

Affective Polarization: Unraveling the Causes of Democratic Backsliding in 68 Countries

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Abstract: This article examines the dynamics of democratic backsliding, focusing on the potential impacts of affective polarization, with inflation as a control variable. Utilizing two primary datasets: the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset, and the World Bank's Global Database of Inflation (GDI), the study conducts both bivariate and multivariate regression analyses. The findings confirm that affective polarization significantly predicts changes in both electoral and deliberative democracy, supporting the hypothesis that increased polarization can lead to democratic backsliding. However, the relationships between inflation and dimensions of democracy were not statistically significant at the conventional levels. Despite these limitations, this study contributes to the literature on democratic backsliding by highlighting the potential impact of affective polarization and inflation on various forms of democracy. The findings underscore the complexity of democratic backsliding and the need for further research in this area. As democratic backsliding continues to be a pressing issue in many parts of the world, it is important to understand these dynamics. Future research could benefit from expanding the dataset to include more countries and a longer timeframe. This would increase the number of observations and potentially lead to more robust findings. Additionally, future studies could consider incorporating other variables that might influence democratic backsliding, such as institutional strength, and cultural factors.

Keywords: affective polarization, democratic backsliding, inflation, democracy.



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Introduction

The phenomenon of democratic backsliding has become a major problem in modern politics. Democratic backsliding is a process of regime change towards autocracy that makes usage of power more repressive, while declining the engagement of public in policy making (Cassani & Tomini, 2019). This study aims to delve into the dynamics of democratic backsliding, focusing on its relationship with affective polarization. Considering the increased attention given to affective

polarization in recent scholarly articles and by respected analytical hubs (Exler, 2020; Orhan, 2022; Theuns, 2020; V-Dem, 2023), I have chosen to study this phenomenon in more detail to understand its relationships with democratic backsliding. As affective polarization, characterized by strong partisan animosity, can lead to political instability and undermine democratic norms, potentially facilitating democratic backsliding (Druckman et al., 2023). This variable has been at the forefront of contemporary political discourse, making it particularly relevant for this study. By examining this relationship, this article aims to contribute to the ongoing scholarly conversation and provide insights into the dynamics of democratic backsliding.

The independent variable under consideration is affective polarization, with inflation serving as a control variable representing the economic health of the countries. The dependent variable is democratic backsliding, represented through the change in five dimensions of democracy - electoral, liberal, deliberative, egalitarian, and participatory.

This paper utilizes two primary datasets: the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset and the World Bank's Global Database of Inflation (GDI). The analysis encompasses a time frame from 2006 to 2019 and includes a diverse set of 68 countries, all classified as "Free" by Freedom House in 2006. This selection allows for a nuanced understanding of how and why democracies erode over time in contexts where democratic norms and institutions are presumably well-established.

Given this context, the research question guiding this paper is:

"How does affective polarization influence democratic backsliding?"

This research question will guide the exploration of the dynamics of democratic backsliding and the role of affective polarization in this process. The findings of this study will contribute to the broader understanding of the factors influencing democratic stability and change.

Literature Review

Democracy

Studying the distant past is crucial for understanding democracy's evolution and vulnerabilities. Historical examples, such as the Roman Republic's transition to autocracy (Baehr, 2017) and Turkey's shift from democracy to authoritarianism (Bartels et al., 2023), illustrate how democracies can falter. This historical perspective highlights that democratic backsliding is not a new phenomenon but a recurring issue. Recognizing these patterns helps in developing strategies to preserve democratic systems.

The origins of democracy trace back to ancient Athens in the fifth century BC, where the concept of "demos" (people) and "kratos" (rule) laid the foundation for modern democratic governance (Dahl, 2020). This early form of democracy, characterized by direct citizen participation, was limited in scope, as only adult male citizens who had served in the military were allowed to vote (Hatzis, 2016). Women, slaves, and foreigners were excluded (Tridimas, 2019).

