

The Populist Democratic Backsliding Model

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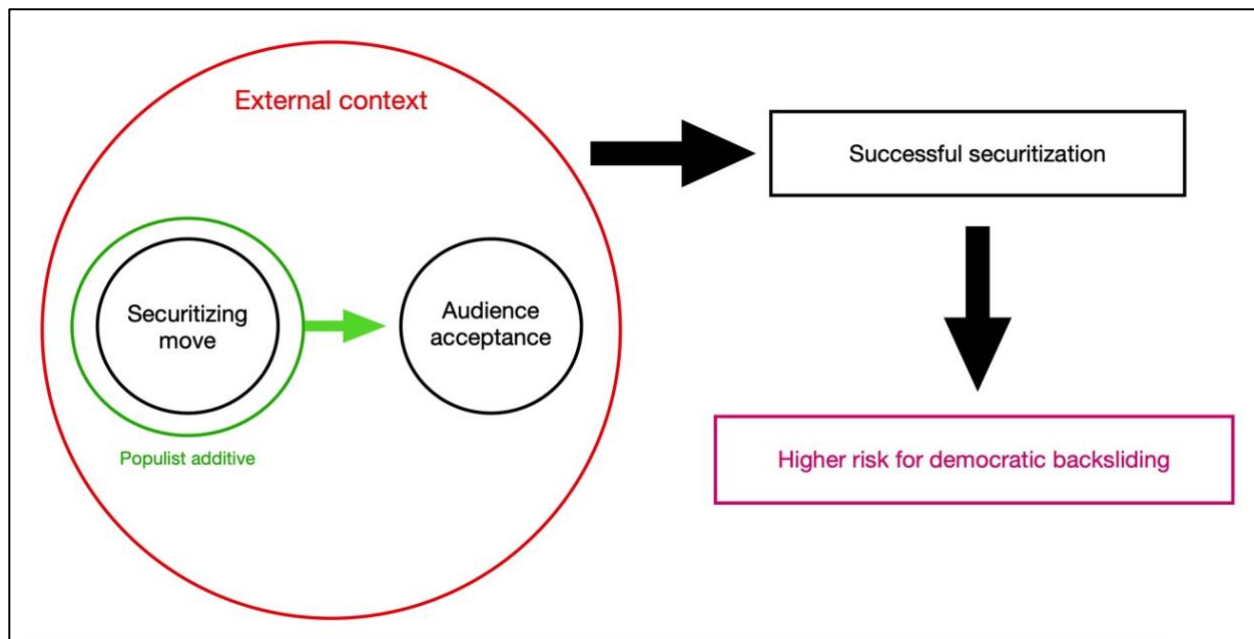


INTRODUCTION

The Populist Democratic Backsliding Model, or the PDB Model, has been developed to illustrate a connection between populism and democratic backsliding. This is explained through the lens of securitization and populism's role within the external context of the securitization process. The PDB model argues that the use of a populist political style indicates a greater risk of democratic backsliding.

Description of Model:

A flowchart diagram with three sections. The first section is a circle demonstrating the securitization model, the outer circle containing the “external context” and two circles inside containing the “securitizing move” and “audience acceptance.” Around the securitizing move is a ring labeled “populist additive” with an arrow pointing towards the audience acceptance. An arrow connects the securitization model to a box labeled “successful securitization.” Another arrow leads this box to the final box labeled “higher risk for democratic backsliding.”





BASE: THE SECURITIZATION MODEL

The PDB Model structure is based on the securitization model's structure that contains the following elements: the external context surrounding both the securitizing move and audience acceptance. These things together result in successful securitization. The external context contains the factors outside of the securitizing move, the facilitating conditions. These factors affect the likelihood of acceptance and include things such as the believability of the narrative and the position of the actor in society. The securitizing move is the designation of an existential threat, and the audience acceptance means a significant audience accepted this issue to be the existential threat it's presented as by the securitizing move. Once an issue is successfully securitized, extraordinary, emergency measures may be enacted to handle it (Nyman, 2018).

