



PROJECT MUSE®

## How Oppositions Fight Back

Laura Gamboa

Journal of Democracy, Volume 34, Number 3, July 2023, pp. 90-104 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2023.a900435>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/900435>

🔗 *For content related to this article*

[https://muse.jhu.edu/related\\_content?type=article&id=900435](https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=article&id=900435)

# HOW OPPOSITIONS FIGHT BACK

*Laura Gamboa*

*Laura Gamboa is assistant professor of political science at the University of Utah. She is the author of Resisting Backsliding: Opposition Strategies Against the Erosion of Democracy (2022).*

Global democracy has been in crisis for two decades. The “third wave” of democracy that began in the mid-1970s ushered in years of democratic expansion. But the number of electoral democracies in the world has been shrinking, dipping to its lowest point since 2002 last year. Between 2000 and 2022, the world saw more democratic breakdowns (41) than transitions to democracy (36).<sup>1</sup> The world has lost fifteen of the 86 democracies that existed at the start of the millennium. An authoritarian wave is reversing the gains made in the 1980s and 1990s. What can be done to stop it?

Most regime breakdowns today are different from those of the twentieth century. Behind the authoritarian wave are democratically elected leaders who use and abuse institutions and institutional reforms to undermine checks and balances, hinder free and fair elections, and thwart political rights and civil liberties. A wealth of literature has focused on the factors that propel these potential autocrats to power. What defenders of democracy can do once such leaders are in office, however, has received less attention.<sup>2</sup>

I have argued elsewhere that because the erosion of democracy happens over time, oppositions have ample opportunity to fight back. Which strategies they use (institutional versus extra-institutional) and for what ends (moderate versus radical) will play a major role in whether they succeed or fail in stopping a potential autocrat from undermining democracy.<sup>3</sup>

The end of the Cold War solidified a normative preference for democracy throughout much of the world, raising the costs of overt attempts to overturn democratic government. Blunt moves to shut down the legislature and courts in order to ram through desired policies, for example,

tend to generate strong opposition. In December 2022, Peruvian president Pedro Castillo tried to avoid impeachment by declaring a state of emergency, dissolving the legislature, and announcing a judicial reform. The response to his declaration was immediate. Domestic and international actors mobilized against the president's *autogolpe*. Minutes after his speech, the United States tweeted a condemnatory statement and the Organization of American States (OAS) called for a meeting of its Permanent Council.<sup>4</sup> Activists and politicians also condemned the move. By the end of the day Castillo had been impeached and arrested.

To avoid this kind of backlash, today's leaders willing to undermine democratic institutions are more likely than were their Cold War counterparts to think twice before attempting a coup or self-coup. They have learned that they can avoid this kind of backlash and maintain a democratic façade by undermining democracy gradually instead. Using legislation, referendums, and constitutional assemblies, they coopt or weaken institutions of horizontal accountability—courts, legislatures, and oversight agencies—with seemingly innocuous modifications that, when accumulated over time, end up degrading free and fair elections and transforming democracies into competitive authoritarian regimes: Elections proceed, but the opposition's uneven access to resources and the media, as well as the government's manipulation of electoral rules, makes it nearly impossible to defeat the incumbent. We have seen this in Hungary under Viktor Orbán and Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

## Stopping Democratic Backsliding

Slow-motion democratic breakdown is often thought of as an invisible, and hence formidable, enemy, but it can also be a blessing in disguise. Because the erosion of democracy happens gradually, opposition forces have ample time and opportunity to fight back. Whether they succeed at hindering the potential autocrat's ability to destroy their country's democracy depends greatly on the goals they set and how they go about achieving them. The wrong choices can prove costly.

What are the opposition's goals? Radical goals seek to unseat an executive before the end of his or her constitutional term. Moderate goals seek to prevent specific antidemocratic reforms, policies, or measures. To achieve these goals, the opposition can use institutional strategies, which rely on the legislature, the courts, or elections, or extra-institutional strategies that operate outside these channels. Individually, none of these goals or strategies is particularly consequential. Together, however, they can either hinder or help the executive's ability to erode democracy.

*Extra-institutional strategies with radical goals* are risky gambles that could inadvertently break democracy completely, further polarize society, and martyrize the executive. They bypass established channels

TABLE—OPPOSITION STRATEGIES AND GOALS

		GOALS	
		Moderate	Radical
STRATEGIES	Institutional	Electioneering Legislating Lobbying Litigation	Recall Referendum Presidential Impeachment
	Extra-Institutional	—	Coups Guerrilla Warfare Protests, Boycotts, Strikes

of conflict resolution and create zero-sum games, increasing autocrats' incentives to repress and lowering the costs of doing so. If successful, these tactics can fully stop a potential autocrat from eroding democracy. But if they fail, they will provide the executive with "legitimate" reasons to remove opposition members from office and to prosecute or jail them, while also creating a "rally 'round the flag" effect that generates enough popular support for the executive to push through aggressive antidemocratic institutional reforms that the opposition will be too weak to stop.