As societies grew more complex, direct democracy became impractical, leading to the development of representative democracy, where elected officials make decisions on behalf of the people (Landwehr & Schäfer, 2023). Most contemporary democracies, such as those in the US, UK, and India, use this system.

In summary, democracy has evolved from a limited system in ancient Greece to a more inclusive and representative model. This evolution reflects ongoing adaptation to societal changes and advancements, while the core principle of people holding power remains central. Understanding the five dimensions of democracy - electoral, liberal, deliberative, egalitarian, and participatory - provides a comprehensive view of its diverse practices and highlights areas for improvement or concern.

Electoral Democracy

A system that allows every citizen to choose one candidate from a list of candidates for political office is the foundation of electoral democracy (MacKuen & Rabinowitz, 2003). Elections are the result of this procedure, in which every citizen registers as a voter and submits a secret ballot containing their choices. Citizens in representative democracies are only able to voice their opinions by choosing representatives to serve as chief executives and lawmakers (Little, 2020). The main option available to voters when legislators pass laws that a large number of people disagree with is to elect new lawmakers who will uphold alternative priorities and values. Given this knowledge, public servants have a vested interest in endorsing laws and policies that align with the preferences of the vast majority of voters in their districts.

Among the essential components of electoral democracy are (Little, 2020):

- Free and fair elections: elections are the foundation of democracy because they give people the power to choose representatives to represent them in parliament and other governmental roles.
- Universal suffrage: every citizen has the right to vote regardless of their social standing, color, gender, or religion.
- Rule of law: all citizens are treated equally under the law.
- Political participation: citizens have a word in decisions affecting the collective life of the country.
- Representative government: in a representative democracy, representatives are chosen by their fellow citizens to serve as legislators and chief executives.

Modern electoral democracy has its roots in Europe during the French Revolution (Edelstein, 2016).

Liberal Democracy

A liberal democracy is a system of governance that blends liberal political philosophy concepts with the structure of a representative democracy. It is a form of governance in which institutions and norms created by the constitution safeguard people's freedoms and rights while also limiting the power of the state (Rhoden, 2013).

Some essential components of a liberal democracy are:

- ✓ Elections: Between or among multiple distinct political parties (Gu, 2024).
- ✓ Separation of powers: Into different branches of government (Von Achenbach, 2017).
- ✓ Rule of law: In everyday life as part of an open society (Del Llano, 2023).
- ✓ Market economy: With private property (Popov, 2021).
- ✓ Universal suffrage: The right to vote for all citizens (Vines & Glick, 1967).
- ✓ Equal protection: Of human rights, civil rights, civil liberties, and political freedoms for all citizens (Mukand & Rodrik, 2020).

The Age of Enlightenment is where liberal democracy started, as well as its name (Higley & Burton, 2006).

Deliberative Democracy

Deliberation is a key component of decision-making in deliberative democracy. By restricting decision-makers to a smaller but more representative sample of the population that is given the time and resources to concentrate on a single topic, it prioritizes quality over quantity. The bare

minimum definition of deliberative democracy is two-way communication in which interests, values, and preferences are considered and discussed in relation to issues of shared concern (Bächtiger et al., 2018). It includes the conditions that for communicative impact to be effective, deliberation must occur in environments of reciprocity, equal recognition, respect, and power.

Among the crucial elements of deliberative democracy are (Cohen, 2007):

- **Genuine Thought:** Not just the sum of preferences expressed during voting, but genuine thought is the main source of legitimacy for legislation.
- **Inclusive and Equal Participation:** Every citizen should be able to take part in the deliberation process on an equal basis.
- **Reasoned Argumentation:** Participants should provide justification for their positions and take into account the arguments made by others.
- **Consensus Decision-Making:** The goal of deliberation is to come to a consensus or, at the very least, a majority agreement.

Deliberative democracy is a theory and practice that dates back thousands of years, as the roots of deliberative democracy can be traced back to Aristotle and his notion of politics, but it has garnered more scholarly interest in the 1990s (Meagher & Feder, 2010).

