

# Charismatic Leaders and Democratic Backsliding\*

James R. Hollyer<sup>1</sup>, Marko Klašnja<sup>2</sup>, and Rocío Titiunik<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Minnesota

<sup>2</sup>Georgetown University

<sup>3</sup>Princeton University

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## Abstract

In recent years, democratic nations have frequently elected charismatic leaders. Political parties tend to benefit electorally from charismatic politicians' popularity. However, we demonstrate theoretically that parties may also pay a cost. When they become reliant on a leader's charisma, parties grow less able to sanction their behavior in office and more prone to catering to their will—they become personalized. We show that this is particularly likely in contexts of high ideological polarization and strong institutional foundations of democracy. This inversion of the power dynamic between parties and politicians provides room for charismatic leaders to enact anti-democratic policies. The likelihood of party illiberalization, democratic backsliding, and autocratic reversion are thus higher under charismatic leaders. In a panel of democracies between 1950 and 2020, we find that the associations between leaders' charisma and patterns of democratic breakdown, democratic quality, party illiberalism, and party personalization are consistent with our theoretical expectations.

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Two trends have gained considerable scholarly and popular attention in recent years. The first is the apparent decline in the quality of democracy (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019), as evidenced by the usurping of democratic norms, electoral competition, judicial independence, civic participation, press freedoms, and/or accountability constraints on the executive (Bermeo, 2016). Democratic erosion has not been confined to the more weakly institutionalized democracies in the developing world, but seems to have also reached some of the world's wealthiest and most enduring democracies (e.g. Haggard and Kaufman, 2021a).

The second trend is the apparent proliferation of charismatic leaders<sup>1</sup> in democracies, arguably a reflection of the increasing personalization of democratic politics (Rahat and Kenig, 2018). Scholars have suggested that this trend is manifested in the growing individualization of electoral campaigns (Kriesi, 2012), personalized media portrayals of elections and institutions (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002), and voters' seemingly increasing preoccupation with candidates at the expense of parties and issues (Karvonen, 2010). Charismatic politicians plausibly both contribute to and benefit from such trends, forming deep bonds with voters (Andrews-Lee, 2019) and building strongly personalized movements and narratives (Zúquete, 2008).

Could these two trends be related? Many observers have bemoaned attacks on democratic norms and institutions by such charismatic leaders as Donald Trump, Victor Orban, Jair Bolsonaro, Narendra Modi, Nayib Bukele, and Recep Erdoğan. In autocracies, regime personalization has long been linked with weaker institutions and worse governance (Davenport, 2007; Frantz et al., 2020). We formalize a theory showing that similar dynamics may occur in democracies. Our model shows that democratic backsliding, including a potentially full-blown autocratic rever-

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<sup>1</sup>Charisma may be understood as an objective quality of a politician's personality (Willner and Willner, 1965) or a subjective phenomenon emanating from the followers' perception of a leader's qualities (Madsen and Snow, 1991; Weber, 1978). We remain agnostic as to the source of charisma, but assume throughout that it attracts a popular following distinct from that of their political party.

sion, is more likely with charismatic than non-charismatic chief executives. This is not because charismatic leaders have a greater proclivity to authoritarianism than less charismatic leaders; rather, we focus on the role of *political parties* as one of the key democratic institutions that can constrain their leaders' exercise of power (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). We demonstrate that backsliding can happen when the leader's party grows too electorally dependent on their charisma to be able to credibly commit to sanctioning that leader for anti-democratic actions. In other words, the party elites are more likely to strategically *acquiesce* to democratic erosion undertaken by a charismatic compared to a non-charismatic leader, because the electoral costs of sanctioning a charismatic politician are higher than sanctioning a non-charismatic leader, and such costs may outweigh any costs from democratic backsliding. This rational acquiescence represents an equilibrium *personalization* of the party—its willingness to prioritize the goals of its leader, including those that may be inimical to continued democratic rule.<sup>2</sup>

We further use this theoretical framework to examine how party personalization varies with contextual and institutional factors. We show that a party is less likely to exercise control over a charismatic leader as elite polarization increases. Sanctioning a leader is likely to cost the party at the ballot box, and its electoral loss is its opponents' gain. As the ideological distance to these opponents grows, the prospect of giving them (self-inflicted) ground becomes increasingly unpalatable, making the party less willing to impose any kind of sanction on a recalcitrant leader.

We also demonstrate that party personalization is more sensitive to leader charisma in institutionally *stable* democracies. Leader charisma matters to the party because of its electoral

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<sup>2</sup>Throughout, we use the term 'personalism' to describe a characteristic of the *party*. Borrowing from the literature on autocratic politics (e.g. Geddes, Wright and Frantz, 2014), a personalistic party is one in which the collective interest of the party is subservient to the individual interest of the leader. This is in contrast to other uses of the term 'personalism' or the 'personal vote' (e.g. Hollyer, Klašnja and Titiunik, 2022), which describes electoral strategies by individual candidates that focus on their efforts rather than on the party platform.

dividends. In a less stable democracy, a leader's anti-democratic actions are more likely to end in a full-blown democratic breakdown, after which the incumbent party need not worry about electoral competition, thus reducing the importance of the electoral returns to charisma. In more stable democracies, by contrast, a leader's bid at backsliding is more likely to be checked by other institutional forces, meaning that the charismatic appeal of the leader still matters for the party as it prepares for the next competitive election.

We empirically illustrate the model's predictions using cross-national data on democratic breakdown, the quality of democracy, party and leader characteristics, elite polarization, and democratic stability over the period 1950-2020. The empirical patterns are generally consistent with our theoretical expectations. Proxying for leader charisma with a chief executive's outsider status—their lack of prior national-level political experience—we find that the likelihood of democratic breakdown is higher and the quality of democracy lower under charismatic than non-charismatic leaders. Corroborating the plausibility of our theoretical mechanism, incumbent parties with outsider chief executives are more illiberal and more personalized than their counterparts with insider leaders. Moreover, incumbent party personalization tends to be strongly correlated with leaders' outsider status in more highly ideologically polarized and stable democracies. We find similar patterns with alternative measures of the quality of democracy, charisma and ideological polarization.

## **Related Literature**

Our study builds on the literature on democratic consolidation, survival, and backsliding, which is far too vast to fully survey here (see [Waldner and Lust, 2018](#), for a recent review). Work that focuses on the strategic interactions that sustain or undermine continued democratic rule—as we do—may be divided into two strains: one that emphasizes the role of the populace, and another that emphasizes the importance of institutional actors, including political parties. We primarily

contribute to the latter.

This work predominantly focuses on the willingness of opposition parties to accept defeat at the polls versus turning to extra-constitutional methods to implement their preferred policies. This trade-off is usually dictated by the odds of success in democratic elections relative to attempts to seize power by force, and the distance between the policies desired by the parties or the groups they represent and the policies advocated by the ruling elites (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2006; Boix and Stokes, 2003; Przeworski, 2005; Wantchekon, 2004). Our paper departs from this literature by focusing on interactions *within* a given party—between that party’s elites and a co-partisan chief executive—rather than between two or more parties.

In this, our paper builds on the insights from Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) and Hollyer, Klašnja and Titiunik (2022). Levitsky and Ziblatt note that the willingness of political parties to act as a gatekeeper screening out demagogic politicians is critical to democratic survival. We, in turn, study the ability of a party to constrain a potentially authoritarian leader in the event that it has foregone its gatekeeping role. Relatedly, Hollyer, Klašnja and Titiunik (2022) show that nominating a charismatic candidate for senior political positions may reflect a party’s inability to credibly commit to a promotion strategy based on programmatic brand-building. The model we develop here, in turn, focuses on a related disciplining commitment problem a party may face once a charismatic leader is already in office.

By focusing on relations within a party, wherein actions by party members to sanction a chief executive may jeopardize those co-partisan’s grip on power, our paper adapts several key assumptions of the literature on autocratic politics (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003; Padró i Miquel, 2007). The dependence of the party on its leader for its continued survival in power is often referred to in this literature as the regime’s degree of personalism, where leaders attempt to amass more personalist authority over their time in office (Svolik, 2012); in contrast, regimes that are less dependent on their leader are said to be institutionalized (Meng, 2020). An empirical literature attempts to classify autocratic regimes by their level of personalism, which in turn predicts regime

stability and various aspects of regime behavior ([Gandhi and Sumner, 2020](#); [Geddes, Wright and Frantz, 2014](#)). Our argument is that personalism is not only a feature of autocratic politics but also of democratic politics, a point also recently raised by efforts to measure and evaluate trends in party personalization in democracies by [Frantz et al. \(2022\)](#) and [Rahat and Kenig \(2018\)](#). Our study demonstrates theoretically how such party personalization can arise in equilibrium in democracies when leaders are charismatic, and why it may be similarly detrimental to the quality of governance in democracies as in autocracies.