In Venezuela, the use of extra-institutional strategies by opponents of President Hugo Chávez (1999–2013) to achieve radical goals helped to erode democracy: Together, an April 2002 coup (which deposed Chávez for two days), an indefinite general strike in 2002–2003 aimed at pushing Chávez to resign, and an electoral boycott in 2005 intended to delegitimize the government gave the Venezuelan leader the perfect excuse to purge the armed forces and state oil company (PDVSA), guaranteed him full control over the National Assembly from 2006 to 2010, provided reasons to prosecute members of the opposition, and allowed him to push for more aggressive antidemocratic reforms, all without losing his democratic façade.

Chávez's tailor-made constitution, which made congress unicameral, increased the presidential term, allowed for immediate reelection, and increased the executive's hold over military promotions, passed in a December 1999 referendum, and the 2000 general election saw him reelected and gave his party a majority of seats in the National Assembly. Nonetheless, the anti-*chavista* coalition had several important resources, including allies in the armed forces and PDVSA, support in the courts and oversight agencies, and a third of the seats in the National Assembly. Moreover, throughout 2001, Chávez's polarizing discourse splintered the government's coalition and gave the opposition more legislative and judicial allies, the endorsement of the country's largest media outlets, and the ability to mobilize millions of Venezuelans.

Ultimately, however, the opposition's extra-institutional actions cost it most of these resources. The coup, indefinite strike, and electoral boy-

cott not only damaged the anti-*chavistas*'s democratic credentials but also allowed Chávez to take over the resources that his adversaries once controlled. The coup provided Chávez with a pretext and critical information for purging the armed forces. Similarly, he used the strike as an excuse to fire 60 percent of PDVSA's employees and replace them with loyalists. The electoral boycott had similar consequences. Chávez did not need an excuse to purge the legislature—the opposition gave him an almost total *chavista* National Assembly wrapped in a bow.

---

***Whether opposition forces succeed at hindering the potential autocrat's ability to destroy their country's democracy depends greatly on the goals they set and how they go about achieving them. The wrong choices can prove costly.***

---

In just six years, the once formidable Venezuelan opposition had become weak. Between 2006 and 2012, the government coopted the courts and oversight agencies, passed laws limiting press freedoms, and used the security apparatus to put down protests and repress opponents. In 2009, Chávez modified the constitution to allow for indefinite reelection. He ran for a third term in 2012 and won easily, at least in part by using and abusing state resources, manipulating electoral laws, and either coopting or shutting down independent media outlets that gave voice to the opposition. Venezuela's elections had been deemed free and fair through 2008. But no longer.

*Institutional strategies with moderate goals* are a safer bet. They recognize existing channels of conflict resolution and leave room to negotiate, safeguarding the opposition. Such strategies decrease a leader's incentives to repress and increase the costs of doing so. They deprive the potential autocrat of "legitimate" reasons to prosecute, jail, or remove opposition leaders from office or to push for more aggressive antidemocratic reforms. If successful, institutional strategies aimed at moderate goals can slow or stop democratic erosion. But even if they fail, the opposition will still live to fight another day.

This was the case in Colombia under President Alvaro Uribe (2002–10), a potential autocrat. Uribe introduced legislation to increase executive powers, undermine the courts and Congress, and coopt oversight agencies. The opposition used mostly moderate institutional and extra-institutional strategies to stop the president's power grabs. Although weaker than its Venezuelan counterpart, the anti-*uribista* coalition managed to protect its resources and eventually stop the erosion of democracy in Colombia.

The opposition to Uribe possessed fewer resources than did the anti-*chavistas*. It had some support in courts and oversight agencies, but no

The opposition to Uribe possessed fewer resources than did the anti-*chavistas*. It had some support in courts and oversight agencies, but no

allies in the armed forces or control of large media outlets. Although the anti-*uribista* coalition had roughly a third of the seats in Congress, it lacked the mobilization capacity of its Venezuelan counterpart. Considering Uribe's popularity and the weakness of Colombia's democracy after years of armed struggle, the prospects of keeping the country democratic seemed slim. Yet unlike the anti-*chavistas* in Venezuela, the Colombian opposition avoided radical extra-institutional strategies. By opting for a more moderate approach, it managed not only to protect its legitimacy and win allies but also to weaken Uribe's authoritarian reforms and prevent the cooptation of the judiciary and oversight agencies.

The opposition in Colombia went to great lengths to protect its democratic legitimacy. Not only was it quick to reject the radical extra-institutional strategies used by the guerrilla groups in the country, but it always used institutional discourse. The anti-*uribistas* wanted to stop Uribe's antidemocratic reforms, not to end his presidency. Thus, although the government tried, it failed to tarnish the opposition's reputation. Not only did Uribe's opponents protect their seats in Congress and expand their coalition, they also kept international allies who interceded in their favor more than once.