POPULISM AND THE POPULIST ADDITIVE

A solid definition of "populism" has not been concluded, the general conversation touching on both its political and social nature (Magcamit, 2017). It is generally considered to be a political style that is performed and a relationship between the leader and "the people." The populist leader's objective is to convince "the people" (for which a definition varies, but is often the national ethnic majority) that their primary goal is to protect the state and its citizens. "The people" are presented as opposing "the elite" (a group labelled as such regardless of affluence, seen mainly as threatening "the people's" way of life). The populist leader acts as the guardian of the will of "the people" and fortifies their legitimacy by maintaining this narrative. This is shown through policy decisions that focus on relative gains as opposed to absolute gains (Magcamit, 2017). A notable trait of populist leaders is that they deny legitimate opposition, meaning they claim that they alone can best represent and protect "the people" (Mudde, 2021). Personalistic leaders favor this style (Magcamit, 2017). Populist parties and leaders have a growing presence in and influence on western democracies (Del Ponte and Huddy, 2021). Taking this phenomenon into consideration when observing the securitization model may predict the progression of this influence and the strength of these democracies.

Populism as an "additive" in the PDB Model strengthens the narrative created in the securitizing move and, as a result, directly impacts and increases the likelihood of audience acceptance. The populist additive lies within the external context, surrounding the securitization move. A populist style directly impacts the external context as it affects both the internal and external aspects taken into consideration. Internal is associated with linguistic choices, while external is associated with social information (Nyman, 2018). The populist style itself is a method by which these factors that govern the believability of a narrative or the perceived social standing of the securitizing actor are presented in a specific light. It aligns these things with the populist leader's narrative of them alone being for "the people." The securitization move, therefore, presents anything that threatens "the people" (or the legitimacy of the populist leader, which is seen as a threat if this individual denies legitimate opposition) as



an existential threat. If the audience (containing "the people"), influenced by the context of the populist style, feels that this declaration of an issue as existentially harmful is relevant to them or relevant to the leader that alone can protect them, they are more likely to accept it. The populist leader then has the ability to acceptably carry out extraordinary measures to combat this successfully securitized threat.

A HIGHER RISK FOR EXECUTIVE AGGRANDIZEMENT AND DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING

Per the PBD Model, the populist additive in the securitization model leads to successful securitization and subsequently a higher risk of democratic backsliding. The higher risk for democratic backsliding arises from the phenomenon of executive aggrandizement. Executive aggrandizement occurs when democratically elected incumbents attempt to dismantle institutional constraints on their power. This is referred to as an "executive power-grab," where this incumbent attacks checks on their powers. This occurs over time and is likely through the processes already institutionally established (Laebens, 2023). If a leader removes constraints democratically, it is difficult for opposing parties to stop these changes, making the greatest seat of power and its support more unilateral in nature. It distances the relationship between the executive and the other branches of government, political opposition, and voters. As a result, leaders who enact executive aggrandizement are nicknamed "elected autocrats," "would-be authoritarians," and "presidents with hegemonic aspirations" (Laebens, 2023).

Executive aggrandizement is a factor that can contribute to democratic backsliding (Laebens, 2023). Democratic backsliding is the process by which democracy regresses incrementally. As democracy is widely considered to be the "final" type of governance, any deviation from democracy once achieved is backsliding (Wolkenstein, 2022). It is not an instantaneous shift, but rather the gradual "sliding away" from democratic processes (Wolkenstein, 2022). This regression is said to be indicated by things such as elections becoming less competitive and mechanisms that sustain a democracy being eliminated (like the "disabling" of constitutions) (Wolkenstein, 2022).

The PDB Model indicates a higher risk for democratic backsliding due to a correlation between populist tendencies and executive aggrandizement. In the PDB Model, executive aggrandizement can be interpreted as the arrow between "successful securitization" and "higher risk for democratic backsliding." A key aspect of the populist narrative is the denial of legitimate opposition (Mudde, 2021). This narrative may lead to the populist leader using this position to seek more power on the basis that they alone represent and act for "the people." In the case of democracies, populist leaders are constrained to the democratic processes that elected them. In order to gain more power, they must go through these processes to change anything. The securitization of issues provides an avenue through which emergency measures can be put in place that can bypass typical constraints or norms (Nyman, 2018). The populist narrative, as stated above, increases the likelihood of audience acceptance,



and therefore the populist narrative allows for the smoother enactment of emergency measures that could place the leader in a heightened position of power. What could result is the incremental indications of democratic backsliding through the conduit of executive aggrandizement.