While our theoretical account elides the strategic considerations of the electorate, focusing instead on the interactions at the party level, it shares some similarities with [Svolik \(2020\)](#) (see also [Haggard and Kaufman, 2021b](#)). Therein, increased ideological polarization in the electorate can drive even voters who hold pro-democracy attitudes to support autocratic candidates, because the policy costs of supporting candidates who share their commitment to democracy but not their partisan loyalties may be too high. In our theory, partisan commitments play a similar role within the party: partisan politicians may be unwilling to sanction a (charismatic) co-partisan executive as ideological polarization among parties rises. We note, however, that backsliding in our model can happen even in the absence of polarization, and that the leader's charisma may play a critical moderating role in the link between ideological polarization and democratic erosion.

Our theory assumes that charismatic politicians may remain popular even when they engage in executive aggrandizement and other anti-democratic actions, thus potentially binding their parties' disciplining hands. For this, we draw on the literature on charisma. Charismatic politicians create strong emotional bonds with voters ([Andrews-Lee, 2019](#)) that can inspire fierce loyalty beyond support created through persuasion ([Dumitrescu, Gidengil and Stolle, 2015](#)). Charismatic leaders may thus be better able than less charismatic politicians to overcome criticism, poor performance, or controversial decisions ([Madsen and Snow, 1991](#); [Merolla and Zechmeister, 2011](#)).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>[Grillo and Prato \(Forthcoming\)](#) show that through anti-democratic actions, incumbents may strategically lower voters' expectations about acceptable behavior, only to partially back down and clear

We view our contribution as conceptually distinct from, if empirically related to, the literature on the rise of populism and its threat to liberal democracy. Typically, this literature defines populism as an ideology that promotes a Manichean division of society into a ‘pure people’ and a ‘corrupt elite’ (Mudde, 2004). While many leaders we would identify as charismatic are populist, others (e.g. Emmanuel Macron) are not. Conversely, while many leaders identified as populists are charismatic, other parties adopting a populist platform (e.g., Poland’s PiS) are not dominated by a charismatic figure. Our focus on leader charisma relates more closely to an older definition of populism by Weyland (2001), which emphasizes subordination to a charismatic leader in a form of plebiscitary rule. However, this definition also emphasizes a lack of party institutionalization as prerequisite for populism. In our work, the absence of institutionalization is an equilibrium phenomenon. Hence, our work may be seen as an explanation for why charismatic leadership and de-institutionalization tend to go hand-in-hand in examples Weyland (2001) characterizes as populist.

## Model

### Primitives

We consider an interaction between two actors, an incumbent political party  $I$  and a leader drawn from that party  $L$ . There is also an opposition party  $O$ , which is non-strategic. Because our focus is on the ability of the incumbent party to discipline its incumbent leader, we focus on the strategic considerations involving only  $I$  and  $L$ . We index actors with  $j \in \{L, I, O\}$ .

The interaction takes place over two periods  $t \in \{1, 2\}$ . In each period,  $L$  makes policy choices along a unidimensional policy space, for instance the left-right ideological space that 

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this lower standard. With their strong following, charismatic leaders willing to engage in backsliding may be especially well positioned for such maneuvers.

typifies many developed democracies.<sup>4</sup> We denote  $L$ 's choice of policy in this dimension as  $x_t \in \mathbb{R}$ .

In the first period of play,  $L$  makes an additional binary policy choice  $a \in \{0, 1\}$ , where  $a$  captures the degree of 'authoritarianism.' We intend  $a = 1$  to denote policies consistent with democratic backsliding—the concentration of power in the hands of the executive or the undermining of institutions and civil liberties in a way that hinders  $L$ 's opponents. An authoritarian turn in policy need not portend an autocratic reversion, but may do so. To capture this, we assume that if  $a = 1$ , and if the leader is retained in power, democracy is overthrown with probability  $1 - \sigma$ , where  $\sigma \in (0, 1)$  denotes the stability of the institutional foundations of democracy. We intend  $\sigma$  to represent political institutions, elite actors, or structural features of the polity that inhibit autogolpes. For instance,  $\sigma$  may be rising in the duration of democratic rule. However, this parameter does not capture popular checks on government encroachments (in the manner of [Weingast, 1997](#)); popular responses to elite decisions are captured elsewhere in the model, as described below.

After  $L$  makes her choices in the first period of play,  $I$  makes a decision to retain or remove the leader  $r \in \{0, 1\}$ , where  $r = 1$  denotes a decision to retain. Setting  $r = 0$  may represent a decision to stage or support the opposition's call for a vote of no-confidence or impeachment, or simply to fail to renominate the incumbent leader in subsequent electoral contests.

The assumption that  $I$  makes a binary retention decision is an analytic simplification. Any move to sanction the leader in an incumbent party is likely divisive, with members lining up both in support of and in opposition to the leader. Moreover, a variety of sanctioning devices are likely available to the party other than simple leader removal. For simplicity, we abstract away from internal divisions within the party, and we note that our insights should extend to other forms

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<sup>4</sup>Assuming a single policy dimension is a simplification, as in many countries multiple dimensions may be relevant. Our empirical measure of ideological space takes potential multi-dimensionality into account, as discussed below.



of sanctioning, so long as they impose a cost on the incumbent party and party members. For instance, parties with recalcitrant leaders may see widespread defections by elite party members, losing these politicians either to newly created parties or existing competitors. Insofar as such behavior imposes an electoral cost on both the defectors and on the existing party membership, the logic of our model will still hold. Mass defections from a party are analogous to setting  $r = 0$ .

If  $I$  chooses to remove the leader following the adoption of an authoritarian policy ( $a = 1$ ), the party's action removes the threat posed to democracy. That is, we assume that authoritarian backsliding attempted by the current leader does not directly open the door to similar maneuvers by her successor. In this way, the incumbent party can act as a guardrail of democracy. Following the choice of  $r = 0$ , the incumbent party chooses a new leader to see them into the next election. In contrast, if  $r = 1$ , democracy survives with probability  $\sigma$ .

In any setting in which democracy survives the first period of play, an election then follows, pitting the incumbent party  $I$  against the opposition  $O$ .  $I$  wins this contest with probability  $\rho(r, \nu) \in [0, 1]$ . Critically,  $\rho(r, \nu)$  is a function both of  $I$ 's prior decision regarding the fate of the incumbent leader ( $r$ ) and of  $\nu \in \mathbb{R}$ , which represents the leader's charismatic appeal. Higher values of  $\nu$  are equivalent to higher levels of charisma.<sup>5</sup>

We impose additional assumptions regarding the functional form of  $\rho(\cdot; \cdot)$ . First, we assume that  $\rho(1, \nu) > \rho(0, \nu)$ ,  $\forall \nu$ , implying that incumbent party infighting harms its political future. Second,  $\rho(1, \nu)$  is increasing in  $\nu$ , implying that when  $L$  is retained, her charisma improves the electoral chances of the incumbent party. Third,  $\rho(0, \nu)$  is constant in  $\nu$ , so that  $L$ 's charisma does not aid the incumbent party in the event she has been ousted from power. This implies that

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<sup>5</sup>Throughout, we interpret  $\nu$  as corresponding to leader charisma. It may also capture other leader-specific characteristics that: (a) bring electoral benefits to the party, so long as the leader remains in her post; and (b) these benefits disappear if the leader is ousted. An example might be a leader's wealth, which can be used to bolster financially a party's electoral prospects. We thank Victor Shih for suggesting this example.

$\rho(\cdot, \nu)$  is subject to increasing differences in  $\nu$ : the more charismatic the leader, the greater the opportunity cost to the party from her ouster. Finally,  $\lim_{\nu \rightarrow -\infty} \rho(1, \nu) - \rho(0, \nu) = 0$ , implying that as the leader becomes less charismatic, the cost of internal infighting declines.

If  $O$  wins the election, it chooses a new leader from among its ranks. If  $I$  wins, its existing leader remains in power. The sitting  $L$  then chooses policy  $x_2$ .

We assume that all actors are policy-motivated, each having an ideal point over  $x$  denoted by  $\hat{x}_j$ . Utilities over the policy dimension are given by the strictly quasi-concave function  $g(x; \hat{x}_j)$ . Without loss of generality, we assume  $\hat{x}_I > \hat{x}_O$ , and we define  $D \equiv g(\hat{x}_I; \hat{x}_I) - g(\hat{x}_O; \hat{x}_I)$ , a measure of elite polarization.

We further assume that all actors have an interest in the fate of democracy. Specifically, both political parties  $\{I, O\}$  would suffer a cost  $\kappa$  from an autocratic reversion that concentrates power in the hands of the leader.<sup>6</sup> However, this cost may vary. For instance, some parties may anticipate that the leader will incorporate their members into the new elite following an autocratic reversion, while others may not; some parties fear that their voters will reject their candidates if they are seen as subverting the democratic order, others do not; or some parties, by virtue of their history, may be comprised of individuals truly devoted to democratic ideals. To capture this variation, we assume  $\kappa$  is drawn from a density  $F_\kappa(\cdot)$  with support on the non-negative real line and the associated pdf  $f_\kappa(\cdot)$ .<sup>7</sup>

$L$ , on the other hand, enjoys a benefit from a successful autocratic reversion. Denote the value to the leader of successfully staging an *autogolpe* as  $\alpha > 0$ . While we assume that all leaders have some anti-democratic drive, we further assume that they suffer a cost  $\gamma > 0$  from

<sup>6</sup>For simplicity, we assume this cost is common to both parties  $\{I, O\}$ . Altering this assumption would have no effect on the main conclusions of the model.