Rather than using extra-institutional means to achieve radical ends, the anti-*uribista* coalition adopted moderate institutional strategies to delay and obstruct government legislation. With a minority in Congress, the opposition used parliamentary procedures to delay, modify, and obstruct government bills. Most of the time these tactics could not stop a bill from passing, but they often succeeded in delaying and taming proposed measures. They also alerted Constitutional Court justices to what was happening so that they could more easily rule against dangerous reforms and measures such as a 2010 referendum to allow presidents to run for a third term.

*Extra-institutional strategies with moderate goals* are somewhat risky. Moderate extra-institutional strategies reduce the incentives to repress, but also the costs of doing so. Nonviolent protests, boycotts, or strikes, for example, that seek to stop antidemocratic reforms can help to protect democracy by mobilizing voters and exposing government abuses. But if they turn violent, a would-be autocrat will have an excuse to crack down on the opposition. Radical institutional strategies, meanwhile, increase both the incentives to repress and the costs of doing so. Tactics such as recall referendums and impeachments can stop democratic erosion, but they can also back the executive into a corner where more aggressive antidemocratic reforms seem like the best or even only way out.

The opposition to Uribe in Colombia found success with moderate extra-institutional strategies. In 2003, it used a boycott to defeat a constitutional referendum on measures including decreasing the size of both

houses of Congress and impeaching all its members. The legislature had reduced the original scope of the initiative and the Constitutional Court then narrowed it further, but it was the boycott campaign that finished off the referendum. Although most of its measures received yes votes, turnout was below the required level to become law.

Anti-*uribistas* also mobilized in support of institutions such as the Constitutional Court. During the Court's deliberations on the 2010 term-limit referendum, for example, the prodemocracy NGO Alianza Ciudadana por la Democracia staged a peaceful demonstration in front of the court building. Although the protesters clearly opposed the referendum, they did not advocate for or against the government. Instead, they used candles to "illuminate" the Court to make the right decision. Some Court justices suggested that these demonstrations helped them to feel comfortable ruling against a president as popular as Uribe.

Still, extra-institutional strategies with moderate goals are not without risk. Nonviolent protests require organization and training. Otherwise, they can easily turn violent, leaving open a window of opportunity for a savvy leader to delegitimize (and sometimes repress) the opposition.<sup>5</sup> This happened, for example, in the United States under Donald Trump (2017–21) when groups such as Antifa would commit violence during planned peaceful protests. Protest organizers did not invite or endorse Antifa or its tactics. But the Trump administration nonetheless repeatedly pointed to Antifa to discredit mass demonstrations opposing the administration's policies.

*Institutional strategies with radical goals* also carry a degree of risk. Recall referendums, for example, can be highly polarizing and may even backfire, as happened during Bolivia's 2008 referendum to recall President Evo Morales (2006–19). Not only did Morales survive, he emerged stronger than before. The recall attempt increased his incentives to repress opposition and created a "rally 'round the flag" effect that allowed him to secure ratification of the draft constitution under debate at the time. The 2004 referendum to recall Hugo Chávez, by contrast, was less harmful for the Venezuelan opposition. Although it failed to stop democracy from eroding—Chávez won handily with 59 percent of the vote—he was unable to leverage the referendum to crack down on opponents and increase his hold over state institutions (unlike after the 2002 coup, 2002–2003 strike, and 2005 electoral boycott). If anything, the referendum helped anti-*chavistas* to develop mobilization structures that they would later use to make inroads in the 2007, 2010, 2013, and 2015 elections.

As these examples show, when potential autocrats want to keep a democratic façade, institutional strategies with moderate goals are the safest bet for protecting democracy. They do not give the executive legitimate reason to retaliate against opposition leaders, nor do they generate popular support for more aggressive antidemocratic reforms. In contrast, extra-institutional strategies with radical goals risk producing

exactly such outcomes. Falling somewhere in between on the risk-reward spectrum are extra-institutional strategies with moderate goals and institutional strategies with radical goals. In some circumstances, they can protect democracy or even completely halt its erosion; in others, however, they can backfire.

## Oppositions Cannot Stand Alone

Clearly, the strategic choices of democratic oppositions make a difference. In Argentina under Carlos Menem (1989–99), Poland under the Law and Justice (PiS) party (2015–present), and the United States under Donald Trump, for example, the opposition's use of moderate institutional strategies as well as moderate extra-institutional or radical institutional strategies helped to stop or at least delay the erosion of democracy. Meanwhile, in Bolivia under Morales and in Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (2003–present), opponents' use of radical extra-institutional strategies, as well as moderate extra-institutional and radical institutional strategies, enabled both leaders to crack down on the opposition and implement aggressive antidemocratic reforms that transformed these democracies into competitive authoritarian regimes. This happened in Bolivia after departmental authorities in Pando violently suppressed pro-Morales demonstrators in 2008, and in Turkey after an attempted coup against Erdoğan in 2016.

