POLS/ECON 409 · *Authoritarianism & the decline of democracy*

1. Let's start with pre-2016 democratic America. Gilens and Page test four schools of thought on who governs in the US. What are they, and what theoretical predictions do Gilens and Page draw from them?

2. What critique – and evidence – did Bartels and Gilens level against the idea that the median voter in the electorate ultimately decided public policy?

3. What is the nature of Gilens' dataset on public policy preferences (e.g., what is the unit of analysis, what is the scope, what variables are measured, and how is it constructed)? How does he measure interest group preferences? How does he measure policy change? Do you have any qualms about the measures or samples?

4. Are the economic elite's preferences similar to mass preferences? Are mass preferences similar to interest group preferences? What implications does this have?

5. What do Gilens and Page find regarding mass, elite, and interest group influence over policy *change*? Were majorities powerless to change policy in the period studied by Gillen and Page? Did elections still matter? Was this "post-democracy" in action, and if so, did it help undermine democracy itself? Or is more evidence needed to support this claim?

6. Turning to 2025, are we, per Levitsky & Ziblatt, "living through the decline and fall of one of the world's most successful democracies?" Are we now living in a "competitive authoritarian" state?

7. What do you make of Levitsky and Ziblatt's four indicators of authoritarian behavior of leaders, as well as the fifteen specific items that make up these indicators? How many of the fifteen items apply to Donald Trump as of 2025? To prominent Democratic party leaders?

8. Levitsky & coauthors note that today, authoritarians more often overthrow democracy through the ballot box than through coups d'état. This generates paradoxes: how do we know when the actions of an elected government undermine democracy? What actions are democratically legitimate to block or constrain an elected autocrat? Unravelling these paradoxes necessarily requires a clear idea of what democracy is – so what is it?

9. How can pro-democracy parties protect democracy from would-be authoritarians? Provide comparative historical and contemporary examples from other countries. Then explain how this worked in the United States historically, and why it ~~failed~~ worked in the last decade? In what ways can autocrats in competitive regimes be vulnerable?

10. Levitsky & Ziblatt note that established elites famously tried to co-opt Mussolini and Hitler as figureheads, only to fail to control those demogogues. Did Republican elites make the same mistake with Trump? Or is Trump more a case of "ideological collusion"? Or something else created by Americans unusual political institutions?

11. Levitsky & Ziblatt argue that authoritarians subvert democracy by "capturing the referees, sidelining the key players, and rewriting the rules to tilt the playing field against opponents." How did Trump do this during his first term, and how has he expanded on these moves in his second? How does the pace of Trump's attacks on democracy's guardrails compare to other leaders of democratic backsliders? Be sure to address the role of the civil service, courts, media, and major civil society institutions like universities, law firms, and unions.

12. Levitsky & Ziblatt argue that pro-democracy opposition should hold to norms of mutual toleration and forbearance in order to preserve a democracy worth having. Do you agree? Once these norms have eroded, how does anyone restore them? Is norm restoration a primarily elite or mass project? What about Levitsky & Ziblatt's suggestions from 2018 – did they fail, or are they yet to be attempted? What is the role of elites in preserving democracy, versus mass publics? What is the role of political elites versus leaders of civil society?

13. What role does race play in the decline of democracy in the United States?

14. Are we in an era of global democratic backsliding? If so, why? What role does diffusion play? Changes in the technology of media and communication? The pandemic? Wealth inequality? Technological change? Globalization?

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25 MAY 2025