BEAUTIFUL SPARK OF DEMOCRACY

The conditions for democratic defence against incumbent-led democratic recession

Joep van Lit

Institute for Management Research

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Beautiful Spark of Democracy

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geboren op 7 maart 1993
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by

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Around 9pm on March 5, 1953, Sergei Prokofiev – the greatest of Russian composers – died. Barely one hour later, Joseph Stalin died. For days, the streets and squares in Moscow were packed. It took a long time to move Prokofiev's body from his home, the casket at some points being lifted above the carriers' head to pass it through the crowds. The leading Russian musical journal, Sovyetskaya Muzyka, *ran his obituary only in April on page 117. The first 116 pages were dedicated to Stalin. All musicians were obliged to play at Stalin's funeral, leaving Prokofiev with a scratchy radio recording of his own* Romeo and Juliet. *All flowers were ordered to be sent to Stalin's funeral, leaving Prokofiev with folded paper flowers.*[1]

1. Read more about this true story here: https://interlude.hk/on-this-day-5-march-sergei-prokofiev-died/

Prologue: Nothing was left for anyone else

This is a story of people. And a story about people. It begins – like any good story – with our hero.

She stood next to her window, slightly to the side of the thin curtains, hidden from anyone watching outside. But who would be watching? Not now, not tonight: everyone was moving in a long, slow, unorganized march to the Red Square, eyes cast down in grief and loss.

She was not a hero yet. She was afraid. Not of him, no, not anymore. He died. Natural causes (some say). She did not care. On this evening, all at once, hope was cut down. Music was silenced by the life and death of one man.

He was Stalin.

She got her coat (of course, it is too big for her in any good story, but in this case, it fitted just fine) and walked outside. She was warned to stay away from the crowds, but her curiosity was too strong to resist.

As she neared the square, soldiers directed the crowd around. Short, cutting hand gestures, allowing no hesitation. The people moved on, silently, pushing her with them. Some cried, looked devastated: from grief, reverence, or fear, she could not tell.

Besides her someone whispered in disbelief: "Imagine it: Stalin… gone."

Imagine.

But she could not.

Flowers lined the streets: colourful wreaths against the grey stone. Not as a celebration, but as a last move to show his power. All flowers in the city were ordered for his funeral.

She stood there, feeling the heat from the mass of people around her against the sharp chill of the evening. She thought of the music again, remembering the notes from symphonies, sonatas, concertos. Climbing, yearning, into the sky, towards the stars.

Like the flowers, all musicians were told to perform at his funeral. Flowers, fanfare, and freedom, all were sacrificed for him. Like in life, his death cast a shadow, drowning out any light that might have flickered in honour of… well… anything, really. Nothing was left for anyone else.

She realized then that this crowd was not grieving. It was suffocating itself, surrendering each individual thought, each whispered doubt. Their lives not their own but bound in fear, in dread, by him.

She wanted to scream, to shout, to cry out. But what good would it do? Her voice would be one among thousands, lost in a sea of bowed heads. Trapped in the silence he had imposed on them all.

She, too, grieved. Not for him, but for them, who had been robbed of their voice, their creativity, their hope. All these years of darkness had left them empty, unable to remember what freedom had tasted like, what beauty without restriction had looked like.

With closed eyes, she dreamed of a world where music would sound freely, where flowers line the streets in celebration for anyone. It was a beautiful world, full of hope and warmth.

Imagine.

But here in Moscow, the cold pressed closer. The crowd continued to flow, directed by short, cutting gestures. And her imagined dream faltered. The music quieted. Swallowed by the unyielding silence of fear. Like the people around her, she was not a hero yet.

She will be, though. Days, months, years might pass. But she will be a hero.

A little spark, far, far away. He stared curiously, almost unafraid of it. It looked quite close, quite insignificant

Baley, in The Naked Sun

Chapter 1

Introduction

1. Capo

How Democracies Die (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018), *How Democracy Ends* (Runciman, 2019), *Crises of Democracy* (Przeworski, 2019), *Democracies Divided* (Carothers & O'Donohue, 2019), *The People vs. Democracy* (Mounk, 2019), *Twilight of Democracy* (Applebaum, 2020), *Democracy Erodes From the Top* (Bartels, 2023), *When Democracy Breaks* (Fung et al., 2024)… All these books have been published in the last ten years, making the curious browser of a bookstore wonder: what is wrong with democracy?

To be fair, there have been books with more uplifting titles – if you assume nuance to be an uplifting vibe: *The Decline and Rise of Democracy* (Stasavage, 2020), *Democracy in Hard Places* (Mainwaring & Masoud, 2022 which does not sound too optimistic but posits that democracy can, actually, survive in hard places), *Why Democracies Develop and Decline* (Coppedge et al., 2022). But this makes the question all the more urgent. Why do some democracies develop and some decline? Why do some hard places result in democracy while others crush it? And above all: what makes some democracies resilient against the attacks on democracy by democratically elected leaders – against "incumbent-led democratic recession"? This thesis focuses on the last question, asking: *when does democratic defence against incumbent-led democratic recession occur?* Incumbent-led democratic recession has been the most prevalent process by which democracies decline, and I will show in this thesis how democracies' resilience against it has so far been understudied and not adequately understood.

Big questions need small answers.[2] Throughout this thesis, there will be a lot of nuances, but my small answer is: some democracies are sustained because those democracies have had successful "democratic defenders". In this thesis, I will show there is nothing wrong with democracy. Instead, there is something wrong with some of its elected leaders, who aggrandize executive power, undermine checks and balances, and turn to autocratization. In response to these leaders, whom I will call would-be autocrats or autocratizing incumbents, democracy needs democratic defenders: elites and citizens who stand up to oppose the would-be autocrat and sustain democracy.

Especially in the first half of this thesis, *Movement I – Autocratic Problems*, I will show that democracy is under threat. If not globally, then at least in some countries – both far away and close to home. And if democracy is going to survive, academics, policy-makers, and citizens alike need to take these threats seriously. However, in the second half of this thesis, *Movement II – Democratic Solutions*, I will show that democracy can

2. Teitur, Betty Hedges, on the album Let the dog drive home.

be resilient. Not because institutions are set in stone, rules cannot be broken, or electoral systems keep out potential wrong-doers. But because of the people within the institutions, the people upholding the rules of the game (even when others cheat), and the people who vote for democracy. The question then becomes, and this is the question central to my thesis: when do those people realize what is going on, when do those people draw a line in the sand, and when do those people stand op to oppose the autocratizing incumbent? In sum: *when does democratic defence against incumbent-led democratic recession occur?*

Before I develop my argument in the following chapters, this *Introduction* will set the stage. In *Section 2 – Setting the benchmark* I discuss what "incumbent-led democratic recession" is and how it relates to broader themes of regime change and autocratization. I also define the core phenomenon of interest: "democratic defence". In *Section 3 – The crime of the century* I set some scope-conditions: I outline the characteristics of the cases I am interested in, I summarize the literature I am contributing to, and I give an overview of the circumstances that facilitate incumbent-led democratic recession. This "background" is important because it shows the gaps in the current literature. In *Section 4 – The research puzzle* I make these gaps explicit, and I show how my thesis contributes to addressing these open and urgent questions, theoretically and empirically. In *Section 5 – Why should we care?* I show that these questions are, in fact, urgent: both empirically and normatively. Finally, in *Section 6 – Structure of this thesis* I outline the remaining chapters.

In 2017, the Washington Post changed its slogan to "democracy dies in darkness". But a single spark can be enough to make it prevail instead. Let's find out how.

2. Setting the benchmark

2.1 What is incumbent-led democratic recession?

Throughout this thesis, I will use the term "democratic recession" to denote a decline in democracy. Specifically, democratic recession is the "substantial decline in core requirements of [liberal] democracy" (adapted from Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019, p. 1096). There are a lot of moving parts in this definition, which require further attention. But first, the best way to understand the term "democratic recession" is by looking at some terms I will not use. This comparison highlights the differences and similarities across the terminology, giving us a clear idea of what a decline of democracy is and is not. Being clear and precise in terminology is not just a semantical exercise. "To use [these terms] as synonyms not only indicates a certain

deafness to linguistic meanings, but it has also resulted in a kind of blindness to the realities [these terms] correspond to" (Arendt, 2023, p. 57): the way we talk about empirical phenomena influences how we perceive them and by extension how we can study them.

I will not talk about democratic backsliding, for example. Bermeo (2016, p. 5) defines this as the "state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain existing democracy". While widely used, this term places too have an emphasis on institutions, but I show throughout this thesis that these are just a small part of the puzzle. In addition, the term's benchmark is "existing democracy", which lacks a strong theoretical foundation how democracy is defined, hindering cross-case comparison. I will not talk about democratic erosion, which Gerschewski (2021, p. 48) describes as the process by which "outside forces can wash out democratic institutions". The erosion metaphor is useful to understand the gradual and incremental changes made to democracy, yet its focus on outside forces goes against one of the key characteristics of contemporary autocratization: it is mainly driven by inside forces and incumbent governments. I will not talk about democratic decay, which is "the incremental degradation of the structures and substance of liberal constitutional democracy" (Daly, 2019, p. 17). It rightly emphasizes both structure and substance but then limits democratic decline to declines of constitutional democracy, ignoring the role of (citizen) norms, perceptions, and arguably informal politics. I will not talk about democratic deconsolidation, which can be defined as diminishing popular support for democracy as a system of government, the emergence of antisystem parties and movements, and the questioning of democratic rules (Foa & Mounk, 2016, p. 15). Although this does take into account the importance of citizen norms, it disavows the empirical reality that democracies decline even when popular support for democracy appears to remain high. And I will not talk about democratic decline as "the incremental assaults on constitutional checks on executive power" (Kaufman & Haggard, 2019, p. 417), which, like backsliding and decay, too narrowly focuses on institutional checks. Lastly, what I am also not primarily interested in is democratic breakdown: the often "dramatic, sudden, and visible relapses to authoritarian rule" (Schedler, 1998, p. 97), not even when it happens through gradual and incremental reform rather than sudden ruptures (Lueders & Lust, 2018).[3]

So, what am I interested in in this thesis? The previous definitions highlight various aspects I need to take into account. Following Bermeo (2016), I look at "state-

3. This is by no means a complete overview of the terminology. The scholarship speaks additionally about regression (Cooley, 2015), stagnation (Mietzner, 2012), rollback (Diamond, 2008), de-democratisation (Bogaards, 2018; Tilly, 2003), decoupling (Ding & Slater, 2021), and many more.

led debilitation" of democracy, but in contrast to her, I look beyond the political institutions. In line with Gerschewski (2021) and Daly (2019) I focus on endogenous processes of autocratization ("decay" rather than "erosion"), where I disregard challenges from the outside. Instead, what I am interested are challenges to democracy that originate inside a political system. Following Foa and Mounk (2016) and Kaufman and Haggard (2019) I look at incremental assaults on formal checks and balances but also on informal norms and support for the "rules of the game". But for this research, these challenges do not need to result in a dramatic relapse to authoritarianism: states can still be democratic after these challenges, but just slightly less so. I therefore talk about democratic recession as the "substantial decline in core requirements of [liberal] democracy" (adapted from Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019, p. 1096).

I make one change to the definition provided by Lührmann and Lindberg (2019): substituting "electoral" for "liberal" democracy. As I will explain in *Section 3.2 – Means* and show more thorougly in *Chapter 2 – Autocratic Actions* current democratic recession is characterized by threats to both the liberal and the electoral dimensions of democracy. If we would limit our view to electoral democracy only, we risk overlooking many cases of democratic recession (and of democratic defence) that occur in the liberal dimensions. Moreover, liberal democracy encompasses electoral democracy, meaning that any decline in the electoral components is in itself also a decline of liberal democracy. Therefore, in this thesis I look at declines of democracy away from the liberal-benchmark, which includes both liberal democracies and electoral democracies.

Substantially, democratic recession is broad enough to capture both the incrementalist nature of autocratization as well as the more severe forms autocratization. Democratic recession is defined as a "substantial" decline in democracy, which includes both sudden, sharp declines, as well as incremental declines. Contemporary democratic recession is often a slow, incremental process (Bermeo, 2016; Diamond, 2021; Gamboa, 2022; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Waldner & Lust, 2018; Wunsch & Blanchard, 2023), where serious challenges are, at least at first, often not substantial. Yet they do build up, over a period of time, to a substantial threat to democracy.

Lastly, I limit my study of democratic recession by focusing on a specific set of actors: democratically elected incumbents. Autocratization is not something that "just happens". Autocratization is done *by* people, who make use of some flaws in the "rule of the game". These would-be autocrats (or autocratizing incumbents, I use the terms interchangeably) make a choice to pursue policies that (could) lead to autocratization

(but see *Section 3.2 – Motive*). In this thesis, I take an actor-centred approach: autocratizing incumbents implement autocratic actions that challenge democracy. Terms like decay, erosion, and backsliding obscure this agency and look at the process as a natural phenomenon, like waves eroding rocks or radioactive chemicals decaying inevitably (Gerschewski, 2021, p. 48), and democrats letting democracy slide away (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019, p. 1099). To reflect this human agency, I append the definition of democratic recession to include "whodunnit": democratically elected leaders (which I will discuss in *Section 3.1 – The crime scene*).[4]

The choice for democratic recession has two final added benefits: one, it is the term that is best embedded in a broader theoretical understanding of regime change (instead of an *ad-hoc* understanding of the concept without explicitly embedding it in broader theories); and two, it has a solid empirical basis in the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) methodology (Coppedge et al., 2011; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019), making it usable for cross-case and longitudinal comparison (instead of case-specific operationalizations that do not travel or generalize as well).[5] Viewed in this way, democratic recession is a form of autocratization: "a process of regime change towards autocracy that makes politics increasingly exclusive and monopolistic, and political power increasingly repressive and arbitrary" (Cassani & Tomini, 2020, p. 277), moving away from full democracy (Lindberg, 2009). Democratic recession is the process of autocratization that diminishes the quality of democracy, without the state necessarily breaking down into autocracy. When democratically elected leaders do this, it is incumbent-led democratic recession (see Figure 1.1).

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4. There is agency on both sides of the equation that needs to be taken into account. Where would-be autocrats undertake Autocratic Actions (see *Chapter 2 – Autocratic Actions*), pro-democracy actors in turn undertake activities, aim at upholding the democratic status quo. That is: autocratization is not an unstoppable force, but pro-democracy actors can resist autocratization with a variety of strategies (see *Section 2.3 – What is the defence of democracy?*). Democratic recession and autocratization are processes with a start-point (the move away from "core requirements of liberal democracy"), but – hopefully – also with an endpoint. Autocratization can be averted or pre-empted (Maerz et al., 2023). In this thesis, I argue it is the role of pro-democracy actors – democratic defenders – to contribute to this.

5. It is of course a point of debate whether it is actually possible to measure democracy levels in countries across time. There have been many attempts to do so (see for example the discussion in Coppedge, 2002; Marshall et al., 2002; Munck & Verkuilen, 2002), and all approaches have trade-offs. There are many cases where democracy levels exist in a grey area and where there is uncertainty about decline or improvement. And there are many cases where one measurement says democracy is stable or even improving, while other measurements indicate decline. I rely in this thesis on V-Dem as the most all-encompassing dataset currently available, but am aware of its limitations (see for example the discussion kickstarted by Little & Meng, 2024a).

Taking this all together, I am interested in reactions (see *Section 2.3 – What is the defence of democracy?*) to the substantial decline in core requirements of liberal democracy, led by democratically elected politicians and (state-)leaders. That is, I am interested in the democratic defence against incumbent-led democratic recession.

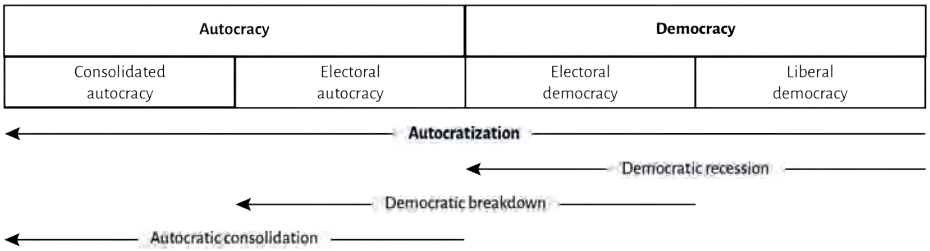

Figure 1.1: Democratic recession as the process of autocratization within democracies, without breakdown into autocracy. Adapted from Lührmann and Lindberg (2019, p. 1100).

2.2 What is democracy?

An important consideration when defining democratic recession is the benchmark: is it a move away from "existing democracy" (backsliding, according to Bermeo, 2016), "electoral democracy" (recession, according to Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019), or "liberal democracy" (my benchmark, see the previous section)?

Democracy means different things to different people (Gallie, 1955; Held, 2006; Shapiro, 2006), even though most people agree that it means some form of rule by the people. But whether this is strictly majoritarian (in which a majority, no matter how small) can decide anything, or whether there are some extra requirements before "rule by the people" constitutes "democracy" (such as universal suffrage or limitations on what the executive can do) differs per person, researcher, paper, and, indeed, definition of its decline. Electoral democracy is just one such conception – albeit one of the most prevalent ones. It is therefore useful to critically examine these different benchmarks.

Electoral democracy, as understood by Lührmann and Lindberg (2019, p. 1096) is Dahl's polyarchy: a system with free and fair elections, freedom of association, universal suffrage, an elected executive, freedom of expression, and access to alternative sources of information (Dahl, 1971, 1998). Democracy is defined by contestation between different interests and opinions in debates to which as many people as possible have access. These two dimensions, competition and inclusion, are core in electoral democracy. Other considerations, such as free media or an active civil society are only important to the extent that they support the core ideas of contestation and inclusion.

Liberal democracy adds to this that there are limitations on power to protect citizens from overreaching executive power (Møller & Skaaning, 2010; O'Donnell, 2004; Plattner, 1999). Specifically, liberal democracy requires the protection of minority rights, limitations on executive power, and adherence to the rule of law. This means that even if a party has an absolute majority in parliament or if a president is supported by a majority, there are some policies that require a very high bar to pass before they can be changed. In other words, the majority cannot simply decide to do away with minority rights, executives cannot weaken checks and balances on their power, and independent accountability mechanisms (Laebens & Lührmann, 2021; Lührmann et al., 2020), most often the judiciary (cf. Boese et al., 2021; Gibler & Randazzo, 2011) can stop or slow-down policies.

There are many more conceptions of democracy: social, egalitarian, elitist, deliberative, participatory, direct… It is outside the scope of this thesis to delve much deeper into this debate, but in *Chapter 2 – Autocratic Actions* I show that the electoral democracy-benchmark does not adequately capture current democratic recession: many challenges to democracy are, in fact, against the liberal elements of democracy. As such, it is necessary to deviate from this benchmark and look at democratic recession away from *liberal* democracy (which includes electoral democracy).

2.3 What is the defence of democracy?

This thesis started with a (very brief) overview of the doomsday-titles about democracy: it is dying, ending, experiencing its twilight, in crisis… But in this thesis I will argue that it is not. To be sure, there are challenges (and this book will contain many examples of these, especially in *Chapter 2 – Autocratic Actions*) and they need to be faced. But democracy can be sustained, on the one hand because of resilient institutions (although I show in *Chapter 3 – Autocratic Counterfactuals* that these are not sufficient), but mostly because of democratic defenders.

The defence of democracy are "all activities, be they formal provisions or political strategies, that are explicitly and directly undertaken to protect the democratic system from the threat of its internal opponents" (Capoccia, 2005, pp. 47–48). Capoccia studies the interwar-period in Europe and explores how mainstream parties try to oppose and resist radical forces (and why they sometimes failed). Importantly, these radical forces exist within the (physical boundaries of the) state as fringe groups or potentially as small political parties.

Early in the book, Capoccia gives us a list of potential strategies that pro-democracy actors can pursue to sustain democracy and defend it against radical forces: ranging

from less repressive (such as civic education, legislative strengthening, and party building) to more repressive in nature (purges of extremists threats, party bans or legislation restricting freedom of assembly for anti-democratic groups) (Capoccia, 2005, pp. 50–67). In his case-studies (Czechoslovakia, Belgium, and Finland) he goes on to show how those in power – incumbents – can use these strategies to defend democracy. What is striking, however, is that these strategies are available almost exclusively to the incumbents. Especially the more repressive strategies rely on the passing of legislation, which in turn requires parliamentary majorities – more often available to the incumbent than to the opposition. But also, the less repressive strategies rely to a large extent on state resources (such as finances: rule of law aid, civic education, policy concessions).

But as I will argue in *Chapter 4 – Democratic Defence* these strategies are often no longer available to democratic defenders, precisely because autocratization is so often incumbent-led: democratically elected incumbents use the formal provisions and institutional rules and regulations to ban criticism or limit oppositions. Therefore, when faced with incumbent-led democratic recession, the defence of democracy takes on a different form, relying more on political strategies rather than those formal provisions. Tomini et al. (2023, p. 121) talk about this as resistance against autocratization, rather than defence: "any activity, or combination of activities, taken by a changing set of often interconnected and interacting actors who, regardless of the motivations, attempt at slowing down, stopping, or reverting the actions of the actors responsible for the process of autocratization".

As such, I define the defence of democracy as political strategies aimed at slowing down, stopping, or reverting autocratic actions. My outcome of interest is the *occurrence* of democratic defence (see *Section 4 – The research puzzle*). I take a pragmatic approach here: following Capoccia (2005) democratic defence occurs when people explicitly say they are defending democracy. Which specific actions they take to defend democracy, and whether they are successful are of lesser interest (for this thesis): since the occurrence of democratic defence is a necessary condition for its success, we first need to understand *when* democratic defence happens, before we can establish *why* it is or is not successful.[6]

6. I return to both these caveats (which actions constitute democratic defence and when is it successful) in *Chapter 8 – Conclusion*.

3. The crime of the century

In the previous sections, we have narrowed down the theoretical field of research to the defence of democracy against incumbent-led democratic recession. This begs the question, however: how relevant is this limited field of research? Are there any empirical cases that fit the criteria of incumbent-led democratic recession? What are the empirical scope conditions and what is the universe of cases we are talking about?

In the next sections, I therefore discuss four fundamental properties of any investigation. First, we look at the crime scene: the universe of cases in which incumbent-led democratic recession has taken place. I will show that democratic recession is not limited to some unique cases, and that it is not some fringe phenomenon that can be resolved with *ad-hoc* measures. It happens globally, across countries with all levels and histories of democracy, necessitating caution even in countries where there are currently no clear challenges to democracy. Then, we look at the means, motive, and opportunity that have enabled incumbent-led democratic recession. I show why the incremental, covert, and often democratically legitimated nature of incumbent-led democratic recession makes it harder – for researchers and democratic defenders – to recognize and counter it. Then, I discuss that motives of the autocratizing incumbent do, in fact, not matter, forcing researchers to look at actors and their actions, rather than their (often implicit) intent. Lastly, I give a brief overview of the facilitating circumstances that provide would-be autocrats with the opportunity to autocratize.

Taken together, this leads to the research puzzle in *Section 4 – The research puzzle*.

3.1 The crime scene

Incumbent-led democratic recession is not a fringe phenomenon. Typical cases include Orbán's actions in Hungary since 2011 (Bakke & Sitter, 2022), or the undermining of the courts in Poland from 2017 onwards by the governing Law and Justice party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS) (Kovács & Scheppele, 2018). Other examples include Armenia in 1993 (e.g. Babayev & Mahmudov, 2023), Madagascar in 1996 (e.g. Marcus & Razafindrakoto, 2003), Brazil in 2016 (Encarnación, 2023) and Slovenia in 2012 (e.g. Bugaric & Kuhelj, 2015), Turkey in 2005 (e.g. Arbatli & Rosenberg, 2020) and South Korea in 2019 (e.g. Eom & Kwon, 2024). These are just some of the 53 cases of incumbent-led democratic recession between 1990 and 2023. In fact, Lührmann and Lindberg identify that 70% of all autocratization in democracies (between 1994 and 2019) has been incumbent-led (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019, p. 1104); in *Chapter 2*

– *Autocratic Actions* I enlarge their timeframe (to run from 1990 to 2023) and show that still almost 50% of autocratization episodes in democracies have been incumbent-led.

This is a minimal universe of cases. That means these are the cases that meet the "substantial"-criterion in my definition, which is operationalized as a 10-percentage point drop in V-Dem democracy scores (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; Maerz et al., 2024; Pelke & Croissant, 2021). But there are many more cases that experience threats to democracy but not yet meet this threshold, such as the United States since 2016 (Kaufman & Haggard, 2019; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Research has shown that there is no such thing as "consolidation" where democracy is truly the only "game in town" (Linz & Stepan, 1996, p. 15) and hardly susceptible to threats; even older, well-established democracies can experience democratic recession (Svolik, 2015). In fact, in *Chapter 5 – Democratic Gambits* I show that there have been threats to democracy from mainstream politicians in countries like the Netherlands as well. Importantly, not all these threats have been successful: for the Dutch case I will argue in *Chapter 5 – Democratic Gambits* that this is in large part due to the vigilance and success of administrative democratic defenders.

The "crime scene" is, therefore, a global crime scene. This thesis is not about democratic defence in specific regions. Instead, I argue that the problems I identify and the solutions I propose travel to different contexts. Throughout the thesis, I make a conscious effort to build on knowledge and examples from around the world, not relying solely on the typical and most obvious cases. At the same time, the typical and most obvious cases are also the cases that are most widely studied and by extension about which most information is available.

The "crime scene" is, however, a crime scene limited in time. The period I am interested in starts in 1990, after the Cold War, and extends into the present. I take this starting point primarily because the prevalence of incumbent-led democratic recession is becoming more pronounced from that time onwards. To be sure, there are examples of incumbent-led democratic recession before then: the fall of Weimar-Germany and the rise of Nazi-Germany in 1939 and Mussolini's march on Rome in 1922 are prime examples (Capoccia, 2005). Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) argue that the "third wave of autocratization", from 1994 onwards, is distinctly different from previous "waves of autocratization". A wave of autocratization or democratization is the time period in which more countries experience autocratization than democratization (or reversed) (Huntington, 1991; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019, p. 1102). In the first (during the interwar-period) and second waves (during 1960s and 1970s) of autocratization, autocratization often was sudden, through military power grabs or the elimination

of free and fair elections. During the third wave, however, autocratization is characterized by more incremental attacks on democracy, without changing the formal rules of the game (Bermeo, 2016; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). I expand the time frame slightly, to 1990 (instead of 1994) to include more cases and to recognize the clear change in political sentiments after the end of the Cold War.[7]

3.2 Means

Now that we have identified *what* the crime is (incumbent-led democratic recession), *where* it occurs (potentially in all democracies), I turn to *what* would-be autocrats do to recede democracy:

By definition, democratically elected leaders perpetrate incumbent-led democratic recession. This gives them one important advantage, over previous, non-elected autocrats, and over democratic defenders: they can rely on the support of a majority (or at least a plurality) of voters and in parliament. By virtue of the democratic system, this gives them the "right" to propose policies and make changes, even to the rules of the game. Given a sufficient majority, many constitutions (the rules of the game) can be changed.[8] Arguably, when circumstances and contexts change, constitutions and democracies should follow suit: incumbents should be able to change the rules of the game.

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7. At the same time, I do not assume that all autocratization after 1990 fits in my definition of incumbent-led democratic recession. The term "waves of autocratization" and its operationalization indicate to some extent that global democracy is in decline. This has led to a heated and interesting scholarly debate asking whether we can actually speak of "waves" and "global democracy levels" (e.g. Boese et al., 2021; Knutsen et al., 2024; Little & Meng, 2024a, 2024b; Skaaning, 2020; Tomini, 2021 and many more). While I do not make the claim I can resolve that debate here, I would argue this debate is slightly beside the point: regardless of if there is a wave of autocratization or not, the fact remains that many countries do experience autocratization. The examples at the beginning of this section and *Chapter 2 – Autocratic Actions* make this abundantly clear. When I say that incumbent-led democratic recession is a global phenomenon, I do not mean that it is the only form of autocratization, nor that autocratization itself is currently the main paradigm through which we should understand the world (cf. Carothers, 2002). It is, however, a phenomenon that occurs in all different parts of the world, across all different levels of democracy, in all different contexts.

8. Some constitutions, like the German *Grundgesetz* have "eternity clauses": there are some fundamental principles that cannot be changed, not even with a 100% majority (see, for example Suteu, 2021). In Germany, Article 79 of the constitution (available in English here: https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch_gg/englisch_gg.html) declares amendments to the constitution on Germany's division into *Länder*, their participation in the legislative process, the inviolability of human dignity and human rights (Article 1), and the democraticness of the German state (Article 20) inadmissible.

This is the presumption of regularity. Like the presumption of innocence, that states persons are considered innocent until proven guilty, the presumption of regularity states that elected leaders act lawfully and in the best interest of the people until proven otherwise (cf. Gavoor & Platt, 2022). It is an elastic and imprecise judicial concept but adequately captures the problem with *incumbent-led* democratic recession. Because incumbents often rely on electoral or parliamentary majorities, it is easy to presume their acts and proposals are in line with regular politics. They can claim they are doing "politics as usual" (Pirro & Stanley, 2022, p. 91) and are operating with "an aspect of normalcy [even though it might be] constitutionally abnormal" (Castillo-Ortiz, 2019, p. 68). Only when there are grave violations or clear indications that proposals are *ir*regular does the presumption fail. Barring those, when incumbents autocratize, democratic defenders are fighting an uphill battle against "regularity".

In fact, as Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) and Bermeo (2016) show, incumbent-led democratic recession does not happen in one fell sweep, hardly giving clear indications or perpetrating grave violations. Instead, they kill democracy "with a thousand cuts" (Khaitan, 2020), "through a discontinuous series of incremental actions, not a one-time coup de grace" (Waldner & Lust, 2018, p. 95). Democratic recession is not a rupture, and sudden break with the previous democratic regime, but a slow reform (Lueders & Lust, 2018). Incumbents do not abolish elections nor do away with judiciaries. These proposals are large-scale changes, that would surely draw attention, either from citizens or from (international) observers. They do, however, try to undermine these (and similar) institutions as checks and balances, often by making small and procedural changes. *Chapter 2 – Autocratic Actions* provides an extensive overview of all actions and strategies would-be autocrats employ, but for now it suffices to say that the incrementalist nature of incumbent-led democratic recession makes democratic defence harder, because there often is no clear starting point or red line that is crossed.

This problem is compounded when the changes are ambiguous and covert in nature. Not only are they small, tentative steps towards autocratization, the proposals are often justified with appeals to public goods or other priorities. One striking example is Tunisian president Kaïs Saïed who in 2021 appointed the country's first female prime-minister, Najla Bouden Romdhane, explaining he did so to advance women's equality. However, he went against established democratic procedures and appointed her without parliament's approval (Ridge, 2022, p. 1540). This creates "vexing ambiguity" (Bermeo, 2016, p. 15): on the one hand, the action is clearly undemocratic; on the other hand, the action does appear to benefit equality, and by extension democracy. Arguably, passing over parliament and parliamentary approval is clearly

undemocratic, with or without justification – to me, there is no real ambiguity there. But imagine a proposal that is slightly less clear-cut: the political appointments of judges or ombudspersons. This is established procedure in many democracies. But would-be autocrats can abuse this standard practice to pack courts or oversight organizations in their favour. Yet, they can claim they do as other democracies do, operate within the letter (and perhaps even the spirit) of the law (Pirro & Stanley, 2022), but still subvert democracy (cf. Scheppele, 2013). In *Chapter 2 – Autocratic Actions* I show how these seemingly legitimate actions do in fact contribute to democratic recession. In *Chapter 6 – Democratic Ambiguity* I further pick up on this ambiguity surrounding autocratization, and how citizens perceive it.

Finally, incumbent-led democratic recession often starts in the liberal dimension of democracy, rather than the electoral dimension (Diamond, 2021; Ding & Slater, 2021; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; Wunsch & Blanchard, 2023). I already discussed that this implies a significant shortcoming in the "standard" definition of democratic recession: changes in the liberal dimensions of democracy (protection of minority rights, limitations on the executive, rule of law) are less easily noticed if we look through an electoral lens. To be sure, many changes to the liberal dimension direct impact the electoral dimension: freedom of information (one of Dahl's polyarchy-requirements) is impacted when journalists start to self-censor in response to shrinking civic space. But the fact that democratic recession starts in these liberal dimensions, indicates that the shrinking civic space itself is already part of the process of autocratization.

Overall, the "means" of incumbent-led democratic recession, by virtue of its apparent democratic mandate, it's incrementalist nature, the often-present justifications, and its challenges to the liberal dimensions of democracy make it hard to accurately pinpoint when autocratization is starting or ongoing. At some point, it will be clear when autocratization occurs, moving from Applebaum's "twilight" into the Washington Post's "darkness". But in many cases, the grey areas provide sufficient alibi to autocratizing incumbents. Especially considering that autocratization is increasingly hard to counter after it has begun (Boese et al., 2021), it is up to democratic defenders to be continuously aware and vigilant.

3.3 Motive

Here, democracy research deviates from a blockbuster heist-movie. Because even though the crime scene is clear and we know the means used to perpetrate the crime of the century, would-be autocrats' motives to commit the crime of the century are in no way relevant to this thesis:

Above, I already wrote about the actor-centred approach in this thesis. This means I put the spotlight on actors – would-be autocrats and democratic defenders – and their actions: Autocratic Actions in *Chapter 2* and Democratic Solutions in *Chapters 4, 5, 6,* and *7*. In these chapters, I discuss how would-be autocrats and democratic defenders aim to appear legitimate and committed to democracy. That is: they care (and researchers should care) about how citizens perceive them. This does, however not mean I make any assumptions about their "true" intentions or motivations, even though the justifications they give do matter (Gessler & Kaftan, 2023). I give two reasons why would-be autocrats' "true" motivations are not relevant in this thesis:[9]

One, pragmatically, it simply is impossible to "look inside the heads" of would-be autocrats. Even if opposition politicians (or researchers, for that matter) claim they know what the would-be autocrat wants, it remains – at best – an educated guess.[10] Not only is it deemed unethical for professionals to make such claims from a distance, when it comes to autocratic motives it is simply impossible. In *Chapter 6 – Democratic Ambiguity* and *Chapter 7 – Democratic Credibility* I argue that such a claim in itself is a political statement and show how would-be autocrats can actually leverage it to increase their own legitimacy. Considering that would-be autocrats are unlikely to claim they, in fact, *want* to autocratize, any claim to that effect is based on the interpretation of others. "What democracy is" is a contested question (Gallie, 1955; and see Ferrín & Kriesi, 2016; König et al., 2022; van Lit, 2023 for empirical examinations), and would-be autocrats claim they are *differently* democratic, rather than undemocratic. Discussions about whether would-be autocrats *want* autocracy are therefore not fruitful and unlikely to further our understanding of autocratization.

Two, empirically, the motivation behind autocratization attempts does not matter. Autocratization can occur, even if politicians have all the intentions to do "the right thing". The clearest examples of this are the states of emergency called around the world during the COVID-19 pandemic. States of emergency have been widely used to aggrandize executive power, would-be autocrats even inventing emergencies

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9. Tomini et al. (2023) argue similarly that democratic defence can occur "regardless of motivation". I show in *Chapter 6 – Democratic Credibility* that the way these motivations are perceived by citizens do, in fact, matter.

10. In psychiatry, the Goldwater Rule of the American Psychiatric Association warns experts to be cautious in making statements about a public figure's mental health, purely based on what those figures do in public (that is: without in-person examination). This rule was formulated after over 1.000 mental health experts warned that 1964 USA Republican presidential nominee Barry Goldwater was "psychologically unfit to be president" (Lilienfeld et al., 2018; and see Piccorelli & Cawley, 2022 about claims on Trump's mental health).

when they are not there as an excuse (Lührmann & Rooney, 2021). However, during the COVID-19 pandemic it was to a certain extent legitimate, and arguably even necessary, to (partially) limit core requirements of liberal democracy such as large-scale public demonstrations for the sake of public health. Liberal democracies have dealt with these temporary limitations better then electoral democracies and better than autocracies, being less restrictive and lifting the restrictions quicker (Engler et al., 2021; Petrov, 2020). But even with the best of intentions, there still was temporarily a substantial decline in democracy. A large literature has emerged that studies these trade-offs between core elements of democracy and other – sometimes as important – policy preferences (e.g. Graham & Svolik, 2020). In *Chapter 2 – Autocratic Actions*, *Chapter 4 – Democratic Defence*, and *Chapter 6 – Democratic Ambiguity* I study how this "vexing ambiguity" (Bermeo, 2016, p. 15) impacts the defence of democracy.

Importantly, autocratization *can* occur because of some ill-willing politician, but it can also occur as an unintended (cf. the "banality of authoritarianism" in Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2024) consequence of policies that were genuinely believed to better society. It therefore does not matter *why* autocratization occurs and what the would-be autocrats' motivations are. What matters is the actions that have a *de facto* effect of undermining democracy. Finally, I think it is, therefore, incorrect to ask, "is this or that politician (or party) an autocrat?". It is better to ask: "do they propose policies that could lead to autocratization?" or "do they contradict democratic norms in their speech or behaviour?". I recognize that "would-be autocrat" is therefore somewhat of a misnomer: it does elicit some understanding that the person *is* what they *do* or propose: a (would-be) autocrat. Regardless, I use this term as a convenient shorthand and reiterate here that I do not assume any autocratic intent on their part.

3.4 Opportunity

Lastly, the actor-centred approach also means that incumbents have a choice to autocratize or remain committed to democracy. Like any crime, this choice can be influenced by the opportunities that arise during a politician's term in office. In this section, I look at those opportunities.

Autocratic actions by would-be autocrats do not occur in a vacuum: there are structural, societal, and international conditions that form the background against which would-be autocrats operate. Comparative research on autocratization processes in democracies has identified a number of such conditions that facilitate autocratization. Chief among these are: institutional and economic factors, societal factors, international factors, and crises (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Waldner & Lust, 2018).

Political institutions determine how much power-sharing, accountability, and checks and balances there are. The "perils of presidentialism"-literature, for example, argues that when a single person has a popular mandate, they can more easily aggrandize their power, and therefore presidential systems facilitate autocratization (Linz, 1990b; Svolik, 2015). This differs from institutions where power is shared: arguably this drives consensus-seeking and deters autocratization (Graham et al., 2017). Other accountability mechanisms include a strong independent judiciary, bi-cameralism, regular, independent media, and free and fair elections (Laebens & Lührmann, 2021). The more they are absent, the easier it is for a would-be autocrat to engage in autocratic actions.

Economic performance has been seen as central in the literature on democratization, yet the effects on autocratization are not always clear-cut (Lipset, 1959; Svolik, 2008; Tomini & Wagemann, 2018). The level of economic development, while important for democratic consolidation, appears to be unrelated to democratic recession. Economic recessions do appear to increase the risk of authoritarian reversals in democracies, and high levels of income inequality are also argued to pave the way for autocratic leaders coming to power in elections, on the promise of redistribution or greater prosperity, yet these effects only appear to play out in a subset of autocratization cases (Waldner & Lust, 2018). In practice, would-be autocrats appear to be able to use both economic success and economic decline as arguments for solidifying their position and legitimizing autocratic action: in the former, to continue the success, and in the latter, to enable decisive action to save the economy.

Societal factors that facilitate autocratization revolve mostly around affective polarization: the process through which elites and publics become increasingly divided over policy, values, and ultimately even democracy itself (Arbatli & Rosenberg, 2020; McCoy & Somer, 2019; Svolik, 2019). While some ideological polarization is to be expected in pluralist democracies, when it becomes pernicious or affective – a single divide between Us and Them that overshadows all else – it makes democratic government more difficult. Indeed, higher polarization is strongly associated with higher risks of democratic recession, as reaching compromise becomes unlikely, and democratic procedures become contested. Affective polarization undermines one of the core principles of democracy: the trust that others will adhere to democratic norms, so that it is relatively safe to be in opposition for a while (Mazepus & Toshkov, 2022). Pre-existing societal divides such as ethnic, religious, or linguistic fractionalization may be building blocks on which Us versus Them polarization dynamics can build. This can lead to power asymmetries in legislatures by making

oppositions smaller or more divided, and thereby less able to counter would-be autocrats' actions.

International factors also impact autocratization. First, membership of international organizations (such as the EU or ASEAN) is generally beneficial to democracy. However, when the international organization is weak in its commitment to democracy or enforcement of democratic principles, it can instead function as a legitimator of a would-be autocrat (Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018; Davies, 2018; Meijers & Veer, 2019). Democracy aid and international election monitoring have the same two contradictory effects. There is evidence that both work to curtail autocratization or tampering with elections, but at the same time there are also signs that would-be autocrats misuse democracy aid or choose their own election monitors to achieve legitimacy (Cornell, 2013; Kelley, 2012). Lastly, would-be autocrats learn from autocrats elsewhere (specifically when there are strong linkages to Russia and China) (Finkel & Brudny, 2012; Morgenbesser, 2020; Tolstrup, 2015); they shop around for new and creative actions that they can implement and mirror in their own contexts.

Finally, crises provide an important window of opportunity for would-be autocrats. The COVID pandemic provides a prime example. Instead of limiting COVID-restrictions in scope and duration, would-be autocrats used the crisis as an excuse to implement states of emergency (Lührmann & Rooney, 2021) and curtail democratic rights. Indeed, research finds the COVID pandemic had a negative effect on worldwide democracy: many restrictions on freedom of movement or assembly imposed during the pandemic have not been turned back (Engler et al., 2021; Kolvani et al., 2021). Note that while the COVID pandemic provides a prime example of how crisis can facilitate autocratization, these effects likely apply to other types of crises too. Crises can be used as a (legitimate) excuse to implement states of emergencies, curtail democratic rights under the guise of preventing a disaster, or implement other policies that harm democracy, and hence defining situations as crises also becomes a tool for autocrats to expand their powers.

Scholarship on democratic recession has thus identified multiple conditions facilitating autocratization. Clearly, such facilitating conditions are important to understand under which circumstances autocratization processes are more likely to occur. However, while these circumstances might facilitate autocratic action, they are not immediate causes of democratic recession. For example, changing oil prices in the 1990s in Venezuela were not the driving force behind its decline in democracy. Rather, Chavéz exploited this economic condition to implement policies that harmed democracy (Gamboa, 2017, 2022; García-Guadilla & Mallen, 2019). In other words,

would-be autocrats have a choice how they react to changing circumstances, can take advantage of them, and misuse them as pretext for autocratic actions. In this thesis, I therefore focus on would-be autocrats' actions and the potentially successful responses to them by democratic defenders.

4. The research puzzle

When does democratic defence against incumbent-led democratic recession occur?

This is the core research puzzle I aim to solve in this thesis. I have introduced several threads that combine into this research puzzle. First of all, incumbent-led democratic recession is a comparatively new phenomenon, at least in how wide-spread and prevalent it is. Where previously (roughly in the first and second waves of autocratization) incumbents were in most cases the main defenders of democracy, able to rely on formal provisions and institutions, now these incumbents are the main perpetrators, using the rules of the game to undermine democracy. Moreover, incumbent-led democratic recession occurs slowly and incrementally, taking advantage of facilitating circumstances. This results in two problems for democratic defenders:

One: there is a problem of recognition. Incumbent-led democratic recession is hard to recognize, because of its incremental, often democratically legitimated, and covert nature. Even political elites – as I will show in *Chapter 5 – Democratic Gambits* – struggle with identifying autocratization when it is ongoing. Some autocratization can be easily recognized when it is unambiguous or too blatant. But many attempts go unnoticed, or at least unconfronted because elites and citizens alike are not entirely sure whether it is an act of autocratization or whether it is "regular politics".

Two: there is a problem of mobilization. Democratic defence appears to go against the political will of the majority. Many would-be autocrats can and do rely on the support of democratic majorities (either in parliament or in society, sometimes evidenced by referendums), their acts being presumed regular. As I outlined, they can leverage stark differences between societal or political groups to further their own goals, resulting in limited space for dissent and democratic defence. In fact, democratic defenders appear to go against democracy – at least in the electoral sense that politicians supported by a majority get to decide. This means that even if actors recognize the threats to democracy, they might be hesitant to stand up to the (apparent) political majority.

The occurrence of democratic defence is puzzling because it requires both: elites and citizens who recognize autocratization, despite its ambiguous nature, and who are willing to mobilize against an apparent political will or political majority to defend democracy. To put it bluntly: we have limited, if not no idea how democratic defenders deal with these problems, and by extension we do not understand when democratic defence occurs. As of yet, the study of democratic defence, the actors who do it, and the conditions under which it occurs remain understudied. I therefore ask: *when does democratic defence against incumbent-led democratic recession occur?*

4.1 Theoretical contribution

In resolving this puzzle, this thesis contributes to two main strands of literature: the established literature on regime change (specifically on autocratization and democratic recession), and the emerging scholarship on resistance to autocratization.

The study of regime change has a long history: "for better or worse, social scientists thrive on political change" (Bermeo, 1990, p. 359). It is one of the core questions we ask, resulting in a wealth of theories, arguments, and case studies. But as empirical reality changes, our answers always seem to come after the fact: incumbent-led democratic recession has been the predominant form of autocratization since the 1990s, but only since about the 2010s have researchers realized this.[11] One of the key contributions I make in this thesis is the introduction of the concept "autocratic actions" in *Chapter 2 – Autocratic Actions*. I argue that we cannot understand democratic recession without looking at these specific acts done and proposals made by politicians – would-be autocrats. We can (and should) compare across cases and times to assess if there are patterns of actions. Not to "cry wolf" when it is unwarranted, but to recognize the early signs of autocratization.

11. This is not to say that there has been *no* research on democratic recession before the 2010s. Waldner and Lust (Waldner & Lust, 2018, p. 94) show how the term "democratic backsliding" has been used frequently in the 1990s already. Bermeo's (2016) article put the first major spotlight on the topic and remains one of the core sources in the research field. The statement that researches have started to pay more attention to democratic recession is based on an interview with Staffan Lindberg, one of the foremost empirical democracy researchers, in the brilliant podcast The Democracy Paradox (the episode is available here: https://democracyparadox.com/2023/03/14/staffan-lindberg-with-a-report-on-democracy-in-the-world/). In 2017, Mechkova et al. (2017, p. 166; one of the authors is Lindberg) wrote "Democracy is facing challenges across the world, yet alarmist reports of a global demise or crisis of democracy are not warranted." Yet in the podcast, Lindberg says he only realized the year after publication of the 2017-article what was actually going on. This realization, together with Anna Lührmann, resulted in the second seminal article core to the research on democratic recession (i.e. Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019).

The more important contribution I make to the scholarship on resistance to autocratization. In response to the increased attention to and occurrence of democratic recession, scholars started to theorize how democracy could be defended against these novel threats from the inside (Boese et al., 2021; Carey et al., 2020; Cleary & Öztürk, 2022; Gamboa, 2022; Laebens & Lührmann, 2021; Lührmann, 2021; Merkel & Lührmann, 2021; Rakner, 2021; Schwartz & Isaacs, 2023; Tomini et al., 2023; Tuovinen, 2023; VonDoepp, 2020). In a seminal Special Issue of *Democratization* (edited by Merkel & Lührmann, 2021) the concept of "democratic resilience" was introduced: "democratic resilience is the ability of a democratic system, its institutions, political actors, and citizens to prevent or react to external and internal challenges, stresses, and assaults" (Merkel & Lührmann, 2021, p. 874). In the same Special Issue, however, the focus immediately shifted from "political actors and citizens" to institutions. In that same year, Tomini (2021, p. 1198) argued for the need to include opposition to autocratization in the analytical framework.

With many others, I have taken up this call. I will argue throughout this thesis that institutions are important: there is no doubt that good democratic institutions can help make democracies resilient. However, I show in *Chapter 3 – Autocratic Counterfactuals* that no single institutional set-up, no matter how good, is sufficient to prevent autocratization. The more important argument I make throughout this thesis is that researchers should focus their attention on the *actors who defend democracy*, not on the institutions in which they do so. Gamboa (2017, 2022) was the first to construct a coherent and convincing analytical framework about actors who oppose incumbent-led democratic recession.[12] She argues that democratic defenders should employ institutional strategies (resist autocratization within the democratic rules of the game) and pursue moderate goals (aim to stop the autocratic action, not to oust the autocratizing incumbent from office). Together institutional and moderate democratic defence should buy pro-democratic oppositions enough time and leverage to convince the electorate to vote the autocratizing incumbent out of office at the next elections. Tomini et al. (2023) have provided another important stepping stone in the research on democratic defence against incumbent-led democratic recession. They theorize how three different groups of democratic defenders (institutional, political, and social) have distinct roles in the defence of democracy. Throughout the chapters, I build extensively on these insights.

12. And if there is any place to admit that I was scared I could start all over with my PhD-plans when her book came out in 2022, I guess it is this footnote. Luckily, the book turned out to be an amazing inspiration to advance my research.

However, where Gamboa argues that "opposition [occurs] at the margins" (2017). I would counter, that opposition to autocratization does not occur in the margins. It might look quite insignificant at first, but instead, it is core, fundamental, front-and-centre in making democracies resilient and sustainable.

In sum, my core contribution to the scholarship on autocratization, democratization, and resilient democracies (fully developed in *Chapter 4 – Democratic Defence*) is that this thesis is the first effort to coherently explain theoretically and rigorously show empirically when democratic defence occurs.

4.2 Empirical approach

To test the claims I make throughout this thesis, I rely on a diverse set of empirical methodologies. The choice to use multiple methods is a conscious one, on a principled and an epistemological basis. The principled argument is that democracy is an interplay between actors, institutions, rules, and norms. By extension, the study of democracy should acknowledge this interplay, and where possible utilize it to come to a better, more complete understanding. Epistemologically, when employing a single methodological angle, researchers risk missing important insights: while the conclusions they draw are likely still valid, they do not paint the entire picture.

In *Chapter 2 – Autocratic Actions* I show this is, in fact, the case. In the chapter, I use the Episodes of Regime Transformation dataset (Maerz et al., 2024), based on the Varieties of Democracy dataset and methodology (Coppedge et al., 2011; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019), to establish my universe of cases. Subsequently, I looked for case-studies that described the process of autocratization in those cases. I found significant overlap, but also distinct differences: case-studies report the autocratization starting earlier than or being more egregious than V-Dem reports. Of course, this makes sense and does not take anything away from the quality of either: country-specific case-studies are a different branch of research than large-scale global models. At the same time, this shows that a multi-method approach is necessary to understand the fuller picture: is democracy in danger, perhaps even more so than we thought, or is there cause for optimism?

While I do not claim I can bridge the divide between qualitative and quantitative research, I have attempted in this thesis to shine a light on process of autocratization and democratic defence from multiple methodological angles:

In *Chapter 3 – Autocratic Counterfactuals*, I design a novel matching-algorithm that takes advantage of recent improvements in the computational social sciences. In *Chapter 4 –*

Democratic Defence (like in *Chapter 2 – Autocratic Actions*), I employ in-depth case-studies, relying on primary and secondary source material (such as peer-reviewed articles and media reports) to illustrate the main dimensions of the theoretical model that is core to this thesis. In *Chapter 5 – Democratic Gambits*, I conduct and analyse in-depth elite interviews with Dutch civil servants to get an "on the ground" perspective of how democratic defence develops. Lastly, in *Chapter 6 – Democratic Ambiguity* and *Chapter 7 – Democratic Credibility*, I rely on survey experiments to gauge if and how citizens react to elite democratic defence.

5. Why should we care?

I argue incumbent-led democratic recession is "the crime of the century". Considering autocratization criminal might be strong language. But it is.

First of all, democracy is positively associated with a large number of normatively preferrable outcomes: more democracy means better education (Dahlum & Knutsen, 2017), lower infant mortality and healthier populations (Gerring et al., 2012), more happiness (Paleologou, 2022), and economic improvements (Acemoglu et al., 2019). While it is hard – if not impossible – to establish the causal effect, the research is generally conclusive that democracy in itself matters (Gerring et al., 2022; Papada et al., 2023). It is important to preserve democracy for democracy's sake, but it is also important to counter autocratization. Because any decline of democracy, no matter how tiny, tentative, or small, is likely to harm people.

The harm to people might be small at first. For many people, there appears to be some appeal of authoritarianism (Foa & Mounk, 2016; Geddes & Zaller, 1989; Wuttke et al., 2020): a strong leader or enlightened despot who is able to solve problems decisively and efficiently. This might be an argument that people are willing to accept small harms in favour of their preferred type of government. But I argue that even a "tiny bit" of autocratization (just to make things more efficient, to combat alleged corruption, or to prevent a public health crisis) impacts our daily lives: our freedom to protest and express our opinion and our freedom to criticise policies we do not agree with, without fearing for our personal safety or job security. Think back to COVID-19, when there were justifiable infringements on our – yours and mine – freedoms (even if legitimated, and even if the restrictions were lifted as soon as possible, the restrictions were declines in democracy, see Engler et al., 2021). During some times, we were not allowed to go outside. Some people felt restricted in their freedom of expression, felt they were not allowed to criticise the government. In many cases,

a single policy priority (public health, understood in a reasonable, yet very limited way as "saving as many healthy years-lived as possible") trumped all others, leaving no room for public debate about other priorities. This "harm" was felt daily and still resonates now.

When autocratization becomes "larger", the harm to people similarly increases. Autocratization goes hand in hand with repression (Gerschewski, 2013). Repression – either by the incumbent or by their supporters – results in the suppression of dissenting opinions, self-censorship, and fear among (potential) oppositions. In 2023, I was asked to join a roundtable discussion in Dutch parliament to talk about the resilience of Dutch democracy.[13] I made the point that I saw no clear indications that autocratization was ongoing, or even imminent, but that "the time to repair the roof is when the sun is shining" (John F. Kennedy, State of the Union, 1962). In response, I was threatened with physical violence on X. Not by an anonymous troll, but by someone with their first and last name clearly shown in their X-handle, and organization they worked at in their bio. During my PhD, I have learned of many more stories – some of which I will tell in *Chapter 5 – Democratic Gambits*, but most of which are not mine to tell – of people who *want* to speak out in genuine support for democracy, without ulterior or political motive, but who fear verbal and physical repercussions. Repression harms people.

Finally, when there is full scale autocratization, it might mean that "some people need killing" (Evangelista, 2023). Evangelista captures in this one sentence, the title of her book, what the turn from democracy to autocracy means for people in the Philippines. I wrote above that autocratization means repression, but this is a vague, academic term, that does not do justice to the lived-experiences of people in autocracies. Autocratization also means extrajudicial killings, which is a legalistic way of saying there are government-supported groups who go unpunished when killing "undesirables" – or worse, are even encouraged and supported to do so. Autocratization means torture and disappearance. Of course, this full scale autocratization is far removed from the level of democracy of many cases in this thesis. Philippine democracy arguable never reached the level of consolidation where we could speak of a stable liberal democracy (Dressel, 2011). However, according to V-Dem data, Hungary and the Philippines score equal on the Electoral Democracy Index at the moment of writing. We should not be complacent and think that "it can never happen here". That is exactly why we – citizens, policy-makers, and academics

13. "Rondetafelgesprek over weerbaarheid democratie", 28 June 2023, https://www.tweedekamer.nl/debat_en_vergadering/uitgelicht/rondetafelgesprek-over-weerbaarheid-democratie

– should be aware of potential autocratization, and why we should care about the defence of democracy against incumbent-led democratic recession.

6. Structure of this thesis

The remainder of this thesis is divided into two parts (see Figure 1.2). In *Movement I – Autocratic Problems*, which can be read as the problem statement, I focus on processes of autocratization to define the puzzle of democratic defence more clearly. As I argued incumbent-led democratic recession takes on different forms than other forms of autocratization, such as coups d'état or military invasions. To understand democratic defence as a response to autocratization, we must first clearly map what it is that democratic defenders are responding to.

In *Chapter 2 – Autocratic Actions* I do precisely this. Based on expert case-studies on almost all occurrences of incumbent-led democratic recession, I construct a toolkit of autocratic actions. This toolkit encompasses all tactics and strategies that would-be autocrats have employed since the 1990s. It is the first attempt to map autocratic actions across all cases, where previous attempts relied on only a small number of "typical cases". I show there is wide variety of autocratic actions, depending on case- and country-specific contexts. This, in turn, complicates matters for democratic defenders: making it harder for them to recognize autocratization when it is ongoing – especially in earlier and more covert stages.

In *Chapter 3 – Autocratic Counterfactuals* I look at the role that institutions can play as "bulwarks" of democracy. A large part of the literature argues that democracies are resilient against autocratization because of their institutional set-up. Independent courts, active media, and a critical civil society do form barriers to autocratization, but we learn from *Chapter 2 – Autocratic Actions* that autocratization attempts are creative and context-dependent. In this chapter I show that, similarly, there is no single template of institutions that can prevent autocratization. In other words: there is no institutional silver bullet against autocratization. To show this, I use a novel matching method for multivariate timeseries data to simulate multiple quasi-experiments. This matching method results in counterfactuals on the country-level, allowing us to accurately compare "what would have happened to democracy" if a single element of a country's institutional set-up would have been different.

Movement I – Autocratic Problems sets the stage for *Movement II – Democratic Solutions*. In this *Introduction*, I explained why I think an actor-centred approach to democratic

defence, rather than relying on institutions and "formal provisions" is a necessary next step, both in practice and in democracy research. *Chapter 2 – Autocratic Actions* contributes to this argument by showing the creativity of would-be autocrats. *Chapter 3 – Autocratic Counterfactuals* shows in turn that democratic defenders cannot rely solely on institutions: they need to "do democratic defence". In *Movement II – Democratic Solutions* I present the democratic solution to these autocratic problems.

In *Chapter 4 – Democratic Defence* I theorize how the problems identified in *Movement I* can be resolved. I argue that both elites and citizens are necessary to counter autocratization. In many instances, autocratization is so covert and ambiguous (which we learned from *Chapter 2 – Autocratic Actions*) that citizens do not easily notice it. Instead, elites in democratic institutions often need to cue to citizens that democracy is under threat. In turn, elites alone likely have insufficient persuasive power to stop or halt the would-be autocrat, necessitating citizens to join the elite democratic defence. As such, democratic defence occurs on two levels: an elite level (where the occurrence of democratic defence is determined by the balance between their self-interest in preventing the autocratic action and repression they are likely to face if they stand up to defend democracy) and a citizen level (where the occurrence of democratic defence is determined by the balance between ambiguity introduced by the would-be autocrat and the credibility of the elite democratic defender).

In *Chapter 5 – Democratic Gambits* I empirically investigate the first level of democratic defence by elites. As I argued in *Chapter 4 – Democratic Defence*, elite democratic defence hinges on their perceived self-interest in preventing the autocratic action and their fear for (future) repression. Using in-depth elite interviews with Dutch civil servants, I show that civil servants see themselves as democratic defenders, they often just do not know how to go about it. These dilemmas exist especially around their willingness to defend democracy: many want to, but do not know if it is their role, lack support from colleagues or supervisors, or fear demotion and other forms of (informal) repression if they speak out. But I also show that civil servants *do* speak out, in explicit support for democracy and with explicit criticism against the political leadership. Even in a liberal democracy like the Netherlands incumbent-led democratic recession does occur on a regular basis, necessitating continuous democratic defence.

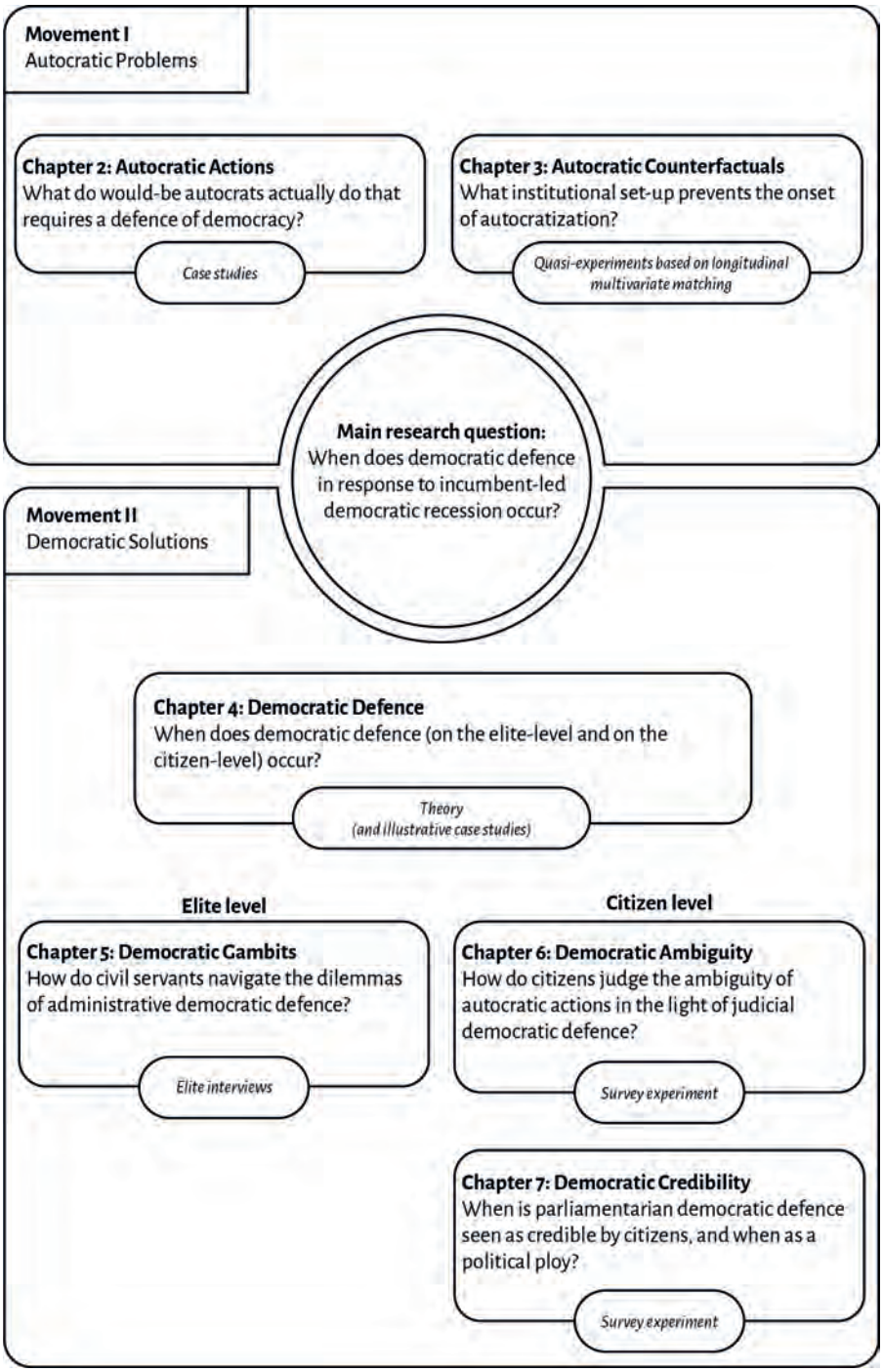


Figure 1.2: Overview and structure of the chapters in this thesis.