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP AS A CASE STUDY

Populist Tendencies and Securitization

President Donald Trump, the 45th president of the United States, displayed populist tendencies during his campaign and administration and this influenced how he securitized issues. Michael Magcamit, who wrote on the Trump's use of populism, says, "Trump's heady combination of hypnotic charisma, gripping portrayal of crisis, and enthralling display of political incorrectness enabled him to successfully sell his intellectually frowned upon—albeit widely popular—economic battle cry to 'make America great again'" (Magcamit, 2017). When this description is taken into consideration, Trump is a viable example of the effects of a populist additive in the securitization model.

The qualities of populism that Trump's actions indicate are associated with him presenting himself as a man of "the people." Aaron Ettinger, who observed patterns in the Trump administration's policy-making decisions, calls the Trump administration's specific approach to policy "populist sovereignty." Ettinger says it "takes on a Jacksonian commitment to the service of the American 'folk community', hence his appeal to a previous era of prosperity and his broadsides against international commitments that supposedly weaken the country" (Ettinger, 2019). Trump redefined the concept of sovereignty as the duty of the government to care for "the people's" needs, specifically prioritizing the needs of the American people over international commitments. In this administration, there was distrust for global and cooperative institutions for fear they would undermine America's self-determination and prosperity (Ettinger, 2019).

This strictly "America first" narrative is populist in that the American people are "the people" and Trump is their protector in a parasitical international sphere (other countries and individuals from other countries taking on the role of "the elite"). The narrative of the prioritization of the people informs how he presents crises. Trump demonstrates his legitimacy in this role of protector by presenting various issues as existential threats to the American people, threats that only he could protect America from. Magcamit notes that Trump is talented in this populist presentation of issues: "This capacity for adopting a unilateralist posture is fueled by the president's skillful framing of a crisis that, if left unchecked, may well ultimately lead to the breakdown of American society. By presenting himself as the only leader who has the extraordinary political will to execute unpopular, albeit necessary, emergency actions, Trump has successfully captured the hearts and minds of...voters" (Magcamit, 2017). Trump used a populist additive in the securitization process to simultaneously legitimize his



position and the crises presented by pushing the "America first," "populist sovereignty" narrative.

Securitization Moves

While he was still running for president in April of 2016, Trump set the stage for a populist narrative. On April 27, 2016, he gave a speech where he relayed his approach to foreign policy. He claimed that American foreign policy had become weak after the Cold War and in the face of a more globalized international system. His primary emphasis was putting America and the American people first: "My foreign policy will always put the interests of the American people and American security above all else. It has to be first. Has to be" ("Transcript...", 2016). With this sentence he directly announced his loyalty to "the people," a key goal of a populist leader. Trump then demonstrated how he would protect "the people," saying, "We will no longer surrender this country or its people to the false song of globalism. The nation-state remains the true foundation for happiness and harmony. I am skeptical of international unions that tie us up and bring America down and will never enter" ("Transcript...", 2016). This declaration of loyalty and promise to protect at any cost is then paired with another hallmark of populism: denial of legitimate opposition. Trump lays this out cleanly. When speaking on the "theft" of American jobs, he says, "I'm the only one — believe me, I know them all, I'm the only one who knows how to fix it" ("Transcript...", 2016). Trump established this populist narrative before he was even elected president, so when he was elected, the factor of the populist additive was already present within the securitization process and affected how he securitized crises.

One of the key issues Trump securitized during his administration was the border crisis, the perceived threat of immigrants coming into the United States through the southern border shared with Mexico. On January 8, 2019, Trump gave his first televised address from the Oval Office on the issue. Trump declared it a "growing humanitarian and security crisis at our southern border," discussing the influx of illegal drugs and individuals with criminal records from Mexico and into the United States ("Donald...", 2019). Through his language choices, Trump presented the issue as an existential threat to the safety of the American people, referencing instances of American citizens being assaulted or murdered by illegal immigrants. In doing this, he created the securitizing move. Magcamit states: "By portraying them as being untrust- worthy thieves with violent tendencies, he is able to advance the idea that the immigrants are existential threats to the U.S. economy and that they must be stopped from contaminating the 'pure' American people" (Magcamit, 2017).

This move is influenced by the populist narrative he is maintaining: that he is the sole protector of the American people. In the speech, he said, "This is the tragic reality of illegal immigration on our southern border. This is the cycle of human suffering that I am determined to end." This narrative would then influence audience acceptance. Potentially as a direct result of this speech, Trump's ratings according to polls became more favorable. Between January 8,



2019 and January 9, 2019, his total approval rating was raised and his total disapproval rating was lowered ("Trump...", 2019).

