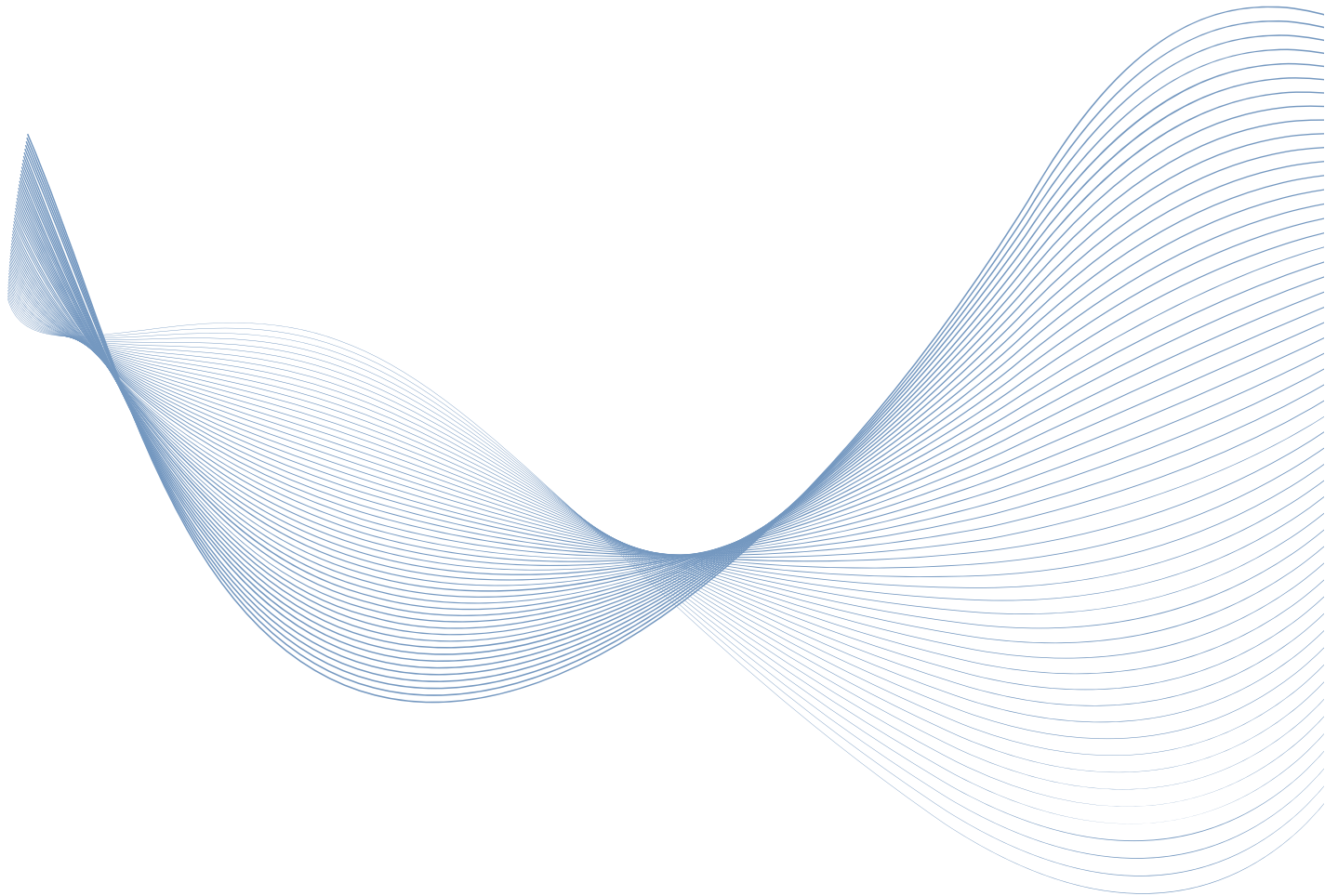

Democracy and Autocracy

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“Immigration, Authoritarianism, and Democracy”



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Editor's Introduction

Rebecca Wai, University of Michigan

With the increasing popularity of right-wing, nativist politics, one might think the regular movement of people across borders that our globalized system has long allowed—and even encouraged—might be a thing of the past. However, many developed countries must contend with the fact that immigration is necessary if they want their economies to continue growing. Over the past 30 years, Asia, Europe, and North America have all seen their immigrant populations double (International Organization for Migration 2024). Though some politicians and pundits foment fear and anger by repeating the narrative that immigrants steal jobs from natives, research has shown quite the opposite. Immigrants often fill low-paying jobs that natives are reluctant to take, which allows natives to take better jobs and invest in education and skill-upgrading (Constant & Massey 2006, Cattaneo et al. 2015).

Yet opposition to immigration is at an all-time high. A 2024 Gallup poll found that 55% of Americans surveyed would like to see immigration decrease (Jones 2024). Not since 2001 did immigration face higher opposition in the United States. Explanations in popular discourse can quickly descend into either racist and xenophobic stereotypes of immigrants, or condescending and simplistic accusations of selfishness among natives. However, scholars of migration know that the story is much more complicated. In my contribution to this newsletter, I discuss research that has repeatedly shown that economic concerns—rather than cultural ones—drive skepticism of increased immigration. Often people do not oppose immigration because of group threat or economic self-interest, but because they worry about the (especially initial) fiscal cost of taking in new populations who likely need welfare benefits. Questions about whether immigrants deserve welfare benefits are ubiquitous; these force governments to confront the “rights vs. numbers” trade-off, where they must decide whether to restrict the immigrants’ freedoms or their quantity.

When considering the welfare rights of immigrants, natives almost always find immigrants less deserving of welfare than other natives. However, if they believe that immigrants are reciprocal and committed to their new host country, it can overcome this “immigrant penalty” (Kootstra 2016, Garand et al. 2017, Reeskens & Van Der Meer 2019, Magni 2024). This is akin to the ‘liberal civic nationalism’ that scholars had long theorized was what made U.S. democracy resilient. Considering restrictions of immigrant rights forces Western democracies to confront head-on whether staying true to their liberal roots is possible in the face of increasingly popular nativist, right-wing forces. In

her contribution, Alexandra Filindra discusses how the U.S. might be shifting to an “ascriptive” nationalism, one based not on a commitment to liberal, democratic values but on identity markers like race (whiteness) and religion (Christianity). The rising and global appeal of ascriptive nationalism poses a fundamental challenge to the rights of immigrants. While civic nationalism permitted an inclusive conception of citizenship—one where new populations could be included in the national fabric as long as they showed their commitment to national values—ascriptive nationalism restricts belonging only to those who were born with the “right” characteristics.

While both Filindra and I consider how the growing appeal of authoritarianism affects the acceptance of immigrants in their host countries, Leydy Diossa-Jimenez explores how migrants can shape politics back home—in the authoritarian states that expelled them. Diossa-Jimenez writes about political exiles, communities that left their native countries not because they were on the political margins, but precisely because they engaged in opposition to autocrats. She traces the history of political violence in Argentina and Colombia to explain how widespread political repression in the former and targeted repression in latter led to different outcomes in exiles’ ability to advocate for democracy from abroad. Similarly, Kumar (forthcoming) details how internal male migration in India has afforded women more opportunities to be politically engaged. When men—who have traditionally acted as gatekeepers in politics—migrate for work, it frees up space for women in their villages to participate and petition for their interests. This reminds us not to think of the contexts that migrants leave as political deserts, but as fertile ground for new kinds of political mobilization.

Despite increasing public sympathy for authoritarian politicians who are restrictive on immigration policy, Katharine Natter cautions us about simply categorizing countries using the binaries of ‘democracy=liberal’ and ‘autocracy=illiberal.’ She convincingly argues that comparative theory-building must jettison the assumption that policymaking in autocracies and democracies is fundamentally different. Natter’s contribution is timely for American audiences as the current—democratically elected—administration repeatedly ignores court rulings that prevent them from implementing authoritarian, illiberal policies. Similarly, we should acknowledge that authoritarian regimes sometimes respond to pressure from international and civil society forces to expand migrant rights.

Like Natter, Adam Michael Auerbach, Tariq Thachil, and Volha Charnysh push back against attempts to simplify the politics of immigration in our book exchange. The authors of *Migrants and Machine Politics* and *Uprooted* challenge long-held assumptions, such as that diversity

is bad for development and that poor urban migrants in India lack influence over machine politics.

Charnysh makes a vital contribution to the debate on whether increasing immigration is good for economic development. She does this by bringing in the state and looking at the long-term effects of diversity, whereas scholars usually focus on the short-term effects. Uprooted examines the dramatic, but somewhat overlooked, post-World War II population transfers after the German and Polish borders were redrawn. Her examination of historical data shows areas receiving many migrants had lower public goods and service provision, mainly because of hostilities between new and host populations. However, because migrants had to rely on the state more than natives, this also led to greater state capacity in the long run.

Too often we think of immigrants as people who lack political power, especially because of hostile circumstances in the home and host countries. However, and much like Diossa-Jimenez, *Migrants and Machine Politics* brings immigrants’ agency and influence back into the story. Far from merely waiting to be “activated” by brokers during elections, Auerbach and Thachil show that in urban Indian slums where migrants reside, brokers must compete to prove themselves to voters. They do this through everyday problem-solving and advocacy for their constituents. Ethnic diversity is usually seen as an obstacle to collective political action. In India’s diverse slums, however, brokers cannot simply rely on shared ethnic identities to sidestep voter interests.

Governments frequently write immigration policy by starting from the belief that introducing new populations will destabilize society. However, the book exchange invites us to consider how immigrant populations—and the diversity they bring—can be a strength. Both books highlight open and inclusive political institutions as key conditions for realizing the benefits of immigration. Similarly, academics must engage in open and inclusive debate about immigration policy and mass attitudes informing it. As contributors to this newsletter show, people from across the political spectrum need to confront hard truths if we want policies that do not alienate voters’ concerns but are still compassionate to immigrants.

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Ascriptive Nationalism, Trump, and America's Democratic Crisis

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In November 2024, Donald Trump won the American presidency for a second time, the only president other than Grover Cleveland to have served two non-consecutive terms. Cleveland does not enjoy a great reputation among historians: he contributed to the consolidation of Jim Crow, tolerated machine corruption, and had a monarchical view of the office that included extensive use of executive privilege (Graff n.d.). The academic consensus is that Trump is much worse in these respects than Cleveland. The full consequences of the 2024 election for American democracy will not be known for several years. Experts warn that the US may be entering a period of “electoral autocracy,” a system of government in which elections are held but political opposition is weakened and ineffective, the press is muzzled, plutocrats use their wealth to control politicians and the public, and other democratic institutions such as the courts no longer perform their functions of checking the party in power (Hanson & Kopstein 2024; Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018; Pierson & Hacker 2020).

Many commentators treated the first Trump victory in 2016 as a fluke, the result of the Democratic candidate's weaknesses, and expected few lasting consequences from Trump's chaotic governance (Graham 2020, Lutz, 2024, cf., Moynihan 2022). The violence of January 6, 2021 strengthened the belief that Trump would be a one-term president, more likely to cross the gates of a federal penitentiary than those of the White House again. Yet in November 2024, 49.8% of those who voted pulled the lever for Trump, not Kamala Harris, the Democratic nominee, guaranteeing “The Apprentice” host a majority in the electoral college. This was the slimmest vote margin since the 2000 election, which was decided by the Supreme Court based on some 500 votes.

Trump's comeback was not the only surprise; the electoral coalition he assembled was also unusual for a Republican president. Specifically, Trump not only maintained strong support among white men (59%) and women (53%), but more than halved his deficit among Black voters (from 6% in 2016 to 16% in 2024) and Latinos (from 28% to 42%). Trump made inroads particularly among Black and Latino men: in 2016, 14% of Black men and 28% of Latino men voted for him, but in 2024, his support among these groups rose to 24% and 47%, respectively. Even in Dearborn, Michigan, a majority Middle Eastern town, 42% of the votes were cast for Trump (PBS.org 2024, Pew Research Center,

2018). This shift defied the GOP's historical struggle to attract voters of color.