In *Chapter 6 – Democratic Ambiguity* I show how citizens notice cues given by elite democratic defenders, investigating the second level of democratic defence as outlined in *Chapter 4 – Democratic Defence*. In this chapter, I use a survey experiment to tease out when the ambiguity around autocratic actions can lead citizens to not believe elite democratic defenders. Specifically, I show that a would-be autocrat can justify their autocratic actions by claiming they do it for the public good (specifically in this chapter: to combat corruption). Even if judges, typical elite democratic defenders, speak out against the proposal, a justification with an appeal to such a positively valenced public good often overrides the cue from elite democratic defenders. This chapter shows how fraught with difficulties democratic defence is. Elites are quickly seen as self-interested, while autocratizing incumbents can leverage their democratic mandate and justifications to make themselves appear democratic. It proves to be an uphill battle for elite democratic defenders to effectively cue that democracy is under threat to citizens, especially if would-be autocrats manage to introduce ambiguity around their proposals.

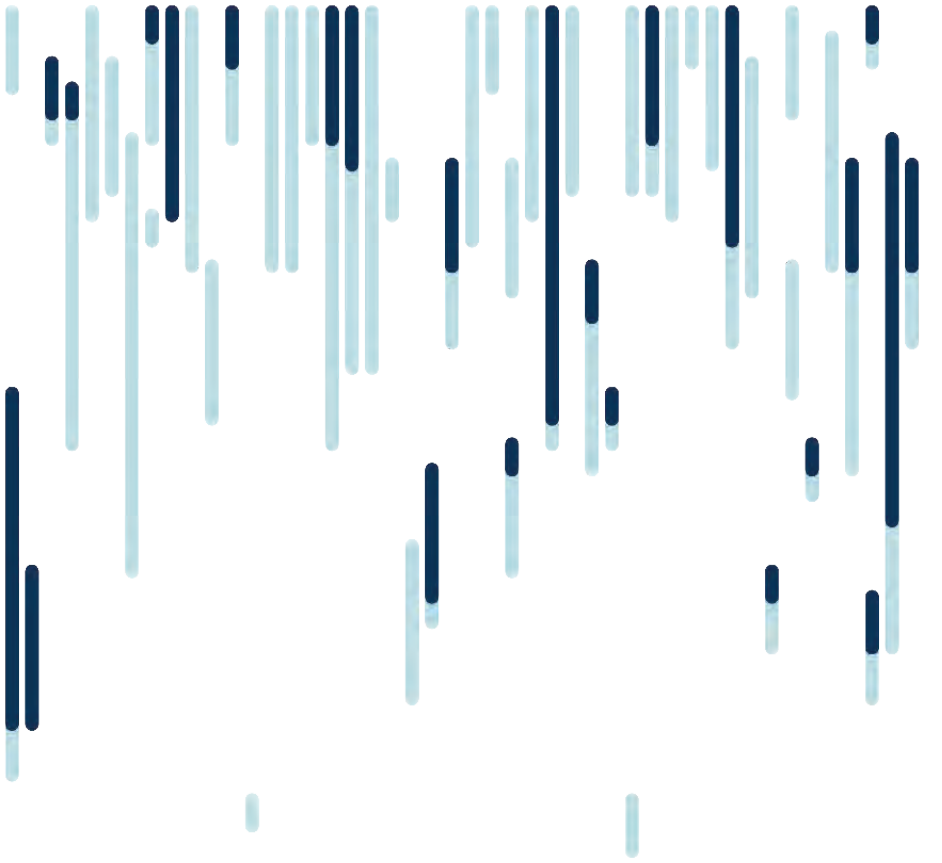
In *Chapter 7 – Democratic Credibility* I further investigate when elite democratic defence-cues are picked up by citizens. Using a survey experiment, I manipulate to what extent parliamentarians, another typical elite democratic defender, can credibly defend democracy. I show that their consistent commitment to democracy is key. If parliamentary democratic defenders are hesitant or inconsistent in their support for democracy (for example supporting an autocratic proposal when their party was in power, but opposing it when they are in opposition), they lose credibility in the eyes of citizens. This chapter shows that even in the absence of justifications that could increase the ambiguity of an autocratic action, elite democratic defence is not always successful. In many cases, the elite democratic defender is perceived to play a political game, instead of genuinely defending democracy.

Finally, in the *Chapter 8 – Conclusion*, I bring these different storylines together. Incumbent-led democratic recession results in new autocratic problems, where autocratic actions are creative, diverse, and most importantly covert and ambiguous. Democratic institutions and formal provisions alone are not sufficient to make democracies resilient against these novel threats. Instead, we need new democratic solutions, focusing on the actors that "do a defence of democracy". However, this makes the defence of democracy a political strategy. In many cases, elites are needed to recognize these subtle and covert threats, but they face repression when they stand up to defend democracy. Even if they do stand up, it is not a given that citizens join the elite defence. Would-be autocrats can and do introduce ambiguity, to appear democratic while undermining democracy at the same time, making elite democratic

defenders fight an uphill battle. Only when they are sufficiently credible do citizens follow them in the democratic defence. I conclude this thesis with suggestions for ways forward for the research on sustainable democracies and democratic defence.

Movement I

Autocratic Problems



Constitutions become the ultimate tyranny

Paul, Dune Messiah

Chapter 2

Autocratic Actions

Research question:
What do would-be autocrats actually do that requires a defence of democracy?

Data and methods:
Inductive coding of peer-reviewed case-studies of all episodes of autocratization since 1990.

Main findings:
Would-be autocrats use a diverse, creative, and context-dependent toolkit to undermine democracy. This "toolkit" shows that the recession of democracy is not limited to its electoral dimension, and that autocratization varies in its ambiguity and blatancy, and it shows that autocratization targets democratic institutions, democratic behaviour, and democratic norms. These actions are what democratic defenders need to stand up against.

Co-authorship:
This chapter is based on the paper *The Would-be Autocrat's Toolkit: What do Incumbents Do When They Undermine Democracy?*, co-authored with Carolien van Ham (2025), published in the European Political Science Review, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773925100106.,

1. Introduction

As I explained in *Chapter 1 – Introduction*, since the end of the Cold War, and especially the turn of the millennium, processes of autocratization – the "substantial de facto decline of core institutional requirements of electoral democracy" – in democracies appear to have become more common (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019, p. 1096). Increasingly, these challenges to democracy are incumbent-led, as incumbents seeking to stay in power strengthen and concentrate their executive powers, dismantle key institutional checks and balances, and engage in strategic manipulation of elections (Bermeo, 2016; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Challenges to democracy thus appear to originate mostly from within, as most autocratization processes are initiated by democratically elected governments and leaders, often using legal and incremental means to undermine democracy. Indeed, research has shown that since 1994, 70% of autocratization processes in democracies was incumbent-led (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019, p. 1104), challenging both new and long-established democracies (Svolik, 2015). In this chapter, I will provide a conceptual and empirical overview of "autocratic actions": actions taken with the *effect* of a substantial de facto decline of core institutional requirements of electoral democracy. These actions are the actions that democratic defenders stand up against.

In recent years, an ever-growing body of scholarship has developed that documents and analyses processes of autocratization and democratic backsliding, erosion and recession in the various regimes around the world (Bermeo, 2016; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; Waldner & Lust, 2018). Theoretical work on how to conceptualize these processes of democratic recession has identified a number of commonalities, such as executive aggrandizement (Bermeo, 2016), curtailing checks and balances (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019), and stealth authoritarianism (Luo & Przeworski, 2023; Varol, 2015); but does not take into account the variety and – arguably – creativity of autocratization "on the ground". In this chapter, I aim to unpack the concept of incumbent-led democratic recession into its empirical components: what concrete actions do would-be autocrats take when seeking to roll back democracy?

Such an analysis is important because extant research on democratic recession mostly focuses either on aggregate analyses of regime-level democratic recession, or on in-depth case studies of specific cases of democratic recession. Research at the aggregate regime-level uses large-n quantitative data and tends to focus on the structural, societal, and international factors that facilitate autocratization, rather than specific autocratic actions, potentially overlooking important nuances. Research at the level of individual regimes uses in-depth qualitative case-studies to

analyse processes of autocratization, the agency of specific actors involved, and the actions they take, but does not allow for cross-case comparison. However, as yet, a clear understanding of how these specific actions are comparable or different across cases is still missing. There are a few attempts to categorize and class autocratic actions in a more comparative way (Ahmed, 2023; Freeman, 2020; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). However, these are based on a limited number of cases and over a limited time period, often including the "usual suspects" of democratic recession such as Hungary, Poland, and Venezuela. While this wealth of research studies autocratization processes in specific countries, we lack a systematic overview of what the autocratizing incumbents (whom I will call would-be autocrats as a convenient shorthand) *do* to undermine and erode democracy in all countries that experience it.

In this chapter, I construct "the autocrats' toolkit" based on an analysis of all 53 cases of incumbent-led democratic recession from 1990 to 2023. Specifically, I analyse peer-reviewed case studies of these cases – spanning all continents and all levels of democracy before the episode of autocratization started – to find and class autocratic actions. Importantly, leveraging in-depth country-expertise, I only include autocratization actions if the author(s) of the included case-studies classify a specific action, plan, or proposal as having contributed to autocratization. Doing so, I expand our knowledge of autocratic actions beyond the usual suspects, while leveraging in-depth country expertise and ensuring theoretical consistency. I find seven overarching strategies that would-be autocrats employ to erode democracy: evasion, manipulation, infiltration, duplication, restriction, prohibition, and delegitimation. These strategies are not only aimed at democratic institutions, but also at influencing the behaviour and values of citizens and actors operating within these institutions. Moreover, strategies appear to vary from more covert and ambiguous strategies to more overt and unambiguous strategies. Furthermore, I show that would-be autocrats selectively use these different strategies in varying arenas of democracy to gradually erode democracy: ranging from the legislative and executive arena to the judiciary and society at large. Clearly, would-be autocrats appear to pick and choose between different strategies. While it is outside the scope of this chapter to do so, my autocrats' toolkit provides avenues for future research to explore why and when would-be autocrats choose different strategies in different contexts. In doing so, it provides a starting point to more systematically study autocratization within and across different cases, enabling the identification of sequencing and diffusion patterns, and helping generate better understanding of when autocratization is successful (or not).

The chapter is set up as follows: in *Section 2 – Autocratic actions as the level of analysis in democratic recession* I briefly review existing research on the classification of autocratic actions. *Section 3 – Measuring autocratic actions* outlines how I identify the cases where incumbent-led democratic recession takes place, how I identify autocratic actions and strategies and in which arenas autocratic actions occur. In *Section 4 – The autocrats' toolkit* I then present my overview of autocratic action and discuss the seven overarching autocratization strategies found. Finally, in *Section 5 – General patterns of autocratic action* and *Section 6 - Conclusion*, I reflect on my findings and provide suggestions for future research.

2. Autocratic actions as the level of analysis in democratic recession

Autocratization does not occur in a vacuum: there are structural, societal, and international conditions that form the background against which would-be autocrats operate. Comparative research on autocratization processes in democracies has identified a number of such conditions that facilitate autocratization. Chief among these are institutional and economic factors, societal factors, international factors, and crises (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Waldner & Lust, 2018 and see *Chapter 1- Introduction*). Clearly, such facilitating conditions are important to understand under which circumstances autocratization processes are more likely to occur. However, while these circumstances might *facilitate* autocratic action, they are not immediate *causes* of democratic recession. For example, changing oil prices in the 1990s in Venezuela were not the driving force behind its decline in democracy. Rather, Chavéz exploited this economic condition to implement policies that harmed democracy (cf. Gamboa, 2017; García-Guadilla & Mallen, 2019). In other words, would-be autocrats have a choice how they react to changing circumstances, can take advantage of them, and misuse them as pretext for autocratic actions. Only looking at facilitating circumstances at the regime-level therefore obscures relevant differences between (failed and successful) autocratization processes.

An emerging literature on the sequences of autocratization instead looks at the meso-level of sub regimes and indicators (Maerz et al., 2020; Sato et al., 2022; Wunsch & Blanchard, 2023), mainly looking at how vertical, horizontal, and diagonal accountability mechanisms (cf. Laebens & Lührmann, 2021) are eroded and in which order. This literature finds some commonalities in the trajectories and sequences that autocratization takes, such as that autocratization appears to start in the non-electoral dimensions of democracy. Beyond that however, findings

still diverge. As such, Maerz et al. (2020) and Wunsch and Blanchard (2023) find that autocratization appears to most often start in the diagonal dimension – civil society, civil liberties, media freedoms are the first elements of liberal democracies to be challenged. However, Sato et al. (2022) find that autocratization starts with the erosion of horizontal accountability mechanisms – institutional checks and balances like an independent judiciary. These findings suggest that would-be autocrats make different decisions about what autocratization strategies are likely to be most successful and what actions to take, depending on the specific context in which they seek to erode democracy. Taking an actor-based approach to better understand those strategies and actions, should therefore enable us to better understand autocratization processes in democracies.

To understand patterns of democratic recession, therefore, we need to focus on what would-be autocrats do and the actions they implement. I call these "autocratic actions": actions taken with the *effect* of a substantial de facto decline of core institutional requirements of electoral democracy (cf. Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). Several studies have sought to conceptualise autocratic actions in democracies. Ahmed classifies autocratic actions (which Ahmed calls democratic transgressions) as either *violating the law*, *violating democratic norms*, *violating ideals*, or *consolidating changes to democratic institutions* (2023, pp. 968–969). There is clear overlap with Pirro and Stanley's (2022) categorization of *forging*, *bending*, and *breaking*. *Forging*, similar to *violations of norms* and *violations of ideals*, are changes in line with the letter and the spirit of the law, that nevertheless change moralities, values, and perceptions about core democratic principles and ideals. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018, pp. 21–24) place heavy emphasis on this as well: two of the four "behavioural warning signs" of democratic recession that they identify deal with politicians *rejecting the values underpinning the rules of the game* and *denying the legitimacy of political opponents*. This is often disguised as a reconceptualization of what democracy is, not as a wholesale rejection of democracy itself. This creates ambiguities around what is and is not democratic and paves the way for further attempts to autocratize. One step up, Pirro and Stanley (2022) describe *bending* as changes in line with the letter, but not the spirit of the law. These are not yet clear transgressions against democracy, but more akin to Scheppele's "Frankenstate," where "perfectly legal and constitutional components are stitched together" (2013, p. 560), potentially resulting in autocratization. Examples of bending include court-packing: while many constitutions allow incumbents to appoint judges to (high-)courts or even expand the number of judges, it is an often-given example of autocratization (see also below). This overlaps with Ahmed's (2023) *power-consolidating changes*, which are (often) constitutional and legal, yet challenge democracy from within. *Breaking*, finally, is a clear violation of both the spirit and

the letter of the law, akin to Ahmed's (2023) *violations of law*. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) describe how would-be autocrats can *tolerate or encourage violence* or *curtail civil liberties*. Freeman (2020) describes three strategies with which would-be autocrats can bend or break democratic rules: *colonization* (packing state institutions with loyalists), *evasion* (breaking the chain of accountability), and *duplication* (creating parallel institutions to overrule already existing ones). Each strategy, depending on its severity, can either bend the rules of the game in favour of the incumbent, or break the democratic game entirely.

These studies provide important insights into the dynamics of incumbent-led autocratization, but they suffer from some empirical and theoretical pitfalls. The most prominent of the empirical pitfalls is that each study relies on a relatively limited sub-sample of cases of democratic recession. Pirro and Stanley (2022) study Hungary and Poland; Freeman (2020) studies Hungary, Poland, Ecuador, and Venezuela; Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) and Ahmed (2023) study the United States. It is not clear if the tendencies found in these cases – even though they are likely paradigmatic examples –translate to other country and constitutional contexts.

Second, the categories identified in the literature overlap, but also leave significant gaps between them, indicating that no single classification is likely to capture the full range of autocratic actions "on the ground". For example, Levitsky and Ziblatt's (2018) four behavioural warning signs do not account for Pirro and Stanley's (2022) bending, and Freeman (2020) does not appear to include forging and norm-erosion in the categorization of autocratic actions. Ahmed (2023) as well as Pirro and Stanley (2022) employ a wider scope, but it is not always clear when an action goes from forging to bending, or from norms violations to clear transgressions. That is: their categories do enable some classification of autocratic actions, but do not appear to cover the full toolkit of autocratic action.

The empirically narrow focus likely leads to gaps in the classification of autocratic actions. I therefore take an inductive approach and class all autocratic actions that occur in all episodes of incumbent-led democratic recession since 1990. I look beyond the usual suspects and include the entire universe of cases, and build on Freeman, Pirro and Stanley, Levitsky and Ziblatt, and Ahmed to conceptualize seven overarching strategies. Where an autocratic action is a single action, that scholarly experts identify as contributing to democratic recession in a specific country, I take a strategy to be a set of actions that have similar consequences for democracy (see Figure 2.1). As such, autocratic actions are likely to be context-specific and dependent on the countries' (institutional) rules, regulations, norms, and political culture – and

by extension less comparable across time and cases. But strategies are comparable across time and cases because the consequences of those context-dependent autocratic actions are comparable. For example, would-be autocrats in different countries could pack courts or electoral commissions with loyalists, two different autocratization actions. However, both actions entail the strategy of *infiltration* of political institutions, albeit in different arenas.[14]

In the next section, I describe how I identify cases where autocratization occurs, and how I identify the autocratic actions that "made the autocratization happen". In the subsequent sections, I present my findings on autocratic actions and strategies and construct the autocrats' toolkit.

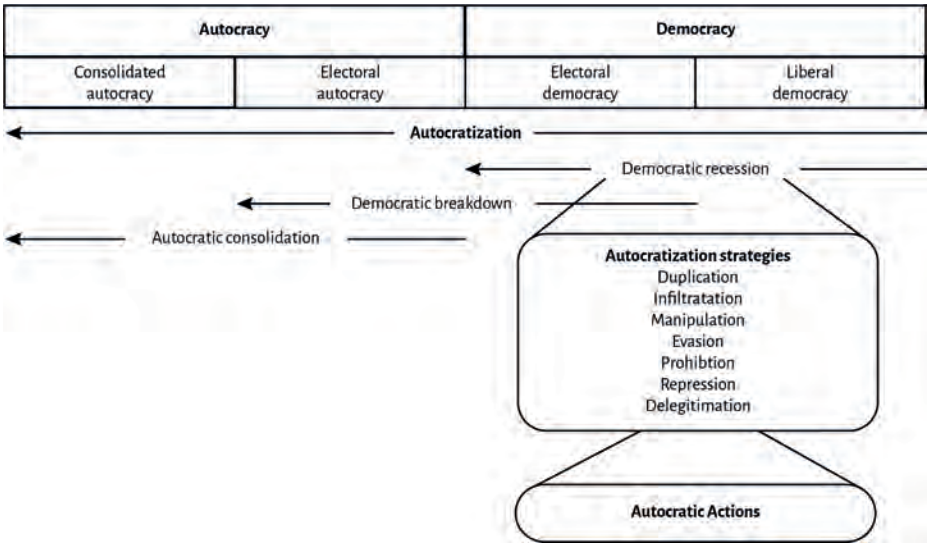


Figure 2.1: The ladder of abstraction from autocratization to autocratic actions. Figure adapted from *Chapter 1 – Introduction* and Lührmann and Lindberg (2019, p. 1100). Autocratization is the overarching concept. Democratic recession, democratic breakdown, and autocratic consolidation are types of autocratization, depending on the start- and endpoint of the autocratization process. Within democratic recession, I study different autocratization strategies. These strategies are comparable across time and cases. Each strategy consists of several different autocratic actions, which are context- and country-specific (see *Section 4 – The autocrats' toolkit* below).

14. Note that a "strategy" could be considered to also imply an intentional consorted effort on the part of the would-be autocrat. I do, however, not assume any intentionality, as it is empirically difficult to observe, especially in the early stages of autocratization. I use the term "strategy" only to denote a set of autocratic actions with comparable consequences.

3. Measuring autocratic action: identifying cases, actions, and arenas

3.1 Identifying cases of incumbent-led democratic recession

I use Varieties of Democracy's (V-Dem) Episodes of Regime Transformation-dataset to construct episodes of democratic recession (Maerz et al., 2024).[15] Following the procedure outlined by Maerz et al. and Lührmann and Lindberg, I measure change in countries' Electoral Democracy Index score over time, and identify as democratic recession episodes when either there was a sharp drop in electoral democracy from one year to the next, after which the country stabilized at a new, lower level of democracy; or when countries' electoral democracy score gradually and continuously declined over successive years. In both cases, a decline in the Electoral Democracy Index larger than 10 percentage points is considered to constitute substantial evidence for autocratization (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; Maerz et al., 2024; Pelke & Croissant, 2021; Wilson et al., 2023). I subsequently limit my sample to include only episodes of autocratization that started in democracies after 1990, and within those cases, identify the cases where autocratization was incumbent-led.

This leads me to identify a total of 112 episodes of autocratization from 1990 to 2023. Within those autocratization episodes, a total of 70 took place in democracies, and within this set, 53 episodes were incumbent-led (in the other 17 cases democratic recession was caused by challenges from outside the government, such as a military coup d'état or popular uprising).[16] This leaves me with a total of 53 episodes of incumbent-led democratic recession in the final universe of cases, which have taken place in 46 different countries. Armenia, Burkina Faso, Moldova, North Macedonia, Peru, South Korea, and Ukraine experienced two episodes of autocratization.

15. Varieties of Democracy provides the most conceptually coherent and methodologically rigorous dataset on democracy scores, see Coppedge et al. (2011). Data, codebooks, and further documentation are publicly available on https://v-dem.net/. The Episodes of Regime Transformation-dataset is available at https://www.v-dem.net/data/ert-dataset/. Due to the update of the underlying V-Dem dataset and the episode-measurement, not all episodes identified by Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) are identical in the ERT-dataset. I use ERT version 14 by Maerz et al. (2024) and also follow their operationalization of the episodes.

16. Specifically, I exclude Bangladesh (2002 – 2007), Fiji (2000 – 2001; 2006 – 2007), Honduras (2006 – 2010), Libya (2014 – 2023), Mali (2007 – 2013), Nepal (2012 – 2013), Niger (1996; 2009 – 2010), Philippines (2001 – 2005), Thailand (2005 – 2007), and Ukraine (2010 – 2014). All these episodes are classed as military coups by Lührmann and Lindberg (2019: online appendix). I further exclude Guinea-Bissau (2022), Guyana (2019 – 2023), Lesotho (1994 – 1995), Mali (2017 – 2023), and Suriname (1991); these cases are better classed as outside-led coups than as incumbent-led democratic recession. I explicitly do include *autogolpes*, as these are still incumbent-led democratic recession.

Almost all episodes (44 out of 53) are included in this analysis.[17] Figure 2.2 shows all incumbent-led autocratization episodes starting within democracies.

Within each of these episodes, I turn to peer-reviewed case-study literature to identify autocratic actions.

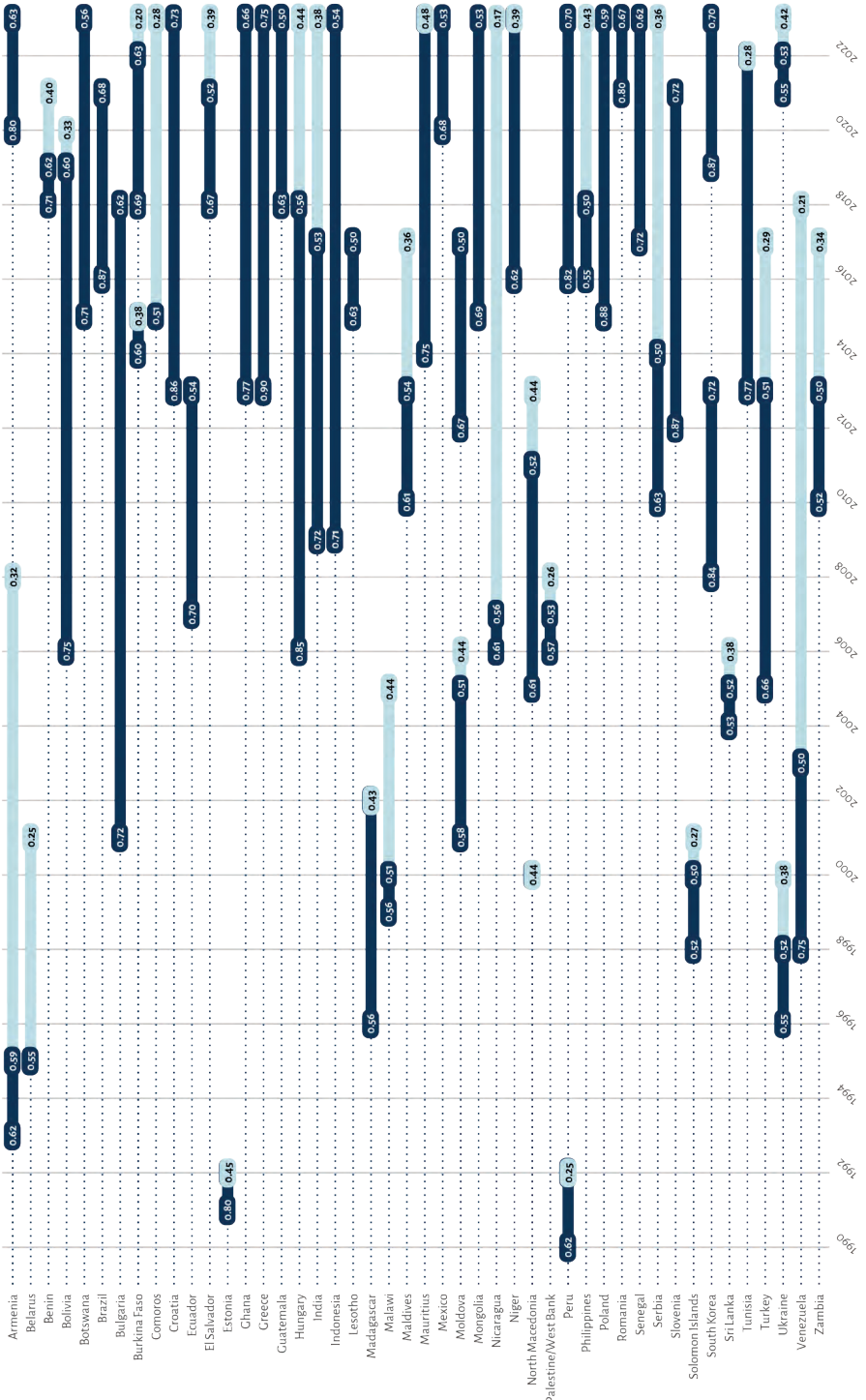
3.2 Identifying autocratic actions

Turning to the identification of autocratic action, I define autocratic actions as any action taken with the *effect* of a "substantial de facto decline of core institutional requirements of electoral democracy" (cf. Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019, p. 1096). Because I focus on incumbent-led autocratization, I consider only actions by the incumbent, but other actors can of course also contribute to autocratization. The identification of autocratic actions is not an easy task, as actions taken can be ambiguous, covert, and – especially at the onset of autocratization episodes – it is often not clear whether the incumbents' intention is in fact to erode democracy.

Autocratic actions can be *ambiguous* when they are justified. For example, in Tunisia in 2022, the president justified his overruling of parliament in appointing a new prime-minister by saying it would promote women's equality (Ridge, 2022, p. 1540) and justified postponing local elections by saying he prefers direct democracy (Huber & Pisciotta, 2023, p. 371). And an action that harms democracy, can also have other, arguably good and beneficial, consequences such as equality, public health, safety, or financial stability. In a crisis such as the COVID pandemic public health concerns might – temporarily – trump democratic rights. Legitimations or potential beneficial consequences do not mean, however, that the strategy itself does not *also* harm democracy.

> Figure 2.2 : Episodes of incumbent-led democratic recession since 1990 (based on ERT-data), with V-Dem's Electoral Democracy Index (EDI). The dark-shaded time-periods show when democratic recession occurred, but the country remained democratic (EDI >= 0.5). The light-shaded time-periods shown when democracies breakdown into autocracies (EDI < 0.5). The numbers denote the electoral democracy score at the beginning of an episode, in the year of democratic breakdown (when applicable), and at the end of the episode. The dotted horizontal lines are presented only to facilitate reading the plot and do not denote anything substantial.

17. No sufficiently in-depth peer-reviewed case studies that explicitly link incumbent actions to democratic recession in the specified periods were found for Bulgaria (2001 – 2018), Burkina Faso (2018 – 2023), Lesotho (2015 – 2017), Mauritius (2014 – 2023), Moldova (2012 – 2017), North Macedonia (2000), Palestine/West-Bank (2006 – 2008), Solomon Islands (1998 – 2001), and Ukraine (2021 – 2023). Nonetheless, I found sufficiently diverse and overlapping actions in the remaining 44 cases, that I am confident I have achieved a high level of coverage of autocratization actions.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Croatia
Ecuador
El Salvador
Estonia
Ghana
Greece
Guatemala
Hungary
India
Indonesia
Lesotho
Madagascar
Malawi
Maldives
Mauritius
Mexico
Moldova
Mongolia
Nicaragua
Niger
North Macedonia
Palestine/West Bank
Peru
Philippines
Poland
Romania
Senegal
Serbia
Slovenia
Solomon Islands
South Korea
Sri Lanka
Tunisia
Turkey
Ukraine
Venezuela
Zambia

Autocratic actions can be *covert* when they are framed as not having to do with democracy at all. Did the 2019 sedition charges against Indian academics and journalists harm democracy, or was it a simple matter of enforcing the criminal code (Khaitan, 2020, p. 87)? Autocratic actions can also be difficult to identify as such when the would-be autocrat claims to support democracy and claims actions are in fact aimed at protecting or strengthening democracy. In Indonesia purges of the electoral commission to get rid of corrupt commissioners appeared to be aimed at protecting democracy in 2004, while the same argumentation was used in the 2010s in the context of democratic recession (Warburton & Aspinall, 2019, p. 268).

Concretely, this means that actions that can be justified by the would-be autocrat or have potential beneficial consequences can still harm democracy. It also implies that whether actors actually intended to undermine democracy with their actions is not relevant for my identification of autocratic actions.

I solve these issues by analysing only those cases in which we know there is incumbent-led autocratization (the universe of cases identified above and shown in Figure 2.2). Within these cases, I rely on the expert opinion of scholars to classify an action as autocratic, as it requires significant contextual knowledge to identify autocratic action. As such, within the cases in which incumbent-led autocratization occurred, only if a scholarly expert states that a specific action contributed to democratic recession do I include it in my overview. I make the choice to only include peer-reviewed literature (collected through Google Scholar and Web of Science), to ensure the quality of the secondary data on which I build my analysis and the theoretical connection to democracy research.[18]

Specifically, for each of the 53 episodes of incumbent-led autocratization in democracies defined above, I looked for peer-reviewed case studies that explain and describe what happened during that period. In each case study, I looked for actions that those authors link to democratic recession. Those actions are coded in my overview. Only the actions that occur within an autocratization episode (country and time period) were included in the overview.[19] I stopped looking for additional case studies when I reached theoretical saturation and found significant repetition in the

18. Except for Journal of Democracy-articles and Afrobarometer reports in a few cases for which little information was available. For a full overview of sources used and autocratic actions coded for each autocratization episode, please see the Online Appendix.

19. I found a significant number of actions identified by the country-experts that fall outside of the time-scope provided by the ERT-data. I disregard these in my analysis (even though a cursory overview shows they do fit in my seven overarching strategies), but this might indicate that the episodes-approach is likely to *underestimate* the number and scope of autocratization episodes.

actions across different episodes, and when new case studies did not result in new actions found. This resulted in over 420 autocratic actions (of which about 10% are duplicates: multiple mentions by different authors of the same action in the same country at the same time). Please note that while I argue my overview covers most if not all unique *examples* of autocratic action, it does not cover all *instances* of those unique examples. This would require further coding of, for example, NGO reports, policy briefs, and news releases to count all instances of autocratic actions over time. As such, based on this data, it is not yet possible to conduct sequencing analyses of the actions and strategies. This is however a fruitful avenue for future research, which I further discuss in the conclusion.

Overall, this methodology enables me to be strict about which cases and which actions I include. The case-selection is based on the electoral democracy index, which biases my findings against democratic recession in the liberal component of democracy, where recession is likely to be even more covert and ambiguous. As such, the universe of cases is a minimal universe, where I am confident incumbent-led democratic recession occurred, and where I am confident I only include actions that actually contribute to this: I leave the assessment of unclear cases of democratic recession and unclear autocratic actions to future research. Importantly, the overview of autocratization strategies I construct based on these actions can be a deductive tool in determining whether future cases experience democratic recession.

3.3 Identifying arenas of autocratization

Lastly, to ease comparison, I observe autocratic action in four arenas of democracy: the legislature, the executive, the judiciary, and (civil) society (Levitsky & Way, 2015; Linz & Stepan, 1996). These arenas are the settings in which would-be autocrats and democratic defenders interact. The legislative arena concerns the workings of parliament and the making of laws. This includes but is not limited to the making of electoral rules, designing (or gerrymandering) electoral districts, and organizing the election management bodies. The executive arena encompasses the incumbent government and the bureaucracy that implements laws, where the incumbent can engage in executive aggrandizement and co-opt the offices of government that implement the policies passed by the legislature. The judicial arena encompasses both the lower and higher courts, and the implementation of the rule of law, where the would-be autocrat can try to replace hostile judges with more friendly ones. Lastly, the societal arena includes both organized civil society as well as citizens individually. Here, autocratic action is aimed at limiting civil society in effectively engaging with democracy and democratic procedures, as well as co-opting, manipulating, or

restricting the media, or influencing public opinion. I take the different arenas to be a useful analytical tool to analyse where autocratic actions take place.

4. The autocrats' toolkit: Mapping autocratic action across all episodes of autocratization

Based on my catalogue of autocratic actions (available in the Online Appendix to this chapter), I inductively identify seven overarching strategies of autocratization, which I explore in more depth in this section: evasion, manipulation, infiltration, duplication, restriction, prohibition, delegitimation. These seven strategies proved sufficient to classify all actions identified in the case study literature as having contributed to autocratization. As I will explore, the strategies have different consequences for democracy: evasion, manipulation, infiltration, and duplication affect the working of democratic *institutions*; restriction and prohibition affect democratic *behaviour* among elites and citizens; and delegitimation affects democratic *norms* and commitment among elites and citizens.

The seven overarching strategies and the arenas in which the strategies occur can be cross-tabulated to build an overview of autocratic action. This results in Table 2.1, where each cell contains an example of an autocratic action. Below I discuss the different strategies in more detail, by discussing how the strategies are aimed at either institutions, behaviour, or values, and occur in each arena (legislature, executive, judiciary, society). A full overview of all identified autocratic actions (and the sources) can be found in the Online Appendix.

4.1 Autocratization affecting institutions

The first four autocratization strategies target institutions. Evasion, manipulation, infiltration, and duplication primarily affect the institutional set-up of a state and the rules and regulations on how they operate. This limits effective opposition, accountability, and checks on incumbents' power.

Evasion is the most subtle form of autocratic action aimed at institutions. Here, would-be autocrats do not necessarily change the rules of the game. Instead, they reinterpret already existing rules to evade accountability or make sure (external)

checks on their power are limited.[20] In the legislative arena, for example in India in 2018, an incumbent can postpone debates (with the help of a friendly parliamentary Chair) to more favourable times (Khaitan, 2020, p. 67). In Hungary in 2017 the parliamentary procedures were reinterpreted to allow for a fast-tracking of legislation, allowing almost no time for debate (Bánkuti et al., 2012, p. 141; Enyedi, 2018, p. 1068; Kaufman & Haggard, 2019, p. 421). In the executive arena, in Mexico in 2022, austerity measures due to COVID were used to delay appointments to, among others, a government anti-trust commission, which in turn limited effective oversight from those bodies (Ibarra Del Cueto, 2023, p. 310). Evasion in the judiciary can take the form of reassigning cases to other, more favourable courts, or simply ignoring rulings, quoting executive prerogative. This happened in Hungary and Poland all throughout the 2010s (Bakke & Sitter, 2022, pp. 28–29; Bánkuti et al., 2012, p. 143). Evasion in the societal arena is harder: by its very nature, the societal arena has almost no formal checks and balances or accountability to evade. However, in Ghana in the 2010s, government political parties prevented journalists from attending press conferences, which does evade public scrutiny of their internal debates and proposals (Kwode et al., 2023, p. 119), and in Greece in 2016, the government – in line with the letter but arguably not the spirit of the law – reduced the number of media-licenses (Pappas, 2020, p. 63).

When would-be autocrats *manipulate* rules, regulations, and procedures, they change the rules of the game in their favour. Note that the changes themselves are often done in accordance with the rules of the game. In the executive arena, would-be autocrats can try to expand or overstep presidential term limits. I name just a few examples here: Venezuela in 2007 and 2009 (Gamboa, 2017, p. 464), Burkina Faso in 2014 (Wiebusch & Murray, 2019, p. 136), or Comoros in 2018 (Wiebusch & Murray, 2019, p. 137). While this is often approved by parliaments, referenda, or indeed the courts, as happened in Senegal in 2012 (Demarest, 2016, p. 64), academic research understands the extension or abolishing of presidential term limits as unambiguous autocratization (Corrales & Penfold, 2014; Heyl & Llanos, 2022; Maltz, 2007). For elections, electoral codes can be changed to benefit the ruling party, see North Macedonia in 2011 (Auerbach & Kartner, 2023, p. 552), direct elections for regional government heads can be abolished, see Indonesia in 2014 (Aspinall et al., 2020, p. 509), or electoral districts can be gerrymandered. This affects how the legislature does or does not represent the popular vote, but – again – there are also legitimate reasons to amend electoral rules and regulations. In the societal arena, manipulation

20. Note that I define evasion somewhat differently from Freeman (2020), who appears to subsume both manipulation and evasion under the category of evasion. By manipulation I understand *changing* institutional rules in favour of the incumbent, whereas I take evasion to refer to *re-interpreting existing* institutional rules in favour of the incumbent (mostly to evade accountability).

is often more covert and ambiguous. In Serbia in 2015, new regulations regarding advertising did not apply to government advertising (Castaldo, 2020, p. 1629). These government-paid ads were crucial for the media to maintain advertising income, resulting in opportunities for political pressure on the media. Some laws, for example in Indonesia in 2017 also place extra burdens on community organizations that allow the government to dissolve the organization if they do not adhere to them (Warburton & Aspinall, 2019, p. 261). Manipulation leads to democratic recession because the new rules strip away the (opportunity for) checks and balances and unlevel the playing field.

Infiltration is the process by which would-be autocrats "populate nominally independent institutions with loyal agents" (Freeman, 2020, p. 40).[21] This process can be somewhat ambiguous, because incumbents often have the political prerogative to appoint members of institutions. Yet it is clear some political appointments signal autocratization, for example in the judiciary. One way to exert pressure is to prematurely end the term of a court's president. In Hungary (Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018, p. 1177) and Poland (Bakke & Sitter, 2022, p. 28), for example, the age of retirement was lowered so that court presidents and lower judges were forced to resign their posts. These and similar actions result in vacancies that the incumbent can then (legally) fill with loyalists. While attacking and packing the courts is a common theme in incumbent-led autocratization, infiltration is not limited to the judiciary. In the executive arena in Slovenia, loyalists were appointed to a formally neutral council that appoints bureaucrats, after which the rules on hiring and firing were changed so that new bureaucrats would need to be approved centrally, by the executive (Bugaric & Kuhelj, 2015, p. 276). Infiltrating the legislature is harder: I have found no examples where an incumbent outright replaces (opposition) parliamentary members.[22] However, it is clear that would-be autocrats try to tilt the electoral playing field in their favour. In 2010, for example, Orbán created vacancies in the Electoral Commission, by terminating the mandates of elected members, and appointed loyalists to it (Bakke & Sitter, 2022, p. 27). This was mirrored in Poland (Bakke & Sitter, 2022, p. 28) and occurred before in Peru in the 1990s (Levitsky, 1999, p. 79). In the societal arena, would-be autocrats often attack the independence of the media: for example,

21. In my toolkit, I rather refer to infiltration than Freeman's colonization as infiltration better captures the extent to which institutions are subverted, rather than completely taken over.

22. In Malawi in 1999, the constitution was changed so that party defectors can be stripped of their parliamentary seats (Rakner, 2021, p. 104). However, it is unclear if this was actually ever enforced. As such, I would rather class it under manipulation rather than infiltration. In the Maldives in the 2010s, parliamentarians were also stripped of their seat, but it is not mentioned how the new members of parliament were selected, (Croissant, 2019, p. 10). I would class stripping them of their seats as restriction: clearly signalling to others what the costs of defecting are. When these seats are filled by appointment of the incumbent it becomes infiltration.

by outright replacing the top management of public broadcasters. This happened in Slovenia between 2004 and 2008 (Bugaric & Kuhelj, 2015, p. 275) and Croatia in 2016 (Čepo, 2020, p. 148). Clearly, precisely because of the political nature of many appointments in the public sector, infiltration can be somewhat ambiguous as an autocratization strategy. Yet when it becomes a persistent theme that appointments curtail the independent functioning of institutions (for example by limiting judiciary independence or freedom of expression in the media), or when an appointee's career and livelihood depends entirely on compliance with the incumbent government, we can see how it negatively affects the workings of democratic institutions.

Lastly, for *duplication*, the game is in the name: would-be autocrats aim to upset the "centre of power […] without dissolving" an already existing institution (Arendt, 1973; Freeman, 2020), by creating an institution with similar or even identical powers, rules, and goals. But this new institution is mostly or completely under the would-be autocrat's control. Examples in the legislative arena are Chavez's 1999 constituent assembly taking over powers from the sitting congress (Gamboa, 2017, p. 465; García-Guadilla & Mallen, 2019, p. 66). Likewise, Correa in Ecuador created a constituent assembly that slowly took over powers from the regular parliament from 2006 onwards (Freeman, 2020, pp. 43–44). Similarly, for the judiciary, in Hungary Orbán's government created the National Judicial Office that could overrule constitutional judgements. In the executive arena, an example is India in 2014 creating a new department under the direct auspices of government with the task to control the finances of a formerly independent information commission (Khaitan, 2020, p. 80). Lastly, in the societal arena, would-be autocrats create new – and loyal – civil society organizations. An example is the Armenian government-initiated new NGO to syphon off international development aid to undermine the already existing NGOs (Stefes & Paturyan, 2021, p. 9). And in Croatia in 2015, a new journalist association (Croatian Journalists and Publicists) was set up, ostensibly after it had become clear that the Croatian Journalists' Association and the Croatian public broadcaster could not be captured or marginalized (Čepo, 2020, p. 149). Duplication is rather overt because it involves the establishment of new institutions and organizations at times that are opportune for the would-be autocrat. It leads to autocratization because it takes away democratic powers from existing democratic institutions.

4.2 Autocratization affecting behaviour

The subsequent two autocratization strategies are aimed at influencing behaviour of political elites or citizens that might oppose the incumbent. Here, would-be autocrats can use restriction to *de facto* limit challenges to their authority, a more covert strategy, or prohibition to *de jure* limit opposition, a more overt strategy.

Restriction occurs when the would-be autocrat aims to increase the cost of behaviours that they deem unacceptable, without formally forbidding it. Would-be autocrats signal to (potential) defectors the cost associated with their behaviours. This behaviour is thus restricted, without being outright prohibited. Here we enter the realm of harassment and intimidation. In the executive arena, for example, Serbia in 2017 required picture proof that state employees voted for the incumbent (Castaldo, 2020, p. 1630). This can be combined with the relaxation of termination policies, as in Poland in the 2010s, to increase state employees' loyalty to the incumbent (Freeman, 2020, p. 41). In the judicial arena, the judiciary in Belarus was informed by the government via telephone of the desired outcome of cases (Trantidis, 2022, p. 128). In the legislative arena, would-be autocrats can harass parliamentarians who oppose them, both within their own parties and in opposition parties. In the societal arena, criticism of the government is discouraged. As such, journalists in Niger were imprisoned on charges of inciting hatred (in 2014) and using false citizenship papers (in 2018) after they had reported on government corruption (Elischer & Mueller, 2018, p. 397). New financial regulations on churches in Hungary (Bánkuti et al., 2012, p. 145), NGOs in Poland (Przybylski, 2018, p. 58), and Sri Lanka (DeVotta, 2011, p. 133), or universities in India (Khaitan, 2020, p. 87) did not formally prohibit being critical of the government. But when subsidies and funding become politicized, explicit criticism becomes more risky and potentially costly. In many of these cases, there is no evidence of clear, outright prohibition of certain behaviours. However, in the case of Belarusian judges, some were fired after they failed to comply. This threat, no matter how opaque and informal, limits their independence. As such, harassment and intimidation do not *de jure* restrict the opportunity of free speech or pro-democratic action. But they *de facto* do have that effect, by spreading fear and self-censorship, restricting opposition.

The difference between restriction and *prohibition* is that restriction does not explicitly forbid critical opposition but rather aims to increase the costs and risks associated with it, while prohibition occurs when new *de jure* rules are created or enforced to formally forbid or criminalize certain behaviours of opposition members or critics of the regime. In the societal arena this ranges from banning demonstrations against expanding presidential term limits, as happened in Malawi in 2002 (Rakner, 2021, p. 104), revoking licenses of critical media, as happened in Venezuela in 2007 (García-Guadilla & Mallen, 2019, p. 69; Kaufman & Haggard, 2019, p. 422), cancelling a specific television programme because the opposition is too visible in it, in Serbia in 2014 (Castaldo, 2020, p. 1628), or forbidding academics from criticizing government policy, see India in 2020 (Khaitan, 2020, p. 86). In the legislative arena, we mostly see the banning of parties or party-candidates, in Armenia in 1994 (Stefes & Paturyan,

2021, p. 9) and in Peru in 2016 (McNulty, 2017, p. 564) or banning political ads outside campaign-time, but conveniently allowing government public interest ads, as in Hungary throughout the 2010s (Bakke & Sitter, 2022, p. 28). In the executive arena, would-be autocrats have forbidden state employees from appearing on critical media platforms (Čepo, 2020, p. 149).

4.3 Autocratization affecting values

The last autocratization strategy is aimed at influencing values of political actors or citizens. Here, would-be autocrats can turn to *delegitimation* of opponents by attacking their (democratic) credentials. In the legislative arena, an Indian official from Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party called the opposition treasonous in 2018 (Khaitan, 2020, p. 64), and the Fidesz government denounced the opposition as criminal (Herman, 2016, p. 260). In the executive arena, in Serbia in 2015 a smear campaign was started against the ombudsman when they issued a report critical of the government (Castaldo, 2020, p. 1630). In Indonesia (in 2009 and the 2010s) both the electoral committee and the anti-corruption committee were called corrupt (Warburton & Aspinall, 2019, p. 268). In the judicial arena, in Brazil in 2022, the impartiality of the Supreme Court was called into question by the incumbent after an unfavourable judgement (Doctor, 2022, p. 11). In the societal arena, in Turkey (in 2008) the media was called fake (Somer, 2019, p. 52). And sometimes the incumbent forces the media to self-delegitimize, by having them publish reprimands from a (incumbent-controlled) media council, as in Hungary since 2010 (Herman, 2016, p. 260).

Delegitimation is especially hard to combat, since the incumbent can effectively use pending court cases as evidence, spreading the message through captured or harassed media, and claiming anyone who opposes it is part of the same problem. By calling into question the opposition's intentions, a would-be autocrat limits their ability to credibly compete for office, even though these strategies do not fundamentally change the rules of the game. But they call into question the intention of oppositions, delegitimizing not only their campaign, but also their goals and the opposition-members themselves. By extension, the opposition's outcry that certain actions are autocratic is automatically delegitimated as well, thereby also limiting oppositions' capacity to engage in democratic defence.

Table 2.1: The autocrats' toolkit

		Actions aimed at ...						
		Institutions				**Behaviour**		**Values**
		Evasion Re-interpreting institutional rules to ignore accountability	**Manipulation** Tweaking institutional rules to benefit incumbent	**Infiltration** Packing institutions with loyalists	**Duplication** Creating new institutions that supersede existing ones	**Restriction** *De facto* limitations on opposition	**Prohibition** *De jure* limitations on opposition	**Delegitimation** Discrediting of criticism
Actions taking place in the...	**Legislature**	Postpone debates	Gerrymandering	Pack electoral commission	Create a new parliament	Refuse to appoint leader of the opposition to limit their budget	Ban political ads outside campaign time, but allow "government public interest ads"	Denounce opponents as criminal or treasonous
	Executive	Defund critical institutions	Abolish oversight committees	Pack national research bureau	Create new media oversight body	Relax termination policies	Declare state of emergency	Critique independent agencies as fake or biased
	Judiciary	Ask courts to reinterpret presidential term limits	Change nomination rules to no longer need multi-party backing	Pack the courts	Create new supreme court	Inform judges of desired outcome of cases	Ban courts from ruling on certain topics	Start smear campaign that qualifies judiciary as corrupt
	Society	Limiting media attendance at press conferences	Change rules to distribute broadcasting licences	Buy critical media-outlets	Create new youth-institution	Financial restrictions on churches or NGOs	Require formal approval for NGO projects	Force journalists to publish reprimands

Note: The strategies across the top row encompass a variety of different actions that can take place in different arenas. All actions within a single strategy, however, have a similar effect on institutions, behaviour, or values. Examples of specific actions are illustrated in the cells of the table. The arenas down the first column provide a useful analytical tool to compare and contrast how different strategies take shape in different arenas of democracy.

5. General patterns of autocratic action: future questions about incumbent-led democratic recession

This overview of autocratization strategies used in the different arenas leads to four important considerations that warrant future research.

First, while many strategies occur in several (or all) arenas, there appears to be a tendency to use some strategies more in some arenas than in others. It is, by its very nature, hard to pack civil society with loyalists (although it is tried and has succeeded) and difficult to delegitimize the executive (of which the incumbent is part themselves). The arenas therefore provide a useful analytical tool to discern how would-be autocrats play with and adapt to their domestic contexts and target their actions towards the most likely source of opposition. We also see that would-be autocrats use similar strategies, either intentionally or by accident. This makes sense: pro-democracy actors learn from each other, so why would would-be autocrats not do the same? It also implies that researchers and policymakers not only *can* compare cases, but that they also *should*, and that doing so can shed light on diffusion and learning of autocratization strategies (cf. Brinks & Coppedge, 2006; Tolstrup, 2015).

Second, strategies appear to vary from more covert and ambiguous strategies (such as restriction, delegitimation and evasion) to more overt and unambiguous strategies (such as prohibition, infiltration, and duplication). We would expect would-be autocrats as strategic actors to start with autocratization strategies that are relatively more covert and ambiguous, in order to not attract too much attention and opposition to their undermining of democracy. When autocratization progresses, or when more covert techniques are not effective enough, more overt strategies might become more likely. My purpose in this chapter was to inductively identify what strategies would-be autocrats use when engaging in democratic recession. Building on this, future research on autocratization strategies could collect more fine-grained data in terms of precise timing and frequency of actions to analyse the diffusion and sequencing of strategies.

Third, ambiguity and legitimation of autocratic actions appear to be key in explaining the would-be autocrats' success in implementing them. In many cases, would-be autocrats can to a certain extent claim a strategy is legitimate, either because it follows the letter of the law (though arguably not the spirit) (cf. Pirro & Stanley, 2022), or because actions were decided following democratic procedures, or because actions were needed to achieve other ostensibly important outcomes such as security, health or economic growth. Many autocratic actions can therefore be explained as legitimate actions, creating a grey space where would-be autocrats can act. This makes the work

of democracy defenders more difficult. Understanding how would-be autocrats use this grey space, and how democracy defenders can respond in such cases, can generate better understanding of when autocratization strategies are successful or not.

Fourth, the different strategies affect democracy differently. Evasion, manipulation, infiltration, and duplication affect formal institutions. This is wholly in line with our current understanding of democratic recession: the decline in *institutional* democratic characteristics.[23] However, I show would-be autocrats also try to restrict democratic behaviours of others (within and outside of those institutions). And, we see would-be autocrats target democratic values, by delegitimizing opponents, institutions, and broader support for (liberal) democracy. Autocratic actions that are also targeted at constraining the behaviour of opponents, and at delegitimizing those opponents, thus both undermine the credibility of democratic defenders and further undermine their capacity to act. Successful autocratization strategies then can create a vicious circle in which the space to act for democratic defenders is increasingly constrained.

6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I set out to construct a systematic overview of incumbent-led autocratization actions. Recent scholarship has uncovered many distant causes and facilitating circumstances that relate to democratic recession, ranging from structural, to societal to international factors. However, as of yet, there has been no systematic, comparative analysis of what would-be autocrats actually *do* when they erode democracy. Are there similarities between cases or are autocratization strategies completely context-specific? Do would-be autocrats employ a small toolkit, or is their toolkit larger? Does autocratization occur in specific arenas of democracy or does it permeate throughout society? With the analysis of autocratic actions provided in this chapter and especially with the strategies I have identified, I provide tools to answer these questions more rigorously in future research.

Developing a toolkit of "real existing" (Schmitter, 2011) threats to democracy based on the full universe of cases, and thereby mapping the autocrats' toolkit for democratic recession, allows us to better understand present-day autocratization processes. Next to inspiring the questions asked above, the toolkit is useable for future research

23. Importantly, my universe of cases is a minimal universe, based on the episodic approach to autocratization, that relies on declines in electoral democracy. Even in this minimal understanding of democratic recession, I find autocratization strategies do not only target democratic institutions, but behaviour and values as well.

in four ways. First, the toolkit of autocratic action allows future research to compare autocratization between regimes as well as over time, and address questions about authoritarian learning, diffusion, and sequencing in democratic recession. This literature often relies on regime-level data, and as such obscures important variation (both in sequencing and in learning) between cases (see for example Wunsch & Blanchard, 2023). Second, with the toolkit, future research can more easily identify when autocratization strategies were successful or not, giving better insight into near misses, where democratic recession was attempted, but failed (Ginsburg & Huq, 2018), providing a starting point to better understand the conditions for successful democratic defence. Third, as the toolkit is a coherent, globally applicable, and empirically-based toolkit of autocratic action, it makes it easier to pinpoint autocratization early on, identify the more subtle start of autocratization, and respond before it is too late. Contemporary autocratization often starts with innocuous legal challenges that have an unclear and ambiguous effect on democracy. The toolkit helps to place those actions in a broader context, where we can understand them as early-stage autocratization, enabling swifter democratic defence responses in future cases. Fourth, the toolkit enables researchers to identify potential new cases of democratic recession that are not yet captured by the aggregate democracy indices. I do not claim that any single autocratic action signals autocratization, as there can be legitimate justifications to (temporarily) limit or redesign certain elements of democracy. However, multiple infractions might serve as an early warning sign of autocratization for researchers and policy makers alike.

The autocrats' toolkit presented in this chapter is based on academic literature and a minimal universe of cases. Because of this, the data behind the toolkit are not exhaustive – potentially overlooking important and informative cases. My data could therefore be complemented by research outside academia (NGOs, policy briefs, election monitoring organizations, et cetera), and data collected through expert surveys. A more complete database of autocratic action provides pro-democracy actors with an even clearer view on when to step in.

Overall, however, the case studies and my analysis of them show that would-be autocrats do indeed diversify their portfolio, targeting all parts of society in different ways. Without assuming anything about their intentions and decision-making, they appear to be careful when implementing autocratic actions, varying them from outright rules-violations, rules-bending, and rules-dodging, to increasing the "cost" of opposition and undermining democratic values. It is clear that would-be autocrats do not only target formal institutions but also aim to restrict pro-democratic behaviour in others, as well as try to affect democratic values. This has one important consequence

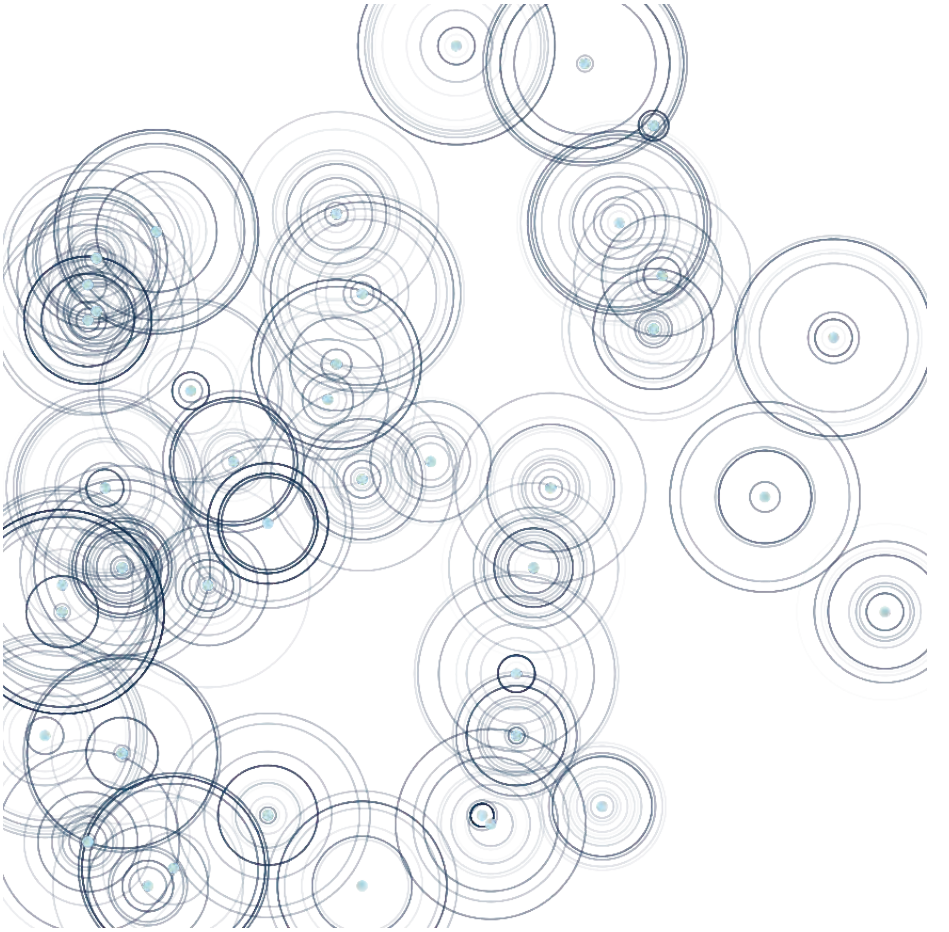
for our understanding of democratic recession: we overlook fundamental aspects if we only look at recession within *institutions*. This chapter shows that the institutional focus is too narrow: there are many autocratic actions that clearly affect informal political spaces. We should no longer understand democratic recession only as the move away from democratic institutions. Instead, we should return to a classical conception of democracy: institutions matter, *but behaviours, and attitudes matter too* (cf. Linz & Stepan, 1996).

There are several benefits to a broader understanding of democratic recession. Next to a more empirically valid understanding of democratic recession, this would also allow researchers and policymakers to "see" democratic recession earlier, before it affects institutions in a large, clear, and obvious way. Two, using the toolkit we can more clearly study "near misses", where a would-be autocrat attempted, but failed to successfully pull-off an action that would harm democracy, since the toolkit focuses on in-the-moment actions, rather than *post hoc* outcomes. Three, we can more easily study recession in liberal aspects of democracy, rather than (only) in the electoral dimensions. Finally, analysing autocratization strategies from this broader perspective also allows us to gain better understanding of when autocratization becomes a self-reinforcing process: where strategies targeted at undermining behaviour and values make democratic defence progressively harder.

Overall, this chapter shows that while autocratization is somewhat context-dependent, it is not completely so. We can, and should compare episodes of autocratization, outcomes, interventions (when desired), strategies, and risks using the toolkit of autocratic actions and the strategies of evasion, manipulation, infiltration, duplication, restriction, prohibition, and delegitimation identified here. The toolkit can guide future research and provide a backdrop to better understand democratic recession, even (especially!) when constitutions and institutions slowly turn into the ultimate tyranny.

In the next chapter, I further problematize our current understanding of autocratization and democratic resilience. Often, when would-be autocrats propose (or do) autocratic actions, democracies (and democratic defenders) rely on institutional arrangements to counter it. I investigate which institutional set-up makes democracies resilient against the onset of autocratization and find that no single formal institution is a silver bullet against it. Instead, only societal structures appear to have an effect in making democracies resilient, making an actor-based approach all the more necessary.

2



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

Chapter 3

Autocratic Counterfactuals

Research question:
What institutional set-up prevents the onset of autocratization?

Data and methods:
Quasi-experiments based on a novel method to match longitudinal continuous multivariate data, using V-Dem's episodes of autocratization.

Main findings:
No single formal institutional set-up can make democracies resilient against incumbent-led democratic recession. Instead, only the informal societal institution of citizen commitment to democratic pluralism, the absence of ideological and affective polarization, has causal power in explaining the resilience of democracies against the onset of autocratization.

1. Introduction

In *Chapter 2 – Autocratic Actions* I provided a comprehensive conceptual and empirical overview of the autocratic actions would-be autocrats employ to undermine democracy. Not only does this provide knowledge of the actions that democratic defenders have to stand up against, but it also begs the question: what do we already know about the resilience against incumbent-led democratic recession? In this chapter, I focus on the literature about the institutional factors that influence democratic resilience, showing that no single formal institutional set-up makes democracies resilient. The finding that only societal structures – which I take to be informal institutions – appear to prevent the onset of autocratization, paves the way for the argument in *Movement II – Democratic Solutions* that we should expand our focus to include actors.

In light of 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 the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Italy.[24] 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).

24. ECPR Joint Sessions Workshop "Sounding the Alarm", 25 – 28 March 2024, https://ecpr.eu/Events/Event/WorkshopDetails/14476

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:

First, this research does not systematically compare cases where autocratization occurred with cases where it did not occur.[25] It 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 chapter, I explicitly set out to systematically compare how each potential difference or similarity affects the onset of autocratization.

Second, 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 autocratizers to engage

25. 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.

in autocratization. I argue a macro-political view veils important variation between cases of autocratization and resilience.

Therefore, to further our understanding of the role of institutions in sustaining democracies, I introduce "autocratic counterfactuals". Autocratic counterfactuals are empirical counterfactuals to the "episodes of autocratization". Episodes of autocratization are connected periods of time with a decline in democratic regime traits (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019, p. 1100), resulting in substantial regime transformation, without necessarily leading to regime transition (Maerz et al., 2024, p. 4). The first year of an episode, is the year in which autocratization starts: autocratization onset. The autocratic counterfactuals, in turn, are cases that have similar institutional characteristics to the episode of autocratization, in the years leading up to autocratization onset. Figure 3.1 visualizes this logic: in the time periods 0 to 6, the episode of autocratization and the autocratic counterfactual have similar values for some 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.

