

A stylized world map composed of a grid of small grey dots, serving as a background for the lower half of the cover.

Autocratic Counterfactuals: Rethinking the Role of Institutions in Sustaining Democracy

Joep van Lit

August 2026

Users Working Paper

SERIES 2026:61

THE VARIETIES OF DEMOCRACY INSTITUTE



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG
DEPT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

Autocratic Counterfactuals: Rethinking the Role of Institutions in Sustaining Democracy *

Joep van Lit (joep.vanlit@ru.nl)

Radboud University, Nijmegen, the Netherlands

* I thank participants to the V-Dem Seminar, Gothenburg, 2023, the EPSA Annual Conference, Cologne, 2024, RMRD #2, Leiden, 2023, the Radboud University PoliSci Lunch, Nijmegen, 2023, as well as Carolien van Ham, Maurits Meijers, Alex Lehr, Dimiter Toshkov, and Marc Jacob for their helpful comments.

Abstract

Research on democratic resilience emphasizes that institutions – judiciaries, legislatures, accountability mechanisms – can prevent incumbent-led autocratization. Yet existing studies rarely compare cases where autocratization occurred with cases where it did not. I introduce “autocratic counterfactuals”: real countries that closely resemble episodes of autocratization on all institutional dimensions except one, but do not themselves autocratize. Using a novel longitudinal matching procedure (*locomotive*) applied to V-Dem data, I construct 21 quasi-experiments, each isolating one institutional factor across 50 episodes of incumbent-led autocratization. I find that democratic pluralism – specifically, lower ideological polarization – consistently and robustly decreases the odds of autocratization onset. No single formal institution, whether de jure or de facto, shows a comparable causal effect. These findings suggest that resilience depends less on any institutional “silver bullet” than on the informal social structures that sustain pluralist politics, redirecting scholarly attention from macro-institutional frameworks toward meso-level behavioural explanations.

What keeps the balance between good and evil in this appalling universe? Is there some kind of logic? Some mysterious force?

- The First Doctor in *Twice Upon a Time*

1. Introduction

Is there any single institutional framework that makes democracies resilient against the onset of autocratization? Using 21 quasi-experiments that each isolate one institutional factor while holding all others as constant as possible, this paper shows that democratic pluralism – not any single formal institution – is evidenced to prevent the onset of incumbent-led autocratization. This suggests that (1) *behavioural* rather than *institutional* explanations are empirically more fruitful; and (2) an institutional view is only suitable when it looks at a *combination of institutional factors*, rather than a single framework, and, crucially, at the informal social structures in which those institutions are embedded – rather than at a single framework.

1.1 *The puzzle*

Given recent (and historical) threats to democracy, scholarship has increasingly asked the question what is needed to sustain democracies. The paradigmatic cases of Hungary and Poland speak volumes: where they were thought to be consolidated, liberal democracies, Orbán and Kaczyński respectively broke down important safeguards that were thought to be part of the unchangeable “rules of the game” (Linz & Stepan, 1996). Even though it has been argued that democracy in some of the autocratizing countries was merely a “mirage” (Dawson & Hanley, 2016), the process has not been confined to newer, post-communist democracies. The United States has seen threats to its democracy from within the democratic system (Kaufman & Haggard, 2019; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2024; V-Dem, 2023), as well as Greece (Pappas, 2020; V-Dem, 2023), South Korea (Boese et al., 2021; Jee et al., 2022; Laebens & Lührmann, 2021; Shin, 2020) and potentially many other formerly-thought-to-be consolidated democracies. Importantly, in these “episodes of autocratization” the countries under threat, processes, actors, and outcomes of autocratization are different from previous cases. It is not external radical forces, but internal democratically elected leaders who challenge democracy (Bermeo, 1990; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). It is not electoral manipulation or fraud, but incremental threats to liberal dimensions of democracy that occur most frequently (Diamond, 2021; Ding & Slater, 2021; Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; Waldner & Lust, 2018). And it is also not limited to newer democracies, but appears to challenge established democracies, casting doubt on the concept of “consolidation” (Svolik, 2015).

In response to incumbent-led autocratization, scholars (and democratic defenders) have first turned to the role of institutions as the pillars of consolidation. This is not surprising: from historical examples of autocratization it is clear that institutional rules and regulations can be a great bulwark in keeping would-be autocrats out of power. And if they get into power, rules and regulations and checks and balances can keep a would-be autocrat from breaking down democracy “too much.” In fact, Capoccia (2005, pp. 44–45) describes that a defence of democracy is first and foremost a reliance on those formal institutions. As such, democratic resilience is defined as a system’s ability first to prevent autocratization from happening altogether (“onset resilience”) and second to bounce back if autocratization occurs (Boese et al., 2021; Merkel & Lührmann, 2021; Tomini et al., 2023). There are, however, two caveats with this institutional view of democratic resilience. On the one hand, the existing research does not systematically compare cases where autocratization occurred with cases where it did not occur.¹ This literature focuses on explaining those cases where democracies declined, without considering how they differ from or are similar to cases where democracy was sustained.

In this paper, I explicitly set out to systematically compare how each potential difference or similarity affects the onset of autocratization. On the other hand, the institutional view of democratic resilience emphasizes the role of macro-level structures in democracies, such as independent judiciaries, opportunities for media oversight, or legislative constraints on the executive (with some exceptions that do try to disaggregate the macro-political indices, see Pelke, 2023; Wunsch & Blanchard, 2023). These “accountability mechanisms” (Laebens & Lührmann, 2021; Lührmann et al., 2020) allegedly make it harder for would-be autocrats to engage in autocratization. I argue such a macro-political view veils important variation between cases of autocratization and resilience.

¹ The empirical problem with talking about “resilience” is that the term captures two types of cases that do qualitatively differ. The first type are cases which have never experienced a threat to democracy. These cases are “resilient” simply because their resilience has not been tested yet. The analogous example is a driver who drives without a seatbelt but never had an accident. This driver is not truly “resilient:” they just have not been tested yet. The second type are truly resilient. Their democracy has been challenged, and they have survived. In this case, a driver wears a seatbelt, has an accident, but has no or only limited injuries. *A priori* it is impossible to empirically differentiate true resilience from untested resilience. Moreover, when autocratization is incremental and covert, it might be possible that we cannot even differentiate these cases *ex-post*, if they turned out to be resilient. Its resilience and democratic defence might have been as covert as the autocratization. Laebens and Lührmann (2021, p. 913) argue that accountability mechanisms make democracies both more truly resilient against actually occurring threats and more likely to deter executives from trying to autocratize in the first place. It must be noted, however, that they do not provide empirical evidence for this.

As such, we do not yet know which – if any – institutional frameworks singlehandedly contribute to the resilience of democracies against the onset of autocratization.

1.2 The contribution

To (partially) resolve these caveats, I introduce “autocratic counterfactuals”. For any given episode of autocratization (a connected period of substantial autocratization, Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019, p. 1100; Maerz et al., 2024, p. 4) an autocratic counterfactual is a case that has similar institutional characteristics to the episode of autocratization in *the years leading up to autocratization onset*, but crucially *do not experience autocratization*. Using these autocratic counterfactuals, I construct 21 quasi-experiments that each isolate one institutional factor while holding all others as constant as possible, leveraging an experimental logic that approaches causal inference more closely than previous research. In this paper, I therefore set out to explicitly compare how each potential institutional difference (or similarity) affects the onset of autocratization, specifically against episodes of incumbent-led autocratization as these are currently the predominant challenge to (liberal) democracies.

These quasi-experiments reveal that democratic pluralism robustly prevents the onset of autocratization. This finding stands in stark contrast to the absence of evidence for any single formal institution tested individually: using these same empirical matches, I show that no single *formal* institutional set up has an evidenced causal effect on the resilience of democracies against the onset of autocratization.

The contributions of this paper are ultimately twofold. First, the finding that democratic pluralism matters directs scholars and policymakers toward what *does* sustain democracy, not only toward what does not. The absence of evidence for any single formal institutional “silver bullet” means that strengthening courts, media, or civil society on its own is likely insufficient to make democracies resilient. But even if an institution is coopted or infiltrated by an autocratizing incumbent (Freeman, 2020; van Lit & Van Ham, 2026), resistance is still possible –it requires, however, a society committed to democratic pluralism. Thus, the robust effect of pluralism tells us *where to invest*: in the social structures, norms, and elite behaviours that sustain a pluralist political culture. This underlines the importance of the emerging research on the actors who defend democracy (Cleary & Öztürk, 2022; Gamboa, 2022; Tomini et al., 2023; van Lit et al., 2023), building on the logic that institutions are only as effective as the people working in, with, and for them. Second, the pluralism finding reveals “where the democratic defence-action is”: at the meso- and micro-levels, not in macro-political indices. I find no causal link between the high-level indices of democratic quality and onset resilience, or between accountability mechanisms and onset

resilience. Instead, I find evidence that societal structures matter. This matters for the way we think about democratic resilience as for one, social structures are not formal institutions enshrined in a constitution; and two, they are only institutions in the broadest, most informal sense in that they structure society. Social structures operate on the meso- and micro-levels: influencing the way people participate in politics, their social and political capital, and their engagement with civic communities (Almond & Verba, 1963; Putnam, 2000). Even though we often measure them at aggregate, national levels, the effects of democratic pluralism happen “on the ground”. As such, the absence of formal institutional effects explains why prior macro-level research has been inconclusive, while the pluralism finding points the field toward more productive ground.

To show this, the paper proceeds as follows. In the next section I discuss which explanations and institutions need to be included in the matching to create convincing quasi-experiments. After that, I operationalize these criteria using the V-Dem dataset and introduce the *locomotive* matching procedure I designed to create the quasi-experiments. In the results section, I show that democratic pluralism robustly decreases the odds of autocratization onset, while no single formal institutional framework shows a comparable effect. In the conclusion I describe some ways in which democratic resilience scholars should rethink the role of institutions in light of these findings. Doing so, I not only put forward a substantive argument about the role of citizens, elite-actors, and society in sustaining democracy, but do so based on a novel research method.

2. Core institutional explanations of democratic resilience

I unpack the term “institutions” into three components the scholarship argues could contribute to democratic resilience against the onset of autocratization: formal *de jure* institutions; the way these formal institutions *de facto* work; and informal institutions (see Table 1). This distinction is more theoretical than empirical, as *de jure*, *de facto*, and informal institutions often align or influence each other (Bratton, 2007; although they also often misalign, see Helmke & Levitsky, 2006). Moreover, for the purposes of contributing to democratic resilience, the theoretical arguments are comparable. Yet it is important to include all three: excluding one or more of these understandings dismisses large parts of the literature on democratic resilience. The causal explanation put forward by the literature is generally that the more institutions constrain the power of a single actor (in casu the autocratizing incumbent), the harder it is to engage in autocratization, and the less likely autocratization is to occur (Graham et al., 2017; Laebens & Lührmann, 2021). Different institutions increase the difficulty of autocratization in different ways, though (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Waldner & Lust, 2018).