Egalitarian Democracy

One kind of democracy that prioritizes citizen equality is the egalitarian one. It is seen as a system that de facto protects citizens' rights and freedoms, distributes resources so that every citizen can meaningfully participate in politics, and cultivates an atmosphere that allows every person and social group to have an impact on political and governance processes (Sigman & Lindberg, 2015).

There are three primary dimensions that support this general principle (Sigman & Lindberg, 2018):

- **Equal Protection of Rights and Freedoms:** This dimension guarantees that all citizens have the same rights and freedoms, irrespective of their cultural, social, or economic backgrounds.
- **Equal Access to Power:** This dimension creates an atmosphere where all people and social groups have an equal chance to influence political and governing processes.
- **Equal Distribution of Resources:** This dimension makes sure that resources are distributed in a way that allows all citizens to participate meaningfully in political processes.

The idea of egalitarian democracy gained popularity and application in the 20th century, especially in relation to social democratic movements and laws intended to reduce social and economic inequality (Sigman & Lindberg, 2015).

Participatory Democracy

A type of democratic governance known as participatory democracy places a strong emphasis on the widespread involvement of citizens in the creation and management of political institutions (Bherer et al., 2016). Compared to traditional representative democracy, it aims for higher levels of citizen participation and direct representation.

Participatory democracy's essential components include (Maboudi, 2020):

- **Public Participation:** The involvement of citizens in determining the course of collective life. This is a "thick" as opposed to "thin" definition of participation because it involves more political engagement than simple voting.
- **Inclusive Processes:** Constituent-making processes that are inclusive and participative are more likely to produce democratic outcomes than traditional, elite-led methods.

- Impact on Public Policy: Participatory governance practices have the potential to directly influence significant national public policy decisions.

With origins in ancient Athens, where the notion of direct citizen engagement in decision-making processes initially emerged, participatory democracy has been a concept for centuries (Mueller, 2004).

In conclusion, over time, democracy - a form of governance in which the people hold the power - has taken on many forms, each with its own distinctive characteristics and guiding ideals.

Democratic Backsliding

Democratic backsliding is the opposition of democratization and is often referred to as democratic erosion or de-democratization (Grumbach, 2022). It is a slow decline of democratic standards. This process may be the outcome of state-led efforts to weaken the political institutions that preserve democracy, including electoral procedures, the rule of law, and individual rights violations (Bermeo, 2016). It entails the breakdown of essential components of a healthy democracy, including free and fair elections, freedom of the press, and the rule of law.

Democratic backsliding can often be identified by the slow, delicate processes that are deteriorating, making it difficult to detect until it is too late. A multitude of circumstances, including shifts in executive power, public opinion, and economic crises, can influence it (Bernhard, 2021; Grumbach, 2022). Democratic backsliding has serious consequences, including a decline in civil liberties and political stability as well as a frequent emergence of authoritarian rule.

Democratic backsliding is a phenomenon that became popular in the 2010s, the reason for this phenomenon to gain popularity was that many countries that were regarded as strong democracies began to lose its high democratic indexes. As V-Dem mentioned in its 2023 democracy report, nowadays approximately 42 countries are autocratizing, while only 14 countries are democratizing (V-Dem, 2023). It is mentioned there that disinformation, polarization and autocratization are reinforcing each other.

Democratic backsliding can have negative consequences on a country's political system. In terms of politics, it may result in a breakdown of democratic norms and institutions, which are the cornerstone of a democracy. This includes limiting civil liberties, undermining free and fair elections, and eroding the checks and balances that keep power from concentrating in one hands (Brusis, 2019). Autocratic rule, in which a small number of people hold all the power, can result from democratic backsliding. This can lead to the marginalization of opposition parties, suppression of criticism, and the silence of the media - all of which are harmful for democracy.

For this paper, I conceptualize democratic backsliding as a process of regime change towards autocracy that makes usage of power more repressive, while declining the engagement of public in policy making (Cassani & Tomini, 2019).