<sup>7</sup>We could extend the analysis to situations in which  $\kappa$  assumes negative values – i.e., the party *wants* backsliding to take place. However, the strategic dynamics in this setting are uninteresting, the party would simply never check the executive.

acting on that impulse. For example, a leader focused on concentrating power may need to suffer the cost of breaking long-standing alliances along the way. As with  $\kappa$ , the cost to leaders of fomenting backsliding varies. Specifically, we assume that  $\gamma$  is drawn from a density  $F_\gamma(\cdot)$  with support on the non-negative real line and the associated pdf  $f_\gamma(\cdot)$ .

The expected utility of each party  $j \in \{I, O\}$  in a given period  $t \in \{1, 2\}$  is thus given by:

$$\mathbb{E}u_{j,t} = g(x_t; \hat{x}_j) - a[r(1 - \sigma)]\kappa$$

where  $\mathbb{E}$  is the expectations operator.<sup>8</sup>

The leader derives utility from her policies in both  $x$  and from the possibility of autocratic reversion whenever she is in power. We assume she derives a utility normalized to zero if removed from office. Hence,  $L$ 's expected utility is given by:

$$u_{L,t} = \begin{cases} g(x_t; \hat{x}_L) + a[r(1 - \sigma)\alpha - \gamma] & \text{if in power} \\ 0 & \text{otherwise.} \end{cases}$$

For simplicity, we assume that leader ideal points over the policy space  $x$  are identical to those of their nominating party.<sup>9</sup>

The order of play is as follows:

1 Values of  $\{\kappa, \gamma\}$  are drawn for all players. The realization of these values is common knowledge.  $L$  sets the policy  $\{x_1, a\}$ .

2 The incumbent party  $I$  determines whether or not to retain the leader  $r \in \{0, 1\}$ . If  $r = 0$ ,

<sup>8</sup>We assume players do not discount the future. Model results would be qualitatively unchanged by the inclusion of a discount factor. Expectations are used in these expressions since the outcomes of autogolpe attempts are uncertain.

<sup>9</sup>Our results would be substantively unchanged if this assumption were weakened, so long as leaders are ideologically closer to their nominating party than to the opposition.

$L$  is replaced by a new leader with  $\hat{x}_L = \hat{x}_I$ .

3a If  $a = 1$  and  $r = 1$ , a backsliding episode occurs.  $L$  successfully consolidates an autocratic reversion with probability  $1 - \sigma$ .

3b If either  $a = 0$  or  $r = 0$ , or if  $L$ 's bid for an autocratic reversion fails (with probability  $\sigma$ ), then an election takes place.  $I$  prevails with probability  $\rho(r, \nu)$ . If  $O$  prevails, a new leader is selected with  $\hat{x}_L = \hat{x}_O$ .

4 The sitting  $L$  sets policy  $x_2$ .

5 All payoffs are realized and the game ends.

## Equilibrium

We consider subgame perfect equilibria to this game—that is, a strategy profile such that each player is adopting a best response in every subgame of the interaction. A strategy for  $L$  consists of: (1) a mapping from ideal points into policies in the second period of play,  $\{x_2\} : \{\hat{x}_I, \hat{x}_O\} \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ ; and (2) a mapping from the realization of  $\gamma$  into policy  $\{a, x_1\} : \mathbb{R}_+ \rightarrow \{0, 1\} \times \mathbb{R}$  in the first period of play.<sup>10</sup> A strategy for  $I$  is a choice of  $r \in \{0, 1\}$ , which is a mapping from the first period levels of authoritarianism and the realization of  $\kappa$ ,  $r : \{0, 1\} \times \mathbb{R}_+ \rightarrow \{0, 1\}$ .

We proceed to characterize the unique equilibrium in this game. We start by defining an inequality that dictates  $I$ 's strategy: if it is satisfied, the incumbent party will always retain the leader regardless of her prior actions in office.

**Definition 1.** *Define a threshold in  $\kappa$ ,  $\underline{\kappa}$ , such that for all realizations  $\kappa < \underline{\kappa}$ ,  $I$  has a dominant strategy of retaining the leader.  $\underline{\kappa} = D[(1 - \sigma) + \sigma\rho(1, \nu) - \rho(0, \nu)]$ . We define any party with a draw  $\kappa < \underline{\kappa}$  as personalistic.*

<sup>10</sup>In the first round of play,  $\hat{x}_L = \hat{x}_I$  by construction, so there is no variation in this term.

A second inequality influences the strategy of the leader. This threshold is a function of  $\gamma$ :  $L$  only sets  $a = 1$  if the costs of doing so are sufficiently low.

**Definition 2.** Define a threshold in  $\gamma$ ,  $\bar{\gamma}$ , such that for all realizations  $\gamma > \bar{\gamma}$ ,  $L$  has a dominant strategy of setting  $a = 0$ . Define  $\bar{\gamma} = (1 - \sigma)\alpha$ .

The relevance of the thresholds  $\bar{\gamma}$  and  $\underline{\kappa}$  is as follows. For backsliding (and, thus, autocratic reversion) to take place, two conditions must be met. First, one must have a leader  $L$  who chooses to engage in anti-democratic behavior ( $a = 1$ ). The willingness of  $L$  to engage in backsliding depends on the cost parameter  $\gamma$ ; for  $\gamma > \bar{\gamma}$  she will abstain from anti-democratic actions regardless of the strategies of all other players. Hence, for backsliding to occur, it must be the case that  $\gamma < \bar{\gamma}$ , which happens with probability  $F_\gamma(\bar{\gamma})$ .

Even if the leader is willing to engage in backsliding, for it to take place in equilibrium, her party must be a willing accomplice. Were the party always willing to fulfill its role as a guardian of democracy, even the most obstreperous leader would recognize that engaging in backsliding would lead to her certain removal from power. A forward-looking leader would therefore exercise restraint and set  $a = 0$ .

However, the party may or may not play this role. If the electoral costs it faces as a result of unseating the current leader exceed the expected costs of backsliding  $(1 - \sigma)\kappa$ , the party will tolerate its leader's anti-democratic actions and will become personalized—dominated by the will of its leader. In this case, a leader may choose to set  $a = 1$  in equilibrium. This outcome results whenever  $\kappa < \underline{\kappa}$ , which takes place with probability  $F_\kappa(\underline{\kappa})$ .

Conditions for backsliding are therefore satisfied when *both*  $\gamma < \bar{\gamma}$  and  $\kappa < \underline{\kappa}$ , which occurs with probability  $F_\gamma(\bar{\gamma})F_\kappa(\underline{\kappa})$ . We state this claim in Lemma 1; in the appendix, we present the full specification of the equilibrium that leads to this result.

**Lemma 1.** *The equilibrium probability of democratic backsliding is given by  $F_\gamma(\bar{\gamma})F_\kappa(\underline{\kappa})$ , and the equilibrium probability of autocratic reversion is given by  $(1 - \sigma)F_\gamma(\bar{\gamma})F_\kappa(\underline{\kappa})$ .*

## Comparative Statics

Having characterized the probabilities of democratic backsliding (at the polity as well as party level), democratic reversion, and party personalization, we can now turn our attention to parameters which may affect these probabilities. We focus on three parameters of the model,  $\{\nu, D, \sigma\}$ , which respectively capture the leader's charisma, the ideological distance between the incumbent party and the opposition, and the stability of the institutional foundations of democracy.

**Proposition 1.** *The threshold below which the party is personalized,  $\underline{\kappa}$ , rises in  $\nu$ ; hence, the probability that the incumbent party becomes personalized also rises in  $\nu$ . As a result, the probability of democratic backsliding,  $F_\gamma(\bar{\gamma})F_\kappa(\underline{\kappa})$ , and the probability of autocratic reversion,  $(1 - \sigma)F_\gamma(\bar{\gamma})F_\kappa(\underline{\kappa})$ , are rising in  $\nu$ .*

Proposition 1 constitutes the main theoretical claim of this paper: electoral politics centered around the charismatic appeals of political leaders are a threat to democracy. This threat arises because of a relationship between leader charisma and the equilibrium strategy of the incumbent party, here encapsulated in the effect of  $\nu$  on the threshold  $\underline{\kappa}$ . When electoral politics centers on the leader's charismatic appeal, the incumbent party faces a substantial cost from sanctioning its leader's behavior and thus becomes less willing to sanction—the cost of backsliding necessary to induce the party to play its democratic role ( $\underline{\kappa}$ ) rises. As  $\underline{\kappa}$  rises, the probability that the party's cost of backsliding falls below this threshold,  $F_\kappa(\underline{\kappa})$ , rises in turn.