If you asked most American politics experts in the mid-20th century, they would tell you that despite an uneven development, American democratic institutions are strong because America is characterized by a "civic culture." This culture reinforces the belief that anyone, regardless of their ascriptive traits—that is, characteristics they acquire at birth which are hard to change—is welcome in the American national community so long as they embrace the tenets of liberal individualism: they respect other people's rights, follow the laws, and work hard. In other words, one's race, gender, religion, language, sexual orientation, or lifestyle preferences are not what's important in making one a "true American." Their commitment to the principles of American liberal democracy is all that counts (Almond & Verba 2015 [1963]). If anything, mid-20th century critics complained that the American public was too supportive of liberalism behaving like liberal automatons, unwilling to consider any other idea (Hartz 1991 [1955]).

How did America transition from this ideal to nearly half of voters supporting a candidate who sought to be a "dictator for a day" and exact retribution on political opponents? To be sure, people offer many reasons for their voting choices. Surveys showed that the economy, foreign policy, national security, and many other things were on people's minds. One explanation lies in the rise of "ascriptive nationalism," an ideology that defines true American identity based on traits like Christianity, nativity, gun ownership, and adherence to traditional gender roles. Unlike studies that examine social identities and beliefs in isolation, I argue that these elements form an integrated ideological system (Baker et al. 2020, Buyuker et al. 2021, Fording & Schram 2020, Jardina 2019, Sides et al. 2019).

Where does "ascriptive nationalism" come from? Contemporary scholarship has documented that nation-states can be home to many co-existing conceptions of who belongs, the "imagined community." The conflict among these ideologies can be consequential for the survival of liberal democracy (Buyuker et al. 2023, Gessler & Wunsch 2024, Tudor & Slater 2021). Scholars of American political development have shown that the American political tradition has not consisted of a linear increase in support for political liberalism. Instead, it has been and continues to be a messy tableau of multiple ideologies whose centrality ebbs and flows over time (King & Smith 2013, Smith 1997, Smith & King 2024). Furthermore, historians have documented that ideas that link political membership and good citizenship with whiteness, masculinity, and Christianity have their origins in the Colonial and early Republic eras (Filindra 2023, Gross 2008, Higginbotham 1980, Morgan 1989).

In the United States, the "civic culture" is one way to think about who can make a true American, and it is indeed a powerful ideal. However, many Americans use other criteria to determine who belongs. Studies show that many people cherish a vision of American identity that combines whiteness, Christianity, nativity, wealth, masculinity, and violence-centered expressions of community, such as armed service and gun ownership (Filindra 2023, Schildkraut 2011). I call this nationalism "ascriptive" because it is based on the valorization of characteristics that are often considered "biological" and are difficult to change. These beliefs are not independent of each other but co-exist as part of an integrated vision of what it means to be an American. Even if people of color reject the whiteness dimension of this ideology, a commitment to other dimensions make them adherents to this political culture. Civic nationalism and ascriptive nationalism are negatively correlated which means that people who score high on one index are likely to score low on the other (Filindra 2023).

Earlier studies show that people who view American identity in ascriptive terms are more likely to hold exclusive and punitive immigration policy views (Schildkraut 2011), embrace undemocratic norms, and be at greater risk of radicalization into violence (Filindra 2023). And they are more likely to like and support Trump because he projects an aggressive, nativist, masculinist persona. What is more, this view of American identity is popular not only among whites but also people of color (Schildkraut 2007). I contend that Trump's emphasis on nativism, Christianity, and male dominance, as well as his campaign's attention to communities of color, drew in not just white Americans but many Black and Latino citizens who share an ascriptive view of American identity.

Measuring Ascriptive Nationalism

I fielded a daily cross-sectional survey between May 8 and November 4, 2024. A total of 13,000 people responded to the survey, including 3,800 people of color. Participants were asked the following question: "Next we will ask a few questions about what makes someone a true American. There are a lot of disagreements on this topic. We want to understand what you believe is important to have for a true American. For each of the following items, please specify if it should be extremely important, very important, somewhat important, slightly important, or not at all important in making someone a true American." The items included in the list were: 1) Being born in America; 2) Being Christian; 3) Having European ancestors; 4) Living in rural America; 5) Not relying on government to get by; 6) Serving in the military; 7) Owning and carrying firearms. A second question asked: "How important should each of the following be in making a woman a true American?" The items included: 1) Listening to her father or husband; 2) Staying at home to take care

of her children; 3) Appreciate all the things that her husband does for her. The final question was: “How important should each of the following be in making a man a true American?” The items here included: 1) Being the provider for his wife and children; 2) Being a manly man; 3) Being successful at work; 4) Never get upset but get even. A factor analysis shows that all items fall on a single factor dimension (eigenvalue=7.803) and therefore they are part of a single underlying construct. They also form a statistically reliable additive scale ($\alpha=0.936$). Not surprisingly, Republicans’ average score on the scale ($M=0.464$, $SD=0.240$) is a lot higher than Democrats’ average ($M=0.327$; $SD=0.273$). Consistent with earlier studies, the data suggest that on average, non-whites score higher on ascriptive nationalism ($M=0.410$, $SD=0.271$) than do whites ($M=0.372$, $SD=0.260$).

The Effects of Ascriptive Nationalism on the Electorate

Ascriptive nationalism influences affective polarization, vote preferences, and attitudes about democracy and political violence.¹ I specified a series of linear regression models that showed the following: First, among Democrats, ascriptive nationalism increases positive feelings towards the Republican party but not vice versa. Specifically, controlling for a variety of demographic predictors, a change from the lowest to the highest value on the ascriptive nationalism scale corresponds with a 32-percentage point increase on the Republican feeling thermometer. Similarly, ascriptive nationalism boosts empathy for Republicans among Democrats by 16 percentage points. However, among Republicans, the same change corresponds to an 8-percentage point decline on the Democratic feeling thermometer and has a negative but not statistically significant effect on feelings of partisan empathy. In other words, ascriptive nationalism can lead to stronger affinity for Republicans among Democrats but more dislike for Democrats among Republicans. This suggests that sorting from the Democratic to the Republican party may be taking place in part because of this stronger affinity for the GOP among Democrats who score high on ascriptive nationalism.

Second, ascriptive nationalism is associated with an increased likelihood of voting for Trump over Harris in 2024 by 23 percentage points.² Among whites, a change in ascriptive nationalism from the lowest to the highest value corresponds to a 22.5-percentage point increase in the likelihood of voting for Trump.

¹ I report results of linear regression models using weights and robust standard errors. The controls include gender, race, age, education, income, economic insecurity, Evangelicalism, ideology, partisanship, racial identity salience, and religious identity salience.

² The dependent variable is based on a 5-pt scale that ranged from “very likely to vote for Harris” to “very likely to vote for Trump.” The mid-point represents “unlikely to vote for either.”

Among people of color, the same change corresponds to a 28-percentage point increase in the likelihood of voting for Trump. In other words, this exclusionary view of American identity boosted support for Trump among people of color even more so than among whites where there were ceiling effects. By comparison, economic insecurity boosted support for Trump by 8 percentage points and conservatism increased the likelihood of voting for Trump by 12 percentage points. In my models, only partisanship had a stronger effect (85-percentage points) than ascriptive nationalism, which is to be expected. Among whites, white identity salience is not a significant predictor of vote choice once I account for ascriptive nationalism.

Third, ascriptive nationalism correlates with greater support for deeply undemocratic beliefs. Specifically, the survey asked: “How helpful or harmful would it be if U.S. presidents had absolute immunity from criminal prosecution?” and “How helpful or harmful would it be if U.S. presidents could work on the country’s problems without worrying so much about opposition from Congress or the courts?” (both on 6-point Likert scales). Taken together, these items tap into beliefs that a president can do no wrong and we should not have mechanisms to hold him accountable. Ascriptive nationalism is the strongest predictor of support for such beliefs. Specifically, respondents at the top end of the ascriptive nationalism scale were 57 percentage points more supportive of absolute immunity and 38 percentage points more supportive of the idea that presidents should not be subject to judicial oversight compared to those at the lowest end of the scale. By comparison, controlling for other demographics, strong Republicans are only 15 percentage points more likely than strong Democrats to believe absolute immunity is helpful and 5 percentage points more likely to believe that presidents should work without judicial oversight.

Finally, citizens who score high on ascriptive nationalism may be more at risk of violent radicalization. Scholars measure violent radicalization intent using a battery of questions that ask: “People are often very eager to support organizations that promote their group’s political and legal rights. How true or false is each of the following for you?” (6 percentage point true/false scale). The answers include: 1) I would continue to support an organization that fights for my group’s political and legal rights even if the organization sometimes resorts to violence; 2) I would continue to support an organization that fights for my group’s political and legal rights even if the organization kills people to protect the group; 3) I would attack members of the opposition if I saw them beating a member of my political group; 4) I would retaliate against members of a group that had attacked my group, even if it wasn’t certain that these were the guilty parties ($\alpha=0.842$) (Moskalenko & McCauley 2009, 2021).

Ascriptive nationalism is positively correlated with violent radicalization intent and a change from the lowest to the highest value of ascriptive republicanism corresponds to a 44-percentage point increase on the violent radicalization index. This is the strongest predictor of violent radicalization in the model. However, controlling for ascriptive nationalism, strong conservatives are 7 percentage points less likely than strong liberals to express violent radicalization intent and strong Republicans are 4 percentage points more likely than strong Democrats to do the same.

Conclusion

The first Trump Administration left its marks on the administrative state and on the tenor and substance of partisan politics where misinformation reigned (Moynihan 2022). The second Trump era may be far more consequential for American society and its political institutions. There is no doubt that Trump, through the installation of Elon Musk at the nebulous “Department of Government Efficiency,” has moved quickly to hollow out the administrative state, enabling closer links between plutocrats and political leaders via economic corruption (Hanson & Kopstein 2024, Pierson & Hacker 2020). Trump has also sought to weaken civil liberties and the rule of law by targeting activists, journalists, and lawyers, whom he views as “the enemy within.” Immigrants and refugees have also been targeted: not only has Trump moved to cancel the temporary protective status that allows people who hail from warzones to live and work in the United States, but he seeks to use the infamous Guantanamo Bay prison to house detained immigrants. Trump’s Department of Homeland Security is organizing immigration raids in major cities and seeking to use traffic enforcement camera feeds to identify targets for deportation.

Furthermore, Trump loyalists in the cabinet have used the trope of “eliminating waste” to initiate cuts in both civil rights protections and social welfare programs targeted at low-income children and families, military veterans, and senior citizens. In the name of eliminating DEI, the Department of Defense has deleted from its databases pictures of women and people of color who served with distinction. Even the “Enola Gay,” the plane that delivered the nuclear bomb in Japan in 1945, an attack that contributed to the end of World War II, has been deleted because “gay” is one of the keywords used to flag “DEI” content.

Trump’s electoral success was, in part, due to his appeals to ascriptive nationalism, which resonated with many Americans, including many people of color. These voters did not necessarily vote for the authoritarian restructuring of American democratic institutions. In that sense, elites, not the public, bear responsibility for the country’s democratic decline. However, the Trump elections have demonstrated the power of ascriptive

nationalism as a messaging strategy as well as the relative weakness of Democrats’ centrist, policy-based rhetoric. As Europe and the US are discovering, ascriptive nationalism has a deep appeal among many people and it is not easy to develop effective counter-messaging. Yet, democracy demands that we keep trying.

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Immigration Policy, a “Biomarker” for Political Regime Transformation?