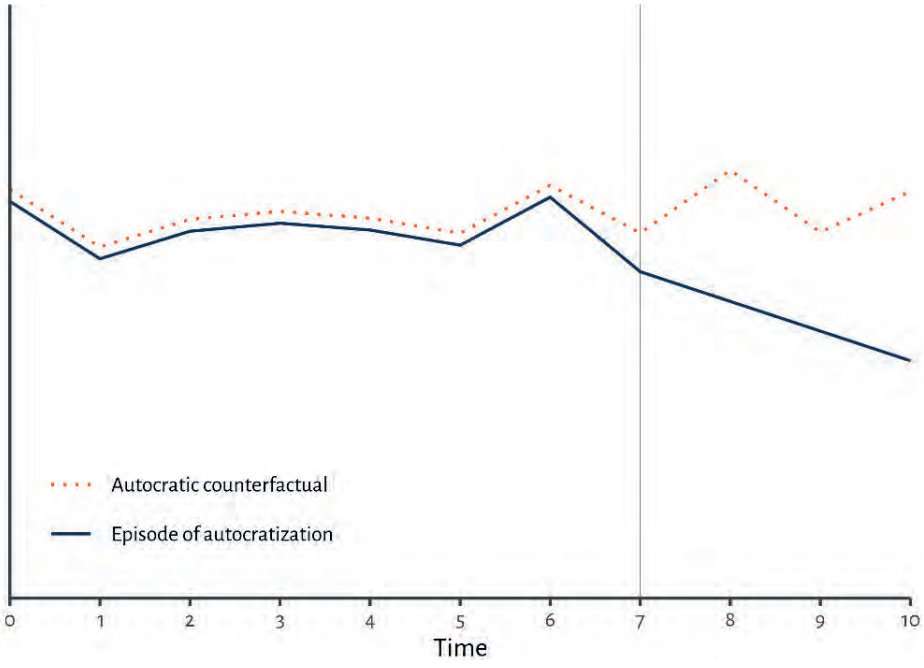


Figure 3.1: The logic of autocratic counterfactuals visualized. Note that this figure shows how autocratic counterfactuals "match" the episode of autocratization on a single characteristic form time periods 0 to 6, but the matching in this chapter occurs over multiple characteristics.

I introduce a new way of researching democratic resilience, not by controlling for potential confounders as in more standard regression techniques (which are useful but limit claims about causal inference), but by leveraging an experimental logic and randomization which approaches causal inference more closely. Using these autocratic counterfactuals, I show that no single *formal* institutional set up has an evidenced causal effect on the resilience of democracies against the onset of autocratization. In addition, I do provide first evidence that *informal* institutions – specifically commitment to democratic pluralism among citizens – has a causal effect in preventing the onset of autocratization. The implications of this are twofold.

First, this should caution scholars and policymakers to rely too much on a "silver bullet" against autocratization. Strengthening courts, media, or civil society on its own is likely insufficient to make democracies resilient. Instead, the study of democratic resilience should focus on a comprehensive approach in which pro-democratic sentiments are crucial. Institutions *do* matter, but more as facilitating circumstances than as causal explanations (see *Chapter 1 – Introduction*). A too narrow focus on institutional resilience is not suitable. 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. Even if an institution is coopted or infiltrated by an autocratizing incumbent (Freeman, 2020 and see *Chapter 2 - Autocratic Actions*), resistance is still possible.

Second, democratic resilience should be understood in terms of micro- and meso-level factors, not in terms of high-level macro-political factors. 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 second, 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 polarization and commitment to democratic pluralism happen "on the ground". As such, I find that we should study the resilience of democracy not just at the macro-level of formal institutions but look at the informal institutions that shape political live at meso- and micro-level.

To show this, the chapter proceeds as follows. In *Section 2 – Core institutional explanations of democratic resilience* I explain which explanations and institutions need to be included in the matching to create convincing quasi-experiments. After that, in *Section 3 – Empirical strategy* I operationalize these criteria using the V-Dem dataset and introduce the *locomotive* algorithm I designed to create the quasi-experiments. In *Section 4 – Results* I show that only measures for democratic commitment can plausibly be a causal explanation for democratic resilience. In *Section 5 – Conclusions* I describe some ways in which democratic resilience scholars should rethink the role of institutions. 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

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 (see *Chapter 1 – Introduction*), hinder resilience. The mirror-image is as true: circumstances that hinder autocratization, facilitate resilience. As such, it is logical that research shows that institutions *do* play a role.

In this section, 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 3.1). 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.

Table 3.1: The most prominent institutions in the resilience of democracy

Formal institutions		**Informal institutions**
De jure institutions *(formal rules of the game)*	*De facto* institutions *(accountability mechanisms)*	*(social structure of society)*
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. Linz, 1990a and see also *Chapter 7 – Democratic Credibility*). 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 the 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 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 (see *Chapter 2 – Autocratic Actions*). As such, diagonal accountability mechanisms can make autocratization more difficult by strengthening the other accountability mechanisms. There is not much literature that compares the effect of civil society on the resilience of democracies across cases, but 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; Grahn & 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 *de*creases the difficulty of autocratization. A lack of polarization does not necessarily *in*creases its difficulty – it just neutralizes it.

In this chapter, I aim to assess whether each of these separate institutions (see Table 3.1) has a singular causal effect on the resilience of democracies against the onset of autocratization; 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 condition 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 randomization (mimicking an experimental set-up) that closer approximates causal inference.

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

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 set-ups over several years to see which result in autocratization and which do not. In this chapter, I therefore create multiple quasi-experiments to approximate causal inference.

Quasi-experiments 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). A counterfactual is a hypothetical scenario that explores what would have happened if past events had occurred differently (Toshkov, 2016, Chapter 6). Or, in the words of one of the key texts on counterfactuals: "if kangaroos had no tails, they would topple over" (Lewis,

1973, p. 1). An autocratic counterfactual is, by extension a case that is similar to an episode of autocratization in the years leading up to autocratization onset on all but one criteria. Importantly, the autocratic counterfactuals I find in this chapter are not hypothetical constructs, but empirical cases (see *Section 3.4 – Introducing* locomotive). Using autocratic counterfactuals allows us to answer the question: "would autocratization still occur if we change one aspect of a country's institutional set-up, while keeping everything else the same?" Below, I develop a new matching method to find these counterfactuals.

3.1 On matching

The main downside with quasi-experiments is that it is hard to find units that are sufficiently similar to speak of counterfactuals. Especially in the social sciences, there is much variation between units (countries, organizations, people) which make successful quasi-experiments rare (though fruitful when they do work, see for example Graham & Svolik, 2020 or; Ares & Hernández, 2017). One method that enables quasi-experiments is matching on theoretically important criteria. I describe here how I create matches of sufficient quality to be able to talk about autocratic counterfactuals.

Matching is a method that aims to equate or balance the distribution of relevant covariates between different groups of interest (Stuart, 2010, p. 2). In essence, its purpose is to create, in experimental language, a control group and a treatment group, which differ on nothing but the treatment and potentially the outcome. Importantly, matching techniques interested in causal inference *do not* match on the outcome: this is left to vary, because the point is to ask the question "if the theoretical explanation is the only variation, does the outcome vary as well?"

The core question a matching technique needs to ask is what covariates to match on, that is, that is: what are the matching criteria? If a strong theoretical explanation is left out of the matching criteria, the resulting matches between control and treatment group are not adequately balanced: there might still be variation of theoretical interest left unaccounted for in the control group, leading to inaccurate causal inferences. Similar to more conventional experimental designs and statistical models, matching is susceptible to these concerns. However, when there are strong theoretical expectations about which potential explanations are key (which is the case in this chapter, see *Section 2 – Core institutional explanations of democratic resilience*), matching is a fruitful tool to assess whether these explanations actually hold. As such, matching can be used to

counter endogeneity especially in circumstances where there are *a priori* theoretical expectations. These theoretical expectations are the matching criteria.

The more matching criteria there are, the harder it is to find a good match, as there is more variation within and between cases to deal with. There are some ways to match on a large number of criteria (as I discuss below), but these require a large number of cases and potential matches, as well as introduce an additional layer of statistical complexity.

3.1.1 How to find the best match?

I now turn to the three general methods to estimate matches:

First, the best match is an exact match, where everything but a covariate of interest and potentially the outcome of interest is exactly equal (Iacus et al., 2012; Keele, 2015). As one might expect, this is often hard to achieve in the social sciences. A "coarsened" approach (Iacus et al., 2012) simplifies the data, so that the categories-to-be-matched are larger (in simple terms, the data is rounded up or down, resulting in less detail but more potential matches). In the absence of exact matches, it is useful to turn to these approximate matches. In addition to a set of matching criteria, a coarsened approach requires researchers to set a tolerance level for the maximum allowed deviation (in simple terms, do you round to the nearest tenth, half, or whole number?). In matching terminology, this tolerance is called a caliper: a specified range that the potential match needs to fall in compared to the observation-to-be-matched-with. The downside of this is that if the variation between cases is substantial, some observation-to-be-matched-with might not have a match within the caliper.

Second, to simplify the matching, the covariates of interest are often reduced to a single "propensity score" that aims to capture the variation across different dimensions (King & Nielsen, 2019; Thoemmes & Kim, 2011). Basically, all covariates are reduced to a single score, based on the probability that a case is part of a specific (sub)group (the propensity score). Subsequently, the matching is done on only this score instead of on a battery of matching criteria. This reduces complexity for the matching, making it useful when the number of matching criteria is large, but introduces another layer of (statistical) complexity before the matching has even started, which makes the quality of the matches hard to interpret. Because of this statistical complexity and because of my limited number of potential matches, I disregard propensity score matching: the autocratic counterfactuals I aim to find are "true" empirical cases, and not statistical constructs.

Third, a final approach is to allow for unlimited deviation (i.e. no caliper), but take the "nearest neighbour" to the observation-to-be-matched-with (Sävje et al., 2021). That is: by calculating the differences on all matching criteria between the potential matches and the observation-to-be-matched-with, it is possible to calculate which potential match is closest. This approach can be combined with propensity scores. This ensures that each treated observation has a match, but those matches might not be very good. In this chapter, I combine a caliper-inspired approach with a nearest-neighbour approach to take advantage of both.

3.1.2 Time series matching

Time-series (i.e. longitudinal) matching poses additional difficulties. In essence, it multiplies the number of matching criteria. If theories require the control to match the treatment on K covariates, and theories expect that the process takes about T time-periods to unfold, then there are $K * T$ matching criteria. Because each matching criteria needs to match for each year, otherwise it is not a good match according to the theoretical assumptions we started with. In cross-sectional matching ($T = 1$), the match only needs to actually match with the observation-to-be-matched-with in the current time period. But in longitudinal matching, each additional covariate of interest, and each additional time-period drastically reduces the number of potential matches.

Imai et al. (2023) have developed a method to match time-series for categorical variables, but it does not yet hold for continuous variables. However, autocratization (especially in the alleged third wave of autocratization is incremental, gradual, and covert (Bermeo, 1990; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Wunsch & Blanchard, 2023). For matching, this implies we cannot rely on relatively coarse measurements and categorical variables (in contrast to Imai et al.'s (2023) approach), 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. In other words, autocratic counterfactuals need to match on incremental changes in continuous variables, not on categorical variables.

Therefore, I develop a new method of longitudinal continuous multivariate matching, called *locomotive* (see *Section 3.2 – Introducing:* locomotive). The input for *locomotive* consists of episodes of autocratization. For each episode and each set of matching criteria, *locomotive* identifies the best available empirical match. This results in a quasi-experimental set-up, in which the episodes of autocratization are the treatment-group (i.e. they have some institutional set-up that did not prevent the onset of autocratization), and the matches are the control group (i.e. they are the same on all but one criteria and did not result in the onset of autocratization). This allows me to

answer the counterfactual question "would autocratization still occur if we change one aspect of a country's institutional set-up, while keeping everything else the same?"

Each quasi-experiment follows the same design:

3.2 The treatment group

The treatment group is defined by V-Dem's Episodes of Regime Transformation dataset (ERT, Maerz et al., 2024), selecting only those episodes that start in democracies and are incumbent-led (this is the same universe of cases as outlined in the *Introduction* and in *Chapter 2 – Autocratic Actions*). V-Dem's ERT dataset codes when a decline in democracy (operationalized as Dahl's *polyarchy*, the Electoral Democracy Index,[26] Coppedge et al., 2011; Dahl, 1971) exceeds 10 percentage points, after incremental declines of at least 1 percentage point over time (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; Maerz et al., 2024; Pelke & Croissant, 2021). Specifically, I look at the countries' institutional set-up in the years *before* the onset of autocratization, as they should have prevented autocratization. For example, if autocratization started in 2006 (as it did in Hungary), I look at the institutional set-up in 2005 and before as matching criteria. The treatment group is the same in each quasi-experiment.

3.3 The control groups

To construct the control groups, I employ *locomotive* to match autocratic counterfactuals to the episodes of autocratization. These matches are counterfactuals, because they do not experience autocratization themselves; and because they differ on one key criterion from the episode of autocratization, while being similar on all others (see *Section 2 – Core institutional explanations of democratic resilience*). That means I create a separate control group for each theoretical explanation. For example, when I analyse judicial constraints as the core explanation of democratic resilience, I find autocratic counterfactuals who are similar to the episodes of autocratization on legislative constraints and civil society participation, but do not experience autocratization. If judicial constraints do have causal explanatory power, we should observe a difference between its scores for the episodes of autocratization and the autocratic counterfactuals.

I take a multi-tiered approach to the criteria I am interested in. First, I include the higher-level indices for *de jure*, *de facto*, and informal institutions (see Table 3.2) to capture whether there is empirical evidence that these institutions matter in the resilience of democracy. Second, I "unpack" these higher-level indices in their components, to see

26. I deviate from my definition in the introduction that democratic recession is a decline in *liberal* democracy scores. Instead, to align myself with the macro-political research on democratic resilience and the role of institutions, I follow V-Dem's approach and use the electoral democracy index here.

if those individually matter for the resilience of democracy. This multi-tiered approach is necessary, because I restrict the number of criteria on which the control groups and the treatment group match. If I would find that *de jure* formal institutions do not matter, the evidence is weak when I only look at the aggregate measure: there might be sub indicators that on their own do prevent the onset of autocratization. The optimal way to strengthen the evidence is to include more matching criteria at once, but as discussed, this drastically reduces the number of empirical matches *locomotive* finds. The "unpacking" mitigates this to a certain extent: when all these quasi-experiments result in the same conclusion, the conclusion is stronger. Specifically, I unpack the *de jure* institutions into its lower-level indicators. They overlap substantively with the lower lever indicators of the *de facto* institutions. There are no lower-level indicators available for informal institutions.

Furthermore, the autocratic counterfactuals are matched to an episode of autocratization over a number of years. Since autocratization is a process over time, often consisting of many independent and separate autocratic actions potentially spanning multiple years (Waldner & Lust, 2018b and see *Chapter 2 - Autocratic Actions*), 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. I call this number of years leading up to the onset of autocratization the *lead*.

This approach results in 21 quasi-experiments (with 21 different control groups but always the same treatment group), in which each of the core explanations is left to vary as the treatment once.

Table 3.2 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.[27] To test the effect of *de facto* formal institutions, I match

[27] 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_ccsi*). 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 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.

on vertical, horizontal, and diagonal accountability mechanisms (mirroring judicial constraints, legislative constraints,[28] 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. On the lower level, I unpack the each of the *de jure* formal institutions (judicial constraints, executive constraints, and civil society participation) into their indicators.

Table 3.2: Matching criteria (grouped per "cluster" of explanations, see also the Online Appendix)

	Concept	Variable name	Measurement
High-level indices			
De jure 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 *e.g.*, 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?
De facto 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?

28. 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 Online Appendix, I run additional quasi-experiments that include it and find that the substantive conclusions in this chapter do not change.

Table 3.2: Continued

	Concept	Variable name	Measurement
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?
	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?
Civil society participation (unpacking *v2x_cspart*)	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 these 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.

[1] Sourced from Claassen (2020).

[2] Reversed, so that all higher values denote "more democratic" qualities.

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

3.4 Introducing: locomotive

To construct the autocratic counterfactuals, I designed the LOngitudinal COntinuous MulTIVariatE matching algorithm (*locomotive*[29]), which enables matching between treated observations of interest (i.e. countries that experience an episode of autocratization) and control observations (i.e. countries do not experience an episode of autocratization), over an (theoretically) unlimited number of years and an (theoretically) unlimited number of substantive continuous matching criteria.

The algorithm sequentially iterates over seven steps to find the best match for any given observation of interest. Broadly, it first selects potential matches for each observation of interest (employing a caliper logic) and then calculates the quality of each potential match (with the Euclidean distance, employing a nearest-neighbour logic). The potential match with the highest quality (i.e. lowest Euclidean distance) is finally selected as the best match. The specifics of the algorithm are as follows (visualized in Figure 3.2):

Before the algorithm, the dataset containing the observations of interest $O_{1,\ldots,n}$ (in which n is the number of observations), which have matching criteria $K_{1,\ldots,k}$ (in which k is the number of substantive matching criteria) with given values, for the time period T_0 in which the outcome of interest occurs, and for time periods $T_{-1,\ldots,-t}$ (in which t is the number of years leading up to the outcome of interest) is defined. *locomotive* is run for each observation in O on a dataset with potential matches P, which have non-missing values for matching criteria $K_{1,\ldots,k}$ and for time periods $T_{-1,\ldots,-t}$, and additionally non-missing values for V-Dem's Electoral Democracy Index (EDI). In the following, I use the episode of autocratization in Hungary (starting in 2006 – note that since the episode starts in 2006, I look at matches for 2005 and before, as explained in *Section 3.2 – The treatment group*) as an example to illustrate the algorithm in Table 3.3.

3.2.1 The algorithm

First, *locomotive* discards any country in P that is not in the same geographical area[30] as the observation of interest. 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

29. Which is slow but does get you where you need to go in the end.

30. 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).

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.

Second, *locomotive* discards the potential match in *P* if it is a potential match with itself (in *O*), even outside its autocratization episode, to counter any democratic or autocratic legacies that could lead to endogeneity (Neundorf & Pop-Eleches, 2020; Pop-Eleches & Tucker, 2018).

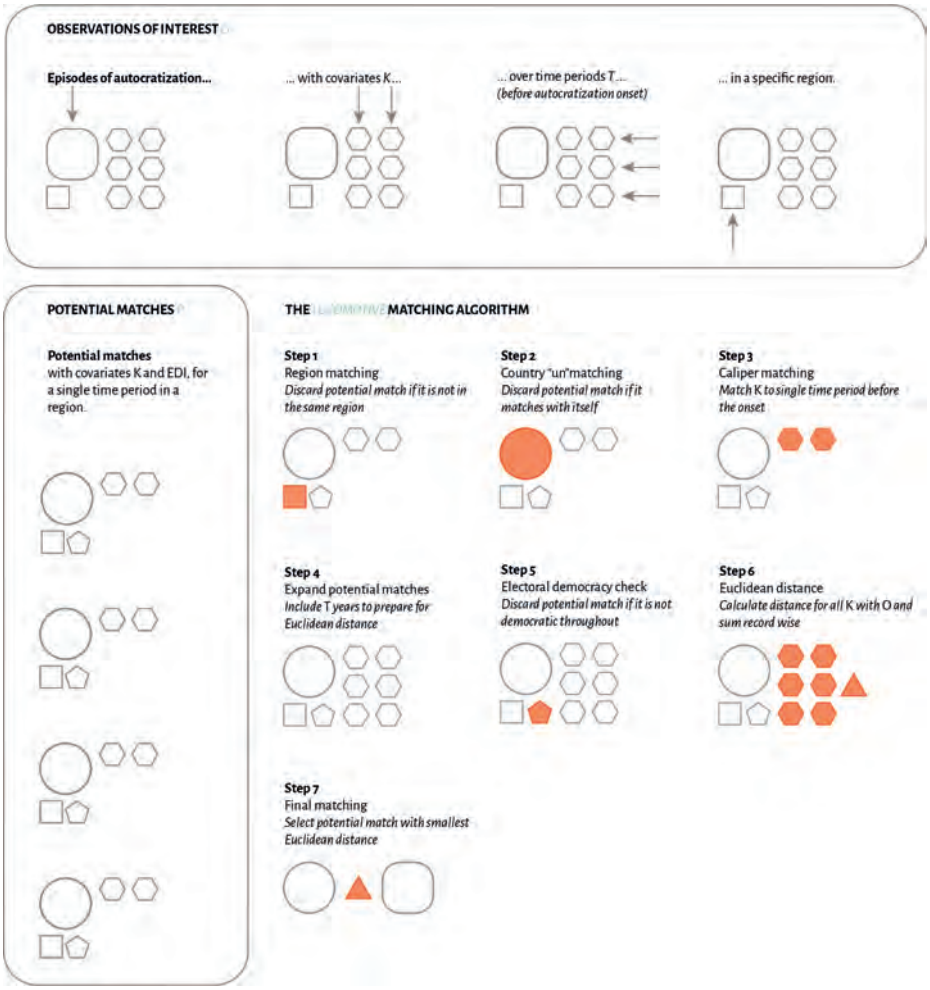


Figure 3.2: The locomotive algorithm. Each episode of autocratization *O* has values for covariates *K* over time periods *T*. Over a series of seven steps, a potential match *P* is compared to the episode of autocratization on several criteria to assess whether it is an autocratic counterfactual.

Table 3.3: Illustration of *locomotive*, for the episode of autocratization in Hungary (starting in 2006)

Step	Action	Outcome for the potential matches
1	Region matching	Disregards any countries *outside* of Eastern Europe (excluding the Caucasus)
2	Country (un)matching	Disregards Hungary itself
3	Caliper matching	Disregards any countries that fall outside the caliper
4	Expand potential matches	*No change in which countries potentially match, expanding the dataset of potential matches to include lead years*
5	Electoral democracy check	Disregards any countries that are not electoral democracies throughout all *lead* years
6	Euclidean distance calculation	*No change in which countries potentially match*
7	Final matching (nearest neighbour matching)	Select country with smallest Euclidean distance: Albania

Third, *locomotive* uses a caliper to find any potential matches $P_{1,\ldots,\ p}$ (in which p is the number of potential matches). Potential match P differs no more than the size of the caliper for each matching criterion K from any observation of interest O for time period T_{-1} (i.e. right before the outcome of interest occurs). *locomotive* searches for potential matches from 1990 to 2023: it is not necessary that $O_{T\ =\ 2021}$ matches $P_{T\ =\ 2021}$, but it can instead match $P_{T\ =\ 1993}$. Any observation of interest O therefore likely has multiple potential matches P. Any potential match P can match multiple observations O. I apply the caliper only for T_{-1}. This allows *locomotive* to be a bit more flexible in years further before the onset of autocratization, as these likely have a slightly smaller effect than the year right before the onset of autocratization. It is therefore necessary to be strict for T_{-1}, but less so for $T_{-2,\ldots,\ t}$. In addition, I do not match on T_o, the year of autocratization onset, as the outcome then has already occurred (i.e. if the treatment is a causal treatment, it should occur before T_o).

Fourth, *locomotive* expands the datasets of potential matches to include t time periods before the onset of autocratization. Up until step three, the potential matches include only a single country-year, selected with the caliper. However, since *locomotive* is designed to look for *longitudinal* matches, it expands the data for the potential matches to include the lead. It can then (in step six, below) calculate the distance for the entire time period.

Fifth, *locomotive* removes any potential matches that are not an electoral democracy (EDI < 0.5) for any country-years in *t*.[31] This ensures *locomotive* takes into account 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.

Sixth, *locomotive* calculates the Euclidean distance between the values of matching criteria *K* of each potential match (*t* sequential country-years) and the values of *K* of each observation of interest *O* for the *t* years before the onset of autocratization. The Euclidean distance is the length of the shortest straight line from point *A* to point *B*. In simple, one-dimensional geometric space, the Euclidean distance E_1 given by the difference between two points: $E_1 = x - y$. In two-dimensional geometric space, the Euclidean distance E_2 is given by the root of the sum of the squared differences, identical to Pythagoras' theorem. To calculate the difference between points *A* and *B* with values $A(x_a, y_a)$ and $B(x_b, y_b)$, we take:

$$E_2 = \sqrt{(x_b - x_a)^2 + (y_b - y_a)^2}$$

Euclidean distance can be easily generalized to even higher dimensions, by adding more (equal to the number of dimensions *n*) squared differences to the sum under the root:

$$E_n = \sqrt{(x_b - x_a)^2 + (y_b - y_a)^2 + \cdots + (n_b - n_a)^2}$$

When the points are interpreted not as geometric locations in a multidimensional space, but as country-years with scores on multiple indicators, the number of dimensions equals the number of covariates to be matched ($K = n$) between two cases. The first point (or country-year) is then an observation of interest ($O = A$), while the second point (or country-year) is the potential match ($P = B$).

This does not yet, however, allow for time-series matching as the equations assumes that the dimensions *x, y, …, n* are independent of each other. In time-series matching,

31. 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.

it is given that dimension *n* is *not* independent of x_t if *n* is the value of *x* in a previous time-period, e.g. $n = x_{t-1}$. To account for this, I calculate the Euclidean distance record wise. That is: for each time period $T_{-1,\dots,t}$, *locomotive* calculates the Euclidean distance $E_{K,t}$. *locomotive* then sums these differences at single timepoints to get the full Euclidean distance between *O* and *P* for all matching criteria *K* over all time periods *T*:[32]

$$E_{K,-1} = \sqrt{\left(x_{P,-1} - x_{O,-1}\right)^2 + \left(y_{P,-1} - y_{O,-1}\right)^2 + \cdots + \left(K_{P,-1} - K_{O,-1}\right)^2}$$

$$E_{K,-2} = \sqrt{\left(x_{P,-2} - x_{O,-2}\right)^2 + \left(y_{P,-2} - y_{O,-2}\right)^2 + \cdots + \left(K_{P,-2} - K_{O,-2}\right)^2}$$

$$E_{K,-t} = \sqrt{\left(x_{P,-t} - x_{O,-t}\right)^2 + \left(y_{P,-t} - y_{O,-t}\right)^2 + \cdots + \left(K_{P,-t} - K_{O,-t}\right)^2}$$

And finally:

$$E_{K,T} = E_{K,-1} + E_{K,-2} + \cdots + E_{K,-t}$$

Seventh, *locomotive* selects the potential match with the smallest Euclidean distance (i.e. the nearest neighbour to *O* in *P*) as the best match. If there are multiple matches with an equally small Euclidean distance, it selects a random match.

3.2.2 Assessing 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. 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. First of all, the caliper ensures that the match and the episode of autocratization are "somewhat" close to each other at *t-1*, but using the Euclidean distance, I can precisely calculate how close they are. The lower the Euclidean distance between the episode of autocratization and its matched counterfactual, the better the quality of the match.

32. This is record-wise summing of the squares: assessing how close each observation P_t is to observations O_t. Time wise summing of the squares indicates that I would be interested to see how close observation P_t is to P_{t-n}. As I am interested in the distance over time between cases, and not the stability of a single case over time (i.e. the distance between time periods within a case), *locomotive* sums record-wise, not time-wise.

If the caliper is set to the largest distance a match can be away from an observation of interest theoretically, before it is substantially clear it does not match anymore, I can use the proportion between the Euclidean distance and the caliper to provide a conservative estimate of how good the match is:[33]

$$Quality = \frac{E_{K,T}}{caliper}.$$

When *quality* < *1*, the match performs better than my caliper, while *quality* > *1* indicates a lower quality match. Since I set the caliper to a theoretically informed value (see *Section 3.2.3 – Optimizing the caliper and lead*), matches that perform better than the caliper can be considered empirically "similar" to the episode of autocratization, while those performing worse than the caliper are arguably "different" (i.e. not a good match).

3.2.3 Optimizing the caliper and lead

As stated, there is no theoretical limit to the number of matching criteria or the number of matching years that can be included in *locomotive*. There are practical limitations, though, which influence how strict *locomotive* can be in its selection, and impact the size of the caliper, the number of matching criteria *K* and the number of matching years *T*. The most prominent limitation is the number of countries in the world. By virtue of empirics, there are only around 200 countries in the world, of which a substantial number are unsuitable as potential matches because they are autocracies (either during a potential match period, or during all years of observation). Furthermore, I limit the potential matches to the years after 1990 (inclusive) to account for the large differences in autocratization and democratization processes before and after 1990. This leaves *locomotive* with only 6.350 country-years that are potential matches.

First, this impacts the caliper I can set. Through trial runs, the most optimal setting for this chapter appears to be a caliper of 0.1 (on a scale running from 0 to 1). A lower caliper results in substantially more matches with lower quality, while a higher caliper allows too much variation between the match and the episode. The choice

33. An alternative is to calculate the maximum Euclidean distance (i.e. the furthest *P* could be from *O*), 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 $E_{max} = K \cdot T$. 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 caliper is therefore a more conservative yet realistic estimate, based on the same theoretical reasoning used for the caliper in the first place.

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. Furthermore, *locomotive* uses this caliper only as a first selection, and in many cases (see below) is the quality of the match much better than a difference of 10 percentage points, but it is still a sizeable margin of error (but see the Online Appendix for the analyses when the caliper is set to 0.05, which significantly reduces the quality of the matches).

Second, this impacts the number of matching criteria K and matching years T (in similar ways). Each additional time period and each additional matching criteria add to the distance between the match and the episode, reducing the quality. Through trial runs, the most optimal setting for K appears to be 3 and for T appears to be 2, allowing for substantial matching on both high-level and mid-level criteria (see below) over two years before the onset of autocratization, without diminishing the number of matches that can actually be made over (but see the Online Appendix for the analyses when the lead is set to 3, which significantly reduces the quality of the matches).

Lastly, *locomotive* assumes the onset of autocratization (and processes of resilience) occurs equally fast (or slow) in different contexts: a decline of 0.1 from a score of 0.9 is taken to be identical as a decline of 0.1 from a score of 0.6. This assumption is identical to one of the assumptions in the episodic approach of autocratization in ERT.

3.5 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), so I run four separate logistic regression models for each experiment to assess the effect of the one core institutional explanation of democratic resilience that is left to vary. In the first model, I only include the varying criterion as explanatory variable. In the second model, I include the quality of the match as control. In the third model, I include as substantive controls *log(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(population)* (as smaller countries experience regime change differently from larger countries, see Geddes, 1999), which are both robustly related to democratic stability, but exclude

the match-quality.[34] In the fourth model, I include all covariates. Because I already include the episode's region as a substantive matching criterion, I do not further control for regional diffusion. Finally, I do not control for time-effects, assuming that all incumbent-led democratic recession since 1990 has similar traits.

4. Results

4.1 Matches

Running *locomotive* on the matching groups outlined in Table 3.2 (with the caliper 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 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 caliper, 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 Online Appendix).

The average quality of the matches is 1.03, where a score of 1 indicates it exactly matches the caliper, lower scores denote a match that performs better than the caliper, and higher scores denote a match performs worse than the caliper. Substantively, a quality of 1 (based on a caliper set to 0.1 for variables scaled from 0 to 1), indicates that the match varies a total of 10 percentage points across all matching criteria and matching years. 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. As such, an average quality of 1.03 (indicating slightly more than 10 percentage points difference), for 2 or 3 criteria and 2 lead is good enough to be confident in my conclusions.

34. I do not include a measure of democratic stock (while important, see Pérez-Liñán & Mainwaring, 2013) in the analysis as this is based on the same underlying variation in EDI as the episodes of autocratization. However, I show in a fifth model in the Online Appendix that including it does not alter the substantive conclusions.

Figure 3.3 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 caliper – indicating sufficient similarity to talk about an autocratic counterfactual The other 28 matches perform worse than the caliper – indicating they are not a good enough match to speak of an autocratic counterfactual. The Online Appendix gives an overview of the quality of all matches, including how many perform better or worse than the caliper, but I show below that my substantive findings hold when controlling for match-quality.

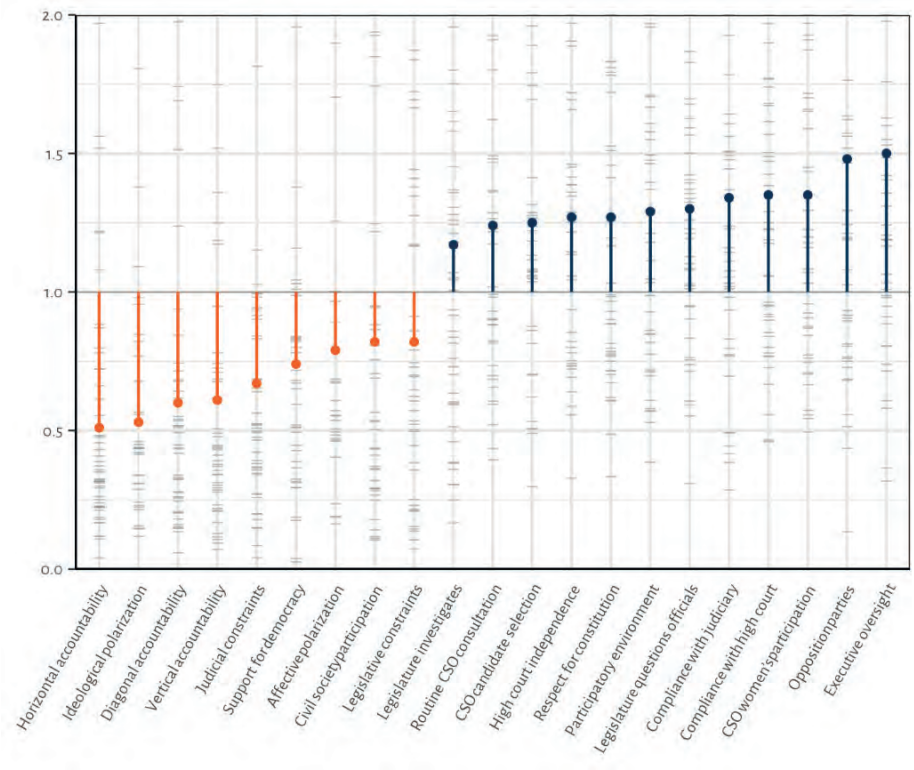


Figure 3.3: Quality of the matches (lower is better), compared to the caliper. The "lollipops" show the average match quality per treatment: scores above 1 indicate the match is generally worse than the caliper; scores below 1 indicate the match performs better than the caliper. The "barcodes" show the quality of each individual matched episode of autocratization. The barcodes are truncated at 2 for visual clarity.

4.2 Quasi-experiments

Turning to the quasi-experiments, Figures 3.4 through 3.9 show the results from the logistic regression, focusing only on the treatment-coefficients (see for all 21 full regression tables, including the confounders *log(GDP)*, *log(population)*, and the match-quality the Online Appendix). 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 to an episode of autocratization when horizontal and diagonal accountability mechanisms are equal, and only vertical accountability is left to vary (see also the "clusters" in Table 3.2). If the treatment (vertical accountability in this example) would causally explain resilience against the onset of autocratization, it should be negative and significant.

4.2.1 Higher-level indices: only informal institutions causally explain onset resilience

I look first at the higher-level indices: *de jure* formal institutions (Figure 3.4), *de factor* formal institutions (Figure 3.5), and informal institutions (Figure 3.6). Most of the coefficients are statistically insignificant (at the standard $\alpha = 0.05$).

Starting with the *de jure* formal institutions (Figure 3.4), judicial constraints on the executive have no effect in any of the models. Legislative constraints on the executive and civil society participation (similar to vertical accountability mechanisms and diagonal accountability mechanisms, respectively) are not evidence to have causal power on their own. In fact, when including all covariates, more legislative constraints on the executive appear to increase the odds of autocratization onset ($\beta = 0.731^{*}$ *(0.289)*).

Turning to *de facto* formal institutions (Figure 3.5), horizontal accountability mechanisms do have an effect when I include no additional controls ($\beta = -0.649^{*}$ *(0.326)*, showing the coefficient, significance stars denoting * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, and *** $p < 0.001$, and the standard error), but the effect-size sharply decreases and becomes insignificant when including the match quality, GDP per capita and population size. There is no evidence that vertical accountability mechanisms and diagonal accountability mechanisms have a causal effect on their own.

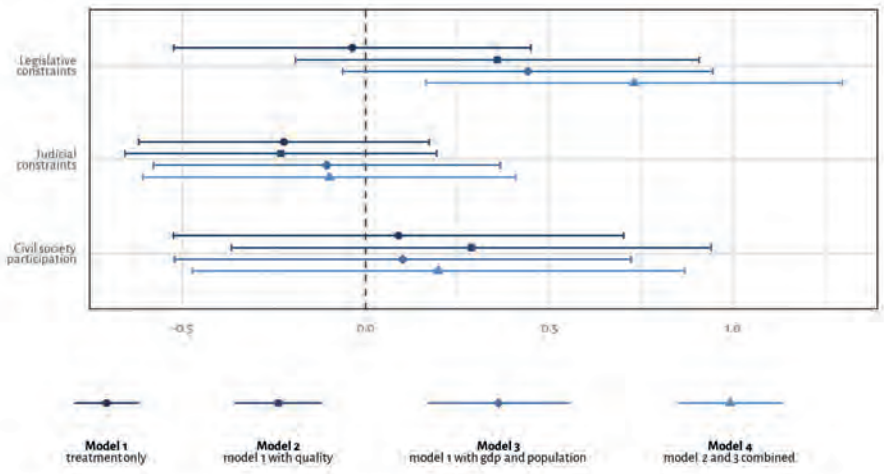


Figure 3.4: Coefficients (with 95% confidence intervals) from the logistic regressions for the *de jure* formal institutions, clustered by the matching groups. Higher coefficients indicate the treatment *increases* the odds of autocratization onset.

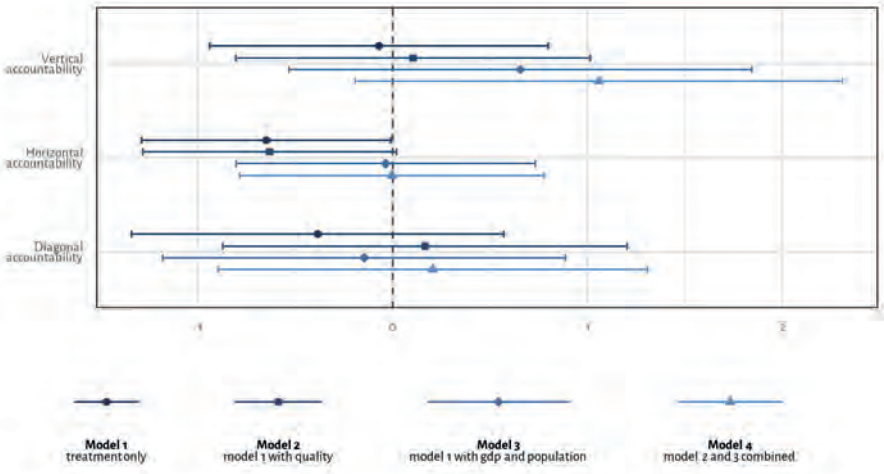


Figure 3.5: Coefficients (with 95% confidence intervals) from the logistic regressions for the *de facto* formal institutions, clustered by the matching groups. Higher coefficients indicate the treatment *increases* the odds of autocratization onset.

Third, informal institutions, understood as societal factors (Figure 3.6), appear to be most promising. Both ideological polarization (model 1: β = *-0.937*** *(0.347)*; model 2: β = *-1.046** *(0.420)*; model 3: β = *-0.822** *(0.377)*; model 4: β = *-1.134** *(0.452)*) and affective polarization (model 1: β = *-0.938*** *(0.343)*; model 2: β = *-1.172** *(0.474)*; model 3: β = *-1.063*** *(0.349)*; model 4: β = *-1.202 ** *(0.476)*) consistently across all four models decrease the odds of autocratization onset. There is no evidence that support

for democracy has causal power on its own. While this is cause for initial optimism, both ideological polarization and affective polarization have a relatively low number of matched episodes (32 matches and 28 matches, respectively, see the Online Appendix). This is due to a high number of missing values in the support for democracy measure.[35] This leads to some caution when interpreting the quasi-experiments. At the same time, if this is missingness *not* at random, we would expect to see some more change in the coefficients when additional controls are introduced. As this is not the case, it lends more credibility to the conclusion that lower levels of ideological polarization and lower levels of affective polarization, each on their own, have some causal power in decreasing the odds of autocratization onset. Importantly, the effects of these informal institutions are the *only effects* that hold across different model specifications, indicating that *no formal institutions*, and arguably only *informal institutions*, broadly understood to encompass citizen values and societal norms, have an independent causal effect on onset resilience. This holds important implications for academics and democratic defenders in practice, that I will elaborate on in *Section 5 – Conclusion*.

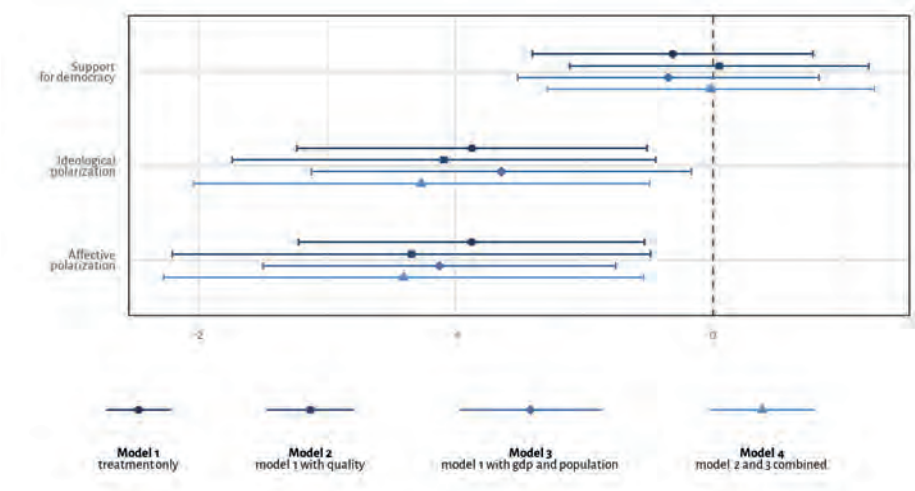


Figure 3.6: Coefficients (with 95% confidence intervals) from the logistic regressions for the *informal* institutions, clustered by the matching groups. Higher coefficients indicate the treatment *increases* the odds of autocratization onset.

35. The missingness in the support for democracy is *worse* for affective polarization and ideological polarization, as it removes more potential matches when *locomotive* has to match on support for democracy. When support for democracy is left to vary (i.e. *locomotive* matches on affective polarization and ideological polarization), missingness in the measure only affects the episodes, not the potential matches.

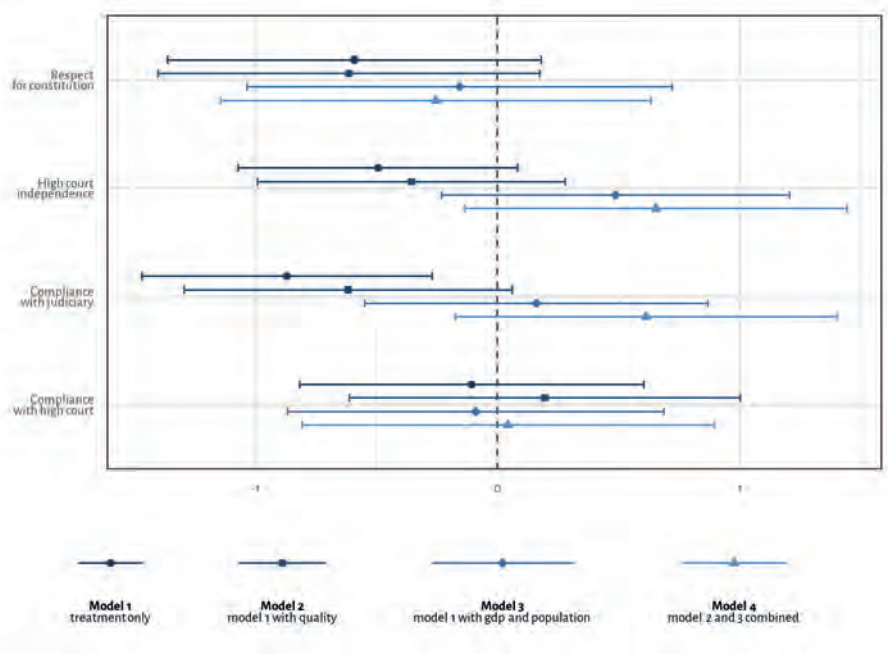


Figure 3.7: Coefficients (with 95% confidence intervals) from the logistic regressions for the lower-level indicators, unpacking the *judicial constraints*-index, clustered by the matching groups. Higher coefficients indicate the treatment *increases* the odds of autocratization onset.

4.2.2 Lower-level indicators: no additional evidence for the causal effect of formal institutions

Turning to the lower-level indicators, there are again mostly null-findings.

Unpacking judicial constraints (Figure 3.7) shows that government compliance with the judiciary (in general) does appear to have an effect in preventing autocratization ($\beta = -0.868^{**}$ (0.306)), but this effect disappears when controlling for other covariates. Compliance with high courts, high court independence, and executive respect for the constitution are not evidence to have a causal effect on their own. The lack of effect from the other covariates, as well as the effect of compliance with the judiciary disappearing when controlling for other covariates, is ultimately not convincing that there is an actual empirical effect.

Unpacking legislative constraints (Figure 3.8), I find no causal effect from effective opposition parties nor investigations by the legislature. There is a first effect from legislative questions (model 1: $\beta = -0.627^{*}$ (0.267); model 2: $\beta = -0.672^{*}$ (0.304)), but this disappears when controlling for other covariates. Similarly, oversight

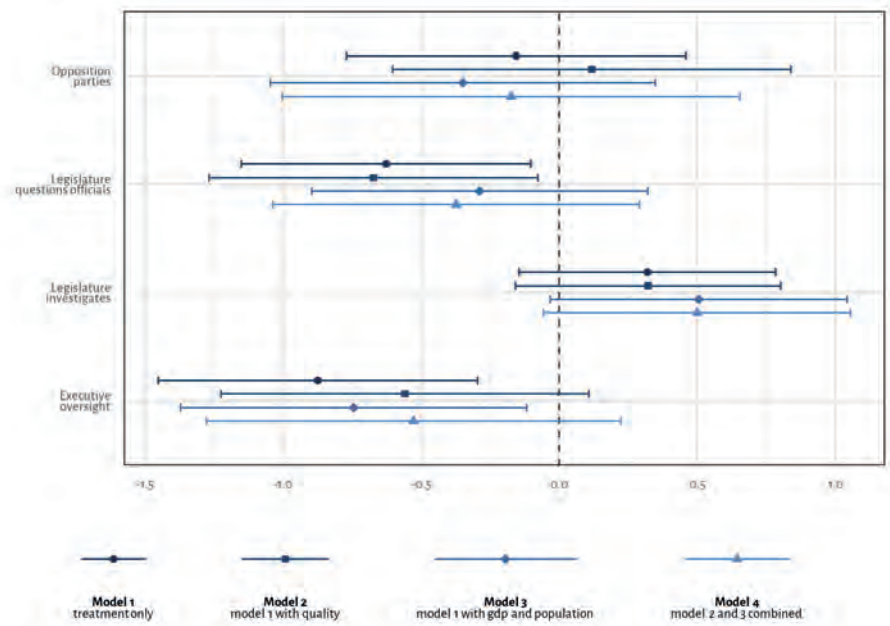


Figure 3.8: Coefficients (with 95% confidence intervals) from the logistic regressions for the lower-level indicators, unpacking the *legislative constraints*-index, clustered by the matching groups. Higher coefficients indicate the treatment *increases* the odds of autocratization onset.

from the administration over politicians does have a causal effect in preventing autocratization, across two of the four models (model 1: $\beta = -0.873^{**}$ *(0.295)*; model 3: $\beta = -0.744^{**}$ *(0.320)*), but this effect disappears when controlling for the quality of the match. While this quasi-experiment does have 41 matches, its average quality is 1.5, scoring second-lowest, with only 13 out of 41 matches performing better than the caliper. Because of this, and because of the lack of effect on the higher level, I need to be cautious in interpreting this effect. Yet, it is hopeful that "bodies other than the legislature, such as comptroller general, general prosecutor, or ombudsman" (Coppedge et al., 2024, p. 157) might be able to halt autocratization. I investigate this further in *Chapter 5 – Democratic Gambits*.

Finally, unpacking civil society participation (Figure 3.9), women's participation in CSO's and how candidates are selected to CSO leadership are not evidenced to causally affect autocratization onset. Routine CSO consultation appears to increase the odds of autocratization onset (model 1: $\beta = 0.737^{*}$ *(0.296)*; model 2: $\beta = 0.864^{**}$ *(0.301)*), but this effect disappears (both in size and significance) when other covariates are included. This quasi-experiment has a quality of 1.24, with 19 out of 29 matches performing better than the caliper. Similarly, the participatory

environment does have a causal effect in model 1 (β = *-0.816* (0.332)*): but not in the other models. The matching for this quasi-experiment's quality is 1.29, with 16 out of the 40 matches performing better than the caliper. While not strong evidence on its own, this finding does reinforce the role of citizen involvement and societal factors against autocratization.

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

Taking all this into account, the main take away is that there is no single institutional silver bullet against autocratization. Accountability mechanisms, judicial constraints, legislative constraints cannot unilaterally prevent autocratization. This makes sense: *Chapter 2 – Autocratic Actions* shows how diverse incumbent-led democratic recession is (i.e. picking and choosing from a menu of manipulation, Schedler, 2002), making it more likely that democratic resilience needs to be responsive to these diverse challengers. As such, 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 chapter shows it does not make empirical sense either.

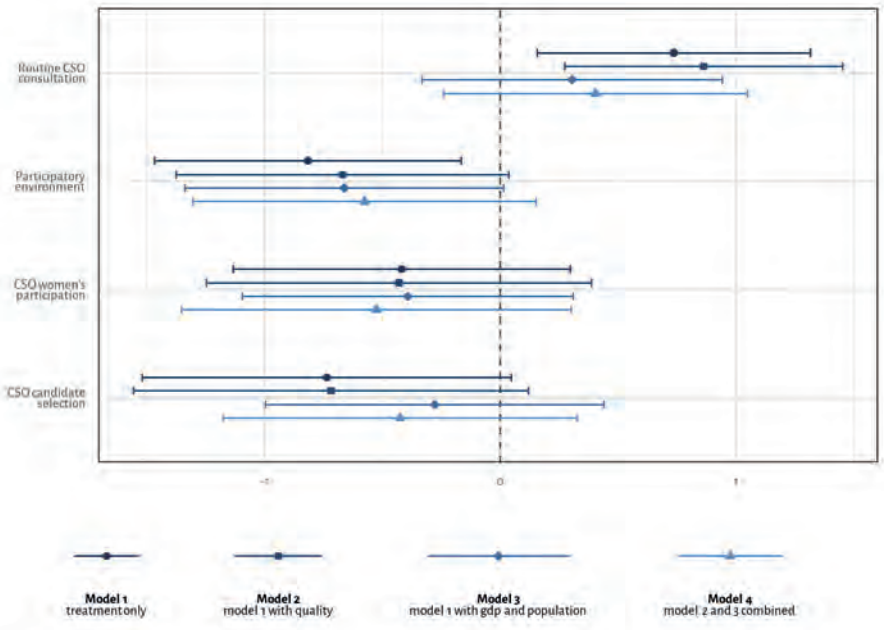


Figure 3.9: Coefficients (with 95% confidence intervals) from the logistic regressions for the lower-level indicators, unpacking the *civil society participation*-index, clustered by the matching groups. Higher coefficients indicate the treatment *increases* the odds of autocratization onset.

However, this chapter shows that societal indicators, primarily the absence of ideological polarization and affective polarization and not general support for democracy, do have consistent causal explanatory power in decreasing the odds of autocratization. In slightly broader terms: citizen support for democratic pluralism appears to be a crucial factor in resilient democracies. Sadly, the data does not allow me to dig deeper into what specific considerations (or "sub indicators") play a role, but this is hopeful news. While these societal indicators are not something that can be captured through new rules or regulations or institutions, it is something that elites – would-be autocrats and democratic defenders – 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. Following the findings in this chapter, in *Chapter 4 – Democratic Defence* I therefore make the argument that in many – if not all – circumstances, citizen support for democratic defence is crucial.

There are some weak indications for "potential silver bullets": judicial constraints and oversight from the administration over the executive. Judicial constraints on the executive, specifically the executive's compliance with the judiciary, have causal effect on preventing the onset of autocratization. This evidence is weak, however: it exists only in models the suffer from selecting in the dependent variable, and the effects disappear when controlling for other covariates. Similarly, the effect form administrative oversight disappears when controlling for other covariates. It is worth investigating under what circumstances these "checks and balances" can prevent autocratization.

Lastly, there is also some evidence that institutions can enable autocratization: this is the involvement of CSOs (both on the higher level and on the lower level), and legislative constraints (primarily on the higher level, with non-significant indications at the lower level). Both effects are dependent on the model specification, so no firm conclusions can be drawn. However, in light of the presumption of regularity (see *Chapter 1 – Introduction*), I would argue that we should take this potential backlash serious. When CSOs affect policies through routine consultation and when the legislature investigates the government, it might be seen as interfering with democracy (understood as majoritarian rule), although I recognize this is a hypothesis I cannot test in this chapter.

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

In this chapter, I set out to identify counterfactuals to the episodes of autocratization. From the literature, we learn there are many institutional explanations for the resilience of democracies against the onset of autocratization. Broadly, these explanations focus on accountability mechanisms that compel incumbents to follow the rules of the game, and oversight mechanisms that can check and balance executive power. Academic studies have pointed out the important of these institutions, but so far we do not yet know whether specific institutions on their own actually have a causal effect on resilience against the onset of autocratization.

Using 21 quasi-experiments, I use a multi-tiered approach to assess if an argument can be made that a single institutional set-up makes democracies resilient. I construct these 21 quasi-experiments using a novel longitudinal continuous multivariate matching algorithm, *locomotive*, which matches the years leading up to an episode of autocratization to other countries in the same geographic region, on a number of criteria. In general, the matches are approximately as good as the 10 percentage point threshold standard in the literature, lending credibility to the results from the quasi-experiments.

I find that there is no compelling evidence that a single formal institution can prevent the onset of autocratization. While this makes sense, it does push policy makers and academics alike to consider a broader range of explanations (both for autocratization and democratic resilience) and not focus on a single silver bullet. We know that autocratizing incumbents are likely to change institutions in such ways that they often still resemble democratic institutions in other countries. Yet, the country-specific context might mean that the change leads to (further) autocratization (Scheppele, 2013). That is, autocratization is not simply a decline in any dimension of democracy: it needs to be a dimension that is relevant to that country. In Poland, for example, the autocratizing incumbents targeted the constitutional courts first, which was a body actively trying to curb executive power, turning them into a government enabler (Sadurski, 2019b). The effects of a captured judiciary would likely be less severe for democracy (although still autocratic) in countries that have no or lesser activist constitutional or high courts. Similarly, democratic resilience should be understood as a multi-dimensional, and a defence relevant to that country. 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.

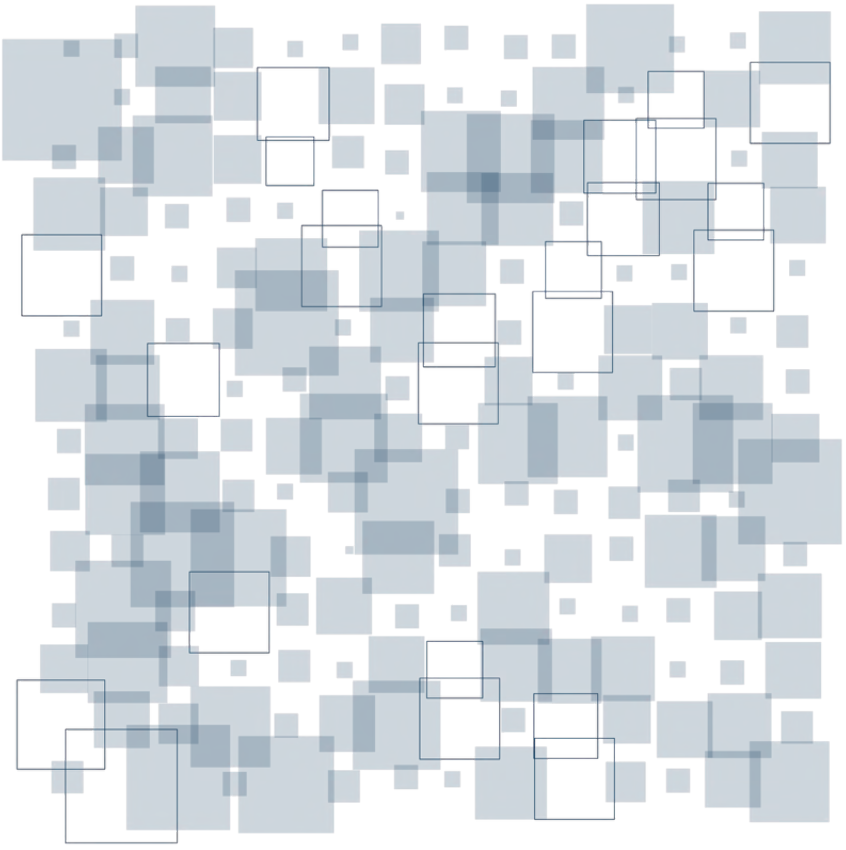
This chapter does provide evidence that societal factors, such as the absence of (ideological and affective) polarization causally contributes to resilience against the onset of autocratization. It is not the macro-level of formal institutions that causally explain democratic resilience, but the informal institution of (the absence of) polarization and citizen support for democratic pluralism. Democracy scholars should recognize this: already in 1999 did Geddes conclude that democratization research should not focus on macro-level explanations, but rather on micro- and meso-level explanations. In this chapter, 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)

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. 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.

Therefore, in *Movement II – Democratic Solutions* I propose a theoretical framework to understand the occurrence of democratic defence on two levels (elites and citizens); and subsequently test this framework with elite interviews and survey experiments.

Movement II

Democratic Solutions



Some believe it is only great power that can hold evil in check. But that is not what I have found. It is the small everyday deeds of ordinary folks that keep the darkness at bay.

Gandalf, in the Hobbit [movie adaptation]

Chapter 4

Democratic Defence

Research question:
When does democratic defence occur (on the elite-level and on the citizen-level)?

Data and methods:
Two illustrative case studies.

Main argument:
Elite democratic defence depends on the balance between their self-interest and repression by the autocratizing incumbent. Citizen democratic defence depends on the balance between the autocratic action's ambiguity and the elite defenders' credibility. I show the validity of this theory with the cases of Poland (2017 – 2018) and Senegal (2011 – 2012).

Co-authorship:
This chapter is based on the paper *Countering Autocratization: A Roadmap for Democratic Defence*, co-authored with Carolien van Ham and Maurits Meijers (2023), published in *Democratization*, *31*(4), 765-787. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2023.2279677.

1. Introduction

In *Movement I – Autocratic Problems* I showed that autocratization is diverse and context dependent. In addition, it requires more than "just institutions" to counter autocratization. In this chapter, I will develop a theoretical framework to understand how the actors within those institutions – democratic defenders – stand up to defend democracy.

In the previous chapters, I argued that democracy around the world is under threat. Increasingly, democratically elected incumbents seek to undermine democracy, and increasingly citizens appear to be willing to support them in their actions (Graham & Svolik, 2020; Krishnarajan, 2023; Mazepus & Toshkov, 2022). Autocratizing incumbents pack courts, subvert checks and balances, and aggrandize their executive power (Bermeo, 2016; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). As investigated in *Chapter 2 – Autocratic Actions*, they show great creativity in undermining democracy and in justifying their actions. Yet, when democracies are under threat, pro-democratic actors can stand up to defend democracy. Existing research has mainly focused on the specific actions of autocratizing incumbents and the circumstances under which they succeed, but much less is known about unsuccessful attempts at autocratization and the role of democratic defenders. In particular, we lack a comprehensive theoretical framework to account for the occurrence of democratic defence.

Democratic defence should be an important part of the autocratization literature (Cleary & Öztürk, 2022; Gamboa, 2017, 2022; Tomini, 2021; Tomini et al., 2023). In the past, domestic attempts to undermine democracy predominantly came from extremist parties that had no real shot at coming into power through democratic means. Capoccia studies how pro-democracy incumbents could use formal provisions and informal political strategies to limit the extremists' chances even further (Capoccia, 2005). By proclaiming and acting on support for democracy, many incumbents tried to make democracy "the only game in town" (Linz & Stepan, 1996). Since the turn of the century, however, democratically elected incumbents increasingly seek to undermine democracy from within. Democratic recession – the substantial decline of core requirements of democracy – is especially worrisome as it does not only affect hybrid or emerging democracies, but also consolidated democracies (Svolik, 2015). As incumbents in many democracies around the world no longer default to defending democracies, the very institutions designed to protect democracy become the target of incremental changes and attacks. I focus my framework on those puzzling cases that were (at least) electoral democracies when democratic recession started, and in which democratic recession was led by incumbents who themselves were elected in free and fair elections.

I employ an actor-centred approach to democratic recession to contribute to this literature and conceive of autocratization and democratic defence as a strategic interaction between elites and citizens. Autocratizing incumbents implement autocratic actions that erode aspects of democracy. Democratic defenders, in turn, aim to uphold the democratic *status quo*. I argue democratic defence can take place on two levels: by elite democratic defenders and by citizens. This chapter develops a model of democratic defence that distinguishes between these two levels and conceptualises the trade-offs democratic defenders face on each level. On the first level of democratic defence, elite democratic defenders face trade-offs between their personal interest and repression by the incumbent. On the second level, citizens face trade-offs between elite democratic defenders' credibility and the autocratic action's ambiguity. I illustrate the value of my framework with an empirical application to the cases of Poland and Senegal.

This chapter is structured as follows: in *Section 2 – Beyond democratic resilience* I provide a brief review of the state of the art of research on democratic recession and resilience, highlighting why research on democratic defenders is urgently needed. *Section 3 – A two-level model of democratic defence* outlines the two-level model of elite and citizen democratic defence. In *Section 4 – Two illustrations*, I apply this framework to the cases of Poland and Senegal, providing an empirical illustration of the model. *Section 5 - Conclusion* provides three avenues for further research on democratic defence.

2. Beyond democratic resilience: Democratic defence

There is ample research on the structural factors that increase the likelihood of autocratization. These explanations focus on institutional, economic, social, and international factors (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Levitsky, 2000; Waldner & Lust, 2018 and see *Chapter 1- Introduction*). In terms of institutional factors, for example, it is argued that in more majoritarian or presidential systems elites and citizens are more used to power-concentration in executive offices. This facilitates autocratization when an incumbent with autocratic ambitions is elected (Laebens & Lührmann, 2021; Linz, 1990b; Svolik, 2015). In terms of economic factors, research has demonstrated that the weaker a state's economy is (for example higher inequality or lower GDP), the more vulnerable it is to autocratization (Lipset, 1959; Svolik, 2008; Tomini & Wagemann, 2018). Economic decline and high economic inequality are associated with lower trust in politicians and political institutions (Norris & Inglehart, 2019), which can turn into crises allowing more concentration of executive power (Levitsky, 2000; Lührmann & Rooney, 2021). In terms of social factors, polarization has been

found to be a key condition making autocratization more likely. As polarization creates growing distrust between social groups, leaders are incentivized to ignore democratic norms, ensuring more benefits for their in-group (Arbatli & Rosenberg, 2020; McCoy & Somer, 2019; Svolik, 2019).[36] Finally, in terms of international factors research on autocratization has found that international normative preferences for democracy often help states remain democratic or democratise: the EU is one of the prime examples (Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018). On the other hand, linkages to autocratic regimes, specifically China and Russia, increase the likelihood of autocratization (Finkel & Brudny, 2012; Morgenbesser, 2020; Tolstrup, 2015).