**Proposition 2.** *The threshold below which the party is personalized,  $\underline{\kappa}$ , rises in  $D$ ; hence, the probability that the incumbent party becomes personalized rises in  $D$ . As a result, the probability of democratic backsliding  $F_\gamma(\bar{\gamma})F_\kappa(\underline{\kappa})$ , and the probability of autocratic reversion,  $(1 - \sigma)F_\gamma(\bar{\gamma})F_\kappa(\underline{\kappa})$ , are rising in  $D$ .*

Proposition 2 holds that rising elite polarization on the policy dimension  $x$  (measured by  $D$ ) between the incumbent party and its challenger increases the risk of backsliding. As with the

effect of charisma, this result is due to the relationship between polarization and the strategy of the incumbent party. Should the incumbent party move to oust its leader, it will face a more serious challenge in any ensuing election ( $\rho(0, \nu) < \rho(1, \nu)$ ). This then increases the likelihood that the challenger will take power, and implement its preferred policies. The more threatening the incumbent finds these policies, the less willing the party is to run this risk. Consequently, the cost of backsliding necessary to motivate the incumbent to action ( $\underline{\kappa}$ ) rises, increasing the risk that this threshold is not met ( $F_{\kappa}(\underline{\kappa})$ ).

There is also a moderating effect between these two terms. A reliance on leader charisma is most likely to lead to party personalization when elite polarization is already high. Formally,  $\frac{\partial^2 \underline{\kappa}}{\partial \nu \partial D} > 0$ . Intuitively, increasing values of  $D$  mean that the incumbent party suffers a higher cost from future electoral defeats, whereas higher values of  $\nu$  imply that removing the leader has a larger negative effect on future electoral success. If, for instance, both  $I$  and  $O$  have converged to the median voter, the cost of electoral defeat to  $I$  is relatively low, so the party may be willing to remove the leader even when the electoral consequences are great (for high  $\nu$ ). If  $I$  and  $O$  have moved to the polar extremes of the ideology space, however, even the slightest electoral cost may be damaging and the party will be more subservient to its leader's wishes.<sup>11</sup>

**Proposition 3.** *The threshold value  $\underline{\kappa}$  is more sensitive to movements in  $\nu$  when  $D$  is high than when it is low, and vice versa.  $\frac{\partial^2 \underline{\kappa}}{\partial \nu \partial D} > 0$ .*

Finally, we turn our attention to  $\sigma$ , the stability of the institutional foundations of democracy. We interpret this term as incorporating structural or institutional features of a polity (i.e., features other than the reaction of the mass public) that make it more or less vulnerable to autocratic rever-

<sup>11</sup>The moderating relationship between  $\nu$  and  $D$  is ambiguous when considering either backsliding or autocratic reversion, because these effects depend on the distribution  $F_{\kappa}(\cdot)$ , and so would depend on  $\frac{\partial f_{\kappa}(\cdot)}{\partial \kappa}$ , which is ambiguously signed. We could impose assumptions about the shape of  $f_{\kappa}(\cdot)$ , but they are challenging to justify empirically.

sion. For example, following the logic of democratic consolidation, longer periods of uninterrupted democratic rule may be associated with higher levels of  $\sigma$ .

Increasing values of institutional stability have a mechanistic effect on the probability of autocratic reversion. Any given attempt at backsliding is less likely to wholly undermine the democratic order as stability rises. But it also has a further effect on the strategic behavior of both the leader and the incumbent party. Consider first the incumbent party. The party knows that the bid for an autocratic reversion succeeds with probability  $1 - \sigma$ . In the event of success, it will no longer have to face a future challenge by opposition at the polls (or, if it faces such a challenge, it can be sure the contest will be sufficiently rigged that it will win). If it moves to prevent the backsliding episode by sanctioning the leader, however, it guarantees that it will face an election, and it will face it from an unfavorable position (since it will have removed its leader). Hence, as autocratic reversion grows more likely to succeed, the incumbent party grows less willing to step in to prevent it:  $\underline{\kappa}$  is falling in  $\sigma$ . In other words, parties are more likely to be personalized when  $\sigma$  is low.

Consider the perspective of the leader. Mechanically, the leader's bid for an autocratic reversion is less likely to succeed as  $\sigma$  rises, and vice versa. Moreover, the leader is only capable of successfully bringing about the collapse of the democratic order if her party is onside. As described above, the party is more likely to rally to the leader's defense as institutional stability declines. Hence  $\bar{\gamma}$ , the threshold cost above which the leader refrains from challenging democracy, is falling in  $\sigma$  (rising in instability). All these forces point in the same direction: the risk of democratic backsliding and autocratic reversion rise as stability ( $\sigma$ ) declines.<sup>12</sup>

This logic, however, implies an intriguing moderating relationship: weak institutional foundations for democracy and leader charisma act as *substitute* mechanisms in driving party personalization. In less stable democracies, parties are more likely to become personalized even with relatively uncharismatic leaders. In stable democracies, by contrast, the likelihood that the party

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<sup>12</sup>However, the moderating relationship between charisma and stability in effecting democratic backsliding and breakdown is ambiguous for the same reasons discussed in footnote 11.



becomes personalized is highly sensitive to leader charisma (and very low when the leader is non-charismatic). Leader charisma only matters to the party when competitive elections take place. In an unstable democracy, if  $L$  and  $I$  make a bid at backsliding, it is highly likely to succeed, and the party need not worry about facing another competitive election. Thus, the electoral benefits of the leader's charisma are not a relevant consideration. In contrast, in a democracy with stable institutional foundations, any bid at backsliding by both party and leader is likely to be, at least partially, checked by other institutional forces, meaning that another competitive election will be forthcoming. In this case, the charismatic appeal of the leader will still matter for the party.

**Proposition 4.** (a) *The thresholds  $\underline{\kappa}$  and  $\bar{\gamma}$  are both falling in the institutional stability of democracy. Hence, the probability of democratic backsliding,  $F_{\gamma}(\bar{\gamma})F_{\kappa}(\underline{\kappa})$ , the probability of autocratic reversion,  $(1 - \sigma)F_{\gamma}(\bar{\gamma})F_{\kappa}(\underline{\kappa})$ , and party personalization,  $\underline{\kappa}$ , are falling in  $\sigma$ .* (b) *The extent of party personalization is more sensitive to leader charisma and to polarization in stable, as opposed to unstable, democracies:  $\frac{\partial^2 \underline{\kappa}}{\partial \sigma \partial \nu} > 0$ .*

## Empirical Illustration

We now illustrate how our theoretical predictions can inform the empirical study of democratic backsliding. We examine the link between charismatic leaders and three forms of backsliding: democratic breakdown (change in regime type), the decline in the quality of democracy, and the extent to which incumbent parties embrace illiberal policies. We also evaluate the key mechanism operating in our model: the link between leader charisma and party personalization, and how that relationship may be moderated by elite polarization and democratic stability.

## Outcome Measures

**Democratic breakdown.** We use a binary variable *Democracy*  $\in \{0, 1\}$  as coded by [Boix, Miller and Rosato \(2013\)](#), updated through 2020, indicating a minimal level of suffrage (participation) and free and fair elections (contestation).<sup>13</sup> In our model, such a breakdown should take place with probability  $(1 - \sigma)F_\gamma(\bar{\gamma})F_\kappa(\underline{\kappa})$ . However, democratic breakdowns happen for a variety of reasons, whereas our theoretical focus is on *autogolpe*, such as Alberto Fujimori's suspension of Peru's constitution and dissolution of Congress in 1992, or Mahinda Rajapakse's amendments of Sri Lanka's constitution in 2010 to substantially broaden presidential powers. We therefore estimate the hazard that a democracy spell ends through an autogolpe, and model the non-autogolpe breakdowns (such as through military coups or civil wars) as a competing risk (more details are below).

To code the type of democratic breakdown, we primarily rely on [Goemans, Gleditsch and Chiozza \(2009\)](#), and supplement it with a variety of other secondary sources. Specifically, for an instance of breakdown to be coded as an autogolpe, we require: (1) a democratic collapse, as coded by [Boix, Miller and Rosato \(2013\)](#), take place in a given country-year, and (2) that the leader of that country, as coded by [Goemans, Gleditsch and Chiozza \(2009\)](#) or other sources, remain the same before and after the collapse. This coding scheme should capture all instances of *successful* autogolpes since, in any instance wherein democracy collapses yet the incumbent survives in power, that incumbent must have made a conscious choice to hold authority even after the democratic order has collapsed. Our model most directly speaks to this form of democratic collapse.

This coding scheme may introduce type II errors. There may be instances of democratic breakdown owing to mechanisms described by our theory, but which we do not code as auto-

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<sup>13</sup>We opt for this measure of democracy because of its longer coverage compared to alternatives such as [Cheibub, Gandhi and Vreeland \(2010\)](#).

golpes. For instance, a competing faction may use the chaos of an autogolpe attempt to oust the incumbent party and install itself as the elite of an autocratic regime. However, while our theory may speak to some instances of democratic collapse other than those we code as autogolpes, these forms of democratic collapse also arise for reasons wholly orthogonal to our model, such as through a foreign intervention. We therefore regard our predictions with respect to other forms of autocratic collapse as ambiguous.

**Quality of Democracy.** Transitions in political regime type are extreme, and rare, political events.<sup>14</sup> Our theory, however, allows for the possibility of less drastic antidemocratic actions, such as eroding the checks and balances on the executive, undermining electoral institutions and regulations, or imposing (or extending) the government’s control over the press. Because complete reversion takes place only probabilistically, we attempt a continuous operationalization of the probability  $F_{\gamma}(\bar{\gamma})F_{\kappa}(\underline{\kappa})$ .