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On 20 January 2025, the day of his inauguration as 47th President of the United States, Donald Trump signed a flurry of executive orders that threatened or abolished migrant rights. These included ordering the mass detention and deportation of undocumented migrants and announcing limitations to birthright citizenship, a constitutional guarantee (BBC 2025). Trump’s first term in office (2017–2021) was characterized by excessive use of executive lawmaking and disregard for minority and civil rights; this ushered in an episode of democratic decline that went hand in hand with migrant right violations and restrictions (Bolter et al. 2022, Hellmeier et al., 2021). The disregard for human rights, separation of powers, and rule of law in the first months of Trump’s second term indicate that it will be worse this time around, and not only for migrants (Levitsky & Way 2025). However, this link between authoritarian tendencies and immigration restrictions, while intuitive, is not deterministic. Neither is the link between democracy and immigration liberalization.

This essay reflects on the relationships among democracy, authoritarianism, and immigration policy, and specifically on what lessons these provide for the current political moment. My aim is to make three points: First, I underscore the need for and benefits of a truly global migration scholarship for both scientific advancement and societal action, especially in the context of rising nationalism and growing attacks on academic freedom. Second, I show that the relationship between regime type and immigration policy, being neither linear nor deterministic, is characterized by a set of potential “regime effects” scope conditions. Third, I argue that the burgeoning literature on comparative migration highlights more similarities in migration politics across political regimes and geographies than is often assumed. This creates new avenues for theory-building that helps make sense of migration policy dynamics and their link to geopolitical developments.

I end the essay by suggesting that immigration policies could be seen as a ‘biomarker,’ not for political regime type, but for political regime transformation. In the medical and natural sciences, biomarkers capture what is happening in an organism at a given moment in time and can indicate underlying systemic changes (e.g. disease progression or recovery), sometimes even before they fully manifest (Strimbu & Tavel 2010). By loosely applying this term to migration studies, I propose that immigration policies can serve as early indicators

of broader political regime transformations such as democratization or autocratization. Shifting our focus of analysis from regime type to regime transformation can help migration studies to move beyond dominant binary conceptual divides and to open up new questions with broader relevance for comparative politics.

The Need for a Global Perspective in a Nationalist World

There are many reasons why the majority of scholarship on immigration policy has traditionally focused on a few countries in North America and Western Europe. These reasons include historical global power inequalities and the political economy of knowledge production (Natter & Thirollet 2022). Fortunately, a critical shift has occurred in migration studies over the past two decades, one that defies this deeply engrained Western-centrism by decentering so-called “Western liberal democracies” and amplifying research on and from the Global South (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020, Levitt 2023). This not only remedied an empirical gap by expanding analyses to world regions where a significant proportion of migrants and refugees resides, but also revealed the limitations of dominant theoretical frameworks.

Notably, this research has challenged widespread assumptions about the relationship between migration policy and political regimes. One such assumption is that democracies inherently produce liberal migration policies due to institutional checks, liberal norms, and judicial oversight, while autocracies default to restrictions and violations of migrant rights (Freeman, 1995; Hampshire, 2013; Hollifield, 2004). As is discussed below, regimes across the democracy-autocracy spectrum face inherent trade-offs in their immigration policy, grappling with economic needs, geopolitical dependencies, cultural integration, human rights considerations, and security concerns. These lead to more similarities—in immigration politics, power dynamics, and governance tools—across regimes than one might expect. However, this empirical insight is still not fully integrated in theoretical frameworks that still tend to operate within the binaries of democracy/autocracy, Global North/Global South, and liberal/illiberal (Natter & Thirollet 2022). Another widespread assumption is that (immigration) policymaking in autocracies is driven by fundamentally different dynamics and thus requires a separate set of analytical tools. This also hinders comparative theory-building (van den Dool & Schlauffer 2024, Williamson & Magaloni 2020).

Overcoming binary worldviews and breaking the unidirectional transfer of theory from ‘North’ to ‘South,’ however, is necessary for both theoretical innovation and everyday politics. Conceptually, reciprocal comparisons that “view both sides of the comparison as ‘deviations’ when seen through the

expectations of the other, rather than leaving one as always the norm’ (Pomeranz 2000, 8) invite us to open our eyes to similarities where we do not expect them and to develop stronger theoretical explanations that are not blinded by prescribed world divisions. Politically, upholding such comparative, global scholarship is crucial, despite or in spite of the challenges posed by rising nationalism, attacks on academic freedom, and budget cuts. As Comaroff and Comaroff (2012, 114) wrote over a decade ago, “the so-called ‘Global South’...affords privileged insight into the workings of the world at large.” In today’s context of global democratic backsliding, studies of historical and contemporary immigration politics in authoritarian, “Global South” countries afford scholars working on so-called “Western liberal democracies” an analytical head start and can prevent civil society from losing precious time to develop evidence-based advocacy and resistance strategies.

How Political Regime Type Does (Not) Matter

Cross-regional comparisons of immigration policy, which are needed to gain systematic insights into the role of political regime type, continue to be a challenging endeavor. Indeed, information on immigration policy is notoriously fragmented, sometimes difficult to access, and constantly subject to change depending on the economic, diplomatic and political priorities of governments in power. In addition to in-depth case studies, scholars have therefore started to create datasets to track and analyze migration policies across time and space (de Haas et al. 2015, Solano & Huddleston 2021).

As part of this collective effort, Natter (2024) compared immigration reforms across over 40 democratic and autocratic states over the 20th and early 21st centuries, showing that their restrictiveness does not consistently differ by regime type. Instead, regardless of the political regime in place, restrictions in recent decades have focused on border controls, while entry and integration policies have been characterized by openings. These macro-level insights are confirmed by in-depth qualitative case studies from Europe, Latin America, and Africa, which show that democracy does not go hand in hand with liberal immigration policies. Conversely, autocracies do not exclusively resort to restrictive immigration policies (Betts 2021, Bigo & Tsoukala 2008, Fitzgerald & Cook-Martín 2014, Guild et al. 2009, Milner 2009, Natter 2023b).

To advance theory-building on immigration politics across political regimes, I developed a three-fold typology to specify the scope conditions for the assumed “regime effect” by distinguishing regime-specific from generic and issue-specific immigration policy processes (Natter 2018, 2023b). First, ‘generic’ policy processes are at play regardless of the regime in place or the policy issue at stake, as they emerge out of the very essence of policymaking and power dynamics in

modern states. For instance, despite wide variations in how states work on the ground, state actors are always internally fragmented and pursue potentially diverging interests, leading to discrepancies between policy discourses, policies-on-paper and implementation. Second, ‘issue-specific’ policy processes are present across regime types but are specific to immigration, being inherently linked to the effects of immigration on state sovereignty and institutional interest alignment. Bureaucratic dynamics are a case in point: Ministries of Interior in both democracies and autocracies are likely to follow a security-driven agenda on irregular migration, whereas Ministries of Health might be more sympathetic to opening services to undocumented migrants given the imperative of securing public health. Finally, ‘regime-specific’ policy processes are intrinsically tied to specific features of political regimes. For instance, the weight of legal actors in immigration policy is, by definition, more important in liberal democracies than in autocracies where judges are often not independent.

Zooming into these regime-specific dynamics allows us to better understand some counter-intuitive empirical observations in migration policy. In democracies, the notion of the “liberal paradox” (Hollifield 1992) has been advanced to capture the tension between governments’ commitments to economic and rights-based liberalism on the one hand, and the political pressures of national identity and security on the other. This paradox explains why democratic governments often tend to adopt restrictive rhetoric to satisfy electoral demands while still enacting liberal reforms in the background to align with economic and international imperatives.

In autocracies, leaders also must reconcile the diverging interests of economic and institutional actors. However, they are more independent from election cycles and public opinion, and thus paradoxically can enact open immigration reforms more easily than their democratic counterparts. What I have called the ‘illiberal paradox’ (Natter 2024) does not imply that autocracies do enact more liberal policies than democracies, but that autocracies can liberalize their immigration rules more easily than democracies if they so wish, that is, if it fits the broader economic goals, foreign policy agenda or domestic political priorities of the regime in place. For instance, in Morocco, the monarchy’s decision to enact a series of open immigration policies in the 2013–18 period served both a domestic and international function: the regularization of thousands of undocumented migrants aimed to signal a commitment to democracy and human rights at home while projecting an image of inclusivity abroad to bolster Morocco’s diplomatic relationships with sub-Saharan African countries (Natter 2023b). The relationship between regime type and immigration policy is thus neither linear nor deterministic, but reflects complex

trade-offs between various domestic and diplomatic agendas.

Shared Governance Tools, Shared Conceptual Tools?

Despite the impressive growth of global migration scholarship, concepts and analytical frameworks remain overwhelmingly rooted in empirical research on Europe and North America. Theory-building grounded in empirical studies on Africa, Asia or Latin America is still rare. Where it does exist, proposed concepts and theories tend to be mobilized for the study of immigration politics in other “Southern” regions, rather than travelling across the Global North/South divide (Bakewell & Jónsson 2013, Nawyn 2016). However, this is where a lot of analytical potential lies, as the three sets of studies discussed below showcase.

For instance, based on her empirical work on the Gulf states, Thiollet (2019) has developed the notion of ‘illiberal transnationalism’ to capture the fact that Gulf states, together with transnational private actors, have fostered regional integration through illiberal migration governance. This concept helps us analyze contemporaneous immigration policies enacted by democratically elected governments across the UK, Italy, and Denmark, which seem to have fostered a particular kind of European regional integration through migrant right violations (Basheska & Kochenov 2024, Fassi et al. 2023, Heusala et al. 2024). However, EU scholars have seemingly not yet integrated insights and concepts from the study of Gulf countries to make sense of these illiberal transnational dynamics in migration governance.

Another example for such theoretical cross-fertilization is my joint work with Kelsey Norman and Nora Stel (Natter et al. 2023). Rooted in our empirical research on Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan, Turkey, and Egypt, we proposed the notion of ‘strategic non-regulation’ to capture state practices to govern migrants through the absence of action as well as ad hoc, informal, or ambiguous actions (Natter 2023a, Norman 2020, Stel 2020). For instance, Lebanon’s ambiguous policies toward Syrian refugees create a grey zone where refugees lack legal clarity, allowing the state to exercise discretionary control while avoiding full accountability. Scholars working on migration policies across Europe have used similar conceptual tools to make sense of such dynamics on the ground (Davies et al. 2017, Heyer 2022, Oomen et al. 2021, Rozakou 2019). The use of deliberate inaction or ambiguity thus seems to enable states across regions and regime types to navigate competing interests while maintaining flexibility, outsourcing responsibilities, avoiding accountability, or suppressing collective action. However, there is little dialogue across these different literatures, leaving a lot of analytical potential around strategic non-regulation

as a central mechanism for migration governance worldwide untapped.

A third example of research that seeks to overcome binary world divisions is work around political practices and policy tools. For instance, I have argued that the dynamics captured by the liberal and illiberal paradox are not exclusive to their respective regime types (Natter 2024). Indeed, democracies also employ autocratic policy tools that bypass parliamentary or judicial oversight to implement controversial and sometimes even illegal measures. Across Europe and the Americas, for instance, executive orders or ministerial decrees have been common tools to circumvent discussions in parliament, among parties, or with the public (FitzGerald & Cook-Martin 2014, Halilovic 2024, Natter & Slingenberg forthcoming). Conversely, autocracies also need to secure their domestic and international legitimacy by taking into account economic lobbies or public opinion (Brooker 2014, Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003) and thus may face constraints in their migration policy choices. For instance, research has revealed the limited, yet real margin of maneuver of (transnational) civil society to lobby for migrants' rights in autocracies such as Morocco, Singapore, and Iran (Kemp & Kfir 2016, Moghadam & Jadali 2022, Üstübcici 2016). Also in Gulf countries, reforms of migrant labor policies were enacted in response to public opposition and/or international diplomatic pressures (Shin 2017, Thiollet 2015). Collectively, this research suggests that there might be more shared immigration policy dynamics and governance tools across political regimes and political geographies than often assumed, opening up new theoretical perspectives.