Table 1: The most prominent institutions in the resilience of democracy

Formal institutions		Informal institutions
<i>De jure</i> institutions (<i>formal rules of the game</i>)	<i>De facto</i> institutions (<i>accountability mechanisms</i>)	(<i>social structure of society</i>)
Judiciary	Horizontal accountability	Citizen commitment to democracy
Legislature and elections	Vertical accountability	Ideological polarization
(Rules about) civil society	Diagonal accountability	Affective polarization

First, institutions can mean formal, *de jure* rules: constitutions, the official “rules of the game”, the set-up and “division of power” between different branches of government (O’Donnell, 1998), who does what, with which mandate, and to what extent (Kaufmann et al., 2018; North, 1990). The judiciary has been at the forefront as one of the main institutions that could make democracies resilient against the onset of autocratization. It can *de jure* (and *de facto*, see below) increase the difficulty of autocratization (and decrease its likelihood) as it throws up hurdles before autocratic policies can be implemented. Empirical research has found that the judiciary can be “the last bulwark” against autocratization (Boese et al., 2021, p. 886; cf. Gibler & Randazzo, 2011). Similarly, the legislature, although less studied, could provide an avenue for oppositions to unite their counter-power to defend democracy (cf. Hobolt & Osnabrügge, 2025; Linz, 1990a). Lastly, civil society, while not a part of the government itself, is part of the broader institutional framework of checks and balances and the “rules of the game”. Civil society organizations are often enshrined in legal frameworks that recognize their role in advocacy, representation, and participation in democratic governance (Diamond, 1994). Many democratic constitutions and formally guarantee the right to free association, assembly, and expression, which give civil society a role in political processes (Keane, 1999), and by extension in the resilience of democracies (cf. Bernhard, 2020; Fernandes, 2015). Thus, civil society operates within a formal legal structure that grants it a role in shaping governance. These legal structures are part of the *de jure* formal institutions even though civil society itself functions outside the direct sphere of governmental authority.

Second, institutions can include the way a polity *de facto* operates. Lührmann conceptualize these *de facto* effects of the “rules of the game” as accountability mechanisms, which might better reflect the way executives are constrained in practice rather than on paper (Lührmann et al., 2020, p. 812; O’Donnell, 1996). Each *de jure* formal institution has its *de facto* mirror image. Judiciaries and legislatures can *de jure* make autocratization more difficult, but they also need to do so in practice. When they do so in practice, both are examples of horizontal accountability, where “more or less equal institutions” have some grasp on power to promote or halt policies (Lührmann et al., 2020, p. 812). Less horizontal accountability exists when power is concentrated in the executive office, such as presidentialism (Linz, 1990b), or centralization of executive power (Norris, 2008). This allows for more freedom for persons occupying those offices, potentially increasing the chance

of autocratization. Elections and citizen preferences provide vertical accountability. It is an asymmetric relationship, where the elected holds more power than the elector (at least, until the next elections). Recent cases have shown that citizens are willing and able to vote out the autocrat (e.g. Schwartz & Isaacs, 2023), yet it has a mixed record (Hellmeier & Leuschner, 2024; Lindberg, 2009), as many citizens appear to prefer partisan preferences over democracy (Graham & Svolik, 2020). At the same time, electoral competition has the potential to halt autocratization, as future elections could oust the would-be autocrat (Gamboa, 2022; Markowski, 2024), potentially inducing them to refrain from (further) autocratization if pro-democratic supporters signal this clearly enough. Diagonal accountability, finally, relies on empowering the vertical and horizontal dimensions (Lührmann et al., 2020, p. 813). These institutions include media and civil society, who cannot bindingly compel executives to do anything (where judiciaries can bindingly halt policies and elections can bindingly remove executives). But they can provide cues and information to actors and institutions that do have such power. It is therefore no surprise that these institutions are so often the target of autocratic actions. As such, diagonal accountability mechanisms can make autocratization more difficult by strengthening the other accountability mechanisms. Laebens and Lührmann describe how civil society resistance in Benin, Ecuador, and South Korea is the only factor that played a pivotal role in “resolving democratic erosion” (2021, p. 920). In addition, there is substantial research linking active civil societies to democratization (Bernhard et al., 2017; Grahm & Lührmann, 2021; Kamrava & Mora, 1998), lending more credibility to the claim that civil society and diagonal accountability mechanisms could play an important role.

Third, institutions can mean *informal* institutions: norms, values, and democratic commitment that are embedded in the fabric of the polity (Helmke & Levitsky, 2006; Lauth, 2015; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). This research primarily focuses on the effects of polarization in society (Laebens & Öztürk, 2021; McCoy & Somer, 2019) and support for democracy (Claassen, 2020). Similar to diagonal accountability, a democratically committed population makes autocratization harder, but only indirectly: for example, by potentially prompting citizens to vote against autocratizing incumbents. The logic of polarization is reversed: research has shown that increased (affective) polarization makes citizens trust opponents less and makes them favour their preferred party more – even if it is contributing to autocratization (Gidengil et al., 2022; Iyengar et al., 2019). As such, increased polarization decreases the difficulty of autocratization. A lack of polarization does not necessarily *increase* its difficulty – it just neutralizes it.

Overall, democratic onset resilience (a system’s capability to prevent autocratization from occurring altogether) and the onset of autocratization (the first year in which a country experiences substantial autocratization) are two sides of the same coin. When a democracy experiences

autocratization, it is not onset resilient; and when a democracy is onset resilient, it does not experience autocratization. Circumstances that facilitate autocratization, hinder resilience. The mirror-image is as true: circumstances that hinder autocratization, facilitate resilience. As such, it is logical that research shows that the presence or absence of institutions *does* play a role – for both resilience and autocratization onset.

However, I aim to assess whether each of these separate institutions (see Table 1) has a singular causal effect on the resilience of democracies against autocratization onset; that is: is there a single “last bulwark” against autocratization? The scholarship argues there should be a causal effect from each of these institutions on onset resilience: they make autocratization harder to start or accomplish by throwing up hurdles in different ways. Yet, the empirical investigation of these claims rests on standard regression approaches and conditions on potential confounders. While worthwhile and insightful, these results do not provide strong evidence for a causal claim. In the next section, I therefore develop an approach based on quasi-randomization (mimicking an experimental set-up) that closer approximates causal inference. As I show below, this design reveals that the causal power lies not in any single formal institution but in the informal structure of democratic pluralism – a finding that suggests the debate move from purely institutional explanations toward the social structure in which institutions are embedded.

3. Empirical strategy: Quasi-experiments based on longitudinal continuous multivariate matching

To test whether any single institution causally explains democratic resilience, I construct 21 quasi-experiments, each isolating one institutional factor while holding all others as constant as possible. This section explains how I construct these quasi-experiments in four steps.

It begins by establishing the causal logic of the approach: why quasi-experiments based on empirical counterfactuals are the appropriate method, and what it means for a case to serve as a valid counterfactual to an episode of autocratization. It then specifies the institutional frameworks on which matches and episodes of autocratization must resemble each other, drawn from V-Dem's measures of de jure, de facto, and informal institutions (V-Dem, v14, Coppedge et al., 2024; Pemstein et al., 2024). With the substance of the matching established, it introduces *locomotive*, the matching procedure I designed to find the empirically closest counterfactual for each episode of autocratization. Finally, it describes the estimation strategy (six complementary models applied once the matches are identified) and specifies what a result must look like to constitute evidence of a causal effect.

3.1 The logic of autocratic counterfactuals

The best way to test the causal effects of institutions on democratic resilience and the onset of autocratization is an experimental set up. It is, however, clear that we cannot design a true experiment that manipulates different institutional frameworks, exposes them to the same political pressures over several years and see which result in autocratization and which do not. A next-best approach is to rely on quasi-experiments that employ natural variation on a single dimension of interest in otherwise highly similar empirical units to see if outcomes of interest differ (Gerber & Green, 2011). If the units are similar enough, the only theoretically possible cause for the different outcomes is the one dimension that differs. These units are each other's counterfactual (Fearon, 1991; Robinson et al., 2017): hypothetical scenarios that explore what would have happened if past events had occurred differently. Paraphrasing one of the key texts on counterfactuals: "if kangaroos had no tails, would they topple over?" (Lewis, 1973, p. 1), or: if a country did not have the specific framework for one institution, would it experience autocratization?

The core requirement is simple to state, even if difficult to satisfy: find real cases that are as close to identical as possible to cases of autocratization on all theoretically relevant dimensions, but that do not themselves experience autocratization. If such cases exist, and if they genuinely resemble the episodes of autocratization on everything except the institution of interest, then the only remaining candidate explanation for the different outcome is that institution. The counterfactual question (what would have happened if this country had had a stronger judiciary, or lower polarization, or a more active civil society?) is answered not hypothetically, but empirically.

I call these cases *autocratic counterfactuals*. For any given episode of autocratization, an autocratic counterfactual is a country that, in the years immediately before autocratization onset, had a near-identical institutional framework on all relevant dimensions except one (the institution whose causal effect is under investigation) to the institutional framework of an episode of autocratization in the years leading up to the onset of autocratization; and that did not experience autocratization. The logic is visualized in Figure 1: in the time periods 0 to 6, the episode of autocratization and the autocratic counterfactual have similar values for some given institutional characteristic; in time period 7, the episode of autocratization experiences the onset of autocratization and from that point onwards, the autocratic counterfactual does no longer have similar values for the institutional characteristic. If that institution has a genuine causal effect on resilience, we expect it to look systematically different between the matches and the episodes of autocratization. If it does not, the argument that this institution prevents autocratization is weakened.

This design requires one quasi-experiment per institution under investigation, because, following an experimental logic, each institution must be the *one* dimension left to vary while all others are held constant. The result in this paper is 21 separate quasi-experiments, each with the same treatment group (the episodes of autocratization) but a different control group (the matches), constructed specifically to isolate the causal effect of a single institution. I now turn to these matching criteria.

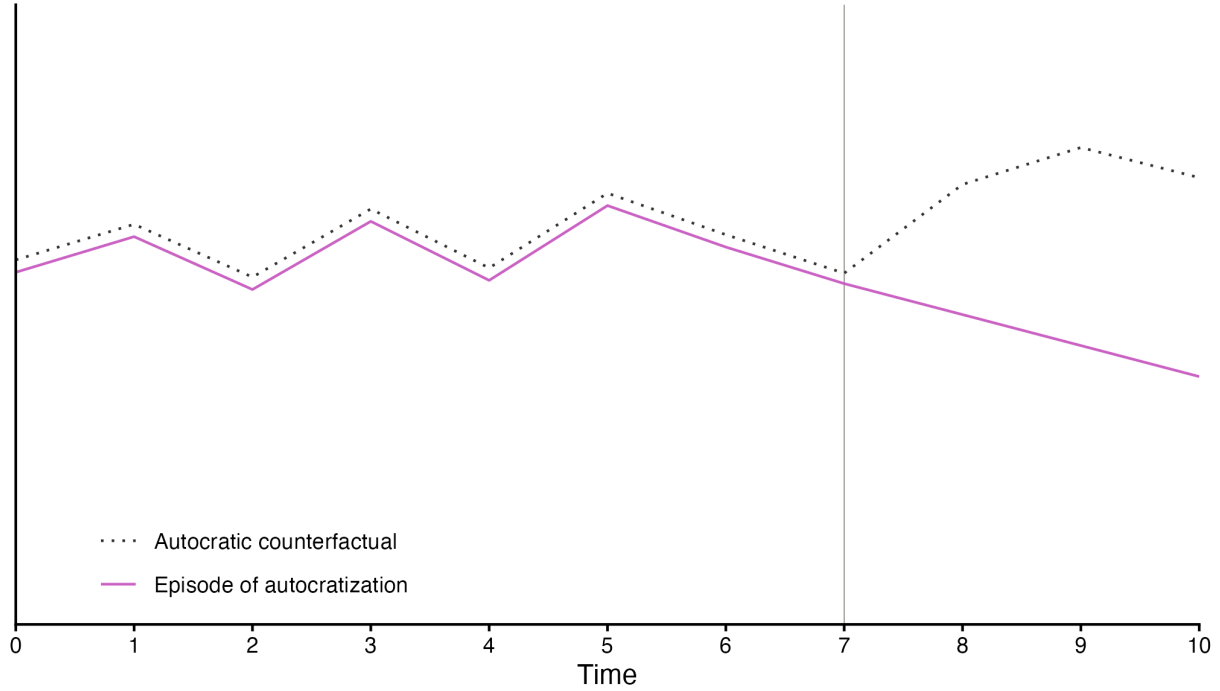


Figure 1: The logic of autocratic counterfactuals visualized. Note that this figure shows how autocratic counterfactuals “match” the episode of autocratization on a single characteristic from time periods 0 to 6, but the matching in this paper occurs over multiple characteristics.