However, despite the extensive body of research on the conditions that facilitate autocratization, less is known about when and why autocratization fails. To better understand cases where autocratization was attempted but failed ("near misses", Ginsburg & Huq, 2018), scholars have turned their focus to explaining democratic resilience. The resilience of democracies – defined as the ability of a democratic system to prevent and react to anti-democratic challenges and attacks (Boese et al., 2021, p. 886; Merkel & Lührmann, 2021, p. 872) – depends on three main pillars: the strength of democratic institutions, the presence of accountability mechanisms, and citizen values. Horizontal accountability mechanisms prevent backsliding when one actor's power limits the power of others: they cannot singlehandedly decide to turn autocratic (Graham et al., 2017). The judiciary "as the last bulwark against autocracy" (Boese et al., 2021, p. 898; cf. Gamboa, 2017; Staton et al., 2022) is one example. Vertical accountability via elections plays an important role as well, giving oppositions the opportunity to democratically oust an autocratizing incumbent (Ding & Slater, 2021; Glasius, 2018). Lastly, a vibrant civil society increases democratic resilience by enabling diagonal accountability (Bermeo, 2003; Cornell et al., 2020). When democracy is truly consolidated and the only game in town, the mere presence of strong accountability mechanisms and institutions deters and prevents an incumbent from challenging democracy.

However, it has become clearer that even when democracy appears to be consolidated, autocratizing incumbents find cracks in the system to further their autocratic agenda. Venezuela, Brazil, Turkey, Hungary, and the USA all show how more-or-less consolidated democracies can still be challenged (Kaufman & Haggard, 2019). This could be explained by assuming that the democratic institutions in these cases were not sufficiently resilient: democracy was merely a mirage (Dawson & Hanley, 2016; Krastev, 2016). But this assumption appears to be too strong when more consolidated

36. It is important to note that some autocratizing incumbents also seek to increase polarisation as a way to gain support for their actions.

democracies are also under threat. We must contend with the possibility that even strong institutions can be successfully targeted by incumbents, precisely because they have a legitimate and democratic mandate to adapt institutional rules and procedures. Incumbents can leverage their mandate to attack democracy – overtly or covertly. In *Chapter 3 – Autocratic Counterfactuals* I show, in fact, that formal institutions are not evidenced to prevent the onset of autocratization. In response to incumbent-led democratic recession, we must therefore not only look at institutional resilience, but also consider the actors involved in democratic defence.

In other words, actors and their actions matter for democratic resilience: popular support for democracy correlates with the resilience of that democracy (Claassen, 2020). Citizens play an important role in checking and balancing the regime (Bartels, 2020; Graham et al., 2017; Mazepus & Toshkov, 2022). Support for democratic checks and balances, however, is dependent on factors like economic prosperity, partisanship, polarization, and ethnic divisions (Bartels, 2020, 2023; Graham et al., 2017; Rovny, 2023). As such, under some circumstances, preferences other than democracy are more salient, making citizen support for democracy a necessary but likely not sufficient condition for democratic resilience.

Between incumbent, institutions, and citizens, however, there are elite actors who can also prevent or revert autocratization (Tomini et al., 2023). There is only limited research on the opposition strategies against incumbent-led autocratization (Cleary & Öztürk, 2022; Gamboa, 2022; Tomini et al., 2023). I aim to expand this literature by asking under which circumstances institutional elites and citizens oppose incumbents and engage in democratic defence: "all activities, be they formal provisions or political strategies, that are explicitly and directly undertaken to protect the democratic system from the threat of its internal opponents" (Capoccia, 2005, pp. 47–48). When incumbents are the main autocratizing actor – as is often the case in the so called "third wave" since the 1990s (Bermeo, 2016; Coppedge, 2017) –, defenders' access to formal provisions to counter anti-democratic actors (such as bans on anti-democratic parties or anti-democratic speech) are limited. Rather, the formal provisions that check and balance incumbents' actions are precisely incumbents' primary targets of autocratization. The defenders' *political strategies* – their interaction with autocratizing incumbents and how they respond to autocratic action – become all the more important. Therefore, democratic resilience is the *outcome* of successful democratic defence.

In this chapter, I present a theoretical framework that models this interaction between autocratizing incumbents and elite and citizen democratic defenders, to explain when democratic defence occurs.

3. A two-level model of democratic defence

I conceptualize democratic defence on two levels. The first level of democratic defence are elites operating within the democratic institutions. The second level of democratic defence are the citizens. In most cases of incumbent-led democratic recession, both levels will be needed: elites on their own do not have sufficient momentum to persuade a committed autocratizing incumbent to stop; and citizens on their own face an informational disadvantage and classic coordination problems. Elites can help resolve the citizens' informational disadvantage, while citizens rallying in defence of democracy provide elites with more momentum to counteract the autocratizing incumbent.

There are two exceptions to the need for both levels of democratic defence. First, when the autocratic effect of actions is unintended, elite democratic defence on its own can be successful. Democratic defence, in these cases, simply works because the autocratic effect of the proposal was neither intended nor seriously considered up until that point. Indeed, democracies often have checks and balances built in for this very purpose: to critically examine policies and legislation and adjudicate whether they adhere to democratic norms. I disregard such "unintended autocratization" in the remainder of this chapter, as it is an important part of democratic resilience, but cannot be understood as democratic defence in response to incumbent autocratization attempts.

Second, when the autocratic effect of an action is so blatantly clear to citizens that they face no informational disadvantage, citizen defence on its own can be successful. The 2023 protests in Israel against Netanyahu's judicial overhauls are an example of large popular mobilization without strong central organization.[37] Elite opposition actors voiced concerns about the judicial overhauls, but citizens understood the unambiguous autocratic effects of the proposal without further elite cueing (Gidron, 2023).[38] As I argue below, however, incumbent-led autocratization is often characterized by high levels of ambiguity. This makes it less clear for citizens when an action is, in fact, an *autocratic* action, and increases the need for elite cueing.

I argue when incumbent-led autocratization is intentional and at least somewhat ambiguous, both levels – elites *and* citizens – are necessary for democratic defence.

37. "Israelis rally against Netanyahu's judicial plan for 22nd week." *Al Jazeera*, June 4, 2023, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/4/israelis-rally-against-netanyahus-judicial-plan-for-22nd-week

38. "Justice minister unveils plan to shackle the High Court, overhaul Israel's judiciary." *Times of Israel*, January 4, 2023, https://www.timesofisrael.com/justice-minister-unveils-plan-to-shackle-the-high-court-overhaul-israels-judiciary/

Here, I explore the core considerations for these two types of actors when deciding whether to engage in democratic defence. I focus on four elements: elite self interest in preventing the autocratic action, perceived threat of repression of elite opposition by the autocratizing incumbent, elite credibility as a rallying point for citizens, and ambiguity of the autocratic action. For the first level of democratic defence, I argue that elites weigh their self-interest in preventing the autocratic action from being implemented against the perceived threat of repression by the incumbent. For the second level of democratic defence, I argue that citizens weigh the elite defender's credibility against the autocratic action's ambiguity.

My starting point is when an incumbent proposes or implements an autocratic action. The model, however, does not aim to explain the incumbent's motives for engaging in autocratic actions. Research on autocratization has been rather lopsided: while the actions of autocratizing incumbents, and their choices to engage in repression versus co-optation during autocratization have been amply studied (Gerschewski, 2013), research on democratic defenders attempting to counter autocratization is largely absent. I therefore limit my focus on the trade-offs that go into the potential democratic defenders' considerations to engage in democratic defence.

3.1 Level 1: Elite democratic defence

The first level of democratic defence is elite action within institutions: they stand up against the autocratizing incumbent, refuse to cooperate, speak out against the undemocratic nature of the action, or actively counteract the action. I understand institutional elites to be a broad category, encompassing the actors who work in the public institutions that are essential for the functioning of democracy. This includes, for example, oppositions in parliament, judges within the judiciary, or bureaucrats within ministries; but excludes civil society leaders and private media organisations. Their defining characteristic is that they have the authority, stature, and credibility to claim that a specific action has adverse consequences for democracy. By extension, elites do not have the informational disadvantage citizens have when it comes to recognising autocratic actions: judges know the law and constitution, bureaucrats know how administrative processes are supposed to run, and legislators know when parliamentary procedures are violated. As such, the primary problem for elites is not assessing how blatantly autocratic an action is. Rather, it is about how much they are willing to risk in an attempt to stop the autocratizing incumbent.

Therefore, the dominant aspects elites weigh when they decide to defend democracy are the threat of *repression* by the incumbent and the elite's *self-interest* in maintaining

the democratic status quo. While repression by the incumbent can disincentivize elite democratic defence, elite's self-interest can incentivize it.

3.1.1 Incumbent repression

Research shows that incumbents employ repression to intimidate the opposition to further their anti-democratic agenda (Bartman, 2018; Edel & Josua, 2018; Gerschewski, 2013). Repression can come in the form of physical sanctions against oppositions by the incumbent, like harassment or intimidation by instigating unwarranted and undue criminal proceedings (Davenport, 2007; Gerschewski, 2013; Levitsky & Way, 2002). Incumbent repression is relevant for understanding democratic defence, as repression can stop the opposition in its tracks. Moreover, it can have the compounding effect that other (potential) opposition members fear a similar fate and start to self-censor (Ong, 2021; Tomic & Radeljic, 2022; VonDoepp, 2020). Repression can also occur in the form of a credible threat against livelihood, job security, or family-members. Such opaquer repression is especially salient in democracies, where autocratizing incumbents attempt to maintain a veneer of democratic credibility, and where out-right, violent repression is more difficult. Examples of more clear-cut repression include the firing of critical journalists from public media in Turkey (Somer, 2019), illegal surveillance by security services of the media in Serbia (Castaldo, 2020), or charging academics and journalists with trumped up charges of sedition in India (Khaitan, 2020). An example of more opaque repression is the decision by the Fidesz government in Hungary to relax the termination policies for bureaucrats, which then created opportunities to fire state employees when they no longer appeared sufficiently loyal (Freeman, 2020). This severely restricts the space for opposition, and effectively represses state employees, even though the new termination policies have not been put into practice yet.

Credible threats can also be issued to elites or organisations that are aligned with potential defenders. Hence, even when a (potential) democratic defender is not directly targeted, they can see which personal costs they might bear if they continue opposing the autocratizing incumbent. If repression is successful, the incumbent does not need to formally exclude voices from the debate as long as they get muffled sufficiently.

3.1.2 Elite self-interest

Given the high risk of resisting the autocratizing incumbent, elites assess their self-interest in opposing the incumbent and weigh it against the likelihood and strength of incumbent repression. If the autocratic action of the incumbent threatens to directly affect the ability of (members of) the elite to perform their professional duties or even

affect their livelihood, professional and material self-interest can incentivize elites to withstand the incumbent and defend democracy. For instance, when incumbents threaten to fire a large proportion of judges, judicial elites are more incentivized to stand up against this threat.[39]

When repression is comparatively low, elites can afford to try to safeguard their self-interest by defending democracy. When repression is comparatively high, the cost of standing up against the autocratizing incumbent may become too high for elites, making it less likely they will defend democracy. However, when the incentive to defend their self-interest is higher, elites are more likely to bear the personal costs associated with defending democracy. As such, elites adjudicate between the risk of incumbent repression and the extent of their personal and professional self-interest in defending democracy, as they self-select into democratic defence.

Whether it is in the personal interest of elites to defend democracy also depends on the scope of the autocratic measures already in place. When democracy is still fully intact, elites have stronger incentives to resist democratic recession. But when democratic safeguards have been removed, it can be in the self-interest of elites to be co-opted by the autocratic incumbent and facilitate their power grab. As institutions are increasingly swaddled by autocratization, elites' self-interests may shift. Rather than defending democracy as a means to defend ones' material and professional interests, elites may be better served by switching sides and supporting the autocratizing incumbent – particularly when the threat of repression is high. When elites are co-opted in this way, autocratization has progressed to such an extent that democratic defence is increasingly less likely. This suggests that the progression of autocratization decreases the window of opportunity for democratic defence. For instance, the Polish Constitutional Tribunal was captured by PiS loyalists after 2016, turning them from an activist court into a government enabler (Sadurski, 2019b).

In short, depending on the course of autocratization, either democratic defence or co-optation serves the self-interest of elites. In both cases, the threat of repression reduces the likelihood for democratic defence.

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39. I recognize that elites from one institution (say: the judiciary) can try to defend democracy against autocratic actions aimed at another institution (say: limiting media freedom). First, I argue that the judicial self-interest in this case is comparatively smaller than if the incumbent aimed to limit judicial independence. Nonetheless, they might have some personal interest in maintaining media freedom. Second, I argue that repression could be comparatively low. In that case, the judges' (limited) self-interest still trumps repression, leading to elite democratic defence by actors *outside* their own institutions. Overall, however, this implies that democratic defence is more likely by elites *within* their own institutions.

3.2 Level 2: Citizens' democratic defence

The second level of democratic defence concerns citizens mobilizing in defence of democracy. Citizen mobilization only counts as democratic defence when there is an explicit connection to democracy. Citizens must not only stand up to defend a material public good but also direct their attention to a *democratic* common good. This does not preclude citizens from defending democracy by primarily protesting against a certain policy issue, such as bills limiting citizenship (e.g., in India, 2019) or rolling back abortion-rights (e.g., in the USA, 2022), but requires that citizens at least understand their protest in a broader, democratic context.[40] If not, they cannot be said to defend *democracy*. While high, this definitional bar is not too high: in India and the USA, protesters and commentators explicitly connect the topics to extant democratic rights and freedoms. Citizens acknowledge both roles: a more direct effect on people's daily lives and a broader effect on democracy, freedom, or the constitution.

When the autocratic nature of the incumbent's action is unambiguous, citizens can take to the streets without relying on elite cues, as the Israeli example shows. When there is no "clear evidence" (Lührmann, 2021, p. 1028) that an action is anti-democratic, the autocratic nature of certain actions can be ambiguous to citizens: elites become instrumental in mobilizing popular opposition to the autocratizing incumbent. Then the core trade-off for citizens to mobilize is between the autocratic action's ambiguity and the elite defender's credibility. Is the elite defender genuinely concerned about the fate of democracy, or is their supposed democratic defence merely a self-interested, political ploy?

3.2.1 Ambiguity of autocratic actions

Before citizens join an elite defence, they must first determine if the incumbent's action is autocratic in nature. While some autocratic actions have a clear autocratic intention and effect, the intention and effect of other actions can be more ambiguous. This "vexing ambiguity" (Bermeo, 2016, p. 15) contains two components: the action's blatancy and its justification.

First, autocratizing actions vary in the degree to which they are clearly and obviously autocratic. Some actions blatantly harm democracy: outright abolishing elections or extending presidential term-limits (Corrales & Penfold, 2014; Heyl & Llanos, 2022; Maltz, 2007). Yet, other actions are more ambiguous. Whether requiring voter identification is harmful to democracy (because it disenfranchises some voter groups

40. This does not mean that *any* protest invoking democracy is a democratic defence. As with elites, citizens can also misconstrue their intentions. However, any protest that does not invoke democracy is arguably always *not* a democratic defence.

disproportionally) or beneficial (because it limits some voter fraud), is context-dependent and debated (Carey et al., 2020).

Second, incumbents can also cloak the autocratizing effects of their actions by justifying their actions. Blatant and unjustified autocratization has a negative effect on the incumbent's popularity (Frederiksen, 2022). Therefore, autocratizing incumbents justify their autocratic actions by arguing why they are necessary or desirable. In many cases, the incumbent gives a seemingly reasonable justification for their action. In Hungary, autocratic action was justified because it combats corruption (Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018). In Rwanda, the Republic of Congo, and Colombia the justification was populist in nature: the incumbent called for a referendum to circumvent presidential term limits (Dawson & Young, 2020; Ginsburg & Huq, 2018; Yarwood, 2016). And in Bulgaria the banning of certain opposition parties was justified with reference to a contested and arguably misinterpreted constitutional phrase (Dawson & Hanley, 2019). In other cases, limitations on democracy might not only seem reasonable or legitimate but actually be perceived as necessary by citizens to curb a crisis (for example in response to war, natural disasters, economic crisis, or a public health crisis such as COVID19). Crises can therefore be an important window of opportunity for autocratizing incumbents to argue that autocratic actions are necessary and legitimate, increasing the autocratic action's ambiguity (Engler et al., 2021; Frederiksen, 2022; Kolvani et al., 2021; Schlipphak & Treib, 2017).

Because autocratic actions are not always blatant and often justified by incumbents, it can be harder for citizens to identify incumbent actions as unambiguously autocratic. Research has shown that partisanship or polarization, policy preferences, and contextual factors cloud citizens' judgments of whether actions are democratic or autocratic. Incumbents can exploit the ambiguity of an autocratic action and appeal to fellow partisans to limit opposition against it. If it is sufficiently unclear that a certain action is indeed autocratic, citizens are unlikely to support elite democratic defenders.

3.2.2 Credibility of elite democratic defenders

If ambiguity surrounds the autocratic action, elite cueing is likely necessary for citizens to become democratic defenders. When citizens consider joining elite democratic defenders, they must believe that the elites are credibly committed to democracy. That is: that the defence is not merely a political manoeuvre to gain some (electoral) leverage over the incumbent, but a genuine *democratic* defence. I argue that a core part of elite credibility is based on the degree to which citizens perceive the institutions themselves to be important for democracy, and therefore likely depends

on citizens' specific support for and existing institutional trust in these democratic institutions (Easton, 1979; Gerschewski, 2013). The higher the trust in and support for the institution, the more likely it is that elite's democratic defence is deemed credible by citizens.

Yet, elite democratic defenders may not be *only* motivated by democratic concerns or commitment to democracy. As noted above, it can be in the professional and personal self-interest of elites to mount a defence of democracy. From the citizens' perspective, this obscures to what extent the elites are actually defending democracy or acting purely out of self-interest. For instance, a judge who opposes suspending the president of a court (as happened in the Maldives and Hungary) might publicly state their aim is to preserve democracy and the rule of law. But they risk being perceived as just trying to save their own jobs, or as having their own political agenda as "cronies"[41] of the opposition. In more strongly polarized contexts, it likely will be harder for democratic defenders to appear not self-interested, especially to non-partisans or anti-partisans. Hence, perceptions by citizens of elite defenders' self-interest can undermine elites' credibility.

In addition, autocratizing incumbents can actively undermine the credibility of elite defenders by framing democratic defenders as treasonous, fake, criminal, or corrupt, while emphasizing their own democratic mandate. Delegitimation of opponents will likely have an even larger effect in strongly polarized circumstances, especially for the incumbent's supporters. In their quest to mobilize citizens, elite democratic defenders therefore invariably fight an uphill battle. They must assert their own credibility against the autocratizing incumbent's democratic mandate and attempts to delegitimize them.

I argue that citizens' adjudication between the incumbent's action's ambiguity and the elite democratic defender's credibility explains when citizens join the elite democratic defence. When the autocratic nature of the action is comparatively more ambiguous, it is likely that the public does not engage in democratic defence. When the elite democratic defenders are comparatively more credible, however, it is likely that citizens join the elite's democratic defence – raising the cost for the autocratizing incumbent to persist.

3.3 A roadmap for democratic defence

41. Koncewicz, T. "Polish Judiciary and Constitutional Fidelity: beyond the institutional 'Great Yes'?" *Verfassungsblog*, June 12, 2016, https://verfassungsblog.de/polish-judiciary-and-constitutional-fidelity-beyond-the-institutional-great-yes/.

My theoretical framework stipulates that democratic defence can occur on two levels: elite democratic defence and citizen democratic defence. Figure 4.1 summarizes the theoretical model and visualises the trade-offs that institutional elites face in Level 1 and citizens face in Level 2. The starting point of my framework is an autocratic action initiated by the incumbent. The solid arrows (pathway 1) show the most-likely occurrence of democratic defence in response to incumbent-led autocratization in democracies. The dotted arrows (pathway 2) show citizen can defend democracy without elite cues.[42] On the first level of democratic defence, I show the trade-off for institutional elites between repression and self-interest. On the second level I show the trade-off for citizens between credibility and ambiguity. In the next section I illustrate the utility of my two-level framework of democratic defence with the cases of Senegal and Poland.

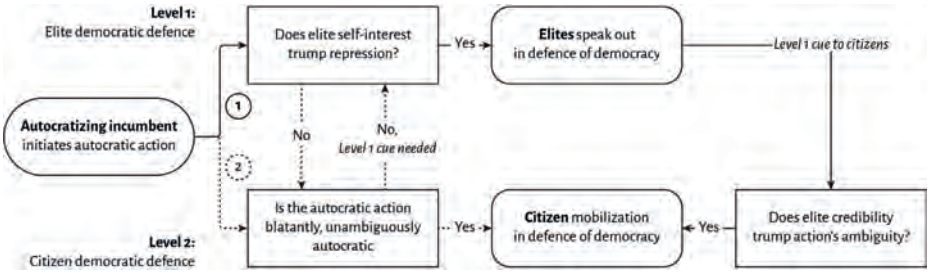


Figure 4.1: When does democratic defence occur? The two levels of democratic defence. The solid arrows (pathway 1) show the most-likely occurrence of democratic defence in response to incumbent-led autocratization in democracies. The dotted arrows (pathway 2) show citizen can defend democracy without elite cues if the autocratic action is blatantly, unambiguously autocratic. If elite self-interest *does not* trump repression, and if the action *is not* blatantly autocratic, the model predicts no democratic defence occurs at either level.

42. Since I focus in the figure on the occurrence of democratic defence, I do not show potential outcomes (successful or unsuccessful defence).

4. Two illustrations: Democratic defence in Senegal and Poland

To demonstrate the utility of my two-level framework of democratic defence, I now turn to the illustrative cases of Poland and Senegal. They provide two diverse cases to illustrate a range of variation on the autocratizing incumbent and their repression, elites' self-interest, and citizens' willingness to mobilize. Both Poland (before 2017) and Senegal have been described as relatively well-functioning electoral democracies in Europe and Africa respectively, prior to (attempted) autocratization. In Poland, autocratization started when a new executive came to power, while in Senegal, the sitting incumbent tried to extend his hold on power. In Poland, the autocratic action targeted the judiciary, while in Senegal, it targeted constraints on the executive. In line with Level 1 of my model, the judiciary in Poland spoke out against the incumbent, while in Senegal political oppositions tried to defend democracy. Lastly, in Senegal civil society is "the cornerstone of democratic development and a key indicator of the political climate" (Castro Cornejo et al., 2013, p. 14) (providing a case where citizen democratic defence is comparatively likely), while in Poland civil society has been described as relatively small scale and since 2015 increasingly limited (a case where citizen democratic defence is less likely) (Gliński, 2011; Korolczuk, 2023). Combined, these two illustrations are a useful probability probe and illustration of my model – although I welcome further empirical testing.

The illustrative case-studies below build on extensive analyses of research on Poland and Senegal, as well as on primary source materials such as newspaper articles, NGO reports, and statements by various (judicial) institutions. While not a thick description of autocratization in either[43] all quotes that I rely on in my analysis are triangulated over different and independent sources.

I divide autocratization in Poland into two empirical units. In the first empirical unit, covering March to July 2017, I start by exploring how low repression and high self-interest incentivize judges to speak out about the undemocratic nature of judicial reforms suggested by the governing Law and Justice party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS). Then I show how, despite this high self-interest, citizens perceived the judicial system as credibly committed to democracy. In addition, I show that PiS aimed to increase the ambiguity around the reforms, making an effort to show they were justified and not autocratic. In the second empirical unit, covering August to December 2017, I show that elite level democratic defence did not change. However, PiS shifted gears

43. For that, I refer to Sadurski (Sadurski, 2019a, 2019b) and Kovács and Scheppele (2018) for Poland; and Kelly (2012) and Heyl (2019) for Senegal.

and not only insisted on the necessity of the reforms but also tarnished the credibility of the judiciary. In the end, this meant that the trade-off for citizens favoured the autocratic action's ambiguity over the elites' credibility, resulting in a fading of democratic defence on the second level, capture of the Constitutional Court, and subsequent (further) autocratization.

Similarly, I divide autocratization in Senegal into two empirical units. First, covering the beginning of 2011, I show how president Wade proposed to lower the threshold for a first-round win in presidential elections, to ensure his tenure. This action proved sufficiently and blatantly unambiguous autocratic that citizens rallied in defence of democracy, even though the opposition coalition had limited credibility. This induced Wade to back down and retract his proposals. Lastly, covering July 2011 to March 2012, I show Wade introducing again a blatant autocratic action, trying to overstep presidential term limits. This time, however, ambiguity was increased when the Senegalese Constitutional Court greenlighted Wade's bid. This slight increase in ambiguity proved enough to overcome the mostly uncredible opposition, resulting in Wade being able to run for a third term.

4.1 "Inglorious constitutional revolutions": Judicial repression in Poland (2017-2018)

4.1.1 When high self-interest trumps opaque repression

Initially heralded as a great example of successful democratic transition and consolidation, by 2018, Poland was the first country where the European Union used its Article-7 sanctioning mechanism over the degradation of the rule of law. In 2017, right before the Article-7 sanctions were initiated, PiS attempted to capture the entire judicial system with three new bills. These bills would (1) potentially dismiss all judges of the Supreme Court; (2) dismiss all members of the National Judicial Council (*Krajowa Rada Sądownictwa*, KRS), the agency which exists to ensure judicial independence and nominate judges for vacancies; and (3) create a new disciplinary chamber with virtually unchecked mandate. If the bills were signed into law, PiS would be able to appoint new members for the KRS and the new disciplinary chamber, as well as all Supreme Court judges and up to 10% of all lower court judges (Kovács & Scheppele, 2018, p. 197).

On the first level of democratic defence, judicial elites spoke out in reaction to the proposals. They did so, first, with formal letters according to the procedures (that is: following the way checks and balances were set up and meant to be used). When that failed, they voiced their opposition publicly. From these statements, it is clear they are

not only worried about the harm to democracy, but also about the acute risk they face personally: the bills would "subject judges to politicians",[44] "deprive"[45] the judiciary of powers and responsibilities, and "foresee the end of the term for all judges"[46] currently on the KRS. Repression, on the other hand, is present but opaquer and more indirect than their acute personal interest. Amnesty International, for example, describes a case where a critical judge opposed a PiS-loyal judge. The latter was subsequently promoted to president of the regional court, overturning verdicts of the former. In April 2017, the critical judge was indicted (by the PiS-loyal now-president) in a disciplinary proceeding and even in criminal proceedings.[47] In addition, the purpose of the three bills obviously increased the potential for future repression.

4.1.2 When high ambiguity is trumped by even higher credibility

Despite judicial elites' opposition, PiS remained steadfast in their proposals, and justified them by claiming that they would improve the efficiency of a backlogged judicial system, curb corruption, and end the communist heritage of the Polish judiciary.[48] The combined technicality of the bills and extensive justification created large ambiguity for citizens.

Nonetheless, citizens rallied to defend democracy. In the weeks following the bills' submission to the *Sejm* on July 12th, thousands of people gathered in front of courthouses in more than fifty cities around the country. The protestors chanted "Freedom, Equality, Democracy!"[49] and are quoted saying: "[PiS] is about to finish democracy,"[50] and "[this proposal is] against the constitution and democracy."[51] Former Polish prime minister Lech Wałęsa also called on the public to "defend

44. Bodnar, A. "Judges need our support." May 20, 2016, https://bip.brpo.gov.pl/en/content/judges-need-our-support-article-adam-bodnar-onetpl.

45. KRS. "Opinion of the National Council of the Judiciary regarding the Government's Draft Act on the National Council of the Judiciary." March 7, 2017, https://www.krs.pl/en/resolutions-positions-of-the-council.html.

46. KRS. "Opinion of the National Council of the Judiciary regarding the Government's Draft Act on the National Council of the Judiciary." March 7, 2017, https://www.krs.pl/en/resolutions-positions-of-the-council.html.

47. "The Power of 'the Street'." *Amnesty International*, 2018, https://www.amnesty-international.be/sites/default/files/bijlagen/poland_report_final.pdf, chapter 3.

48. "The conspiracy theorists who have taken over Poland." *The Guardian*, February 16, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/16/conspiracy-theorists-who-have-taken-over-poland

49. "'The independence of the judiciary is in danger': Massive protests erupt in Poland." *Business Insider*, July 24, 2017, https://www.businessinsider.com/tens-of-thousands-are-protesting-in-poland-over-bills-to-change-judiciary-2017-7

50. "Protesters across Poland warn of impeding dictatorship." *Times of Israel*, July 23, 2017, https://www.timesofisrael.com/protesters-across-poland-warn-of-impending-dictatorship/

51. "US warns Poland over judiciary bill as protests grow." *CNN*, July 21, 2017, https://edition.cnn.com/2017/07/20/world/poland-protests-democracy-supreme-court/index.html

democracy."[52] The judges' statements that the proposals harm democracy, strengthened by other domestic and international actors, proved credible enough to overcome the ambiguity introduced by PiS.

Initially, the alignment of elite and citizen democratic defence seemed to provide sufficient momentum to make the PiS-autocrats concede. While the *Sejm* approved the bills, president Duda vetoed two of the bills on July 24th. The third bill, which would remove 10% of all lower court judges, was signed and came into effect at once – "waiting for PiS-friendly KRS members to name their replacements" (Kovács & Scheppele, 2018, p. 197). In other words: the combined persuasive force of opposing elites and citizens supporting them proved sufficient to make Duda concede (at least partially).

4.1.3 When ambiguity trumps tarnished credibility

After a "disingenuous measure to outmanoeuvre democratic activists" (Sadurski, 2019a, p. 99) in September 2017, Duda reintroduced virtually the same bills, with the same justifications and the same technicalities. Again, judicial elites spoke up, through formal reports and public statements.[53] But instead of joining their protests, citizen support is "limited in effect and reach"[54] and "not as numerous as in July".[55] Right after the original bills were vetoed by Duda, PiS started a billboard smear-campaign against the judiciary in August 2017. The campaigns described the judiciary as a "privileged caste"[56] and showcased examples where judges were caught shoplifting, drunk-driving, or starting bar fights. PiS prime minister Mateusz Morawiecki openly accused the judiciary of taking bribes.[57] The judiciary was presented as a corrupt, inefficient body, serving the elites at the expense of ordinary

52. "Ex-Presidents of Poland Issue a Rebuke to the Governing Party." *New York Times*, April 25, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/26/world/europe/poland-lech-walesa-law-and-justice.html

53. Supreme Court of Poland. "Communiqué on the draft Act on the Supreme Court tabled by the President of Poland." October 6, 2017, https://citizensobservatory.pl/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Polish-Supreme_Court_Communication_on_Presidential_Draft.pdf.

54. "Nations in Transit 2018: Poland". *Freedom House*. Accessed October 30, 2023, https://freedomhouse.org/country/poland/nations-transit/2018

55. "Grudniowe protesty pod sądami ziemi opolskiej." *Komitet Obrony Demokracji*, December 21, 2017, https://ruchkod.pl/grudniowe-protesty-pod-sadami-ziemi-opolskiej

56. "Poland Starts Ad Campaign to Back Court Overhaul Disputed in EU." *Bloomberg*, September 8, 2017, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-09-08/poland-starts-ad-campaign-to-back-court-overhaul-disputed-in-eu

57. "Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki: Why my government is reforming Poland's judiciary." *Washington Examiner*, December 13, 2017, https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/prime-minister-mateusz-morawiecki-why-my-government-is-reforming-polands-judiciary

Poles. In particular, the message that "communist judges remain in place"[58] and that "courts need to be cleansed of judges who have lost the public trust"[59] was repeatedly voiced in the media, official statements, and speeches.

In effect, PiS portrayed the elite defenders as so self-interested – communist judges trying to prevent removing communist judges – that they could be in no way credibly committed to democracy. These deliberate attempts to delegitimize the judiciary helped tilt the balance in favour of already high ambiguity. While the protests that remained show that judges tried to and succeeded in solving the informational disadvantage of some citizens, they no longer reached and convinced a group of citizens large enough to provide sufficient momentum to make PiS concede, likely at least partially due to this smear campaign. Without citizen support and despite domestic and international elite condemnation of the revised bills, the *Sejm* approved the bills and Duda signed them into law in December, resulting in a judiciary that is now under complete and direct control of the parliament and the president.[60]

4.2 "Don't touch my constitution": Unambiguous autocratization in Senegal (2011-2012)

4.2.1 When low credibility is undercut by even lower ambiguity

Abdoulaye Wade was elected president of Senegal in 2000, in generally free and fair elections. Since then, Senegal has been classified as one of Africa's most stable electoral democracies.[61] From the outset, Wade appeared to be committed to democracy, reforming the presidency by limiting the number of terms to 2 and the length of the term to 5 years in 2001.[62] In 2007, his commitment to democracy was reaffirmed, when Wade pledged not to run for a third term,[63] while it was still unclear whether a third term could be constitutional (the debate was whether Wade's first

58. "Polish courts marred by communist-era holdovers: PM." *Radio Poland*, 17 December, 2017, http://archiwum.thenews.pl/1/10/Artykul/340276

59. "Poland: Independence of the Judiciary and the Right to Fair Trial at Risk." *Amnesty International*, August 10, 2017, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2017/08/poland-independence-of-the-judiciary-and-the-right-to-fair-trial-at-risk/.

60. "Poland: Judicial independence remains at risk according to new report from GRECO." *Council of Europe*, September 27, 2021, https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/poland-judicial-independence-remains-at-risk-according-to-new-report-from-greco.

61. "Senegal." *National Democratic Institute.* Accessed October 30, 2023. https://www.ndi.org/sub-saharan-africa/senegal and "Senegal." *Freedom House*. Accessed October 30, 2023, https://freedomhouse.org/country/senegal

62. "Elections in Senegal." *African Elections Database*. Accessed on October 30, 2023, https://africanelections.tripod.com/sn.html#2001_Constitutional_Referendum

63. "Senegalese leader in row over 2012 re-election bid." *Reuters*, August 24, 2010, https://www.reuters.com/article/senegal-election-idAFLDE67N13620100824

term, under the old constitution, counted towards his total number of terms under the new constitution). In 2008, however, his pro-democracy and pro-turnover stance changed, as the presidential term was again lengthened to 7 years (Heyl, 2019, p. 350). Then, in early 2011, Wade introduced a bill that would lower the required proportion of votes to win in the first round of presidential elections from 50% to 25%.[64] The opposition immediately claimed the lower threshold effectively guaranteed his win.[65] Indeed, if the proposal would have been implemented, Wade would have won the 2012 elections in the first round without the need for a run-off, with 34.5% of the vote (Resnick, 2013, p. 639).

In response to Wade's attempt to lower the electoral threshold, the opposition tried to coordinate and present a single front against Wade. A united opposition arguably signals Wade presented a larger threat to democracy than before, as internal differences could be bridged to oppose a substantial threat to democracy. However, the Senegalese opposition had often "cried wolf" and accused Wade of anti-democratic behaviour, for example, during and after the generally free and fair 2007 elections (Galvan, 2009). Initially the opposition's unity should strengthen their credibility as democratic defenders, but the coalition quickly broke down when the election came closer. Tellingly, the opposition leaders refocused their attention and finances on their own campaigns (Demarest, 2016, p. 73). They showed their hand: the aim was not only to protect democracy, but rather to use a democratic defence against the proposed changes as a way to oust Wade. As such, their credibility as democratic defenders was rather low.

On the other hand, Wade's electoral manipulation has blatant autocratic effects. It is clear that citizens indeed perceived this action as clearly autocratic: ambiguity was low. Nearing the end of Wade's second term, dissatisfaction with his presidency was already quite high: there were protests against overspending, poor economic performance and (youth) unemployment.[66] The protests intensified after Wade's proposals and no longer rallied solely around economic mismanagement, but now also revolved around slogans such as "My voting card, my weapon" (Resnick, 2013, p. 623), "Don't touch my Constitution" (Demarest, 2016, p. 67), and "I am a part of this,

64. "Senegal: Abdoulaye Wade drops poll plans after riots." *BBC News*, June 23, 2011, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13887613

65. "Fresh protests hit Senegal's capital." *Al Jazeera*, June 28, 2011, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2011/6/28/fresh-protests-hit-senegals-capital

66. "Thousands rally in Dakar for new anti-Wade protest." *France24*, February 7, 2012, https://www.france24.com/en/20120207-dakar-anti-wade-protests-third-term-senegal-presidential-election

so I must act".[67] Citizens thus rallied explicitly in defence of democracy in the face of this blatant autocratic action.

Despite the comparatively low credibility of elite democratic defenders, citizens mobilized with explicit reference to democracy. In other words, it was so unambiguously clear for citizens that Wade's proposal threatened democracy, that they mobilized in defence of democracy, even though the opposition was more politically motivated and un-credibly committed to democracy. In June, Wade withdrew the proposal to lower the threshold to win in the first round of presidential elections.[68]

4.2.2 When low credibility is trumped by ambiguity

Right after, in July 2011, Wade reneged on his 2007-pledge to not run for a third term and indicated that he would stand for re-election.[69] While the scholarship is generally in agreement that extending presidential term limits is blatantly and unambiguously autocratic, this is not always clear for citizens. Especially in this case, ambiguity was introduced when the Senegalese Constitutional Court greenlighted Wade's candidacy.[70] While blatantly autocratic in nature, the third term limit was not perceived as autocratic by a sufficiently large group of citizens.

The opposition denounced the Court as partisan and biased and threatened to boycott the elections. No longer united, and focused on their own presidential campaigns, however, their credibility as democratic defenders remained as low as when they opposed lowering the electoral threshold. Opposition leaders sought to organise protests, but the protests were largely "sporadic".[71] Above all, the protests were first and foremost anti-Wade and not as explicitly pro-democratic as the first wave of protests.

Compared to Poland, in Senegal credibility appeared to play a lesser role. For citizens, this means that the slight increase in ambiguity through the Constitutional Court's approval of an otherwise blatantly autocratic action trumped any credible cue of

67. "In Senegal, a singer's bid for presidency." *Al Jazeera*, January 10, 2012, https://www.aljazeera.com/program/the-stream/2012/1/10/in-senegal-a-singers-bid-for-presidency

68. "President withdraws electoral reforms after protest." *France24*, June 24, 2011, https://www.france24.com/en/20110624-senegal-wade-electoral-reform-riots

69. "Fury in Senegal as president seeks third term." *Al Jazeera*, January 28, 2012, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2012/1/28/fury-in-senegal-as-president-seeks-third-term

70. "Senegal's president can run for third term, court rules." *The Guardian*, January 30, 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jan/30/senegal-president-run-third-term

71. Alexis Arieff, (2012). Congressional Research Service: Segenal, https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/R41369.pdf, p. 3.

democracy that elites could have given them. In other words: up until June 2011, autocratization was so unambiguously clear that even a largely un-credible defender could provide enough information to citizens for them to mobilize. From July 2011 onwards, a slight increase in ambiguity trumped that low credibility.

4.3 Taking stock: Democratic defence in Poland and Senegal

With the case studies of Poland and Senegal, I aim to illustrate how the trade-offs in democratic defence can change over time and differ between countries. As such, these brief case-studies are not meant to provide conclusive evidence of the empirical validity of my model (I turn to more evidence in the following chapters). Rather, they illustrate how my theoretical model works in practice.

In Poland, the PiS government provided many justifications (the focus on efficiency, anti-corruption, and the role the proposals would play in eliminating the "communist heritage") to make the autocratic action as ambiguous as possible. Despite such ambiguity, the legal system and the judicial democratic defenders initially proved credible enough for citizens to rally in defence of democracy. Only when the judges' credibility was tarnished did citizens' democratic defence diminish. In other words, PiS tried to push through the autocratic action by diminishing the credibility of opponents.

In Senegal, Wade more blatantly violated democratic norms, signalling clear, unambiguous autocratization. The opposition was clearly more motivated by politics than by genuine commitment to democracy. Even so, autocratization was so unambiguously clear that even hardly credible political elites proved enough to rally citizens in defence of democracy. A month later, however, Wade managed to introduce more ambiguity when the Constitutional Court greenlighted his overturning of term limits. This increase in ambiguity in a context of consistently low elite credibility resulted in only sporadic mobilization in defence of democracy. In contrast with Poland, Wade tried to push through his autocratic actions by increasing the ambiguity of the autocratic action.

From a comparative perspective therefore, these two cases illustrate the trade-offs citizens and elites face in choosing to become democratic defenders. They suggest that elite defenders' credibility and the autocratic action's ambiguity partly compensate for each other in producing the occurrence of joint elite and citizen democratic defence.

5. Conclusion: Countering autocratization and ways forward

Democracies around the world face the challenges of democratic recession. Increasingly, democratically elected incumbents undermine democracy "from within". Existing research has devoted a great deal of attention to explaining why autocratizing incumbents come to power, and which circumstances facilitate their executive aggrandizement, while less attention has been paid to democratic defence against it. In this chapter, I present a novel theoretical framework of democratic defence that focuses on the interaction between the incumbent, institutional elites, and citizens. Developing a two-level model of democratic defence, I show how the democratic defender's personal interests, repression by the incumbent, the autocratic action's perceived ambiguity, and the defender's perceived credibility interact to affect the occurrence of democratic defence.

On the first level of democratic defence, elites aim to maintain the democratic *status quo*. They weigh their personal interest in preventing a specific autocratic action against repression by the autocratizing incumbent. When their self- interest is comparatively high, they mount a defence by opposing the incumbent. Often, however, this is not enough to make the autocratizing incumbent concede. In these cases, citizens need to mobilize in defence of democracy.

On the second level of democratic defence, citizens decide to mobilize by weighing the credibility of the democratic defender against the ambiguity of the autocratic action. When the democratic defender is considered not sufficiently credible, or when the autocratic action is sufficiently ambiguous, citizens are less likely to engage in democratic defence.

Using the illustrative cases of (attempted) democratic recession in Senegal (2011-2012) and Poland (2017-2018), I illustrate these trade-offs and show that successful democratic defence is most likely when elites and citizens align in support of democracy. The cases also suggest that elite defenders' credibility and autocratic action ambiguity can partly compensate for each other in producing the successful occurrence of joint elite and citizen democratic defence. Joint democratic defence in Poland was mainly driven by credibility and in Senegal by (lack of) ambiguity.

I argue that the two-level framework of democratic defence presented in this chapter will provide useful for further research on the role of actors in defending democracy in other case studies. Future research should examine how autocratizing incumbents

respond to democratic defence. In my roadmap, I focus on the role of democratic defenders, and when they decide to engage in democratic defence. However, defence of democracy is a *necessary* but not sufficient element to counter autocratization. The response of the autocratizing incumbent is the other half of the strategic interaction between autocratizer and democratic defenders. I leave to future research to investigate the factors that influence an incumbent's considerations on when to concede and when to persist, and especially how this interacts with the defenders' considerations.

Another avenue for future research on democratic defence is to consider the endogeneity of the model *over time*. For the actors involved in democratic defence, the two levels imply that they must be aware of incremental changes by the autocrat that co-opt or otherwise repress domestic defenders' capability to mount a defence. Democratic defence is increasingly harder every time autocratization is successful. Capture of democratic institutions by the incumbent can limit a defender's ability to mount a defence, to be credible, or to counter an incumbent's delegitimation attempts. Defenders can end up in a vicious circle: the context in which defenders operate (negatively) shapes their capacity to act (Cleary & Öztürk, 2022, p. 210). In the Polish case study sustained attacks on democracy wore down elites' capability and citizens' willingness to protest: emotions faded away by continuous attacks and constant manipulations or cover-up techniques.[72] In the case-studies, I abstracted the autocratic actions away from some pre-existing level of repression. However, successful autocratization in both cases would have increased the possibilities for future repression. As such, autocratization is a cumulative, self-reinforcing process.

Conversely, successful democratic defence could lead to a virtuous circle: strengthening the credibility of elite defenders and bolstering the democratic commitment of citizens – reducing the likelihood of success of future autocratization attempts by the incumbent. Future empirical research should examine the manifestation of such vicious circles of autocratization and virtuous circles of democratic defence.

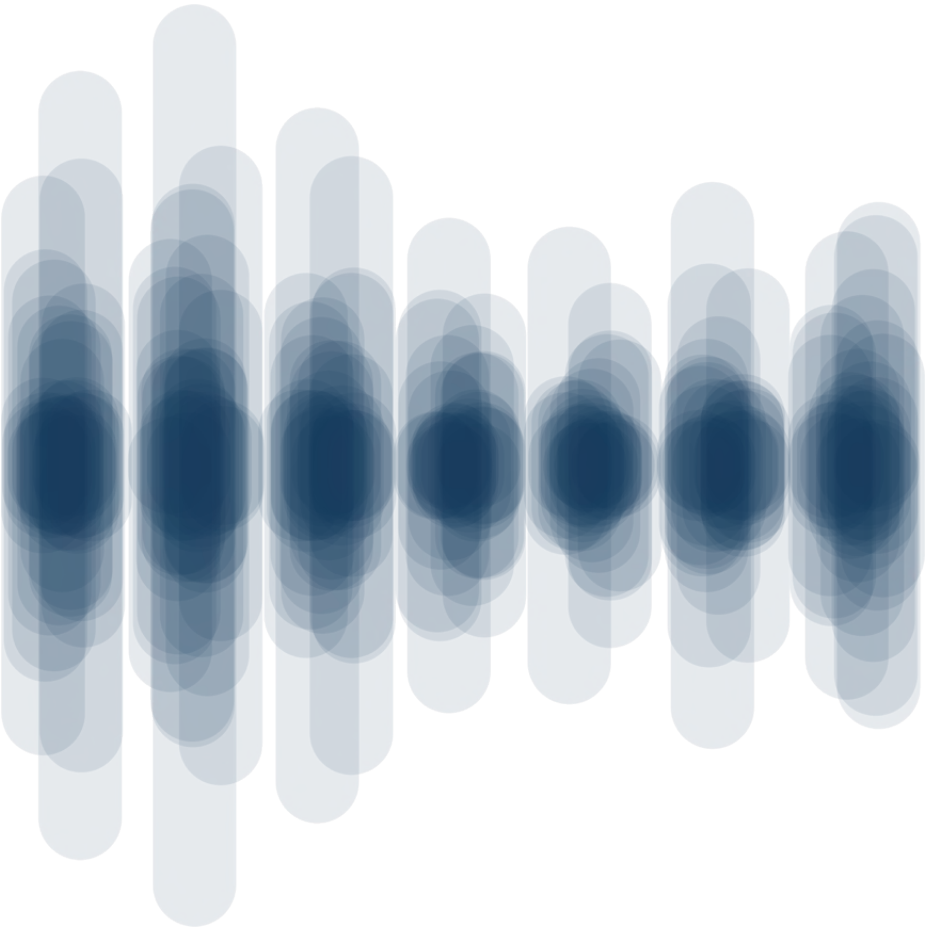
Lastly, future research should further unpack the dual role of elite democratic defenders as both institutional elites and democratic defenders. I suggest that the most likely elite actors to defend democracy are self-interested elite actors, when their self-interest coincides with protecting democracy. Yet, for citizens to perceive elites as credible democratic defenders they must be perceived as primarily

72. Bodnar, A. "Free Men and genuine Judges will Remember about Free Courts." *Verfassungsblog*, January 26, 2018, https://dx.doi.org/10.17176/20180126-092235.

interested in preserving democracy. This means that elites face a daunting balancing act, providing the autocratizing incumbent with many options to undermine the credibility of democratic defenders by delegitimizing them. Democratic defenders must reiterate again and again that their goal is primarily to preserve democracy, not some ulterior political or self-interested motive. And even then – as I showed for the Polish case – their credibility might be undermined, and democratic defence might fail.

To conclude, an actor-based approach of democratic defence is crucial to understand what actions domestic and international actors can take to prevent (further) democratic recession. The framework presented in this chapter provides a first step towards better understanding how and when democratic defence occurs. When autocratization in democracies occurs in covert and ambiguous ways, "ordinary folks" are necessary to join elites and together build momentum to defend democracy.

In the next three chapters, I empirically test the two levels of democratic defence. In *Chapter 5 – Democratic Gambits* I present the results from elite-interviews with Dutch national level civil servants, discussing how and when they defend democracy. This is the empirical test of level 1. In *Chapter 6 – Democratic Ambiguity* and *Chapter 7 – Democratic Credibility* I rely on survey experiments to empirically test level 2, and explore in depth the two dimensions that influence citizen democratic defence as I theorized in this chapter.



You ought to be careful. People will think you are … up to something.

Severus Snape in Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone

Chapter 5

Democratic Gambits

Research question:
How do civil servants navigate the dilemmas of administrative democratic defence?

Data and methods:
29 elite interviews with civil servants in the Dutch national government.

Main argument:
Civil servants can and do recognize autocratization (even in a liberal democracy) but whether they act on it primarily depends on support from their colleagues and supervisors, and limitations imposed by the organizational and political culture. Importantly, even in a liberal democracy, civil servants fear repercussions and repression from those higher-up if they speak out about democracy too openly.

Authorship:
This chapter is based on the paper *Gambitting Democracy: When Civil Servants Do (or Do Not) Defend Democracy*, currently under review.

1. Introduction

In *Chapter 4 – Democratic Defence* I argued elites often play a pivotal role in the defence of democracy, both as defenders themselves and by given cues to citizens who can then mobilize in support of democracy. In this chapter, I test this argument and investigate when and how civil servants think about their role as defenders of democracy. I test the effects of elite cues on citizens in *Chapter 6 – Democratic Ambiguity* and *Chapter 7 – Democratic Credibility.*

In response to my question about their role as defenders of democracy, one civil servant exclaimed: "But we *are* the checks and balances?!" (author's interview with *Hannah**)[73]. They were surprised about my question and forceful about their position on it. *Hannah** went on to explain how they defended democracy in the past and present. They gave examples of a civil servant's everyday work: countering the political leadership's proposals with practical considerations and advising them on better or alternative routes of action. But they also expressed their doubts about their role when a proposal seems not only unconstitutional, but undemocratic. When this happens, there is no everyday response. Civil servants then enter a grey zone, between administrative neutrality and administrative activism, fraught with dilemmas. In this chapter, I ask (and show) when an administrative democratic defence against incumbent-led autocratization unfolds.

Administrative democratic defence are actions civil servants take and advice they give (to colleagues, supervisors, and the political leadership) to halt or slow down would-be autocrats. Civil servants can and do defend democracy, but they face a choice between administrative neutrality (the Weberian expectation that civil servants execute policies neutrally) and administrative activism (responsibility for a common good). In trying to strike this balance, civil servants have to figure out if they have the *capability to recognize* autocratization, *the access to instruments* to halt or slow-down autocratization, and *the willingness to use* those instruments. Only when each of these three requirements is met, does administrative democratic defence occur. That is: administrative democratic defence requires civil servants who are capable to recognize autocratization, who have access to instruments to halt it, and who are willing to use those instruments.

Moreover, as argued in *Chapter 4 – Democratic Defence* democratic defence is a vital component of resilient democracies considering that threats against democracy have

73. As I explain in *Section 4 – Empirical approach*, I refer to my participants with pseudonyms. Throughout the paper, I use asterisks (*) to emphasize this.

increasingly come from inside the democratic system (Bermeo, 2016; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019 and see *Chapter 2- Autocratic Actions*), being initiated by democratically-elected incumbents, giving (apparent) legitimacy to the would-be autocrat. Furthermore, incumbent-led democratic recession is gradual and incremental (Diamond, 2021; Maerz et al., 2024), starting in the liberal components of democracy by eroding civil liberties and subverting checks and balances (Wunsch & Blanchard, 2023). Would-be autocrats' democratic mandate and the incremental nature of contemporary autocratization make it often hard to recognize autocratization when it is in its early stages, especially when the would-be autocrat follows the "rules of the game" to subsequently undermine the game.

These threats to democracy are not limited to newer or younger democracies (Svolik, 2015). While it has been extensively studied in the paradigmatic cases of Hungary (Pirro & Stanley, 2022), Poland (Sadurski, 2018), or Venezuela (Gamboa, 2022), more recent scholarship has pointed to arguably consolidated democracies that appear under threat, such as the USA (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018), Greece (Pappas, 2020), and Israel (Gidron, 2023). This indicates threats to democracy (whether they are successful or not) *can* emerge in liberal, consolidated democracies as well.

This makes the defence of democracy – actions taken to halt, revert or slow-down attempts to autocratize (Capoccia, 2005; Tomini et al., 2023) – a more complex endeavour: specifically, we do not yet know which dilemmas "democratic defenders" face. As shown in *Chapter 3 - Autocratic Counterfactuals* in response to threats by incumbents, the institutional set-up of democracies is often not sufficient to counter incumbent-led autocratization and more importance is being placed on the actions of actors that stand up to defend democracy (Gamboa, 2022; Tomini et al., 2023; van Lit et al., 2023). Because the formal rules and regulations that should safeguard democracies are precisely the targets of incumbent autocratizers' attacks, democratic defenders have to rely on political strategies, making the defence of democracy politically contentious. In this chapter, I therefore ask (and show) how administrative democratic defence unfolds.

To develop this argument, I explain in *Section 2 – Civil servants as democratic defenders*, first, *why* civil servants are prime candidates to be one of the first actors to recognize and respond to autocratization: they have the expertise and knowledge to do so, and autocratization (in liberal democracies) frequently starts "in their surroundings". In *Section 3 – How does administrative democratic defence unfold*, I theorize *when* administrative democratic defence occurs: before civil servants can defend democracy, they need to have the capability to recognize autocratization, access to

instruments that halt or slow down the autocratic proposals, and willingness to act and use those instruments. In *Section 4 – Empirical approach* and *Section 5 – Results*, I build on 29 elite interviews with Dutch national-level civil servants (*rijksambtenaren*), showing how they think about administrative democratic defence. In *Section 6 – Conclusion*, I conclude that democratic defence is a continuously ongoing process, even in a liberal democracy. Even if democracies are resilient, attempts to incrementally autocratize occur frequently, requiring a constant response. As such, this chapter contributes to a deeper understanding of the first instances of democratic defence and focuses especially on the role civil servants play. To revert autocratization or stop it before it has started altogether civil servants play a crucial role in sounding the alarm, and alerting other actors to threats against democracy.

2. Civil servants as democratic defenders

There is only limited research that recognizes civil servants as potential democratic defenders (but see Bauer, 2024; Bauer et al., 2021; Lotta et al., 2023; and a brief mention of top civil servants in Tomini et al., 2023; van Lit et al., 2023), yet I argue they are key "first responders," with the ability to sound the alarm early against incumbent-led autocratization, for two reasons:

One, civil servants are likely to have the expertise and knowledge to recognize autocratization – even covert and incremental autocratization. Tomini et al. (2023) and Van Lit et al. (2023) suggest civil servants understand the democratic system, their specific work topics, and how their craft was understood in previous cases to signal when proposals move away from accepted norms (cf. van Dorp, 2023; Wagenaar, 2004). They are experts on their own topic of work – be it close to the "core of democracy" (such as members of an electoral commission), or further away (such as civil servants working in a social welfare department). This topical expertise especially allows them to understand how proposals affect the system as a whole or parts of it, regardless of their personal opinion about the proposal. It is their job to recognize changes, and advise on whether these changes are possible, probable, and permissible.

Second, the civil service can be one of the first institutions confronted with autocratization (Green, 2019; Rockman, 2019). As autocratizing incumbents aim to keep a democratic façade (Mechkova et al., 2017), they often follow standard procedure to implement policies (albeit sometimes skewed, following the letter but not the spirit of the law, see Pirro & Stanley, 2022). The civil service is asked for

advice and subsequently asked to execute these policies. And just like other checks and balances such as the courts and media, it is a target of autocratization (Lotta et al., 2024 and see *Chapter 2 - Autocratic Actions*). In other words, autocratization occurs "in the surroundings" of civil servants, either as potential accomplices, or as potential targets.

These arguments suggest administrative democratic defence is a fruitful avenue to sustain democracies. But whether civil servants do defend democracy, depends on whether they perceive themselves to "serve the minister" or to "serve democracy". In the classical Weberian view, civil servants (as bureaucrats) should be neutral and implement policies regardless of their personal morals: there exists limited room for any judgment on the part of the civil servants. However, perhaps the civil service should also function as a counter-majoritarian power. More in line with Arendt, this view holds that civil servants have a personal responsibility in preventing the most atrocious policies (see Peters & Pierre, 2022 for an extensive discussion).

Most civil servants have allegiance to both elected officials ("serving the minister") and to an abstract general interest ("serving democracy"). While these allegiances often align, misalignment can occur (Bauer, 2024). When this happens, civil servants must prioritize. If they prioritize the democratic general interest over the political will, administrative democratic defence occurs. Or: when they see themselves as serving democracy and not serving the minister.

3. How does administrative democratic defence unfold?

Precisely because democratic defence against incumbents goes against the (apparent) political will of the majority, administrative democratic defence is a process that is more complicated than "just sounding the alarm." Building on the whistle-blower-literature (see for example Culiberg & Mihelič, 2017; Olesen, 2021), I argue there are three necessary requirements for administrative democratic defence: they need to have the *capability to recognize* autocratization, *access to instruments* that halt it or slow it down, and *willingness to act* and use those instruments. Only when each requirement is met, does administrative democratic defence occur.

Before democratic defence can occur, *a potential defender must have the capability to recognize that autocratization is ongoing*. This is challenging on two levels: one, incumbent-led autocratization has some legitimacy, as the incumbent holds a democratic mandate; two, contemporary autocratization is incremental (see *Chapter 2*

– *Autocratic Actions*), where single proposals are unlikely to lead to an undermining of a democratic system, but multiple proposals could (cf. the 'Frankenstate' in Scheppele, 2013). The capability to recognize autocratization entails both an actor's awareness of the proposal (i.e. a civil servant in department A is unlikely to be aware of an unrelated proposal in department B), as well as the actor's judgment that such a proposal is "wrong" (for example, in a legal, democratic, procedural, or consequential way) (Culiberg & Mihelič, 2017). It therefore requires actors with extensive knowledge and awareness of the political and democratic system to recognize these threats. As discussed above, I argue that civil servants are prime candidates to have this capability.

A democratic defence, understood as an action that can halt, revert, or slow-down autocratization, requires *instruments that democratic defenders can acc*ess and use to effectively "do democratic defence". For example, courts can issue binding judgments (e.g. Zambrano et al., 2024) or citizens can demonstrate against or vote autocrats out of office (e.g. Markowski, 2024). Hirschman's (1972) describes how elites can voice their dissent or exit an organization because of differences. Together with neglecting their work (Farrell, 1983; Golden, 1992) or subverting and obstructing internal procedures (Guedes-Neto & Guy Peters, 2021; Schuster et al., 2022), civil servants can (and do) use these instruments to try and disrupt autocratization.

Concretely, civil servants can issue critical advice about proposed policies; they can share confidential information to third parties in an effort to make (what they perceive as) wrongdoings public; they can delay policies by throwing up procedural hurdles; they can refuse to execute policies (especially if they are street-level bureaucrats, see Lipsky, 1980; Lotta et al., 2024); and they can quit their jobs. What instrument they choose, likely depends on the perceived severity of autocratization, as well as on how likely they find it managers or the political leadership will listen to their advice. Additionally, not all (administrative) defenders have access to the same instruments: where courts can issue binding judgments, civil servants cannot; and where top civil servants have access to a direct line of communication with the political leadership, lower-ranking civil servants need to rely on their filtering upwards.

Finally, *democratic defenders need to be willing to act* and use the instruments they have at their disposal, weighing the pros and cons of their defence. That is: they need to have the intent to voice critique or take other measures in their instrumental arsenal (Culiberg & Mihelič, 2017; Zhang et al., 2009). Doing so, defenders must assess whether their defence is likely to have an effect (O'Sullivan & Ngau, 2014), whether they are likely to stand alone or can build on support from colleagues,

managers, and the organizational culture (Akkerman et al., 2022; Demir et al., 2023; Goodsell, 2011; Valentine & Godkin, 2019), and whether they might face repression or repercussions (Gerschewski, 2013; van Lit et al., 2023). Potential defenders also make their own normative decision: is it their place to counter political majorities? Here, the democratic commitment of the potential defender as well as their conception of democracy (i.e. as either more majoritarian or more liberal) comes into play. For example, if a civil servant sees a role for themselves in democracy, but holds a more majoritarian conception, they are more likely to adhere to a Weberian role, making them less willing to use the instruments; while civil servants holding a more liberal democracy conception, are likely to value checks and balances in their own work as well.

4. Empirical approach

To study the role of civil servants and their capability, access, and willingness in the defence of democracy, I conducted 29 in-depth semi-structured elite interviews (Bogner et al., 2018; Lilleker, 2003; Littig, 2009) with civil servants at different career levels and across different departments and agencies of the Dutch national government.[74]

The interviews were held in June, July, and August 2024,[75] and took between 45 minutes and 2 hours and 10 minutes. The location of the interview was always up to the participant, usually in their private offices, in meeting rooms, or in the office-restaurant. Five of the interviews were conducted online or at other locations. One interview was a dual-interview. When asked about it, participants did not mind if colleagues could see us:

> Yes, I'm quite open about it if colleagues ask about this interview. It's also visible in my calendar, so people can see you are interviewing me. I actually enjoy teasing people a bit, showing that [administrative

74. The interview set-up has been approved by the Ethics Assessment Committee of Faculty of Law and Nijmegen School of Management, under number EACLM-LT-037.

75. Note the interviews took place after the November 2023-election results, in which the far-right Party for Freedom (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*, PVV) won a plurality of votes and seats (37 out of 150, https://www.kiesraad.nl/actueel/nieuws/2023/12/01/kiesraad-stelt-uitslag-tweede-kamerverkiezing-22-november-2023-vast). This context has likely increased the saliency of "democratic resilience" to many participants. However, examples given by the respondents span time periods during and (far) before this government came into office. In other words, the examples do not only concern responses to politicians affiliated with extreme or radical parties but include responses to more centre-politicians.

> democratic defence] is an interesting and relevant topic. No, it's fine to talk about this among colleagues. But I don't want my full name to be mentioned, like "this civil servant says this for that reason," as it could disrupt the unity of the civil service. After all, I do say things that can be a bit uncomfortable, but I believe those discussions should happen internally. (author's interview with *Michael**)

I interviewed civil servants across six departments and seven organizations that are organizationally part of a department but functionally independent. Of the participants, 16 hold non-managerial positions, 6 are middle-management, and 7 are upper-management. Participants contribute to different parts of the policy cycle, including research, consultation (with politicians and external stakeholders), legal affairs, and policy writing. Throughout the chapter, I only refer to "civil servants of the Dutch national government", and do not specify the departments participants worked at. I do so for two reasons:

First, by ensuring anonymity, participants were willing to talk more freely and openly:

> [Wanting anonymity] can be a personal matter. But I've been working here for [a certain amount of time]. I work in a glass box, where everything is visible to everyone. I'm very aware that my work and my role within the organisation depend on being seen as impartial and acting in the interest of everyone. (author's interview with *Terry**)

Some of the participants I talked to work on sensitive topics or mentioned colleagues, supervisors, or political elites by name. These details could reveal participants' identity. Therefore, in the quotes everything in square brackets is inserted by the author: to ensure anonymity or to make references participants make to earlier parts of our conversation clearer.

Second, as *Michael** and *Terry** hinted at and other participants made more explicit: the civil service works by virtue of its neutrality. At the same time civil servants hold personal opinions,[76] but they make a conscious effort to separate their private opinions from their work:

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76. There is a difference between personal opinions about preferred policies, and personal opinions about fundamental rules of the democratic game. All civil servants I spoke to are adamant they leave their policy-preferences aside in their work. The grey area exists when I ask them about their opinions about the "rules of the game". In the remainder of the chapter, I always refer to their opinions about the rules of the game, when talking about personal or moral opinions, *never* about policy-preferences, since they are, according to the participants, irrelevant to their work.

> There are times when it's really difficult [to leave behind my private opinions], that's true, it does happen. But generally, [civil servants] are able to make the distinction. Of course, you would prefer some policies to be implemented differently – we all feel that way. But we don't say what we would do personally. (author's interview with *Justin**).