Quo Vadis? Focusing on Regime Transformation

To conclude, immigration policy is not a simple function of democracy or autocracy. Rather than focusing on static regime types to explain the dynamics of immigration policy, we should shift our focus to moments of regime transformation—when regimes (re)define their institutional set-up, national identity, social contract, and territorial sovereignty. Such a focus on dynamic regime transformation allows for a more nuanced and productive analysis of how immigration politics and political regimes co-produce each other (Natter & Thiollet 2022). Indeed, as migration has become more politicized, political elites across the globe increasingly mobilize migration policies to establish and maintain their legitimacy and authority. Conversely, political regime shifts often manifest first in policies targeting migrants or minorities—be it to demonstrate the exclusion of 'outsiders' or to signal commitments to human rights. Immigration policies could thus be seen as 'biomarkers' for broader political regime dynamics,

indicating underlying systemic changes sometimes even before they fully manifest.

Ultimately, disentangling and theorizing how immigration policies respond and/or contribute to regime transformations can help foster the multi-directional transfer of knowledge across political regimes and political geographies, thereby overcoming conceptual divides in the study of migration politics. It might also prove useful for civil society actors who operate in shifting political regime contexts and seek to develop advocacy and protection strategies, for both migrants and democracies.

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From Exile to Enfranchisement: The Unmaking of Authoritarianism from Abroad

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In recent years, as democratic backsliding and authoritarian resurgence have drawn renewed attention from social scientists, much of the focus has been on how migrants and refugees affect the politics of receiving states. Scholars have examined how autocrats and populists weaponize immigration, how diasporas reshape elections in host countries, and how exile communities can serve as both symbols and scapegoats in the democratic anxieties of their new homes (Wellman 2023, Umpierrez de Reguero et al. 2023). Yet less attention has been paid to a different and equally urgent question: how do migrants and refugees shape the politics of sending states? More specifically, how do emigrants expelled by authoritarian violence come to participate in—and sometimes propel—the re-democratization of the states that once forced them into exile?

This essay centers that question by offering a homeland-oriented perspective on the relationship between authoritarianism, political violence, and emigration. Drawing on my research on Latin America's first two cases of emigrant enfranchisement—Argentina and Colombia—I argue that exiles displaced by state violence are not merely victims of authoritarianism. They are often critical agents in its unmaking. In countries where political repression produces exile, it can also generate a form of politicized displacement that seeds transnational democratic engagement (Escobar 2007, Chaudhary & Moss 2019, FitzGerald 2008, Moss 2022, Shain 1989, Perez-Armendariz 2021). These exiles, who flee repression not as passive refugees but as politically targeted individuals and organizations, often return—literally or symbolically—as participants in rebuilding or contesting democratic institutions (Diossa-Jimenez 2024).

Rather than seeing the emigrant merely as a product of authoritarian overreach, my research reframes emigrants as path-dependent political actors, whose exile is shaped by the pattern of violence they experienced, and whose political engagement abroad can influence institutional reforms at home (Van Haute & Kernalegenn 2023, Escobar 2007). By comparing Argentina's military dictatorship in the 1970s and Colombia's violent democratization in the 1980s, I show how the form of politicized violence—widespread versus targeted—shapes both the opportunities for exile and the capacity of displaced communities to organize transnationally (Harff and Gurr 1988). These differences, in turn, help explain why and

how emigrant political rights were extended in both countries in 1991—despite stark contrasts in their trajectories (Lafleur 2015, Umpierrez de Reguero 2023).

At a time when many democracies are confronting both internal erosion and external displacement, these cases remind us that authoritarian violence, while destructive, can also generate new democratic capacities beyond the nation-state's borders (Arar & FitzGerald 2023, Blatter et al. 2022, FitzGerald 2008, Wellman 2023, Rodhes & Harutyunyan 2010). The challenge is recognizing—and supporting—the political agency that often begins in exile.

Politicide and Exile as a Mechanism of Democratic Re-entry

Authoritarian regimes do not merely expel; they target. Political exile is not just the story of people fleeing violence, but of people being deliberately forced out because of who they are and what they represent to the state. While political violence has long been studied as a “push factor” in migration, its long-term role in structuring emigrant politics remains under-theorized. To understand the relationship between authoritarianism, emigration, and democratization, we must first understand politicide—a specific form of violence that shapes not only the act of leaving but also the political afterlife of exile (Arias & Goldstein 2010, Blatter et al. 2022, Von Holdt 2014).

Politicide refers to state-sponsored mass killing aimed at eliminating members of opposition movements or political groups (Harff & Gurr 1988). Unlike genocide, which targets individuals based on ethnoracial identity, politicide focuses on real or perceived political affiliation. As Charles Tilly (2003) put it, it is a form of “violence as politics,” where the elimination of dissent is not collateral but strategic. In Latin America, politicide has been used to annihilate leftist parties, labor unions, student movements, and even moderate reformists, undermining democratic competition through repression (Umpierrez de Reguero et al. 2023, Ferris et al. 2020).

The significance of politicide for exile politics is twofold. First, it determines who leaves. Victims of politicide are often the politically engaged: activists, organizers, intellectuals and scholars, union leaders, and former violence specialists (Earl & Braithwaite 2022). Their departure is not incidental to their politics—it is constitutive of it. They leave not because they were marginal, but because they were central to contesting power. Second, politicide shapes how those who leave engage with the homeland. Exile is not simply geographic displacement—it is political rupture. Yet it can also become a space of political reconstitution (Alshaibi 2024). Exiles often retain a sharp sense of political identity, carry institutional knowledge, and,

crucially, may find in the host country more freedom to organize, advocate, and rebuild (Duquette–Rury 2020).

In this sense, exile may become a mechanism of democratic re-entry: a way for politically displaced actors to return, symbolically or materially, into the national political conversation. But not all exiles become political entrepreneurs. And not all forms of repression produce the same conditions for transnational mobilization. The nature of violence matters.

As I show in the cases of Argentina and Colombia, widespread politicide, as occurred under Argentina's military regime, produced a broad and visible exile community that coalesced around human rights and democracy advocacy. In contrast, targeted politicide, like that in Colombia's civilian regime, scattered opposition actors, suppressed organizing abroad, and obscured exiles as a category of political actors (Diossa-Jimenez 2024). These distinctions help explain why exile communities were more politically effective in one case than the other—and why their influence on democratic reform differed so starkly.

To study exile only as a story of loss is to overlook its generative potential. When political violence expels those most committed to change, it can also create the conditions for those changemakers to return—through exile, through memory, and through rights fought from across borders.

Argentina and Colombia in Comparative Perspective

Argentina and Colombia were the first two Latin American countries to extend extraterritorial political rights to their citizens abroad. In 1991, both countries granted emigrants the right to vote—an important symbolic and institutional gesture toward political inclusion (Palop-García & Pedroza 2019). Yet despite the shared timing, their pathways to emigrant enfranchisement could not be more different. A closer comparison reveals how the pattern of political violence—widespread versus targeted—shaped not only who was displaced but also whether and how those exiles could organize transnationally to influence democratization.

Argentina: Widespread Violence and Visible Exile

In Argentina, political violence during the military dictatorship (1976–1983) was systematic and expansive. The regime engaged in an orchestrated campaign to annihilate entire segments of political society, from militant organizations and union leaders to university students and moderate reformists (CONADEP 1984, Brysk 1994). The repression was widespread and indiscriminate across the political spectrum, targeting

not only leftist parties (such as the Communist Party), and the Peronist left, but also centrist members of the Unión Cívica Radical, (Calveiro 2005). The violence was not only lethal—it was public and spectacular in its reach, leaving little ambiguity about who was at risk and why.

This breadth of repression created a large, politically diverse exile community. Many of those forced abroad were already politically engaged and, once in exile, found common cause in advocating against the dictatorship. Key organizations emerged, such as Casa Argentina de Solidaridad (CAS), Comité Argentino de Solidaridad con el Pueblo Argentino (COSPA), and Comisión Argentina de Derechos Humanos (CADHU), especially in Mexico, France, and other sympathetic host countries. These exile networks became critical vehicles for international human rights advocacy, memory work, and the formation of democratic opposition abroad.

By the time Argentina returned to democracy in 1983, this exile community had established itself as both a symbol of resistance to state violence and a source of democratic legitimacy. Their return was not only physical but political: they brought back institutional memory, organizational skill, and demands for accountability (Keck & Sikkink 1998, Lastra 2016, Sikkink 2011). Although the initial post-transition period included authoritarian compromises—such as executive pardons for military officials—emigrant rights were eventually codified in 1991, part of a broader attempt to recognize those excluded and persecuted by the dictatorship. In this way, widespread politicicide created a transnational political force that shaped the direction of democratic reform.

Colombia: Targeted Violence and Suppressed Exile

Colombia's case presents a sharp contrast. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, political violence occurred within a civilian government widely regarded as democratic. However, democracy coexisted with deeply entrenched violence (Gutiérrez Sanín 2007). Rather than widespread repression, the Colombian state and allied paramilitary actors engaged in targeted politicicide, aimed primarily at emerging left-wing movements, including Unión Patriótica (UP), Nuevo Liberalismo, and Alianza Democrática M-19. Political leaders, candidates, and organizers were assassinated, threatened, or disappeared—but the violence remained selective (Kalyvas 2006).

This targeted repression produced an exile that was less visible, less organized, and more fragmented. Unlike Argentina, Colombia lacked a clear international narrative of violence, authoritarianism, and exile. Many exiled Colombians were not publicly recognized as such; they were framed as economic migrants or

as those who simply disappeared from the political landscape. As a result, few emigrant organizations emerged with the capacity or legitimacy to advocate for political rights. One exception was the Centro Cívico Colombiano in New York, which eventually supported calls for extraterritorial voting (Guarnizo & Sanchez 1998, Sanchez 2003). But overall, the Colombian exile community was politically demobilized.

And yet, Colombia still enacted emigrant political rights in 1991, largely due to the convergence of domestic political reforms and pressures for constitutional renewal. In the wake of failed peace processes and persistent civil conflict, the 1991 Constituent Assembly represented an opportunity to rebuild legitimacy through symbolic inclusion (Van Cott 2000). Emigrant rights became one part of that agenda. But in contrast to Argentina, where exile activism had helped force recognition, Colombia's reforms came from above, without strong emigrant demand—and were thus more fragile and less implemented in practice.

Taken together, these two cases underscore how the form and scope of political violence shapes not just migration, but also the political potential of exile. In Argentina, widespread repression produced a broad-based exile community that advocated for rights, returned with political leverage, and reshaped democratic institutions. In Colombia, targeted politicicide dispersed opposition, suppressed organizing, and limited the role of emigrants in democratic reform. While both countries adopted emigrant voting rights in 1991, the mechanisms—and meanings—of those reforms were fundamentally different.

Exile, in this light, is not a static identity but a political process shaped by state violence, international visibility, and organizational capacity. And democratization, far from being a linear or purely domestic transition, can be transnationally co-produced by those forced beyond the nation-state's borders.

Beyond Victimhood: Exiles as Political Entrepreneurs

The dominant image of migrants and refugees in global discourse is one of loss—of home, of safety, of voice. Political exiles, in particular, are often cast as victims of state repression, severed from the political life of the nation they left behind. While that suffering is real, it can obscure another crucial dimension of exile: that many who are forced to flee are not only political targets but also political actors (Alshaibi 2024). Their departure is not the end of their political engagement—it is, in many cases, its transnational transformation.

To understand the democratic potential of exile, we must shift from seeing exiles as passive casualties to recognizing them as political entrepreneurs—

individuals and organizations who carry with them the experience, networks, and skills to organize, advocate, and influence political change from abroad (Lafleur 2013). Particularly in cases of politicide, where those forced to flee are often former party leaders, union organizers, journalists, and activists, the political capital accumulated in the homeland becomes a resource for mobilization in exile.