Yet sometimes the strategies that seem to have the best odds of succeeding do not pan out. The opposition in Hungary and El Salvador, for example, have eschewed radical extra-institutional strategies in favor of mostly institutional and extra-institutional strategies with moderate goals such as litigation, electioneering, and peaceful demonstrations. The theory outlined above suggests that such efforts would impede or halt democratic erosion. Yet Hungary's Viktor Orbán (2010–present) and El Salvador's Nayib Bukele (2019–present) still managed to turn their countries into competitive authoritarian regimes. What happened?

The success of moderate extra-institutional strategies (and some radical institutional or moderate extra-institutional strategies) relies on potential autocrats' desire to maintain a veneer of democracy. They want to keep up democratic appearances in order to avoid penalties and censure from domestic and international supporters of democracy. This tends to keep them from overtly undermining democratic practices and institutions. Without such pressure, however, a potential autocrat will be more likely to attempt blatant power grabs, and oppositions will have less leverage to do anything about it.

***Domestic support for democracy.*** Citizens' normative support for democracy has been waning all over the world, as the system seems to be neither functioning well nor benefiting them. The response to power



grabs today is mediated by polarization, partisanship, and incumbency.<sup>6</sup> Of the roughly 55 countries that democratized between 1970 and 2000, only ten became high-quality democracies (with a V-Dem Liberal Democracy score of 0.8 or more). The rest remained stagnant. Low and midlevel democracies (with scores of 0.4 to 0.59 and 0.6 to 0.79, respectively) may have achieved minimally free and fair elections, universal suffrage, and civil rights and freedoms, but they failed to fully incorporate citizens into the political arena or to provide for them equally.

Inefficient democracies marred by inequality are perfect breeding grounds for leaders with hegemonic aspirations,<sup>7</sup> and they make democratic institutions easy prey. We often think of institutions as inherently weak or strong, and we assume that countries with longer histories of democratic rule are less likely to experience democratic breakdowns because they have stable institutions that are hard to dismantle or modify. But that is not necessarily so, as the case of Venezuela shows. By the time Hugo Chávez came to power, Venezuela was the second-oldest democracy in Latin America. In 1999, its legislature, courts, and oversight agencies had been in place for several decades. But Chávez was able to destroy them in just six years. Poland, by contrast, did not democratize until 1990, after half a century of authoritarian rule. Its democratic institutions had been in place for only 25 years when PiS came to power in 2015. Its government has been working to undermine democracy ever since, yet Poland has not yet become a competitive authoritarian regime.

No matter how old or stable, institutions cannot stand alone. They need citizens to defend them. But citizens will do so only if they trust those institutions. A case in point is President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's attempts to undermine Mexico's democracy. Since he became president in 2019, AMLO, as López Obrador is known, has used legislation and institutional reforms to coopt and undermine oversight agencies and reduce civilian control over the armed forces.<sup>8</sup> These moves have stirred little public opposition. Indifferent toward institutions such as the Human Rights Commission or Energy Regulation Commission (both of which were quickly coopted by government loyalists), Mexican citizens lacked meaningful incentives to mobilize en masse against the government's attempts to hobble these bodies.

The lack of resistance emboldened AMLO, and in 2022 he began targeting Mexico's National Electoral Institute (INE), introducing a reform that would effectively dismantle the body. The INE, however, enjoys strong citizen support. According to LAPOP's 2021 survey, 57 percent of Mexicans trust the INE "a lot" (between 5 and 7 on a scale of 1 to 7), making it the country's second most trusted institution. So far, they have been willing to protect it. Hundreds of thousands of citizens have flooded the streets to protest AMLO's moves against the electoral body. Although the nonviolent demonstrations—a moderate extra-institutional strategy—failed to stop the reform in Congress, they persuaded the

Supreme Court in May 2023 to rule against a popular president, as happened in Colombia in 2010.

Unfortunately, in some countries, it is rare for people to turn out in numbers to defend democratic institutions. In El Salvador, for example, President Bukele dismantled democracy in short order, with very little resistance. Since the country transitioned to democracy in the early 1990s, it had had one of Latin America's strongest two-party systems.<sup>9</sup> But neither of its two parties—the National Republican Alliance (ARENA) and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN)—ever adequately improved security or well-being in one of Latin America's most dangerous countries. The pact that created Salvadoran democracy produced a stagnant political class that was unresponsive to the plight of the people.<sup>10</sup> Mired in bureaucratic and partisan fights and high-level corruption scandals,<sup>11</sup> both ARENA and the FMLN failed to solve key problems of crime and inequality.

Salvadorans became visibly disenchanted with democracy. In 1998, five years after the transition, 80 percent of the people believed that democracy was better than any other form of government. By 2018, that number had dropped to just 30 percent.<sup>12</sup> Bukele took advantage of the democratic malaise, running as a maverick against both ARENA and the FMLN in the 2018 election. He won over better-known candidates from the establishment parties, despite having earlier shown authoritarian tendencies when he was mayor (as a member of the FMLN) of San Salvador. The people were willing to gamble democracy in order to get something done.