To measure such actions, our second outcome variable is the *Liberal Democracy Index* from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project (Coppedge et al., 2022). We focus on the Liberal Democracy Index because it measures constraints on the executive—protection of civil liberties, the rule of law, and checks and balances—which in our theory are precisely the types of constraints a charismatic leader might seek to weaken. This index is a continuous measure, ranging from 0 and 1, with higher values denoting greater checks on the executive. For robustness, we use the Freedom House’s democracy measure (Freedom House, 2021) as an alternative outcome variable (see Table C3).

**Party Backsliding.** The precondition for either breakdown or a reduction in the quality of democracy in our theory is the strategic acquiescence by the ruling party to antidemocratic actions of their chief executive (i.e.  $r = a = 1$  in our model). In such instances, the incumbent party itself will

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<sup>14</sup>Only 1.64 percent of country-year observations in our data constitute a democratic breakdown, and 0.45% occur through an autogolpe. Table B2 gives the summary statistics.

have backslid in its commitments to democratic principles. Again, this takes place with probability  $F_{\gamma}(\bar{\gamma})F_{\kappa}(\underline{\kappa})$ . We draw our third, *party-level* outcome from the Varieties of Party Identity and Organization (V-Party) dataset (Lindberg et al., 2022). We analyze the *Anti-Pluralism Index*, which captures the extent to which a party shows “a lacking commitment to democratic norms prior to elections.” This measure is continuous, with higher values indicating greater anti-pluralism (i.e. lower commitment to democratic norms).

**Party Personalization.** Finally, the key mechanism in our comparative statics is how our parameters of interest affect the balance between the costs to the incumbent party of backsliding versus replacing its leader before the election ( $\underline{\kappa}$ ). As  $\underline{\kappa}$  increases, the party is more likely to accommodate the leader’s will, becoming more personalized. To capture this dynamic, we use the variable *Personalization of Party* from the V-Party dataset (Lindberg et al., 2022) that captures the expert coders’ perceptions of the degree to which a party is “a vehicle for the personal will and priorities of one individual leader.” This variable is a continuous score with higher values indicating greater personalization.

## Key Predictors

Guided by Propositions 1-4, we examine the relationship between these outcome measures and proxies for leader charisma ( $\nu$ ), elite polarization ( $D$ ), and democratic stability ( $\sigma$ ).

**Charisma.** We are not aware of any existing measures of charisma of chief-executives around the world. Charisma is a complex phenomenon. It may derive from a leader’s personality, interpersonal skills and communication style (Eatwell, 2006). However, it may also flow from *linkages* between the leader and her followers, driven for example by contextual factors such as economic or political crises (Merolla and Zechmeister, 2011; Weyland, 2003) that may accentuate the followers’ grievances and needs to which a leader may appeal (Andrews-Lee, 2019; Madsen and Snow, 1991).

Rather than trying to capture this multitude of sources of charismatic authority in a complex measure, we focus on an empirically more tractable proposition: that a leader's charismatic appeal, whatever its source, often leads to a meteoric rise in politics. Consequently, we construct a measure of a chief executive's *outsider status* as a proxy for a leader's charisma. [Hollyer, Klašnja and Titiunik \(2022\)](#) demonstrate theoretically that parties may prioritize the nomination of charismatic candidates who are less motivated by party-centric effort over their less charismatic but more disciplined and programmatic colleagues. By virtue of being politically inexperienced, outsiders are less likely to have risen to the highest executive office because of their willingness to toe the party line, and more likely due to other qualities such as charisma.<sup>15</sup>

We define as outsider a leader who did not hold previous leadership positions atop any of the three branches of national government: the cabinet (vice-president or deputy prime minister, minister, chief of staff), national legislature (a seat in the lower or upper house, if available), other key central government institutions (central bank, special prosecutorial offices), the constitutional court, and in federal states, chief executive positions in the highest federal unit (such as governorship). To code the outsider status, we compile the biographical and career information on leaders for the period 1950-2020 from a number of sources (listed in table [B1](#)). Of the 936 leaders in our data, 79 (8.4%) are classified as outsiders.

Examples of outsiders perceived as charismatic abound, from businessmen like Donald Trump and Italy's Silvio Berlusconi, sportsmen like Liberia's George Weah and Mongolia's Khaltmaagiin Battulga, to entertainers like Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Guatemala's Jimmy Morales.<sup>16</sup> Not every outsider leader is charismatic, of course. False positives may be particularly likely to in-

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<sup>15</sup>[Hollyer, Klašnja and Titiunik \(2022\)](#) also demonstrate the validity of outsider status as proxy for charisma in mayoral elections in Brazil.

<sup>16</sup>We also count as outsiders those leaders who previously only occupied local political office, such as mayors, thus including leaders like Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte, and El Salvador's Nayib Bukele.

clude two types of common outsiders: military officials, especially following successful instances of coup d'état, and technocratic leaders. To account for these possibilities for measurement error, we draw on the same bibliographical sources to code and control for the leaders' military and technocratic background.<sup>17</sup>

We do not claim that insiders cannot be charismatic. Barack Obama, Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro or India's Narendra Modi are examples of leaders who have garnered strong political followings on account of their charismatic appeal without being political novices. We merely argue that while not all charismatic politicians are outsiders, outsiders are more likely to be charismatic than not. Patterns shown in Figure B1 are consistent with this intuition: our outsider variable is strongly positively correlated with two other proxies: (1) a measure of parties' campaign emphasis on their leader's charisma (left panel of Figure B1<sup>18</sup>), and (2) an expert-rated measure of the degree to which a leader is portrayed as being endowed with extraordinary personal characteristics or leadership skills (right panel of Figure B1). We cannot use this first alternative proxy in our analyses because of limited time coverage. We use the second proxy for robustness and find very similar results (see Appendix Section C). While we acknowledge that our measure of charisma is imperfect, the patterns in Figure B1 suggest that it is a plausible proxy.

**Elite Polarization.** We utilize data in V-Party (Lindberg et al., 2022) on parties' ideological positions on several dimensions (the economic left-right, immigration, religion, minority rights, and cultural issues) to construct a measure of *Elite Polarization* as the ideological distance between the ruling party (or coalition) and the opposition.<sup>19</sup> We incorporate multiple issue dimensions because a one-dimensional distance, based for example on the traditional economic left-right, may

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<sup>17</sup>The construction of the technocratic variable is detailed in Section B. We note that technocrats often lead caretaker governments, and as explained below, we exclude caretaker leaders from our analyses.

<sup>18</sup>We do not use this measure in the analyses because of its limited availability

<sup>19</sup>The construction of the measure is detailed in Appendix Section B.

be too reductive in the cross-national context. This measure is continuous, with higher values indicating greater polarization.

While hewing closely to our theoretical conception of polarization, this measure is available for a shorter period of time (mostly from mid 1970s to 2020) than our country-level outcome measures (democratic breakdown and the quality of democracy; available for 1950-2020). To check against issues from changes in sample composition, in the Appendix we also report the results with a measure of *Societal Polarization* from V-Dem (Coppedge et al., 2022) that is available for the entire period for which we have the cross-national outcomes and the charisma proxy (see Appendix Section C).

**Democratic Stability.** We use the length of the ongoing spell of democracy as a measure of institutional stability of democracy, assuming that longer spells of democracy indicate greater stability. We use data from Boix, Miller and Rosato (2013) on the number of years since the most recent episode of democratization.

## Hypotheses

Given these operationalizations, we translate our theoretical propositions into the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1** (From Proposition 1). *Outsider leaders (corresponding to higher values of  $\nu$ ) are associated with: (a) a greater probability of autogolpe; (b) lower quality of democracy; (c) an increase in the governing parties' anti-pluralism; and (d) greater party personalization.*

**Hypothesis 2** (From Proposition 3). *Outsider leaders are more strongly associated with higher party personalization when elite polarization is high (corresponding to larger values of  $D$ ) than when it is low.*

**Hypothesis 3** (From Proposition 4b). *Outsider leaders are more strongly associated with higher*

*party personalization in more stable democracies (corresponding to higher values of  $\sigma$ ) than in less stable democracies.*

While these are not the only testable hypotheses arising from our model, they are novel and refer to our core goal of studying the role of leader charisma in democratic backsliding and party personalization. Our empirical tests, however, will accommodate the other predictions that do not directly involve charisma (Propositions 2 and 4a), which we briefly touch on discuss below or in the appendix.

## Results

Since our empirical design relies on observational data, our analyses may not necessarily capture causal relationships. Still, our theory is “elaborate” (Rosenbaum, 2010), in that it produces a number of distinguishable predictions. The more the data are consistent with these predictions, the more we will consider our empirical results to be plausible, even if not causally identified.

