but they provide a critical check on a leader's power. In Hungary, Orbán began tightening his grip on power before he was prime minister, when he was merely the leader of the Fidesz party. To strengthen his rule, he started with altering the Fidesz party constitution to ensure he could determine that Fidesz candidates friendly to his ambitions were on the ballot at all levels. Democracy assistance organizations should train civil society organizations, democracy watchdogs, and local media to pay special attention to party constitution amendments that put excessive control in a party leader's hands. This dynamic is worth bringing to light even if that party is not a ruling party.

*Push for greater transparency in campaign financing.*

Murky campaign finance laws enable personalist parties to flourish, as patronage networks or the individual leader can fund his or her own campaign. For example, Babiš, former prime minister of the Czech Republic, created his political party, ANO, and largely funded it through his own €1 million contribution and interest-free loans from his company, Agrofert. Babiš's funding of his party paved the way for his control of it, including setting the political agenda and placing and ranking ANO candidates on party lists.

External actors, such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the European

Union, should take the lead in increasing transparency by auditing campaign financing as part of their election monitoring missions. The OSCE, for example, should use its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights monitoring missions to audit campaign financing.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, the EU should increase its oversight over donations received by political parties, especially private donations, by designing a campaign finance auditing office that examines member state campaign financing.

## Conclusion

**L**iberal democracy is being challenged. Some of these challenges originate outside of democracies' borders, including sustained efforts by revisionist authoritarian regimes to weaken and undermine liberal democratic systems. But increasingly, democracies are facing serious threats from within. Recent scholarship shows that the greatest threat to democracy today comes from democratically elected incumbents who are eroding constraints on their power and gradually dismantling democracy from the top. This report summarizes an emerging line of research that identifies a new factor that explains this phenomenon: the growing prevalence of personalist political parties. The personalization of political parties is heightening the risk of democratic backsliding and collapse.

This report summarizes new research that carefully documents the process through which personalist parties are facilitating democratic decline. It explains that personalist parties lack the incentive and capacity to meaningfully check a leader's efforts to expand executive power. As a result, leaders of personalist parties are more likely to dismantle institutional constraints on the executive. Moreover, such attacks on state institutions send shock waves throughout society, deepening political polarization and weakening the citizenry's commitment to democratic norms. In these ways, ruling party personalism erodes horizontal and vertical channels of executive accountability, thereby paving the way for democratic backsliding and collapse.

Better understanding how democracy is degrading and the factors that facilitate it is a critical first step in developing more effective approaches to defending democracy. This research showed, for example, that the election of leaders backed by personalist political parties—particularly where a leader creates their own political party—is an easily observable warning sign that democracy is at risk of decline, requiring greater policy attention and resources to increase the resilience of the political systems they govern.

## Appendix A: Measuring Personalism and Data Collection Approach

To measure personalism, this research classifies every democratically elected leader in one of two categories: the “party picks the leader” or “the leader picks her/his party.” This distinction indicates whether the leader or the party elite have greater control within the political party. To make this determination, the data include an indicator of whether the leader created the support party. Additionally, it captures seven other indicators that demonstrate how the leader participated in the support party prior to taking office as chief executive.

This data set includes all leaders in democracies in office in January of a calendar year from 1991 to 2020. It classifies a “democracy” using data on regime type from Geddes et al. (2014).<sup>38</sup> The sample includes 542 democratic leaders in 106 countries.

This research defines the leader as the chief executive (i.e., prime minister or president) of a democratic government at the national level. Further, a support party is a political organization, civic association, or mass movement that mobilizes voters to help elect candidates to office. To determine if a political party is a support party, it identifies whether the party backed a candidate in the first or second round of the national election from which the chief executive is selected. Political support includes openly identified speech, organizational resources, and/or financial backing.

Recording the support party during the first election means that the relationship between the party and leader is assessed prior to the leader’s taking office. Therefore, this measure of party personalism captures the pre-electoral history of each leader and the leader’s party, which prevents anti-democratic behavior once a chief executive is in office from clouding the analysis.

The next phase of data collection captures narratives that describe the history of the relationship between the democratic leaders and their support parties in the sample. Using these narratives, this research records quantitative data on the following eight indicators of personalist parties:

These eight indicators record information about the leader and the leader’s party by looking at the history of the relationship, including whether the leader created the party and whether the leader served in positions within the party prior to taking office.<sup>40</sup> Using these eight items, this research constructs an index of ruling party personalism, with higher values indicating greater personalism and lower ones indicating less personalism. Essentially, this data measures the extent to which parties are vehicles to advance leaders’ personal political careers such that the leader has more control and power over the party than do other senior party elites in advancing policy and making personnel choices.<sup>41</sup> This definition includes two subcomponents: “parties that advance leaders’ careers” and leaders’ “control and power” relative to other senior party elites.

For more information on the data collection approach, please consult *Personalism in Democracies: A New Index*.<sup>42</sup>

FIGURE 3: INDICATORS OF PARTY PERSONALISM<sup>39</sup>

<b>Party creation</b>	Did the leader create the political party that supported the leader in the election?
<b>National appointment with electing party</b>	Did the leader previously hold a national government appointment with the electing party?
<b>National elected position with electing party</b>	Did the leader previously hold a national elected position with the electing party?
<b>Party leadership position with electing party</b>	Did the leader previously hold a leadership position in the electing party?
<b>Local appointment with electing party</b>	Did the leader previously hold a local government appointment with the electing party?
<b>Local elected position with electing party</b>	Did the leader previously hold a local elected position with the electing party?
<b>Prior independent</b>	Did the leader previously hold political office or run for an election as a political independent?
<b>Party experience</b>	How long has the leader belonged to an established party before assuming office?

*The eight indicators in this table record information about the leader and the leader’s party. Using these indicators, this research constructs an index of ruling party personalism that measures levels of personalism in democracies.*

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