3.2 The matching criteria

For an autocratic counterfactual to be a “good counterfactual”, it must resemble the episode of autocratization it is matched to on dimensions of theoretical interest. This section specifies what that resemblance requires: which institutional dimensions cases must be similar on, how those dimensions are measured, and why these particular variables are chosen.

The matching criteria serve two distinct functions. First, in most quasi-experiments, they are the *control variables* — the dimensions held constant between treatment and control so that only one institution is left to vary and so that we know the treated and control observations are near-identical. Second, in one quasi-experiment they are the *treatment variables*: each institution whose causal effect is under investigation will, in its own quasi-experiment, be the one dimension explicitly *not* controlled for, so that it is free to differ between the episode and its counterfactual.

The matching criteria are drawn from the scholarship on the theoretical explanations of democratic resilience: *de jure*, *de facto*, and informal institutions (see above). Table 2 shows the operationalization of the matching criteria. For *de jure* formal institutions, I match on judicial and legislative constraints on the executive, as well as on civil society participation.² To test the effect of *de facto* formal institutions, I match on vertical, horizontal, and diagonal accountability mechanisms (mirroring judicial constraints, legislative constraints, and civil society participation, respectively). I also test the effect of *informal* institutions, by assessing measures for affective and ideological polarization and support for democracy. Importantly none of the selected operationalizations in Table 2 aggregates into V-Dem’s EDI.³ This mitigates any model-dependent endogeneity issues. All variables are normalized to run from 0 to 1, and where necessary recoded so that higher values denote “more democratic” qualities.

While V-Dem’s measurement of democracy around the world is not uncontested (see for example the Special Issue of PS: Political Science & Politics edited by Little & Meng, 2024), it has for the purposes of this research some important benefits over alternative measures. First, I do not claim there is a “global wave of autocratization” (cf. Boese, Lindberg, et al., 2021; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; Tomini, 2021), but focus on autocratization within countries – which undoubtedly occurs. Second, V-Dem has the most fine-grained data on democracy and processes of autocratization, which is especially salient as it is exactly the small, incremental change over time – not the sudden rupture and breakdown into autocracy (cf. Lueders & Lust, 2018) that is of interest. It furthermore has this fine-grained data not only for the aggregate democracy scores, but also for all the individual components and – crucially – measures of *de jure*, *de facto*, and (some) *informal*

² V-Dem includes two higher-level indices of civil society participation: the Civil Society Participation Index (CSPI, *v2x_cspart*, used in this study) and the Core Civil Society Index (CCSI, *v2xcs_csi*). The CSPI is a “thick measure of the degree to which civil society participates in the political process” and the CCSI measures “ability to organize free of state constraints and how engaged the citizenry is in CSOs ... The CSPI is geared purely to capturing citizen and CSO participation and its effectiveness in conveying demands to the party system and state administration, while the CCSI also takes into account how state policy shapes citizen engagement. The latter controls for the effects of state harassment and legal regulation in facilitating or encouraging citizen participation. While such constraints are often minor in democracies, they are quite important under authoritarian conditions, especially in those cases in which the regime uses forms of democratic emulation as a means to secure compliance and to shore up its rule.” (Bernhard, Jung, et al., 2017, pp. 346–347) Because the two indices correlate highly, and because the CCSI is only preferred in authoritarian contexts, I use the CSPI.

³ While theoretically important, I exclude V-Dem’s clean elections-index. It directly aggregates into the EDI, which would result in endogeneity and selection on the outcome-variable. In the SI, I run additional quasi-experiments that include it and find that the substantive conclusions in this paper do not change.

institutions. More so than other democracy-datasets, V-Dem is uniquely useable to find autocratic counterfactuals.

Within each “cluster”, I work at two levels of aggregation. At the *higher level*, I use composite indices that capture the overall strength of an institutional domain — judicial constraints, legislative constraints, civil society participation, the three accountability mechanisms, and the informal institutions of polarization and democratic support. At the *lower level*, I unpack each of the three *de jure* institutional indices into their lower-level indicators testing each component separately. This multi-tiered approach is necessary because a null finding at the aggregate level does not rule out the possibility that a specific sub-component has causal power. Conversely, when null findings replicate consistently across both the aggregate index and each of its components, the evidence against a causal effect is substantially stronger.

Finally, I match only on institutional characteristics within the same cluster. While the matching procedure works on a theoretically unlimited number of dimensions or lead-years, including too many dimensions directly reduces the comparability between matches and episodes of autocratization. As an example, when I construct the quasi experiment to test the causal effect of executive respect for the constitution (*v2exrescon*, one of the lower-level indices used to unpack judicial constraints on the executive), I keep the other three indices in that cluster (i.e. compliance with judiciary, compliance with high court, and high court independence) as-similar-as-possible between control and treated observations, while letting “executive respect for the constitution” vary.⁴

⁴ A note on the number of criteria. Increasing the number of simultaneous matching criteria would in principle strengthen each quasi-experiment, since it would make the treatment and control groups more similar on more dimensions. In practice, however, it reduces the number of episodes for which a sufficiently close empirical match can be found, since there is only a limited number of potential matches (i.e. country-years) empirically available. The multi-tiered approach is partly a response to this constraint: rather than matching on all criteria simultaneously, each quasi-experiment matches on the cluster of criteria most directly related to the institution under investigation, leaving that institution free to vary. When the quasi-experiments within a cluster converge on the same conclusion, the argument is strengthened without sacrificing the number of matches.

Table 2: Matching criteria

	Concept	Variable name	Measurement
High-level indices			
<i>De jure</i> formal institutions	Judicial constraints on the executive	v2x_jucon	To what extent does the executive respect the constitution and comply with court rulings, and to what extent is the judiciary able to act in an independent fashion?
	Legislative constraints on the executive	v2xlg_legcon	To what extent are the legislature and government agencies <i>e.g.</i> , comptroller general, general prosecutor, or ombudsman capable of questioning, investigating, and exercising oversight over the executive?
	Civil society participation	v2x_cspart	Are major CSOs routinely consulted by policymakers; how large is the involvement of people in CSOs; are women prevented from participating; and is legislative candidate nomination within party organization highly decentralized or made through party primaries?
<i>De facto</i> formal institutions	Vertical accountability	v2x_veracc	To what extent is the ideal of vertical government accountability achieved?
	Diagonal accountability	v2x_diagacc	To what extent is the ideal of diagonal government accountability achieved?
	Horizontal accountability	v2x_horacc	To what extent is the ideal of horizontal government accountability achieved?
Informal institutions	Support for democracy	SupDem_trim ¹	Relevant questions include those asking respondents to evaluate the appropriateness or desirability of democracy, to compare democracy to some undemocratic alternative, or to evaluate one of these undemocratic forms of government (see Claassen, 2020)
	Affective polarization	v2cacamps ²	Is society polarized into antagonistic, political camps?
	Ideological polarization	v2smpolsoc	How would you characterize the differences of opinions on major political issues in this society?
Unpacking the higher-level indices into their lower-level indicators			
Judicial constraints (unpacking v2x_jucon) ³	Executive respects the constitution	v2exrescon	To what extent does the executive respect the constitution and comply with court rulings, and to what extent is the judiciary able to act in an independent fashion?
	Compliance with judiciary	v2jucomp	How often would you say the government complies with important decisions by other courts with which it disagrees?
	Compliance with high court	v2juhccomp	How often would you say the government complies with important decisions of the high court with which it disagrees?
	High court independence	v2juhcind	When the high court in the judicial system is ruling in cases that are salient to the government, how often would you say that it makes decisions that merely reflect government wishes regardless of its sincere view of the legal record?
Legislative constraints (unpacking v2xlg_legcon)	Legislature investigates in practice	v2lginvstp	If the executive were engaged in unconstitutional, illegal, or unethical activity, how likely is it that a legislative body (perhaps a whole chamber, perhaps a committee, whether aligned with government or opposition) would conduct an investigation that would result in a decision or report that is unfavourable to the executive?

Table 2: Matching criteria

Concept		Variable name	Measurement
Civil society participation (unpacking <i>v2x_cspart</i>)	Legislature opposition parties	v2lgoppart	Are opposition parties (those not in the ruling party or coalition) able to exercise oversight and investigatory functions against the wishes of the governing party or coalition?
	Administrative oversight	v2lgotovst	If executive branch officials were engaged in unconstitutional, illegal, or unethical activity, how likely is it that a body other than the legislature, such as a comptroller general, general prosecutor, or ombudsman, would question or investigate them and issue an unfavourable decision or report?
	Legislatures questions officials in practice	v2lgqstexp	In practice, does the legislature routinely question executive branch officials?
	Routine CSO consultation	v2cscnsult	Are major civil society organizations (CSOs) routinely consulted by policymakers on policies relevant to their members?
	CSO women's participation	v2csgender	Are women prevented from participating in civil society organizations (CSOs)?
	CSO participatory environment	v2csprtcpt	Which of [the answer options] best describes the involvement of people in civil society organizations (CSOs)?
	Candidate selection	v2pscnslnl	How centralized is legislative candidate selection within the parties?

Notes: All variables are sourced from V-Dem, except for *SupDem_trim*. See the V-Dem Codebook, v14 (Coppedge et al., 2024) for all measurement information. All variables are normalized to run from 0 to 1, and where necessary recoded so that higher values denote “more democratic” qualities.

¹ Sourced from Claassen (2020).

² Reversed, so that all higher values denote “more democratic” qualities.

³ I disregard lower court independence (*v2juncind*) here.