However, when these personal opinions enter the public domain (for example, through a chapter like this), this could harm the neutrality, workability, and effectiveness of the civil service. As such, names provided with the quotes are pseudonyms and do in no way reflect the participant themselves.

Some participants asked permission to be interviewed from their supervisor beforehand:

> I'm not too concerned about [talking about my personal opinions] myself – I've written a short piece on [a topic] before. But I know there are colleagues who feel differently. So I think [asking permission] is particularly important for discussions that might become public. So this time, I thought I should mention it upfront to my supervisor, so people are aware it's happening and there are no issues later on. (author's interview with *Ernie**).

But most did not: "It didn't even cross my mind [to ask permission]. I feel completely free in that regard. No issue at all." (author's interview with *Anthony**)

Participants were contacted directly. The first few participants were selected based on their (publicly available) profile and area of work. Subsequent participants were selected using snowball-sampling (Parker et al., 2019), specifically asking participants for references to colleagues who might disagree with them. I did not mention who had referred me to potential participants, unless explicitly recommended to do so by the first participant. I kept reaching out to new participants until I reached theoretical saturation (Saunders et al., 2018), evidenced by substantive overlap in participants' positions on the role of civil servants in the defence of democracy.

The interviews were recorded with the participants' consent, transcribed *verbatim*. The resulting quotes are translated by the author. The interviews were semi-structured, based on a general topic list (an introductory conversation about the participant's work, followed by a more substantive conversation about their views on administrative neutrality, administrative activism, their democratic commitment, and their role in democratic resilience) and based on participant-specific examples

and themes. I analysed the interviews during and after the interview-period, enabling me to ask later participants to reflect on comments by earlier participants. Additionally, this allowed me to discuss my interpretation with some participants to refine it as the interviews took place. All participants have been invited to read and reflect on the manuscript, and all accepted their quotes as they are shown, but the interpretation ultimately remains my own.

4.1 Positionality

At the onset of this research project, I had a clear idea if, how, and when civil servants would defend democracy. However, from the first interviews, the complexities civil servants described struck me: how could civil servants not see their role and importance? I struggled initially with the realities of their work, and how to understand the dilemmas they face. This prompted one participant to answer when asked whether they were a democratic defender: "Yes, absolutely, without question. I'm a passionate defender of democracy. Does that surprise you?" (author's interview with *Justin**). At some points, I used Socratic questioning to push participants to reflect more critically on their own answers. I asked if they were bothered by this more critical questioning, to which one responded: "You're really making me think. No, that's a good thing, a very good thing!" (author's interview with *Dean**). When participants put questions and comments like these back to me, I used it as an opportunity to discuss with them the set-up and thoughts behind the interview and discuss my (unrealistic) expectations I had before starting the interviews.

Despite my strong expectations beforehand, I am confident the conversations I had were frank and fair. Multiple participants shared personal stories and opinions, after which they looked at the recorder and asked me not to include it in the research. In addition, participants were also not hesitant to refine and comment on my interpretation during the interviews.

4.2 The Dutch case

The Netherlands has been a relatively stable liberal democracy since the end of the Second World War (Angiolillo et al., 2024; V-Dem, 2024). Democratic commitment among citizens is high, although trust in the government has been declining over the past years, and there appears to be growing democratic ambivalence (Verwey-Jonker Instituut, 2021; Voogd et al., 2023). Regardless, the Netherlands has seen no real threats to its democracy similar to those in the paradigmatic cases of democratic recession. It is, however, still a worthwhile case to study, precisely because contemporary autocratization is not limited to relatively new democracies.

One recent debate in Dutch parliament exemplifies this. During the *Algemene Politieke Beschouwingen* (18 and 19 September 2024, the General Political Debates, the debate of the Dutch lower house (*Tweede Kamer*) at the start of the parliamentary year) parliament asked the government to explain why they preferred using a state of emergency (*staatsnoodrecht*, Articles 110 and 111 of the Aliens Act) to solve asylum-problems in the Netherlands rather than submit emergency legislation. A state of emergency would (temporarily) sideline parliament, while emergency legislation would require parliament to pass new laws following regular but fast-tracked parliamentary procedures. It is worth noting that both ways to implement policies more quickly have been used in other contexts to recede democracy: states of emergencies have been widely studied (Lührmann & Rooney, 2021) and incumbents have rushed legislation through parliament to avoid close scrutiny and debate in, among others, Nigeria (Thaler, 2017), North Macedonia (Auerbach & Kartner, 2023), Hungary (Bánkuti et al., 2012), India (Khaitan, 2020), and Poland (Przybylski, 2018).

While it is by no means certain that rushed procedures or states of emergency would lead to autocratization, the opposition (later joined by coalition party New Social Contract, *Nieuw Sociaal Contract*) pushed the government to publish civil servants' internal advices about the proposed state of emergency. Now prime-minister and former top-civil servant Dick Schoof agreed to publish these internal documents, first partly redacted,[77] later in full.[78] In these documents, civil servants from different departments advised strongly that the state of emergency was "democratically and legally[79] unacceptable". Opposition parliamentarians used these administrative advices to accuse the government of turning into an "autocratic government that resists any form of opposition [literally: *tegenmacht*, counterpower]".[80] In response, Geert Wilders, the leader of the PVV, the largest party in parliament, said he did not have "a backbone like a banana,"[81] insisting on the state of emergency. His co-partisan

77. "Ambtelijke stukken over toepassing artikelen 110 en 111 Vreemdelingenwet 2000", 19 September 2024, https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/publicaties/2024/09/19/ambtelijke-stukken-over-toepassing-artikelen-110-en-111-vreemdelingenwet-2000

78. "Ongelakte adviezen inzake de toepassing van de artikelen 110 en 111 van de Vreemdelingenwet", 19 September 2024, https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/detail?id=2024D34082&did=2024D34082

79. In Dutch, the advice says *rechtsstatelijk*, which is stronger and better understood as the rule of law and constitutionality than "mere" legality.

80. Esther Ouwehand, from the Party for the Animals (*Partij voor de Dieren*), in "Tweede Kamer, 3e vergadering, Donderdag 19 september 2024", 19 September 2024, https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/plenaire_verslagen/detail/2024-2025/3

81. "Wilders: 'stukken of geen stukken, er komt een asielnoodwet'", *NRC*, 19 September 2024, https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2024/09/19/wilders-stukken-of-geen-stukken-er-komt-een-asielnoodwet-a4866507

and minister of asylum and migration Marjolijn Faber similarly said she prefers a state of emergency: "I value civil servants, but they have an advisory role. It's up to the minister and the government to make the final decisions".[82]

It has since become clear that the Schoof-government is not going to call a state of emergency on asylum, and is working on proposing measures following the standard procedure. However, this example shows that threats to democracy do occur, even in a liberal democracy like the Netherlands. More importantly, it shows what role civil servants have taken upon themselves, and how their role is subsequently politicized: both by oppositions (requesting internal documents, going against established tradition) and government. Lastly, the example shows how civil servants are involved as "first responders": they were charged to research the possibilities of the state of emergency (and came up with arguments against it) even before parliament and the courts could have their say. Importantly, civil servants' arguments were used, almost *verbatim*, in parliamentary debates, further illustrating this point.

All in all, this makes the Dutch case a typical case (cf. Gerring, 2007; Seawright & Gerring, 2008) to study administrative democratic defence in liberal democracies, and I argue in the conclusion how my findings travel to other contexts and other actors.

5. Results: Navigating the dilemmas of administrative democratic defence

As argued, administrative democratic defence requires three criteria to be met: defenders need to have the capability to recognize autocratization, access to instruments to counter it, and the willingness to use those instruments. To show how administrative democratic defence unfolds, I now turn to the civil servants themselves. Through the interviews, it became clear there is no single answer to the requirements of capability, instruments, and willingness. I therefore let civil servants first formulate and navigate the dilemmas they face in their own words. I then discuss how they balance their allegiances to the minister and to democracy.

In summary, administrative democratic defence does occur in the Netherlands: in some circumstances, civil servants do see threats to democracy; and in some circumstances they are able and willing to defend democracy. Yet, even if they see autocratization, they do not always defend democracy.

82. "Asielminister Faber denkt noodrecht te kunnen doorzetten", *NOS Nieuws*, 20 September 2024, https://nos.nl/artikel/2537862-asielminister-faber-denkt-noodrecht-te-kunnen-doorzetten

5.1 The dilemma around capability: Expertise or endgame?

As became clear from the interviews, civil servants face a dilemma about whether their topical, political, and democratic expertise trumps their realization that policy-making is – by definition - political. Civil servants are acutely aware their workcraft exists in an administrative-political context: they advise, but the political leadership decides. Civil servants note how it is their job to provide clear and strong argumentation for *and* against policy proposals. They emphasize repeatedly that a potential clash between the administration and politics should happen, not based on their personal motivations, but on their expert opinion:

> Politics and the administration should clash; that's clear. [Civil servants] are always there to provide sound arguments when we do clash, along with the right reasoning. It's essential to know what you're talking about. And ideally, you shouldn't be doing it alone as a civil servant. You hope that your superiors are also on board, and that together, you can offer politicians strong arguments in return. (author's interview with *Luna**)

And:

> I believe the civil service definitely plays a role in [democratic resilience]. Simply by having the expertise to thoroughly understand your topic and present the pros and cons to a politician. Yes, that's certainly a part of democratic resilience. (author's interview with *Susan**)

But even when they try to give such rational, factual advice, they still risk being seen as activist:

> It's very much about understanding what the different options are from your own expertise, as well as identifying the better and worse options. But I can see how [an advice] might be perceived as lacking neutrality, especially if it contradicts political will. However, if the advice is grounded in professional knowledge, then that should be the guidance offered. I believe it's crucial for the civil service to operate this way in a democracy. (author's interview with *Colin**)

Above all, they acknowledge they at least *should have* the knowledge about democracy and the capability to recognize autocratization:

> Well, we are not the fourth power,[83] but we are the experts. The expertise [literally: *vakmanschap*, craftwork] and knowledge on this issue [of democracy] resides with us – it should be with us. (author's interview with *Alicia**)

At the other side of the dilemma is their awareness that they do not define what is true or not, nor, ultimately, what is democratic or not. *Fred** called this the "endgame", which civil servants struggle with on two counts: there is no rigid democratic criterion that allows them to say unequivocally if a policy is undemocratic and autocratization occurs in incremental steps that are easily overlooked. Combined, this means they often cannot oversee what the ultimate outcome – the endgame – of a policy might be:

> There is no endgame. It's not like a decision is made at a certain point and then everything is settled – this is the new status quo. If there were an endgame, you might be able to conclude things definitively, but that is rarely the case. Most individual civil servants cannot fully gauge the consequences [of a policy]. You shouldn't step into a role where you can't oversee the outcomes. Instead, use your position, knowledge, and expertise within the frameworks you have. (author's interview with *Fred**)

First: civil servants struggle with the endgame, because "what democracy is" is highly personal. In fact, one civil servant pointed out to me that the word democracy occurs only once in the Dutch constitution, and in a vague and non-committal way at that. The full preamble of the Dutch[84] constitution reads: "The Constitution protects the fundamental rights and the democratic rule of law", yet nowhere is the "democratic" in "democratic rule of law" further defined. As such, one civil servant noted:

> We've made these [democratic] dilemmas very personal. There aren't any shared frameworks to reference, which makes it easy for people to criticise you for basing your advice on personal opinions. I think that is the issue with moral and ethical questions. When you invoke

83. Here, *Alicia** refers to the separation of powers (legislative, executive, and judicial), stating they think the administration is not a fourth power.

84. This preamble (*Algemene Bepaling*) is not included in the English, German, French, or Spanish official translations, available at https://www.government.nl/documents/reports/2019/02/28/the-constitution-of-the-kingdom-of-the-netherlands. See for the Dutch version https://www.denederlandsegrondwet.nl/.

> something, you need to be able to refer to a common understanding about it. (author's interview with *Seamus**)

As such, civil servants hesitate using what one of them called the "democratic criterion" because the "democratic criterion is… well it is more dependent on interpretation and weighing. Legal criteria are a lot more rigid" (author's interview with *Justin**). And in practice:

> What does [saying democracy is under pressure] actually mean? [Democracy] is such a big concept… what do you really mean when you say [it is under pressure]? It's difficult to articulate. For instance, if I encounter a principled issue in my work, I could discuss it with my supervisor and explain that I find it challenging for specific reasons. But when you say, "democracy is under pressure," that's much harder to express. It raises questions like: what does that really mean? What can we do about it? It doesn't relate much to your day-to-day responsibilities. (author's interview with *Colin**)

Second: civil servants do not only struggle with the endgame because democracy is relatively undefined, but also because autocratization occurs in small, incremental steps:

> The issue with taking very small steps is that there's always a justification for them, a reason why they're not seen as anti-rule of law or anti-democratic. It often comes down to a weighing of interests. That's the challenge: you can rarely assert with certainty that a proposal is so contrary to the rule of law or democracy that it should be outright rejected. (author's interview with *Dennis**)

And:

> In the end, after years, [the policy] culminated in a total clusterfuck [*sic*]. But when you look back at the timeline, all single steps seem logical – everything makes sense, until it went horribly wrong in the end. Then you reflect: "when should I have seen it coming?" That's difficult. Yes, in hindsight, I could say "that might have been a questionable aspect". But did I really perceive it that way back then? When do you actually see it? [Here, *Zachary** puts their head in their hands, falls silent for

> a moment, and says from behind their hands:] I don't know. (author's interview with *Zachary**)

Like *Zachary** most civil servants are hopeful, yet doubtful about their capability to recognize these small steps of autocratization, but some are adamant no individual civil servant can:

> No, I would be lying if I said I could recognise [those small steps]. And anyone who claims they can is also lying. Because it's simply not possible. So, it has to be a collective effort. Let me explain why I feel so strongly about this. The work entrusted to us, with all the right intentions, is immense. As a top civil servant, and even as a regular civil servant, you are compelled to look at the bigger picture and identify the common thread. Of course, there will always be incidents, but truly getting to the bottom of things, as you'd like to, and understanding all the intricate details, is unfeasible. The entire process is almost beyond comprehension, so you can't tackle it alone. (author's interview with *Angelina**)

When it comes to the first requirement – do civil servants have the capability recognize autocratization? – the answer is a resounding "yes, but…". Yes, civil servants know they have (and should have) the *expertise* and knowledge to recognize autocratization. Not only if they are closer to the core of democracy, but also if their topic of expertise is further removed from it. Their craftwork and topical knowledge should allow them to understand if and when procedural rules or "soft guardrails of democracy" (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018) are tarnished. However, civil servants also struggle with the endgame: the fact that a single servant cannot oversee the ultimate outcome of a policy (because the democratic criterion is up for interpretation, and because autocratization occurs incrementally).

In practice, this results in a first hurdle for administrative democratic defence: many civil servants can recognize autocratization, yet they often doubt whether they have seen it correctly. Despite this, some civil servants do successfully navigate this dilemma, as evidenced by the brief case study of the *Algemene Politieke Beschouwingen* above, and by the discussion on the use of instruments below.

5.2 The dilemma around instruments: Internal or external?

From the interviews, a further dilemma for civil servants about which instruments to use emerged. The clearest distinction that emerged from the interviews is the

distinction between the internal voicing of dissent (such as voicing your concerns to your supervisors, which *Colin** already alluded to) or the external flagging of issues (such as leaking to the media, striking, or issuing public statements).

For all civil servants I spoke to, the first route of defence is always internal. This entails their formal advice, but also informal discussions with colleagues, managers, and politicians:

> The minister wanted something that was simply not possible – constitutionally speaking. It truly was not permissible. However, it had been done in other departments. It was possible, but it really was not possible. It was complicated because I repeatedly stated, "this is not possible, for all these reasons." I consulted colleagues who are well-versed in constitutional matters, so my arguments were sound. In every meeting with the minister, I kept reiterating, "this is not possible, because this and that is not permissible." But the questions kept coming. What helped me significantly was when I called the assistant to the minister and said, "what the minister wants is simply unconstitutional." That's when it clicked, that they really shouldn't be doing it. In subsequent meetings with the minister, the same question arose, and I wrote my advice down in response. I articulated, in very strong terms, why it was not possible. Then it finally clicked for everyone. I discussed this extensively with my manager, expressing that if the minister truly wanted this, I would prefer to be reassigned to a different dossier. I am not going to implement [that policy]. I refuse to do that ever in my life. Thankfully, [my manager] fully supported my stance. (author's interview with *Lee**)

*Lee** was "proud" of the way they handled this and colleagues at the other departments thought it was "good, very good" what *Lee** did. Looking through the steps they took, they are committed to the internal instruments, even though it is clear that the policy was fundamentally wrong to *Lee**: seeking strong legal argumentation from colleagues, consulting with their supervisor, answering questions in meetings. Even when they went outside of the regular channels, by contacting the assistant to the minister, their concerns remained internal.

In this case an external instrument was not needed, but other civil servants note how they sometimes do seek publicity:

> Well, we engage with the media more frequently these days. If you typically only approach the media when [the politicians] aren't listening, it quickly earns you the label of "activist group". That's why we now go to the media more often, not just when [the politicians] fail to listen. (author's interview with *George**)

And:

> I think [being scared to openly talk about our advices] creates an unnecessary tension. We should be able to speak frankly and freely about [our advice about democracy]; there's nothing strange or awkward about it. Honestly, I don't understand it. As civil servants, it is what we should be thinking about – it's our right to exist. (author's interview with *Luna**)

However, there is no consensus on where the line between legitimate public debate and illegitimate administrative pressure on politics is:

> You always know that you can take action, but in the end, the decision isn't yours. You can be very firm, saying repeatedly, "don't do it, don't do it." But ultimately, if the decision-makers say, "we're going ahead," then as a civil servant, it's not your place to decide what's allowed and what is not. In the end, as a civil servant, you have no real power because you don't make the decisions. I would stand my ground until the very end. But would I do that with my government ID [*Rijkspas*] around my neck? That's something I'd really need to think about… No, I wouldn't. I would make a clear distinction there. Otherwise, it could seem like I'm using my position to settle personal scores. If it's something I feel strongly about at my core, I would want to fight it as a private citizen, not by using my role or authority as a civil servant. (author's interview with *Justin**)

The follow-up question to the use of both internal and external instruments is what civil servants would do if the minister (or the civil servant's supervisor) does not listen to their concerns. Some would rather quit their job:

> It's true that up to a certain point, you can say [some policies are] not your responsibility. But eventually, you have to ask yourself, "has this gone too far? Do I still want to be doing [this job]? How do I explain my

> actions to my children?" That's a personal choice. So, what do I say to civil servants? "I completely understand [your discomfort], but you can only go along with things to a certain point." For many civil servants, we are not there yet, but when you do reach that point, you need to know where your own moral line is. (author's interview with *George**)

But others note:

> At the same time, when you leave [your job], you lose all your influence. That would be something I would consider: how long can I tolerate [when politicians propose policies that I think are undemocratic]? I think I'll keep asking questions – I hope I will. I imagine I would stay at my job. But in the end, you're just one person against the minister. (author's interview with *Hannah**)

And:

> We're in a position where we can still exert some influence, because politicians can be open to certain arguments. I also think it's important to stay and show that. The danger is, if everyone leaves and new people come in who are happy to work for [a minister], things could end up even worse. So part of the reason for staying is to keep things in check. The civil service remains, while politicians come and go. (author's interview with *Susan**)

The second requirement, therefore – whether civil servants have access to effective instruments – appears to be met more uniformly than the capability-requirement. Most concerns about democracy are handled *internally*, and civil servants are often hesitant to go *externally*. Importantly, none of the civil servants I spoke to considered neglecting or shirking their work: instead they emphasized their power of "asking questions" (like *Hannah**) and the possible quick turnover of the autocratizing incumbent (like *Susan**). At the same time, there is a set of civil servants who think that it is fundamentally part of their job ("our right to exist," as *Luna** puts it) to seek that public debate. In some interviews, I asked participants explicitly to reflect on the dilemma between internal and external instruments. For many, their first instinct would be to reject external instruments because it goes against their oath of office, but:

> You sometimes start to wonder – should you drop a hint somewhere? Maybe to someone in the media… Those thoughts do come up. I'm very much against sharing confidential information, but when you see miserable decision-making that the media isn't picking up on, I think it wouldn't be all that surprising if a civil servant had coffee with a journalist. I wouldn't find it strange, even if it's just to say, "You might want to dig into this [topic], because something is off." I'm not saying I would do it myself, but… (author's interview with *Michael**)

Importantly, many participants often link the question of instruments directly to the question of capability: like *Lee** seeking the advice of colleagues and supervisors to strengthen their argument, or like *Hannah** trusting their instincts. The stronger their recognition of "miserable decision-making" (as *Michael** put it) is, the more they appear to seek access to external instruments after they have exhausted their internal instruments. As such, the questions of capability, instruments, and willingness do not exist in a vacuum, but interact with each other.

5.3 The dilemma around willingness: Discomfort or audacity?

Civil servants face a last dilemma about whether they, in fact, *want* to defend democracy. Even if they recognize autocratization, and even if they have access to internal or external instruments to halt it or slow it down, many civil servants do not or dare not defend democracy. This depends on the balance between administrative discomfort and administrative audacity.

Administrative discomfort is the realization that it is not up to the civil servant to make the final decision. *Justin** and *George** illustrated this already, but *Fred** puts it most clearly:

> There are many moments of discomfort. Yes, decisions are being made (including ones that you've been working on yourself) that you believe are, quite frankly, bad policies. However, at a certain point, there's nothing more you can do about it. So you have to learn to let it go. (author's interview with *Fred**)

On the other hand, administrative audacity exists when civil servants go against (explicit) political will to draw a line in the sand:

> Let me share a personal example. [A minister] once said to me, "I want [example]." I replied, "Well, that's your responsibility. You're the one

> who has to sign off on [the policy], not me." However, they then devised a ruse to get me involved. After considering it, I decided, "I'm not going to do that. I stand by my work and my advice." The minister responded, "But I'm your boss, so you will do [this]." I said, "That's not how the world works." The minister remarked in turn they were going to raise [my behaviour] at the ministerial council." Later, the phone rang. It was the minister saying, "I spoke with my colleagues, and they all think you need to [do it]." I replied, "In that case, I'll come in tomorrow to resign, because I won't do it." After the discussion in the ministerial council, the minister dropped the case. In [another situation], [a different minister] told me to not [do something that was required according to established procedures]. I asked why not. The minister replied, "[The topic] is very political, so it needs to go through me first." I answered, in the same tone of voice as before, "I won't do that." The minister said, "You'll hear from me." But I never did. So, I texted [my supervisor], asking if I was too inflexible. The reply was, "the minister thought you had some audacity." That made me realise how civil servants can face pressure. But at some point, you have to draw a line. Apparently, they respected my stance because they never followed up with me. But it was challenging. From my experience, you can earn respect as a civil servant if you occasionally take a stand. (author's interview with *Dean**)

It is clear that *Dean** (and *Lee** before) have clearly recognized policies that needed to be stopped – not because of their personal policy preference, but because of core, fundamental considerations about democracy and the rule of law. *Dean** defended established procedures as well as their (and their colleagues') independent and frank advice. Yet, the courage and audacity to speak out against not just one minister (in the case of *Lee**), but the entire ministerial council (in the case of *Dean**) is not a given:

> There's a significant difference between having the space to criticise and actually taking that space. I don't think any civil servant would deny that the opportunities to criticise exist because they certainly do. However, it takes a strong person who is very sure of themselves to seize that opportunity in the moment. (author's interview with *Angelina**)

And when civil servants are ready to seize that opportunity, they still might not be willing to actually follow through with it:

> Next time, I might make a different choice. Because at a certain point, I have to be honest: my mortgage needs to be paid. It will affect my home life. The protection offered isn't sufficient if you truly want to speak out. (author's interview with *Hannah**)

And:

> Look, I can confidently say that I would definitely [speak out]. But I also have a mortgage and children in university, you know? It's easy to be outspoken, but you have to wait and see how things actually play out. (author's interview with *Zachary **)

Even in a liberal democracy like the Netherlands, civil servants might recognize autocratization, but be afraid to lose their jobs if they are too outspoken because of (informal or prospected) repression. This raises the bar significantly for potential democratic defenders. It takes a "strong person" (as *Angelina** puts it) to defend democracy, not only because it might be considered audacious to go against the political will, but also because it might result in serious backlash, from colleagues or supervisors. Furthermore, because administrative defence is self-described as "audacious", rather than standard practice, civil servants run the risk off consciously or unconsciously removing themselves from the debate:

> I have to be honest: we're in a comfortable position as a relatively small organization. We handle a lot of dossiers, so we must constantly choose where to invest our energy and resources. That capacity is always a factor in your judgment, and it carries the risk of using it as a reason to overlook certain, more politically complicated dossiers. I do realize that is a risk. (author's interview with *Terry **)

*Terry** appears to be self-aware that self-censorship is an easy way out, but does call the opportunity to use capacity as an argument not to get involved "comfortable". And:

> I can assure you that discussing these challenging topics is far from guaranteed within organisations. Civil servants are incredibly busy, often facing tight deadlines, particularly those closer to politics, as well as those involved in implementation. They simply don't have the time to engage in discussions [about democracy]. Unfortunately. (author's interview with *Luna**)

Taking this all together, I argue the willingness-requirement is therefore, the single most difficult to meet. Importantly, there are some guidelines about capability and instruments: a government programme on "Ethics and Dialogue";[85] a book authored by a civil servant and published by the government titled "Power and Courage";[86] and new standards that civil servants to be "test[ed …] not only for subject knowledge and strategic talent, but also and especially for awareness of their functioning under the rule of law."[87] This should help civil servants make the distinction between activism and craftwork and enable civil servants to organize some form of collective counterpower when fundamental issues are at stake. However, these programmes do not give sufficient guidelines for civil servants "in the moment", especially when autocratization occurs incrementally (as *Zachary** describes), or is justified by some weighing of interests (as *Dennis** describes). When administrative democratic defence is audacious, rather than standard and expected, when there is a real risk of repression, and when it is a comfortable way-out to self-censor, it becomes increasingly hard to keep recognizing autocratization. The whistleblower literature (e.g. Culiberg & Mihelič, 2017) also tells us that civil servants rely on their organizational surroundings to determine if the can, should, and are willing to defend democracy: the role of senior colleagues and managers in supporting junior colleagues (as evidenced by *Lee**, cf. Akkerman et al., 2022; Demir et al., 2023) and organisational culture (cf. Goodsell, 2011; Valentine & Godkin, 2019) is likely of primary importance, and should be further researched. Moreover, *Zachary** and *Hannah** describe how job-security and career perspectives might impact their willingness to engage in democratic defence (cf. Riaz et al., 2022). The willingness-requirement, therefore, likely determines more than capability and access whether administrative democratic defence takes place. There are some benchmarks to guide a civil servant's perception of their capability and instruments, but hardly any, except their personal motivation and dedication and (hopefully) support from colleagues and managers, about willingness.

85. "Dialoog en Ethiek", https://www.grenzeloossamenwerken.nl/dialoog-en-ethiek

86. "De boekenplank: Macht en moed Praktijkboek", 22 June 2023, https://www.grenzeloossamenwerken.nl/actueel/nieuws/2023/06/20/de-boekenplank-macht-en-moed-praktijkboek

87. See here for the report in English: "The broken promise of the rule of law", 2 July 2024, https://www.staatscommissierechtsstaat.nl/onderwerpen/rapport/documenten/rapporten/2024/07/02/index, p. v.

5.4 Discussion: Serving the minister or serving democracy?

The core question in this chapter is if and how administrative democratic defence unfolds. It comes as no surprise that there are about as many different role-perceptions as there are civil servants, so what does this mean for administrative democratic defence?

First, administrative democratic defence is crucial for resilient democracies. Even in a liberal democracy, democracy's resilience is dependent on defenders stepping up to constantly defend against incremental autocratization. In other words, democratic defence is not a one-off action, but an ongoing (arguably everyday) process. This is why civil servants' own role perception is so important: they are in a prime position to identify autocratization in its early stages. Even so, not all civil servants see that democracy is under threat:

> Is democracy under threat? I believe that's a complex question. Many different groups feel it is pressured. However, I think that when decisions are made by a majority and when we operate within the framework of the rule of law, it becomes challenging to argue that those decisions are democratically unsound. (author's interview with *Justin**)

At the same time, resilient democracies need fair and honest advice. *Lee's** and *Dean's** experiences as well as the administrative advice about the state of emergency are by no means the only examples of this. *Alicia** describes how it is their role to serve the minister, but only up to the point where their expertise and craftwork allow it:

> This is how I define my role. On the one hand, my starting point is that I am a loyal civil servant. You support your minister or serve the organisation, but always grounded in your expertise and moral compass. I have had conversations with [the minister], firmly stating, "you have to understand that this is simply not possible." For example, [a minister] was very keen on [proposal], but I simply refused to cooperate with that. There are other colleagues who take this approach as well, but it requires a certain level of self-confidence. These aren't easy conversations. It's about staying strong. Or at least how I do it: remaining steadfast based on solid arguments. You earn respect for this because they know you are providing fair and honest advice in those moments. Criticising is often framed as "you just have to contradict them," and I do that from time to time. But just imagine having to do that! I often find myself with clammy hands before a

> difficult conversation with a minister. But it does work. (author's interview with *Alicia**)

Second, democratic defence is an interplay between different actors (cf. Tomini et al., 2023). While civil servants acknowledge their role, many of them emphasize they are not the only ones who are responsible:

> Ultimately, it's all about interplay. Democracy isn't solely about the minister and parliament; it also involves the courts, the Ombudsman, and various other roles and responsibilities. (author's interview with *Fred**)

And:

> There's a reflex that has persisted for too long: "democracy belongs to someone else. Everything is fine in the Netherlands, and if it isn't, we can rely on Strasbourg or Brussels." However, everyone has a responsibility [for democracy]. I also believe that judges and the media play significant roles in this. As civil servants, we have a duty to keep the media informed and up to date. But, ultimately, it's the political parties that serve as the vehicle to bring these issues into the debates. And this is something we consider [in the department] as well. Parliament needs to be positioned to engage [with democratic resilience] effectively. (author's interview with *Alicia**)

Different institutions (e.g. courts, administrations, media, academics, and political parties) all have their part to play. In fact, it is likely that the different institutions can strengthen each other, because they have different capabilities, instruments, and willingness. The media, for example, have access to external tools, parliament owes little allegiance to the minister, and courts have to suffer less discomfort and can more easily be "audacious". As part of this interplay, civil servants can strengthen other democratic defenders: *Michael** hinted it might be part of democratic defence to share confidential information when "miserable" policies are proposed, and *Alicia** explains how the civil service is also tasked to "position parliament effectively".

But the interplay of democratic defence is not only between institutions. Precisely because democratic defence is a "process beyond comprehension" and a "collective task" (as *Angelina** puts it), *Lee** sought support from their colleagues and supervisors. Civil servants' willingness to defend democracy depends on the knowledge that they will be supported, which in turn depends on their colleagues and the organizational

culture. As such, there is a need to "engage in discussions about democracy" (as *Luna** states) among civil servants as well: they need to know what their position is (both in capability to recognize and access to instruments); they need to learn from each other whether they are leaning towards serving the minister or serving democracy; and they need to discuss what role they see for themselves – even if they cannot come to a consensus.

Third, administrative democratic defence is a democratic gambit: a risky move that can have beneficial pay-offs to democracy or that can result in its further undermining. If civil servants speak out too soon and too often, they risk being perceived as activist or political (as *George** and *Terry **). If, on the other hand, they do not sound the alarm, they risk becoming accomplices in autocratization:

> This is precisely what I fear: those small steps. I found myself wondering, initially, how this election will unfold. And then… we just carry on. Now I think, how can [this person] be appointed as minister? Yet it happens, and we just continue. Everyone does. Everyone goes along with it. If we keep acquiescing, keep going along, might people eventually ask in fifteen years, "Who were those bystanders?" And that's what I'm afraid of. (author's interview with *Ernie**)

In conclusion, administrative defence does occur, and it can be successful. The examples in this chapter show that politicians are susceptible to arguments about democracy, constitutionality, and autocratization. But the examples also show how fraught with dilemmas the decisions that lead to administrative democratic defence are. As it stands now, it too often relies on a single civil servant to have the willingness (and audacity) to signal autocratization, to their colleagues, supervisors, or to the political leadership.

6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I sought to explain how administrative democratic defence unfolds in a liberal democracy. First, I argued that civil servants are prime candidates to respond to incumbent-led autocratization, because they have the expertise to recognize it; and because autocratization often occurs "in their surroundings". Second, I argued that this administrative democratic defence hinges on three necessary requirements: do civil servants have the capability to recognize autocratization, access to instruments to halt it, and are they willing to act and use those instruments?

Using 29 elite-interviews with Dutch national-level civil servants, I show how they meet these requirements. Talking about their capability, civil servants face a dilemma between their expertise and the endgame (the lack of their overview of the complex system of policy-making). They resolve this by focusing on their own topic of expertise, where they can and do recognize changes in the system that misalign with previously established norms and practice and the rule of law. Talking about access, civil servants face a further dilemma between the choice for internal instruments and external instruments. They resolve this by trying to exhaust the internal instruments and finding common ground with colleagues and supervisors. Only in exceptional circumstances have civil servants felt the need to speak out publicly. Lastly, talking about willingness, civil servants face a dilemma between the acknowledgement that they simply have to suffer discomfort over some policies and the audacity to sometimes draw a line in the sand. This dilemma is the hardest to resolve, as there are only limited shared guidelines and understandings.

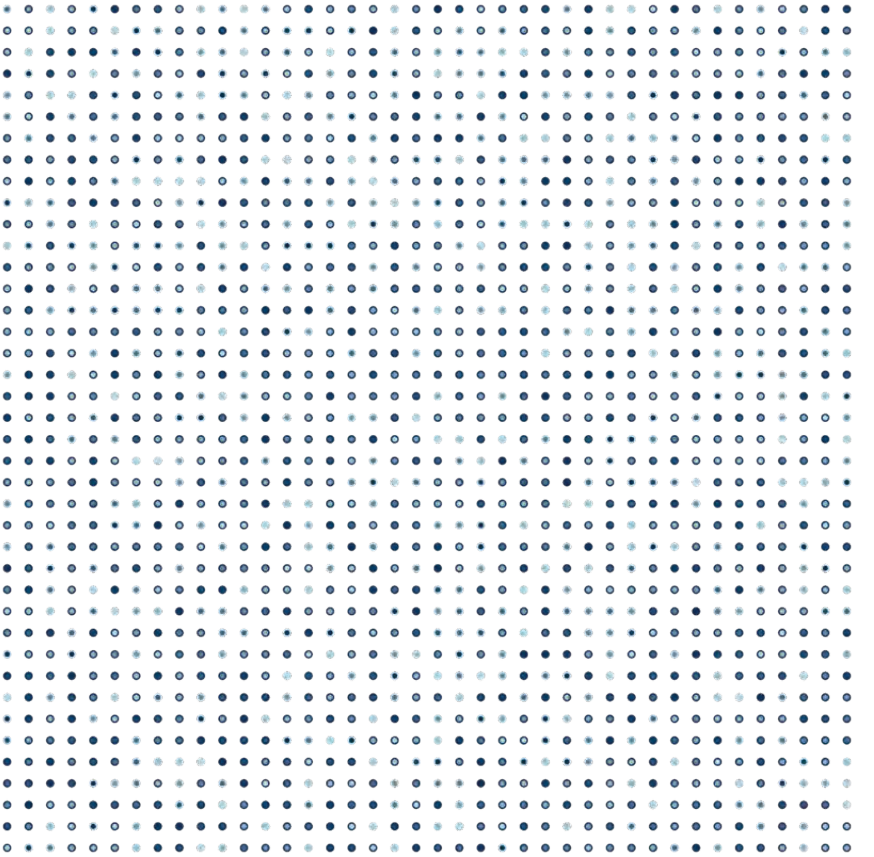
The case of the Netherlands, as a typical liberal democracy shows two things. One: even in a liberal democracy, politicians ask civil servants to implement proposals that are deemed undemocratic. This implies, two, democratic defence itself should be an ongoing process – even in liberal democracies. The reason Dutch democracy is resilient until now is not just because there are strong institutions: autocratization-attempts occur *within* those institutions regardless. It is the actors who hold positions in those institutions, the "passionate defenders of democracy" (author's interview with *Justin**), the "guardians of the rule of law" (author's interview with *Luna**), and the "guardians of democracy" (author's interview with *Katie**) who make liberal democracy resilient. However, the Dutch civil service is not necessarily typical: the Dutch civil service lacks political appointments (with an exception of the top level, see van Dorp & 't Hart, 2019), making it less susceptible to politicisation. The United States' (Peters & Pierre, 2004) and Hungary's (Meyer-Sahling, 2008) civil service are more politicised than the Dutch - and have potentially politicised even more since 2011 (see the examples in *Chapter 2 – Autocratic Actions* and Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2024). On the other hand, Belgium's (Dierickx, 2004) and the United Kingdom's (Sausman & Locke, 2004) appear to be less politicised. Overall, the level of politicisation of the civil service might be an important contextual circumstance that could impact the occurrence of administrative democratic defence (Peters & Pierre, 2022). I suspect that the level of politicisation of the civil service impacts primarily the willingness of civil servants to engage in democratic defence, as it might become even more audacious to speak out in more politicised context. The findings in this chapter are therefore most likely to travel to contexts where politicisation of the civil service is minimal. However, I welcome future empirical evidence on this point.

In this chapter, I have focused on civil servants as prime candidates to be "first responders" to autocratization. But clearly they are not the only defenders of democracy: their dilemmas likely travel to different actors, although they might resolve them differently. Nonetheless, my focus on civil servants might overemphasize the relevance of some dilemmas compared to other actors. Since elites play a pivotal role in defending democracy against incumbent-led autocratization (cf. van Lit et al., 2023), future research should look into how other actors perceive their role and shape their responses.

The set-up of my interviews (using snowball sampling) likely results in a sample that is slightly biased towards civil servants who are willing or considering defending democracy or have had discussions with colleagues about it. That is: it is probably a sample of most likely administrative democratic defenders. Even so, these likely democratic defenders struggle to resolve the dilemmas, leading me to suspect that they might be even harder to resolve for other civil servants. Since democratic defence is an interplay, both between institutions and between actors within institutions, the fact that it is difficult even for a sample of likely democratic defenders to formulate their roles, should be cause for worry for scholars and practitioners.

Importantly, the difficulties of democratic defence do in no way preclude democratic defence from occurring. I have shown examples when civil servants do defend democracy, even with "clammy hands" (like *Alicia**). And it is likely multiple more defences have occurred, outside the view of the public eye and outside the purview of my interviews. However, it is also likely that some autocratization attempts have not been recognized or not been acted against, because the dilemmas at that point in time were resolved differently. That is why the interplay of actors, each with different expertise, instruments, and moral grounding, is necessary in the defence of democracy: to overcome any gaps that a single defender might leave. As such, democratic defence hinges on multiple actors, to be aware and signal whether an incumbent is up to something.

This chapter showed how elite democratic defence occurs, as the empirical test of level in theorized in *Chapter 4 – Democratic Defence*. However, elite democratic defenders cannot (and do not) stand alone: they often need to coordinate with citizens who mobilize in defence of democracy. In *Chapter 6 – Democratic Ambiguity* and *Chapter 7 – Democratic Credibility* I turn to level 2 of democratic defence, and assess if, how, and when citizens heed to elite democratic defenders' call.



Many of the truths that we cling to depend greatly on our point of view.

Obi-Wan Kenobi in Return of the Jedi

Chapter 6

Democratic Ambiguity

Research question:
How do citizens judge the ambiguity of autocratic actions in the light of judicial democratic defence?

Data and methods:
Factorial survey experiment, fielded in the Netherlands, Germany, and France.

Main argument:
Citizens do follow judicial democratic defence, but not if the elite appears to be self-interested, and especially not if the autocratizing incumbent provides a positively-valenced justification. This shows that the autocratizing incumbent often has the upper hand and can easily introduce ambiguity when trying to recede democracy.

Co-authorship:
This chapter is based on the paper *Defending Democracy: Investigating the Efficacy of Elite Democratic Defence in a Competitive Information Environment*, co-authored with Maurits Meijers, published in West European Politics, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2025.2525601

1. Introduction

In *Chapter 4 – Democratic Defence* I argued democratic defence occurs on two levels. On level 2, citizen democratic defence often follows elite cues since incumbent-led autocratization is characterized by high levels of ambiguity. Using elite interviews, *Chapter 5 – Democratic Gambits* showed how and when civil servants stand up to defend democracy. In turn, this chapter investigates when citizens heed such an elite democratic defender's call as the first test of level 2 of democratic defence.

Therefore, I ask in this paper: does elite democratic defence matter? Democracies are increasingly challenged from within by democratically elected governments, rather than by radical forces outside of the democratic system (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). This occurs in newer democracies such as Poland and Hungary, but also in older and arguably consolidated democracies such as India or the United States. This incumbent-led autocratization underscores the urgency of the question of whether and how democracies can be effectively defended against acts of autocratization. Recent theoretical work on how autocratization can be opposed highlights the importance of the dynamic interaction between opposition elites and citizens for the emergence and success of democratic defence. While there is some evidence that institutional resilience can prevent incumbents autocratizing (Boese et al., 2021; Merkel & Lührmann, 2021), these very institutions and accountability mechanisms are often the target of incumbent-led autocratization in liberal democracies. Many cases of democratic recession – i.e., autocratization within democracies without full breakdown into autocracy (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019, pp. 1099–1100) – start in the *liberal* elements of democracy: restricting civil society, undermining an independent judiciary, or obstructing a free press (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Wunsch & Blanchard, 2023). As such, democratic resilience requires that pro-democracy actors engage in democratic defence, pursue resistance strategies to safeguard democracy, and counter acts of autocratization. An actor-based approach to democratic defence is therefore crucial in the study of autocratization and the resistance against it.

Yet, we know little about how autocratization attempts can be successfully thwarted by such actors. Emerging scholarship has argued that democratic defence requires a plurality of actors to collectively resist democratic recession in defiance of the autocratizing incumbent (Tomini et al., 2023; van Lit et al., 2023), arguing that democratic defence relies on the interplay between contestation by institutional and societal elites as well as mass public mobilization to effectively resist autocratization (cf. Gamboa, 2022). Recent autocratization attempts in Israel in early 2023 (Gidron,

2023), Poland in 2017-18 (Matthes, 2021) and during the 2023 elections (Markowski, 2024), and Guatemala in 2023 (Schwartz & Isaacs, 2023) highlight that citizen mobilization can be a driving force in preventing autocratization, reverting back to democracy after autocratization, and driving democratization (cf. della Porta, 2014). However, for citizens to be willing to defend democracy, they need to recognize a threat to democracy when they see it. But there is increasing evidence that citizens are often unable to detect these threats, either because they engage in motivated reasoning to rationalize autocratic acts as being democratic (Krishnarajan, 2023), because they favour other policies more (Gidengil et al., 2022; Graham & Svolik, 2020), or because of partisan proclivities (Barber & Pope, 2019; Mazepus & Toshkov, 2022; Simonovits et al., 2022). This is well documented in recent experimental research, which force respondents to strike a balance between their partisan affiliation and democracy concerns.

Currently, we lack empirical evidence on whether and how opposition elites can trigger resistance against autocratization among citizens. This study therefore examines the conditions under which citizens update their perceptions of democracy in the face of democratic defence cues by elite democratic defenders, and how citizens adjudicate between competing democratic claims by the autocratizing incumbent and pro-democracy resistance actors. Recent literature has started to investigate the efficacy of pro-democratic claims, but this has resulted in conflicting conclusions. Wuttke et al. (2024; 2024) find limited evidence of the effects of pro-democratic claims, while Hobolt and Osnabrügge (2024) find that voters are willing to punish politicians who transgress against democracy. These conflicting findings, I argue, exist because incumbent justifications and democratic defence claims exist in a competitive information environment. The claims that a proposal is democratic or autocratic do not exist in a vacuum but are shaped by the credibility of the democratic defender and the ambiguity of the autocratic action. I aim to advance our understanding of the efficacy of pro-democratic claims be investigating this competitive information environment in more depth.

I posit three central arguments to further this debate. First, I argue that elite democratic defence is instrumental in raising awareness about incumbent-led autocratization (Tomini et al., 2023). In particular, institutional elites inhabiting state institutions play a key role in articulating the antidemocratic nature of proposed autocratic actions. Second, I argue that the efficacy of elite democratic defence depends on the perceived credibility of the elite actor mounting this defence. This, in turn, depends on citizens' perceptions of the elite actors' self-interest (van Lit et al., 2023). I posit whereas "selfless" democratic defence against autocratic proposals targeting a third

democratic institution is perceived to be more credible, opposition against autocratic proposals targeting their own institutions tend to be perceived as less credible. Third, I argue that elite cues are especially important the more "vexing ambiguous" (Bermeo, 2016, p. 15) autocratic actions are, as ambiguity obscures to citizens how the proposal might affect democracy. Contemporary democratic erosion has been characterized by opaque, and often covert, executive aggrandizement, instead of unambiguous electoral manipulation or outright coups (Bermeo, 2016; Daly, 2019; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). These "stealth" forms of autocratization (Varol, 2015; see also Luo & Przeworski, 2023) are hard to recognize for citizens, making elite cues all the more important.

In sum, my overarching argument is that that citizens must adjudicate between the two complex and competing claims of the elite democratic defender (and whether they are credible or not) and the autocratizing incumbent (and whether their justification for the autocratic proposal is ambiguous or not).

I test these claims with a pre-registered factorial survey experiment in three liberal democracies (France, Germany, and The Netherlands, $n = 9.159$). I present respondents with a fictitious news release about autocratization, manipulating the nature of the autocratic action, the justification provided by the incumbent, and a democratic defence by an elite democratic defender. These three elements are randomly varied to examine how they independently affect democracy evaluations of the proposed autocratic action. Since the effect of partisanship and group identity on acquiescence with autocratization is increasingly well established in the literature (Gidengil et al., 2022; Graham & Svolik, 2020; Krishnarajan, 2023; Mazepus & Toshkov, 2022; Simonovits et al., 2022), I study how democratic defence can affect citizens' perceptions of democracy in the absence of identity cues. The fictitious news release is, therefore, situated in a third country (Norway) to abstract citizens' perceptions of democracy from partisan considerations.

The results of the experiment provide some optimism: democratic defence is possible. In many instances, pro-democratic elite cues signal to citizens that democracy is under threat. However, the results should also caution us: democratic defence is hard, as autocratizing incumbents seem to have the wind at their back, while elite democratic defenders fight an uphill battle. Specifically, I find when incumbents justify their autocratic action with an appeal to a positively valenced good (i.e., combating corruption), the action is consistently seen as more democratic – even if democratic defenders voice their concerns about democracy. In fact, I find some evidence that a democratic defence in these cases can actually backfire and make the action seem more democratic than if no defence had taken place.

This chapter advances the literature on democratic resistance against autocratization on two fronts. First, I contribute to the emerging literature on preventing and reversing incumbent-led autocratization (Boese et al., 2021; Cleary & Öztürk, 2022; Gamboa, 2022; Tomini et al., 2023; van Lit et al., 2023). I show that resistance against autocratization is a complex interplay between the autocratizing incumbent, elite democratic defenders, and citizens. Specifically, I find avenues for successful elite democratic defence, but also pitfalls and risks that democratic defenders must avoid. Second, I contribute to the literature on citizen recognition of autocratic actions (Gessler & Kaftan, 2023; Graham & Svolik, 2020; Krishnarajan, 2023; Mazepus & Toshkov, 2022). I show that – even in the absence of partisan cues – citizen evaluations of democracy are easily manipulated by autocratizing incumbents.

To build and test these arguments comprehensively, the chapter is structured as follows. In *Section 2 – Citizens as judges of democracy*, I theorize how elite democratic defence can affect citizen evaluations of policy proposals made by an autocratizing incumbent. I formulate six hypotheses to provide an overarching argument of elite democratic defence, which incorporates perceptions of the ambiguous nature of the autocratic action as well as the credibility of the democratic defender. In *Section 3 – Data and empirical approach* I outline my empirical approach and my original survey experiment, fielded in the Netherlands, France, and Germany ($n = 9.159$). In addition to the pre-registered test of my hypotheses, I explore in *Section 4 – Results* two further extensions of my arguments. First, I explore the theorized causal mechanisms and show that these in fact explain most of the variation in my sample. Second, I explore the effect of elite democratic defence on self-reported political actions, showing muted effects. In *Section 5 – Discussion and conclusion*, I bring these three arguments – my hypotheses about the conditional effects of elite democratic defence, the causal effects of credibility and ambiguity, and the potential for citizen engagement – together, and formulate avenues for future research.

2. Citizens as judges of democracy

Institutional, political and societal elites play an important role in resisting autocratization (Tomini et al., 2023). While the empirical study of autocratization has focused for a long time on the preconditions of democratic recession (Waldner & Lust, 2018) and the strategies employed by authoritarian actors (Morgenbesser, 2020; Schedler, 2002), recent research has made inroads into the conditions under which democracies can be defended against the onset of autocratization (Boese et al., 2021; Tomini et al., 2023; van Lit et al., 2023). This literature on democratic defence

highlights that elite democratic defenders do not (and cannot) stand alone: elites and citizen defence usually need to collaborate to counter autocratization.

On an aggregate level, citizen support for democracy is strongly related to the resilience of democracy (Claassen, 2020). However, on a more micro-level, we know that citizens have diverse (policy) preferences, of which a commitment to democracy is just one. In these strands of research, citizens are asked to weigh the trade-off between certain (policy) preferences on the one hand, and commitment to democracy on the other hand. Increasing evidence shows that democracy often takes the back seat in these trade-offs. Graham and Svolik (2020) and Carey et al. (2020) find that only a small minority of respondents were willing to punish an in-party candidate when they showed disdain for democratic norms. This effect can be due to citizens' strong preference for their own power, but it can also be grounded in citizens taking cues from leader- or party-names in the news, without actually having to consider the policy itself (Bisgaard & Slothuus, 2018; Brader et al., 2012; Nicholson, 2012). In a study on a diverse set of countries, Krishnarajan (2023) shows that citizens are not always conscious of the fact that they trade-off against democracy. Instead, citizens "update" their democracy beliefs: they consider an action that harms democracy actually as democratic, because it aligns with their partisan or policy preference (and vice-versa). Similarly, Mazepus and Toshkov (2022) find that opposition-supporters are more in favour of extending checks and balances on executive power, while government-supporters are more lenient towards limiting them. When their in-party is in government, it is likely that a citizen wants the government to perform well and implement its preferred policies. By extension, any limitations on the achievement of these policies are viewed less favourably.

These studies suggest that citizens are highly susceptible to elite cues about democracy. When reading this with a pessimistic view towards the future of democracy, this implies that citizen commitment to democracy might be inconsistent, dependent on political gain, and full of bias. More optimistically, however, the fluidity of citizens' democracy conceptions also means that they should be susceptible to arguments of pro-democratic actors about the democratic quality of different actions.

My overarching argument, therefore, is that elite pro-democratic counterclaims (i.e. "democratic defences" stating that a proposed autocratic action is, in fact, autocratic) can counter the trade-offs posited by autocratic incumbents. I build this argument by first assessing how the autocratizing incumbents' and democratic defenders' claims affect citizen perceptions of democracy separately. But in reality, these claims and

counterclaims exist in a competitive information environment (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Robison, 2022), so I subsequently theorize how citizen perception is affected when the autocratic claim and democratic counterclaim collide.

2.1 The efficacy of credible democratic defence

In the context of incumbent-led autocratization, the autocratizing incumbent has democratic mandate. This makes it easier for them to push through policies that might harm democracy, as citizens often have neither *a priori* reason to doubt an incumbent's commitment to democracy, nor to question an action's effect on democracy. Much of the scholarship assess only the effects of the autocratizing incumbent's claims (cf. Gessler & Kaftan, 2023). Recent scholarship has begun examining counterclaims, but thus far, there is no conclusive evidence that these counterclaims are persuasive as the incumbents' claims (Hobolt & Osnabrügge, 2024; Wuttke et al., 2024; Wuttke & Foos, 2024). In line with this, I argue that whether citizens perceive a proposal to be autocratic or democratic depends on the presence or absence of a claim about the proposal's democratic nature. When citizens are confronted with a clear signal that an autocratic action is, in fact, autocratic, they likely reconsider their evaluation of the action as less democratic. Specifically, a democratic defence – the claim that a proposal is undemocratic – pinpoints an incumbent's (potential) lack of democratic commitment, underlines that there is harm to democracy, and by extension decreases the perceived democratic quality of the policy. therefore, I expect:

Democratic defence hypothesis *H1*: When a democratic defence is mounted, the autocratic action will be perceived as less democratic than when no democratic defence is mounted.

However, not all democratic defenders are equally credible. I argue that a democratic defence only works as a counterweight to autocratic proposals when they are sufficiently credible. Opposition actors may claim a proposal has adverse effects on democracy for a variety of reasons (Tomini et al., 2023). This also indicates a defence of democracy might occur for disingenuous reasons. Opposition actors might use it as a political ploy, rather than genuinely standing up for democracy. So, while democratic defenders can stand up to defend democracy for a variety of reasons, I argue that their motivation can influence their credibility in the eyes of citizens. Wuttke et al. (2024) find some first evidence for this, concluding that pro-democracy speeches by Republicans after January 6th do not affect citizens' mind about the insurrection. Moreover, previous research has established that a lack of credibility may lead citizens to discount party rhetoric (Bawn & Somer-Topcu, 2012; Enelow &

Munger, 1993; Fernandez-Vazquez, 2019; Lupu, 2013), which in turn can influence citizens' behaviour and preference formation. An actor's credibility may result from competence considerations, but trust in actor's true motives is another source of credibility (Druckman, 2001).

As such, opposition actors who have a certain degree of self-interest in preventing the action might be perceived as less credible by citizens. The claim that a proposal is bad for democracy might not align with citizens' views of the defender if they are perceived to just try to save their own skin. On the contrary when an actor has no "skin in the game" they can be perceived to be more credible in their concern for democracy. Therefore, I hypothesize that a claim about adverse effects for democracy is more credible when it is made by an actor who is less self-interested. Therefore, I expect:

Credibility hypothesis *H2*: When democratic defenders have more self-interest in resisting the autocratic action, the effect of their defence will be less pronounced than when they are less self-interested.[88]

2.2 The "vexing ambiguity" of autocratization

Where the credibility affects the strength of the democratic defence, ambiguity affects the strength of the incumbent. In recent years, we have seen ample examples in which autocratizing incumbents claim to be not *anti-democratic*, but rather *differently-democratic*: Hungary's prime-minister Viktor Orbán's "illiberal democrat" is a paradigmatic example. In addition, autocratic policy proposals are often not clearly, overtly, and unambiguously autocratic (Daly, 2019; Ding & Slater, 2021). Some limits to democratic rule might actually be considered legitimate: curbing freedom of association to benefit public health during a pandemic, curbing freedom of the media for national security, or packing the courts the re-establish some previous balance (Daly, 2022). Research shows that considerations such as public health crises (Engler et al., 2021; Kolvani et al., 2021) and national security concerns (Lührmann & Rooney, 2021) can indeed trump commitment to democracy, both for citizens and elites. Some actions might also have diverging effects on democracy: harming one element of democracy, while safeguarding another. Requiring voter identification disenfranchises some voter groups disproportionately, while it also reduces voter fraud. Clearly, some actions might be democratic in some contexts, while they have an autocratic effect in others. Incumbents can therefore pick and choose justifications (or organizational structures) that seem legal and reasonable on their own. But

[88] I deviate from the preregistration by changing the order and numbering of my hypotheses. The content of the hypotheses is not changed. See the Online Appendix.

they "interact in a horrible way when stitched together," potentially resulting in autocratization nonetheless (Scheppele, 2013; see also Skaaning, 2020; Tomini, 2021). All in all, these dynamics can create a "vexing ambiguity" (Bermeo, 2016, p. 15) around autocratization, in which it is unclear and contested what constitutes autocratization, who is the autocrat, and when autocratization starts.

Incumbent justifications for their actions, in turn, can emphasize and compound this ambiguity, as elites can strongly shape public perception and increase public approval of them (Grose et al., 2015; Levendusky & Horowitz, 2012; McGraw, 1991; Robison, 2022). In the context of autocratization, when a justification for an autocratic proposal is an appeal to a "positively valenced" goal, ambiguity around its (autocratic) nature is introduced. For example, the battle against corruption is in itself a democratic goal, so it is *a priori* not clear why a proposal that is justified with such an appeal might be undemocratic. Therefore, I expect:

Increased ambiguity hypothesis *H3a*: When an incumbent justifies an autocratic action with an appeal to a positively valenced goal, the action will be perceived as more democratic than when no justification is provided.

However, not all justifications are likely to have this effect. When autocratizing incumbents provide a justification that is clearly self-serving (i.e., when they admit that they aim to aggrandize their power), autocratization becomes less ambiguous and more clearly anti-democratic. As such, a justification that is self-serving, it is likely less persuasive to citizens than when no justification is provided. Therefore, I expect:

Decreased ambiguity hypothesis *H3b*: When an incumbent justifies an autocratic action with an appeal to increasing power, the action will be perceived as less democratic than when no justification is provided.

2.3 When credibility and ambiguity collide

In the previous sections, I theorized about the effects of autocratizing incumbents' justifications and democratic defence claims in a one-sided information environment. However in real life, citizens are exposed to both claims more-or-less simultaneously, resulting in a competitive information environment (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Robison, 2022). Citizens must adjudicate between both claims to come to a conclusion about a proposal's "democratic quality". In this competitive information environment, the efficacy of one claim in changing citizens' minds depends on the efficacy of the other claim.

I argue that there are two main factors that are taken into account when citizens adjudicate between competing claims about the democratic quality of a specific proposal: First, I argue the incumbent's justification interacts with the democratic defence. A democratic defence can be more effective, when the justification provided by the autocratizing incumbent is self-serving rather than an appeal to a positively valenced good. When the autocratizing incumbent openly admits they make a proposal to gain more power, and when democratic defenders claim the proposal harms democracy, citizens increasingly follow the democratic defenders. In turn, when the justification appeals to a positively valenced good, the ambiguity depresses the effect a democratic defence might have in comparison. In other words: if the autocratizing incumbent justifies their proposal with a self-serving justification (making autocratization less ambiguous and more blatant), democratic defenders should be able to leverage this, and their claim should hold more weight for citizens than when the incumbent presents a positively valenced justification. Therefore, I expect:

Leverage hypothesis *H4*: When the justification by the incumbent is self-serving, the effect of a democratic defence will be more pronounced than when the incumbent's justification appeals to a positively valenced goal.

Second, however, democratic defenders can likely only leverage this when they are seen as credible. Specifically, when democratic defenders are perceived to be more self-interested in preventing the action, their defence is perceived to be less credible (following the logic for *H2* above), and the proposal is considered comparatively more democratic. A democratic defender's ability to leverage a self-serving justification and their credibility interact: a more credible democratic defender will persuade even more citizens that an action is harmful to democracy when there is no justification, or when the justification is self-serving. Therefore, I expect:

Three-way interaction hypothesis *H5*: Citizens will see an action as least democratic when there is democratic defence, which is mounted by a selfless defender, and when there is no or a self-serving justification for it by the incumbent.

3. Data and empirical approach

To test my hypotheses, I fielded a factorial survey experiment in The Netherlands, France, and Germany in July and August 2023.[89] The survey was in the field from July 14 to July 31 in Germany and the Netherlands and from July 14 to August 3 in France. The survey was administered to a sample of 9.672 respondents by the company *Kieskompas*. *Kieskompas* recruits respondents through a Voting Advice Application (VAA). The panel is based on an opt-in basis, comprising VAA users who express a willingness to be contacted again. Although non-probability samples may result in biased outcomes, research indicates that the effects observed in survey experiments conducted with convenience samples versus population samples do not exhibit significant disparities (Krupnikov et al., 2021). To address selection bias, I apply post-stratification weights to approximate a nationally representative sample (Franco et al., 2017; Miratrix et al., 2018). The weighted sample includes 9.159 respondents.[90]

I field the survey in comparatively stable, well-performing, and arguably consolidated democracies (Germany, France, and the Netherlands) to study democratic defence in cases where democracy still appears to be "the only game in town" (Linz & Stepan, 1996). Recent scholarship has exemplified that autocratization can occur at all levels of democracy: we saw it before in Poland and Hungary, and now in the United States (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018) and Greece (Pappas, 2020; V-Dem, 2023). Therefore, my population of interest is liberal democracies, and not democracies where it is clear that democratic recession has occurred. At the same time, the quality of democracy is a topic of public debate in all three countries, making respondents from those countries likely somewhat familiar with (claims about) autocratization.

The selected cases also differ on important characteristics, which broadens the scope of my generalizability. Germans have, on average, a high satisfaction with, and support for democracy, which has been relatively stable over time since 1990. On average. French citizens score lower than the European median for both support and satisfaction, and Dutch citizens used to score high on both as well, but have seen a marked decline since the 2000s to a level somewhere between Germany and France (Claassen, 2020). Similarly, when it comes to trust in government, the three countries show divergent trajectories: Germany experienced slowly increasing trust

89. The experiment was preregistered prior to data collection, on July 10, 2023, at https://osf.io/gqpfn. The study has been approved by the Ethics Assessment Committee Faculty of Law and Nijmegen School of Management, under number 2022.14. Since I manipulate respondents' perception of the Norwegian political system (see 'Experimental Design' below), I extensively debrief them and provide information at the end of the survey about the high quality of Norwegian democracy.

90. See the Online Appendix for the weighting procedure. I run robustness checks to confirm that my substantive conclusions hold for the unweighted sample as well.

in government since the 2000s (58.8% of respondents expressed trust in government in 2022), while France remained a low-trust society (43.4 % of respondents expressed trust in government in 2021), and the Nether- lands saw a decreasing trust from a high of 78.1% in 2021 to 47.2% in 2022.[91] All three countries have scored consistently high on V-Dem's electoral democracy index (> 0.85 since 1975) and liberal democracy index (> 0.8 since 1982).

As such, the three cases provide divergent contexts within my population of liberal democracies for citizens' views on democracy and susceptibility to opposing claims.

3.1 Experimental design

I implement a 2*2*3 factorial survey experiment, assigning respondents randomly to one of 12 vignettes showing a news release about democracy in Norway: 2 treatments manipulating the absence or presence of a democratic defence; 2 treatments manipulating the democratic defenders' self-interest; and 3 treatments manipulating the autocratizing incumbent's justification (see *Section 3.1.1 - Treatments* and Figures 6.1 and 6.2 below).

