

The Journal of Social Encounters

Volume 6
Issue 2 *Peace Bishops: Case Studies of
Christian Bishops as Peacebuilders*

Article 18

2022

Review of Backsliding: Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World and Crises of Democracy.

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Recommended Citation

dos Santos, Pedro A.G. (2022) "Review of Backsliding: Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World and Crises of Democracy.," *The Journal of Social Encounters*: Vol. 6: Iss. 2, 154-156.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters/vol6/iss2/18

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***Backsliding: Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World.* Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufman. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Paperback, \$20.00, 9781108958400.**

***Crises of Democracy.* Adam Przeworski. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Paperback, \$24.99, 1108498809.**

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In the past two decades, democracies have experienced severe challenges. Such challenges have affected countries around the world, including some previously considered strong established democracies with virtually no chance of democratic collapse. Most notable, the election of Donald Trump and the constant challenge to democratic institutions in the United States has interested and worried scholars, pundits, and the general population. When previously established concepts and ideas cannot fully explain current political dynamics, scholars must grapple with the theoretical and empirical implications of such difficulties. Adam Przeworski's *Crises of Democracy* uses the idea of crisis to better understand the current moment, while Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufman's *Backsliding: Democratic Regimes in the Contemporary World* focuses on backsliding. Both books build from and contribute to the well-established literature on democracy and democratic development, though they take slightly different approaches.

Conceptual and empirical debates on what is democracy and what makes a country a democracy have been hallmarks of the political science field throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. It is no surprise that these two books provide slightly different definitions and measurements of democracy. Przeworski (p. 5) adopts what he calls a minimalist and electoralist approach of what a democracy is, "a political arrangement in which people select governments through elections and have a reasonable possibility of removing incumbent government they do not like." His analysis provides a variety of data to elaborate on the ways in which electoral competition has deteriorated around the world. Haggard and Kaufman point to the analytic scrutiny the concept of democracy has received in the political science field, arguing that the discussion revolves around three interacting pillars: free and fair elections, protection of civil rights and liberties, and horizontal checks including the rule of law (Haggard and Kaufman, pg. 3). The authors do not provide a conceptual definition, however, relying on the Varieties of Democracy dataset (V-Dem) to establish thresholds for what they consider a democratic country in a given period.

Both books are ideal for scholars of democracy, advanced undergraduates, and graduate students. Przeworski's book is very suitable to the general public as well, including its emphasis on descriptive analysis. Haggard and Kaufman's book is part of the Cambridge Elements Political Economy Series, and space limitations (the book is only 94 pages) likely precluded the authors from providing more detail in some sections. The focus on the V-Dem dataset allowed the authors to delve into empirical discussions early in the short manuscript. Both books do a great job at corroborating their data analysis with case studies. Przeworski uses "stories" to provide a historical

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background for two crises that led to a collapse of democracy (Weimar Germany and Chile 1970-73) and two resolved political crises (United States 1964-76 and France 1954-62 and 1968). Haggard and Kaufman provide [an online appendix](#) with detailed case studies for the sixteen cases highlighted in their manuscript as well as brief case studies focusing on polarization (Brazil, Poland, and the United States) and four cases showing the incremental ways in which backsliding occurs today (Venezuela, Russia, Hungary, and the United States).

Both manuscripts are responses to contemporary issues. While the authors take slightly different approaches and develop distinct conceptual tools, they are addressing similar phenomena. Przeworski takes a broader approach, focusing on crises of democracy. He defines a crisis as something “that cannot last, in which something must be decided. They emerge when the status quo is untenable and nothing has yet replaced it” (pg. 9). Przeworski later provides more detail on how he defines the three kinds of crisis that can influence a crisis of democracy: economic (a fall in per capita income by at least 10 percent during consecutive years); political (such as conflicting claims on who should govern, fights between judiciary and executive, and forced resignation); and what he calls “narrowly governmental” (pp. 29-38). Two interesting points in Przeworski’s broad analysis of previous crises are of note. First, the frequency of government crises is much higher in democracies that fell (p. 35). Second, past experience with democracy is important to avoid democratic collapse: “the probability of a democracy falling decreases rapidly as a country accumulates the experience of peaceful alternations in office resulting from elections” (p. 37).

Przeworski focuses on bigger picture (mostly country-level) approaches to understanding democratic crisis, specifically if the current moment constitutes a crisis of democracy, or if a crisis is impending (pg. 21). One of the strengths in Przeworski’s manuscript is its focus on the historical development (and erosion) of democracy in the 20th century. His discussion of four cases (Germany and Chile as collapse cases, United States and France as maintenance cases) provides important comparison points between the past and the present. Przeworski is emphatic that “the future depends on whether the conditions we observe in the present mirror those in the past” (p. 78) and that some conditions are markedly different today, including the role of capitalism in political development. The stronger part of Przeworski’s manuscript makes the rest of the book less compelling, as the descriptive analyses on present day try to cover too much ground while keeping a small thread connected to the historical analysis of Part 1.

Haggard and Kaufman’s focus on backsliding is a narrower approach to addressing current democratic woes. They define backsliding as “the incremental erosion of democratic institutions, rules and norms that result from the actions of duly elected governments, typically driven by an autocratic leader” (pg. 1). Haggard and Kaufman use country-level data to focus on individual or group-level behavior, and their goal is to survey the phenomenon of democratic backsliding and discuss possible future research agendas. The narrower focus in Haggard and Kaufman makes for a more compelling assessment of key elements of what is happening with democracy today. The authors conclude, somewhat unsurprisingly, that “democracies most at risk of reversion are those that are more weakly institutionalized to begin with” (pg. 74). This goes in line with Przeworski’s point that previous experience with democracy is important to maintain democratic rule.

So, what do these books tell us about the fate of democracy? Both manuscripts send a similar message: the end is not nigh, but we must not be complacent. “Complacency plays a critical role in the backsliding process, as oppositions and publics are lulled into accepting autocratic messaging and subtly shifting status quo” (Haggard and Kaufman, p. 84). Both manuscripts allude to shifting opinions about democracy and general discontent as threats to democratic rule. Other important factors, such as the rise of social media and international influences must be better understood. Polarization and general discontent with democratic institutions are real threats to democracy. As Przeworski puts it, “I do not think that the very survival of democracy is at stake in most countries, but I do not see what would get us out of the current discontent” (pg. 206).

These two books do not provide any suggestions on what **must** be done to protect democratic institutions in the United States and beyond, but they are good resources for those trying to better understand how political scientists see this current moment, and what we must understand about the past and present to better protect democracy from autocrats, demagogues, and opportunists.