3.3 The “control” observations: Finding autocratic counterfactuals

With the matching criteria specified, the remaining task is to find, for each episode of autocratization, the country-years that most closely resembles it on those criteria but did not itself experience autocratization. Because no off-the-shelf matching procedure (e.g. Imai et al., 2023; Keele, 2015; Sekhon, 2009) handles the specific demands of this design (matching across multiple criteria, across multiple years leading up to each episode, while drawing potential matches from a continuous time-series) I designed a custom procedure: LOngitudinal COntinuous MulTIVariatE matching, or *locomotive*. Rather than relying on synthetic data (Abadie et al., 2010; Arkhangelsky et al., 2021), simulated counterfactuals, or propensity scores (King & Nielsen, 2019; Thoemmes & Kim, 2011), I aim to find “true empirical matches”. All matches *locomotive* identifies are real country-cases, with real institutional characteristics. In addition, *locomotive* relies on time-series cross-sectional matching (building on Imai et al., 2023), but focuses on continuous rather than categorical measures, as it is precisely the small, incremental, continuous changes that currently drive autocratization, rather than large, categorical changes. This section explains how it works.

locomotive sequentially iterates over seven steps to find the best match for any given observation of interest (the episodes of autocratization, see below). It is iterative, because it runs on each autocratization of interest separately (see below); it is sequential because it takes seven steps in fixed order. Before working through them, it helps to have the overall logic in view: steps 1–3 and 5 act as filters, progressively eliminating candidate matches that are too geographically distant, too dissimilar, or insufficiently democratic (employing a coarsened or calliper logic, Iacus et al., 2012; Keele, 2015); step 4 expands the remaining candidates longitudinally so that matching occurs across multiple years rather than a single point in time; step 6 calculates the closeness of each surviving candidate to the episode of autocratization; and step 7 selects the best match (with the Euclidean distance, employing a nearest-neighbour logic, Sävje et al., 2021; cf. Imai et al., 2023).

The matching procedure operates on each episode of autocratization for a set of matching criteria over a given number of years leading up to autocratization onset. The purpose of *locomotive* is to reduce the full set of candidate matches (i.e. the full V-Dem dataset, restricted to observations that are non-missing on all relevant dimensions) to a single, best match. *locomotive* searches for potential matches from 1990 to 2023, focussing on the time period after the Cold War, but disregards time-effects otherwise.⁵ An episode of autocratization in 2006 is allowed to match with its control in 2000, for example. The specifics of the procedure are as follows (formal notation of the procedure can be found in SI, section A):

⁵ This assumption is identical to one of the assumptions in the episodic approach of autocratization in ERT.

Step 1 – Region matching: *locomotive* discards any candidate match that is not in the same geographical area⁶ as the episode of autocratization. While this is a comparatively crude measure, it ensures at least some comparability in terms of the countries’ histories and cultures. In addition, because there is evidence that both democratization and autocratization processes diffuse internationally more strongly when countries are closer together (Brinks & Coppedge, 2006; Bunce & Wolchik, 2007; Gleditsch & Ward, 2006; Hall & Ambrosio, 2017), geographical proximity is an important confounder to include as we cannot randomize it away.

Step 2 – Country exclusion: *locomotive* discards any candidate match if it is a potential match with itself, even outside its autocratization episode, to counter any democratic or autocratic legacies that could lead to endogeneity (Neundorff & Pop-Eleches, 2020; Pop-Eleches & Tucker, 2018).

Step 3 – Calliper matching: *locomotive* uses a calliper to discard any candidate match that is not near-identical to the episode of autocratization in the year immediately before autocratization onset. Applying the calliper only to the one year right before autocratization onset allows *locomotive* to be a bit more flexible in years further past, as these likely have a slightly smaller effect on autocratization onset. A near-identical match therefore necessitates a stricter threshold closer to autocratization onset.

Step 4 – Longitudinal expansion: *locomotive* longitudinally expands the datasets of candidate matches. Up until step 3, the potential matches include only a single country-year, selected with the calliper. However, since autocratization is a process over time, often consisting of many independent and separate autocratic actions potentially spanning multiple years (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; van Lit & Van Ham, 2026; Waldner & Lust, 2018) a match must look beyond a single year. To assess the impact of a specific theoretical explanation of democratic resilience, it is therefore necessary to match on a number of years leading up to the onset. *locomotive* is designed to look for *longitudinal* matches, so it expands the data for the potential matches to include the years leading up to (but not including) the year of autocratization onset. This results in match-episodes, consisting of multiple country-years, for which we know (from step 3) that the country-year before autocratization onset is near-identical. Step 6 below subsequently calculates

⁶ The regions are taken from V-Dem (Coppedge et al., 2024, p. 395). *locomotive* requires a potential match to be in the same region as an episode of autocratization. The regions are defined as: Eastern Europe (excluding the Caucasus); Latin America and the Caribbean; the Middle East and North Africa (including Israel and Türkiye, excluding Cyprus); Sub-Saharan Africa; Western Europe and North America (including Cyprus); East Asia and the Pacific; South and Central Asia (including the Caucasus).

the distance between the years before autocratization onset in the episode of autocratization and the match-episode.

Step 5 – Democracy filter: *locomotive* discards any candidate match that are not an electoral democracy ($EDI < 0.5$) for any country-years in the match-episode.⁷ This ensures *locomotive* considers the substantial differences between democratic recession (autocratization within democracies, without leading to breakdown), democratic breakdown, and autocratic consolidation. To leave *locomotive* some flexibility, I do not further match on democracy-scores, and take electoral democracy as a necessary condition, but not a substantive matching criterion.

Step 6 – Euclidean distance: *locomotive* calculates the Euclidean distance between the match-episode and the years before autocratization onset in the episode of autocratization. The Euclidean distance is the standard measure of closeness in multidimensional space: the lower the distance, the closer the candidate. Because the matching here spans multiple years, distances between the matching criteria are calculated separately at each lead year and then summed, producing a single distance score that captures both how close the candidate is at each point in time and how closely its trajectory tracks the episode's.

Step 7 – Nearest-neighbour selection: *locomotive* selects the potential match with the smallest Euclidean distance as the best match. If there are multiple matches with an equally small Euclidean distance, it selects a random match. *locomotive* then returns to step 1 for the next episode of autocratization.

In the end, I settled on a lead of 2 and a calliper of 0.1. The choice for 0.1 aligns with V-Dem's episodic approach, which requires a 10 percentage point drop in electoral democracy scores to be classed as such (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; Maerz et al., 2024; Pelke & Croissant, 2021). This difference, therefore, is a clearcut threshold, above which there are unambiguous and substantial differences (which therefore need to be excluded as a match), and below which cases are similar on the face of it. A lead of 3 substantially reduces the quality of the matches, beyond meaningful comparison. Even so, SI, section D shows that the substantive conclusions hold for a lead of 3 and a calliper of 0.05.

⁷ While an important criterion, this step only occurs fifth: potential matches are only excluded if they are undemocratic in *any of the years* in the potential match. Potential matches are allowed to be autocratic in years outside the potential match. If *locomotive* were to exclude these potential matches in an earlier step, it would significantly reduce the number of potential matches, as it would already eliminate any match that has *ever* been undemocratic.

3.4 The “treated” observations: Episodes of autocratization

locomotive is run on each episode of autocratization in the treatment group, defined using V-Dem's Episodes of Regime Transformation (ERT) dataset (Maerz et al., 2024). The ERT codes substantial declines in democracy operationalized through Dahl's polyarchy (the Electoral Democracy Index, EDI, Coppedge et al., 2011; Dahl, 1971): connected periods of incremental decline of at least 1 percentage point per year that cumulate to more than 10 percentage points overall are classed as an “episode of autocratization” (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; Maerz et al., 2024; Pelke & Croissant, 2021). From the full ERT, I retain only those episodes that begin in democracies and are incumbent-led, since the theoretical question concerns whether institutions can prevent democratically elected leaders from dismantling democracy from within. For each episode, the relevant institutional configuration is the one in place in the years *leading up to the onset of autocratization*: these are the years in which the institutions “should have” provided resilience, and these are the years *locomotive* matches on. The ERT's relevant data is therefore only the year of autocratization onset. The resulting treatment group is identical across all 21 quasi-experiments and is summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: The “treated” observations: episodes of incumbent-led autocratization

Country	Onset of autocratization in	Searching for a match for
Armenia	1993	1991 - 1992
Armenia	2020	2018 - 2019
Benin	2018	2016 - 2017
Burkina Faso	2014	2012 - 2013
Burkina Faso	2018	2016 - 2017
Bulgaria	2001	1999 - 2000
Bolivia	2006	2004 - 2005
Brazil	2016	2014 - 2015
Botswana	2015	2013 - 2014
Ecuador	2007	2005 - 2006
Estonia	1991	1989 - 1990
Ghana	2013	2011 - 2012
Greece	2013	2011 - 2012
Guatemala	2018	2016 - 2017
Croatia	2013	2011 - 2012
Hungary	2006	2004 - 2005
Indonesia	2009	2007 - 2008
India	2009	2007 - 2008
South Korea	2008	2006 - 2007
South Korea	2019	2017 - 2018
Sri Lanka	2004	2002 - 2003
Lesotho	2015	2013 - 2014
Moldova	2001	1999 - 2000
Moldova	2012	2010 - 2011
Madagascar	1996	1994 - 1995
Maldives	2010	2008 - 2009

Table 3: The “treated” observations: episodes of incumbent-led autocratization

Country	Onset of autocratization in	Searching for a match for
Mexico	2020	2018 - 2019
North Macedonia	2005	2003 - 2004
Mongolia	2015	2013 - 2014
Mauritius	2014	2012 - 2013
Malawi	1999	1997 - 1998
Niger	2016	2014 - 2015
Nicaragua	2006	2004 - 2005
Peru	1990	1988 - 1989
Peru	2016	2014 - 2015
Philippines	2016	2014 - 2015
Poland	2015	2013 - 2014
Palestine/West Bank	2006	2004 - 2005
Romania	2021	2019 - 2020
Senegal	2017	2015 - 2016
Solomon Islands	1998	1996 - 1997
El Salvador	2018	2016 - 2017
Serbia	2010	2008 - 2009
Slovenia	2012	2010 - 2011
Tunisia	2013	2011 - 2012
Turkey	2005	2003 - 2004
Ukraine	1996	1994 - 1995
Ukraine	2021	2019 - 2020
Venezuela	1998	1996 - 1997
Zambia	2010	2008 - 2009

3.5 A worked example

Table 4 traces *locomotive*’s operation on the Hungarian episode that began in 2006, specifically for the quasi-experiment that tests whether “legislature investigates in practice” prevents the onset of autocratization (i.e. aiming for a near-identical match on “administrative oversight”, “legislatures questions officials in practice”, and “legislature opposition parties”, but letting “legislature investigates in practice” vary).

Step 1 narrows the candidate pool to Eastern Europe (excluding the Caucasus). Step 2 excludes Hungary itself. Step 3 applies the calliper at $t-1$ (2005), eliminating any country-years too distant on the matching criteria. Step 4 expands the surviving candidates to include the two lead years (2004 and 2005). Step 5 removes any candidate that fails the electoral democracy threshold in either lead year. Step 6 calculates the Euclidean distance for each remaining candidate across both criteria and lead years. Step 7 selects the closest match: in this case, Albania, which institutional framework in 2013 and 2014 matches Hungary’s in 2004 and 2005, respectively.

Table 4: Illustration of *locomotive*, for the episode of autocratization in Hungary (starting in 2006), letting “legislature investigates in practice” vary as the institutional framework of interest.