Not all exiles mobilize, of course. The experience of violence, surveillance, and trauma can also produce demobilization, silence, and withdrawal. But among those who do engage, exile can create unique political opportunities. Exiles are often positioned within international solidarity networks, may have access to democratic institutions in their host countries, and frequently retain strong ties with oppositional movements in the homeland. In this way, exile can open space for what Yossi Shain (1989) called an “exile polity”—a political community operating across borders, capable of challenging or reimagining the national order from the outside.

Argentina’s experience offers clear examples. Organizations such as CAS, COSPA, and CADHU were not merely human rights groups; they were exile-run institutions that translated the dictatorship’s repression into international advocacy, public memory, and pressure for democratic accountability. They lobbied host governments, engaged international organizations, documented abuses, and supported returning exiles in rebuilding political parties and civic life (Lastra 2017). Their work reframed Argentina’s political crisis as not just a domestic tragedy but a global concern—and positioned exiles as witnesses and architects of democracy’s return.

In contrast, Colombian exiles—many of whom fled the assassination campaigns against Unión Patriótica and AD-M19—faced much steeper barriers. Their political organizations were weaker, less recognized, and often threatened by host-state apathy and home-state repression. The violence that targeted them was not publicly acknowledged, and the categories of “exile” and “refugee” were often denied to them altogether (Cepeda 2006, Dudley 2004). Still, some organizations, like the Centro Cívico Colombiano in New York, managed to navigate this political invisibility and advocate for emigrant voting rights. Their success, however limited, underscores the importance of political entrepreneurship under constraint—the ability to leverage slim resources, forge coalitions, and make claims on behalf of silenced constituencies (Cepeda 1993, Kayran & Erdilmen 2021).

These examples suggest that exile politics are shaped not only by who is forced out, but also by how violence structures political possibilities: who survives, who organizes, and who is heard (Harff and Gurr 1988).

The most active and effective exile entrepreneurs often emerge from networks that predated their displacement—former political parties, unions, student groups—and use exile to retool their activism for transnational terrain (FitzGerald 2008).

Moreover, exile is not simply a holding space between repression and return. It can become a new political space, where ideas are refined, alliances are formed, and demands are articulated that later shape the homeland’s political reconstruction (Sikkink 2011, Brysk 1994). In both Argentina and Colombia, exiles helped define what democratization would mean—not just in terms of elections, but in terms of accountability, memory, and inclusion.

By foregrounding these political actors—and the contexts in which they mobilize—we gain a clearer understanding of how democratic renewal is not only born within borders but often fought for from beyond them. In this way, exiles do not just carry the poison of authoritarianism; they also carry its antibodies.

Concluding Thoughts

In an era marked by rising authoritarianism and mass displacement, it is easy to view migration as a symptom of democratic failure. But as this essay has argued, exile can also be a site of democratic renewal. When authoritarian regimes engage in politicide—using violence to eliminate political opposition—they do not merely silence dissent. They often propel it across borders, where it can regroup, reorganize, and re-enter the national sphere through transnational advocacy, memory work, and claims for political rights.

By comparing Argentina and Colombia—the first two Latin American countries to recognize emigrant voting rights—my research shows how variations in political violence shape the pathways from forced displacement to democratic influence. In Argentina, widespread repression produced a large, visible exile community that became instrumental in documenting abuses and demanding democratic reforms. In Colombia, targeted violence dispersed and suppressed political opponents, limiting the emergence of strong exile networks. And yet, even in the face of political invisibility and limited institutional support, some Colombian exiles managed to claim political space—offering a quieter, but no less important, example of exile as democratic persistence.

This sending-state-centric perspective complements existing scholarship on migration and democracy by shifting the analytical lens from host countries to homelands. Rather than focusing only on how emigrants adapt or integrate into their new societies, we must also ask how their displacement—and the violence that triggered it—shapes their political engagement with the country they left behind.

Doing so allows us to see exiles not just as victims of authoritarianism, but as agents in the struggle for democracy.

This perspective is especially timely. Across the world, from Venezuela to Myanmar to Russia, authoritarian regimes are forcing political opponents into exile. Understanding the long-term political consequences of these expulsions—how exiles organize, mobilize, and return (symbolically or materially)—is critical for scholars and policymakers alike. Exile politics are not a relic of the Cold War but a central feature of contemporary global politics.

Argentina and Colombia teach us that democracy does not only return through elections or institutions—it often returns through memory, pressure, and mobilization from abroad. Political violence creates ruptures, but it also sets in motion new forms of transnational political life.

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Numbers or Rights? A Perpetual Dilemma of Immigration Policy

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Immigration policy has become more restrictive as political parties across the world increasingly shift to the right. This dynamic is often spearheaded by nativist far-right politicians, who win office by appealing to anti-immigrant sentiment (Howard 2006). This puts governments in developed countries in a bind: while voter sentiment must be acknowledged, at least some immigration is necessary for their economies to grow—especially as birth rates drop and jobs across the skills spectrum need to be filled.

Governments generally implement restrictions that fall into two broad categories: 1) restrictions of immigrant *rights*, to reduce the fiscal burden of those who are already in the country, or 2) restrictions of the *number* of immigrants who are allowed to enter in the first place (Ruhs 2013). However, there is a trade-off between these two types of restrictions. If governments restrict rights, the number of high-skilled immigrants who find emigration attractive will drop. But if governments expand rights, the fiscal cost of supporting low-skilled immigrants increases; in turn, this reduces the number of low-skilled immigrants that countries can sustain before it becomes economically unpopular (Ruhs & Martin 2008).

This “rights vs. numbers” trade-off has challenged governments for decades. Traditionally, Western democracies insist that rights are inviolable. For example, countries in the E.U. experienced an elite-led liberalization of immigration policy up until the 2000s. While this has since stagnated, many scholars still believe that “shared normative commitments” will prompt continued liberalization (Koopmans et al. 2012). Yet Western governments have increasingly engaged in the retrenchment of rights, especially when right-wing parties mobilize anti-immigration sentiment (Howard 2006).

Many politicians assume that their constituents want restrictions on both the rights and number of immigrants. However, recent research on public attitudes towards immigration policies has begun to disentangle (1) attitudes towards admission policies regulating the number of immigrants that are allowed into the country, and (2) welfare policies regulating the rights that immigrants are entitled to once they are in the country (Margalit & Solodoch 2022, Helbling et al. 2024). Researchers often assume that voters are most uncompromising on the numbers dimension, as it is seen as the clearest way to measure the changes that

migration brings to society. However, recent studies have found that people across the board were willing to compromise on numbers if it meant another dimension of immigration policy could be changed. Notably, pro-immigration respondents were willing to accept lower numbers if immigrant rights were improved, while anti-immigration respondents were willing to accept higher numbers if admission requirements were more selective (Helbling et al. 2024). Kustov (2024) confirms this, finding that pro-immigration voters prioritized issues that affected immigrants already in the country, rather than issues that affected immigrants trying to enter the country. Rather than the absolute number of immigrants, people care more about the kinds of immigrants—and the ways those immigrants live—in their countries.

The argument for reducing rights hinges on the belief that immigrants—specifically low-skilled immigrants—benefit more from public goods and services than they contribute to the economy. This belief in the fiscal burden of immigrants is commonly thought to be the reason for what scholars call the “immigration consensus,” where natives of all skill levels prefer high-skilled immigrants (Hainmueller & Hiscox 2010, Hainmueller & Hopkins 2015). Despite what one might read in popular discourse, immigration preferences are not driven by the threat of “immigrants stealing jobs.” Instead, people are motivated by ‘sociotropic’ reasoning (e.g., questions of the form “what is good for our country?”) when considering immigration policy (Hainmueller & Hopkins 2014).

The aversion to low-skilled immigrants is undoubtedly linked to skepticism about how deserving immigrants are of welfare. Researchers have also reached a consensus that natives place an “immigrant penalty” when deciding who merits welfare (Kootstra 2016, Garand et al. 2017, Reeskens & Van Der Meer 2019, Magni 2024). The only factor that can help immigrants overcome the penalty is a long work history, which “provides evidence of reciprocity through past contributions” (Magni 2024, 72). Even then, the results are mixed, and an immigrant’s negative work history is punished more harshly than that of a native (Kootstra 2016, Reeskens & Van Der Meer 2019).

Along the lines of this sociotropic consensus, Cavaillé (2023) finds that when it comes to support for redistributive policies, fairness considerations about the status quo come first and economic self-interest comes second. People are primarily focused on policies that move the status quo towards what they believe is fair. At the lower end of the income bracket (where low-skilled immigrants are most likely to sit), people reason according to a ‘reciprocity norm,’ which asks, “How fair is it for some to receive more benefits than they pay in taxes?” (Cavaillé 2023). When it comes to immigration policy, only when immigrants prove themselves to be “cooperators”—contributing to society via high skills or

a long work history—are they seen as deserving of their place in the host country.

Following Kustov (2025), most people are “altruistic nationalists,” meaning they would support immigration if they were convinced that it benefitted them and their co-nationals. And indeed, research has shown that in a wide range of cases, when people see the benefits of new populations—from wealthy Chinese immigrants in the United States to refugees in Uganda bringing in aid—they become more pro-immigration (Lahdelma 2023, Baseler et al. 2025, Liao et al. 2020).

While we cannot ignore that anti-immigration attitudes are sometimes due to ethnocentrism and racist beliefs (Garand et al. 2017, Newman & Malhotra 2019), scholars have shown that people are mostly concerned about the economic effects of immigration, rather than cultural effects (Aviña et al. 2025). Although Newman and Malhotra (2019) convincingly show that in the US, prevailing attitudes reflect anti-Hispanic sentiment, preferences for high-skill immigrants remain even when they are from culturally dissimilar backgrounds (Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2015). Similarly, when welfare is concerned, immigrants from culturally similar backgrounds are seen as equally undeserving of welfare as those who are culturally dissimilar (Kootstra 2016, Magni 2024).

With all the public opposition to immigrants receiving welfare benefits, should countries restrict the number of low-skilled immigrants and their rights, and favor high-skilled immigrants who are less likely to depend on welfare? In an upcoming project, Charlotte Cavaillé and I investigate this using the case of Singapore, where immigration policy is aligned with the public’s supposed preferences. Singapore does not grant immigrants welfare benefits and gives low-skilled immigrants almost no rights beyond basic labor rights. However, this does not seem to have satisfied the public. Though Singapore is an autocracy with restricted civic space, there has been increasing advocacy for the rights of low-skilled immigrants (Bal 2015, Yeoh et al. 2022). High-skilled immigration has also faced public backlash, calling into question whether the “immigration consensus” is really a consensus.

Many autocracies and non-Western democracies that do not have the same history of liberal norms choose to restrict immigrant rights in favor of accepting much-needed low-skilled immigrants. Politicians in Western democracies have increasingly advocated for this approach. With rising animosity towards immigrants, one might think that the public would easily agree to restrict rights instead of the number of immigrants. But will citizens of Western democracies in fact choose to give up their liberal ideals? While the reciprocity norm makes natives skeptical about immigrants, it might also push them to commit to their liberal ideals

of providing comprehensive rights to immigrants, regardless of their skill level. When investigating whether opposition to immigration is about the stock or flow of immigrants, one study found that people are generally opposed to deportations because they feel a sense of moral obligation to those already in the country (Margalit & Solodoch 2022). This suggests that governments should anticipate a public outcry if they want to rescind immigrant rights. It also has implications for the current U.S. administration, which has increased deportations to an eye-wateringly high and questionably legal degree.