I situate the proposal in Norway, firstly, because this allows me to eliminate partisan responses. Previous research shows that a partisan or incumbency-cue has strong effects on respondents evaluation of an action's democratic quality (Graham & Svolik, 2020; Krishnarajan, 2023). I am, on the other hand, interested in the effect of democratic defence in the absence of partisan cues. As discussed, in empirical reality an autocratic proposal or a democratic defence is brought by an actor who often has partisan connotations. However, by including such partisan cues, in becomes impossible to disentangle the partisan effect from other theoretically interesting aspects. To be able to establish whether democratic defence – in and of itself – has an effect on citizen evaluations (and not like or dislike of the autocratizing incumbent or the democratic defender), it is necessary to abstract it away from partisan cues. Secondly, the Norwegian case is a strict yet reasonable test for democratic defenders. Norway presents a least likely case of democratic recession. When asked (pre-treatment), respondents evaluate Norwegian democracy at 6.23 (SD = 0.97, on a scale of 1 to 7). This means that respondents recognize Norway as (very) democratic and indicates that any autocratic action should be recognized as autocratic. However,

91. OECD (2022). *Building Trust to Reinforce Democracy*, https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/building-trust-to-reinforce-democracy_b407f99c-en.html

challenges to democracy are also not entirely unlikely in Norway.[92] Thirdly, presenting the case of Norway to respondents in other liberal democracies strengthens my connection to the population of interest. If I would have shown respondents a similar scenario in well-known and broadly-published case such as Hungary, I risk probing respondents' knowledge and evaluation of what they read about the case before, rather than the effects of my treatments.

The news release informs respondents about new legislation with an autocratic character proposed by the Norwegian prime minister (see Figure 6.2 for the full text and the design of the vignette). In the news release, I manipulate three dimensions: the presence/absence of democratic defence, the credibility of the democratic defender, and the ambiguity of the autocratic action. The news release moreover emphasizes that this a proposal, not passed legislation, and that *parliament will consider the proposal in the next session*, to increase both its ecological validity and underline that the democratic rules of the game appear to be followed. I now discuss all three experimental conditions in detail.

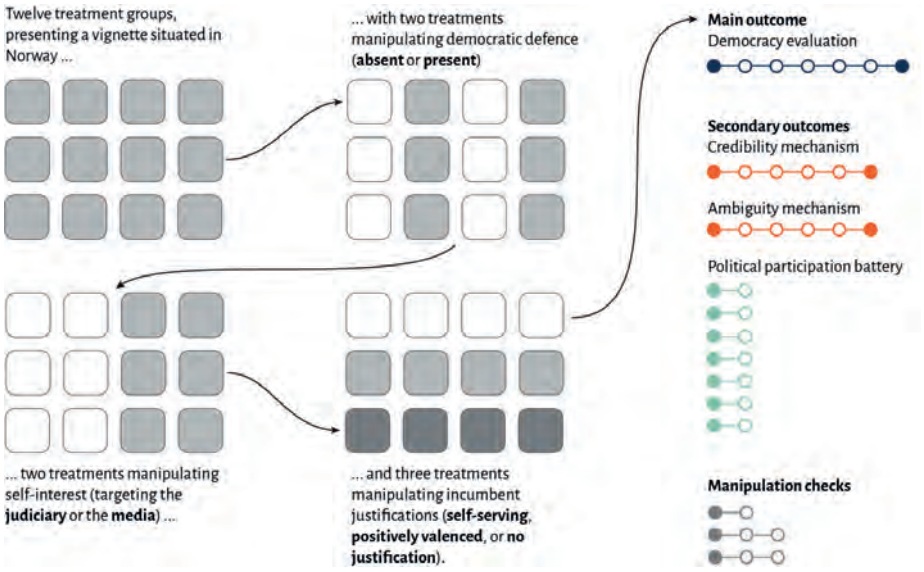


Figure 6.1: The experimental block in the survey. Each of the twelve treatment groups has approximately 750 respondents. See for a precise overview the Online Appendix. Please note I ask additional questions pre- and post-treatment. See for a full overview the Online Preregistration.

92. See this corruption scandal in the Norwegian Supreme Court: "Skoghøy-saken: - Høyesteretts fremgangsmåte reiser prinsipielle spørsmål", *Avondbladet*, 21 April 2023, https://www.advokatbladet.no/hoyesterett-skoghoy/skoghoy-saken-hoyesteretts-fremgangsmate-reiser-prinsipielle-sporsmal/193936; Transparency International (2022). *CPI 2022: Trouble at the Top*, https://www.transparency.org/en/news/cpi-2022-trouble-at-the-top.

3.1.1 Treatments

To test the democratic defence hypothesis (*H1*), the absence or presence of elite democratic defence is manipulated with two conditions. The baseline treatment is the absence of any democratic defence (no statement by the Supreme Court). Its presence is manipulated by the statement that *Norway's Supreme Court, however, has issued a strongly negative opinion, opposing the proposal*. Extant research indicates that judges are a most likely case of democratic defenders, as independent and active judiciaries are paramount in preventing autocratization (Boese et al., 2021; Tomini et al., 2023; Zambrano et al., 2024). Courts have strong persuasive powers, especially in liberal democracies, to signal threats to democracy.[93]

To test the credibility hypothesis (*H2*) I vary the democratic defenders' credibility by manipulating elite democratic defender's self-interest in preventing the autocratic action. I do so by manipulating the target of the autocratic action. In the baseline, "selfless" treatment, the incumbent's proposal limits media independence by proposing to create a new organization that has the power to *withdraw the license of public broadcasters*. In other words: the Supreme Court is defending another organization. The "self-interest" treatment, in turn, is an autocratic action that affects judicial independence by proposing an organization that has the power to *dismiss Supreme Court judges*. My reasoning is here that if the autocratic action targets Supreme Court judges, these judges also have a self-interest in issuing a negative opinion about it, while if the action targets the media, judges do not have a direct self-interest in preventing this. Self-interest, in this sense, is materialistic self-interest: judges have a material incentive to safeguard their own jobs and own independence. Selfless democratic defence, on the other hand, is this lack of material self-interest: judges who defend against media independence.

To test both ambiguity hypotheses (*H3a* and *H3b*), I vary the ambiguity of the autocratic action by manipulating the justification by the incumbent. Here, the baseline treatment is the absence of any justification: similar to the absence of a democratic defence, I show respondents no additional information. I manipulate the "positive valence justification" by an accompanying statement of the incumbent that the proposal needs to be implemented *with the argument that this new organization will combat rising corruption in the [media/judiciary]*. In turn, the "self-serving justification" is manipulated with a statement that the proposal needs to be implemented,

93. I corroborate this logic by asking respondents (pre-treatment) to evaluate how much they trust different institutions in their own country. Respondents trust courts the most (*mean = 4.70, SD = 1.61*), followed by the media (*mean = 3.69, SD = 1.59*).

Norwegian prime minister proposes new legislation

yesterday

OSLO, Norway — The prime minister of Norway proposed to create a new organisation that has the power to dismiss Supreme Court judges. The prime minister will appoint the members for this new organisation. The proposal is supported by the prime minister's governing party with the argument that this new organisation will combat rising corruption in the judiciary. Norway's Supreme Court has issued a strongly negative opinion, opposing the proposal. The parliament has announced it will discuss the prime minister's proposal in its next session.

Figure 6.2: Example vignette of treatment group 1. The treatments are underlined for clarity here but had plain formatting in the actual survey. See the *Section 3.1.1 - Treatments* for the *verbatim* formulation of the other treatments.

with the argument that this new organization will increase the government's control over the [media/judiciary].

The leverage hypothesis (*H4*) and the three-way interaction hypothesis (*H5*) are tested with an interaction between the treatments.

3.1.2 Experimental realism

All elements in the vignette are based on empirical examples of incumbent-led democratic recession to ensure ecological validity and experimental realism. First of all, the autocratic proposal in the vignette is not a presented as a "done deal" but will still be discussed in parliament. This is included to show respondents that the incumbent is adhering to procedural democratic norms and is not outright and overtly autocratizing. Second, the proposal is about "new organization", not about changes to an already existing organization. As such, I do not require respondents to know about the pre-existing characteristics of democratic institutions in Norway. In addition, by stating that "the prime minister will appoint members for this new organization", I show respondents that the new organization will be completely under control of the incumbent to further emphasize its potential for executive aggrandizement. Furthermore, media-licenses have been threatened by incumbents in among others Venezuela (García-Guadilla & Mallen, 2019; Kaufman & Haggard, 2019), Belarus (Trantidis, 2022), and Hungary (Bánkuti et al., 2012; Herman, 2016). Disciplinary chambers against judges have come in the spotlight predominantly because of the Polish case (Sadurski, 2019a). But similar control over the judiciary in the context of autocratization has been observed in among others Ecuador

(Freeman, 2020), the Maldives (Musthaq, 2014), and again Hungary (Bakke & Sitter, 2022). Autocratization has been legitimized with reference to anti-corruption measures globally, from Hungary, to Suriname, to Indonesia, but it is also a genuine political goal of democratic incumbents. The formulation of the democratic defence-treatment is taken from the Polish National Judicial Council when confronted with the possible establishment of a disciplinary chamber.[94] The vignette is formatted as a news-release to further enhance its realism (see Figure 6.2 for an example).

Despite my efforts to make the vignette externally valid, I recognize this experiment is an abstraction of empirical reality. I designed the vignette with a focus mostly on internal validity (i.e. treatment validity Egami & Hartman, 2023). As such, I take the treatments from empirical examples, designed as a news release. Because my main focus is on assessing the effects of causes – specifically the effects of democratic defences in the context of competing claims – I sacrifice some external, contextual validity. I combat this by fielding the experiment in a variety of contexts (the Netherlands, France, and Germany), and assess the effects of my treatments in these sub samples separately in the Online Appendix. I reflect on how my results travel to other contexts in *Section 5 – Discussion and conclusion*.

3.2 Outcome variables and hypotheses testing

After receiving the experimental treatments, respondents are routed to a series of questions that tap into their evaluations of the democratic quality of the proposal. The main outcome of interest is their answer to the question *[t]o what extent do you think this action would make Norway more or less democratic?*, answered on a 7-point Likert scale, where higher scores indicate respondents find it *more* democratic. In addition, I ask two questions to tap into the causal mechanisms underlying my experimental findings (see below). The experiment concludes with three manipulation checks. Respondents who fail the manipulation checks are included in the analysis per my preregistration: robustness checks shows that my conclusions hold when controlling for attention and manipulation (see the Online Appendix). The estimation of the models is explicated in the Online Appendix. I run balance checks on all covariates

94. KRS. "Opinion of the National Council of the Judiciary regarding the Government's Draft Act on the National Council of the Judiciary." March 7, 2017, https://www.krs.pl/en/resolutions-positions-of-the-council.html.

included in the survey and only include those that were unbalanced.[95] I analyse several heterogeneous treatment effects (for country, political ideology, and party-affiliation) and find that my results hold across subgroups. Even though these contexts appear to be important to some degree (and warrant further research), these results strengthen the external validity of my argument, as I show that the overarching argument presented in this chapter travels between different liberal democracies. To ease interpretation, the results of my models are presented graphically: higher scores consistently indicate that respondents evaluate the proposal in the vignette as more democratic (and consequently that democratic defence, if present, has mattered less). All full regression tables can be found in the Online Appendix).

3.3 Mechanism testing

I argue the effects of incumbent justifications for autocratic proposals and democratic defence claims occur because citizens perceive them as ambiguous or credible. To assess these mechanisms, I ask respondents two post-treatment questions:

To examine the credibility-mechanism empirically, I ask those respondents who saw a democratic defence about the democratic defender's perceived intention, with the question: *thinking about the Norwegian Supreme Court: if you had to choose, what is the most likely motivation of the Supreme Court behind their opinion on the new organization?* The answer options ranged from 1: *Genuinely believes the new organization harms democracy* to 6: *[selfishly] thinks [judges/journalists] might lose their job.*[96] I recoded respondents' answers so that higher scores indicate that the democratic defence is perceived to be more motivated by commitment to democracy (i.e. more credible).

To examine the ambiguity-mechanism empirically, I ask all respondents *what do you personally think is more important in a democratic country?* The answer options ranged from 1: *fighting corruption / that the government is in control* to 6: *that judges cannot be easily dismissed / that media licenses cannot easily be withdrawn* – depending on what the vignette read. This question captures the ambiguity around the proposal as it asks respondents to trade-off democratic ideals (judicial independence and

95. The measured variables are: political trust, satisfaction with democracy, support for democracy (in general), support for liberal democracy, trust in political institutions, sex, education, birth year, vote at the previous elections, income, employment, and region. See the Online Preregistration for the exact questions. Only the variable measuring commitment to free and fair elections (*post_libdem_frelect*) was unbalanced and therefore included. For parsimony, it is not shown in the visualizations, but it is included in the regression models.

96. For answer-option 6, "selfishly" was shown when the autocratic action in the vignette targets the judiciary, to contrasts their commitment to democracy with selfish job-security. Due to a coding-error in the survey-flow, the credibility-question was only shown to Dutch respondents who saw a democratic defence, n = 1.544.

media independence) for some other policy-goal (fighting corruption or executive aggrandizement). Since the fight against corruption can be considered a democratic goal in itself (similar to judicial or media independence), the choice between corruption and judicial or media independence is not so clear-cut. As such, if this justification indeed introduces ambiguity, respondents might be tempted to shift their answer to the justification-side of the scale rather than the judicial or media independence-side of the scale. In contrast, a self-serving justification clearly runs opposite to democratic ideals, making the choice for respondents more clear-cut. Since this justification is not expected to introduce ambiguity, I expect respondents to answer more towards the judicial or media independence-side of the scale. I recoded respondents' answer so that higher scores indicate respondents are more likely to follow the autocratizing incumbent's justification (i.e. more ambiguity).

I analyse both mechanisms with a mediation analysis employing weighted Structural Equation Models. In the Online Appendix I show that my conclusions hold when I run standard OLS regression with the mediators (credibility and ambiguity) as the outcomes of my experimental treatments.

3.4 Participation battery

Since citizen participation is crucial in defending democracy (Gamboa, 2022; van Lit et al., 2023), an attitudinal evaluation of autocratic proposals is likely not sufficient. I therefore also explore whether democratic defence can motivate citizens to engage in political action. Respondents' denouncement of anti-democratic action is arguably relatively "cheap": especially when thinking about a hypothetical in a different country, respondents incur no personal costs (time, repression, effort, et cetera) for their critical stance. In line with Carey et al. (2020), I therefore take citizens' intended political participation as a stricter test of their commitment to democracy. Specifically, I ask respondents to evaluate to what extent they would participate in politics to stop the autocratic action from happening,[97] with the question *Imagine that you live in Norway, are allowed to vote there, and that you had to react to the proposal.*

97. In light of the findings about 'questionnaire democrats' (Dalton et al., 2007), I recognize that my battery of political participation items runs the risk of still being 'cheap' and effortless for respondents, especially since they require respondents to incorporate multiple abstractions ('imagine this happens in Norway, imagine you are allowed to vote, what would you do'). However, we argue these items are still somewhat more costly for respondents compared to the main dependent variable, the proposals' democracy evaluation. In addition, the muted findings are even more pessimistic if we take this participation battery to be 'cheap'. Our empirical findings suggest that, even in a comparatively 'cheap' scenario, citizens are changing their likelihood to participate in politics significantly more so after the incumbent's justification, than after a democratic defense, where a 'cheap' battery would invite more responses following the democratic defence.

Would you do any of the following in reaction to the prime- minister's proposal? Answer options include *Vote for the prime minister in the next elections* (recoded in the analysis so its direction aligns with the other items); *Display a poster opposing the proposal in your window; Try to persuade people you know to oppose the proposal; Sign a petition against the proposal; Join a demonstration against the proposal that was approved by the police; Contact a politician or political party to voice your opposition to the proposal*; or *Join a demonstration against the proposal that was not approved by the police* (based on Jenkins et al., 2008; van der Meer et al., 2009; van Deth, 2022). Respondents were allowed to select none, one, or multiple answers. Three items measure respondents' willingness to express their opinion (vote, poster, discuss); three items measure respondents' willingness to actively involve themselves in politics (peaceful protest, contact, unapproved protest); while the last measures a middle ground (petition). The participation-items are measured on a binary scale and summed into a full participation-battery. As with the main analysis, I analyse this using weighted linear regression, including the unbalanced covariate. See the Online Appendix for the full regression table.

4. Results: Does elite democratic defence matter?

Can judicial elites convince citizens that a proposed action is undemocratic and autocratic? Do citizens react differently when the judicial elites have a self-interest in pre- venting the action? And does the justification provided by the autocratizing incumbent change citizens' democracy perceptions? My findings show that while democratic defence matters, its efficacy depends on the competitiveness of the informational environment: the democratic defenders' credibility and on the action's ambiguity (increased or decreased through the incumbent's justification).

Before I turn to my main findings, I make two important preliminary observations. First, I note that the intercept of my models is rather low: *[1.59 - 1.80]* across models. The intercept captures respondents' mean evaluation of the proposal when there is no incumbent justification and no democratic defence. And since I find no difference between the proposal against media independence and judicial independence (see below), this is cause for some (very) careful optimism. It namely suggests that – in the absence of partisan cues — respondents are clearly able to evaluate the autocratic proposals as autocratic.

Considering that my autocratic action-treatments do not directly target the most obvious violations of democracy, such as free and fair elections, it is a good omen that a large majority of Dutch, French, German respondents recognize that limiting media freedom

or judicial independence harms democracy. A methodological caveat here is that there is a floor-effect for my coefficients. Since the proposals are already deemed rather autocratic without taking into account the hypothesized effects of elite democratic defence or incumbents' justifications, the substantive effects found are rather small.

Second, I find no statistically significant difference in respondents' evaluations of proposals that limit judicial independence and proposals that limit media independence ($\beta = 0.04$, $p < 0.109$, see the top row, *target: judiciary*, in Figure 6.3). Methodologically, this indicates that these two treatments are equivalent in affecting respondents' outcome answers. Substantively, this suggests the interaction effects between the autocratic action and judicial democratic defence are not driven by differences in the action but instead tap into the self-interest dimension as I designed them to do.

4.1 The conditional effect of democratic defence

First, I examine democratic defence impacts how democratic a proposal is evaluated. I hypothesized that elite democratic defence gives respondents informational cues that the incumbent's proposal is in fact autocratic (*H1*). The second row in Figure 6.3 (*democratic defence*: *present*, across all three models) shows that this is the case (see the Online Appendix for the full regression results). On average, when a democratic defence is present, the incumbent's proposal is seen as less democratic than when democratic defence is absent, confirming hypothesis *H1* ($\beta = -0.10$, $p < 0.001$).

However, the success of democratic defence cannot be seen separately from the democratic defender. I argued when the democratic defender can be perceived as materially self-interested, their defence is seen as not genuine and, therefore, less credible (*H2*). Model 2, fifth row, in Figure 6.3 shows the result of the interaction effect (*judiciary* × *democratic defence*). It shows clear empirical support for this hypothesis. A proposal is seen as more democratic when Supreme Court judges defend judicial independence of the Supreme Court than when judges defend the public broadcaster's media independence. In other words, when elites have a material self-interest in their democratic defence respondents evaluate the proposal to be more democratic than when elites defend another organization. I thus find evidence for this interaction effect, supporting hypothesis *H2* ($\beta = 0.13$, $p = 0.017$).

There are two implications that can be drawn from this. First, it implies that democratic defence cannot be seen separate from the autocratic action and the democratic defender. While this seems obvious given that a defence is always in response to an attack, this also provides complex problems for defenders. It implies that the political context matters, and that democratic defence is more than a "simple"

call on democratic preferences or democratic commitment. Second, however, when judges speak out against a proposal challenging judicial independence, the proposal is seen as *more* democratic than when judges do not defend democracy. So not only does democratic defence work better when it is selfless rather than self-interested, this experiment provides evidence that a defence by a self-interested democratic defender can *backlash*. The proposal is seen as more legitimate and democratic when a self-interested actor issues a "strongly negative opinion" about it. This could indicate that citizens perceive a democratic defence by a self-interested actor as a clear sign that there is something amiss with that defender and that they should be stopped or contained. In other words: a self-interested defence might be evidence to citizens that the autocratizing incumbent is actually doing the right thing in curbing the defender's independence.

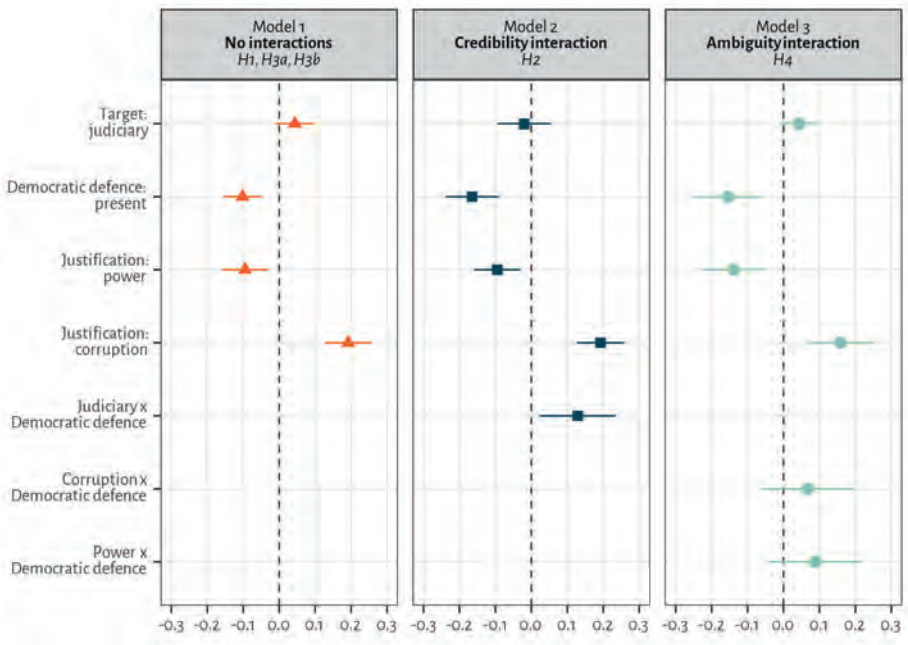


Figure 6.3: Point estimates and 95% confidence intervals from OLS regression (see the Online Appendix for the full table). Higher scores mean that respondents evaluate the proposals in the vignette as *more* democratic (and consequently that democratic defence, if present, has mattered less).

4.2 The effects of incumbent justifications

Turning to the claims of the autocratizing incumbent, I expected that their justifications affect respondents' evaluations. I hypothesized that incumbents' justifications obfuscate the undemocratic nature of autocratic actions and make their autocratic consequences more ambiguous by appealing to positive outcomes, such as combating corruption (*H3a*). The fourth row in Figure 6.3 (*justification: corruption*, across all models) shows indeed that respondents evaluate an autocratic action that is justified with an appeal to a positively valenced justification as more democratic than when no justification is presented ($\beta = 0.19$, $p < 0.001$, supporting hypothesis *H3a*).

I also argued that an incumbent's justifications might reveal "autocratic intent" to citizens. Hypothesis *H3b* stated that when the autocratizing incumbent makes clear that they aim to expand their own powers, this has negative effects on respondents' evaluations. I find support for hypothesis *H3b* in Figure 3, across all models, third row (*justification: power*): when autocratizing incumbents appeal to executive aggrandizement with a self-serving justification, citizens perceive the proposal to make Norway less democratic, compared to when no justification is presented ($\beta = -0.09$, $p = 0.004$).

The leverage hypothesis *H4* posited that that democratic defenders should in some cases be able to leverage an incumbent justification. I expected democratic defence would be less effective if a positively valenced justification is present compared to no justification; and more effective if a self-serving justification is present compared to no justification. I find no evidence for this in Figure 6.3, Model 3, sixth row (*corruption × democratic defence*, $\beta = 0.07$, $p = 0.304$); or in Model 3, the bottom row (*power × democratic defence*, $\beta = 0.09$, $p = 0.178$). Hence, democratic defenders do not seem to be able leverage an incumbent's justification to make the autocratic nature of the proposal even clearer. That said, a more nuanced picture emerges when I estimate the three-way interactions between democratic defence, incumbent justification, and the target of autocratic action.

4.3 The effects in the competitive information environment

In the three-way hypothesis *H5*, I postulated that the effect of democratic defence depends both on the perceived self-interest of the democratic defender, as well as the justification provided by the autocratizing incumbent in a three-way interaction. Specifically, I hypothesized that democratic defence is most effective when the defender is selfless and when no justification or a self-serving justification was provided, compared to all other combinations of democratic defence and incumbent justifications. As I show below, I find no clear-cut evidence for this. At the same time, Figure 6.4 shows that democratic defence and incumbent justifications do interact in interesting and complex ways.

To facilitate interpretation I class the treatments into three sub-groups: when there is no democratic defence, a self-interested democratic defence (i.e. the judiciary defending against a proposal to limit judicial independence), and a selfless democratic defence (i.e. the judiciary defending against a proposal to limit media independence).[98]

First, in the *absence* of democratic defence (the square points in Figure 6.4) the positively valenced justification makes the proposal seem most democratic (*marginal mean = 2.13, 95% confidence intervals = [2.07; 2.20]*)[99] and the self-serving justification makes the autocratic action seem least democratic (*1.84 [1.78; 1.90]*), compared to when no justification is given (*1.98 [1.92; 2.05]*). Second, a *selfless* democratic defence (the circular points) lowers citizens' democracy evaluations, even in the presence of a positively valenced justification. Third, there is evidence that a *self-interested* democratic defence (the triangular points) impacts respondent democracy evaluations less than a selfless democratic defence. This is especially clear when a positively valenced justification is presented (*2.21 [2.11; 2.30]*, compared to 1.90). In fact, when a self-interested democratic defence is mounted against an action is justified with an appeal to a positively valenced good, democratic defence does not significantly change respondents' democracy evaluation (*2.21 [2.11; 2.30]*, compared to 2.13, when there is no democratic defence).

These observations combined provide insights into the competitive information environment of democratic defence, showing the difficulties of democratic defence. When elites are materially self-interested they can successfully defend democracy, but only if the incumbent is unambiguously autocratic. When the incumbent introduces ambiguity by an appeal to a positively valenced good, democratic defence becomes harder and self- interested democratic defenders fail to effectively cue autocratization to citizens. When the autocratic proposal is more ambiguous, only selfless democratic defenders can effectively cue autocratization to citizens.

In conclusion my main findings are that first of all elite democratic defence does matter.[100] When a democratic defender speaks out about the autocratic nature of an incumbent's autocratic proposal, many citizens are willing to be critical of the

98. I deviate from my preregistration by analysing the three-way interaction across three rather than four subgroups. I show in the Online Appendix that my conclusions hold when looking at four sub- groups.

99. To make the comparisons easier, I switch to presenting the marginal means and 95% confidence intervals here (but see the Online Appendix for the full regression results).

100. The Online Appendix shows that these results hold when I estimate heterogeneous treatment effects across party, ideology, and country sub samples. I argue this is not only an indication of substantial effects of interest, but also that my findings are generalizable to the wider population of liberal and consolidated democracies.

incumbent (supporting *H1*). Second, the more selfless democratic defenders are, the more their democratic defence is able to affect citizens (supporting *H2*). Third, the autocratizing incumbent can, in contrast, also affect citizens' perceptions by providing justifications for the autocratic proposal (supporting *H3a* and *H3b*). However, I find no clear-cut evidence that democratic defenders can leverage these justifications.

When I look at the full informational environment, taking into account both the position of the defender (self-interested or selfless) and the incumbent justification (self- serving or positively valenced), I thus find some evidence that selfless democratic defence against ambiguous autocratization can change citizens' minds (in partial support of *H5*). But this success is tenuous at best, because when democratic defenders appear to be self-interested and react to such a proposal, the defence fails to convince citizens. This is in line with my general theoretical premise that democratic defenders face an uphill battle. I explore this uphill battle further in the next section. I delve deeper into by exploring the causal mechanisms underpinning the effects of democratic defence and incumbent justifications in the next section.

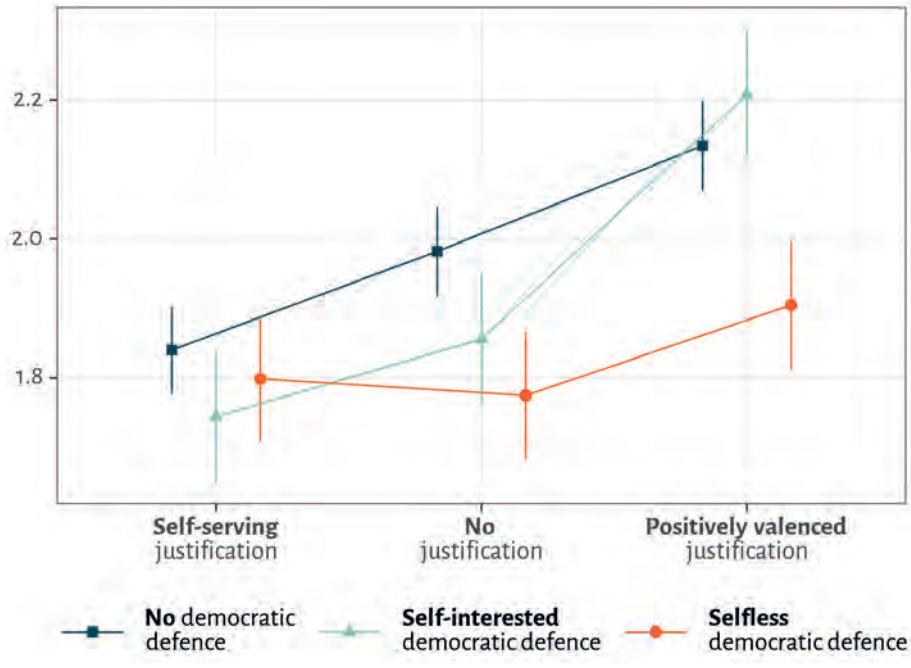


Figure 6.4: Marginal means with 95% confidence intervals of the effects of different types of democratic defence. The lines connecting the dots are added to provide clarity for how to interactions crosscut. Higher scores mean the vignette is evaluated as *more* democratic (and consequently that democratic defence, if present, has mattered less).

4.4 Explanations of the causal effects

I theorized that the conditional effects of democratic defence are caused by whether respondents perceive democratic defenders as *credibly* committed to democracy or, conversely, materially self-interested. Moreover, I theorized that the efficacy of incumbent justifications depends on whether they increase or decrease the autocratic action's *ambiguity*. In this section, I show that these causal arguments hold empirically employing a Structural Equation Model. To facilitate interpretation, I show the results graphically in Figure 6.5, but the Online Appendix shows the results of the full mediation analysis, including goodness of fit-measures and included but not shown covariates. All three models satisfy the standard goodness of fit-requirements. The Online Appendix also shows that standard OLS models with the mediators as outcomes (of the treatments) and predictors (of the democracy evaluation) lead to the same substantive conclusions.

When it comes to credibility, the theorized causal mechanism postulated that a self-interested democratic defence decreases the perceived credibility of the defender. If defenders lack credibility, respondents should in turn evaluate the proposal as more democratic. Figure 6.5, panel A shows that when the democratic defender is self-interested (i.e. the judiciary defending against a proposal to limit judicial independence), they are perceived to be significantly more motivated by their own material self-interest and job-security than by their commitment to democracy ($\beta = -0.17$, $p = 0.02$). In turn, the more credible democratic defenders are, the less democratic the proposal is evaluated by respondents ($\beta = -0.36$, $p < 0.001$); or conversely when democratic defenders are seen as less committed to democracy (because they appear to be more materially self-interested), the proposal is seen as more democratic.

Substantively, this is first evidence that democratic defence works *when* democratic defenders appear to be genuinely committed to democracy. If they do not appear to be genuinely committed to democracy but instead are perceived to be motivated by material self-interest, democratic defence does not work. My results show elite defenders' credibility is a causal factor in how respondents evaluate autocratization attempts.

Turning to ambiguity, the theorized causal mechanism posited that a positively valenced justification (i.e. an appeal to the fight against corruption) increases respondents' perceptions of ambiguity, which in turn should lead to higher democracy evaluations; while a self-serving justification has the opposite effect.

Figure 6.5, panel B shows that when the autocratic action is justified with an appeal to a positively valenced goal, this justification is seen as more important in democracy than media- or judicial independence, indicating increased ambiguity ($\beta = 1.10$,

$p < 0.001$). Conversely, panel C shows than when the autocratizing incumbent employs a self-serving justification, respondents lean towards the media- and judicial independence rather than the justification, indicating a lack of ambiguity ($\beta = -1.26$, $p < 0.001$). In turn, any increase in ambiguity increases how democratic respondents evaluate the proposal to be ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < 0.001$; and $\beta = 0.25$, $p < 0.001$). This is first evidence that justifications can veil the autocratic nature of proposals *because* the proposal's ambiguity (or lack thereof) is a causal factor in how respondents evaluate autocratization attempts.

Based on these results, when ambiguity and credibility collide, I argue it is ambiguity that appears to prevail. Not only do my main findings show that incumbents are able to mask the autocratic nature of their proposals, but this ambiguity is also picked up to a large extent by citizens. Credibility, on the other hand, plays a smaller role for democratic defenders. Yes, citizens who believe the judiciary is genuinely committed to democracy are more likely to heed their democratic defence. However, the effect of a positively valenced justification on ambiguity is substantially larger than the effect of a selfless democratic defence. In other words: it appears to be harder to be perceived as a credible democratic defender, than it is for an incumbent to make autocratization seem democratic. In addition, the direct effect of a self-serving justification on the democracy evaluation ($\beta = 0.13$, $p < 0.001$) suggests there are likely some respondents for whom any justification – self-serving or positively valenced – is sufficient to make a proposal seem democratic. Finally, any justification appears to lower the credibility of the democratic defender. This is in line with my initial assumption that democratic defence is possible, but that the defenders are facing an uphill battle. It is easier for an autocratizing incumbent in a democratic country to delegitimize the democratic defenders, than it is for democratic defenders to appear credibly committed to democracy.

4.5 Does democratic defence result in citizen participation?

My findings show that both elite democratic defenders and the autocratizing incumbent have sway over respondents' democracy perceptions – albeit to different degrees. Therefore, I now assess whether elite democratic defence results in citizen participation, as it is often crucial in the defence of democracy.

Worryingly, I find that elite democratic defence does not result in citizen political participation. Figure 6.6 shows that the driving force behind political participation is the justification, never the democratic defence. This holds for the full participation battery as well as for the individual items, suggesting that citizens are likely more driven by discontent over specific proposals, than by commitment to democracy. In line with my expectations, a positively valenced justification decreases political participation, while a self-serving justification increases political participation. In

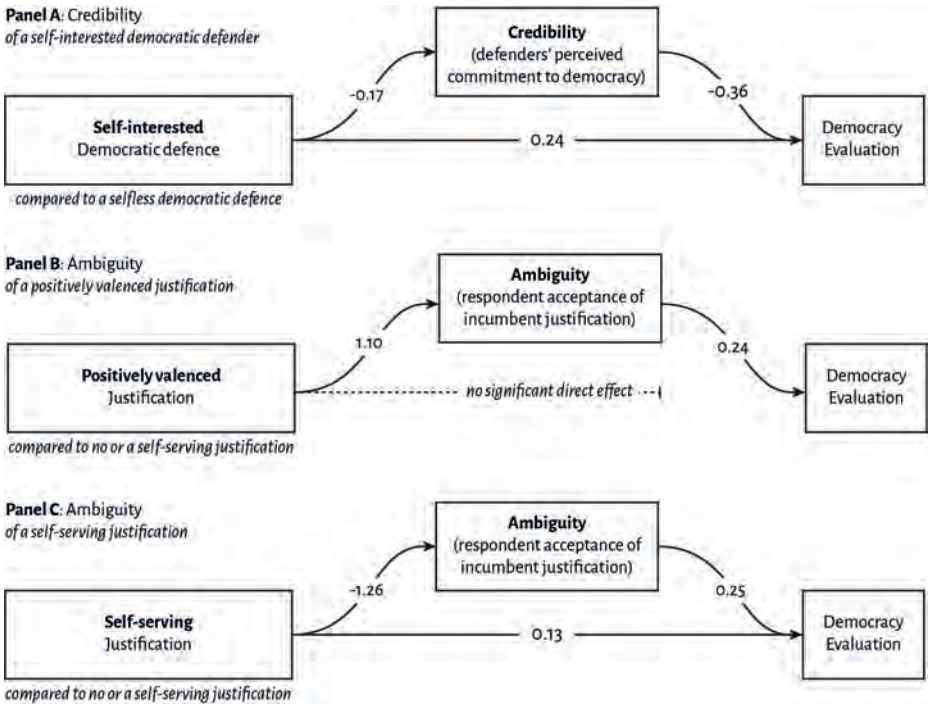


Figure 6.5: The mediation of ambiguity and credibility. Other treatments and unbalanced covariates are included in the analysis but are not included in the figure. All coefficients are significant at $\alpha = 0.05$. See the Online Appendix for the full results. Higher democracy evaluations indicate respondents find the proposal *more* democratic (and consequently that democratic defence, if present, has mattered less).

general, a positively valenced hypotheses reduces political participation more than a self-serving justification increases it.

A closer look at the individual items reveals two interesting patterns. The effect sizes appear to confirm that less costly options (expressing opinion through vote-change, hanging up a poster, or trying to persuade acquaintances) are more palatable to respondents than more costly options (protesting or contacting a politician). Secondly, there is a notable finding in respondents' willingness to join a lawful protest: they are significantly more likely to join a protest when the judiciary is targeted than when media are targeted. I provide two tentative explanations here but emphasize that citizens' participation in democratic defence requires further research. The likelihood to participate in defence of the judiciary might be due to the salience of citizen protests against judicial reforms in Israel in news reporting during the time the survey was in the field. As such, joining a protest might have been the option that was more front of mind for respondents when it comes to defending the judiciary than defending the media. Secondly, it might be possible that

an independent judiciary is seen as more important for democracy than independent media and requires more swift citizen action to defend. Overall, these findings show the need to look beyond attitudinal evaluations of autocratization and democratic defence to include behavioural aspects.

In sum, all my findings reinforce the conclusion that elite democratic defence is possible, but challenging and complex. Even in a liberal democratic country as Norway, the autocratizing incumbent often has the upper hand.

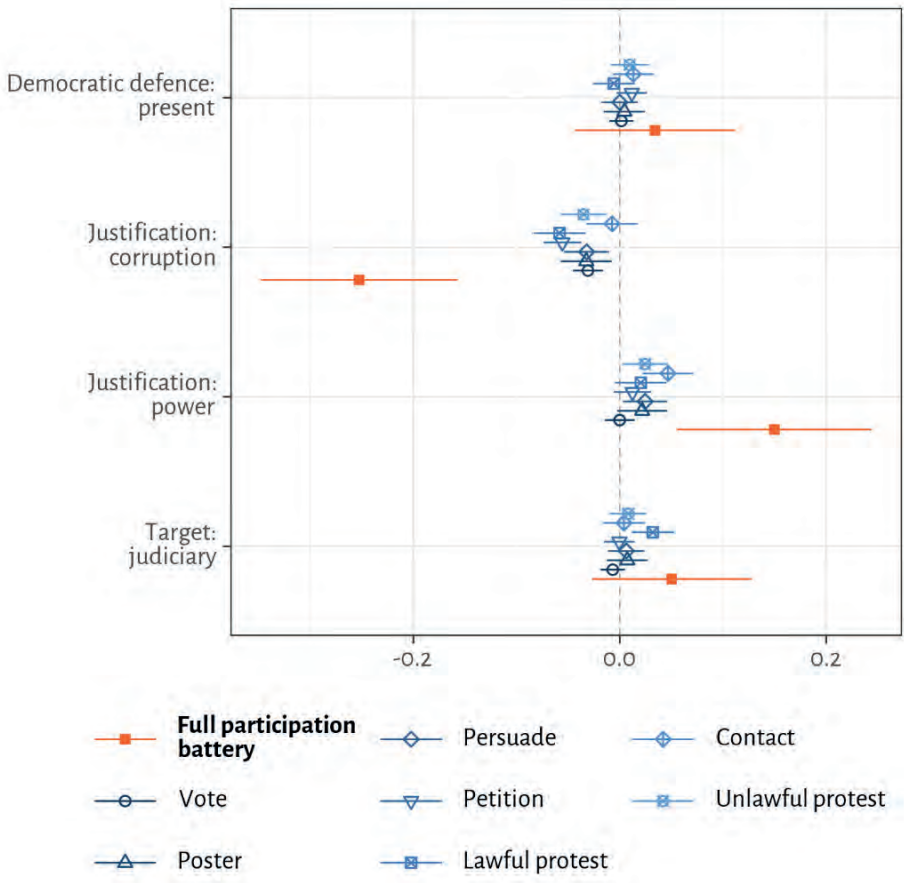


Figure 6.6: Coefficient plot with 95% confidence intervals for the participation battery: democratic defence does not result in political participation. The full participation battery ranges from 1 to 7, while the individual items are binary. Higher scores mean respondents are more likely to engage in that form of political participation. See the full regression results in the Online Appendix.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Democracies around the world face the challenge of democratic recession: democratically elected incumbents who seek to aggrandize executive power at the expense of democratic norms and principles. Scholarship has established that citizens are, to a large extent, susceptible to accept violations of democratic norms – specially in polarized contexts or when proposed by a party or candidate the citizen supports. I build on this literature and seek to understand under what circumstances citizens follow a democratic defender who posits a pro-democratic counterclaim to these autocratic proposals.

My argument in this chapter is threefold. One, resistors against autocratization – democratic defenders – provide a counter narrative that a proposal harms democracy. They aim to persuade citizens that autocratic action is, in fact, autocratic. For many citizens, this should cue their commitment to democracy, and result in a lower evaluation of the democratic quality of the proposal. However, two, it is hard for democratic defenders to appear genuinely committed to democracy. In many cases, defenders can be perceived to have an ulterior motive (job security, political gain) to accuse the incumbent of autocratization. That is: not all democratic defenders are always credible in their defence. Moreover, three, autocratizing incumbents can try to make autocratization seem as legitimate and democratic as possible. By appealing to positively valenced goods (operationalized in the experiment as the fight against corruption), autocratizing incumbents aim to persuade citizens that the autocratic action is either not autocratic or necessary. I call this the ambiguous nature of autocratic action. Overall, I argue that citizen response to elite democratic defence (and by extension, citizen evaluation of the democratic quality of the proposal) is determined by a trade-off between the elite democratic defenders' credibility and the autocratic action's ambiguity (van Lit et al., 2023).

To test this, I fielded a factorial experiment in the Netherlands ($n = 3.012$), Germany ($n = 3.201$), and France ($n = 2.945$), for a total of 9.158 respondents, in July and August 2023. In this experiment, I manipulated three experimental conditions: the justification provided by the autocratizing incumbent (to simulate whether autocratization is ambiguous or not), the target of the proposal (to simulate defenders' self-interest when their institution is targeted), and the presence or absence of a democratic defence. Importantly, the vignette simulated autocratic action in Norway, a country that respondents very clearly identified as democratic, but likely do not have strong partisan or incumbency knowledge about. As such, I eliminate party-effects and

incumbency-effects and allow respondents to completely focus on the autocratic action and the democratic defence.

The experiment provides strong, yet nuanced, evidence for all three of my arguments. First of all: elite democratic defence does matter. When a democratic defender speaks out about the autocratic nature of an incumbent's autocratic proposal, many citizens are willing to be critical of the incumbent (*H1*). Second, the more selfless democratic defenders are, the more their democratic defence is able to affect citizens (*H2*). Third, the autocratizing incumbent can, in contrast, also affect citizens' perceptions by providing justifications for the autocratic proposal (*H3a* and *H3b*). I theorized that if the incumbent justification reveals some "autocratic intent", by being overtly self-serving, any democratic defender could leverage this. However, I find no clear-cut evidence for this (*H4*). But when I look at the full informational environment, taking into ac- count both the position of the defender (self-interested or selfless) and the incumbent justification (self-serving or positively valenced), I do find evidence that under specific circumstances, the democratic defence can be the strongest claim: only when democratic defenders are selfless can they counter an autocratic proposal that is justified with an appeal to a positively valenced good (*H5*). But this success is tenuous at best, because when democratic defenders appear to be self-interested and react to such a proposal, the defence might actually backlash. I delve deeper into this by also exploring the causal mechanisms underpinning the effects of democratic defence and incumbent justifications. I show that democratic defence is effective because both credibility and ambiguity are causal factors in determining how citizens respond to autocratic proposals.

The case of hypothetical autocratization in Norway provides a strict test for these claims. For one, respondents recognize Norway as clearly democratic, so it is unlikely that just any claim critical of the democratically elected government should carry much weight. Second, in my vignette, the incumbent adheres to procedural democratic norms: going through parliament and waiting on parliamentarian approval. In that light, the effect of elite democratic defence on citizen evaluations is indeed a positive story. However, the success of democratic defence is in no way guaranteed. I have outlined the pitfalls and the difficulty of the balancing act that democratic defenders face: they must not appear to be self-interested (unless the action is unambiguously autocratic). For democratic resilience, this shows how important the role of the actors within the institutions is.

When it comes to the importance of the judiciary as the "last bulwark against autocracy" (Boese et al., 2021; Staton et al., 2022), my results urge caution. Yes, the courts can defend democracy against autocratic actions targeting the media (when there is no justification

provided by the incumbent) and the courts them- selves (when there is a self-serving justification provided by the incumbent, signalling unambiguous autocratization), but their defence is not a save-all, as shown by the potential backlash against a self-interested democratic defence. This suggests that within limited space, judges, bureaucrats, parliamentarians, and other actors can stand up to pinpoint which rules are broken.

In further contrast to the positive story about the success of democratic defence, my results also show the fragility of a democratic system, as autocratizing incumbents can sacrifice democracy (or intentionally autocratize) to achieve certain policy goals. An appeal to a positively valenced goal causes respondents to see autocratic action as more democratic. Even without partisan cues, citizens can follow the incumbent, especially when the policy goal has a positive connotation. I only limited my experiment to the positively valenced goal of curbing corruption but recognize many other positively valenced goals could have similar (or worse) anti-democratic effects. On the flip side, "clear autocratic intent" – signalled by a self-serving justification – results consistently in lower democracy evaluations.

Where previous literature shows that citizens are willing to trade-off democracy for something else (Graham & Svolik, 2020; Krishnarajan, 2023), I show that citizens are less willing to do so when they are faced with the explicit consequence that it harms democracy. And where other research shows the positive effect of democratic defence when they adhere to non-violent means and moderate goals (Cleary & Öztürk, 2022; Gamboa, 2022), I add an additional requirement: democratic defenders must be more credible than the action is ambiguous. Even so, an elite democratic defence does not appear to result in citizen participation. To sum up: democratic defence matters, but the "vexing ambiguity" (Bermeo, 2016) of autocratization does limit its efficacy. The credibility of democratic defenders is not given and can severely hamper the effect of democratic defence.

I acknowledge that my study is only a first step in teasing out the trade-offs for citizens and democratic defenders. And suggest five avenues for future research. First, ambiguity does not only revolve around the contrast between explicit power grabs and the fight against corruption. It extends to referendums, states of emergency, economic improvements, et cetera. Furthermore, in certain extreme circumstances, one could make the argument that limits to democracy might be necessary and legitimate. Many constitutions also allow for (temporary) limitations on democratic rights during crises. Given the troubling results in this chapter, it is necessary that future research examines how these other aspects of ambiguity occur empirically and what their effects are on citizens.

Second, I have also not tried to establish whether some democratic institutions are targeted more successfully than others. While I found no difference between attacks on the judiciary and the media (as the experiment intended), in real life, autocratic actions are not equivalent. Future research should study whether citizens react differently to autocratic actions targeting different democratic institutions. Moreover, likely the first autocratic action is more easily disguised than subsequent autocratic actions. When attacks on democracy continue, at some point autocratization might reach a "tipping point" (cf. Werner et al., 2025). At this point, either further autocratization becomes inevitable as many avenues for democratic defence have been closed off or citizens voice their resistance independently of elite defenders.

Third, autocratization and democratic defence does not occur in a vacuum. The core question in this chapter was to examine the effect of elite democratic defence on citizen democracy evaluations, which necessitated the absence of partisan cues. However, partisan cues are almost always present empirically. Even if elite democratic defenders are institutionally neutral, autocratizing incumbents can blame them of partisan bias. In extension of the existing literature and this chapter, further research should examine how perceptions of *democratic defence* (and not just autocratization) are affected by these partisan cues.

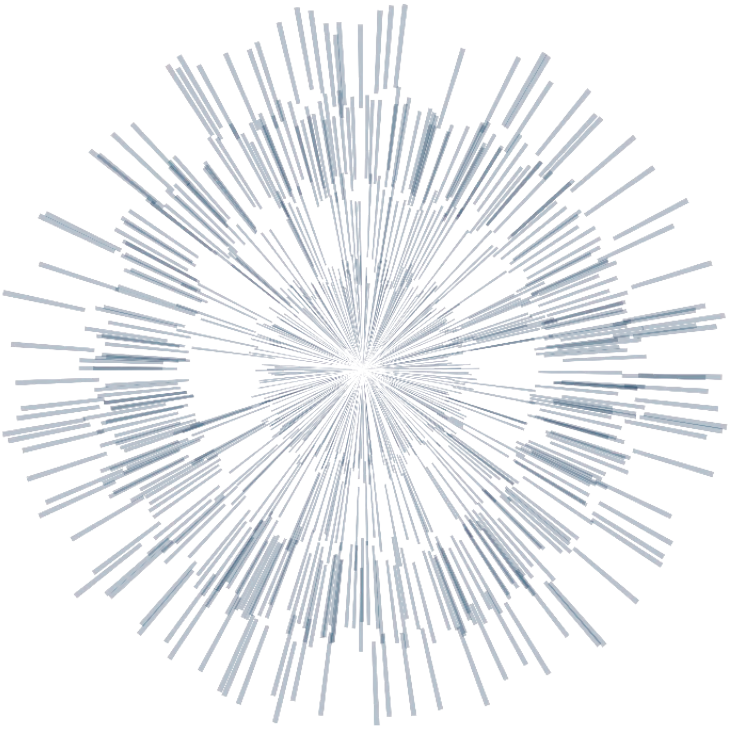
Fourth, defenders' credibility arguably does not solely rely on whether they are self-interested or not. Credibility might depend on partisan loyalty, perceived knowledge, playing political games, et cetera. In addition, democratic defenders could increase their credibility with arguments why the proposal is undemocratic. As a counterweight to the incumbent justification, democratic defenders can and arguably should provide informational cues (to citizens and other potential defenders) about the autocratizing effect of an incumbent's action.

Lastly, the vignette presents an abstracted version of reality to respondents. This limits my findings not as much in terms of internal validity, but potentially more so in external validity (Egami & Hartman, 2023). In particular, I ask respondents in liberal democracies to envision autocratization in Norway – another liberal democracy. This is useful to test the effects of my treatments in the absence of partisan cues but does sacrifice external validity to a certain degree. The main question I cannot answer in this regard is whether respondents are more critical of autocratization in a third country compared to autocratization in their own country (and hence potentially more susceptible to democratic defence) or less critical.

Despite these possible extensions of my research, it is clear that the success of democratic defence is possible, but in no way guaranteed. And even for established, recognized, consolidated democracies like Norway, citizens' views regarding democracy are all too easily manipulated when credibility and ambiguity collide.

This chapter investigated the effect of elite democratic defence on citizen perceptions of democracy and citizen willingness to participate in the democratic defence, as the first empirical test of level 2 of democratic defence as theorized in *Chapter 4 – Democratic Defence*. In *Chapter 7 – Democratic Credibility* I present a second test of my theory, delving deeper into the mechanisms that underpin the democratic defenders' credibility.

6



It is, of course, well known that careless talk costs lives. But the full scale of the problem is not always appreciated.

Narrator in Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

Chapter 7

Democratic Credibility

Research question:
When is a parliamentarian democratic defence seen as credible by citizens, and when as a political ploy?

Data and methods:
Factorial survey experiment fielded in The Netherlands.

Main argument:
Parliamentarians are credible democratic defenders in the eyes of citizens if they consistently defend democracy. If they instead inconsistently defend democracy, they are perceived to play a political game and lose credibility. I show some tentative first evidence that their democratic defence can be more credible if they explain why the autocratic action is undemocratic.

Co-authorship:
This chapter is based on the paper *Credible Resistance or Political Ploy? When Parliamentarians Stand Up for Democracy*, co-authored with Maurits Meijers and Carolien van Ham, currently under review.

1. Introduction

In *Chapter 4 – Democratic Defence* I argued democratic defence occurs on two levels. Elites – the first level – often cue that democracy is under threat to citizens. As I showed in *Chapter 6 – Democratic Ambiguity* citizen democratic defence – the second level – depends on the ambiguity of the autocratic actions, but also on the credibility of the democratic defenders. In this chapter, I delve deeper into the credibility of democratic defenders as a further empirical test of the second level of my theory.

On 2 January 2021, then-President Trump called Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger and asked him to "find 11.780 votes". This would tip the Georgia-results for the presidential elections in favour of Trump – as Biden won Georgia with 11.779 votes. Previously supported by Trump,[101] Raffensperger challenged Trump, and said his claims of voter fraud were not true. Trump responded Raffensperger was taking a "big risk" with this statement.[102] As it turns out, Raffensperger has been able to capitalize on this risk, winning the 2022 elections for Georgia Secretary of State against the Trump- and GOP-backed candidate.[103] On the other hand, many Republican election deniers have not been punished in subsequent elections (Bartels & Carnes, 2023). Moreover, a substantial number of Republican voters expressed the belief that the 2020 elections were fraudulent and were more likely to support candidates perpetuating the lie of election fraud (Arceneaux & Truex, 2023). This begs the question when democratic defence by political actors, and more specifically, partisan politicians, is perceived as credible by citizens.

Trump's refusal to accept the 2020 election results is one example of incumbent-led democratic recession (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2024) – the "substantial de-facto decline of core institutional requirements for electoral democracy" within democracies, without directly turning into democratic breakdown (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019, pp. 1096–1099). Indeed, since the 1990s, democratic recession has been increasingly incumbent-led. Importantly, this is not limited to new democracies: the example from the US shows that even what were thought to be consolidated democracies

101. "Republican Brad Raffensperger wins runoff election for Georgia secretary of state", *CBS News*, 5 December 2018, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/republican-brad-raffensperger-wins-runoff-election-for-georgia-secretary-of-state/.

102. "'I just want to find 11,780 votes': In extraordinary hour-long call, Trump pressures Georgia secretary of state to recalculate the vote in his favor", *Washington Post*, 3 January 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-raffensperger-call-georgia-vote/2021/01/03/d45acb92-4dc4-11eb-bda4-615aaefd0555_story.html.

103. "How Raffensperger went from Trump outcast to MAGA vanquisher", *Politico*, 25 May 2022, https://www.politico.com/news/2022/05/25/raffenspergers-defying-trump-maga-00035217.

can be under threat from incremental and gradual democratic recession (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Svolik, 2015). As such, the resilience of many consolidated democracies is being tested: can democratic institutions stay strong against challenges from the inside? In light of these developments, scholars are increasingly investigating how democratic defenders can prevent democratic recession from happening, or revert it once it has started (Gamboa, 2022; Tomini et al., 2023; van Lit et al., 2023)

This literature highlights that most effective defences occur when elites and citizens collaborate in engaging in democratic defence against the autocratic incumbent (Gamboa, 2022; van Lit et al., 2023). However, citizens have a considerable informational disadvantage in rising up against autocratization, as initial steps towards democratic recession are often small and incremental, and require significant expertise to be recognised as democratic recession. When democratic recession happens gradually, incrementally, and ambiguously (Bermeo, 2016; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019), credible democratic defenders can provide a vital cue to citizens and other actors that democracy is being challenged (van Lit et al., 2023). As I argued in *Chapter 4 – Democratic Defence*, especially in cases of early and arguably hidden and covert democratic recession elite cues are necessary for and beneficial to citizen engagement with democratic defence.

In this chapter, I explore the credibility of democratic defence by one specific potential defender (parliamentarians) against autocratic actions initiated by democratically elected incumbents (cf. Hobolt & Osnabrügge, 2024). I argue parliament is often at the forefront of democratic recession: be it as a target of co-optation and repression or as a potential democratic defender in stopping it. Yet, parliamentary politics has been relatively absent in the study on democratic defence, which has often focused on the judiciary and other accountability mechanisms (e.g. Boese et al., 2021; Laebens & Lührmann, 2021). Clearly, however, parliamentarians can play a primary role in defending democracy: they can identify proposals to undermine democracy early on, they have a democratic mandate to stop such proposals from being implemented, and they have incentives to inform citizens about attempted democratic recession. However, as the example in the beginning of this chapter illustrated, parliamentarians (and other politicians) must grapple with the challenge that they are partisan politicians, and may not be considered credible defenders by citizens.

In this chapter, I therefore investigate under which conditions a democratic defence by a parliamentarian is a *credible* democratic defence, and when it is seen as a political ploy. This credibility, I argue, is a necessary condition for successful democratic

defence: if it is not present citizens do not believe that democracy is in danger (at least not due to the specific proposal that parliamentarians defend against), and by extension are unlikely to mobilize in defence of democracy.

To do so, this chapter continues as follows. In *Section 2 – Parliamentarians as democratic defenders*, I review the literature on democratic defence and develop my theoretical argument about the credibility of parliamentarians' democratic defence. Specifically, I argue that parliamentarians' credibility depends on whether they are allied with the government or opposition, and whether they are consistent democratic defenders or not. First, I argue it matters whether the democratic defender is allied with the government or with the opposition. In general, I argue that government democratic defenders have a stronger democratic mandate and are therefore perceived as more credible in their democratic defence (*H1*). Second, when government-allied parliamentarians are *inconsistent* in their defence of democracy, they are perceived as even more credible as democratic defenders (*H2a*) since they show willingness to accept personal risk (i.e. removal from the party) by standing up to the co-partisan would-be autocrat. Third, in contrast, opposition democratic defenders are seen overall as less credible than government democratic defenders, because their democratic defence is more likely to be seen as a self-interested political ploy. They are only seen as credible democratic defenders when they consistently defend democracy (*H2b*). I explain in *Section 3 – Empirical strategy* that I test these arguments with a factorial survey experiment, fielded in the Netherlands ($n = 4.785$). The results in *Section 4 – Results* show mixed support for my hypothesis that government-allied defenders are more credible than opposition-allied defenders. There is, however, strong support that a consistent defence of democracy matters a great deal. Overall, in *Section 5 – Conclusion* I find that parliaments are not powerless against incumbent-led democratic recession. Both opposition and government-allied parliamentarians can give credible cues to citizens that democracy is being challenged.

2. Parliamentarians as democratic defenders: Facing trade-offs between the democratic and the political

As incumbent-led democratic recession has become more common, research has shifted from studying the facilitating conditions of autocratization (e.g. Haggard & Kaufman, 2021), to the actions that would-be autocrat incumbents take when seeking to undermine democracy (Ahmed, 2023; Freeman, 2020; Pirro & Stanley, 2022 and see *Chapter 2 - Autocratic Actions*), to what can be done to resist those actions (Tomini et al., 2023 and see *Chapter 4 - Democratic Defence*). As such, the conditions under which democratic defence occurs – which I take to be any activity aimed at slowing

down, stopping, or reverting autocratic actions (Capoccia, 2005, pp. 47–48; Tomini et al., 2023, p. 121), and when democratic defence is successful or not, has become a burgeoning new research agenda.[104]

Research on democratic defence, and specifically resistance actors, has often focused on the judiciary (as a horizontal accountability mechanism), civil society and the media (as a diagonal accountability mechanism), and citizens' willingness to vote out would-be autocrat (as a vertical accountability mechanism) (Laebens & Lührmann, 2021; Lührmann et al., 2020). The empirical research on the success of democratic defence by these actors suggests that non-violent and moderate tactics are most likely to work (Cleary & Öztürk, 2022; Gamboa, 2022). This means that pro-democracy actors need to signal to the would-be autocrat, other groups in society, and international communities that they do not aim to overthrow the incumbent, but merely to stop a specific autocratic proposal from being implemented. One such example of moderate strategies is for the opposition to unite into a single front. But its success is in no way given: united oppositions were unsuccessful in ousting the incumbent through elections in Turkey and Hungary (Musil, 2024). Recently, the cases of Israel (Gidron, 2023) and Guatemala (Schwartz & Isaacs, 2023) show, however, that pro-democratic resistors to autocratization are not powerless. When the conditions are right (international support for the pro-democratic opposition, clear pro-democratic argumentation by the opposition themselves, and a largely unambiguous autocratization campaign), mass movements to sustain democracy can be successful. These lines of defence are essential in mobilizing action against would-be autocrat incumbents and stop them in their tracks. However, because of informational disadvantages and coordination challenges, mass mobilization in defence of democracy is likely to occur at a relatively later stage, when autocratizing actions have already been taken and are starting to become more visible (van Lit et al., 2023).

104. Research has also focused on understanding under what conditions democracies are more resilient to autocratization (Boese et al., 2021; Merkel & Lührmann, 2021). However, democratic resilience in this sense refers both to having the conditions that prevent autocratization to start in the first place, such as institutions that prevent a would-be autocratic incumbent from being able to come to power, or once in power, prevent would-be incumbents from being able to engage in autocratic actions; as well as the conditions that enable democracies to successfully resist attempts to undermine it. In this chapter, I focus on democratic resilience in the latter sense and consider democratic resilience to mean the capability of democratic systems to resist attempts to undermine democracy. Democratic resilience is only demonstrated when it has been tested: when would-be autocrats have attempted autocratization, democratic defence has occurred, and the defence has been successful in warding off autocratization. Democratic resilience from this perspective therefore is demonstrated by successful democratic defence.

But democratic defence can arguably start much earlier already: in the moment would-be autocrats start proposing autocratic actions to the members of their cabinet, their party, and the top-level officials that are expected to carry out those actions. I argue that politicians, political parties, and parliaments can play important roles in early democratic defence against would-be autocratic incumbents, for three reasons.

First, parliamentarians are knowledgeable about the democratic process and have access to information about proposals currently under debate that might harm democracy. Incumbents often need the support of parliamentary majorities to approve potentially autocratic legislation, such as the legislative dismantling of checks and balances and other institutional changes that strengthen the executives' hold on power (Bermeo, 2016; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). Parliamentarians are therefore in the position to detect actions by autocratizing governments relatively early on.

Second, parliamentarians have a formal democratic mandate to scrutinize the executive government and hold it to account for its actions. Parliamentarians therefore have the power to block proposals aimed at democratic recession and stop the incumbents' autocratization in its tracks. However, democratic defence in parliament requires political parties to coordinate their actions against the would-be autocrat government, and - if the government relies on parliamentary majorities – requires inter-party defence to be mobilized.

Third, even if parliament is already (partly) co-opted, and parliamentarians go along with the would-be autocrats' measures to undermine democracy, they still face the risk of being voted out of office at the next elections if voters do not approve of these actions. Parliamentarians thus potentially also have electoral incentives to engage in democratic defence. However, voters will likely only discipline an autocratizing government if they are aware that they are undermining democracy, and parliamentarians are key in providing this information to the public and signalling to citizens that autocratization is happening. Parliaments therefore also have an essential information and agenda-setting function towards citizens, which can help to mobilise citizens for democratic defence.

When would-be autocrats seek parliamentary majorities to approve their actions, government-allied parliamentarians can engage in democratic defence, as getting autocratic actions approved in parliament requires the support of the incumbents' own political party, or multiple parties, providing parties and politicians supporting

the government with a unique power to stop such actions. I would expect therefore that government-allied parliamentarians can potentially play an important role in democratic defence. But government-allied parliamentarians face a difficult balancing act between supporting and constraining "their" incumbent, likely facing trade-offs between achieving their policy goals and protecting democracy.