Step	Action	Outcome for the potential matches
1	Region matching	Disregards any countries <i>outside</i> of Eastern Europe (excluding the Caucasus)
2	Country exclusion	Disregards Hungary itself
3	Calliper matching	Disregards any countries that fall outside the calliper
4	Longitudinal expansion	No change in which countries potentially match, expanding the dataset of potential matches to include lead years
5	Democracy filter	Disregards any countries that are not electoral democracies throughout all <i>lead</i> years
6	Euclidean distance	No change in which countries potentially match
7	Nearest-neighbour selection	Select country with smallest Euclidean distance: Albania, 2013-2014

3.6 Estimation

After all episodes are matched to the 21 control groups, the remaining estimation is comparatively simple. The outcome of interest (autocratization onset) is binary (yes or no), with matched data and small sample sizes. To test the dependency of my findings on model specifications, I run six separate models. In models 1 to 3, I run a conditional logit model: first without any covariates but the institutional framework of interest (the “treatment”); second with $\log(\text{GDP per capita})$ (as richer countries experience regime change differently from poorer countries, see Morlino & Quaranta, 2016; Przeworski & Limongi Neto, 1997; Teorell, 2010) and $\log(\text{population})$ (as smaller countries experience regime change differently from larger countries, see Geddes, 1999) as additional covariates, which are both robustly related to democratic stability; and third with $\log(\text{GDP per capita})$ and $\log(\text{population})$ and a one-year lag of the country’s EDI as a measure of democratic stock (as countries with more democratic stock appear to be more stable Pérez-Liñán & Mainwaring, 2013). Recognizing that the matching procedure only matches within clusters of explanations and that this does not capture other potentially-meaningful variation, I include these additional covariates to control for this. As shown in the results below, the findings are largely similar across models, suggesting that the matching works well and that any additional variance is captured by these aggregate covariates. In models 4 to 6, I include the same covariates (none; with $\log(\text{GDP per capita})$ and $\log(\text{population})$; with both and a one-year lag of EDI) but apply Firth-penalization and include LSDV-fixed effects to account for the small number of observations and the matched data-structure.

For any single institutional framework to count as a causal explanation of democratic resilience, its coefficient in the logistic regression must be negative (indicating that more “democratic quality” of that institution decreases the odds of autocratization onset), statistically

significant at conventional thresholds ($\alpha = 0.05$), and robust across the six model specifications. A coefficient that loses significance once GDP per capita, population, or EDI are added is not strong evidence of a causal effect; an effect that holds across all models is. The next section assesses the 21 quasi-experiments against this standard.

4. Results

Running *locomotive* on the clusters outlined in Table 2 (with the calliper set to 0.1 and the lead set to 2 years before autocratization onset) results in 21 control groups of differing sizes. Not all episodes of autocratization can be matched in every quasi-experiment. This depends both on data availability (support for democracy, for instance, has a substantial number of missing values for both the episodes and for the potential matches), and on the values of some episodes of autocratization (if there is no single country-year that falls within the calliper, step 3 in *locomotive*, no sufficiently good match can be found, and the episode of autocratization remains unmatched). As such, episodes with affective polarization as the treatment only have 28 matches, while episodes with horizontal accountability as the treatment have 48 matches (see for an overview of all matches, their quality, and the number of matches the SI, section B).

4.1 Assessing the quality of the matches

Since *locomotive* relies on empirical cases, the match between an episode of autocratization and its counterfactual is never perfect: there will be some variation over in countries' scores on the different indices. It is therefore necessary to be able to assess the quality of the matches. Next to its purpose as the main selection mechanism, the Euclidean distance also serves as a quality check for the matches. I use the proportion between the Euclidean distance and the calliper to provide a conservative estimate of how good the match is.⁸ Substantively, a proportion of 1 indicates that the match differs a total of 10 percentage points across all matching criteria and matching years from the episode of autocratization. That is: it could be identical for all criteria and years but one (where it deviates 10 percentage points); or it could differ a few percentage points at different criteria and years but never totalling more than 10 percentage points. When this proportion is

⁸ An alternative is to calculate the maximum Euclidean distance given by the length of the scales of matching criteria K and the number of years we require them to match on T . If we scale all covariates to run from 0 to 1, the maximum Euclidean distance is simply $E_{max} = K \times T$. This, however, increases the maximum Euclidean distance with each additional matching criterion or matching year, and goes against the intuition that matches should decline in quality the more criteria you add. Using the proportion of the caliper is therefore a more conservative yet realistic estimate, based on the same theoretical reasoning used for the caliper in the first place.

smaller than 1 the match performs better than my calliper, while a proportion higher than 1 indicates a lower quality match. Since I set the calliper to a theoretically informed value (Maerz et al., 2024), matches that perform better than the calliper can be considered empirically “similar” to the episode of autocratization, while those performing worse than the calliper are arguably “different” (i.e. not a good match).

The average quality of the matches across all quasi-experiments is 1.03. Figure 2 shows the quality of the matches for each treatment. Even the comparatively worst match (executive oversight) has an average quality of 1.5, with still 13 out of the 41 matches performing better than the calliper – indicating sufficient similarity to talk about an autocratic counterfactual. The other 28 matches perform worse than the calliper – indicating they are not a good enough match to speak of an autocratic counterfactual. The SI gives an overview of the quality of all matches, including how many perform better or worse than the calliper, and I show below that my substantive findings hold when controlling for match-quality.

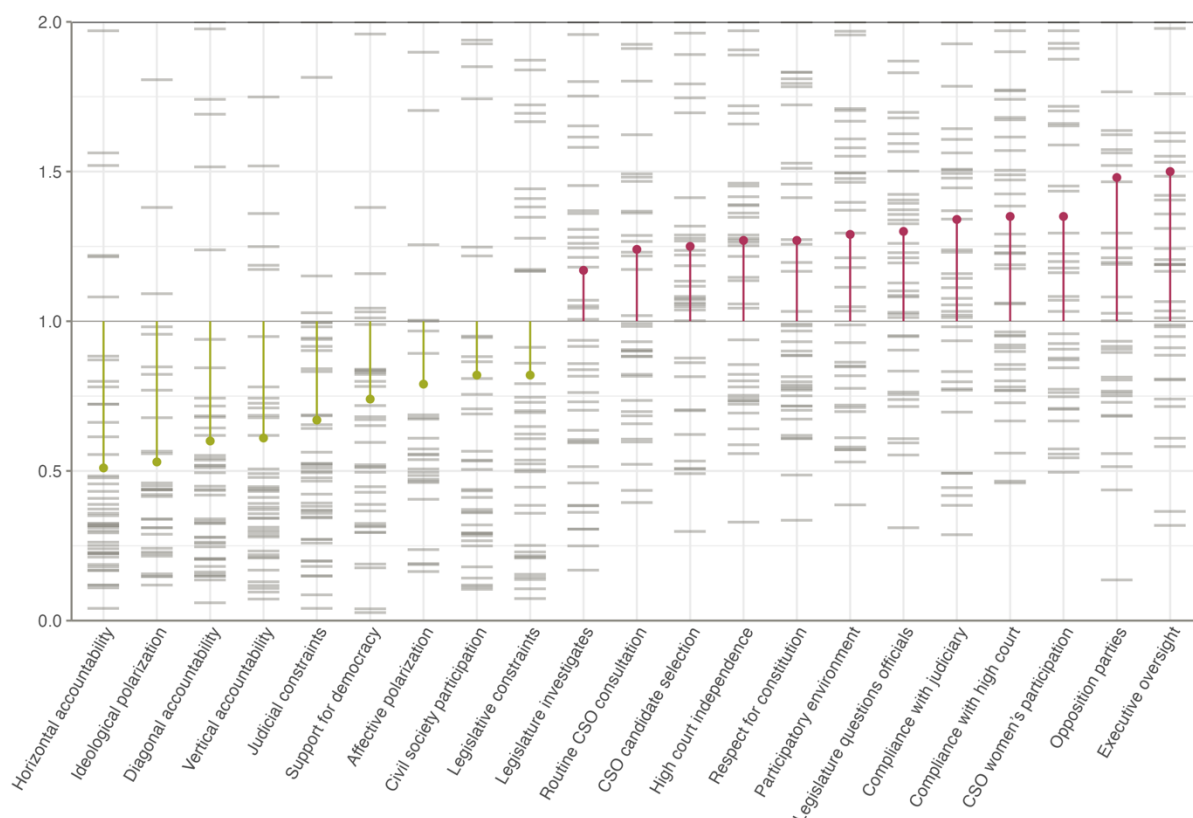


Figure 2: Quality of the matches (lower is better), compared to the calliper. The “lollipops” show the average match quality per treatment: scores above 1 indicate the match is generally worse than the calliper; scores below 1 indicate the match performs better than the calliper. The “barcodes” show the quality of each individual matched episode of autocratization. The barcodes are truncated at 2 for visual clarity.

4.2 Quasi-experiments

Figures 3 and 4 show the results, focusing only on the treatment and excluding the other covariates for visual clarity (see for all 21 full regression tables SI, section C). Each of the rows in the figures presents autocratic counterfactuals. For example, the row labelled “vertical accountability” shows the effects of vertical accountability mechanisms in the counterfactual on autocratization onset, compared to the episode of autocratization, when horizontal and diagonal accountability mechanisms are near-identical, and only vertical accountability is left to vary. The horizontal axes denote the log odds with 95%-confidence intervals. Recall that each quasi-experiment holds all but one institutional variable constant between the treatment and control groups, leaving only the institution of interest and the outcome to vary: a negative and statistically significant coefficient on that variable (across all if not most models) would constitute evidence of a causal effect on onset resilience.

Most of the findings below are statistically insignificant, which likely reflect the small sample sizes. This absence of evidence should *not* be interpreted as evidence of absence. However, given the literature’s focus on individual institutions, it is worth noting that the statement “there is no evidence of an effect” has a substantial large a (policy-)impact. In addition, if the below effects are not true-null findings, it at least suggests that the effect of institutional frameworks is smaller than other aggregate non-institutional effects, again suggesting that scholars and policy-makers alike should look beyond singular institutional explanations of resilience.

I look first at the higher-level indices (Figure 3): *de jure* formal institutions, *de facto* formal institutions, and informal institutions. With the exception of “ideological polarization”, none of the higher-level indicators are evidenced to have a causal effect. No single model results in a coefficient that is significant at the 0.05-threshold. Most institutional characteristics, nonetheless, have the expected negative direction, suggestion they decrease the odds of autocratization onset, with two noteworthy exceptions. “Legislative constraints”, across all models (though insignificant) appears to increase the odds of autocratization; as does “vertical accountability”, across the four most well-specified models (though again insignificant). Being cautious in interpreting these insignificant findings, we should at the same time take this potential autocratic backlash serious: if there is any indication that such institutional characteristics enable autocratization, pro-democratic actors should not rely on them as measures of (institutional) resilience.