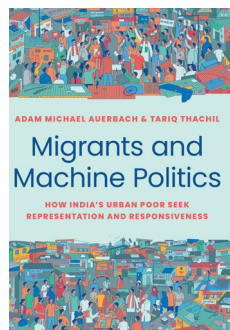
The liberalization of immigration policy was elite-driven and then hamstrung by the mobilization of anti-immigrant public opinion. Does this mean that elite-driven immigration restriction could also be stopped by public opinion? Governments might have taken it a step too far when trying to deport legal residents without just cause. Widespread protests against the deportation of legal permanent residents and visa holders show that when restrictions are taken to the extreme, it can activate and boost the otherwise tepid support for immigrant rights. However, it is too early to tell whether public backlash is strong enough to reverse the retrenchment of immigrant rights, especially in the face of right-wing parties ideologically committed to nativism. Even if the pendulum swings back in a liberal direction, immigration proponents cannot avoid the “rights vs. numbers” trade-off. Those who advocate for a more liberal admissions policy must contend with question of whether countries have the resources to support and integrate new populations without triggering a popular backlash. Meanwhile, those who advocate for expanding the rights of immigrants already in the country must accept the trade-off that this will increase public opposition to immigrants coming in at all.

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Author Exchange



Migrants and Machine Politics: How India's Urban Poor Seek Representation and Responsiveness.
By Adam Michael Auerbach and Tariq Thachil. Princeton University Press, 2023. 288p. Paperback.

Review by Volha Charnysh,
Associate Professor of Political
Science, Massachusetts Institute of
Technology.

Migrants and Machine Politics examines how claim-making unfolds in India's urban slums. Drawing on multiple years of ethnographic fieldwork, hundreds of interviews, and large-scale surveys in two Indian cities, Bhopal and Jaipur, the authors offer a ground-up view of how political machines operate in a democratic context. The result is a tour de force that advances our understanding of the processes through which the poor rural migrants are incorporated into the growing cities of the Global South.

Auerbach and Thachil challenge four longstanding assumptions about machine politics: that the urban poor are pawns of local strongmen and their brokers; that parties select brokers solely for their ability to monitor votes and rely on shared ethnic identities to build loyalty and distribute benefits; and that broker-voter-party interactions are confined to election periods. Instead, the authors show that machine politics in India's cities is marked by intense competition, with slum residents actively selecting brokers from within their communities and, to a meaningful extent, compelling brokers and party organizations to respond to their needs. Crucially, most broker-voter interactions center on everyday problem-solving and occur between elections. Beyond these theoretical contributions, the book stands out for its rich ethnographic detail, offering readers a vivid sense of the texture of daily life in urban slums. Each conclusion is supported by multiple forms of evidence, making the book a valuable resource and a high benchmark for scholars working in developing country contexts.

The book is organized around four key decision points at which slum residents (clients), slum leaders (brokers), and politicians (patrons) select one another. First, Auerbach and Thachil demonstrate that brokers arise through a surprisingly meritocratic, bottom-up process in which effectiveness in addressing everyday community needs outweighs ethnic or partisan loyalties. As a result, individuals with higher levels of education or bureaucratic know-how are more likely to be chosen, since these traits enhance their capacity to assist residents. Broker authority, however,

is precarious: continued performance is essential to maintaining influence. The second decision point explores how brokers choose whom to help. Rather than targeting residents whose votes are easiest to monitor, brokers prioritize requests that bolster their personal reputations within the community. Turning to the broker-patron interaction, Auerbach and Thachil argue that joining party organizations enhances brokers' ability to serve their followers. Drawing on interviews and original survey data, they show that party patrons reward brokers who exhibit partisan loyalty and possess higher education levels—patterns consistent across both Congress and the BJP, despite their ideological differences. Finally, the authors use a petition experiment to analyze how patrons decide which brokered requests to fulfill. They find that patrons prioritize cases that offer opportunities for credit-claiming, favoring the delivery of durable, visible public goods and targeting more populous slums to maximize political returns.

The result of these multi-level selection processes is an equilibrium in which slum residents are able to participate in the democratic system, securing “representation and accountability” (21) despite their precarious economic status and limited formal education. Yet, this raises a deeper question: is this ultimately a welfare-enhancing equilibrium? To what extent do brokers actually reduce inequalities in political access between slum residents and the broader urban population? After all, residents remain confined to informal settlements, disconnected from other urban constituencies, and continue to lack basic services, while state institutions remain largely unresponsive. Moreover, the distribution of political attention within slums is itself unequal: those most in need—particularly recent migrants and women with limited social networks—often receive the least support. The virtuous cycle of responsiveness that the authors describe may also break down at several points: brokers' loyalty to patrons can undermine their accountability to residents, and educated brokers may exploit their informational advantages to extract rents, among other risks. Auerbach and Thachil are admirably candid about these limitations, which remain important to consider in light of the book's broader argument that the urban poor possess more agency and political access than previously recognized.

High levels of political competition appear crucial for ensuring that political machines benefit voters: slum leaders who fail to address residents' needs risk losing their reputations and being replaced by more capable brokers, while party patrons vie for the support of the most influential intermediaries. In this context, reputations for effectiveness and responsiveness become vital assets, generating strong incentives for brokers and patrons to perform. A promising avenue for future research is to explore how the social composition of slums—along dimensions such as religion, ethnicity,

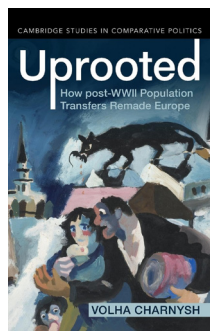
migration status, and urban–rural linkages—shapes the intensity of political competition and the incentive structures governing broker and patron behavior. How might these dynamics differ in more ethnically homogeneous, spatially dispersed, or long-established settlements?

Response from Adam Auerbach and Tariq Thachil

We are so grateful to have a scholar we deeply respect comment on our book. We are especially thankful for Charnysh's appreciation of our effort to show how poor urban communities wield the forces of democratic competition to actively shape and demand accountability from the political machines that govern them. We hope our book complicates the common portrayal of these communities as the passive targets of wily politicians.

A corrective, however, should not veer into overstatement. Charnysh raises an important question: to what degree does the responsiveness and representation we document improve the lives of slum residents in India? Indeed, our own evidence finds important limitations to such accountability. For example, slum residents cannot replicate their success in securing local public goods – streetlights or paved roads– when seeking property rights. Nearly 90% of households lack titles, their highest priority, even after decades of living in the city. Politicians in the city appear to have few incentives to formalize slums, thereby blunting the precarity that fuels machine politics. The inability of slum residents to create such incentives points to a further limitation: the lack of coordinated collective action across settlements to advance shared interests. Instead, the impressive mobilization we document remains compartmentalized within each slum, entrenching a fractured, piecemeal politics.

That said, we also caution against assuming the demise of the machine politics we describe would necessarily signal a salutary change for the urban poor. Scholars often implicitly assume the alternative to distributive machine politics is a redistributive programmatic system. Yet we note that in contexts like urban India, the alternative could easily be a pro-rich or middle-class programmatic politics, or perhaps even an elitist predatory politics centered around facilitating regulatory evasion and profiteering by the wealthy. Indeed, in India's highly unequal urban economy (hardly unique to the subcontinent), such alternatives appear not only possible, but even likely. A recognition of the real limits of machine politics must therefore also grapple with these uncertainties regarding its alternatives.



Uprooted: How post-WWII Population Transfers Remade Europe. By Volha Charnysh. Cambridge University Press, 2024. 342p. Hardback.

Review by Adam Michael Auerbach, Associate Professor Johns Hopkins School of International Studies, and Tariq Thachil, Professor, Madan Lal Sobti Chair for the Study of Contemporary India, University of

Pennsylvania.

Following the Second World War, the borders of Germany and Poland were significantly redrawn. Roughly one-fifth of each country's population was transferred to the other, in an effort by the Allies to create more socially homogeneous nation-states. In *Uprooted: How Post-WWII Population Transfers Remade Europe*, Volha Charnysh masterfully explains how these dramatic population transfers produced varying degrees of social diversity across towns in West Germany and Poland, with immediate and long-term consequences for collective action and development. Charnysh marshals an impressive array of historical data—archival data and Polish- and German-language documents like diaries, memoirs, and newspapers—to assess the social and economic impact of the arrival of displaced migrants on their new hometowns.

The findings of the book are nuanced and important. Despite shared German or Polish ancestry, social differences—dialects, dress, customs—between natives and their new migrant neighbors became politically salient. As a consequence, those towns with higher numbers of migrants were less likely to produce public goods like fire brigades, as local collective capacity buckled under the weight of social heterogeneity. Surprisingly, though, such diversity would become a boon to the construction of state capacity over time—diverse communities had a harder time providing local public goods for themselves, and so they turned to the state for public services, deepening state capacity in the long run.

Charnysh further finds that those communities with higher levels of social diversity experienced faster economic development in the presence of inclusive political institutions. This occurred sooner in West Germany, following the post-War introduction of democracy and economic liberalization. It unfolded later in Poland, after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Charnysh thus documents how and why diversity can be positively linked to state capacity and economic growth. Convincingly, Charnysh traces how the geographic destination of migrants across towns was largely arbitrary, strengthening the book's causal claims.

Uprooted should powerfully reshape debates on social diversity and development. The book encourages scholars to take the state more seriously in understanding how social diversity influences public goods provision. Studies on ethnic diversity typically fixate on intra-community dynamics of collective action, with little theoretical or empirical engagement with the larger state institutions in which such collective action unfolds. Diversity, Charnysh shows, can fundamentally shape state capacity, and it can spur economic development depending on the quality of state institutions. *Uprooted* further pushes scholars to take time more seriously. Studies in the literature often rely on cross-sectional data to assess the association between diversity and development, ignoring the longer-term interplay between citizen mobilization and the strength of state institutions.

The themes that animate *Uprooted* resonate widely in the contemporary world, where large numbers of people have been displaced due to conflict and environmental disasters. That said, one area of the book that could have been expanded surrounds the cases to which its lessons travel. The conclusion's discussion of three instances of massive political uprooting—during the Greco-Turkish War of 1919–1922, the Partition of British India, and the repatriation of French settlers from Algeria to France in the 1960s—were relatively fleeting, providing few details to fully understand the extent to which they reflect the larger contextual parameters of post-War population exchange in Poland and West Germany. In South Asia, social divisions between displaced, post-partition migrants and natives in receiving localities did become politically salient in some places (for instance, in Hyderabad and Karachi, Pakistan), though it is difficult to see how this translated over time into greater local state capacity. How much did the particularities of the emergent, post-War international system, and the guiding role of the Allies and specifically the United States, Britain, and the USSR in the redrawing of borders and movement of people in Europe, limit the degree to which *Uprooted's* findings can illuminate today's politics of displacement?

These small points around scope conditions aside, *Uprooted* represents the very best of contemporary comparative politics research. The combination of deep historical research, close attention to causality, and rich theorizing make a book that should be widely read across the social sciences.

Response from Volha Charnysh

It was a real privilege to have two brilliant scholars comment on my book. I appreciate their recognition of the book's insight about the importance of tracing the effects of migration and cultural diversity over time. To date, most studies have concentrated on the immediate aftermath of refugee inflows—a period when resources are strained and intergroup tensions peak. Extending

the time horizon reveals that—by increasing the demand for state-provided public goods and weakening resistance to state control—forced displacement creates opportunities for strengthening the state.

Yet not all governments are willing or able to step in to assist the uprooted population and receiving communities. That is why it is essential to consider the specific domestic and institutional conditions that enabled Polish and German governments to respond to postwar population transfers by mobilizing new fiscal and administrative resources.

My analysis indicates that ruling elites in Poland saw population movements as an opportunity to broaden their support base, while the German elites were driven to act by a mix of electoral incentives and fears of social unrest. Still, the postwar international context played a part in shaping these outcomes. In Poland, Soviet backing strengthened the state's coercive capacity and facilitated the redistribution of formerly German property to uprooted Poles. In Germany, occupying authorities overrode local opposition to accepting expellees, mandating full citizenship rights and access to welfare benefits. Critical resources for housing, business loans, and other forms of assistance came, in part, from the Marshall Plan.