Weak normative support for democracy in El Salvador brought a potential autocrat to power, and it put the country's hard-won democratic institutions in peril. Once in office, Bukele immediately began his assault on democracy. In February 2020, the president, assisted by the police and army, muscled his way into the opposition-controlled Legislative Assembly to force a vote in his favor. In April, Bukele disregarded the orders of the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court and maintained his iron-fisted pandemic policies.<sup>13</sup> Then in May 2021, Bukele used his new legislative majority to dismiss the judges who had ruled against him and pack the Constitutional Chamber with allies. Throughout his presidency, he has defied court orders, used his powers of decree to curtail civil and political liberties, and attacked independent media outlets.

One might expect that such severe moves would have incited popular opposition to the president in a country so deeply scarred by decades of authoritarian rule. Yet none of these power grabs sparked the kind of massive domestic outcry seen in Mexico over the INE. Despite El Salvador's significant decline in democracy (it transformed from an electoral democracy into an electoral autocracy between 2019 and 2022, according to V-Dem's 2023 report), Bukele remains widely popular. His approval rating stood at 78 percent in 2021 and rose to 83 percent in

2022.<sup>14</sup> Although there have been protests criticizing his policies, few if any have gathered more than five-hundred people.<sup>15</sup>

Part of Bukele's support stems from his purported success in dealing with gang violence. In 2018—before he came to power—El Salvador was the second most violent country in Latin America, with a homicide rate of 51 per 100,000 inhabitants. In 2022, El Salvador became the fifth safest nation in the region, with a homicide rate of 7.8 per 100,000 inhabitants.<sup>16</sup> This achievement is the result of opaque negotiations with gangs and a never-ending state of emergency that has enabled Bukele to suspend civil and political rights and imprison citizens arbitrarily. These measures have not cost him popular support.<sup>17</sup> Disaffected with democracy, Salvadorans have become cynics. Why should they put themselves in danger to protect democratic institutions that have done little for them?

*Support for democracy abroad.* Foreign actors have also wavered in their normative support for democracy. The recent rise of leaders with hegemonic aspirations in advanced democracies such as the United States, plus the disruptions caused by the covid pandemic, has muted the international community's responses to attacks against democracy (particularly in the Americas). Not only have national governments and international and regional organizations ignored or minimized power grabs, they have also allowed authoritarian countries including Russia and China to gain leverage in weak and backsliding democracies.

The rapid erosion of El Salvador's democracy exemplifies this trend. In Europe, the breakneck pace of Hungary's democratic decline, which far preceded the pandemic, impelled the European Union to devise better responses to democratic backsliding.<sup>18</sup> In the Americas, by contrast, the international community has responded to authoritarian leaders with ambivalence. The United States and regional bodies such as the OAS have been extremely critical of left-wing dictators in Nicaragua and Venezuela. But ideological and domestic concerns have kept them quieter on Bukele and other right-wing authoritarians.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps the best example of this is the international community's response to Bukele's aforementioned occupation of the Legislative Assembly in 2021. The president, who had come to power without a legislative majority, wanted the body to approve a US\$109 million equipment loan in February 2020 as part of his Territorial Control Plan to fight organized crime. Lawmakers were so troubled over the lack of transparency about how the funds would be spent that they rejected the loan and suspended the special legislative session for considering the request. Bukele did not back down, calling for special weekend sessions. When legislators boycotted those sessions, Bukele summoned his supporters to protest in front of the Assembly and then strongarmed his way into the building accompanied by members of the armed forces. Like Castillo in Peru, Bukele was threatening a self-coup.

Whereas Castillo's move elicited international condemnation, however, the response to Bukele's threat was tepid. The EU and some national governments immediately called for both sides to "talk," while

---

*The efforts of opposition forces to fight democratic erosion may succeed in slowing or stopping a county's slide into autocracy. But they also carry the risk of backfiring and inadvertently bolstering a potential autocrat's ability to overturn democracy.*

---

emphasizing the importance of checks and balances.<sup>20</sup> But the United States and the OAS (which carry significant weight in the region) were less vocal. OAS secretary general Luis Almagro had telephoned El Salvador's foreign minister on the eve of the Assembly occupation. After the call, Almagro praised Bukele's security policies and reported that the foreign minister had expressed respect for democratic institutions.<sup>21</sup> The next day, the United States criticized the military's presence in the Assembly but urged "patience," echoing Bukele's own words.<sup>22</sup> OAS press releases were silent on the matter. There is no official record (at least

that is publicly available) of any attempt to assemble the OAS Permanent Council or invoke the Inter-American Democratic Charter, which have been common responses to quickly address authoritarian threats in Latin America, or to follow up with member-state leaders to diffuse the tensions that might have led to Bukele's show of force. Nor did the United States threaten to cut monetary aid to El Salvador. In fact, the U.S. Congress was sufficiently satisfied with the country's help curbing immigration that it renewed millions in aid just a few months later.<sup>23</sup>