The one institutional characteristic that is consistently evidenced to prevent autocratization onset is “ideological polarization”. Across all models, it is negative and significant (ranging from $\beta = -21.79$, $SE = 10.01$, $p = 0.03$ for model 3 to $\beta = -16.89$, $SE = 7.38$, $p = 0.02$ for model 1). V-Dem measures this with the questions *How would you characterize the differences of opinions on major*

political issues in this society?(they call it “polarization of society”, *v2smpolsoc*), answered on a scale of 0: *Serious polarization. There are serious differences in opinions in society on almost all key political issues, which result in major clashes of views*; 1: *Moderate polarization. There are differences in opinions in society on many key political issues, which result in moderate clashes of views*; 2: *Medium polarization. Differences in opinions are noticeable on about half of the key political issues, resulting in some clashes of views*; 3: *Limited polarization. There are differences in opinions on only a few key political issues, resulting in few clashes of views*; 4: *No polarization. There are differences in opinions but there is a general agreement on the direction for key political issues.* They provide the additional clarification that *[w]hile plurality of views exists in all societies, we are interested in knowing the extent to which these differences in opinions result in major clashes of views and polarization or, alternatively, whether there is general agreement on the general direction this society should develop.* (Coppedge et al., 2024, p. 346). As such, a higher score on this variable (and by extension lower odds of onset autocratization) does not deny political pluralism but appears to focus on the extent to which this results in “clashes of views”. The finding that this prevents the onset of autocratization must therefore be interpreted to mean that commitment to democratic pluralism rather than uniformity prevents autocratization onset.

Figure 4 unpacks the *de facto* indices into their lower-level components. Similar to the higher-level indices most quasi-experiments show an absence of evidence that any of these institutional frameworks contribute singularly to resilience against autocratization onset. And also similar, there is tentative evidence of potential backlash effects across all three panels (though insignificant). For all but “routine CSO consultation” this backlash effect is model-dependent and therefore likely substantively meaning-less. But for “routine CSO consultation” it is robust across models. While insignificant, this should caution us again against assuming all seemingly pro-democratic institutions cannot result in pro-autocratic outcomes.

Of note is the borderline significant effect of “CSO women’s participation”. Together with “political polarization” above, it is the only variable for which coefficients reach the significance, although for “CSO women’s participation” it is only for models 5 ($\beta = -9.80$, $SE = 4.59$, $p = 0.03$) and 6 ($\beta = -9.81$, $SE = 4.51$, $p = 0.02$). The other coefficients are all negative, but insignificant (ranging from $p = 0.12$ for model 1 to $p = 0.052$ for model 4). While these results are too mixed to draw as strong conclusions as for “political polarization”, they do suggest that the routine inclusion of women (and potentially, although not tested here, all groups that are less represented in political decision-making) in civil society organizations is important for democratic resilience. Like the conclusion about political pluralism, above, this result implies that political inclusion is an important, though not as crucial, feature of resilient democracies.

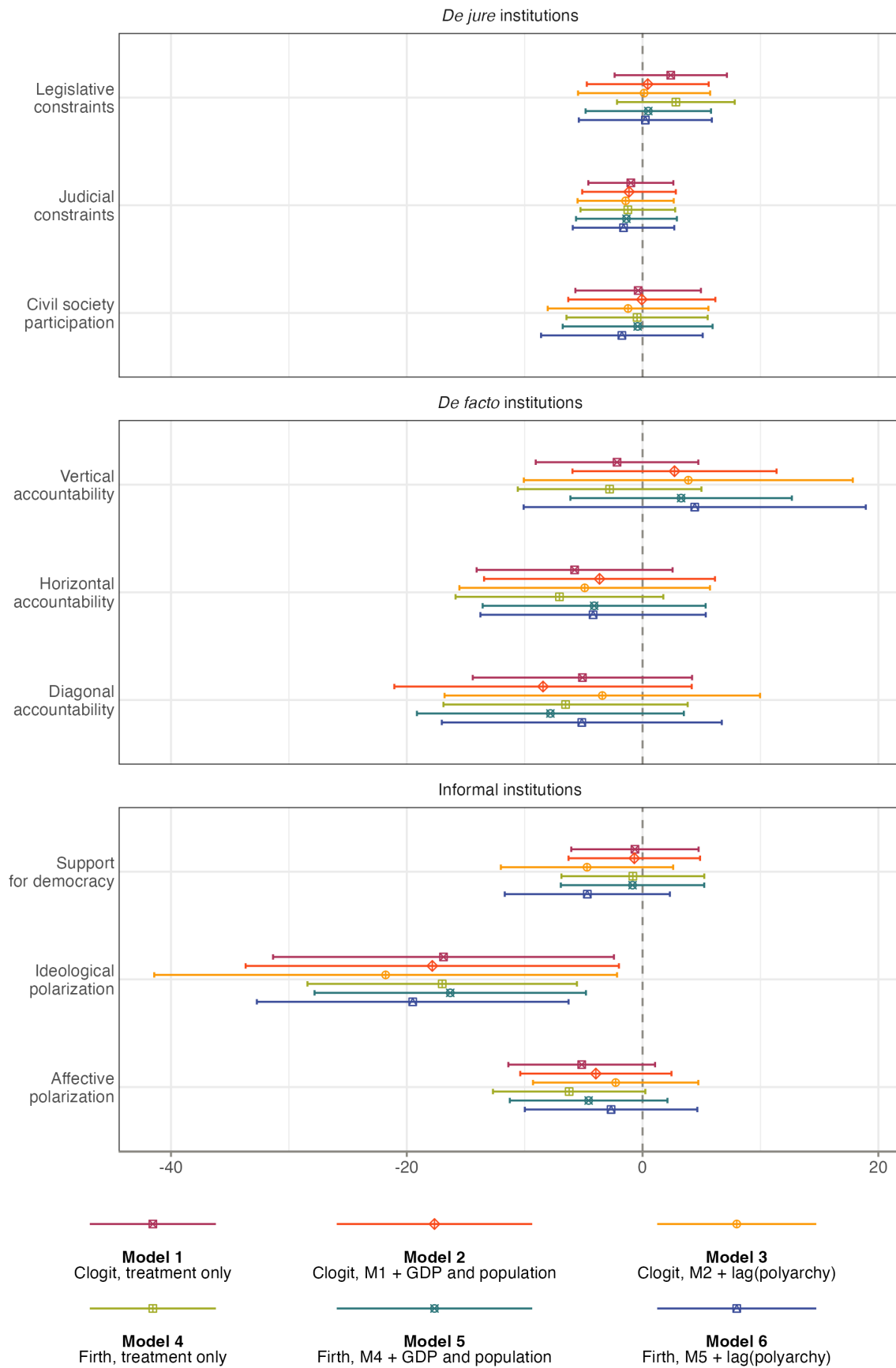


Figure 3: Log odds (with 95%-confidence intervals) for the *de jure*, *de facto*, and informal institutions, clustered by the matching groups. Higher coefficients indicate the treatment *increases* the odds of autocratization onset.

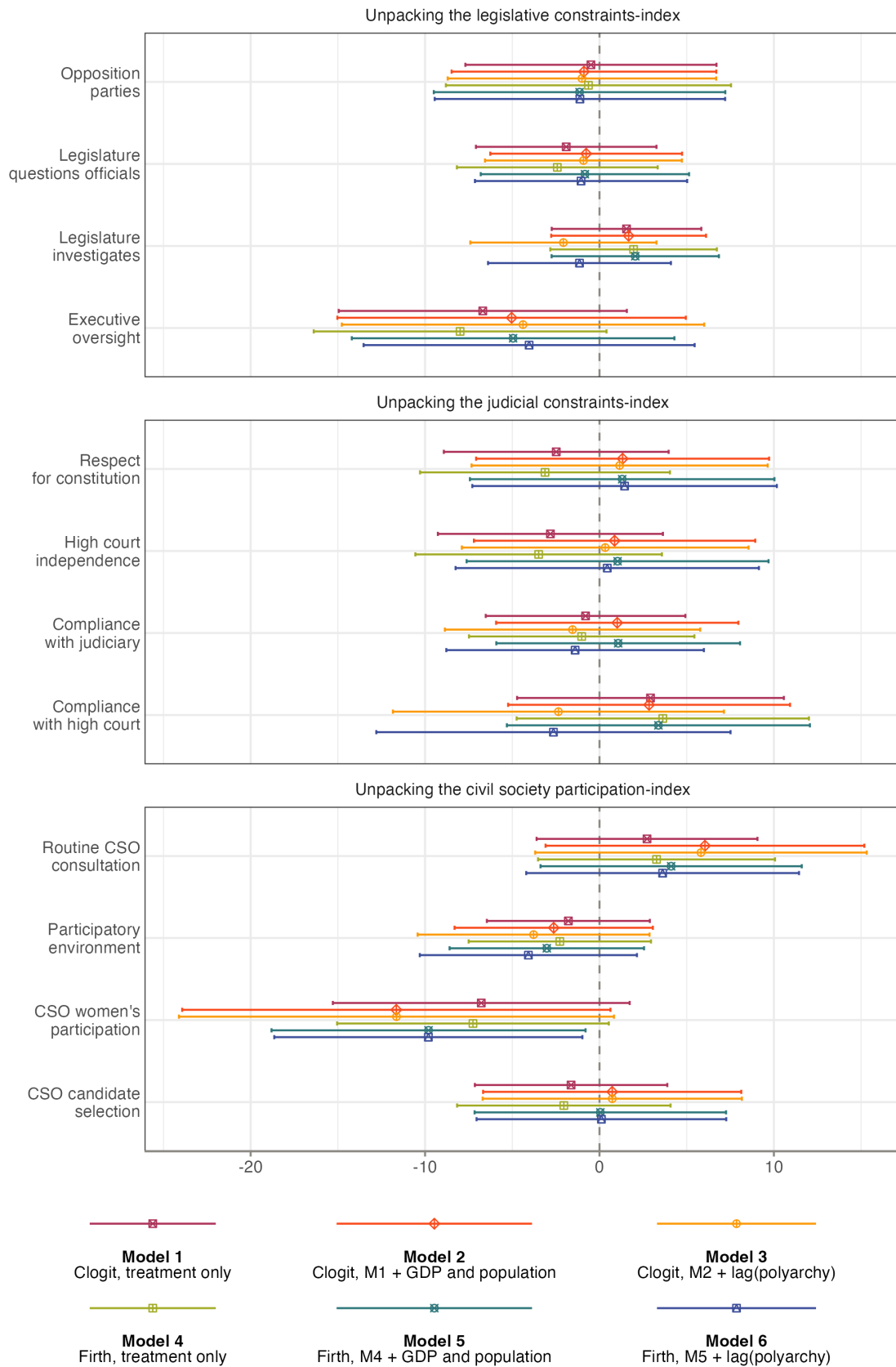


Figure 4: Log odds (with 95%-confidence intervals) for the lower-level indicators, unpacking the legislative constraints-, judicial constraints, and civil society participation-indices, clustered by the matching groups. Higher coefficients indicate the treatment *increases* the odds of autocratization onset.