On the other hand, parliamentary oppositions can also engage in democratic defence but are likely to do so in a different way than government-allied parliamentarians. Government-allied parliamentarians can engage in democratic defence already in intra-party meetings, by discussing and potentially blocking proposed autocratic actions even before they reach voting stage, and in doing so keep proposed autocratic actions largely behind the scenes, away from the public. Parliamentary oppositions, on the contrary, are more likely to publicize proposed autocratic actions by incumbents, as a way of putting pressure on the government and signalling to citizens that autocratization is happening, which can help to mobilise them for democratic defence.

Overall, parliamentarians can (and by virtue of their role arguably *should*) critically engage with proposals made by the incumbent (cf. Lührmann, 2021). This critical engagement means they assess the potential autocratic implications of incumbent proposals and call them out if they see them. I take this "call" or statement that democracy is in danger to be the elite democratic defence and investigate when citizens perceive such a defence to be credible.

Research has shown that anti-democratic elite behaviour and elite rhetoric can erode citizens commitment to democracy (Clayton et al., 2021; Hall & Druckman, 2023; Krishnarajan, 2023). I argue that pro-democratic elite behaviour and rhetoric has a similar, but positive, effect as a first step to successful democratic defence. Below, I further develop my argument about the conditions under which citizens are likely to perceive the informational cues given by parliamentarians as credible.

2.1 The credibility of elite democratic defence

Tomini et al. (2023, p. 121) argue that resistance to autocratization exists regardless of the defenders' motivation. Yet attitudes and behaviours towards democracy do not always align. This is true for citizens (Braley et al., 2023; Graham & Svolik, 2020), but also for party elites (Carey et al., 2020). So, while actors who resist autocratization might indeed do so based on their commitment to democracy, they might also have – additional – ulterior motives.

Government-allied and opposition parliamentarians face this disadvantage clearly: they are partisan politicians. This means that citizens may perceive politicians to be driven by partisan motivations, rather than genuine commitment to democracy, when engaging in democratic defence. Citizen perceptions of such an ulterior motive can play a crucial role in determining whether citizens follow the elite cue and rally in support of democracy.

The credibility of elite democratic defenders is defined as their perceived genuine commitment to democracy (van Lit et al., 2023). Elite democratic credibility is diminished when citizens have reason to suspect that there might be other reasons than genuine commitment to democracy that are driving the elite's behaviour or statements. As credibility is in the eye of the beholder, there can be a range of reasons why it is diminished. Here, I focus on incumbency (affiliation with the government or with the opposition), democratic mandate, information position, and consistency as sources of credibility in the eyes of citizens.

In general, I argue that government-allied democratic defenders are likely more credible than opposition democratic defenders: they have a stronger democratic mandate than opposition defenders, and they have access to more information about the state of democracy.

First, government-allied democratic defenders are more credible to citizens because they are likely to be perceived to have a stronger and more legitimate mandate to criticize the state of affairs. In many cases of current democratic recession, it is incumbent-led (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). This means that the would-be autocrat can leverage their democratic mandate to further their autocratic ambitions (van Lit et al., 2023), while opposition democratic defenders face an uphill battle in parliament, building on lesser electoral support. Both opposition and government-allied parliamentarians enjoy a democratic mandate, but their opposition's mandate – in the eyes of citizens – is arguably weaker as they have lesser electoral support. However, government-allied parliamentarians can rely on a similar measure of support as the incumbent, especially when the government-allied parliamentarians have been loyal supporters of the incumbent's party. Furthermore, government-allied parliamentarians likely have more influence in intra-party deliberation and might be able to stop attempts at autocratization early on. At the same time, they face difficult trade-offs as they have the opportunity to achieve desired policy goals, which may conflict with their commitment to protect democracy. However, I argue that citizens likely also realise this difficult position government-allied parliamentarians find themselves in and intuitively understand the challenges of "standing up to one's

friends", which may make democratic defence by government-allied parliamentarians more credible in the eyes of citizens. Research has found that in corruption-allegations, "friendly fire" (i.e. allegations from co-partisans) is seen as more trustworthy (Botero et al., 2019). Therefore, democratic defence by government-allied parliamentarians is hard to sell as a political ploy, as government-allied parliamentarians have very little to gain from standing up to a would-be autocrat incumbent from their own party (rather have much more to lose), which I expect further increases their credibility as democratic defenders.

Second, I argue government-allied parliamentarians are more credible due to their perceived informational advantage over opposition parliamentarians. Recent literature has investigated how would-be autocrats and actual autocrats use (mis)information to further their autocratic ambitions (Guriev & Treisman, 2019). Specific pieces of information are selectively brought out from the (co-opted) institutions into the public sphere. As a result of this, it is likely that government-allied parliamentarians are perceived to have more information about what is happening within different democratic institutions and thus are perceived to have more information about the state of democracy than opposition parliamentarians. Furthermore, where opposition parties have an incentive to highlight internal divisions within the government (Whitaker & Martin, 2022), government-allied parties have the incentive to hide these internal divisions. Therefore, information about autocratization may be purposely kept from opposition parliamentarians, and decisions that do not need parliamentary approval may be kept behind the scenes, meaning that this information is likely to be hidden from oppositions. At the same time, would-be autocrats also seek democratic legitimation for their actions. Even when opposition parliamentarians will find out about the proposals eventually, government-allied parliamentarians still have an informational advantage, as proposals will likely be prepared in intra-party meetings before being presented to parliament in full. Taken together, government-allied parliamentarians likely have an informational advantage in the eyes of citizens over opposition parliamentarians when it comes to the state of democracy.[105] For these two reasons, I expect that:

105. I disregard potential strategic considerations within governing coalitions here for parsimony but recognize that they might play a role. Specifically, when government coalitions are made up of several parties, the incumbent's party might be more credible than the other parties in the coalition, following the same reasoning as the government-opposition-division above. However, the other parties in the coalition still are able to source some legitimacy and credibility from their association with the government writ large. Similarly, they might be somewhat more susceptible to be perceived as playing a political game, but not nearly as much as opposition parties.

Government defence hypothesis (*H1*): All things equal, government-allied parliamentarians[106] who defend democracy are more credible than opposition parliamentarians who defend democracy.

2.2 The moderating role of consistency in the defence of democracy

However, I argue incumbency is not all that matters when it comes to credibility. Specifically, parliamentarian's consistent defence of democracy plays a crucial moderating role. Parliamentarians can be regarded consistent defenders of democracy when they always try to resist similar autocratic actions. Instead, when they sometimes resist autocratic actions but sometimes fail to, I regard them as inconsistent defenders of democracy.

The literature on parties' positional change has found that parties and candidates are often punished for inconsistent behaviour (Andreottola, 2021; Doherty et al., 2016; Meijers, 2025; Sigelman & Sigelman, 1986; Tomz & Van Houweling, 2016): citizens consider repositioning to signal "bad valence". Repositioning is associated with dishonesty, lack of reliability, and low levels of competence (Allgeier et al., 1979; McCaul et al., 1995). An important reason for citizens' rejection of inconsistency is it that obfuscates parties' true positions – inducing uncertainty among voters (Fernandez-Vazquez, 2019; Lupu, 2013, 2014). When it comes to defending democracy against the incumbent's autocratic actions, citizens' preference for steadfastness is likely to be particularly pronounced. Previous studies show that parties shifting on "principled" issues tend to lose popular support, while shifting on pragmatic issues can even garner popular support (Doherty et al., 2016; Tavits, 2007; Tomz & Van Houweling, 2016). Defending democracy is a principled issue *par excellence*. Inconsistent defence of democracy therefore diminishes a parliamentarian's credibility.

I argue, incumbency (whether parliamentarians are allied with the government or with the opposition) cannot be seen separately from consistency, especially on principled issues, That is: the effect of consistent democratic defence interacts with incumbency. Specifically, I argue consistent democratic defence moderates to what extent a positional shift is perceived by citizens as a genuine change of opinion or a political ploy. Government-allied democratic defenders are likely *more* credible if they are *inconsistent*, because their positional change signals a clear valence shift away from partisan loyalty to democracy (building on Wuttke et al., 2024). Despite being a loyal partisan in the past, a parliamentarian appears to "draw a line in the sand" on core

106. The wording of hypothesis *H1* and *H2a* deviates from the preregistered hypothesis: I have changed "government" into "government-allied parliamentarian", to better reflect my experimental design in which a parliamentarian, not a government-employee, is the elite democratic defender. I further change the numbering of the hypotheses from H2 and H3 to *H2a* and *H2b*, respectively.

issues about democracy. The starker the contrast between past loyalty and current disagreement on a democratic (or rather: autocratic) issue, the stronger the signal about democracy should be. Moreover, they are willing to "risk" their affiliation with the incumbent (with all the associated perks and benefits). This could be understood by citizens as parliamentarians' willingness to bear great personal cost in defence of democracy, showing genuine commitment to democracy, increasing their credibility.

In contrast, a government-allied democratic defender who is a consistent defender of democracy does not signal their willingness to bear personal cost nor departure from partisan loyalty, creating no extra boost to their credibility. While consistent government-allied democratic defenders are still arguably more credible than any opposition democratic defender (following *H1*), I expect they are less credible than inconsistent government-allied democratic defenders.

Inconsistent opposition democratic defenders are, conversely, *less* credible than consistent opposition democratic defenders. The main reason for this is that opposition-allied parliamentarians, more so than government-allied parliamentarians, risk being perceived as playing a political game. When opposition parliamentarians change their position towards democracy, they can appear politically motivated, merely looking for electoral rewards. They do not, as inconsistent government-allied democratic defenders, signal genuine commitment to democracy by changing their positions. Instead, they signal an ulterior, self-interested, political motive. Opposition democratic defence, therefore, needs to be consistent. As such, I expect that:

Inconsistent government defence hypothesis (*H2a*): All things equal, government-allied parliamentarians who inconsistently defend democracy are more credible than government-allied parliamentarians who consistently defend democracy.

And:

Inconsistent opposition defence hypothesis (*H2b*): All things equal, opposition actors who inconsistently defend democracy are less credible than opposition actors who consistently defend democracy.

3. Empirical strategy

To test these arguments and the causal mechanisms, I run a 2*2 factorial vignette experiment in the Netherlands, fielded by the Dutch survey company *KiesKompas*,[107] from October 30 to November 13, 2023. *KiesKompas* employs an opt-in panel (through a Voting Advice Application), resulting in a non-representative convenience sample. Research has shown that the effects of experimental treatments in such non-representative samples do not significantly differ from population samples (Krupnikov et al., 2021). Even so, I run additional robustness checks based on a weighted sample to approximate a nationally representative sample in the Online Appendix (Franco et al., 2017; Miratrix et al., 2018).

3.1 Case selection, saliency of the issue, experimental design, and ecological validity

In 2021, the Rutte-III government stepped down in response to a critical report about the transparency and fairness of childcare benefits legislation (the childcare benefits scandal). In turn, the debate about checks and balances (Dutch: *macht en tegenmacht*, literally: power and counterpower) was central to the following elections. This was brought into focus even more when, after the elections, the negotiators for the potential government-allied parties appeared to sideline prominent and critical parliamentarian Pieter Omtzigt (who played an important role in uncovering the benefits scandal).[108] After the Rutte-IV government collapsed in July 2023, Omtzigt created a new party (*Nieuw Sociaal Contract*, New Social Contract), which became the fourth largest in the November 2023 elections. My survey was fielded right before these elections, in a context of heated political debate. Because of this context respondents are likely aware of the role of checks and balances in a democracy. But they are not primed to such an extent that it is their sole concern: only 30% of respondents said trust in the government is one the five most important topics during the 2023 election, and 18% said the benefits scandal is.[109] As such, my panel provides a good test-case of the effect of democratic defence on interested, knowledgeable, yet not overly primed citizens.

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107. Preregistered prior to data collection, on 25 October 2023, available at https://osf.io/zxydc. The experiment has been approved by the Ethical Assessment Committee Faculty of Law and Nijmegen School of Management, under number 2022.14.

108. "Verkenners zagen Omtzigt als probleem en risico voor de formatie", *NOS Nieuws*, 10 June 2023, https://nos.nl/nieuwsuur/artikel/2478376-verkenners-zagen-omtzigt-als-probleem-en-risico-voor-de-formatie.

109. "Belangrijke politieke thema's", *EenVandaag*, 20 October 2023, https://eenvandaag.avrotros.nl/peilingtrends/politiek/belangrijke-politieke-themas/

In the vignette (see Figure 7.1) I manipulate two dimensions: the incumbency of the democratic defender and their consistency. Each dimension has two levels, for a full 2*2 factorial vignette.

To manipulate the parliamentarian's incumbency, I emphasize three times that Lucas Perez, the democratic defender in question, is a member of the parliamentary faction of either the governing or the opposition parties. I focus on defence within parliament, rather than defence within the ministerial council or the administration, because for those there is no clear equivalent for opposition defence. In addition, parliamentary debates are public, while policy advice from administrators or discussions with ministerial councils are more confidential.

For the democratic defence, Perez states he counters the proposal, connecting it to his worries about the democratic system. I consider this a democratic defence, as he clearly aims to stop or halt a proposal that he finds undemocratic. To manipulate his (in)consistent democratic defence, I emphasize two times that Perez has previously supported or opposed another proposal to limit the right to demonstrate (the undemocratic proposal in my vignette, see below). Perez is inconsistent when he is now advocating against the government's proposal, while he previously supported limitations on the right to demonstrate; and Perez is consistent when he opposed limitations on the right to demonstrate previously and now again. Of course, over time circumstances might change which require parliamentarians to change their mind. However, in my vignette the circumstances do not change: the autocratic proposal Perez' reacts to is similar. Moreover, I emphasize that Perez' opinion has changed – not the circumstances. That is: the proposal is identical, and only Perez' attitude towards the proposal changes. I acknowledge that his change in opinion might be genuine, but it still affects his credibility – especially in light of the argument that the defence of democracy and commitment to the right to demonstrate can be considered a principled issue that should be stable (Doherty et al., 2016; Tavits, 2007; Tomz & Van Houweling, 2016).

The vignette presents a hypothetical news-release about the Argentine government wanting to place limitations on the right to demonstrate.[110] I chose the hypothetical scenario to take place in Argentine because this allows me to respondents' associations with actual parties or incumbents. Extant research has shown that

110. Respondents were told this was a hypothetical news-release and also debriefed at the end of the survey with more information about democracy in Argentina as well as the right to demonstrate there with a link to the 2022 Freedom House Country Report. I fielded the survey in the Netherlands, shortly after the Argentine presidential elections of October 22. All respondents saw the pre-treatment information that '*[t]he past elections, on October 22, went well.*'

democracy perceptions often take a secondary role to partisanship (Gidengil et al., 2022; Graham & Svolik, 2020), especially in more polarized contexts (Iyengar et al., 2019). In addition, supporters of the incumbent are more willing to limit checks and balances, while supporters of oppositions are less willing to do so (Mazepus & Toshkov, 2022). As these are strong confounders, situating the scenario in a country where respondents have less information about the political situation (except for what I provide them with in the vignette[111]) allows me to take out these effects and isolate the effects of my treatments. The downside of the use of another country is that this limits the external validity of the experiment, being an abstraction away from reality. To show that my results hold across a variety of subgroups (and therefore likely generalize to evaluations of autocratization and democratic defence in respondents' own country) I assess heterogeneous treatment effects in the Online Appendix, which confirm my overall conclusions in the main text.

Democracy in Argentina
Last week, the Argentinian government proposed to limit the right to demonstrate. Lucas Perez, an important member of one of the **governing** parties, however, strongly opposes this recent proposal.

Therefore, Perez has made a proposal countering **his own government**. He says he is really drawing a line now: "We have to be careful with our democratic system." **Previously, however,** Perez has **supported** a proposal to limit the right to demonstrate.

At this moment, it is still unclear if his fellow party members of the **governing** parties will agree with Perez, since he has **changed his opinion** about the right to demonstrate.

The parliament will discuss the proposal and Perez' counterproposal next week.

Democracy in Argentina
Last week, the Argentinian government proposed to limit the right to demonstrate. Lucas Perez, an important member of one of the **opposition** parties, however, strongly opposes this recent proposal.

Therefore, Perez has made a proposal countering **the government**. He says he is really drawing a line now: "We have to be careful with our democratic system." **Previously**, Perez has **also opposed** a proposal to limit the right to demonstrate.

At this moment, it is still unclear if his fellow party members of the **opposition** parties will agree with Perez, even though he has **always had the same opinion** about the right to demonstrate.

The parliament will discuss the proposal and Perez' counterproposal next week.

Figure 7.1: Two of the four vignettes in English (the experiment was fielded in Dutch). The treatments are bold in the example, but they had plain formatting in the actual survey. The *left* vignette shows the vignette for treatment group 1: an inconsistent government-allied parliamentarian. The *right* vignette shows the vignette for treatment group 4: a consistent opposition democratic defender.

111. All respondents get the pre-treatment information that '*Argentia has been a solid democracy, with regular free and fair elections. The past elections, on October 22, also went well*'.

The vignette deals with limitations on the right to demonstrate. While justifiable in certain situations (such as the COVID-19 public health crisis, e.g. Erhardt et al., 2022), placing restrictions on the right to demonstrate goes against core liberal democratic values. Dutch respondents should also recognize this. For example, in 2022, Amnesty International published a report about the decline in freedom to protest in the Netherlands.[112] In addition, discussion about the right to protest as well as limitations on it have been held in public media. This concerned both demonstrations supporting more conservative viewpoints (farmer protests, blocking highways in 2021 and 2022, and a rally in front of an abortion clinic during the November campaign) and demonstrations supporting more liberal viewpoints (climate activists blocking one of the main highways in September 2023 and a climate march during the November campaign). Lastly, when asked how important the right to protest is in a democracy 35.6% of the panel answered *Extremely important*, and an additional 27.4% answered *Important*.

Overall, I argue the vignette presents a stylized yet realistic approximation of democratic processes that Dutch respondents could have a well-informed opinion about. Dutch respondents are likely to be aware of different dimensions of democracy, because of the elections soon after the survey-period, without being overly primed to it. Furthermore, Dutch respondents are likely to have limited knowledge about Argentine democracy, beyond the information provided to them in the survey, allowing me to tease out the effects of my treatments, while ruling out confounding effects of, for example, partisanship. The Dutch context itself is taken to be a typical example of liberal and mostly stable democracy, even though there is discussion about how to give shape to specific requirements of democracy, such as the right to demonstrate. In addition, there is lively and meaningful debate in Dutch politics about this topic, even within governing parties and between government-allied parliamentarians (see *Chapter 5 – Democratic Gambits*), lending further realism to my vignette. As such, I argue my findings should generalize to other contexts of liberal democracies with sufficient room for meaningful contestation in parliament.

3.2 Outcomes of interest

Being a credible democratic defender is a crucial first step in being an effective democratic defender. As such, I do not investigate whether the parliamentarian's democratic defence affects citizens' evaluation of democracy in Argentina, nor their willingness to engage in citizen democratic defence. Instead, the main pre-registered outcome of interest is the parliamentarian's credibility, measured by asking *how credible*

112. Amnesty International (2022). *Demonstratierecht onder druk*. https://www.amnesty.nl/content/uploads/2022/11/AMN_22_33_demonstratierecht-onder-druk.pdf?x71340.

[respondents] *think Lucas Perez is when he says he is worried about Argentina's democracy*, answered from 1 (*not at all credible*) to 7 (*very credible*). In line with *H1*, I expect that the government-treatment results in higher credibility than the opposition-treatment. Furthermore, I expect the *inconsistent*government* treatment to result in higher credibility than *consistent*government* (in line with *H2a*), and that *consistent*opposition* results in higher credibility than *inconsistent*opposition* (in line with *H2b*).

In addition to this pre-registered outcome of interest, I investigate the proposed causal mechanisms: whether democratic defenders are perceived to have the mandate to counter the incumbent; whether they are perceived to have access to the right information to make this judgment; and whether they are perceived to prioritize democracy over their own political interests (or, conversely, are perceived to play a political ploy). To assess whether respondents think the effect of elite incumbency runs through the mandate-mechanism, I ask if respondents *think Lucas Perez, as a member of one of the [governing/opposition]*[113] *parties, has the democratic authority to criticize the government's proposal*. To assess whether the effect runs through the information-mechanism, I also ask if respondents *think Lucas Perez is able to get hold of the right information he needs to make a statement about the state of Argentine democracy*. Both questions are answered from 1 (*no*) to 6 (*yes*). I expect that the effect of the party-treatment on credibility is mediated by these questions. Specifically, the government-treatment should increase information and mandate, which in turn should increase credibility. In addition, I ask whether respondents *believe Lucas Perez prioritizes democratic rules and norms or prioritizes his own political gain*. This question, measured on a 6-point scale, directly taps into whether respondents think Perez uses democratic defence as a political ploy rather than genuine concern for democracy. I expect that respondents who have seen the *inconsistent*government* or *consistent*opposition* treatments believe Perez prioritizes democratic norms more, which in turn should increase his credibility. In contrast, the *consistent*government* and *inconsistent*opposition* treatments will lead respondents to believe Perez prioritizes his own political gain more, which should decrease his credibility. I analyse these mediators using Structural Equation Modelling. In the Online Appendix I verify the conclusions I draw with a standard OLS regressions where the mediator is the outcome of my treatments and as the predictor of the main credibility-outcome.

Lastly, I ask respondents what they *think are next steps Lucas Perez should take, to protect democracy in Argentina*. With this, I aim to explore what citizens expect parliamentarians to do to safeguard democracy. I presented a battery of fixed options (*go to court, organize a protest, set up a petition, organize a party meeting, file a motion of*

113. Depending on the vignette respondents read.

no confidence, go to the media, or ask for a debate), of which respondents could choose multiple, but also provided an open text box for respondents to share their own ideas of the next steps. I analyse these descriptively and present what percentage of respondents expects specific next steps.

I ask one attention check and two manipulation checks, but, following my preregistration, run the main analysis on the full sample (i.e. including inattentive respondents to estimate the more conservative and more realistic intention-to-treat-effect). I run balance tests on different covariates to determine that all potential confounders were evenly distributed across the treatment groups, so no further covariates were included, following the preregistration.[114] I use OLS regression to model my data, with the treatments as explanatory variables for *H1*, and an interaction between consistency and government-affiliation for *H2a* and *H2b*. Alternative models in the Online Appendix show that my findings generally hold when I control for attention and manipulation checks, as well as for party-supporter subgroups and left-right self-placement subgroups.

The survey resulted in 4.785 respondents, who were randomly assigned to one of four treatment groups, for about 1.200 respondents per treatment (see the Online Appendix for a precise overview and all descriptives).

4. Results: When are parliamentarian democratic defenders credible?

In short, I find that the credibility of parliamentarian democratic defence is highest when they consistently defend democracy – regardless of their incumbency (affiliation with the governing parties or opposition parties). However, incumbency does play a role in two main ways: in the access to information democratic defenders are perceived to have (more for government-allied parliamentarians), and in the extent to which they are perceived to play a political game (more for opposition-allied parliamentarians). I discuss the hypotheses and the proposed causal mechanisms below.

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114. Covariates included are age, gender, education, income, region, employment, political interest, left-right self-placement, vote at previous elections, political trust, political knowledge, commitment to liberal democracy, populist attitudes and technocratic attitudes. See the Online Appendix.

4.1 The effects of incumbency on democratic defenders' credibility

Model 7.1 in Table 7.1 shows that, in general, government-allied democratic defenders are perceived to be more credible than opposition democratic defenders ($\beta = 0.12$, $p = 0.01$). This provides initial support for *H1*. Model 1 also shows that inconsistency has a large, negative effect on credibility ($\beta = -1.44$, $p < 0.001$).

Turning to my hypothesized causal mechanism: I theorized the effect of government-allied democratic defence on credibility was due to the democratic defender having a stronger democratic mandate than opposition democratic defenders; and due to their privileged access to information about the state of democracy. In Figure 7.2 I show the results of the mediation analysis and find that access to information does indeed explain the causal effect of incumbency on defenders' credibility.

In contrast to my first proposed mechanism (mandate), government-allied democratic defenders do not have a stronger perceived mandate than opposition democratic defenders: I find no significant difference between government-allied democratic defenders and opposition democratic defenders. A tentative explanation for this might be that respondents think that parliamentarians in general have a strong democratic mandate (46.7% answered the highest score). This is true, even though respondents trust parliament only on 3.94 (SD = 1.46) out of 7. While further research would need to explore this, it is a first hopeful sign that parliamentarians in general are in a good position to defend democracy. In turn,

Table 7.1: When are parliamentarian democratic defenders credible?

	Model 1: *H1* (Main effects only)	**Model 2: *H2a* and *H2b* (Interaction effects)**
Intercept	4.84 (0.04)***	4.98 (0.05)***
Incumbency (*Reference: opposition*)		
Government	0.12 (0.05)**	-0.14 (0.06)*
Defence of democracy (*reference: consistent*)		
Inconsistent	-1.44 (0.05)***	-1.71 (0.06)***
Interaction		
Government * Inconsistency		0.53 (0.09)***
R^2	0.18	0.18
Adj. R^2	0.18	0.18
Num. obs.	4.785	4.785

Note: standard errors in parentheses. *** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05

however, parliamentarians – regardless of their incumbency – who are perceived to have a stronger mandate are perceived to be more credible ($\beta = 0.17$, $p < 0.001$). In line with my second proposed mechanism (information), there is a significant effect of government-allied democratic defence on the level of information the defender is perceived to have ($\beta = 0.10$, $p = 0.02$). The level of information, in turn, increases the defender's credibility, in line with my expectations ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.001$).

On a positive note, the effects of perceived mandate and information as strong predictors of defenders' credibility seem to imply defenders can increase the credibility of their democratic defence, if they clearly communicate *why* they come to the conclusion that a proposal is undemocratic signalling their informed position; and if they emphasize their democratic mandate when they defend democracy. My first conclusion is therefore that government-allied democratic defenders can credibly defend democracy, primarily because they appear to have access to the right information to make such a judgment (in support of *H1*).

4.2 The effects of consistency on democratic defenders' credibility

When it comes to the moderation effect of consistency, model 2 in Table 7.1 and Figure 7.3 show the results for the inconsistent government defence-hypothesis (*H2a*) and the consistent opposition defence-hypothesis (*H2b*).

I expected inconsistent government-allied democratic defenders to be more credible than consistent government-allied democratic defenders (*H2a*). However, while Table 7.1 shows the interaction effect *does* exist ($\beta = 0.53$, $p < 0.001$), the total effect for inconsistent government-allied democratic defenders needs to take into account the main effect of inconsistency ($\beta = -1.71$, $p < 0.001$), and the main effect of government-allied democratic defence ($\beta = -0.14$, $p = 0.03$). To ease interpretation, the marginal means for each treatment group are shown in Figure 7.3, From this, it is clear that inconsistent government-allied democratic defence (marginal mean = *3.66*; 95% confidence interval: *[3.57; 3.74])* is more credible than inconsistent opposition democratic defence (*3.27 [3.18; 3.36]*), but less credible than consistent government-allied democratic defence (*4.98 [4.89; 5.06])* (in contrast to *H2a*). My results indicate that government-allied defenders are not credible if they inconsistently defend democracy. Instead, just like opposition democratic defenders, they need to consistently defend democracy or risk being perceived as incredible – although government democratic defenders are still significantly more credible than opposition democratic defenders, even if both are inconsistent.

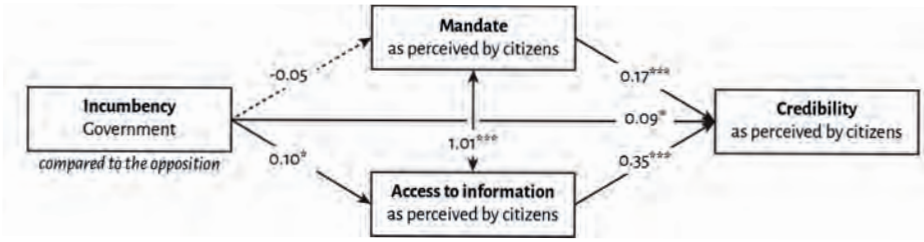

Figure 7.2: The mediation of the parliamentarian democratic defenders' mandate and access to information as perceived by respondents. Other treatments and unbalanced covariates are included in the analysis but are not included in the figure. Stars denote * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. See the Online Appendix for the full results. Higher scores indicate more mandate, more information, and more credibility.

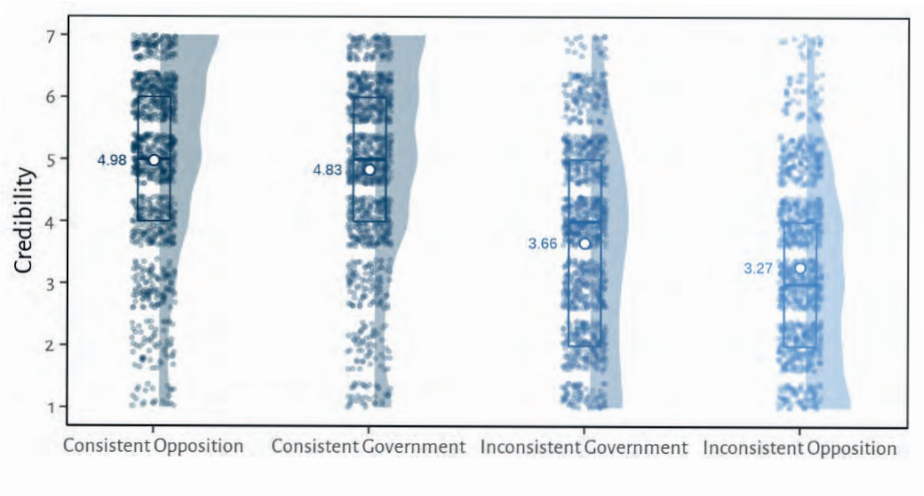

Figure 7.3: Distribution of *credibility*-evaluations across the treatment groups, with observations, box plot, and density plots. The marginal means per treatment group (based on the regression coefficients in Model 2; see the Online Appendix for the marginal means), including 95%-confidence intervals are shown as dots in the boxplot. Higher scores mean the democratic defender is more credible.

I also expected that consistent opposition democratic defenders are more credible than inconsistent opposition democratic defenders (*H2b*). Figures 7.3 and 7.4 shows this is the case. In fact, consistent opposition democratic defenders are the most credible parliamentarian democratic defender (*4.98 [4.86; 5.06]*), significantly different from the three other groups. However, the cross-over interaction in Figure 7.4 indicates that the effects of inconsistency, while bad for both government-allied, is worse for opposition democratic defenders. When opposition democratic defenders are inconsistent, they become the least credible (*3.27 [3.18; 3.36]*).

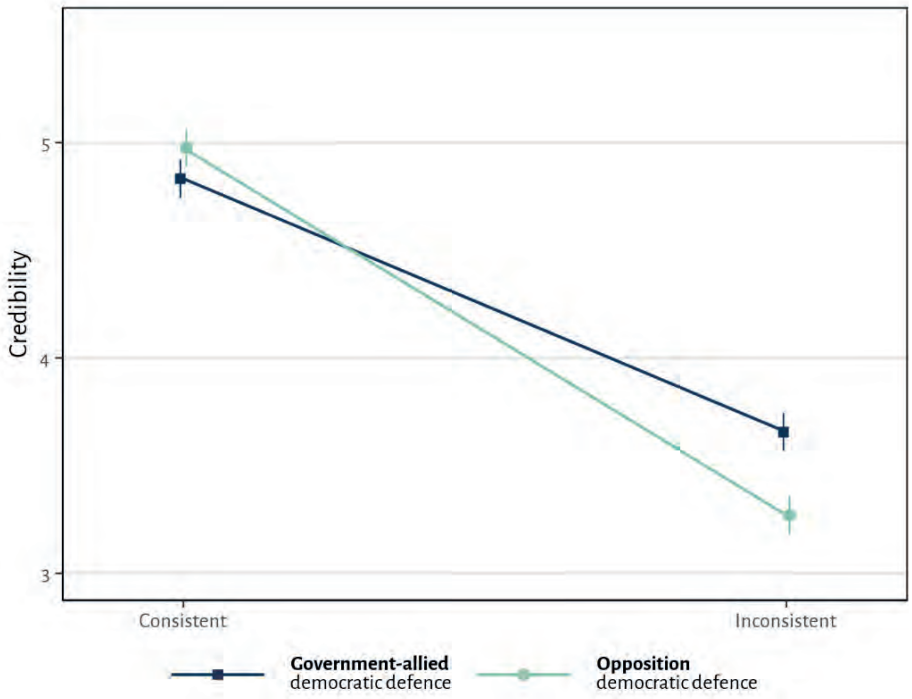

Figure 7.4: Marginal means with 95%-confidence intervals for the four treatment groups (based on the regression coefficients in Model 2, see the Online Appendix for the marginal means), showing the cross-over interaction between incumbency and consistency. Higher scores mean the democratic defender is more credible.

Turning to my hypothesized causal mechanism: I argued (in)consistency could signal to citizens that parliamentarians play a political game, rather than being genuinely committed to democracy. That is: by being (in)consistent, democratic defenders show they prioritize democratic norms or their own political gain. Inconsistent opposition democratic defenders, I expect, are most likely to be seen as playing a political game. In Figure 7.5 I show the results of the mediation analysis and find that perceptions of a political ploy do indeed explain the causal effect of inconsistent inconsistency (but not incumbency) on credibility.

Compared to a consistent opposition democratic defence, inconsistent *oppositions* are seen as the parliamentarians who use democracy as a political ploy most often ($\beta = 1.29$, $p < 0.001$). This makes intuitive sense: those opposition parliamentarians are perceived to change their stance towards the right to demonstrate based on some expected political gain. Inconsistent *government* parliamentarians are also perceived to play a political game, although to a lesser extent that inconsistent opposition democratic defenders ($\beta = 1.00$, $p < 0.001$). Consistent democratic defenders –

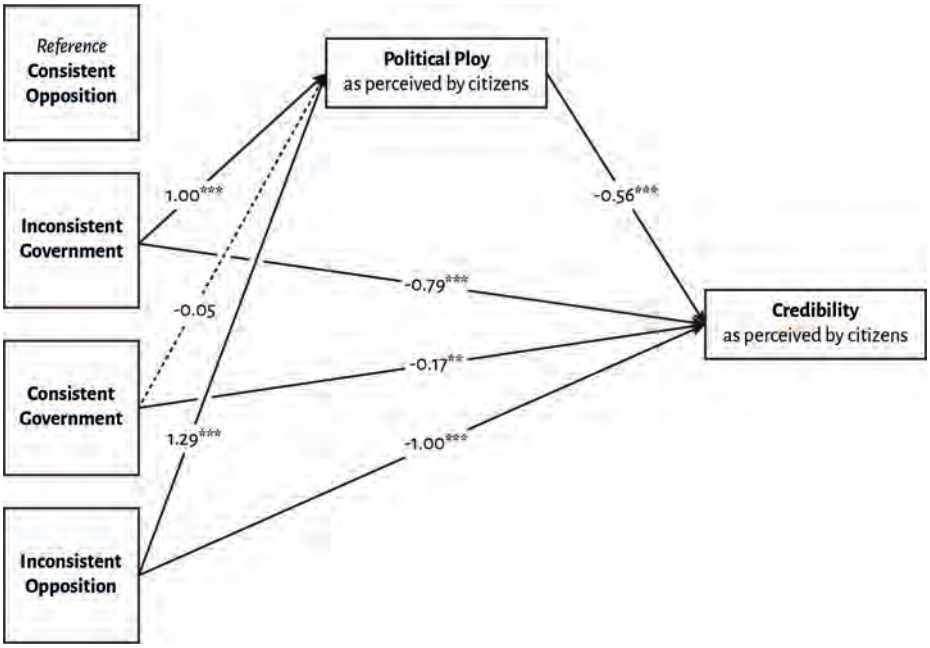

Figure 7.5: The mediation of the parliamentarian democratic defence as a political ploy as perceived by respondents. Other treatments and unbalanced covariates are included in the analysis but are not included in the figure. Stars denote * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. See the Online Appendix for the full results. Higher scores indicate more perception of a political ploy and more credibility.

whether government-allied or opposition-allied – do not differ in the extent to which respondents perceive them to play a political game. Overall, this confirms my logic: especially when opposition parliamentarians inconsistently defend democracy, they appear to respondents to only change their mind when they based on some expected political gain.

Importantly, this means that democratic defenders need to be aware of citizens' possible perception of their actions as a political ploy, as not every appeal to democracy always resonates with citizens. On a positive note, this means that citizens appear to be able to recognize the games politicians play: both government-allied and opposition democratic defenders should stay consistently committed to democracy.

To sum up my findings, I find that consistent democratic defenders – government-allied or opposition-allied – are more credible democratic defenders. Because of their consistent commitment defence of democracy, they are perceived as more genuine, and do not appear to use democracy as a political ploy. However, government-allied

and opposition democratic defenders are not equal. Government-allied democratic defenders have a slight edge over opposition democratic defenders, as they are perceived to have more access to relevant information. Overall, these findings provide some optimism for the defence of democracy against incumbent-led democratic recession in parliament, as long as parliamentarians consistently defend democracy against incumbent-led autocratization. These findings generally hold when I estimate heterogeneous treatment effects for party-subgroups and respondent left-right self-placement subgroups. I explore these further in the Online Appendix.

4.3 What is next for parliamentarian democratic defenders?

To explore which options parliamentarian democratic defenders have next, I asked respondents what they expect Lucas Perez to do next. Figure 7.6 show the results graphically (the full table can be found in the Online Appendix).

Citizens expect democratic defenders to be mostly deliberative in their defence of democracy (filing motions, providing information to the media, asking for debates), and less so activist (organizing protests, creating petitions, going to court). This is in line with Gamboa's (2022) argument that democratic defence is most likely to be successful when it has moderate goals rather than radical goals.

In general, consistent democratic defenders (the diamonds) are more often expected to take further actions than inconsistent democratic defenders (the squares), regardless of the party-affiliation. Figure 7.6 illustrates this is true for most next steps: the diamonds are clustered together significantly more to the right than the squares. This further strengthens the conclusions from the main analysis that consistency is one of the driving forces of credibility.

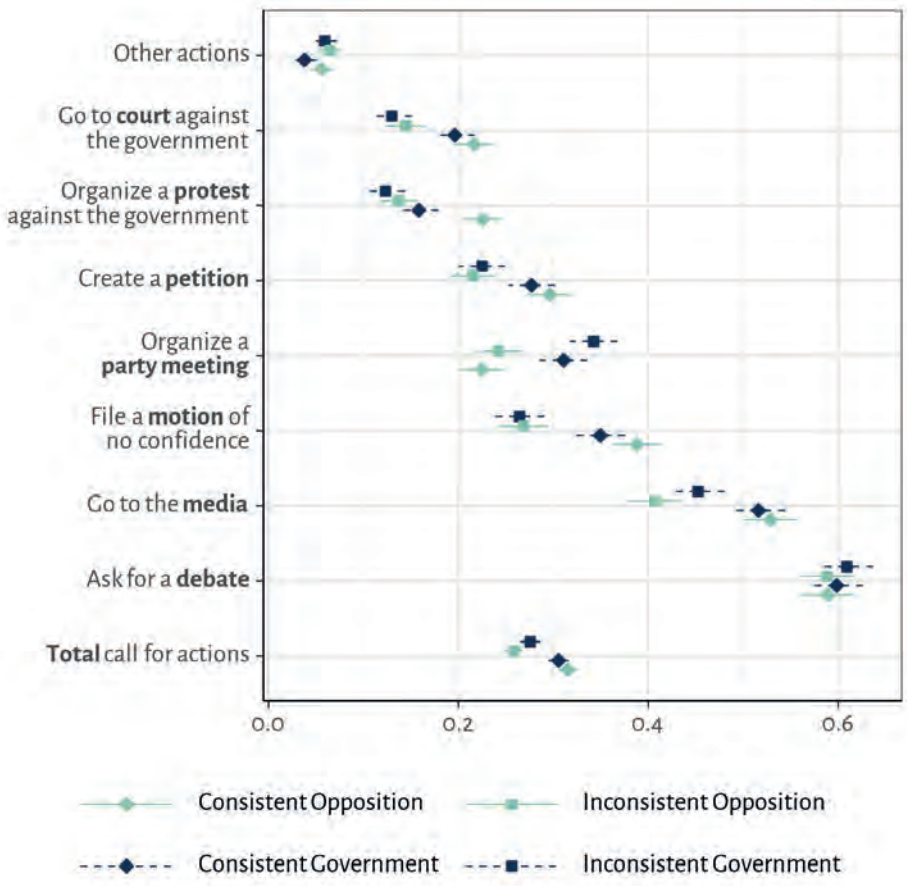

Figure 7.6: Marginal means of respondents who expect the parliamentarian democratic defender to take these next steps, with 95%-confidence intervals. The marginal means can be interpreted as proportion of the respondents who expect the parliamentarian democratic defender to take these next steps.

Table 7.2: Open answers to the question what respondents expect parliamentarian democratic defenders to do next.

Explain …	Why the proposal is undemocratic	10
	Why the proposal is undemocratic based on "scientific" evidence	5
	Why he changed his mind	35
	Alternatives	2
Engage with …	Other parties	14
	Incumbent	3
	Own party	1
	Citizens	5
	International community	5
Actions …	Judicial proceedings	4
	Legislative proceedings	9
	Start a referendum	35
	Rescind own position	18
	New elections	3
	Revolution	2
	Demonstrate	1
	Vote against proposal	1
	Everything possible	3
Do nothing because the incumbent has the mandate to propose what they want		6

Note: In total 255 respondents answered the open question. 100 respondents gave meaningless answers, 8 respondents gave lengthy answers that were classed twice, resulting in 163 meaningful answers.

There are two exceptions to this. First, respondents expect government-allied democratic defenders (the dotted error bars), regardless of their consistency, to call for a party meeting more often than opposition democratic defenders (the solid error bars). This signals that respondents pick up on the potential internal division among the government-allied parliamentarians, showing citizens do not only expect parliamentarians to defend democracy, but that parties (as an institution) also play a large role. Internal divisions, especially within the government-allied parliamentarians, can be a leverage point for democratic defenders to push for party-wide commitment to democracy.

Second, consistent opposition democratic defenders are more expected to organize a protest against the government than government-allied democratic defenders. This is in line with the general political action-literature, which suggests that protests by opposition actors are legitimate avenues to voice discontent. However, I add to this that there is a clear difference between opposition parliamentarians who are consistently committed to democracy and inconsistent oppositions. The latter are hardly distinguishable from government-allied parliamentarians when it comes to legitimately organizing protests.

There are 163 meaningful answers to the open question about what "other" actions respondents expect Perez to take next (see Table 7.2). In addition to comments that align with the responses in Figure 7.6, there are three things worth nothing: One, whenever Perez was inconsistent, respondents often wanted him to explain why he changed his mind. Multiple respondents write that changing one's mind can actually be a show of strength rather than weakness, if properly explained. Two, a substantial number of respondents wanted more information about the state of affairs and asked for example Perez to provide this through leaflets or information campaigns. They also expected the democratic defender to engage with other parliamentarians, in his own party, other opposition parties, and the incumbent's party, indicating that citizens are likely to pay more heed to democratic defence when it is done together with other parliamentarians. Taken together with the expectation that Perez should go to the media, I suggest this is again cause for some optimism. Respondents are willing to accept inconsistencies and standing up to government, but they require a good explanation and solid information. Three, a large portion of respondents either want the question about the desirability of the proposal or its democraticness put to citizens, through a referendum or through new elections. I take this to mean that citizens do, under some circumstances, see an active role for themselves to engage with democratic defence, be it through joining protests that parliamentarians organised, voting in elections, or directly voting on the desirability of undemocratic proposals.

5. Conclusion: Parliament is a credible place to defend democracy

In response to the increasing literature on incumbent-led democratic recession, scholars have started to investigate opposition and resistance to autocratization. Resilient democracies need democratic defenders who are willing to risk personal cost and political futures in their commitment to safeguard democracy. Much of this

research has focused on the role that judges, civil society actors, media, academics, and activists can play, but less attention has been paid to parliamentarians. Yet when autocratization starts, it often begins in parliament: either as a target to be co-opted or as a legal and democratically mandated way to push through legislation with autocratic effects. Against the tide of autocratization and the unlevel playing field in favour of incumbent would-be autocrats, parliaments can play a powerful role as democratic defenders. As such, parliamentarians can be an important line of defence. I investigate in this chapter when parliamentarians' defence of democracy is perceived as credible by citizens.

I argued that the credibility of parliamentarian democratic defence as perceived by citizens hinges depends on incumbency (affiliation with the governing or the opposition parties), moderated by their consistent defence of democracy. I argue that government-allied democratic defenders have more access to information and have a stronger mandate. Therefore, in general, their defence of democracy is more credible (*H1*). Furthermore, I argue that a departure from the party line for government-allied democratic defenders signals genuine commitment to democracy (*H2a*), while it signals playing a political game for opposition democratic defenders (*H2b*).

With a pre-registered survey experiment fielded in the Netherlands ($n = 4.785$) I find substantial evidence for these arguments. The hypothesis that government-allied democratic defence is indeed the most credible is largely supported; when it is interacted with consistency however, consistent opposition democratic defenders become the most credible. The effects of *in*consistency are nevertheless most severe for the opposition. I show that the effect of incumbency is primarily mediated through the perceived access to information: government-allied democratic defenders are perceived to have more access to information and are therefore more credible. The effects of a consistent defence of democracy, in turn, are primarily mediated through a perceived political ploy. Inconsistent democratic defenders (regardless of their incumbency) are more often perceived to play a political game, harming their credibility as genuine defenders of democracy. This echoes previous findings that suggest democratic defence should focus on stopping the autocratic action, and not (initially) use it as a tool to oust an autocratic leader (Cleary & Öztürk, 2022; Gamboa, 2022). I have limited the exploration of the causal mechanisms underpinning credibility to three main suspects – access of information, mandate to counter the incumbent, and perception of playing a political game – but acknowledge that other mechanisms could play a similar role.

By design, I wanted to eliminate partisan affiliations between respondent and hypothetical democratic defender, as research shows that it plays a large role in respondent evaluations. However, this does mean that I cannot establish if my findings work differently for stronger or weaker partisans. Future research should investigate the effects of consistent and government or opposition democratic defence taking into account the partisanship of the respondent as well. Overall, however the hypothetical scenario in Argentina benefits the testing of my theoretical argument because I show there are theoretically important dimensions to elite cues beyond partisan identity and polarization in citizen perceptions of autocratization. Even in an abstracted context, where there is not much at stake, respondents are able to distinguish between more and less credible sources about democratic recession. While polarization and partisan affect might moderate these effects, it is worth noting that they do exist on their own as well.

My experimental design had to proxy departure from the party-line and inconsistent democratic defence by having the democratic defender change his opinion on a very principled issue. I recognize that there are many different ways in which parliamentarians can signal dissent with the main party line without being inconsistent in their defence of democracy. While this limits the ecological validity of my study to some extent, I argue that the "risks" and costs for the parliamentarian democratic defender are clear enough to respondents – as evidenced by the large effects of consistency and the heterogeneous treatment effects for party-supporter and left-right self-placement subgroups in the Online Appendix.

My findings should be interpreted in the light of these limitations as well: the experimental set-up benefits internal validity at the expense of generalizability. But the fact that I find these results in a fictitious case that is likely distant from respondents' everyday life, gives hardly any context-clues and provides no party-identifying information, makes me expect that the effects of parliamentarian democratic defence are likely larger when it hits closer to home. Cross-country experiments could verify this.

To safeguard democracy in times of incumbent-led democratic recession, I conclude with three main take-aways.

First, parliamentarians have at least three avenues to bolster their democratic defence, of which I especially want to highlight their information-providing capacity. Government-allied parliamentarians are perceived to have access to information about the state of democracy, improving their credibility. However, there is no reason

opposition democratic defenders cannot aim to leverage the same information. As such, a clear (and consistent) explanation of the autocratic effects of proposals is a first "quick win" for democratic defence. In addition, parliamentarians are already perceived to have a strong mandate to be critical of democracy, and this is especially the case for opposition parliamentarians. But I find that at least one factor – access to information – is likely to increase the perceived mandate. I posit here the suggestion that there are other ways to increase the perceived mandate of parliamentarians as well: emphasizing (previous) electoral support, highlighting (previous) committee work, mentioning (previous) bills or motions they supported or opposed. I look forward to future research that investigates this in more depth. Lastly, the political game is in the eye of the beholder. While this holds risks for parliamentarians, it suggests that they can also counter this perception if they are aware of it. Again, this comes back to providing citizens with information: about how politics work, about why the parliamentarian changed their mind, and about what it means to democratize or autocratize. Parliamentarians *are* democratic early responders, especially when it comes to providing information about (potential) autocratization. When these three information-strategies are pursued, my findings suggest that parliament is a credible place for a first defence of democracy.

Second, inconsistent democratic defence has a large and detrimental effect on the credibility of democratic defenders. While worse for opposition parliamentarians, the effect is also negative for government-allied democratic defenders. A first conclusion here is that it is hard to be a credible democratic defender if parliamentarians have previously endorsed autocratic actions. This echoes the critiques on Civic Platform in Poland, who were "the first constitutional offender" (Sadurski, 2019a) right before PiS took over. More importantly, this should be taken as a warning about militant democracy, in which some antidemocratic measures (such as party bans or limiting antidemocratic speech) can be taken with the aim to prevent the subversion of democracy (Loewenstein, 1937; Malkopoulou & Kirshner, 2019). I find that citizens are critical of actors who want to defend democracy while previously (or simultaneously) harming aspects of it.

Third, I researched the credibility of democratic defenders as I took this to be a necessary criterion for effective democratic defence and citizen participation in democratic defence. However, my next-steps-questions show a diffuse picture about the extent that citizens are actually willing to actively engage in it. It is clear that some citizens do want and expect to be mobilized, yet a larger proportion seems to expect parliamentarians to deal with autocratization through procedural and deliberative means within parliament itself. This might be due to my experimental

design: respondents are perhaps likelier to follow an appeal to action by a co-partisan than an out-partisan. Nonetheless, these results must caution democratic defenders against being too optimistic, and future research should explore when elite democratic defence is not only perceived as credible by citizens, but also when it actually translates into citizen mobilization.

Overall, parliamentarians can provide an effective cue, against autocratization from their own party and against autocratization from other parties. However, their credibility is not a given: careless, inconsistent defence of democracy, a lack of clear argumentation, or playing an all too obvious political game can severely limit their reach, and by extension the success of their democratic defence.

In this chapter, I focused on the role of parliamentarians as elite democratic defenders, and especially how their credibility as perceived by citizens might be affected. Together with *Chapter 6 – Democratic Ambiguity*, this chapter provides a comprehensive test of the two-level theory of democratic defence as outlined in *Chapter 4 – Democratic Defence*. In the following *Chapter 8 – Conclusion* I bring the different evidentiary clues together to formulate an answer to the research question: when does democratic defence occur?

Be merry! We meet again, at the turn of the tide. A great storm is coming,
but the tide has turned.

Gandalf in The Two Towers

Chapter 8

Conclusion

1. Introduction

When Fukuyama (1992) declared the "end of history", he did not account for the democratic election of those who would turn out to become autocratizers. Sure, democracies have thrived since then: in the 2000s, there were more democracies than ever before. But democracies – whether long- or recently-established – have seen novel threats since then, especially in the form of incumbents who challenge it (Bermeo, 2016; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; Waldner & Lust, 2018). We are 33 years and 238 pages further, so let us assess where we stand.

Autocratization in democracies, without full breakdown into autocracies – what I term democratic recession – has challenged democracies in three ways: (1) democratic recession is increasingly perpetrated by democratically elected incumbents; (2) who follow the rules of the game to incrementally undermine democracy; (3) often starting in the liberal dimensions of democracy rather than the electoral dimensions. This "crime of the century" (see *Chapter 1 – Introduction*) can easily go undetected. I call this the problem of recognition. And when it *is* detected by pro-democratic actors – those actors whom I call democratic defenders –, they have to fight an uphill battle: against an incumbent who often enjoys an electoral or parliamentary majority or plurality; against electoral legitimacy and the "presumption of regularity"; and against the apparent political will of many people which seems to legitimate actions and proposals that could (and do) harm democracy. I call this the problem of mobilization. Because of this uphill battle it is surprising and puzzling – both on the elite and the citizen level – when democratic defence does occur, and all the more important to figure out why it sometimes does and other times does not occur. This thesis therefore asks (and answers): *when does democratic defence against incumbent-led democratic recession occur?*

In this *Conclusion*, I will first combine the partial answers from the six preceding chapters into a coherent, overarching solution to the puzzling occurrence of democratic defence (*Section 2 – Summary of this thesis* and *Section 3 – Solving the crime of the century*). I then turn to a discussion on the limitations of this thesis and avenues for future research (*Section 4 – Limitations of this thesis*). Finally, I conclude with the implications my research holds for the broader literatures on autocratization, on democratic resilience, and for policy-makers (*Section 5 – The way ahead*).

I argued in *Chapter 1 – Introduction* that a discussion about "waves of autocratization" is not of primary concern in this thesis. At the same time, the waves-metaphor holds strong appeal: it calls to mind images of unstoppable forces of nature that wash over

politicians and citizens alike: global problems that require global solutions. And indeed, US President Joe Biden called on for such a global solution and appealed to world leaders to "turn the tide" against autocratization at the 2023 Summit for Democracy.[115] But of course, you have read this thesis and you now know that resistance against waves of autocratization does not require a monumental tide to turn. It requires, I argue, nothing more than a single spark.

2. Summary of this thesis

When does democratic defence against incumbent-led democratic recession occur?

This is the core research puzzle I aimed to solve in this thesis. In the previous six chapters, I have worked on partial answers to this question. In this section, I will summarize the key findings from each chapter, and combine them into a coherent, overarching solution to this puzzle (see Figure 9.1).

2.1 Summarizing Movement I – Autocratic Problems

In the first half of this thesis, I presented Autocratic Problems. Many of these problems are widely discussed in the literature, but there are two questions that have received less attention than they should have:

First, would-be autocrats use a diverse, creative, and context-dependent toolkit to challenge democracy, showing what actions democratic defenders need to respond to. *Chapter 2 – Autocratic Actions* offers a comprehensive "toolkit" to analyse and compare actions by would-be autocrats across contexts, aiming to deepen understanding of how autocratization unfolds, based on in-depth case studies of almost all cases of incumbent-led democratic recession since 1990. While recent studies focus on broad causes of democratic decline – such as economic issues and polarization, which can be better understood to be facilitating circumstances rather than immediate causes – this chapter examines what would-be autocrats actually do to recede democracy. By identifying seven key strategies (evasion, manipulation, infiltration, duplication, restriction, prohibition, and delegitimation) and conceptualizing autocratization as a process of recurring "autocratic actions", it provides a systematic framework for examining whether autocratic actions share common patterns or sequences that could signal overarching strategies.

115. "Biden: World 'turning the tide' after backslide on democracy", *AP* News, 29 March 2023, https://apnews.com/article/biden-summit-for-democracy-china-russia-abd53580d1e8c64c3b5b44e67d83fb73

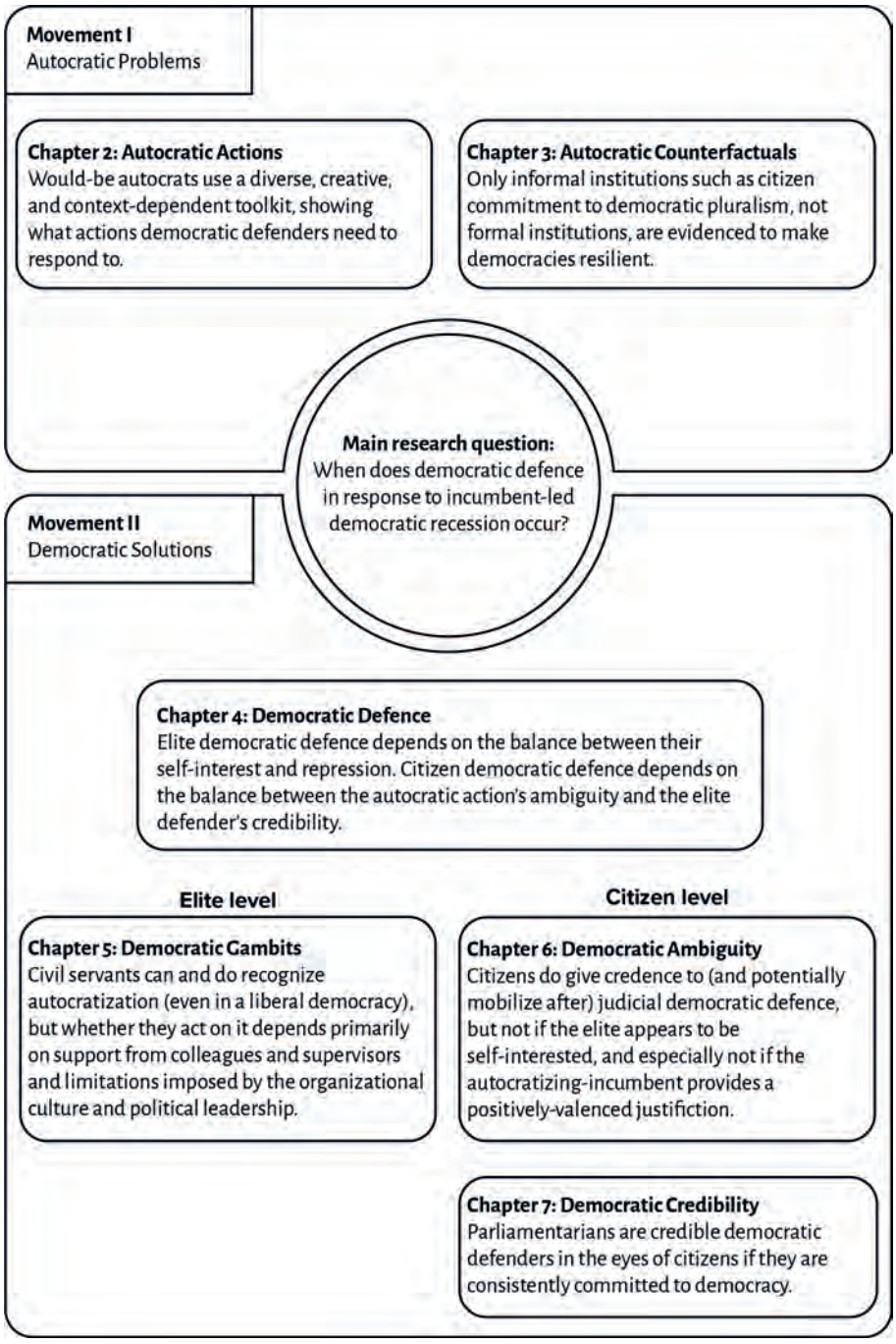

Figure 9.1: Partial answers to the core research question.

The toolkit allows researchers to investigate autocratization on a finer scale, moving beyond institutional decline to include actions that affect democratic behaviour and values. This broader perspective enhances our understanding of democratic recession, enabling earlier detection of democratic backsliding before formal institutions are visibly impacted. It also facilitates studies of "near misses" – instances where autocrats attempt but fail to weaken democracy – and offers insights into recessions in liberal, not just electoral, aspects of democracy.

The toolkit is also a necessary step in the research of democratic defence, as it shows what democratic defenders are up against. Autocratization is diverse, creative, and context-dependent. But it is also in many cases covert and ambiguous. This indicates that democratic defenders should be aware of these diverse threats to democracy, learn to recognize them (first in contexts where we know autocratization occurred, and then applying that knowledge to defenders' own contexts), and act against them. Similar to autocratization that targets institutions, behaviour, and values, democracy is likely also sustained by institutions *and* by behaviours and attitudes: making democratic defenders, their behaviour, and the consistent commitment to democracy all the more important.

For democratic defence, this chapter shows how difficult it is to start democratic defence. A single action might not lead to democratic erosion (so democratic defence might be an overreaction), yet it can be a stepping stone for future autocratization (so democratic defence might be warranted). But it also shows that autocratization, and by extension democratic defence, is not a fringe phenomenon: since autocratization can appear as "everyday politics", democratic defence needs to be "everyday" as well. I pick up this thread in *Chapter 5 – Democratic Gambits*.

Ultimately, while autocratization varies by context, this toolkit does reveal recurring tactics that future research (and democratic defenders) can use to better understand, track, and counteract democratic erosion. By broadening the focus of democratic recession, this framework equips scholars and practitioners to recognize and address autocratic threats more proactively.

Second, only informal institutions such as citizen commitment to democratic pluralism, not formal institutions are evidenced to make democracies resilient. In *Chapter 3 – Autocratic Counterfactuals* I design an algorithm that allows for the matching of longitudinal continuous variables, *locomotive*. Using this, I construct counterfactuals to the episodes of autocratization (the same universe of cases as in *Chapter 2 - Autocratic Actions*, drawn from Maerz et al., 2024), which match the

years leading up to those episodes on all relevant criteria, except one. This one varying criterion is then used as a treatment: does its variation explain the onset of or resilience against autocratization, or not? Importantly, these counterfactuals to the episodes of autocratization, which I term autocratic counterfactuals, are true empirical cases; that is, the counterfactuals are not statistical constructs, but countries in the same region as the episode of autocratization that have similar developments in certain key criteria and institutions over multiple years as the episode. Based on these matches, I construct 21 quasi-experiments, which allow me to approach causal inference and tentative claims about the causal effect of many institutions on democracies' resilience against autocratization.

First and foremost, the chapter shows that there is no evidence that there is a causal effect from any institutional set-up on democracies' resilience against the onset of autocratization. Higher-level measures of the quality of democratic institutions, such as the role of vertical, diagonal, or horizontal accountability mechanisms or the presence of judicial oversight mechanisms, legislative constraints on the executive, or an active civil society do not appear to have the causal power to prevent autocratization on their own. Also, when I disaggregate these higher-level measures into their lower-level constituent indicators, there is no evidence that any of them have an independent causal effect on resilience against the onset of autocratization. What I do find, however, is a causal effect of the informal institutions of ideological and affective polarization. The less ideological and affective polarization there is, the less likely autocratization is to occur.

The focus on independent causal effects is not a strawman argument: both in research and in empirical reality, we are often looking for the single silver bullet that prevents autocratization. In the European Union, this has for example taken the shape of the judicial committees mandated by the Venice Commission. But following the more established democratization literature, autocratization should be seen as a complex interaction between challenges to different aspects of democracy. Thus, democratic resilience does not have a single bulwark but must rely on different actors and institutions supporting each other. If anything, the study of democratic defence and resilience should move away from a too narrow focus on institutions and broaden its scope to the role of norms, behaviour, and actors – ranging from elites to citizens. I follow this direction and potential solution in *Movement II – Democratic Solutions*.

2.2 Summarizing Movement II – Democratic Solutions

In the second half of this thesis, I study the circumstances under which Democratic Solutions can be found. *Chapter 4 – Democratic Defence* is the core theoretical

contribution I make to the field, and *Chapters 5*, *6*, and *7* are the empirical examinations of this framework.