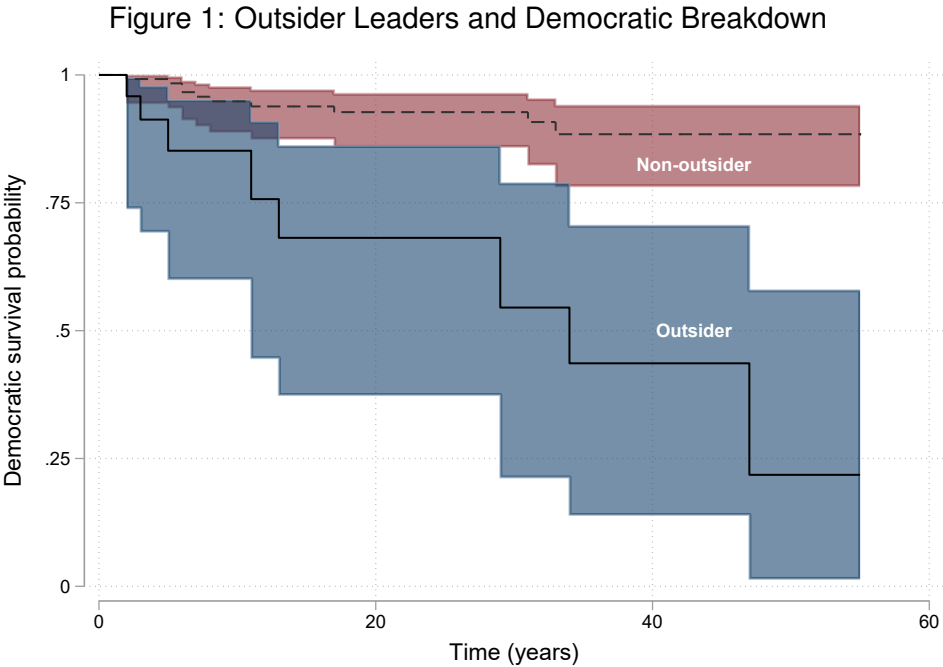
For ease of exposition, we present the results by the type of outcome variable, and relate each analysis to the hypotheses laid out above.<sup>20</sup> We begin with democratic breakdowns. Our sample consists of all democratic-spell years between 1950 and 2020, defined as one or more years of continuous democracy in a given country (our sample begins in 1950 because our outsider status variable starts in that year).<sup>21</sup> As mentioned above, our model speaks to autocratic reversions through *autogolpe*, and the expectations would be ambiguous for the other types, such as reversions due to interventions by foreign powers, military coups or civil wars. We thus treat the non-autogolpe breakdowns as a competing risk.

<sup>20</sup>Summary statistics for all the analysis samples used below are shown in Tables B2-B4.

<sup>21</sup>Since multiple leaders may serve in the same calendar year, we keep only the longest-serving leader in that year. The exceptions are leaders of caretaker governments, who are eliminated even if they served longer within a given year than the permanent outgoing or incoming leader in that year.



Hypothesis 1 (a) indicates that an autogolpe should be more likely under charismatic than non-charismatic leaders. Figure 1 explores this conjecture descriptively, by plotting the probability of a democratic regime surviving past time  $t$  (indicated on the horizontal axis) by the outsider status of its leader. While autocratic reversions are rare, the democratic survival probability is visibly lower under outsider leaders, suggesting that it is plausible that charismatic leaders are more likely to undermine democracy.



*Note:* Figure is a Kaplan-Meier plot of the probability of a democratic regime survival (vertical axis) past time  $t$  (horizontal axis) by the outsider status of its leader.

To evaluate this possibility more systematically, we estimate the probability that a (charismatic) leader will engineer an autogolpe in year  $t$  conditional on not already having done so, by fitting a

Cox competing hazards model of the form:<sup>22</sup>

$$h_i(t) = h_0(t)\exp(\gamma\text{Outsider}_{i,t} + \mathbf{X}_{i,t}\beta) \quad (1)$$

where  $i$  denotes a democratic regime,  $t$  denotes time (number of years of a democratic spell),  $h_0(t)$  is the baseline hazard function, and  $\mathbf{X}_{i,t}\beta$  is a vector of covariates and their associated coefficients.<sup>23</sup> Standard errors are clustered by democratic regime spell.

Our sample contains democratic countries that have experienced prior democratic breakdowns. As our theory indicates (Proposition 4a), past democratic instability may influence the prospects of democracy in the present. We deal with this issue by stratifying the Cox model by the number of previous democratic breakdowns, thus estimating the baseline hazard separately for democratic regimes that experienced prior democratic collapse and those that have not (Box-Steffensmeier and Zorn, 2002).<sup>24</sup> The results are insensitive to alternative ways of accounting for prior instability (Table C1).

We also account for several country and leader characteristics that may plausibly correlate with both democratic survival and the propensity of observing a (non-)charismatic leader: GDP per capita (Boix, 2003), military background (Cheibub, 2007), type of leader's entry (whether

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<sup>22</sup>We prefer a Cox model over alternatives because, unlike binary dependent variable models, the Cox model readily incorporates censoring, which is particularly critical given our approach of competing hazards. Also, unlike parametric survival models, the Cox model does not assume a particular shape of time dependence.

<sup>23</sup>Because our outcome variable is binary, we do not include country fixed effects, as such a model would only be identified off of countries experiencing democratic breakdown in the data—only around a third of our sample.

<sup>24</sup>Unlike the remaining analyses we detail below, here we use the number of breakdowns rather than the length of the ongoing democracy spell to capture previous instability, because the latter is already incorporated into the Cox model, based on the functional form of the baseline hazard.

regularly through elections, or in some other way), and any dynastic ties to a previous leader. Details on all the variables are given in Table B1.<sup>25</sup>

Table 1 shows the results. We report coefficient values—not hazard ratios—so a positive coefficient indicates that a given variable increases the risk of autogolpe and a negative coefficient indicates the opposite. The first column includes the outsider variable and the covariates; the second column adds elite polarization, considering the expectations laid out in Proposition 2 (that higher elite polarization should itself be positively associated with democratic breakdown).<sup>26</sup> The results in column 1 confirm the unconditional patterns from Figure 1: conditioning on the relevant country and leader characteristics, outsider leaders are more likely to engage in autogolpe than non-outsider leaders. Given the rarity of such events, the estimate is quite large: autogolpe is around 8.3 times more likely under outsider leaders.<sup>27</sup> The estimate is similar when including elite polarization (column 2), which itself is positively associated with autocratic reversion, as predicted by Proposition 2.<sup>28</sup>

As discussed, our theory provides for the possibility of decreases in democratic quality short of a full-scale autocratic reversion. As in the democratic breakdown analysis, our sample includes all the democratic country-years between 1950 and 2020, as defined by Boix, Miller and Rosato

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<sup>25</sup>In the analyses further below, we also control for a leader’s technocratic background, but since there are no technocratic outsiders who engage in autogolpe, we cannot include it in the Cox models.

<sup>26</sup>All the variables in the Cox model specifications satisfy the proportional-hazard assumption (Figure C1).

<sup>27</sup>In the raw data, outsider leaders preside over 8 autogolpe collapses (3% of all outsider leader observations), whereas insiders preside over 10 such episodes (0.27% of all insider leader observations)—a ratio of the two proportions of more than 11.

<sup>28</sup>Since our model does not produce unambiguous expectations with respect to non-autogolpe breakdowns, we conduct a placebo test of sorts in Table C2. Indeed, leaders’ outsider status does not predict non-autogolpe collapses in our data.

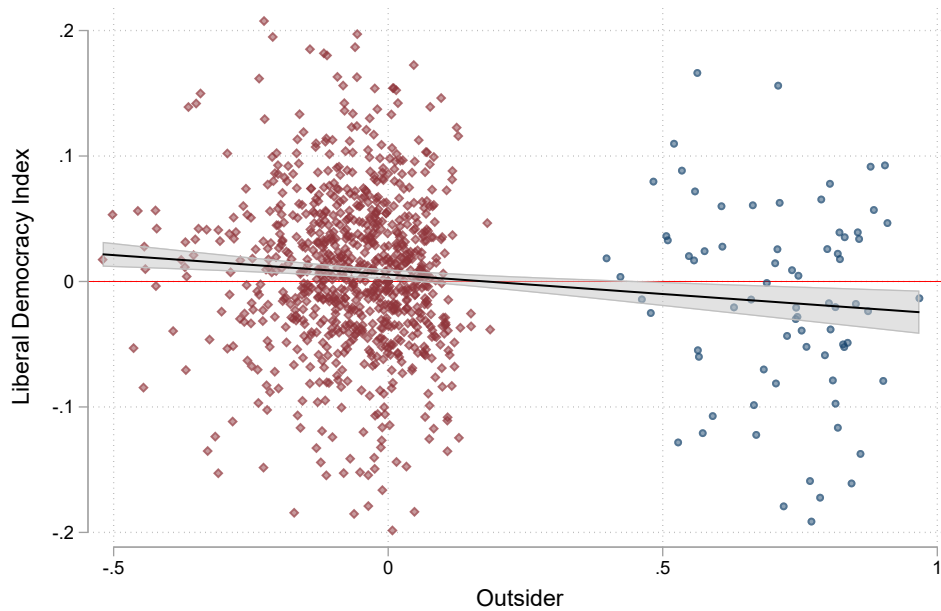
Table 1: Outsider Leaders and Democratic Breakdown—Cox Regressions

	(1)	(2)
Outsider leader	2.118** (0.477)	1.998** (0.738)
Elite polarization		1.100* (0.480)
GDP per capita	-0.674** (0.233)	-1.365** (0.333)
Leader's military background	1.333** (0.444)	0.672 (0.514)
Leader's irregular entry	0.526 (0.809)	0.378 (0.990)
Family ties to previous leader	0.099 (0.741)	-0.834 (0.771)
Observations	3974	2921

*Note:* <sup>+</sup>p<0.1; \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01. Estimates are from a Cox model in equation 1. Variables are described in Table B1. Standard errors are clustered by democratic regime spell.