In today's developing world, external actors continue to shape how states respond to refugee inflows—thereby influencing whether forced migration fosters or undermines state-building. International pressure and financial assistance can play a crucial role in promoting refugee inclusion, expanding public goods provision, and strengthening state capacity. For example, Zhou, Grossman, and Ge (2023) find that in Uganda, the receipt of humanitarian aid ensured that hosting refugees was accompanied by improvements in schools, health clinics, and roads for the broader population. Identifying the conditions that contribute to investment in state capacity in the wake of forced displacement remains an important direction for future research.

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Zhou, Y. Y., Grossman, G., & Ge, S. (2023). [Inclusive refugee-hosting can improve local development and prevent public backlash](#). *World Development*, 166, 106203.

Joint Commentary from Charnysh and Auerbach and Thachil

At face value, *Uprooted* and *Migrants and Machine Politics* could not be more different in scope, method, and setting. Auerbach and Thachil provide an up-close, ethnographic portrait of everyday life in Indian slums, grounded in immersive fieldwork, interviews, and original surveys. They highlight the role of informal

community leaders who mediate between slum dwellers—recent migrants from rural areas who work in the informal sector and lack social protections—and state bureaucrats and elected representatives. Charnysh offers a more zoomed-out account of forced migration in postwar Poland and West Germany, using long-term statistical data and archival research to trace the socio-economic consequences of forced displacement for public goods provision and economic performance. In her account, it is state and party officials—rather than community leaders—who act as key intermediaries between migrants and the native population.

Despite these differences, the two books jointly offer important lessons for our understanding of how migrant diversity affects political organization and development. *Uprooted* and *Migrants and Machine Politics* demonstrate that the role of ethnic diversity in community mobilization and public goods provision is not static, nor is it necessarily negative, as much of the literature suggests. Both books trace, over time, how intra-community diversity interacts with larger political and institutional factors to generate surprising findings. In *Migrants and Machine Politics*, Auerbach and Thachil show that inter-ethnic ties routinely emerge within slums to improve the security and material well-being of residents. Moreover, local informal leaders are responsive to the needs of their non-coethnic neighbors—often deliberately so, to avoid generating reputations for being parochial. In *Uprooted*, Charnysh finds that diverse communities generate stronger state capacity over time, as residents turn to the state to provide services that they struggle to produce themselves. Diversity in Poland and West Germany, moreover, is associated with higher economic development, especially within the context of inclusive institutions.

Read together, our books illuminate the role of growing population mobility in changing how societies interact with state bureaucrats, obtain resources, and achieve representation. In doing so, they challenge accounts of heightened social diversity, often produced by migrant inflows, as inherently destabilizing. This conclusion has been informed by scholarship that has primarily focused on how diverse communities struggle to solve internal collective action dilemmas, dampening their ability to self-provide order or public goods. Our books suggest a more nuanced relationship between diversity and development, by shifting focus from voluntary self-provisioning to the state as the dominant provider of local public goods. Charnysh shows that the inability of diverse migrant communities to self-provide public goods increased their engagement with the state. Such engagement deepens state capacity, which in turn leads to better provisioning under the right institutional conditions. Auerbach and Thachil suggest diversity can incentivize higher levels of political competition and cross-ethnic political coalitions, which can in turn generate more assertive and effective demands on the

state.

Together, our books reframe migrant communities, popularly portrayed as governance challenges, as protagonists in the study of political order. Whether in post WWII Poland or contemporary India, taking the political agency of vulnerable migrant communities seriously offers theoretically and substantively important opportunities to better grasp the evolution of state-society relations.

Meet the Authors



Adam Auerbach is Associate Professor in the School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University. His research focuses on local governance, urban politics, and the political economy of development, with a regional focus on South Asia and India in particular. Auerbach's research has been published in the *American Journal of Political Science*,

American Political Science Review, *Journal of Politics*, and *World Politics*, among other journals. His first book, *Demanding Development: The Politics of Public Goods Provision in India's Urban Slums* (Cambridge University Press) accounts for the uneven success of India's slum residents in demanding and securing essential public services from the state. *Demanding Development* won the Dennis Judd Best Book Award from the Urban and Local Politics Section of the American Political Science Association.



Volha Charnysh is Associate Professor of Political Science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Her research has focused on the role of migration in state-building and cultural change, the effects of mass violence on political behavior, and the comparative legacies of slavery. It has appeared in the *American Political Science*

Review, *British Journal of Political Science*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *World Politics*, and elsewhere. Her first book, *Uprooted: How Post-WWII Population Transfers Remade Europe*, was published by Cambridge University Press in November 2024. She serves on the editorial boards of the *Journal of Historical Political Economy* and of *Broadstreet*, a blog dedicated to historical political economy research.



Leydy Diossa-Jiménez is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Michigan. She earned her Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of California, Los Angeles. As a comparative-historical and international migration sociologist, her research explores the intersections of violence, migration, rights, and gender. She is particularly

interested in how political violence produces exile and shapes the recognition of emigrant political rights. Her work compares the effects of state terrorism on the recognition of exile political rights in Argentina and Colombia. The National Science Foundation and the Fulbright-Hays Program have supported this work. In a separate collaboration with Cecilia Menjívar (UCLA), she examines how familism ideologies are embedded in laws addressing violence against women and how these legal frameworks undermine women's rights in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. Their research has been published in *Latin American Research Review* and *Social Politics*.



Alexandra Filindra is Professor of Political Science and Psychology at the University of Illinois Chicago. She specializes in American gun politics, immigration policy, intergroup relations, ingroup identity politics, and issues of political violence. Her book, *Race, Rights, and Rifles: The Origins of the NRA and Contemporary Gun Culture* (The University of Chicago

Press, 2023), analyzes the origins of the NRA and the relationship between ideologies of citizenship and support for guns and political violence. She is working on a book about threats and violence against elected officials and their staff in contemporary America.



Katharina Natter is Senior Assistant Professor at the Institute of Political Science of Leiden University and Fellow of the International Migration Institute (IMI). Her research centers on migration politics from a comparative perspective, with a particular focus on the role of political regimes in immigration policymaking.

Through her in-depth empirical work on Europe, North Africa and South America, she seeks to advance migration policy theory and connect it with broader social science research on modern statehood and political change. In 2023, her monograph *The Politics of Immigration Beyond Liberal States* was published by Cambridge University Press. Since 2011, she is also involved in Asylos, an NGO providing Country of Origin research for lawyers representing asylum seekers in court.



Tariq Thachil is Professor of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania. His research has focused on political parties, identity politics, and urbanization and migration. His work has appeared in the *American Political Science Review*, *American Journal of Political Science*, *Journal of Politics*, and elsewhere. His first book, *Elite Parties, Poor Voters*

(Cambridge University Press, 2014) won the Gregory Luebbert Award for best book in comparative politics and Leon Epstein Award for best book on political parties. He directs the Center for the Advanced Study of India, and serves on the editorial boards of Cambridge University Press (Comparative Politics series), Princeton University Press (Political Behavior series), and the *American Political Science Review*.

Editorial Team

Executive Editors



Dan Slater specializes in the politics and history of enduring dictatorships and emerging democracies, with a regional focus on Southeast Asia. At the University of Michigan, he serves as the Director of the Center for Emerging Democracies and the James Orin Murfin Professor of Political Science. Previously, he served for 12 years on the faculty at the University of Chicago, where he was the Director of the Center for International Social Science Research, Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science, and associate member in the Department of Sociology.



Rob Mickey is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Michigan. His research focuses on U.S. politics in comparative and historical perspective. He is interested in the country's belated (as well as incomplete) democratization by the 1970s, its current democratic backsliding, and the place of racial conflict in each. He is now at work with David Waldner on a book-length study of America's Reconstruction in comparative perspective with other postwar efforts to construct democratic polities and diverse economies in societies dominated by labor-repressive agriculture. He is also exploring the historical legacies of mid-20th century urban racial conflict for America's contemporary policing with Jake Grumbach and Daniel Ziblatt.

Managing Editor



Adam Fefer is managing editor of the Democracy and Autocracy Newsletter. His research focuses on democracy, ethnic conflict, and power-sharing institutions, with a geographical focus on the Horn of Africa, South Asia, the US, and the Levant. Adam has a Ph.D. in Political Science from UC San Diego and a B.A. from UC Berkeley.

Guest Editor



Rebecca Wai is a Ph.D. candidate in the Political Science department at the University of Michigan – Ann Arbor. Her research focuses on how migrants and refugees are able to gain equitable access to resources when they settle in host communities, especially in the age of growing natural resource scarcity. She is particularly interested in how local community institutions can help integrate migrants into host communities. She examines how these institutions increase interaction between migrants and hosts, and foster economically productive cooperation. Her dissertation project focuses on farmer groups in Uganda that bring refugees and host communities together. Her work has been supported by the United States Institute of Peace, American Political Science Association and Rackham Graduate School.

About *Democracy and Autocracy*

Democracy and Autocracy is the official newsletter of the American Political Science Association's Democracy and Autocracy section (formerly known as the Comparative Democratization section). First known as *CompDem*, it has been published three times a year since 2003. In October 2010, the newsletter was renamed *APSA-CD* and expanded to include substantive articles on democracy, as well as news and notes on the latest developments in the field. In September 2018, it was renamed the *Annals of Comparative Democratization* to reflect the increasingly high academic content and recognition of the symposia.

Section News

From the [Journal of Democracy](#):

The *Journal of Democracy* is a leading forum for expert discussion of the biggest questions in democracy—all in a clear, accessible prose that makes our essays favorites for university settings. The following selection of *Journal* essays explore how immigration crises in recent years have tested the world's advanced democracies and fueled the rise of far-right populist parties. Plus a new debate on the causes of democratic backsliding and symposia on Syria after the fall of Assad and the “third wave” fifty years on.

M. Steven Fish, [The Power of Liberal Nationalism](#)

Democracy's defenders have failed to appreciate the power of nationalism. They must arm themselves with emotionally compelling narratives to counter illiberal foes of free government. When they do, they are championing a winning message.

Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, [Democracy's Surprising Resilience](#)

Despite worry of an authoritarian resurgence, the vast majority of “third wave” democracies are enduring. Democracy, buoyed by economic growth and urbanization, is outperforming most people's expectations and fears.

Rafaela Dancygier, [Liberal Democracy in an Age of Immigration](#)

Immigration threatens to erode liberalism, as far-right parties and migrant communities with illiberal views gain power. Mass publics have shouldered the blame. But should political elites be held responsible?

Sheri Berman, [Democracy and Diversity in Western Europe](#)

Immigration has changed the face of Western Europe. Yet mainstream political parties have largely ignored citizens' concerns about what immigration means for their societies, leaving them ripe for far-right populists to exploit.

Tariq Modood, [The Rise of Multicultural Nationalism](#)

Some liberals attribute the origins of our polarized political era to “identity politics.” But multiculturalism need not provoke majoritarian anxieties—not if national identities can open ways for all citizens to be recognized and heard.

David Kaye, [Freedom of Expression's Crisis of Interpretation](#)

When an epidemic of Koran burnings swept Denmark and Sweden, the Danish government criminalized the practice. It is a misguided response that misses the opportunity to protect both minorities and the right to free speech.

Laura Jakli, [East-Central Europe: The Young and the Far Right](#)

Far-right parties in Europe's newer democracies have been working hard to appeal to younger citizens, and for good reason: Young people's shifting values make them a ripe target for the far right.

Milan W. Svolik, Elena Avramovska, Johanna Lutz, and Filip Milačić, [In Europe, Democracy Erodes from the Right](#)

When ordinary voters are given a choice between democracy and partisan loyalty, who will put democracy first? Frighteningly, Europe harbors a deep reservoir of authoritarian potential.