The international silence was fatal for Salvadoran democracy. The United States holds heavy sway over El Salvador, and U.S. influence has been key to promoting regime change there in the past.<sup>24</sup> Together with the OAS, the Western superpower could have led a stronger response to Bukele's authoritarian maneuvers, and thereby lent a hand to the opposition, which had up to that point been trying to stem the erosion of democracy using institutional strategies with moderate goals—for example, trying to stop or rein in the president's authoritarian reforms via the Legislative Assembly (before 2021) or the Supreme Court. Instead, the anemic response of the United States and OAS did the opposite—it showed Bukele that he would face few if any consequences for dropping the democratic veil. This made it harder for the opposition to succeed using moderate institutional strategies.

The effectiveness of moderate institutional strategies (as well as that of some types of radical institutional and moderate extra-institutional strategies hinges on the assumption that executives will not jeopardize their democratic image with violent crackdowns or overt power grabs unless

they have a legitimate reason. But the international community's ambivalent response (and citizens' relative indifference) to Bukele's authoritarian behavior showed the potential autocrat that he did not need to appear democratic to keep domestic or international support. This emboldened him.

The covid pandemic exploded shortly after Bukele's invasion of the Legislative Assembly building. With the entire world focused on the health emergency, he pushed his authoritarian agenda forward largely unchecked. He declared a strict lockdown in 2020 that led to arbitrary detentions, retaliated against legislators by cutting their salaries, and overrode both the legislature and the courts to extend his powers of decree.<sup>25</sup>

It was not until December 2020, a year and a half after Bukele had come to power, that the United States began to push back against his creeping authoritarianism.<sup>26</sup> By then, however, it was too late. In February 2021, Bukele's New Ideas party won a legislative supermajority, which the government soon used to replace all magistrates of the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court (for ruling against the Ministry of Health's covid policies) and the attorney general (for alleged ties to the opposition). The Constitutional Chamber, now filled with Bukele allies, overturned El Salvador's ban on presidential reelection in September 2021. The United States and the OAS have expressed concern over these power grabs.<sup>27</sup> Yet there is little they can do about them now. As it stands, Bukele will be able to run for office in 2024—and, with control of the courts, legislature, and oversight agencies, he will likely win.

## What Are the Odds?

The efforts of opposition forces to fight democratic erosion may succeed in slowing or stopping a country's slide into autocracy. But they also carry the risk of backfiring and inadvertently bolstering a potential autocrat's ability to overturn democracy. The opposition's strategies and the goals that they are aiming for in part determine which outcome it will be. When a leader with authoritarian leanings still has incentives to appear democratic, that leader will be less likely to violently repress opponents or grab power outright without a "legitimate" reason. In such a context, extra-institutional strategies with radical goals, such as coup attempts or guerrilla warfare, are particularly dangerous gambles. They will likely delegitimize the opposition and provide a perfect excuse for the potential autocrat to punish opponents and institute more aggressive antidemocratic measures. Even certain extra-institutional strategies with moderate goals (such as large-scale street protests with the potential to turn violent) and institutional strategies with radical goals (such as an ill-planned recall referendum) run this risk.

In such circumstances, oppositions should instead consider using institutional strategies to achieve moderate goals. Seeking change through elections, legislation, lobbying, and litigation are far safer bets. Certain

extra-institutional strategies with moderate goals (such as nonviolent well-organized and well-planned street demonstrations) and institutional strategies with radical goals (such as well-organized recall referendums or impeachments) are also less risky. None of these gives potential autocrats a legitimate excuse to crack down on the opposition or to impose antidemocratic reforms. With such strategies, oppositions can buy time, protect their resources, and potentially defeat a budding autocrat.

The ability of the opposition to use these strategies successfully, however, depends largely on how strongly citizens and international partners prefer and are willing to defend democracy. Domestic disenchantment with democracy and international *Realpolitik* are an autocrat's allies, as El Salvador under Bukele illustrates. To overcome these hurdles, oppositions must look beyond the autocrat and acknowledge the context that propelled him or her to power in the first place.

Democratic oppositions often promise to return their country to how it was before the autocrat came to power. For many, however, those were days of despair and exclusion. One way to strengthen people's belief in and desire for democracy is to acknowledge that the past was not as good for everyone and to present citizens with credible alternatives. Doing so might engage new international partners that could make up for the apathy of formerly strong regional allies. Perhaps more important, though, it should help to overcome citizens' apathy toward democracy.

Salvadorans chose to support their president even as he coopted institutions, curtailed civil and political liberties, and governed by decree. And international partners, preoccupied with the pandemic and focused on domestic concerns such as immigration, turned a blind eye as Bukele repeatedly flouted democratic norms instead of using their leverage to stop him. Although worry about El Salvador's dying democracy has increased both inside and outside the country over the past year, this concern comes too late. The country has already become a competitive authoritarian regime. Fighting the autocrat will be significantly harder now. Let that be a lesson.

