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Q2(a)

The world currently has been in the throes of a twin process of 'democratic backsliding' and 'democratic backlash'. How would you explain this paradox?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · PSIR GS 2 · 20 marks · Comparative Politics

Comparative Politics: Nature and major approaches; political economy and political sociology perspectives; limitations of the comparative method.

Core demand of the question

- Define democratic backsliding (how democracies erode without a single coup)
- Define democratic backlash (resistance by voters, courts, streets, opposition)
- Explain the paradox of both happening together
- Illustrate with recent comparative cases; avoid a one-country sermon

Revision summary

Democratic backsliding is incremental erosion of referees by elected executives, not always a coup.

Democratic backlash is resistance by courts, streets, media and opposition victories.

The paradox is that both run together in a polarised decade, on different clocks.

Hungary, the United States, Brazil, Poland and Iran illustrate different mixes of erosion and resistance.

Not every backlash is liberal; the task is to distinguish civic repair from counter-populism.

Introduction

The 2020s are not a simple story of democracy's death or of democracy's revenge. **Nancy Bermeo, Steven Levitsky** and **Daniel Ziblatt**, and the **V-Dem** project describe **democratic backsliding**: erosion from inside, often by elected executives. At the same time, **democratic backlash** - courts, streets, journalists, and opposition wins - has returned in several places. The paradox is that both processes now run as twins, not as chapters in sequence.

Body

Backsliding

Backsliding is rarely a colonels' coup. It is executive aggrandisement, packed courts, captured regulators, tilted electoral law, harassment of the press, and the treatment of opponents as enemies of the nation. **Hungary** under Viktor Orbán, **Turkey** after successive shocks to the opposition, **Venezuela's** long hollow, and fights over certification and the rule of law in the **United States** are standard illustrations. Culture war, migration panics, and inequality supply the fuel. Centre-right and radical-right coalitions have been the usual vehicles, which is why the next question on left setbacks belongs in the same decade.

Backlash

Backlash is not automatic sunshine. It is costly mobilisation. Poland's 2023 opposition coalition ended eight years of Law and Justice rule. Brazil's 2022 vote removed Jair Bolsonaro, then had to survive a 8 January 2023 assault on the plazas of power. Israel's 2023 judicial-overhaul crisis filled the streets. Women's movements, including Iranian and other West Asian protests, are backlash against patriarchal closure, not only against a left-right scorecard. In India, a noisy opposition, a still-independent strand of the higher judiciary, and a competitive if strained federal map are part of backlash capacity even when critics allege backsliding on other metrics.

Why the twin process

The paradox dissolves once time-scales are separated. Backsliding is often **incremental and legalistic**. Backlash is **episodic and public**. **Polarisation produces both: the same identity heat that lets a leader dismantle referees also produces counter-identity. International demonstration effects work both ways - Orbánism travels, so do protest repertoires. Digital platforms organise rallies and also drown them in disinformation. Robert Dahl's polyarchy always rested on contestation plus inclusion; when contestation is attacked, inclusion fights back, unevenly.**

- **A further twist:** backlash can itself be illiberal (majoritarian street against minorities). Not every crowd is a civic culture. The analyst's job is to sort **liberal-democratic repair** from **counter-populism**. The world is in the throes of both, which is why a single headline - "the end of democracy" or "the people have won" - is bad comparative politics.

Flow diagram

Polarisation -> Backsliding
 Polarisation -> Backlash
 Backsliding -> Captured referees
 Backlash -> Courts streets votes
 Captured referees -.meets. -> Courts streets votes

Conclusion

Backsliding erodes referees from above. Backlash tries to restore or reinvent them from below and beside. They coexist because polarised societies produce both strongmen and their antibodies. The outcome is unsettled, country by country.

Facts & figures

Levitsky and Ziblatt

How Democracies Die: elected leaders subvert norms and referees rather than cancelling elections overnight.

V-Dem

Tracks liberal-democratic indices; the 2010s-2020s show a global wave of autocratisation with important exceptions.

Poland 2023

A civic-opposition coalition defeated Law and Justice at the ballot, a textbook backlash after years of judicial capture attempts.

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