In summary, democratic backsliding is a serious worldwide problem that undermines the core principles of democracy. It is a slow process that can be started by a number of things, such as changes in the executive branch's authority, changes in public opinion, and financial crises. Reversing course in a democratic process has serious consequences: it erodes political stability, threatens civil freedoms, and frequently results in autocratic rule.

Affective Polarization and Democratic Backsliding

By the 90s of the XX century, most scholars relied only on political preferences to explain society's polarization (Reiljan, 2020). However, in 1991 in his article Bradley M. Richardson analysed how party loyalists (primarily supporters of traditional cleavage parties) vote for their preferred party in subsequent elections. At the same time, they have a long-standing hostility

towards other parties and their supporters (Richardson, 1991). Studying affective polarization is essential to understand how the society in a specific country is polarized and what measures can be taken to mitigate enmity between different groups of people (supporters of different parties). To conceptualize this phenomenon, I use the definition of affective polarization as “the propensity of party followers (partisans) to perceive rival parties as despised out-groups while harbouring positive ingroup sentiments for their party” (Iyengar et al., 2012, p. 406). Thus, from this, it is clear that affective polarization is about hostile relationships between supporters of different parties while maintaining friendly feelings towards their associates.

First, this phenomenon was used to describe the polarization in the United States, the country with the two-party system; the scholars tried to understand to what extent Republicans feel enmity towards Democrats and vice versa. However, after some time, the issues of affective polarization became also popular in Europe. According to recent findings, the level of affective polarization in some European countries (with multi-party systems) was even higher than in the USA (Reiljan, 2020).

Several investigations were conducted to study the relationship of affective polarization and democratic backsliding. Somer et al. (2021) studied the relationship between pernicious polarization (the next level of affective polarization, when polarization begins to violently undermine democratic institutions) and autocratization, at the same time they have included the influence of opposition strategies on pernicious polarization. Haggard and Kaufman (2021) also studied the correlation between polarization and democratic backsliding, they have conducted large-N research to capture this correlation. Finally, Orhan (2022) has studied the relationship between affective polarization and democratic backsliding through comparison of 53 countries, he has found out that there is a strong correlation between affective polarization and democratic backsliding, however there was no correlation between ideological polarization and democratic backsliding. It is now evident from numerous scholarly papers that there exists a significant relationship between affective polarization and democratic backsliding. It is worth noting that many hypotheses proposed by authors to demonstrate the strong correlation between these two phenomena have been confirmed.

Inflation and Democratic Backsliding

Inflation is a measure of how quickly prices are rising over time (Fernando, 2024). In other words, it quantifies the rate at which money becomes less valuable (O’Neill et al., 2017). The average price increase of a selected basket of goods and services over a one-year period is used to determine the inflation rate. If prices are rising rapidly, it indicates high inflation; if prices are rising more slowly, it indicates low inflation. Deflation is the opposite of inflation and happens when prices fall and buying power rises.

There are several types of inflation, including (Dua, 2024; Williams, 2022):

- Demand-Pull Inflation: This occurs when demand for goods and services exceeds supply, leading to an increase in prices.
- Cost-Push Inflation: This type of inflation occurs when there is an increase in the cost of production for firms, causing aggregate supply to shift to the left.
- Built-In Inflation: This type of inflation is tied to adaptive expectations, the idea that people expect current inflation rates to continue in the future.
- Hyperinflation: This is an extremely high and typically accelerating inflation.
- Stagflation: This is a situation in which the inflation rate is high, the economic growth rate slows, and unemployment remains steadily high.

- **Disinflation:** This is a decrease in the rate of inflation – a slowdown in the rate of increase of the general price level of goods and services.

Every element of the economy is impacted by inflation, including interest rates, government initiatives, corporate investment, employment rates, and consumer spending. Economists define pricing stability as occurring when yearly inflation stays within two percentage points of the base rate in a healthy economy (Frick, 2023). Inflation at this level can be beneficial because it can increase demand and productivity when the economy is slowing down and needs a boost. It can also promote expenditure. But when inflation exceeds wage growth, it may indicate that the economy is having trouble.