## NOTES

1. For the number of electoral democracies, see Michael Coppedge et al., "V-Dem Dataset V13," Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project, 2023. I classify transitions to democracy as instances in which a country achieved a V-Dem Electoral Democracy score of 0.5 or more for three consecutive years. I classify democratic breakdowns as instances in which a country's V-Dem Electoral Democracy score declined below 0.5 after three years of having a score of 0.5 or more.

2. Matthew R. Cleary and Aykut Öztürk, "When Does Backsliding Lead to Breakdown? Uncertainty and Opposition Strategies in Democracies at Risk," *Perspectives on Politics* (March 2022): 205–21; Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer, "Mainstream Parties in Crisis: Overcoming Polarization," *Journal of Democracy* 32 (January 2021): 6–21; Murat Somer, Jennifer L. McCoy, and Russell E. Luke, "Pernicious Polarization, Autocratization and Opposition Strategies," *Democratization* 28 (July 2021): 923–48.

3. Laura Gamboa, *Resisting Backsliding: Opposition Strategies Against the Erosion of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

4. U.S. Embassy in Peru (@USEMBASSYPERU), “Los Estados Unidos Rechazan Categóricamente Cualquier Acto Extraconstitucional Del Presidente Castillo Para Impedir Que El Congreso Cumpla Con Su Mandato,” Tweet, 7 December 2022, <https://twitter.com/USEMBASSYPERU/status/1600560167409442817>; Rafael Mathus Ruiz, “Amplia condena en Estados Unidos al fallido autogolpe de Pedro Castillo en Perú,” *La Nación*, 7 December 2022, [www.lanacion.com.ar/el-mundo/amplia-condena-en-estados-unidos-al-fallido-autogolpe-de-pedro-castillo-en-peru-nid07122022/](http://www.lanacion.com.ar/el-mundo/amplia-condena-en-estados-unidos-al-fallido-autogolpe-de-pedro-castillo-en-peru-nid07122022/).

5. Erica Chenoweth, “The Future of Nonviolent Resistance,” *Journal of Democracy* 31 (July 2020): 69–84.

6. On polarization, see Matthew H. Graham and Milan W. Svobik, “Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States,” *American Political Science Review* 114 (May 2020): 392–409. On partisanship, see Gabor Simonovits, Jennifer McCoy, and Levente Littvay, “Democratic Hypocrisy and Out-Group Threat: Explaining Citizen Support for Democratic Erosion,” *Journal of Politics* 84 (July 2022): 1806–11; Michael Albertus and Guy Grossman, “The Americas: When Do Voters Support Power Grabs?” *Journal of Democracy* 32 (April 2021): 116–31. On incumbency, see Wouter van der Brug et al., “Democratic Support, Populism, and the Incumbency Effect,” *Journal of Democracy* 32 (October 2021): 131–45.

7. Julio F. Carrión, *A Dynamic Theory of Populism in Power: The Andes in Comparative Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022); and Scott Mainwaring and Aníbal Pérez-Liñán, “Why Latin America’s Democracies Are Stuck,” *Journal of Democracy* 34 (January 2023): 156–70.

8. Denise Dresser, “Mexico’s Dying Democracy,” *Foreign Affairs*, 21 October 2022, [www.foreignaffairs.com/mexico/mexico-dying-democracy-amlo-toll-authoritarian-populism-denise-dresser](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/mexico/mexico-dying-democracy-amlo-toll-authoritarian-populism-denise-dresser).

9. Scott Mainwaring, “Party System Institutionalization in Contemporary Latin America,” in Scott Mainwaring, *Latin America Party Systems: Institutionalization, Decay and Collapse* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 34–70.

10. Manuel Meléndez-Sánchez, “Latin America Erupts: Millennial Authoritarianism in El Salvador,” *Journal of Democracy* 32 (July 2021): 19–32.

11. Ricardo Roque Baldovinos, “Nayib Bukele: Populismo e Implosión Democrática En El Salvador,” *Andamios* 18 (May 2021): 231–53.

12. Latinobarómetro, “Latinobarómetro: Opinión Pública de Latinoamérica,” 1998, 2020.

13. Carlos Dada, “‘Defending the Constitution Is Not Up to One Court. It’s the Collective Work of Citizens Committed to the Democratic Order.’” *El Faro* (San José), 18 April 2020.

14. Ipsos, “¿Qué Le Preocupa al Mundo?,” 27 April 2021, [www.ipsos.com/es-sv/que-le-preocupa-al-mundo-abril-2021](http://www.ipsos.com/es-sv/que-le-preocupa-al-mundo-abril-2021); and Ipsos, “¿Qué Le Preocupa al Mundo?” 25 October 2022, [www.ipsos.com/es-pa/que-le-preocupa-al-mundo-octubre-2022](http://www.ipsos.com/es-pa/que-le-preocupa-al-mundo-octubre-2022).