(2013). Here, our unit of observation is a leader-spell rather than a country-year. Hypothesis 1(b) indicates that the quality of democracy should decrease under charismatic compared to non-charismatic leaders. We first evaluate this expectation descriptively in Figure 2, which shows a partial correlation between a leader’s outsider status ( $x$ -axis) and the Liberal Democracy Index, after accounting for country and year fixed effects. While there is a fair amount of variability under both outsider and insider leaders, the Liberal Democracy Index is on average lower under the former, consistent with our expectation.

Figure 2: Outsider Leaders and the Quality of Democracy



*Note:* Figure is a partial correlation plot between the Liberal Democracy Index (vertical axis) and a leader’s outsider status (horizontal axis), after partialling out the country and year fixed effects.

In Table 2, we examine the conditional association between leader charisma and the quality of democracy by estimating the following OLS model:

$$Y_{l,i,t} = \gamma \text{Outsider}_{l,i,t} + \mathbf{X}_{1,i,t} \beta + \theta_t + \delta_i + \epsilon_{l,i,t} \quad (2)$$

where  $l$  is the leader-spell in country  $i$  at start year  $t$ ,  $Y$  is the Liberal Democracy Index,  $\theta_t$  and  $\delta_i$  are the set of year and country dummies, respectively,  $\mathbf{X}_{l,i,t}\beta$  includes the same covariates as in the democratic breakdown analysis, as well as the leader's technocratic background and democratic duration.<sup>29</sup> As in the previous analysis, the second column of Table 2 also adds elite polarization. Standard errors are clustered by leader.<sup>30</sup>

The results remain consistent with the descriptive patterns in Figure 2, as well as with the democratic breakdown analysis. Conditional on country and leader characteristics, column 1 indicates that the Liberal Democracy Index is about .03 points (about 1/7th of the sample standard deviation) lower under outsider than insider leaders. The estimate is similar when including our elite polarization measure, which itself is negatively associated with the quality of democracy, as predicted by Proposition 2.<sup>31</sup>

The empirical results in Tables 1 and 2 are consistent with our theoretical expectations. However, they do not speak directly to the mechanism proposed by our theory—parties' acquiescence to their (charismatic) leaders' anti-democratic actions. The precondition for democratic backsliding in our model is that the party choose to retain the leader even when they undermine democ-

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<sup>29</sup>Mirroring the literature on autocratic survival (e.g. Wright, Frantz and Geddes, 2015), we model duration flexibly with a cubic polynomial.

<sup>30</sup>Close to 20% of leaders have multiple spells in office, making it possible to cluster errors by leader. Inferences are qualitatively similar if the errors are clustered by country (Table C4). We note that leaders coded as outsiders in their first spell are coded as insiders in any subsequent spells.

<sup>31</sup>There is also an overall negative association between democratic stability, as measured by the current democracy spell duration, and the quality of democracy, contrary to our expectations from Proposition 4a. The patterns with an alternative measure of democratic quality (Table C3), however, are in line with our expectation. Overall, therefore, the results for this prediction are inconclusive.

Table 2: Outsider Leaders and the Quality of Democracy—OLS Regressions

	(1)	(2)
Outsider leader	-0.030* (0.012)	-0.028* (0.013)
Elite polarization		-0.019* (0.008)
GDP per capita	0.062** (0.015)	0.013 (0.019)
Leader's technocratic background	0.018+ (0.010)	0.006 (0.010)
Leader's military background	-0.020* (0.009)	-0.022* (0.010)
Family ties to previous leader	-0.010 (0.018)	-0.025+ (0.015)
Leader's irregular entry	-0.055** (0.018)	-0.068** (0.019)
Current democracy spell duration	0.001 (0.008)	0.016 (0.013)
Current democracy spell duration <sup>2</sup>	-0.005** (0.001)	-0.006** (0.001)
Current democracy spell duration <sup>3</sup>	0.000** (0.000)	0.000** (0.000)
Constant	0.500** (0.159)	1.069** (0.231)
Observations	936	697

*Note:* + $p < 0.1$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ . Estimates are from an OLS model in equation 2. Variables are described in Table B1. Standard errors are clustered by leader.

racy (i.e.  $r = a = 1$ ). That is, along with increasing the prospects of democratic backsliding at the polity level, hypothesis 1(c) indicates that charisma should increase *party backsliding* as well. Moreover, a party’s strategic acquiescence implies its *personalization*—it grows more subservient to its leader’s priorities. Hypotheses 1(d) therefore also lead us to expect a positive association between leader charisma and party personalization.

We examine these expectations in Table 3, by estimating the following model:

$$Y_{p,e} = \gamma \text{Outsider}_{p,e} + \mathbf{X}_{p,e} \beta + \theta_e + \epsilon_{p,e} \quad (3)$$

where  $p$  is a governing party in election year  $e$  in all democratic elections between 1970 and 2020,<sup>32</sup>  $Y$  is either the measure of party backsliding (*Party Anti-Pluralism*) or personalization,  $\theta_e$  are the election year dummies, and  $\mathbf{X}_{p,e} \beta$  includes the same set of covariates as in the quality of democracy analyses, as well as each party’s seat share.<sup>33</sup> As in previous analyses, we also show results for specifications that add elite polarization (columns 2 and 4). Standard errors are clustered by party.

The results are once again consistent with our expectations. Incumbent parties with outsider leaders are less committed to democratic norms (column 1-2) and are perceived as more personalized (columns 3-4) than parties with insider leaders. For example, columns 1 and 3 suggests that incumbent parties with outsider leaders are respectively about half a standard deviation more anti-plural and a third of a standard deviation more personalized than governing parties led by in-

<sup>32</sup>While the V-Party dataset from which we draw our outcome measures goes further back in time, the outcome measures are typically missing before 1970.

<sup>33</sup>Our preferred specification does not include country dummies because almost two-thirds of countries in our party-level dataset do not have an outsider leader (because of longer coverage, the share in our leader-spell dataset is much lower—less than half). The results with country dummies are substantively similar, but not surprisingly, less precisely estimated, given the reduced within-country variance (Table C5).



Table 3: Outsider Leaders, Party Backsliding and Party Personalization

	Anti-plusalism		Personalization	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Outsider leader	0.134** (0.043)	0.103* (0.043)	0.545** (0.205)	0.499* (0.211)
Elite polarization		0.053** (0.016)		0.210* (0.096)
GDP per capita	-0.147** (0.015)	-0.168** (0.015)	-0.160* (0.078)	-0.238** (0.081)
Seat share	0.165** (0.048)	0.165** (0.048)	0.703* (0.301)	0.775* (0.301)
Technocratic background	-0.015 (0.023)	-0.019 (0.023)	-0.465** (0.146)	-0.478** (0.150)
Leader's military background	0.055* (0.022)	0.070** (0.021)	0.116 (0.114)	0.151 (0.114)
Family ties to previous leader	-0.002 (0.031)	-0.005 (0.031)	0.068 (0.165)	0.054 (0.169)
Leader's irregular entry	-0.085 (0.055)	-0.127* (0.053)	0.201 (0.343)	0.277 (0.372)
Current democracy spell duration	-0.007 (0.015)	-0.006 (0.015)	-0.072 (0.080)	-0.089 (0.080)
Current democracy spell duration <sup>2</sup>	-0.001 (0.002)	-0.000 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.010)	0.003 (0.010)
Current democracy spell duration <sup>3</sup>	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)
Constant	1.648** (0.146)	1.762** (0.149)	0.622 (0.725)	1.065 (0.736)
Observations	1483	1450	1484	1451

Note: <sup>+</sup>p<0.1; \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01. Estimates are from an OLS model in equation 3. Variables are described in Table B1. Standard errors are clustered by party.

sider chief executives. These results are consistent with the theoretical workings of our model, suggesting that it is plausible that the link between charisma and polity-level backsliding we observed above is operating through its impact on the inner-workings of incumbent parties.<sup>34</sup>

Following Proposition 3, hypothesis 2 further indicates that the link between charisma and party personalization may be dependent on the level of elite polarization. That is, replacing a charismatic leader is electorally risky for the incumbent party, and all the more so if the opposition's ideological ideal point is distant from its own. The interaction of the two factors thus makes the party particularly reluctant to replace a charismatic leader when polarization—the ideological distance between the parties—is large.