For this paper, I conceptualize inflation as “a measure of how quickly prices are rising over time” (Fernando, 2024).

In their work, Kapstein & Converse (2008), revealed that a strong correlation exists between inflation and democratic backsliding. Their findings indicated that in 74% of cases when democracy was ultimately reversed, inflation in the first five years of democracy had increased in comparison to the five years before. This might be the case since inflation reduces actual incomes, which could negatively impact people. Nevertheless, the information also indicates that hyperinflation does not seem to be associated to the breakdown of young democracies. In fact, from 20 young democracies where the annual change in consumer prices topped 100 percent during the first five years, only five were backslided. While Kapstein & Converse (2008) primarily investigated young democracies, their research suggests that high inflation could potentially impact the state of democracies.

In their work, Hayo and Voigt (2010) also found that economic instability, approximated by high inflation rates indicative of macroeconomic policy failure, could potentially influence political stability, or trigger political change. Indicating, that high inflation rates can be the potential threat to the democratic regimes. Building upon the foundational work of Hayo and Voigt (2010), Lewkowicz et al. (2022) further explored the relationship between inflation and political stability. Their research uncovered a statistically significant correlation between inflation and what they termed as “pandemic backsliding”. The Pandemic Backsliding Index, introduced in their study, measures the extent of democratic regression caused by democratic standards being broken by the government in response to the Covid-19 crisis.

Hypotheses

In the hypotheses section of this article, I will explore the relationships between democratic backsliding and independent variable: affective polarization. The dependent variable in this study is democratic backsliding, while inflation is control variable.

The evidence from existing works allow to produce several predictions that can be tested empirically.

For Affective Polarization and Democratic Backsliding:

H1: There is a positive correlation between the score of affective polarization and the occurrence of democratic backsliding. Specifically, as the score of affective polarization increases, the incidence of democratic backsliding also increases. This suggests that higher levels of affective polarization may contribute to a greater risk of democratic erosion in countries.

Specifically, I expect the negative influence of affective polarization on electoral and deliberative dimensions of democracy.

As voters take part in the decision-making in an electoral democracy by choosing representatives who serve as their voice in the political processes. Affective polarization may have a substantial impact on this system.

The perception of election fairness may be impacted by affective polarization. Extremely divided voters could doubt the validity of the election results, particularly if their favored party is not a winner. A fundamental component of electoral democracy, the idea of free and fair elections, may be compromised by this (Druckman & Levy, 2022).

Democratic norms and trust in the government are essential to the rule of law, and they can be undermined by affective polarization. The rule of law, which is based on the idea that all individuals are subject to the same laws regardless of their political affiliations, may be compromised if people see the government through the prism of their party and mistrust its judgments and policies (Kingzette et al., 2021).

Affective polarization has the potential to raise political engagement, but it can also cause people to feel less satisfied with the democratic process. Another important component of electoral democracy may be undermined if people believe that partisanship and extreme viewpoints control the political process. This could lead to dissatisfaction and a withdrawal from political engagement (Chan & Yi, 2024).

A high affective polarization level may result in a worse standard of political deliberation. Strongly polarized people are more likely to ignore opposing ideas without thinking them through, resulting in less effective conversations and a lack of understanding (Orhan, 2022).

Affective polarization can impact political participation. While it might increase participation due to heightened political engagement, it could also lead to withdrawal from political processes if individuals feel their voices are not being heard due to the polarized environment (Chan & Yi, 2024).

I would like to highlight that while I expect that affective polarization significantly influence electoral and deliberative dimensions of democracy, it is important to consider that it may also have consequences for other forms of democracy. Specifically, there is a possibility that increasing levels of affective polarization could also contribute to backsliding in egalitarian, participatory, and liberal democratic systems. This is because affective polarization can impact key democratic values such as tolerance, open dialogue, and mutual respect, which are key elements of these forms of democracy.

