

Democratic Commitment: Why Citizens Tolerate Democratic Backsliding

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Abstract:

Why do citizens often fail to act as effective bulwarks against democratic backsliding? I submit that political culture is key to explaining the electoral success and enduring public support for authoritarian-leaning leaders despite their open violations of democratic standards. A lack of attitudinal consolidation around liberal democratic norms leaves important parts of the electorate vulnerable to buy-outs as well as majoritarian and illiberal appeals by political elites. The empirical demonstration builds on extensive material that combines focus groups discussions, discourse analysis, and original survey data including two conjoint experiments in Hungary and Poland. Its findings show how, despite widespread generic support for democracy as a regime form, divergent understandings of democracy persist among citizens in both countries and shape their responses to democratic transgressions. Building on a forthcoming monograph, the talk theorizes and empirically probes the linkages between political culture and political behaviour to demonstrate the crucial role citizens' democratic attitudes play in processes of democratic backsliding.

Natasha Wunsch is Professor for European Studies and Director of the Center for European Studies at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland. She was previously an Assistant Professor at Sciences Po Paris and a Senior Researcher in the European Politics Group at ETH Zurich. Her research interests lie at the intersection between European Politics and Comparative Politics, with a particular focus on democratisation and democratic backsliding. She recently completed the research project “Democratic Backsliding in Eastern Europe: Sequence, Strategies, Citizens” funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation from 2019-2024.