15. Between 2019 and 2022 there were 147 protests with reported size. Of those, only 21 had more than five-hundred participants. ACLED, “Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project,” 2022, <https://acleddata.com/>.

16. Chris Dalby and Camilo Carranza, “InSight Crime’s 2018 Homicide Round-Up,” InSight Crime blog, 22 January 2019, <https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/insight-crime-2018-homicide-roundup>; and Peter Appleby et al., “InSight Crime’s 2022 Homicide Round-Up,” InSight Crime blog, 8 February 2023, <https://insightcrime.org/news/insight-crime-2022-homicide-round-up>.

17. Óscar Martínez and Daniel Reyes, “Cronología Del Pacto Entre El Gobierno de Bukele y Las Pandillas,” *El Faro*, 18 January 2023; Bryan Avelar and Oscar Lopez, “El Salvador’s Leader Has Eroded Rights to Tackle Violence. Is It Working?,” *New York Times*, 7 December 2022, [www.nytimes.com/2022/12/07/world/americas/el-salvador-state-of-emergency-crime.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/07/world/americas/el-salvador-state-of-emergency-crime.html).

18. Antonia Baraggia and Matteo Bonelli, “Linking Money to Values: The New Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation and Its Constitutional Challenges,” *German Law Journal* 23 (March 2022): 131–56.

19. “Trump Administration and How Latin American Authoritarian Leaders Are Consolidating Power,” YouTube, 28 July 2020, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=lr8Rp0bK12Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lr8Rp0bK12Q).

20. Efrén Lemus, Óscar Martínez, and Carlos Martínez, “La Historia Detrás Del Día En Que Bukele Se Tomó La Asamblea Legislativa,” *El Faro*, 3 September 2020, [https://elfaro.net/es/202003/el\\_salvador/24110/La-historia-detras-del-d%C3%A1s-del-d%C3%ADa-en-que-Bukele-se-tom%C3%B3-la-Asamblea-Legislativa.htm?eType=EmailBlastContent&eId=baa187aa-ecad-48bd-a67b-9a16fac286c9](https://elfaro.net/es/202003/el_salvador/24110/La-historia-detras-del-d%C3%A1s-del-d%C3%ADa-en-que-Bukele-se-tom%C3%B3-la-Asamblea-Legislativa.htm?eType=EmailBlastContent&eId=baa187aa-ecad-48bd-a67b-9a16fac286c9).

21. Luis Almagro [@Almagro\_OEA2015], “Mantuve conversación telefónica con Canciller de #ElSalvador @CancillerAleHT. Expresó respeto del Gobierno de su país por Constitución e institucionalidad y reafirmó compromiso de Gobierno del Presidente @nayibbukele con políticas de seguridad q han arrojado positivos resultados,” Tweet, 9 February 2020, [https://twitter.com/Almagro\\_OEA2015/status/1226360243631927296](https://twitter.com/Almagro_OEA2015/status/1226360243631927296).

22. José Miguel Vivanco, “President Bukele, Brute Force Is Not the Way Forward for El Salvador,” *New York Times*, 14 February 2020, [www.nytimes.com/2020/02/14/opinion/bukele-el-salvador.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/14/opinion/bukele-el-salvador.html).

23. Héctor Silva Ávalos, “Trump and Central America: Less Democracy for Less Migration,” *El Faro*, 29 October 2020, <https://elfaro.net/en/202010/columnas/24941/Trump-and-Central-America-Less-Democracy-for-Less-Migration.htm>; Jaime Quintanilla, “Estados Unidos Regaló a Bukele Un Espaldarazo Para Su Primer Año de Gobierno,” *El Faro*, 1 June 2020, [www.elfaro.net/es/202006/el\\_salvador/24492/Estados-Unidos-regal%C3%B3-a-Bukele-un-espaldarazo-para-su-primer-a%C3%B1o-de-Gobierno.htm](http://www.elfaro.net/es/202006/el_salvador/24492/Estados-Unidos-regal%C3%B3-a-Bukele-un-espaldarazo-para-su-primer-a%C3%B1o-de-Gobierno.htm).

24. Scott Mainwaring and Aníbal Pérez-Liñán, *Democracies and Dictatorships in Latin America: Emergence, Survival, and Fall* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

25. Freedom House, “El Salvador: Freedom in the World 2021 Country Report,” 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/el-salvador/freedom-world/2021>.

26. Joshua Goodman, “US Cuts Military Aid to El Salvador amid Intense Lobbying,” Associated Press, 29 April 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-honduras-el-salvador-lobbying-nayib-bukele-c9c7813cbe556943b2f31faa8199d5cf>.

27. OAS, “Statement of the OAS General Secretariat on the Situation in El Salvador,” press release, 2 May 2021, [www.oas.org/en/media\\_center/press\\_release.asp?sCodigo=E-044/21](http://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=E-044/21).