For Inflation and Democratic Backsliding:

H2: There is a positive correlation between the score of inflation and the occurrence of democratic backsliding. Specifically, as the score of inflation increases, the incidence of democratic backsliding also increases. This suggests that higher levels of inflation may contribute to a greater risk of democratic erosion in countries.

As I am taking “Inflation” as a control variable and as representation of overall economic stability in countries. I believe that high rates of inflation have a substantial impact on all forms of democracy. Democracies that are liberal, egalitarian, electoral, participatory, and deliberative fall under this category.

Methodology

Data and Design

This article utilizes two primary datasets: the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset and the World Bank’s Global Database of Inflation (GDI).

The primary focus of my work is on understanding the dynamics of democratic backsliding, which is the dependent variable. The independent variable under consideration is affective polarization. Inflation is my control variable that represents economic health of the countries.

The analysis encompasses a time frame from 2006 to 2019 and includes a diverse set of countries: Argentina, Australia, Austria, Barbados, Belgium, Benin, Botswana, Brazil, Canada, Cape Verde, Chile, Costa Rica, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ghana, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Latvia, Lesotho, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Mali, Malta, Mauritius, Mexico, Mongolia, Namibia, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Panama, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Serbia, Montenegro, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Trinidad and Tobago, Ukraine, United Kingdom, United States of America, Uruguay, and Vanuatu.

These 68 countries were selected based on their classification as “Free” by Freedom House in 2006. The choice to focus on “Free” countries is driven by the aim to study democratic backsliding in contexts where democratic norms and institutions are presumably well-established. This allows for a more nuanced understanding of how and why democracies erode over time.

However, out of the 92 countries classified as “Free” in 2006 (Freedom House, n.d.), there was absolutely no data available for any of the variables for 23 countries in the V-Dem database, and for one country in the GDI database. Therefore, the final sample consists of aforementioned 68 countries.

This paper will employ quantitative methods, specifically regression analysis in R, to test the hypotheses.

Democratic Backsliding

Bermeo (2016) makes a strong case that democratic backsliding is a gradual process that takes place over time rather than a dramatic, overnight change. Small, nearly undetectable adjustments to a nation’s democratic institutions and practices are frequently the first steps in this process. When considered separately, these modifications might not seem like important, but when added together over time, they can cause democracy to erode significantly.

In order measure democratic backsliding, Little & Meng (2024) used a comprehensive approach that included both electoral and non-electoral indices. They adopted what is known as a “quasi-minimalist” understanding of democracy, which relies on the holding of free and fair elections in which the losers accept the outcome. They focused their empirical investigation on electoral competitiveness indices.

Little & Meng (2024) looked at electoral turnover and incumbent leaders’ performances in terms of election outcomes. They claimed that these are the most crucial results to investigate if anti-democratic leaders’ primary goal is to stay in the power. They discovered that since the late 1990s, the rate of turnover of both ruling parties and individual leaders has stayed largely stable. In addition, recent years have seen a decline in the vote and seat shares of the winners of parliamentary and executive elections, respectively. There is also no decline in the proportion of elections with true multiparty competition.

In this paper, the score for democratic backsliding is calculated by subtracting the value of the democracy index in 2006 from its value in 2019. This approach quantifies democratic backsliding as the change in the democracy index over this specific period. A negative score indicates a decline in democracy (democratic backsliding), while a positive score suggests an improvement in democratic practices and principles. This operationalization provides a clear and quantifiable measure of democratic backsliding, allowing for comprehensive analysis across chosen countries and time period.

For this paper, I am focusing on the following indexes: the electoral democracy index, the liberal component index, the participatory component index, and the egalitarian component index (Coppedge et al., 2024).

Affective Polarization

Affective polarisation's measurement in two-party systems is methodologically quite straightforward, as there are only two competing groups that may perceive each other in a friendly or more hostile way. For example, Iyengar et al. (2012) used the American National Election Studies (ANES) to gather needed information to measure affective polarisation. From ANES dataset they have taken the exact question where respondents were asked to rate different groups on a thermometer scale ranging from 0 to 100, where a score of 0 meant the respondent feels "cold" toward the group, a score of 50 meant the respondent either doesn't know much about the group (before 1968) or doesn't feel "particularly warm or cold toward" the group (after 1968), and a score of 100 implied the respondent has "warm" feelings toward the group (Iyengar et al., 2012). The degree of affective polarisation was the average in-party/out-party evaluation difference among Republicans and Democrats.