4.3 Interpreting the results: There is no silver bullet against autocratization

Taking all this into account, the central result is lower ideological polarization consistently and robustly decreases the odds of autocratization onset. In addition, women's (and potentially other groups traditionally less represented) inclusion in policy-making (specifically through CSOs) is also indicated to contribute to resilience, though less robustly than ideological polarization. In slightly broader terms, therefore: *democratic pluralism appears to be a crucial factor in resilient democracies*. This finding is striking precisely because it stands alone: no single formal institutional framework – accountability mechanisms, judicial constraints, legislative constraints, or executive oversight – shows a comparable causal effect. The contrast between the robust pluralism result and the consistent absence of evidence for formal institutions is the core finding of this paper. It makes substantive sense: we know how diverse incumbent-led democratic recession is (i.e. picking and choosing from a menu of manipulation, Schedler, 2002; or from a toolkit of autocratic actions, van Lit & Van Ham, 2026), making it more likely that a sustainable democracy needs to be responsive to these diverse challenges through a committed pluralist society rather than through any single institutional hurdle. Consequently, it does not make normative sense that a single institution is primarily responsible for the resilience of democracy (cf. Tomini et al., 2023 on ‘the interplay of actors’), and this paper shows it does not make empirical sense either.

This is hopeful news for pro-democratic actors. While these societal indicators are not something that can be captured through new rules or regulations or institutions, it is something that pro-democrats can have an influence on. Elite polarization, behaviour, and discourse has a clear effect on how citizens behave and on polarization in society (Robison & Mullinix, 2016; Zingher & Flynn, 2018). Depolarizing elite behaviour could therefore also decrease (ideological or affective) polarization in society.

This has two important implications for the research on democratic resilience against incumbent-led autocratization.

One: the pluralism finding tells us that researchers should embrace a behavioural and actor-based approach (e.g. Gamboa, 2022; Gerschewski & Tomini, 2026; van Lit et al., 2023). The absence of evidence for any single formal institutional effect, combined with some tentative suggestions that (allegedly) pro-democratic institutions can result in backlash. Focussing on a “last bulwark” risk ignoring important variation between cases and therefore risks missing important opportunities for resistance.

Two: that is not to say that institutional explanations have *no* power. There is a wealth of literature that convincingly shows the role of institutions in sustaining democracy: the absence of evidence in this paper cannot be interpreted as evidence of absence. But it should be taken as a

signal that the institutional explanations on their own perform worse than the pluralism explanation and by extension (although I do not provide a direct test in this paper) behavioural explanations. More importantly, no single institutional framework is evidenced to sustain democracies, suggesting that the power of institutions lie not in a silver bullet but instead in their combination and coordination with other institutions – embedded in, and sustained by, a pluralist society.

5. Conclusion: Rethinking the role of institutions in democratic resilience

In this paper, I set out to test whether any single institutional framework causally prevents the onset of incumbent-led autocratization. The answer is that democratic pluralism does – while no formal institution, tested individually, shows a comparable effect. Using 21 quasi-experiments constructed through a novel longitudinal continuous multivariate matching procedure, *locomotive*, I matched the years leading up to each episode of autocratization to other countries in the same geographic region, on a number of institutional criteria. The result is clear: lower ideological polarization robustly decreases the odds of autocratization onset across all model specifications, while *de jure* institutions, *de facto* accountability mechanisms, and other informal institutions do not.

This finding – that democratic pluralism causally contributes to resilience against the onset of autocratization – is the central contribution of this paper. It is not the macro-level of formal institutions that causally explains democratic resilience, but these informal social structures. Democracy scholars should recognize this: already in 1999 did Geddes (1999) conclude that democratization research should not focus on macro-level explanations, but rather on micro- and meso-level explanations. In this paper, I included societal factors with the higher-level indices, but considering the potential mechanisms with which it contributes to democratic resilience, it is better understood as an informal institutions and meso-level factor (cf. Almond & Verba, 1963; Helmke & Levitsky, 2006; Putnam, 2000). Lower levels of polarization are affected by elite behaviour (while citizen polarization does not clearly affect elite polarization, see Moral & Best, 2023), pointing to a clear mechanism through which pro-democratic actors can strengthen resilience: by embracing democratic pluralism.

To conclude, while it is appealing and intuitive to say there are some “last bulwarks” against autocratization (cf. Boese et al., 2021), the reality is that autocratization and by extension democratic resilience is flexible and multi-dimensional. This paper identifies democratic pluralism as the factor that robustly prevents autocratization onset – a finding that redirects attention from institutional explanations to behavioural and actor-based explanations. Copy-pasting pro-democratic institutions (such as Judicial Committees, proposed and mandated by the EU's Venice

Commission) are not the safe-all for democracy if they do not interact in the correct way with other institutions and, more importantly, if they are not embedded in a society committed to pluralist politics. If there is a mysterious force that keeps the balance, it is likely to be found at lower levels of analysis, in informal institutions, norms as the “soft guardrails” (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018) of democracies, and elite and citizen behaviour within those institutions. Future research should therefore investigate the mechanisms through which democratic pluralism operates: how it translates into resilience against autocratization onset, how inclusion of women (and likely other groups that are less represented) contributes to it, and how these informal structures interact with the formal institutions that remain, even if singularly insufficient, a necessary part of a sustainable democracy.

References

- Abadie, A., Diamond, A., & Hainmueller, J. (2010). Synthetic Control Methods for Comparative Case Studies: Estimating the Effect of California's Tobacco Control Program. *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, 105(490), 493–505.
<https://doi.org/10.1198/jasa.2009.ap08746>
- Almond, G. A., & Verba, S. (1963). *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*. Princeton University Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt183pnr2>
- Arkhangelsky, D., Athey, S., Hirshberg, D. A., Imbens, G. W., & Wager, S. (2021). Synthetic Difference-in-Differences. *American Economic Review*, 111(12), 4088–4118.
<https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.20190159>
- Bermeo, N. (1990). Rethinking Regime Change. *Comparative Politics*, 22(3), 359–377.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/421966>
- Bernhard, M. (2020). What do we know about civil society and regime change thirty years after 1989? *East European Politics*, 36(3), 341–362.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2020.1787160>
- Bernhard, M., Fernandes, T., & Branco, R. (2017). Introduction: Civil Society and Democracy in an Era of Inequality. *Comparative Politics*, 49(3), 297–309.
- Bernhard, M., Jung, D.-J., Tzelgov, E., Coppedge, M., & Lindberg, S. I. (2017). Making Embedded Knowledge Transparent: How the V-Dem Dataset Opens New Vistas in Civil Society Research. *Perspectives on Politics*, 15(2), 342–360.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592717000056>
- Boese, V., Edgell, A. B., Hellmeier, S., Maerz, S. F., & Lindberg, S. I. (2021). How democracies prevail: Democratic resilience as a two-stage process. *Democratization*, 28(5), 885–907.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2021.1891413>
- Boese, V., Lindberg, S. I., & Lührmann, A. (2021). Waves of autocratization and democratization: A rejoinder. *Democratization*, 28(6), 12002–1210.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2021.1923006>
- Bratton, M. (2007). The Democracy Barometers (Part I): Formal Versus Informal Institutions in Africa. *Journal of Democracy*, 18(3), 96–110.
- Brinks, D., & Coppedge, M. (2006). Diffusion Is No Illusion: Neighbor Emulation in the Third Wave of Democracy. *Comparative Political Studies*, 39(4), 463–489.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140052766>

- Bunce, V., & Wolchik, S. (2007). Bringing Down Dictators: The Diffusion of Democratic Change in Communist and Postcommunist Europe and Eurasia. *Center for International Studies Working Paper*.
- Capoccia, G. (2005). *Defending Democracy: Reactions to Extremism in Interwar Europe*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Claassen, C. (2020). Does Public Support Help Democracy Survive? *American Journal of Political Science*, 64(1), 118–134. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12452>
- Cleary, M. R., & Öztürk, A. (2022). When Does Backsliding Lead to Breakdown? Uncertainty and Opposition Strategies in Democracies at Risk. *Perspectives on Politics*, 20(1), 205–221. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592720003667>
- Coppedge, M., Gerring, J., Altman, D., Bernhard, M., Fish, S., Hicken, A., Kroenig, M., Lindberg, S. I., McMann, K., Paxton, P., Semetko, H. A., Skaaning, S.-E., Staton, J., & Teorell, J. (2011). Conceptualizing and Measuring Democracy: A New Approach. *Perspectives on Politics*, 9(2), 247–267. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592711000880>
- Coppedge, M., Gerring, J., Knutsen, C. H., Lindberg, S. I., Teorell, J., Altman, D., Angiolillo, F., Bernhard, M., Borella, C., Cornell, A., Fish, M. S., Fox, L., Gastaldi, L., Gjerløw, H., Glynn, A., Good God, A., Grahn, S., Hicken, A., Kinzelbach, K., ... Ziblatt, D. (2024). V-Dem Codebook v14. *V-Dem Codebook V14*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4774440>
- Dahl, R. A. (1971). *Polyarchy*. Yale University Press.
- Dawson, J., & Hanley, S. (2016). The Fading Mirage of the “Liberal Consensus”. *Journal of Democracy*, 27(1), 20–34. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0015>
- Diamond, L. (1994). Rethinking Civil Society: Toward Democratic Consolidation. *Journal of Democracy*, 5(3), 4–17.
- Diamond, L. (2021). Democratic regression in comparative perspective: Scope, methods, and causes. *Democratization*, 28(1), 22–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.1807517>
- Ding, I., & Slater, D. (2021). Democratic decoupling. *Democratization*, 28(1), 63–80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.1842361>
- Fearon, J. D. (1991). Counterfactuals and Hypothesis Testing in Political Science. *World Politics*, 43(2), 169–195. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2010470>
- Fernandes, T. (2015). Rethinking pathways to democracy: Civil society in Portugal and Spain, 1960s–2000s. *Democratization*, 22(6), 1074–1104. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2014.901966>
- Freeman, W. (2020). Sidestepping the Constitution: Executive Aggrandizement in Latin America and East Central Europe. *Constitutional Studies*, 6(35), 35–58.

- Gamboa, L. (2022). *Resisting Backsliding: Opposition Strategies against the Erosion of Democracy*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009164085>
- Geddes, B. (1999). What Do We Know About Democratization After Twenty Years? *Annual Review of Political Science*, 2(1), 115–144. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.2.1.115>
- Gerber, A. S., & Green, D. P. (2011). Field Experiments and Natural Experiments. In R. Goodin (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Science* (pp. 357–382). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199604456.013.0050>
- Gerschewski, J., & Tomini, L. (2026). Tug-of-War: Theorizing the Oppositional Turn in Autocratization Studies. *Democratization*.
- Gibler, D. M., & Randazzo, K. A. (2011). Testing the Effects of Independent Judiciaries on the Likelihood of Democratic Backsliding: Judicial Independence and Democratic Backsliding. *American Journal of Political Science*, 55(3), 696–709. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2010.00504.x>
- Gidengil, E., Stolle, D., & Bergeron-Boutin, O. (2022). The partisan nature of support for democratic backsliding: A comparative perspective. *European Journal of Political Research*, 61(4), 901–929. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12502>
- Gleditsch, K. S., & Ward, M. D. (2006). Diffusion and the International Context of Democratization. *International Organization*, 60(3), 911–933. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818306060309>
- Graham, B. A. T., Miller, M. K., & Strøm, K. W. (2017). Safeguarding Democracy: Powersharing and Democratic Survival. *American Political Science Review*, 111(4), 686–704. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055417000326>
- Graham, M. H., & Svobik, M. (2020). Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States. *American Political Science Review*, 114(2), 392–409. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055420000052>
- Grahn, S., & Lührmann, A. (2021). Good seed makes a good crop? The relationship between civil society and post-independence democracy levels. *Journal of Civil Society*, 17(3–4), 297–322. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17448689.2021.2003139>
- Haggard, S., & Kaufman, R. (2021). *Backsliding: Democratic regress in the contemporary world*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hall, S. G. F., & Ambrosio, T. (2017). Authoritarian learning: A conceptual overview. *East European Politics*, 33(2), 143–161. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2017.1307826>
- Hellmeier, S., & Leuschner, E. (2024). Elections and autocratization. In *The Routledge Handbook of Autocratization*. Routledge.