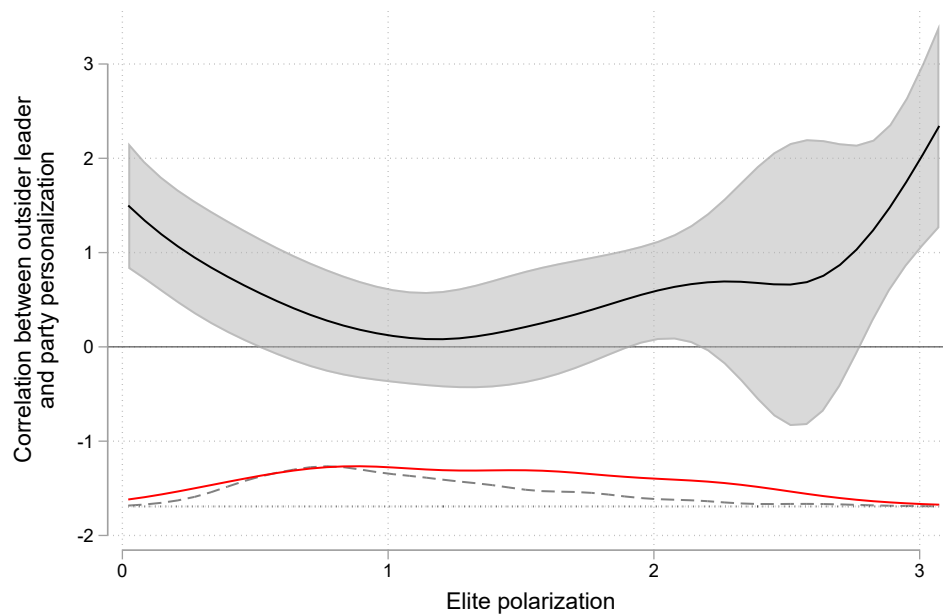
We evaluate this possibility in Figure 3. We add elite polarization and its interaction with the outsider status variable to the specification in equation 3. Rather than impose linearity, we employ the approach by Hainmueller, Mummolo and Xu (2019) to flexibly estimate this interaction. This approach applies a kernel-smoothing estimator that estimates the association between a leader's outsider status and party personalization at a series of values of party polarization using kernel-weighted local linear regressions. The red and dashed lines at the bottom of Figure 3 indicate the distribution of elite polarization for parties with outsider and non-outsider chief executives, respectively.

The results are to an extent consistent with hypothesis 2: the link between charisma and party personalization is stronger at high levels of elite polarization. However, the data also suggest a degree of non-linearity, in that the relationship between a leader's outsider status and personalization weakens when moving from low to moderate elite polarization, before increasing again. Moreover, the relationship between outsider leaders and personalization is equally strong at low

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<sup>34</sup>Table 3 also suggests that, in line with Proposition 2, parties are more anti-pluralist and personalized in elections with greater elite polarization. However, contrary to Proposition 4a, we do not observe a clear relationship between democratic stability (as measured by democratic spell duration) and party personalization.

Figure 3: Outsider Leaders, Elite Polarization, and Party Personalization



*Note:* Using the approach by [Hainmueller, Mummolo and Xu \(2019\)](#), the figure evaluates hypothesis 2 on the association between party personalization and an interaction between a leader's outsider status and elite polarization. Red solid line (gray dashed line) denotes the density of the moderator variable for outsider (insider) leader observations.

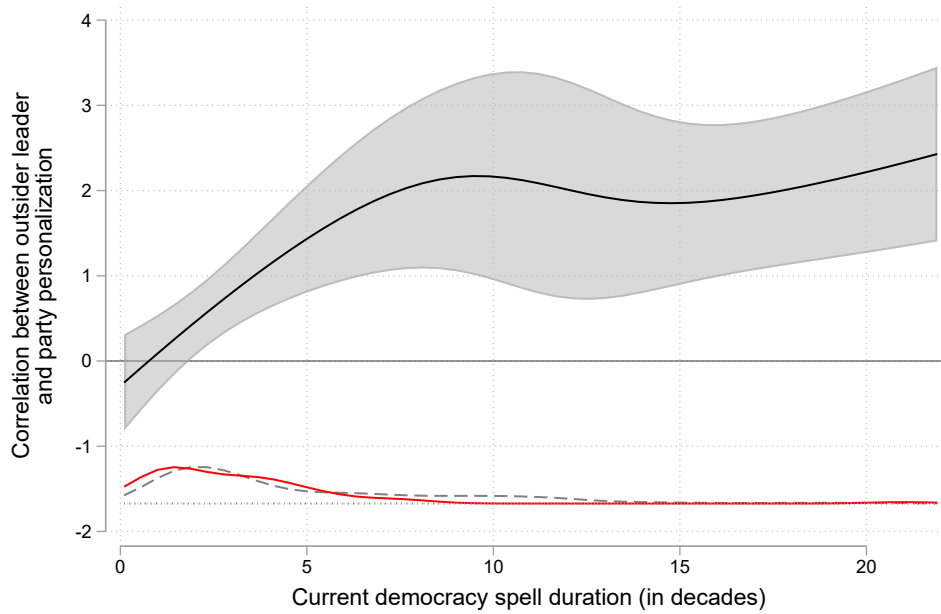
and high levels of elite polarization. Our theory predicts neither of these patterns, and we do not have a ready explanation for them. We are cautious to not over-interpret them, however, given the paucity of parties with outsider leaders in the data (5% of all incumbent parties).

Finally, following Proposition 4b, hypothesis 3 indicates that party personalization should be sensitive to leader charisma in stable democracies, and that personalization should vary less in this term in unstable democracies. This is because leader charisma matters to the party only when competitive elections take place. In unstable democracies, a leader's anti-democratic actions (and the party's acquiesce thereof) are more likely to lead to democratic collapse, in which case the party need not worry about the electoral benefits of its leader's charisma. In stable democracies, however, a leader's (and party's) bid at backsliding is less likely to lead to a full-scale democratic collapse, making the electoral appeal of its leader a more pressing matter for the party. Somewhat counter-intuitively, leader charisma is a threat to party control in stable democratic systems, but is a more minor force in unstable systems. In part, this is because party control of their leaders in unstable democracies is a distant prospect regardless of leader charisma (i.e. party personalization should be higher in less stable democracies).

Since we measure democratic stability with its duration, we therefore expect a positive interaction between outsider and democratic spell duration. Using the same approach as in the analysis of hypothesis 2, the patterns in Figure 4 are generally consistent with this expectation. A leader's outsider status is more strongly linked with party personalization in more durable democracies than less durable ones, particularly those that have had only a short spell of democracy. In addition, as predicted by our theory, parties with non-outsiders in more stable democracies have lower party personalization scores than such parties in less stable democracies (not shown in Figure 4, calculated based on a linear interaction model).

In sum, while illustrative, the patterns in the data we assembled are reasonably consistent with our predictions laid out in hypotheses 1-3. Both democratic breakdown and less dramatic democratic erosion are more likely under charismatic than non-charismatic chief executives. As

Figure 4: Outsider Leaders, Democratic Stability, and Party Personalization



*Note:* Using the approach by [Hainmueller, Mummolo and Xu \(2019\)](#), the figure evaluates hypothesis 3 on the association between party personalization and an interaction between a leader’s outsider status and democratic duration. Red solid line (gray dashed line) denotes the density of the moderator variable for outsider (insider) leader observations.

predicted, these associations are accompanied by greater illiberalization and personalization of incumbent parties under charismatic than less charismatic leaders. Moreover, incumbent party personalization under charismatic leaders is more pronounced in institutionally stable democracies, and also high in ideologically polarized societies. We find similar patterns with alternative measures of democratic erosion (Table C3), charisma (Table C6 and Figure C2), and ideological polarization (Tables C7 and C8).

## Conclusion

Charismatic authority plays an important role in democratic politics. When political parties advance charismatic candidates, they may increase their chances for short-term electoral success. However, such short-term gains may come at a cost. We show that should a charismatic candidate succeed in attaining office, her party will find itself in a weaker position to constrain her behavior, weakening one important institutional check on the potential abuse of power in democracies. In this way, even if charismatic leaders are no more authoritarian than their less charismatic counterparts, they will be given more leeway to engage in democratic erosion should they be inclined to do so.

Parties also play an important role in *screening* the politicians they nominate in elections (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). Effective democratic parties usually achieve this goal by promising career advancement to their candidates in exchange for effort toward programmatic brand-building (Carey and Shugart, 1995). However, charisma may complicate this gatekeeping role as well. When electoral returns to charisma are high, parties may be unable to commit to promotion strategies tied to programmatic effort, prioritizing instead the most electable candidates irrespective of their past actions (Hollyer, Klačnjaja and Titiunik, 2022). As a result, charismatic nominees may be subject to systematically less screening than the less charismatic nominees. While we see no reason to assume an association between individuals' charismatic appeal and authori-

tarianism, this biased party screening may result in the *nominated* charismatic candidates being more prone to authoritarianism than their less charismatic colleagues. Charisma may therefore doubly weaken the accountability that political parties are expected to provide.

These arguments suggest that the politics that revolves around personalistic appeals may contain inherent risks for democratic rule. Personalism—the dependence of a winning coalition on its leader for continued access to positions of privilege—has long been a feature of theoretical focus in autocratic politics (e.g. [Geddes, Wright and Frantz, 2014](#); [Svolik, 2012](#)). But just as this feature shapes the bargaining between an autocrat and his winning coalition, it may shape the bargaining between a democratic chief executive and her party in a way that threatens the stability of the political order in democracies. We believe that these risks warrant further research on the causes and consequences of charismatic politicians in democratic politics.

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