The combination of the securitizing move and the audience acceptance creates a successfully securitized issue. Once an issue is securitized, extraordinary measures can be put in place. In the case of the border crisis, Trump laid out what these measures would be, which would be the building of a complete border wall ("Donald...", 2019). Magcamit notes "Trump's willingness to implement a foreign policy that runs in direct contrast to the international norms and principles" (Magcamit, 2017). Such a limitation on immigration would have violated various treaties the United States ratified (Magcamit, 2017). Because of the securitization process, though, with the successful securitization of the issue legitimized by the populist narrative, these extreme measures would have been more accepted if seen as crisis mitigation.

Executive Aggrandizement

As argued above, the easier access to these emergency measures that are not accepted without the securitization of an issue, can lead to executive aggrandizement. Trump has been identified as a world leader who attempted executive aggrandizement (Laebens, 2023). The case of Donald Trump is one where the democratic systems are left functioning, Trump being unsuccessful and going through what Melis G. Laebens, who wrote on executive aggrandizement, refers to as an "institutionally enforced exit" (electoral defeat) (Laebens, 2023). The institutional systems to protect democracy in the United States largely prevented Trump from gaining an abnormal amount of power. His border wall solution was, at the time of the 2019 speech being given, being blocked by the Democrats, the political opposition ("Donald...", 2019). Trump was also elected out of office.

The PDB Model does not claim that the populist additive is a democracy killer. It merely predicts a higher risk of democratic backsliding. This is true for Trump as it did lead to executive aggrandizement, and executive aggrandizement is a factor that can lead to democratic backsliding. Laebens claims that the correlation between executive aggrandizement and democratic backsliding is dependent on time. "If the incumbent remains in office and aggrandizement progresses, leading to a growing concentration of power, the regime becomes less democratic while the incumbent becomes more hegemonic: it becomes harder for opponents (other political parties, civil society actors, or control organs) to hold them accountable" (Laebens, 2023). She argues that under these circumstances, it would take just two terms for it change the fabric of the governing system so much that it would be hard to label it as a democracy (Laebens, 2023). The PDB model connects the use of a populist political style to this risk.

ON THE CURRENT PDB MODEL

There are limitations to the PDB Model. First, the model has only been observed with democracies. The hypothesis of the populist additive within the securitization model



leading to democratic backsliding is only applicable to democracies as the end result of backsliding indicates democracy was the starting point. This model is also directly based on the securitization model used by Jonna Nyman in *Security Studies: An Introduction* (Nyman, 2018). While a populist additive may be added into other models of the securitization process, it fits best within the visual language of this particular model.

This iteration of the PDB Model is its infant stages and it has many possibilities for growth. Concerning the model only being observed in democracies, it's currently unclear how the populist additive on the securitization model would affect other regime types. Though democratic backsliding would not occur, it would be worth exploring to see how it would affect securitization and audience acceptance in more illiberal regimes. Another topic worth expanding on is the step of executive aggrandizement. Executive aggrandizement can be successful or unsuccessful. Observing if a populist additive has a pattern of influencing the level of success or failure could potentially better predict the likelihood of democratic backsliding. Currently, the model only indicates a higher risk of this backsliding, but cannot predict the exact probability. Another factor worth exploring and its effect on the possibility of democratic backsliding is the populist leader's primary ideology. Populism is not a political party, but rather a style that is combined with a "host ideology" that is more indicative of loyalty to a party or group (Mudde. 2021). Looking for correlations between host ideology leanings (left versus right), the use of the populist additive, and the success of executive aggrandizement could potentially create a checklist of qualities that could predict a higher or lower risk of democratic backsliding.

CONCLUSION

Democratic backsliding is a dangerous phenomenon. The Populist Democratic Backsliding Model may serve as a way that its likelihood can be predicted. In a perfect world, prediction can lead to prevention, but for now in its newness it at the very least correlates populism and the risk of democratic regression.



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Samantha Ramay is an undergraduate student in history at Webster University in St. Louis, USA. In the Lab, she is researching Iran's conflictual relations with Israel and assessing policy scenarios. She is also researching the effects of populism on democracy and populist leaders' contributions to democratic backsliding.





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