- Helmke, G., & Levitsky, S. (2006). *Informal Institutions and Democracy*. Johns Hopkins University Press. <https://doi.org/10.56021/9780801883514>
- Hobolt, S. B., & Osnabrügge, M. (2025). Countering Authoritarian Behavior in Democracies. *Political Behavior*, 47, 781–800. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-024-09971-5>
- Iacus, S. M., King, G., & Porro, G. (2012). Causal Inference without Balance Checking: Coarsened Exact Matching. *Political Analysis*, 20(1), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pan/mpr013>
- Imai, K., Kim, S., & Wang, E. (2023). Matching Methods for Causal Inference with Time-Series Cross-Sectional Data. *American Journal of Political Science*, 67(3), 587–605. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12685>
- Iyengar, S., Lelkes, Y., Levendusky, M., Malhotra, N., & Westwood, S. J. (2019). The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22(1), 129–146. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-073034>
- Jee, H., Lueders, H., & Myrick, R. (2022). Towards a unified approach to research on democratic backsliding. *Democratization*, 29(4), 754–767. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2021.2010709>
- Kamrava, M., & Mora, F. O. (1998). Civil Society and Democratisation in Comparative Perspective: Latin America and the Middle East. *Third World Quarterly*, 19(5), 893–915.
- Kaufman, R. R., & Haggard, S. (2019). Democratic Decline in the United States: What Can We Learn from Middle-Income Backsliding? *Perspectives on Politics*, 17(2), 417–432. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592718003377>
- Kaufmann, W., Hooghiemstra, R., & Feeney, M. K. (2018). Formal institutions, informal institutions, and red tape: A comparative study. *Public Administration*, 96(2), 386–403. <https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.12397>
- Keane, J. (1999). *Civil Society: Old Images New Visions*. Stanford University Press.
- Keele, L. (2015). The Statistics of Causal Inference: A View from Political Methodology. *Political Analysis*, 23(3), 313–335. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pan/mpv007>
- King, G., & Nielsen, R. (2019). Why Propensity Scores Should Not Be Used for Matching. *Political Analysis*, 27(4), 435–454. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pan.2019.11>
- Laebens, M. G., & Lührmann, A. (2021). What halts democratic erosion? The changing role of accountability. *Democratization*, 28(5), 908–928. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2021.1897109>
- Laebens, M. G., & Öztürk, A. (2021). Partisanship and Autocratization: Polarization, Power Asymmetry, and Partisan Social Identities in Turkey. *Comparative Political Studies*, 54(2), 245–279. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414020926199>

- Lauth, H.-J. (2015). Formal and informal institutions. In *Routledge Handbook of Comparative Political Institutions*. Routledge.
- Levitsky, S., & Ziblatt, D. (2018). *How Democracies Die*. Crown Publishing Group.
- Levitsky, S., & Ziblatt, D. (2024). *Tyranny of the Minority*. Penguin Books.
- Lewis, D. (1973). *Counterfactuals*. Blackwell Publishers.
- Lindberg, S. (2009). *Democratization by Elections: A New Mode of Transition*. John Hopkins University Press.
- Linz, J. (1990a). Presidents vs. Parliaments: The Virtues of Parliamentaryism. *Journal of Democracy*, 1(4), 84–91.
- Linz, J. (1990b). The Perils of Presidentialism. *Journal of Democracy*, 1(1), 51–69.
- Linz, J., & Stepan, A. (1996). *Problems of democratic transition and consolidation*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Little, A. T., & Meng, A. (2024). Measuring Democratic Backsliding. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 57(2), 149–161. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S104909652300063X>
- Lueders, H., & Lust, E. (2018). Multiple Measurements, Elusive Agreement, and Unstable Outcomes in the Study of Regime Change. *The Journal of Politics*, 80(2), 736–741. <https://doi.org/10.1086/696864>
- Lührmann, A., & Lindberg, S. I. (2019). A third wave of autocratization is here: What is new about it? *Democratization*, 26(7), 1095–1113. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1582029>
- Lührmann, A., Marquardt, K. L., & Mechkova, V. (2020). Constraining Governments: New Indices of Vertical, Horizontal, and Diagonal Accountability. *American Political Science Review*, 114(3), 811–820. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055420000222>
- Maerz, S. F., Edgell, A. B., Wilson, M. C., Hellmeier, S., & Lindberg, S. I. (2024). Episodes of regime transformation. *Journal of Peace Research*, 61(6), 967–984. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433231168192>
- Markowski, R. (2024). The Polish election of 2023: Mobilisation in defence of liberal democracy. *West European Politics*, 47(7), 1670–1685. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2024.2346436>
- McCoy, J., & Somer, M. (2019). Toward a Theory of Pernicious Polarization and How It Harms Democracies: Comparative Evidence and Possible Remedies. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 681(1), 234–271. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716218818782>
- Merkel, W., & Lührmann, A. (2021). Resilience of democracies: Responses to illiberal and authoritarian challenges. *Democratization*, 28(5), 869–884. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2021.1928081>

- Moral, M., & Best, R. E. (2023). On the relationship between party polarization and citizen polarization. *Party Politics*, 29(2), 229–247. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688211069544>
- Morlino, L., & Quaranta, M. (2016). What is the impact of the economic crisis on democracy? Evidence from Europe. *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale de Science Politique*, 37(5), 618–633.
- Neundorff, A., & Pop-Eleches, G. (2020). Dictators and Their Subjects: Authoritarian Attitudinal Effects and Legacies. *Comparative Political Studies*, 53(12), 1839–1860. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414020926203>
- Norris, P. (2008). *Driving Democracy: Do Power-Sharing Institutions Work?* Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511790614>
- North, D. C. (1990). *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511808678>
- O'Donnell, G. (1996). *Another Institutionalization: Latin America and Elsewhere*. <https://kellogg.nd.edu/documents/1517>
- O'Donnell, G. (1998). Horizontal Accountability in New Democracies. *Journal of Democracy*, 9(3), 112–126.
- Pappas, T. S. (2020). The Pushback Against Populism: The Rise and Fall of Greece's New Illiberalism. *Journal of Democracy*, 31(2), 54–68.
- Pelke, L. (2023). Academic freedom and the onset of autocratization. *Democratization*, 30(6), 1015–1039. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2023.2207213>
- Pelke, L., & Croissant, A. (2021). Conceptualizing and Measuring Autocratization Episodes. *Swiss Political Science Review*, 27(2), 434–448. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spsr.12437>
- Pemstein, D., Marquardt, K. L., Tzelgov, E., Wang, Y., Medzihorsky, J., Krusell, J., Miri, F., & von Römer, J. (2024). The V-Dem Measurement Model: Latent Variable Analysis for Cross-National and Cross-Temporal Expert-Coded Data. *Varieties of Democracy Institute Working Paper*, 21(9th edition), Article 7th Ed. https://www.v-dem.net/media/publications/wp21_2025.pdf
- Pérez-Liñán, A., & Mainwaring, S. (2013). Regime Legacies and Levels of Democracy: Evidence from Latin America. *Comparative Politics*, 45(4), 379–397.
- Pop-Eleches, G., & Tucker, J. A. (2018). *Communism's Shadow: Historical Legacies and Contemporary Political Attitudes*. Princeton University Press.
- Przeworski, A., & Limongi Neto, F. P. (1997). Modernization: Theories and Facts. *World Politics*, 49(2), 155–183.

- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon & Schuster.
<https://doi.org/10.1145/358916.361990>
- Robinson, G., McNulty, J. E., & Krasno, J. S. (2017). Observing the Counterfactual? The Search for Political Experiments in Nature. *Political Analysis*, 17(4), 341–357.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/pan/mpp011>
- Robison, J., & Mullinix, K. J. (2016). Elite Polarization and Public Opinion: How Polarization Is Communicated and Its Effects. *Political Communication*, 33(2), 261–282.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2015.1055526>
- Sävje, F., Higgins, M. J., & Sekhon, J. S. (2021). Generalized Full Matching. *Political Analysis*, 29(4), 423–447. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pan.2020.32>
- Schedler, A. (2002). Elections Without Democracy: The Menu of Manipulation. *Journal of Democracy*, 13(2), 36–50.
- Schwartz, R. A., & Isaacs, A. (2023). How Guatemala Defied the Odds. *Journal of Democracy*, 34(4), 21–35.
- Sekhon, J. S. (2009). Opiates for the Matches: Matching Methods for Causal Inference. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 12, 487–508.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.060606.135444>
- Shin, G.-W. (2020). South Korea’s Democratic Decay. *Journal of Democracy*, 31(3), 100–114.
- Svolik, M. (2015). Which Democracies Will Last? Coups, Incumbent Takeovers, and the Dynamic of Democratic Consolidation. *British Journal of Political Science*, 45(4), 715–738.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123413000550>
- Teorell, J. (2010). *Determinants of Democratization: Explaining Regime Change in the World, 1972–2006*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511762727>
- Thoemmes, F. J., & Kim, E. S. (2011). A Systematic Review of Propensity Score Methods in the Social Sciences. *Multivariate Behavioral Research*, 46(1), 90–118.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00273171.2011.540475>
- Tomini, L. (2021). Don’t think of a wave! A research note about the current autocratization debate. *Democratization*, 28(6), 1191–1201. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2021.1874933>
- Tomini, L., Gibril, S., & Bochev, V. (2023). Standing up against autocratization across political regimes: A comparative analysis of resistance actors and strategies. *Democratization*, 30(1), 119–138. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2022.2115480>
- van Lit, J., & Van Ham, C. (2026). The Would-be Autocrats’ Toolkit: What Do Incumbents Do When They Undermine Democracy? *European Political Science Review*, 18(1), 138–157.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773925100106>

- van Lit, J., van Ham, C., & Meijers, M. J. (2023). Countering autocratization: A roadmap for democratic defence. *Democratization*, 31(4), 765–787.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2023.2279677>
- V-Dem. (2023). *Democracy Report 2023: Defiance in the Face of Autocratization*. https://www.v-dem.net/documents/29/V-dem_democracyreport2023_lowres.pdf
- Waldner, D., & Lust, E. (2018). Unwelcome Change: Coming to Terms with Democratic Backsliding. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 21(1), 93–113.
<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-050517-114628>
- Wunsch, N., & Blanchard, P. (2023). Patterns of democratic backsliding in third-wave democracies: A sequence analysis perspective. *Democratization*, 30(2), 278–301.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2022.2130260>
- Zingher, J. N., & Flynn, M. E. (2018). From on High: The Effect of Elite Polarization on Mass Attitudes and Behaviors, 1972–2012. *British Journal of Political Science*, 48(1), 23–45.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123415000514>