2.2.1 The theoretical solution

Democratic defence occurs on two levels: elites and citizens. *Chapter 4 – Democratic Defence* outlines these two levels theoretically. The first level of democratic defence is elite action within institutions: they stand up against the autocratizing incumbent, refuse to cooperate, speak out against the undemocratic nature of the action, or actively counteract the action. In this chapter, I define elites as a broad category of actors who work within the democratic institutions and are able to recognize autocratization. In this thesis I specifically focus on civil servants, judges, and parliamentarians as elite democratic defenders. The second level of democratic defence concerns citizens: they can mobilize in defence of democracy, vote out autocratizing incumbents, and support elite democratic defenders. These two levels interact and are both needed in most cases. Elite-only democratic defence can work when the autocratic effect of actions is unintended. Democratic defence, in these cases, simply works because the autocratic effect of the proposal was neither intended nor seriously considered up until that point. Citizen-only democratic defence can work when the autocratic effect of an action is so blatantly clear to citizens that they face no informational disadvantage. As I argue in *Movement I – Autocratic Problems*, however, incumbent-led democratic recession is often characterized by high levels of ambiguity. This makes it less clear for citizens when an action is, in fact, an *autocratic* action, and increases the need for elite democratic defenders' persuasion. But this also means that when the would-be autocrat does not react to the elite-only democratic defence, and when democratic recession is sufficiently covert, hidden, or ambiguous, both levels are needed: elites to cue citizens, and citizens to support and strengthen elites' voice.

Elite democratic defence depends on the balance between their self-interest and repression. I argue that self-interest is the determinant on one side of the balance for two reasons. First, elites (just like citizens) face an informational disadvantage when it comes to institutions other than their own: it is simply harder to recognize autocratization outside their own daily work, because they lack the knowledge of the context or established norms and procedures. Second, given the high risk of resisting the autocratizing incumbent, elites assess their self-interest in opposing the incumbent and weigh it against the likelihood and strength of incumbent repression. If the autocratic action of the incumbent threatens to directly affect the ability of (members of) the elite to perform their professional duties or even affect their livelihood, professional and material self-interest can incentivize elites to

withstand the incumbent and defend democracy. Repression, on the other side of the balance, limits the space for potential elite defenders to defend democracy. In *Chapter 2 – Autocratic Actions*, I document extensively how repression (and its closely related cousin prohibition) can lead to self-censorship out of fear for retribution or uncertainty about consequences.

Citizen democratic defence depends on the balance between the autocratic action's ambiguity and the elite defender's credibility. The autocratic action can be blatant or covert (the latter being more ambiguous than the former) and unjustified or justified (the latter being more ambiguous than the former). Ambiguity "veils" whether an action is in fact, an autocratic action. The more ambiguous an action is, the less likely citizen democratic defence is to occur. Unless, of course, an elite democratic defender can credibly remove the "veil of ambiguity", showing the action for what it actually is: an attempt to autocratize. I present an initial test of this argument with two illustrative case-studies (Poland and Senegal).

The following chapters delve deeper into the empirical evidence: *Chapter 5 – Democratic Gambits* tests how the first level of democratic defence – elites – occurs empirically. *Chapter 6 – Democratic Ambiguity* and *Chapter 7 – Democratic Credibility* test how the second level of democratic defence – citizens – occur empirically.

2.2.2 The empirical evidence

On the elite level, civil servants can and do recognize autocratization (even in a liberal democracy), but whether they act on it depends primarily on support from colleagues and supervisors and limitations imposed by the organizational culture and political leadership. In *Chapter 5 – Democratic Gambits* I show how civil servants, as one type of elite democratic defender, navigate the dilemmas of administrative democratic defence. Before they engage in democratic defence, they have to answer three questions: do they have the capability to recognize autocratization, do they have the access to instruments to halt it, and are they willing to act and use those instruments? I study these questions with 29 elite interviews with civil servants in the Dutch national administration.

The first dilemma civil servants face is between their expertise about their work area and the lack of overview of the entire, complex system of policy-making. This dilemma is often resolved by focusing on their own topic of expertise, where civil servants can and do recognize changes in the system that are not in line with previously established procedures, norms, or rules and regulations. The second dilemma civil servants face is between the choice for internal instruments (such as talking to colleagues or

supervisors and writing memos or advice to the minister), that might lack in efficiency, and external instruments (such as sharing confidential information with the media or engaging in public protests). This dilemma is resolved often by trying to first exhaust the internal instruments and finding common ground with colleagues and supervisors. In only limited and exceptional circumstances have civil servants felt the need to speak out publicly. The third, and arguably most important dilemma civil servants face is between the acknowledgement that they are in a position where they have to deal with their own discomfort and the courage and administrative nerve they sometimes want to summon to draw a line in the sand. This dilemma is the hardest to resolve, as there are only limited shared guidelines and understandings. The more pronounced the first two dilemmas are, the harder it becomes for civil servants to resolve the third dilemma.

Importantly, the dilemmas of democratic defence do in no way preclude democratic defence from occurring. I have shown different examples when civil servants do defend democracy, even with "clammy hands" (like *Alicia**). And it is likely multiple more defences have occurred, outside the view of the public eye and outside the purview of my interviews. However, it is also likely that some autocratization attempts have not been recognized or not been acted against, because the dilemmas at that point in time were resolved differently. That is why the interplay of actors, each with different expertise, instruments, and moral grounding, is necessary in the defence of democracy: to overcome any gaps that a single defender might leave.

On the citizen level, in turn, citizens do give credence to (and potentially mobilize after) judicial democratic defence, but not if the elite appears to be self-interested, and especially not if the autocratizing incumbent provides a positively-valenced justification. In *Chapter 6 – Democratic Ambiguity*, I show using a survey experiment ($n = 9.158$), fielded in the Netherlands, Germany, and France that elite democratic defence does matter. When a judicial democratic defender speaks out about the autocratic nature of an incumbent's autocratic proposal, many citizens are willing to be critical of the incumbent. However, the success of democratic defence is in no way guaranteed: defenders must not appear to be self-interested (unless the action is unambiguously autocratic). For democratic resilience, this shows how important the role of the *actors* within the institutions is.

In further contrast to the positive story about the success of democratic defence, the results also show the fragility of a democratic system, as autocratizing incumbents can sacrifice democracy (or intentionally autocratize) to achieve certain policy goals. This appeal to a positively valenced goal causes respondents to see autocratic action as more democratic. Even without partisan cues, citizens can follow the incumbent,

especially when the policy goal has a positive connotation. I only limited my experiment to the positively valenced goal of curbing corruption but recognize many other positively valenced goals could have similar (or worse) anti-democratic effects. On the flip side, "clear autocratic intent" – signalled by a self-serving justification – results consistently in lower democracy evaluations. Under some circumstances elite democratic defenders can leverage this unsound justification, making elite democratic defence more likely to affect citizen perceptions if the autocratizing incumbent signals their intent to aggrandize their executive power. But these positive effects are tenuous and circumstantial at best. In fact, I show that democratic defence can backfire because democratic defenders are not always credible in the eyes of citizens; and that the incumbent's justifications can increase citizen democracy evaluations because they increase ambiguity around the autocratic action.

Finally, to reinforce the point about credibility, parliamentarians are credible democratic defenders in the eyes of citizens if they are consistently committed to democracy. In *Chapter 7 – Democratic Credibility* I show with a survey experiment fielded in the Netherlands ($n = 4.785$) how the credibility of parliamentarian democratic defence as perceived by citizens hinges depends on incumbency (affiliation with governing or opposition parties), moderated by consistency. Consistent democratic defenders (regardless of incumbency) are the most credible democratic defenders to citizens, while inconsistent democratic defenders are less credible (again, regardless of incumbency, but more severely so for opposition democratic defenders). I show that the effect of incumbency is primarily mediated through the perceived access to information: government-allied democratic defenders are perceived to have more access to information and are therefore more credible. The effects of consistency, in turn, are primarily mediated through a perceived political ploy. Inconsistent democratic defenders (regardless of their incumbency) are more often perceived to play a political game, harming their credibility as genuine defenders of democracy.

Parliamentarians have at least three avenues to bolster their democratic defence, of which I especially want to highlight their information-providing capacity. Government-allied parliamentarians are perceived to have access to information about the state of democracy, improving their credibility. However, there is no reason opposition democratic defenders cannot aim to leverage the same information. Opposition parliamentarians *have* access to much of the same information, citizens just perceive them to not have access. In fact, when asked, many respondents ask for more information – regardless of the incumbency of the defender. Therefore, an "easy win" for parliamentarians – government-allied but especially opposition

democratic defenders – is to explain what the information is that causes them to claim democracy is under threat and how they acquired it.

Second, inconsistency has a large and detrimental effect on the credibility of democratic defenders. While worse for opposition parliamentarians, the effect is also negative for government-allied democratic defenders. A first conclusion here is that it is hard to "draw a line in the sand" if parliamentarians have previously endorsed autocratic actions.

Third, I researched the credibility of democratic defenders as I took this to be a necessary criterion for effective democratic defence and citizen participation in democratic defence. However, when asking respondents which next steps they expect the parliamentarians to take, it shows a diffuse picture about the extent that citizens are actually willing to actively engage in democratic defence themselves. It is clear that some citizens do want and expect to be mobilized (entertaining the idea to join a protest organized by the parliamentarian defender, or perhaps sign a petition), yet a larger proportion seems to expect parliamentarians to deal with autocratization through procedural and deliberative means within parliament itself.

3. Solving the crime of the century (or: answering the research question)

If incumbent-led democratic recession is the crime of the century, how do we catch the perpetrators? Big questions need small answers, and my small answer is: "by looking for them".

In any (criminal) investigation, or so Marple, Holmes, and Lupin (well… his adversaries) teach us, an investigator must look for clues and evidence and proof. In the social sciences, proof is elusive: proof constitutes hard, irrefutable, facts. Something *is* true when proven.[116] Evidence, one step down, are observations and information, combined into a story that then becomes an argument. Something *might be* true. In the social sciences we *can* provide evidence, the "truth" of which is decided by the strength of our argumentation, the rigour of our research-design, and the leniency of reviewer-two (cf. Collier, 2011). Clues, finally, are the building blocks of our evidentiary argument. They are the significance-stars in our tables, the highlighted text in our interview-transcripts, and the discussions during conferences, seminars,

116. I will leave the ontological debate to someone else. But even in a highly interpretivist worldview, given a set of rules or paradigms, truth *within* that paradigm can be established.

and workshops. On their own, clues are rather meaningless for "truth". They become meaningful when multiple clues come together, align in some ways, misalign in others, require re-interpretation, or necessitate more clues. They only tell a story when a researcher interprets them and formulates their expectations. In the social sciences, we have a lot of clues. In this thesis, there have been a few of them as well.

So: what is the story they tell?

3.1 Theoretical contributions to the field

The problem is simple: incumbents use creative, diverse, and context-dependent tools to autocratize, against which no single institutional set-up is resilient. The solution is complex.

First, both elites and citizens are, in different capacities, able to respond to autocratization, and perhaps even slow-down, halt, or revert it. This is important and bears repeating: elites *and* citizens can recognize the autocratic actions. Elites, in *Chapter 5 – Democratic Gambits*, see proposals in different policy fields and can make arguments about their potential autocratic effects. Citizens recognize the actions I put to them in the survey experiments in *Chapter 6 – Democratic Ambiguity* and *Chapter 7 – Democratic Credibility* as well. Generally, the intercepts in the models are low, indicating that regardless of democratic defence respondents see the autocratic actions as precisely that: autocratic. These are, however, autocratic actions more on the overt side: limiting the right to protest, or limiting judicial or media independence is close to what most people consider essentials of democracy (Ferrín & Kriesi, 2016; van Lit, 2023) and are therefore likely to be picked up. Yet, citizens *do* pick up on it.

Second, elites are willing to signal democracy is under threat, both internally and at least hypothetically externally as well. *Chapter 5 – Democratic Gambits* shows that their willingness, however, depends on a multitude of factors, of which support from colleagues and supervisors as well as potential repercussions appear to be the most important ones. Even in their own fields of expertise, they are not always sure if they recognize autocratization correctly: this makes it even less likely they recognize (or at least discuss the possibility of) autocratization in other areas.

Third, in the Dutch case, studied in *Chapter 5 – Democratic Gambits*, elite (administrative) democratic defence has been successful so far, even when civil servants did not go outside their institutions with their democratic defence. Yet the experiences around the world (see *Chapter 1 – Introduction* and *Chapter 2 – Autocratic Actions*) signal this is not always the case.

Fourth, not all autocratic actions are equally clearly autocratic to citizens. *Chapter 6 – Democratic Ambiguity* shows that even *a priori* credible elites, such as judges, can be overruled by a positively valenced justification for an autocratic action. In this chapter, I show that such a justification induces ambiguity around the autocratic action, leading many to believe it is more democratic than they otherwise would have thought.

Fifth, not all elite cues are equally valid to citizens. *Chapter 7 – Democratic Credibility* shows that parliamentarians can gain credibility in the eyes of citizens by being consistent in their defence of democracy. If they are, instead, perceived to be playing a political game, they lose credibility, and by extension probably less likely to effectively mobilize citizens to join the democratic defence.

Taking all this evidence together, when does democratic defence against incumbent-led democratic recession occur? I am confident this thesis presents substantial and convincing evidence for the two-level model of democratic defence as outlined in *Chapter 4 – Democratic Defence*. Based on the clues and evidence from *Chapter 5 – Democratic Gambits*, I show elite democratic defence depends on their willingness to engage in defence, mostly influenced by self-interest and feared repression. Based on the clues and evidence from *Chapter 6 – Democratic Ambiguity* and *Chapter 7 – Democratic Credibility*, I show that citizen democratic defence depends on the autocratic action's ambiguity and the elite defender's credibility.

3.2 Empirical innovations

In researching the substance of democratic defence, I have introduced four empirical innovations as well. First, in my interviews with civil servants I am, as far as I am aware, one of the first who asks elites if, how, and when they defend democracy in a liberal democracy. A key insight that has been overlooked so far is that democracy is always under threat – even in a (supposedly) high-performing democracy as the Netherlands. Second, in the survey experiments, I employ a third-party design, which is a first attempt to disentangle partisan cues from democratic defence cues. Not only does this allow for a better testing of the theoretical argument, but it is also one of the first attempts to look beyond partisanship in the study of democratic defence. The findings highlight that there are substantial effects from other theoretically important dimensions that would otherwise be overlooked. Third, the autocrats' toolkit is, as far as I am aware, the first comprehensive overview of autocratic actions that covers almost all episodes of autocratization. Next to our theoretical understanding of different autocratization strategies, this empirical overview is an important step helping us to recognize and counter autocratization.

These are important empirical contributions as they shed new light on the processes of autocratization and the considerations that democratic defenders make that previous research and research designs have not been able to investigate.

In this section, however, I want to focus most attention on the novel matching method I developed in *Chapter 3 – Autocratic Counterfactuals*. While the chapter is not intended as a methodological innovation per se, and while the generalizability of the *locomotive*-algorithm remains to be tested, I would argue that the quasi-experiments resulting from the matching are as close to causal inference political science has gotten for macro-research as any other attempts. If anything, by leveraging randomization over conditioning, I think the causal claims in the chapter are stronger than much comparative research – albeit with strict caveats about the extent of the matching criteria and years. I do *not* claim that this chapter is the be-all and end-all of the debate on the role of institutions and democratic defence. I do claim, however, that the clues and evidence provided by the logic of longitudinal continuous multivariate matching are stronger than many "standard" regression-based approaches.

4. Limitations of this thesis

The main limitation in this thesis is in the research question itself: I focus on the *occurrence* of democratic defence, not on its *success*. If incumbent-led democratic recession is a crime, my thesis presents guidelines on how to investigate that crime and arguably on how to prevent it. It does not, however, give any predictions about the success of the investigation: whether the perpetrator is caught, tried, and convicted is a topic for another book. Like I put it in the *Introduction*: we first need to understand *when* democratic defence happens, before we can understand *how* it happens and *what* its outcome might be. I made this choice consciously in the early stages of the research, and it is best explained with yet another metaphor:

Autocratization is a game of chess. The literature on democratic recession (see *Chapter 1 – Introduction*) has too long focused solely on the moves made by the autocratic player. Only recently has the literature on democratic resilience, and specifically democratic defenders started to look at the moves made by the democratic player. Because we knew so little about their gameplan, I decided to solely focus on them as well. However, whether democratic defence is successful (i.e. whether the democratic player checkmates the autocratic player) obviously also depends on the moves by the autocratic player. In terms from the contemporary classics: the occurrence of democratic defence is the win-set of democratic defenders, while its success depends

on the overlap with the would-be autocrat's win-set (Putnam, 1988). A next step is to incorporate *both* players in a coherent analytical framework. There are some hooks in this thesis that could tie into that framework:

In *Chapter 2 – Autocratic Actions* and *Chapter 4 – Democratic Defence* I show how the use of repression can influence democratic defence: either by prohibiting or restricting opposition, or by inducing self-censorship of potential democratic defenders. It is possible that would-be autocrats employ these same tactics *in response* to a democratic defence (making the defence, at least initially unsuccessful). In *Chapter 5 – Democratic Gambits* I show how administrative elites are faced with pressure from the political leadership: while this was clearly not physical repression, for some civil servants, they felt pressured to rethink (if not stop) their democratic defence. In *Chapter 6 – Democratic Ambiguity* and *Chapter 7 – Democratic Credibility* I show that citizen support for elite democratic defence is contingent on many factors – perceived elite self-interest and consistent defence of democracy being the predominant factors. Using delegitimation aimed at the defenders (see *Chapter 2 – Autocratic Actions*) would-be autocrats could respond to the defence and undermine its success. Again, this could make the defence unsuccessful.

On the other hand, would-be autocrats could also be successfully persuaded to drop their autocratic proposals, begging the question: can would-be autocrats be "rehabilitated"? *Chapter 5 – Democratic Gambits* gives a first answer here: yes, they can. Examples from the Dutch context show that civil servants on multiple occasions have successfully made arguments in favour of democracy and in opposition to the incumbent. While I argued strongly that the would-be autocrat's motive does not matter for the *occurrence* of democratic defence, it might matter for its *success*. Elite democratic defence might be especially likely to be successful when would-be autocrats are unaware they are autocratizing. That is: when they have no "autocratic intent", they can be persuaded by substantive arguments. How this would work in countries that are further down the path of democratic recession, or for autocratizing incumbents who are less committed to democracy, is a question that is still open to future research.

This brings me to the next limitation: I have only looked at a subset of actors that could be democratic defenders. In *Chapter 5 – Democratic Gambits*, I focused on civil servants; in *Chapter 6 – Democratic Ambiguity* I focused on how judicial elites are perceived by citizens; and in *Chapter 7 – Democratic Credibility* I focused on how parliamentary elites are perceived by citizens. There is, however, a wealth of actors that I have not included in this thesis: party-elites, journalists, academics, military

officials, local politicians, civil society organizations, international organizations, companies, and many more (Tomini et al., 2023, p. 132). Because of the consistency of the findings around the ambiguity of autocratic actions and credibility of democratic defenders, I am confident they hold for other actors as well. But this remains, of course, to be tested.

What I have also not looked at is the actions that democratic defenders can take. As I outlined in the *Introduction* and in *Chapter 4 – Democratic Defence*, I take a pragmatic approach: if actors explicitly say they defend democracy, I take it to be a democratic defence – regardless of what they do to defend democracy. In *Chapter 7 – Democratic Credibility* I showed that parliamentary democratic defenders are expected to "stick to the rules of the game" and be consistently committed to democracy. That is: there is some evidence that democratic defence using undemocratic means might not be successful or even counter-productive (cf. Gamboa, 2022 on moderate strategies; and Lührmann, 2021 on critical engagement). This resonates with the "presumption of regularity" in the *Introduction*: as long as it is unclear that a would-be autocrat is doing something irregular, it is not up to democratic defenders to be too aggressive in their democratic defence. At the same time, this poses challenges to democratic defenders. In *Chapter 2 – Autocratic Actions* I showed how autocratizing incumbents can and do limit space for debate and discussion when they autocratize. By extension, the act of autocratization itself limits the moderate strategies, deliberative democratic defences, and opportunities for critical engagement. "What then," do democratic defenders rightly ask, "should we do?" Sadly, I do not provide an answer in this thesis. One fruitful way forward is to experimentally manipulate the different defence strategies in response to a specific autocratic action and assess citizens evaluation both of the autocratic action and of the legitimacy of the defence strategy.

Another avenue to explore further is to look at the "presumption of regularity" empirically. What happens if would-be autocrats are explicit about their "autocratic intent" or accept or willingly admit that what they do is irregular? *Chapter 6 – Democratic Ambiguity* gives some indication that a respondents punish all too overt power-grabs (both in attitudinal evaluations and prospected political participation), but this evidence is preliminary at best. There appears to be growing democratic ambivalence among citizens, however (Wuttke et al., 2020), which could also indicate a higher tolerance for overt autocrats.

Next, I rely on a specific conception of democracy in this thesis, defining democratic recession as the move away from liberal democracy. Strict adherence to liberal democracy as the benchmark implies that actions that improve, say, deliberative democracy or

direct democracy might be understood as autocratic actions. Instead, this might not be "autocratization", even though it could constitute a move away from liberal democracy, but rather "differential democratization". This is exactly the argument many would-be autocrats make, so I do urge caution here. Orbán famously proclaimed himself not anti-democratic, but an illiberal democrat (cf. Zakaria, 1997), implying he is not receding democracy, but supplanting western, liberal, "woke" democracy for Hungarian, illiberal, Christian democracy. While Orbán's illiberal democracy is, without a doubt, a decline of democracy, the case is less clear for other adjectives of democracy (cf. Collier & Levitsky, 1997; Gagnon, 2021). As far as justifications for autocratization go, moving away from electoral democracy to another conception of democracy might be empirically appealing to citizens (and elites), and even normatively acceptable. Again, I cannot make strong claims about this debate here, and welcome future research.

Lastly, while I have aimed to make the democratic solutions to autocratic problems presented in this thesis globally applicable, I am limited in my case-selection in the empirical research I have done. *Chapter 2 – Autocratic Actions* captures almost all cases (across time and space) and likely all autocratic actions and strategies available to incumbents. *Chapter 3 – Autocratic Counterfactuals* includes all known cases of incumbent-led democratic recession. That is: on the problem-side I am confident I can make a globally applicable argument. On the solution side, I have only empirically researched democratic defence in the Netherlands (*Chapter 4 – Democratic Gambits, Chapter 6 – Democratic Ambiguity,* and *Chapter 7 – Democratic Credibility*), Germany and France (both in *Chapter 6 – Democratic Ambiguity*), with case studies of Senegal and Poland (*Chapter 4 – Democratic Defence*). The benefit of this case-selection is that the findings likely generalize to other liberal democracies, at least in Europe. The downside is that I can only claim, but not evidence, that they translate to other country-contexts as well. I base this claim on the research design of the experiments in *Chapter 6 – Democratic Ambiguity* and *Chapter 7 – Democratic Credibility*. I asked respondents to evaluate an autocratic action in a third country (Norway and Argentina, respectively): eliminating all country-, partisan-, and incumbency-cues. This abstracts away the theoretical elements of the research from empirical contexts, making it more likely that the findings travel beyond those contexts. Moreover, while substantially different, my findings do align with arguments made elsewhere (among many others Gamboa, 2022; Markowski, 2024; Muliavka et al., 2025; Rakner, 2021; Schedler, 2019; Schwartz & Isaacs, 2023; Tomini et al., 2023). I look forward to further research about democratic defence in different countries and contexts to improve our understanding of its occurrence and its success even more.

5. The way ahead

In the separate chapters, I ended with recommendations for future research based on the findings in those chapters. But in these final pages I also want to take a step back and assess how my thesis impacts the broader field of democracy research, the study of democratic defence, and potential policy implications.

5.1 Implications for the broader field of democracy research

There are three main implications for the broader study of democracy I want to draw attention to (as well as three tentative approaches I would take).

First, I see a need to better conceptualize and theorize what a "defence of democracy" is. While useful as an empirical lens and highly suitable in this thesis, both "defence" (Capoccia, 2005) and "resistance" (Tomini et al., 2023) lack a strong foundation in broader democratic theory and theories of regime change. The literature relying on these terms is informative and useful, but I argue the terminology requires sharpening to better understand the complexities in the social world around us. Again, this is not merely a semantic discussion: how we conceptualise phenomena impacts what we include and exclude in our research. In *Chapter 4 – Democratic Defence*, I argued why a focus on "resilience" (understood as institutional resilience) puts us on the wrong track. So too do other terms. Both "resistance" (Tomini et al., 2023) and "defence" (Capoccia, 2005) are reactive. They occur in response to autocratic action. Similarly, "safeguarding" (Graham et al., 2017) implies "waiting until something happens." This is, in fact, how I have looked at democratic defence (for lack of a better term) in this thesis. I asked how civil servants, judges, and parliamentarians react to autocratic actions, and how citizens react to those elites. But *Chapter 5 – Democratic Gambits* and *Chapter 7 – Democratic Credibility* show that democratic defence is (and should be) an ongoing process, in which democratic defenders are continuously aware of potential threats. A further problem with "defence" and "resistance" is the highly militaristic connotation (as with "militant democracy", see Loewenstein, 1937). But Gamboa (2022) and *Chapter 7 – Democratic Credibility* indicate that the defence of democracy is not necessarily radical, militaristic, or outside the bounds of normal politics. It is instead moderate, deliberative, and part of everyday politics. Focusing on a military connotation of threats to democracy and responses to it therefore firstly limits the cases, actions, and events we might be interested in. But secondly, it might give democratic defenders themselves the wrong idea about how militaristic or normal, re-active or pro-active their defence could and should be.

I would therefore suggest that the overarching concept (Sartori, 1970) is "sustaining democracy". When "sustaining" focuses on actors, it becomes defence, safeguarding, or resistance. Following Tomini et al. (2023) and Capoccia (2005), resistance is the sustaining of democracy regardless of motives, while a democratic defence is with the explicit connection to democracy. When "sustaining democracy" focuses on institutions that do not go against democratic norms, we look at resilience, and when we look at formal rules and regulations that do go against democratic norms in attempt to protect other democratic norms, it becomes militant. Another branch in the imagined conceptual tree (Munck & Verkuilen, 2002) is the difference between reactive sustaining of democracy and proactive sustaining of democracy. When it comes to the proactive sustaining of democracy, I expect scholars of "sustainable democracy" can learn a lot from civic educators, democratic innovation-scholars, or constitution designers in this regard.

Second, scholars need to further problematize the start of autocratization. In *Chapter 1 – Introduction* and in each of the substantive chapters I emphasize how autocratization is covert and incremental. Yet, in the wider scholarship and in this thesis, we often revert to examples of autocratization that are comparatively unambiguous – at least to "us academics": limiting judicial independence or media independence (*Chapter 6 – Democratic Ambiguity*) or the right to protest (*Chapter 7 – Democratic Credibility*) has clear negative effects to democracy, whether it is justified or not. "We academics" acknowledge the empirical problem, but do not always adequately incorporate it in our own research: if we say autocratization is covert, we must recognize that we are unlikely to spot all autocratic actions. This is especially problematic for the "first instances" of autocratization. In the interviews for *Chapter 5 – Democratic Gambits*, I was struck by how different the examples of pressures on Dutch democracy were that civil servants gave: they were not limited to the core of (electoral) democracy: elections, participation, or inclusion, but extended to examples about social welfare, the criminal system, and environmental concerns.

I would therefore suggest that the onset of autocratization needs to be understood better: there is likely more variety there than we have captured so far. My initial answer would be to look at "acts of tentative autocratization": arguably legal and normatively permitted acts or proposals, about small changes to procedures, rules, and regulations, which, when implemented, could potentially and (perhaps) unintentionally result in autocratization. This allows for a broader scope and includes many more actors as necessary "first responders" (cf. *Chapter 5 – Democratic Gambits*), precisely because recognizing such an act of tentative autocratization requires in-depth knowledge about not only democracy but specific policy areas.

I imagine detecting these acts of tentative autocratization requires a variety of tools. It should be based on not just one benchmark (does it move away from core institutional requirements of electoral democracy, cf. Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019, or of liberal democracy as explored in this thesis?), but – like constitutional interpretation (cf. Sunstein, 2023) – apply a variety of checks: is the proposal legal or proportional?; does it fit with a majoritarian, deliberative, technocratic, or other conception of democracy?; does it differ from how historically proposals have been made or implemented?; does it impact democratic institutions, behaviour, or norms; is it part of a broader anti-democratic narrative?; what would the worst-case outcome be?; what would, in turn, the best-case outcome be?; et cetera. This would likely not result in a clear set of "acts" that are "tentatively autocratic", as these different questions likely result in different answers. But hopefully it does result in a way of thinking that enables us to *make an argument* about the autocratic effect of those acts of tentative autocratization.

Third, democracy is, by its nature, a changing system. It is also the only system of governing societies in which it is legitimate (and arguably even expected) to question to fundamental principles of the system. This leads to the paradox that underpins this thesis, even though I have not explicitly acknowledged it so far: can democracies democratically remove their own democraticness (Popper, 1995, pp. 602–603)? I believe the answer to this question is yes: democracies can democratically autocratize (*Chapter 2 – Autocratic Actions* includes many examples of this). I also believe this answer must be amended with "but it is not desirable they do so." To prevent this "undesirable" outcome, it then seems we need to redefine and re-debate what the core element of democracy is: if it is no longer core that the majority can decide anything it wants (including abolishing democracy), what then is core to democracy (cf. Rijpkema, 2012, who suggests that the core element is democracy's "self-correcting" mechanism)? Discussions on democracy as liberal, electoral, social, egalitarian, or any of its other variants are, arguably, discussions in the margins. I am thinking of more fundamental debate, between parliamentarian democracy, communal democracy, radical democracy, or something completely new. Dahl introduced "polyarchy" in 1956 (Dahl, 1956), which changed the way we think about democracy now – a theoretical change to a concept that has existed for thousands of years. Yet, with enormous empirical impact: V-Dem bases one of its main measures of democratic quality around the world, the electoral democracy index, on Dahl's polyarchy (Coppedge et al., 2011). And V-Dem researchers are invited all across the world to discuss what the measures mean for governments and countries, and how democracy can be improved. Polyarchy changes the world. Theory matters. There

is no reason we cannot debate polyarchy in turn and aim for an understanding of democracy that fits better with today's empirical realities.

I would therefore suggest thinking about democracy-as-it-is-now as a self-referential system: the rules that govern its change are subject to the rules themselves. This leads to the problems we have encountered in this thesis, and especially to the paradoxical answer that democracies can democratically autocratize. Democracy-as-it-could-be should remove these self-references to try and eliminate the potential for paradoxes. In other words: is there a way that we can take decisions about "democracy itself" out of the democratic system (and how democratic is it that there are parts of our societal structure that we potentially have less or no say about)?[117] There are two understandings of democracy that highlight potential ways to think about this:

Democracies resulting from Hannah Arendt's revolutions (Arendt, 1963), might provide some initial inspiration. A successful revolution, according to Arendt, results in not just the overthrow of an old regime, but the establishment of a new political order that ensures freedom and civic participation. True revolutionaries are those who create lasting institutions that secure these freedoms for future generations. To achieve this, the new political order has two different sets of rules: one set that regulates the creation and writing of constitutions (based on communalism), and a second set that regulates the creation and execution of public policy (based on conventional understandings of democracy through elections and representation). This should remove the self-references, because the constitution is governed by different rules than "normal politics": the rules that govern change to the rules are not subject to themselves, but subject to communal decision-making. In theory this means that the people in power can rewrite public policy, but not the constitution. Only the communes, a different power structure, can rewrite the constitution. Of course, this is merely moving the paradox from the leaders to the communes: can

117. Fun fact: my incomplete thought is based on the fact that the mathematician, logician and set-theorist Kurt Gödel allegedly found a loophole in the United States Constitution. According to Gödel's friends Oskar Morgenstern (with John Neumann one of the key founders of contemporary game theory) and Albert Einstein (yes, that one), when Gödel prepared for his citizenship exam, he found a logical inconsistency that allowed to US to be changed into a fascist dictatorship through completely constitutional means. When asked about his background by the examinator, Gödel started to talk about how Austria became a dictatorship through legal means. The examiner replied that it "luckily could not happen [in the US]". To which Gödel said: "Oh yes, I can prove it." Both Morgenstern and Einstein were present at the interview and were "horrified at this exchange", until the examinator moved on with "Oh God, let's not get into this". See Morgenstern's report on the events here: https://albert.ias.edu/entities/archivalmaterial/9fd45e83-9706-4c1f-92de-302efdc85561. Sadly, Gödel never wrote down what loophole he found. The best guess is that it concerns Article V in the US Constitution, which governs changes to the Constitution (Guerra-Pujol, 2013, 2023).

the constitution-writing communes then decide to abolish themselves? That is the problem with self-referential systems and self-governing organizations: they always find a way to reference themselves, no matter how much you try to check and balance.

Elinor Ostrom's commons-structure (Ostrom, 1990) might provide alternative inspiration. Ostrom's "commons" are shared resources – such as fisheries, forests, or water systems – that communities self-govern through collective action and local institutions. She asks how communities prevent overuse and depletion of these resources, even though there appears to be ample opportunity for each individual that enjoys the commons. On a small scale the commons are governed as much by (informal) agreements between people who use them as by natural, structural limitations. Put bluntly, only so many sheep can graze on a meadow (the typical example of a "commons"): even if people decide to send more sheep to the meadow, it will not budge and suddenly produce more grass. As such, the commons themselves place natural, structural limitations on what can and cannot be decided by people. In terms of self-referential systems, these limitations are similar to mathematical axioms that exist outside the system and are (agreed to be) fundamentally "true", regardless of votes, elections, or preferences. That is: there are no self-references, because the fundamental, axiomatic structure underpinning the constitution of commons-democracy is "natural": it cannot be changed, even if we wanted to. Moving away from natural constraints, this fundamental structure can be captured by eternity clauses in constitutions, as we have discussed. But this results again in a moving of the question: what if people simply ignore those constraints? And: how democratic is a democracy if certain constraints are impossible to change?

I stop here, before I write a new thesis about "what democracy is", with one final remark: the fact that we do not yet have an understanding of democracy-as-a-non-self-referential-system, does not mean that we should not think about it. Incumbent-led democratic recession in general and the difficulties of democratic defence against it in particular as outlined throughout this thesis shows the need to critically re-investigate what democracy is – or, more poignantly: what we want it to be.

5.2 Implications for the study of democratic defence

Turning from the implications for the study of democracy to the study of democratic defence, where do these questions leave us?

First and foremost, I want to return to the crime of the century. We can read this thesis pessimistically or optimistically. The pessimistic view is captured best by the presumption of regularity I outlined in the *Chapter 1 – Introduction* and the banality of

authoritarianism (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2024): when democratic recession is hidden by a veil of normalcy (as it follows the rules of the game, is justified, is perpetrated by democratically elected incumbents), democratic defence is hard.

There appears to be so much set against the occurrence of democratic defence that it might even be surprising that it occurs at all. Elites might lack capability, instruments, willingness (*Chapter 5 – Democratic Gambits*), might be perceived as self-interested (*Chapter 6 – Democratic Ambiguity*), or perceived to play a political game (*Chapter 7 – Democratic Credibility*); citizens might be "deceived" by autocratizing incumbents (*Chapter 6 – Democratic Ambiguity*), or reject a democratic defence because the defender is not credible (*Chapter 7 – Democratic Credibility*). There are so many countries that experience incumbent-led democratic recession (see *Chapter 2 – Autocratic Actions*), some people might wonder what even the point of democratic defence is: it appears to not work anyway. Put cynically: what does it even matter if one judge or civil servant says something is undemocratic? Why would *they* even care about democracy or put their jobs on the line?

Yet… they do. Against the presumption of regularity, political will, repression, and all odds: democratic defence does occur. That is the optimistic view. Regardless of the complexities, civil servants, judges, parliamentarians, and citizens stand up to defend something so "complex that it is hard to put into words" (interview with *Colin**, see *Chapter 5 – Democratic Gambits*). The main implication of this thesis is therefore: take actors seriously. It is comparatively easy to focus on hard, measurable, objectifiable institutions, such as the judiciary, parliament, or executives. And there is a lot to learn from this approach– we should not discount it. But I am confident there are more opportunities for democratic resilience hidden in the institutions than the institutions themselves. Throughout my thesis (and most clearly in *Chapter 3 – Autocratic Counterfactuals*), I show there is no single institutional set-up that can be a bulwark against autocratization. I would posit here: democracies can be sustained – with difficulty, but still – even with broken institutions. But "democracies die" (cf. Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018) when the actors, the democratic defenders, stop their work, even if there are sound institutions.

Second, we can no longer ignore the motive – especially of the would-be autocrat's supporters. In the *Chapter 1 – Introduction* I argued that the would-be autocrat's motive is of no importance in this thesis, and I still remain of the firm conviction that their motive does not matter for whether autocratization occurs or not. But the motive of the would-be autocrat's supporter does matter: *why* are so many people convinced by, or at least attracted to, authoritarian appeals (Wuttke et al., 2020)? In large parts of the

literature, those supporters are set aside as "hypocritical democrats" (Simonovits et al., 2022): willing to embrace democratic ideals in surveys and questionnaires, but behaving (and voting) against some democratic ideals. In the research that tries to tap into this sentiment (including *Chapter 6 – Democratic Ambiguity*), the trade-offs between democracy and some other preference is *post-hoc* understood to be a trade-off between the "right" answer and a "wrong" answer: if citizens do not consistently prioritize democracy, they are hypocrites or partisans (cf. Graham & Svolik, 2020). Yet, there are many legitimate grievances against a democratic system. Democracy might be the best system we have,[118] but it is not a flawless system. If democracy is to survive, scholars and practitioners alike should listen to these grievances seriously. Not because we should distance ourselves from democracy (far from it! See in *Chapter 1 – Introduction* why we should care about democracy and its defence), but because it is exactly those grievances that make, in turn, autocratization seem legitimate – at least in the eyes of citizens. Therefore, the study of democratic defence should not only deal with the question "what democracy is", but also "what democracy does for people" and "why do people appear to lose support for and trust in democracy", taking those grievances seriously and critically engage (Lührmann, 2021) with them, not simply put them aside as "wrong".

5.3 Implications for how policy-makers can deal with incumbent-led democratic recession

During my PhD, I have been invited to the Dutch parliament to talk with the Permanent Committee on the Interior about the resilience of Dutch democracy.[119] I have contributed to a chapter on democratic erosion in the Netherlands.[120] I have talked with British civil servants during a workshop with academics and policy makers in Birmingham. I have discussed democratic erosion with civil servants in the Netherlands, both for *Chapter 5 – Democratic Gambits*, and informally during drinks, birthdays of mutual friends, or reunions of previous work. I have talked about democracy and democratic recession with "normal" citizens at, among others, the Dutch festival of democracy Grondfest,[121] at a festival in Den Bosch,[122] and at a meeting of "amateur philosophers" in Rozendaal.

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118. Winston Churchill famously said: "Indeed it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time…", https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/quotes/the-worst-form-of-government/

119. "Rondetafelgesprek over weerbaarheid democratie", 28 June 2023, https://www.tweedekamer.nl/debat_en_vergadering/uitgelicht/rondetafelgesprekover-weerbaarheid-democratie

120. "Verkenning en verdieping democratische erosie en respons in Nederland", 12 April. 2024, https://www.kennisopenbaarbestuur.nl/documenten/rapporten/2024/04/12/verkenning-en-verdieping-democratische-erosie-en-respons-in-nederland

121. "Autocratic backsliding", 1 October 2023, https://grondfest.com/timetable/event/autocratic-backsliding/

122. "Wat is er krom in je rechtstaat?", https://shifttalks.nl/events/krom/#:~:text=KROM!-,Wat%20is%20er%20krom%20in%20je%20rechtstaat%3F,de%20steunpilaren%20van%20je%20democratie

Citizens, civil servants, and politicians all, in the end, ask the same question: "how do we deal with democratic recession?"

The honest answer is that I – we: the scholarly community, citizens, and policy makers alike – do not yet know. The effectiveness of democratic defence actions nor the response of would-be autocrats is adequately understood, in this thesis or in the broader literature. But this thesis does produce some scope conditions. Democratic defenders need to be consistent in their defence of democracy and they need to separate the political game from democratic considerations (*Chapter 7 – Democratic Credibility*). Democratic defence needs to be constantly ongoing and business-as-usual, not "audacious" (see *Chapter 5 - Democratic Gambits*, cf. Bourne, 2024). And democratic defence must be a strategic interaction between different democratic defenders (see *Chapter 4 - Democratic Defence*, cf. Tomini et al., 2023). Specifically: if democratic defenders cannot defend themselves (see *Chapter 6 – Democratic Ambiguity*), it is up to other actors to recognize and stand up to autocratization in arenas outside their own close world. Judges must defend media, media must defend academics, and academics must defend civil servants.

The answer I would give now to those citizens, civil servants, and politicians is: realize that autocratization occurs in many different guises (see *Chapter 2 – Autocratic Actions*) and be ready to recognize it. *What* they should do once they have recognized, is, as of right now, up to themselves.

6. Coda

In the end, every good crime story has a hero who solves the puzzle. It might take a few volumes and sequels to get there (along with some often-not-so-great spin-offs), but in the end the heroes always win. At least – in the stories.

Reality hits harder.

There is no endgame: it is unlikely democracy gets a "happily ever after" as people, politics, and power keep changing. Yet, this is not a pessimistic conclusion. It is an optimistic one. It means we – scholars, policymakers, citizens – can make a difference to direct those changes. Precisely because democracy is a project of change and not of outcome, it will never have an ending – happy or otherwise. But it does have heroes.

On December 25, 1989, Leonard Bernstein brough together musicians from around the world, barely one kilometre from where people where chiselling away at the remnants of the Wall that fell. From Dresden and Leningrad, from Paris and New York, from East and West. Beethoven's Ninth Symphony – the greatest of all symphonies – sounded in the Berlin Konzerthaus, *with screens being put up around the city. The finale began as usual, the melody introduced by the celli – because which other instrument could ever live up to it. But when the Ode to Joy* (Freude) *was supposed to echo throughout the city, instead the choir sang an Ode to Freedom* (Freiheit).[123]

123. Read more about this true story here: https://www.classicfm.com/composers/bernstein-l/beethoven-ode-to-freedom-symphony-berlin-wall/

Epilogue: A global symphony is about to begin

It took 36 years, 9 months, and 21 days. Give or take. She had never forgotten that day at the square. Now she is standing on the Gendarmenmarkt. Fine lines around her eyes from decades of hoping.

The city is alive: vibrant and bright with excitement. People from all over the world have gathered – were gathering – to witness something extraordinary.

Massive screens are placed around the square and throughout the city. They flicker in the twilight, turning off and on again with the static. After a while, they show the stage, framed with lights. Some musicians are tuning their instruments, some are milling about. Inaudible, for now.

An electric buzzing fills the air. When the loudspeakers are warmed up, the sounds from the stage echo around the city. On the square, people huddle together. Gloved hands in pockets, breaths swirling in the air. Slowly, the crowd settles, moves together, presses closer: not out of fear, but out of excitement. Anticipation.

She turns around on the spot, elbows brushing against people, eyes catching other people's gaze, smiling. Here she is, years and leagues away from home, yet closer than ever before.

One hero started it. She does not know who. But she knows she was there when the fire of freedom reached her and everyone around her. It took them only minutes to join in. Then, they all became heroes.

She touches the small piece of concrete in her pocket. It feels heavy, pulls the slightly too large coat from her shoulders. Such a small part of such an important moment.

The wall she took it from felt so massive. And now it is crumbling. Because one hero started it, and all those others joined in.

When the crowd falls silent, she turns back to the screen. A global symphony is about to begin.

The melody is rich and deep, sounding from East and West, from Dresden and Paris, from Leningrad and New York. It is full of struggle and strength, shadow and light, joy and resilience.

A small boy stands next to her, clutching an old banana-yellow teddy bear (because he understands we should normalize comfort and tenderness, softness and resolve). They are in the middle of a world that tried to crush them only weeks before. He is looking up to the screen, barely able to see past others. But he is here.

When the choirs sing, they are not singing just for the people in the city, nor those in the country. They sing for everyone who has ever been silenced, who has felt the weight of oppression, who dared to dream.

For once, for the first time and for the only time that matters, they do not sing of joy. They sing of freedom. A proclamation of everything that was almost destroyed, but what in the end withstands dictators, walls, and fear.

Her heart lifts with the music. She cries, but she does not care, not anymore. One more time, she touches the small piece of concrete in her pocket. Takes it out. Throws it down. No one notices it, but the boy. She feels lighter. He smiles.

The music is rising and the wall is falling, piece by piece. And with it, the darkness that chained them for so long. Good things survive when terror crumbles.

She feels, for the first time and for the only time that matters, the silence of the past dissolving.

Finally, she thought, looking up into the skies.

Finally, she thought, her ears ringing with the sounds of people, of freedom, of music.

Finally, she thought, a beautiful spark.

8

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Appendix

Extra materials for Chapters 2, 3, 6, and 7 are available at https://osf.io/d2xbr/. In this OSF project, I include a full Online Appendix, all data files and R code needed to replicate the findings in the chapters, as well as the preregistrations for the experiments.

Research Data Management

Radboud University has established strict criteria for the ethical, transparent, and fair use of research data. In this section, I outline the measures I took to safeguard the quality of my research data.

This thesis relies on already existing, publicly available data as well as on original, self-collected data. The publicly available data include the peer-reviewed case studies in *Chapter 2 – Autocratic Actions*, the V-Dem, ERT, and Claassen-datasets employed in *Chapter 3 – Autocratic Counterfactuals*, and the news reports on which I based the case studies in *Chapter 4 – Democratic Defence*. In other chapters, I occasionally use news reports to illustrate a point. All these data are properly cited in the main text, with references to locations where they are available. The overview of autocratic actions (including full references to the case studies) constructed in *Chapter 2 – Autocratic Actions* is available at the OSF project and will be stored in the applicable Dataverse upon publication of the paper.

The original, self-collected data encompasses interview recordings and transcripts (*Chapter 5 – Democratic* Gambits) and survey-data (for *Chapter 6 – Democratic Ambiguity* and *Chapter 7 – Democratic Credibility*). In line with the policy of Radboud University, while research was ongoing, all data was stored on the campus network. For this purpose, the Department of Political Science has its own server space which is supported by the IT department. This server space allows for managed access to and the sharing of data between and among partners and guests during the project. Safe and secure storage of data is guaranteed by the IT security and safety protocols of the campus network.

To guarantee the anonymity of the participants, the interview-data (neither the recordings nor the transcripts) will not be made publicly available. The data will be stored on Radboud University servers for 10 years to ensure scientific integrity. Possible access to these forms of data and its storage and processing will be in line with the privacy requirements of the EU GDPR directive.

The survey-data used in the analyses in this thesis is available at the OSF project and will be stored in the applicable Dataverse upon publication of the papers.

All data-cleaning and data-analysis was done using the statistical software R. All code necessary to replicate the findings in this thesis are available at the OSF project and will be stored in the applicable Dataverse upon publication of the papers.

The data management procedures implemented in this dissertation adhere to the regulatory frameworks and guidelines stipulated by Radboud University.

Cover and chapter images

The cover image and all six chapter images are based on the data in this thesis.

The cover image is a visualization of *Ode an die Freiheit*. Specifically: it shows the amplitudes of the entire first time the famous melody is heard in Beethoven's ninth symphony, as introduced by the celli. The audio is taken from the actual recording of the 1989 concert in Berlin, referenced in the *Epilogue*.

The image for *Chapter 2 – Autocratic Actions* shows all episodes of autocratization, similar to Figure 2.2. The image for *Chapter 3 – Autocratic Counterfactuals* shows each episode of autocratization as a point. The rings around it are its matches. The opacity of each ring is determined by the quality of the match. The image for *Chapter 4 – Democratic Defence* is a visualization of the abstract. Each square represents a word of the abstract (in order, from left to right and from top to bottom), with the size of the square determined by the length of the word. The empty squares are the words "democracy" (and its derivatives) or "defence" (and s derivatives). The image for *Chapter 5 – Democratic Gambits* is soundwaves of the word "democracy" as spoken by each of my 29 respondents during the interviews. The image for *Chapter 6 – Democratic Ambiguity* represents 1.600 survey respondents. The colour of the point is determined by the treatment the respondent received, and the stroke around the point is determined by whether they thought the proposal was ambiguous or not. Finally, the image for *Chapter 7 – Democratic Credibility* represents 1.600 survey respondents. The four concentric rings denote which treatment the respondents received, and the shading determines whether they thought the democratic defender was credible or not.

Samenvatting in het Nederlands

Een prachtige vonk van democratie: De voorwaarden voor de verdediging van de democratie tegen democratische erosie door democratisch gekozen aspirant-autocraten

De democratie staat onder druk. Niet door militaire staatsgrepen of door een onverwachte, grootscheepse aanval van buitenaf, maar door een geleidelijk, stapsgewijs proces dat vaak geïnitieerd wordt door democratisch gekozen leiders. Deze leiders met autocratische trekjes (de aspirant-autocraten) ondermijnen van binnenuit democratische instituties, democratisch gedrag en democratische normen. **Dit fenomeen noem ik democratische erosie**. Het is de meest voorkomende vorm van autocratisering sinds 1990. Democratische erosie leidt niet per se tot een compleet verval van de democratie, maar resulteert vaak wel in een democratie van mindere kwaliteit. Veel onderzoek gaat in op de vraag hoe democratieën in verval raken. Er wordt echter minder vaak onderzocht hoe democratieën hiertegen verdedigd kunnen worden. In deze thesis verleg ik daarom de focus: van de erosie van de democratie naar de verdediging van de democratie. De vraag die ik zal beantwoorden is: **Onder welke voorwaarden vindt de verdediging van de democratie plaats, als democratisch gekozen aspirant-autocraten de democratie eroderen?**

De verdediging van de democratie, het kernconcept in deze thesis, definieer ik als: **de politieke strategieën die erop gericht zijn om democratische erosie te vertragen, te stoppen, of te verminderen**. Ik beargumenteer dat een verdediging van de democratie noodzakelijk is en leg hierbij de nadruk op de actoren: het zijn mensen die de democratie sterk en weerbaar maken. Sterke instituties, regels en gebruiken zijn belangrijk, omdat ze de aspirant-autocraten kunnen beperken in hun doen en laten. Het zijn echter juist deze instituties die aangevallen en ondermijnd worden door diezelfde aspirant-autocraten. **Instituties alleen zijn dus onvoldoende. Een duurzame democratie heeft verdedigers nodig, die binnen en buiten de instituties zich inzetten voor de democratie.**

In dit onderzoek kijk ik naar twee groepen actoren of verdedigers: elites (zoals politici, rechters, ambtenaren – mensen die in de democratische instituties werken) en burgers. Beide groepen hebben een verantwoordelijkheid om de bedreigingen van de democratie te herkennen en beide groepen moeten bereid zijn om in verzet te komen als de democratie onder druk komt te staan. Maar de verdediging van de democratie is niet gegarandeerd en gebeurt niet vanzelf. Potentiële verdedigers van

de democratie (elites en burgers) moeten daarvoor twee hindernissen overwinnen. De eerste is: **het herkennen van democratische erosie**. Dat is lastig, omdat erosie vaak geleidelijk en ongemerkt gaat. Aspirant-autocraten kunnen immers doen alsof hun voorstellen een normaal onderdeel van het beleid zijn. Dit wordt ook wel de ambiguïteit van democratische erosie genoemd: aan de ene kant lijkt het legitiem en democratisch, aan de andere kant kan het leiden tot democratische erosie. De tweede hindernis is dat áls de potentiële verdedigers van de democratie de democratische erosie al herkennen, **ze moeten besluiten om in verzet te komen**. De aspirant-autocraten zijn echter vaak democratisch gekozen en genieten zo de steun van (een deel van) de bevolking en het parlement. Hierdoor kan het lijken of de verdedigers van de democratie zelf ondemocratisch zijn, of voor hun eigen gewin gaan. In deze thesis beargumenteer ik dat elites goed in staat zijn om democratische erosie te herkennen. Daarentegen kost het ze moeite om burgers tot verzet te motiveren. Hierdoor is de verdediging van de democratie een complex, risicovol en politiek proces.

Om uit te leggen onder welke omstandigheden de verdediging van de democratie toch plaatsvindt, bestaat deze thesis uit twee delen. **Deel 1 – Autocratische problemen** legt het onderzoeksprobleem verder uit. In *Hoofdstuk 2 – Autocratische acties* introduceer ik een raamwerk om autocratische acties te herkennen. Autocratische acties zijn de strategieën en handelingen van aspirant-autocraten die kunnen leiden tot democratische erosie. Voor dit raamwerk heb ik alle casussen van democratische erosie door aspirant-autocraten sinds 1990 geanalyseerd. De acties die door experts in de systemen van die landen geduid worden als onderdeel van het proces van democratische erosie heb ik vervolgens systematisch gecategoriseerd. Dit overzicht van autocratische acties laat zien dat **aspirant-autocraten een diverse, creatieve, en context-afhankelijke "toolkit" gebruiken om de democratie te eroderen**. Het laat daarmee ook zien op hoeveel verschillende acties de verdedigers van de democratie zouden moeten reageren.

In *Hoofdstuk 3 – Autocratische counterfactuals* ontwerp ik een nieuw *matching*-algoritme. Met dit algoritme kan ik de casussen waarin democratische erosie plaatsvindt, koppelen aan "counterfactuals". Dat zijn casussen van landen die op alle relevante kenmerken vrijwel identiek zijn aan een land waar autocratisering plaatsvindt, op één kenmerk na. Aan de hand daarvan kan ik analyseren welke instituties in een land bijdragen aan de weerbaarheid van democratieën. Uit de analyse blijkt dat geen enkel institutioneel ontwerp van een land bijdraagt aan de weerbaarheid van democratieën. **Alleen de steun van burgers voor het idee dat een democratie bestaat uit een veelzijdigheid van meningen draagt daadwerkelijk bij aan de weerbaarheid**

van democratieën. Deze twee hoofdstukken samen laten zien dat actieve verdedigers van de democratie nodig zijn.

Deel 2 – Democratische oplossingen onderzoekt hoe de verdediging van de democratie in de praktijk plaatsvindt. In *Hoofdstuk 4 – Democratische verdediging* ontwerp ik een theorie over **de voorwaarden waaronder elites en burgers kunnen samenwerken om in verzet te komen tegen autocratische acties**. Ik beargumenteer dat de elite bereid is tot verdediging van de democratie als ze verhoudingsgewijs meer belang hebben bij het tegenhouden van de autocratische actie dan dat ze bang zijn voor onderdrukking. Daarnaast beargumenteer ik dat verdediging van de democratie door burgers afhankelijk is van de geloofwaardigheid van de elite die de democratie wil verdedigen, en van de ambiguïteit van de autocratische actie. Als de elite die de democratie verdedigt geloofwaardig is, zullen burgers meedoen aan de verdediging van de democratie. Maar als de autocratische actie erg ambigu is, is het minder waarschijnlijk dat burgers zullen meedoen, omdat de autocratische actie dan ogenschijnlijk democratisch is. In de laatste drie hoofdstukken laat ik zien dat deze theorie empirisch standhoudt.

In *Hoofdstuk 5 – Democratische gambieten* onderzoek ik, aan de hand van 29 interviews, **hoe Nederlandse rijksambtenaren zelf hun rol als verdediger van de democratie zien**. Dit is de empirische test van mijn theorie over verdediging van de democratie door de elite. In de gesprekken met rijksambtenaren werd duidelijk dat zij zich verantwoordelijk voelen voor de democratie, en die graag willen verdedigen. Ze vertelden over autocratische acties die door ministers zijn voorgesteld, en gaven voorbeelden uit recente jaren en van langer geleden. Ik signaleerde bovendien dat zij niet altijd de democratie durven te verdedigen, omdat zij in sommige gevallen niet zeker weten of ze het wel goed hebben gezien, of bang zijn om hun baan te verliezen, of om toekomstige promoties mis te lopen, of omdat zij onder druk gezet worden door de minister.

In *Hoofdstuk 6 – Democratische ambiguïteit* en *Hoofdstuk 7 – Democratische geloofwaardigheid* presenteer ik twee experimenten, die ik via een online vragenlijst heb uitgezet in Nederland, Duitsland, en Frankrijk. Met deze experimenten test ik mijn theorie over de verdediging van de democratie door burgers. In *Hoofdstuk 6 – Democratische ambiguïteit* kijk ik naar de ambiguïteit van autocratische acties. Hier laat ik zien dat **aspirant-autocraten er vaak in slagen om hun autocratische acties in de ogen van burgers democratisch te laten lijken**. Als een aspirant-autocraat bijvoorbeeld uitlegt dat het nodig is om de onafhankelijkheid van rechterlijke macht of de media in te perken, omdat zij corrupt zouden zijn, dan lukt het de elite die

de democratie wil verdedigen eigenlijk niet om burgers ervan te overtuigen dat dit voorstel ondemocratisch is. Dit laat zien dat als aspirant-autocraten democratische erosie goed praten met een positief argument, de ambiguïteit van de autocratische acties al snel zo groot is, dat de elite die de democratie wil verdedigen, hier maar moeilijk tegen op kan.

In *Hoofdstuk 7 – Democratische geloofwaardigheid* onderzoek ik ten slotte hoe burgers kijken naar de geloofwaardigheid van de elite die de democratie wil verdedigen. Hier laat ik zien dat **elites die inconsistent zijn in hun verdediging van de democratie er minder goed in slagen om burgers ervan te overtuigen dat de democratie onder druk staat**. Dit betekent dus dat de elite die de democratie wil verdedigen altijd scherp moet zijn: bij elke actie moet zij nagaan of dit mogelijk kan bijdragen aan democratische erosie. Als zij een actie mist of er later op terugkomt, wordt dit door de burgers al snel gezien als een politiek spel. Daarmee kan de elite die de democratie wil verdedigen haar geloofwaardigheid verliezen.

In antwoord op de onderzoeksvraag *onder welke voorwaarden vindt de verdediging van de democratie plaats, als democratisch gekozen aspirant-autocraten de democratie eroderen?* laat deze thesis zien dat de **verdediging van de democratie voor elites afhangt van de onderdrukking van aspirant-autocraten en het belang dat elites zien in het behoud van de democratie; en voor burgers hangt het af van de ambiguïteit van de autocratische actie, en de geloofwaardigheid van de elite die de democratie verdedigt**. De uitkomsten van dit onderzoek lijken op het eerste gezicht pessimistisch. Voor de elite die de democratie wil verdedigen zijn er veel valkuilen. Maar als zij zich hiervan bewust is, kan ze wel beter aan burgers uitleggen hoe een actie bijdraagt aan democratische erosie of dat hun verdediging niet gezien moet worden als politiek spel. **Bovendien geeft mijn onderzoek inzichten in de manieren waarop verdedigers van de democratie elkaar kunnen helpen**: door elkaar te steunen in hun rol als verdediger van de democratie, door gezamenlijk op te treden, en door te zorgen dat een gesprek over democratie onderdeel is van hun alledaagse werk. Dat zorgt er voor dat potentiële verdedigers niet bang zijn dat ze alleen komen te staan, en maakt het dus voor iedereen makkelijker om in verzet te komen tegen democratische erosie.

Deze thesis draagt op drie manieren bij aan onze kennis over de verdediging van democratieën. Op theoretisch vlak ontwerp ik een overkoepelende theorie om autocratische acties en de verdediging van de democratie beter te begrijpen. Op empirisch vlak genereer ik nieuwe inzichten, gebaseerd op een verscheidenheid aan methoden, over de rol van de verdedigers van de democratie, over hoe zij zelf hun rol zien, en over wat ze (kunnen) doen om in verzet te komen tegen autocratisering.

Als laatste laat ik zien welke uitdagingen verdedigers van de democratie, die wordt geërodeerd door democratisch gekozen aspirant-autocraten kunnen verwachten en hoe ze die kunnen overwinnen. **Door de focus te verleggen van de rol van instituties bij de weerbaarheid van democratieën naar de rol van actoren binnen en buiten die instituties, draagt deze thesis bij aan de groeiende literatuur over het verzet tegen autocratisering.**

Acknowledgments

This is a story of heroes.

Writing a PhD is a lonely affair: alone in your office, noise-cancelling headphones, isolated from the world. Reading papers, crunching numbers, designing presentations. You are confronted with doubts about your skills and ideas. You face uncertainties about your data and interpretation. You wonder if you contribute anything meaningful to today's societal problems. And so often, you sit alone in your office, headphones, isolated.

But then… a knock on the door, and a hero walks in.

Carolien and Maurits – you are my heroes. Our story started on 23 July 2020. During my interview on Zoom, Carolien was sat in front of her refrigerator and Maurits was crouched down under the eaves of a wooden chalet somewhere. I learned then how they would approach our collaboration on this project: relaxed, engaged, friendly, constructive, critical, and happy. I never doubted, even for a second, whether a PhD at Radboud was right for me: you made that happen. Thank you.

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kennis en vasthoudendheid. Al meer dan dertig jaar lang leer ik om me oprecht en volhardend in te zetten. Jullie hebben mij de mogelijkheden en kansen gegeven om op te groeien tot wie ik nu ben. En hoewel ik ook heb geleerd om mezelf te blijven verbeteren, ben ik dankbaar voor en blij met wie ik dankzij jullie ben geworden. *Lechaim* en dankjulliewel.

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They say you should never meet your heroes. But let me tell you something… If you ever have the chance to meet any of these people: bring *bitterballen and be ready to be amazed*.

In this ensemble of heroes, however, there is one person who is that beautiful spark above all else. Zij was er bij de creatieve momenten. She was there for the highs and lows. Ze is de muziek en het gelach. She encouraged me to be better. Ze stond altijd klaar om me op de meest onmogelijke tijden naar Schiphol te brengen, and was ready to pick me up in the middle of the night. She normalizes comfort and tenderness, zachtheid en doorzetten. Ze bouwt ons huis and so much more. Marianne – *lavoe* en *køsje* en *lux aeterna*.

Curriculum vitae

Joep van Lit (Delft, 1993) graduated from the Marnix Gymnasium in Rotterdam and began his undergraduate studies (International Relations, BSc, and African Studies, BA) at Leiden University. He subsequently pursued a research master's degree in Political Science and Public Administration, also at Leiden University (*cum laude*). In 2020, he joined the Department of Political Science at Radboud University for his PhD research into the defence of democracy against incumbent-led autocratization. In addition to his scientific output, he has authored policy reports for among others the Dutch Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations and has contributed to the societal debate on democracy and autocratization in news interviews and public lectures. Joep has been a Visiting Research at the Varieties of Democracy Institute at the University of Gothenburg (Sweden). Next to his research, Joep has taught extensively in the bachelor and master programmes at Radboud, focusing on methods and the occasional guest lecture. He is currently continuing his research on autocratization and the defence of democracy as a researcher and lecturer at Radboud University.

When democracies are challenged by democratically elected leaders – would-be autocrats – it is up to democratic defenders to sustain democracy. This defence of democracy is, however, neither automatic nor guaranteed, as incumbent-led democratic recession is covert, incremental, and often justified by the would-be autocrat.

This thesis investigates under what circumstances the defence of democracy occurs: when do elite actors within the typical democratic institutions stand up against the would-be autocrat, and when are they able to persuade citizens to join the defence of democracy?

Employing computational methods, case studies, elite interviews, and survey experiments, the thesis shows that the defence of democracy hinges on elites' self-interest in preventing the autocratic action, repression by the would-be autocrat, the ambiguity surrounding the autocratic action, and elites' credibility in the eyes of citizens.

Even when the defence of democracy appears to be an uphill battle, and even though there are many challenges that democratic defenders face, the defence of democracy against incumbent-led democratic recession is both necessary and possible. When aiming to sustain democracies, this thesis shows we need to look beyond institutions and formal rules towards the people within and outside those institutions – elites and citizens alike – and what they do to make democracies resilient.

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