Anna Grzymala-Busse, [The Failure of Europe's Mainstream Parties](#)

Beyond the commonly cited economic and cultural anxieties afflicting many Europeans, a key factor enabling the rise of populism across Europe has been the failure of mainstream parties on both the left and the right to offer clear and credible policy alternatives.

What Are the Real Causes of Democratic Backsliding?

Thomas Carothers and Brendan Hartnett, [Misunderstanding Democratic Backsliding](#)

If democracies did a better job “delivering” for their citizens, so the thinking goes, people would not be so ready to embrace antidemocratic alternatives. Not so. This conventional wisdom about democratic backsliding is seldom true and often not accurate at all.

Francis Fukuyama, Chris Dann, and Beatriz Magaloni, [Delivering for Democracy: Why Results Matter](#)

Voters around the world are losing faith in democracy's ability to deliver and increasingly turning toward more authoritarian alternatives. To restore citizens' confidence, democracies must show they can make progress without sacrificing

accountability.

Thomas Carothers and Brendan Hartnett, [Beyond Performance: Why Leaders Still Matter](#)

Delivery matters, but so do leaders' actions. Why have so many, in both strong and weak economies, been pushing against democratic constraints on their power, and why have those constraints failed to contain them?

Will Syria Be Free?

Tarek Masoud, [Divining Syria's Future](#)

Everything we know about getting and keeping democracy suggests we should be, at best, cautious about the prospects for Syria's democratic future. But, as this collection of essays suggests, there are reasons for hope.

Lisa Wedeen, ["Forever Has Fallen": The End of Syria's Assad](#)

Syrians rejoiced when Bashar al-Assad's regime fell. After decades of dictatorship and civil war, Syrians must now rebuild their country while seeking justice for the victims of authoritarian rule.

Rana B. Khoury and Wendy Pearlman, [Why Syria's Civil Society Is the Key](#)

After the collapse of the Assad regime, Syria stands at a crossroads. Nothing is assured, but the country's civil society is its best hope for charting a democratic future.

Daniel Neep, [Rebuilding the State in Post-Assad Syria](#)

Despite a brutal thirteen-year civil war, Syrians are not building from scratch. In fact, Syria has a long and rich history of state-building to guide them.

Reconsidering the Third Wave

Dan Slater, [The Authoritarian Origins of the Third Wave](#)

The "third wave" of democracy started in 1974—or so the story goes. But the crests and crashes of waves of democracy and authoritarianism have been neglected. A close look can help us understand the current moment, when democracy appears to be in retreat.

Rachel Beatty Riedl, [Neoliberalism and the Third Wave](#)

Democracy across the world is being undermined

by the very forces that once made it possible: the liberal economic order and political competition. The global concentration of wealth has made democratic governance less effective and stripped the people of their power.

Scott Mainwaring, [The Third Wave's Lessons for Democracy](#)

When the "third wave" reached Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s, it brought major advances for democracy. By the first decade of the current century, however, advances had given way to stasis and even erosion.

Ugur Altundal (Dartmouth College) published the following article:

Altundal, U., & Zarpli, O. (2024). [Democracy, visa-waivers, and international mobility](#). *Comparative Migration Studies*, 12(1), 50.

Michael Albertus (University of Chicago) published the following book and articles:

Albertus, M. (2025). [Land Power: Who Has It, Who Doesn't, and How That Determines the Fate of Societies](#). Basic Books.

Albertus, M., & Schouela, N. (2025). [When Redistribution Backfires Politically: Theory and Evidence from Land Reform in Portugal](#). *The Journal of Politics*, 87(2), 616–633.

Albertus, M., & Klaus, K. (2025). [Land and Politics](#). *Annual Review of Political Science*, 28.

Kaplan, O., Albertus, M., Senior-Angulo, D., & Flores-Macías, G. (2025). [How Covid Changed Latin America](#). *Journal of Democracy*, 36(1), 109–122.

Albertus, M., Menaldo, V., & Rojas-Vallejos, J. (2025). [Why elites sometimes undo their own constitutional privileges](#). *World Development*, 192, 107024.

Albertus, M. (2025). [The Coming Age of Territorial Expansion](#). *Foreign Affairs*.

Abdelkarim Amengay (Doha Institute for Graduate Studies) published the following article:

Amengay, A. (2025). How Populist Are Arab Citizens? Assessing Populist Attitudes in the Arab World. *Middle East Law and Governance* 17(1).

Amengay, A. (2024). [Studying Elections in the Arab World: Why? and How?](#) *Siyasat Arabiya* 12(70), 9–24.

Amengay, A. & Lahnin, Y. (2024). [Individual Motives for Voter Turnout in the Arab World: What Impact Does the Evaluation of the Political System.](#) *Siyasat Arabiya*, 12(70), 48–66.

Archie Brown (University of Oxford) and Nicholas James (University of Oxford) published the following article:

Brown, A., & James, N. (2025). [The Self-Magnification of British Leaders: Prime Ministers' Perceptions and Projections of their Powers and Roles in the Postwar Era.](#) *The Political Quarterly*.

Nathan J. Brown (George Washington University), Steven D. Schaaf (University of Mississippi), Samer Anabtawi (University College London), & Julian G. Waller (George Washington University and Center for Naval Analyses) published the book: [Autocrats Can't Always Get What They Want](#) (2024). University of Michigan Press

Melani Cammett (Harvard University) was elected to the American Academy of Arts & Sciences and published the following article:

Parreira, C., Cammett, M., & Atallah, S. (2025). [Is Clientelism \(Only\) for the Poor? Insights on Class and Clientelism from a Survey Experiment in Lebanon.](#) *Journal of Politics*.

Vladimir Gel'man (University of Helsinki) became a director of the MA program in Russian, Eurasian and East European Studies (MAREES) at the University of Helsinki, and published the following article:

Gel'man, V. (2025). [In Search of the Roots of Failure: Reassessing Russian Politics in the 1990s.](#) *Russian Politics*, 10(1), 51–70.

Didi Kuo (Stanford University) published the following book:

Kuo, D. (2025). *The Great Retreat*. Oxford University Press

Robert Mattes (University of Strathclyde), Matthias Krönke (University of Reading), Shaheen Mozaffar (Bridgewater State University) published the following article:

Mattes, R., Krönke, M., & Mozaffar, S. (2024). [African legislators: unrepresentative power elites?](#) *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 50(4), 619–641.

Reo Matsuzaki (Trinity College) published the following articles:

Matsuzaki, R., & Schwartz, R. A. (2024). [When Counterinsurgent Institutions Persist: Unpacking Local Wartime Legacies.](#) *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 59(3), 379–408.

Drixler, F., & Matsuzaki, R. (2025). [Façade Fictions: False Statistics and Spheres of Autonomy in Meiji Japan.](#) *Politics & Society*, 53(1), 57–97.

Olena Nikolayenko (Fordham University), published the following book and book chapters:

Nikolayenko, O. (2025). *Invisible Revolutionaries: Women's Participation in Ukraine's Euromaidan*. Cambridge University Press

Nikolayenko, O. (2025). "Belarus: Civil Resistance and State Repression in an Autocracy" In *Protest and Power in Central and Eastern Europe*, eds. Claudiu Craciun and Henry Rammelt. Palgrave Macmillan.

Bryn Rosenfeld (Cornell University) was promoted to Associate Professor with tenure and published the following article:

Rosenfeld, B., & Wallace, J. (2024). [Information politics and propaganda in authoritarian societies.](#) *Annual Review of Political Science*, 27(1).

Julian G. Waller, (George Washington University and Center for Naval Analyses)

Waller, J. G., & Overfield, C. (2025). [Wartime Russian Civil-Military Relations.](#) *Center for Naval Analyses*.

Kortukov, D., & Waller, J. G. (2024). [The Foundations of Russian Statehood: The Pentabasis, National History, and Civic Values in Wartime Russia.](#) *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 1–27.

Waller, J. G. (2024). "Integralism, Political Catholicism, and Democracy in the Modern West," in *Social Catholicism for the Twenty-First Century?—Volume 1: Historical Perspectives and Constitutional Democracy in Peril*, ed. William Murphy. Wipf and Stock.

From the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem):

V-Dem team members published the following peer-reviewed articles, working papers, and reports:

Peer-Reviewed Articles

Boese-Schlösser, V., Eberhardt, M. (2024) [Democracy Doesn't Always Happen Over Night: Regime Change in Stages and Economic Growth.](#) *The Review of Economics*

and Statistics.

Buckley N., Marquardt K. L., Reuter, O.J., Tertychnaya, K. (2024). [Endogenous Popularity: How Perceptions of Support Affect the Popularity of Authoritarian Regimes](#). *American Political Science Review*, 118(2), 1046–1052. (Note: previous V-Dem Working Paper 132.)

Edgell A. B., Lachapelle J., Maerz S. F. (2024). [Achieving Transparency, Traceability, and Readability with Human-Coded Data](#). *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 1–6. (Note: previous V-Dem Working Paper 145.)

Garbe, L., Maerz, S. F., & Freyburg, T. (2025). [Authoritarian collaboration and repression in the digital age: balancing foreign direct investment and control in internet infrastructure](#). *Democratization*, 1–24.

Knutsen, C.H., & Kolvani, P. (2024). [Fighting the Disease or Manipulating the Data? Democracy, State Capacity, and the COVID-19 Pandemic](#). *World Politics*, 76(3), 543–593. (Note: previous V-Dem Working Paper 127.)

Knutsen, C.H., Morgenbesser, L., Wig, T. (2024). [On the move: Autocratic leaders, security, and capital relocations](#). *Political Geography*, 113, 103154.

Lleshi, S., Kalemaj, I. (2024) [Party Organisation, Youth Wings and Political Representation in Contemporary Albania](#). *Europe-Asia Studies*, 76(10), 1551–1573.

Lott L. & Spannagel J. (2025). [Quality Assessment of the Academic Freedom Index: Strengths, Weaknesses, and How Best to Use It](#). *Perspectives on Politics*, 1–23. (Note: previous V-Dem Working Paper 142.)

Marquardt, K. L., Pemstein, D., Sanhueza Petrarca, C., Seim, B., Wilson, S. L., Bernhard, M., Coppedge, M., & Lindberg, S. I. (2024). [Experts, coders and crowds: An analysis of substitutability](#). *International Political Science Review*. (Note: previous V-Dem Working Paper 53.)

Nord, M., Angiolillo, F., Good God, A., & Lindberg, S. I. (2025). [State of the world 2024: 25 years of autocratization – democracy trumped?](#) *Democratization*, 1–26.

Nord, M., Angiolillo, F., Lundstedt, M., Wiebrecht, F., & Lindberg, S. I. (2025). [When autocratization is reversed: episodes of U-Turns since 1900](#). *Democratization*, 1–24. (Note: previous V-Dem Working Paper 147.)

Wiesner, K., Bien, S., & Wilson, M. C. (2024) [The](#)

[principal components of electoral regimes: separating autocracies from pseudo-democracies](#). *R. Soc. Open Sci.*, 11240262

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Working Papers

Randahl, D. (2025). [Inexorable Force or Dying Wave? The long term trends of democratization and the third wave of autocratization](#). *Varieties of Democracy Institute: Working Paper No. 152*. March 2025.

V-Dem Institute Reports

Nord, M., Altman, D., Angiolillo, F., Fernandes, T., Good God, A., & Lindberg, S.I. (2025). [25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?](#) *V-Dem Institute*.

V-Dem Institute Policy Briefs

Natsika, N., Nord, M., & Lindberg, S.I. (2025). [Measuring and Analyzing the Rule of Law: A Practical Guide](#). *V-Dem Policy Brief*, No. 41.

Nord, M. & Lindberg, S.I. (2025). [U-turns – The Hope for Democratic Resilience](#). *V-Dem Policy Brief*, No. 42.