Another method to operationalise the phenomenon was offered by Reiljan (2020). The case for it was that the measurement of affective polarisation in a multi-party context is much more difficult in terms of methodology and counting the exact affective polarisation index. To overcome these problems, Reiljan used Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) dataset, and to capture the partisan effect has taken the CSES's question: "I'd like to know what you think about each of our political parties. After I read the name of a political party, please rate it on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means you strongly dislike that party and 10 means that you strongly like that party". Then, he calculated affective polarisation score for each partisan group by subtracting the average evaluations towards out-parties from the average in-party evaluation. The in-party/out-party subtractions were weighted with the vote shares of the out-parties and then summed up. Finally, he weighted these party affective polarisation ratings with the vote shares of the respective party and summed all the scores up to get the weighted average which was the affective polarisation index.

For this work, the concept of "political polarization" from the V-Dem database is employed as a key indicator to measure affective polarization (Coppedge et al., 2024). This indicator is designed to answer the question: "Is society polarized into antagonistic, political camps?". It specifically refers to the extent to which political differences permeate social relationships beyond political discussions, such as family functions, civic associations, leisure activities, and workplaces. Mainly for this reason, it is a suitable measure for affective polarization.

A scale from 0 to 4 is used to measure the degree of political polarization, with each point indicating a different level of interaction between members of opposing political parties. Friendly relationships are indicated with a score of 0, and generally hostile interactions are indicated by a score of 4. This measure offers an advanced perspective on the degree of affective polarization present in a community.

The choice of this indicator offers several advantages. Firstly, its straightforward and simple nature allows for ready results for analysis. Secondly, the extensive country coverage of the V-Dem database enables a broader comparative analysis than other databases like the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES). Lastly, despite its name, the "political polarization" indicator primarily measures the level of affective polarization in a country.

However, it is important to acknowledge some limitations of this indicator. It does not account for in-party feelings of partisans, focusing mainly on attitudes towards other parties. Additionally, the scale of the indicator is relatively small, ranging only from 0 to 4, compared to other measurements that range from 0 to 10, such as the like-dislike scale used by Reiljan (2020).

For my analysis, I will calculate the average score of the political polarization index from 2006 to 2019 for each country. This will help me see the general pattern of affective polarization in the countries I am studying over these years.

Inflation

Inflation is a complex economic phenomenon that has been measured and explained in a variety of ways by different researchers.

Consumer Price Index (CPI): The Consumer Price Index (CPI) is the most widely used indicator of inflation. This index examines how prices for a variety of goods and services have changed on average over time for customers. Based on a survey of what people and families in urban or metropolitan areas are purchasing, the basket’s contents have been created (Hadid, 2023).

Headline vs Core Inflation: Two kinds of indicators are commonly used to describe inflation: headline inflation and core inflation. A measure of headline inflation takes into account the overall inflation in an economy, which includes volatile goods like food and energy. In contrast, core inflation takes these things out of account in order to give an indication of the underlying, long-term inflation trends (Giri, 2022).

In my article, I will be utilizing the Headline Consumer Price Index (CPI) inflation data sourced from the GDI provided by the World Bank (A Global Database of Inflation, 2024). This approach allows me to capture the total inflation within an economy, including volatile items such as food and energy, providing a more comprehensive picture of inflation trends.

The reliability and precision of the inflation estimates I am going to use in my research are guaranteed by the World Bank, a respected source of data on the state of the world economy. The database is also routinely updated and freely available, which makes it possible for me to use the most recent data for my study. This method is quite helpful for researching inflation trends because of its accessibility, reliability, and comprehensive coverage (database covers about 209 countries over the period 1970 - 2023).

For my analysis, I will calculate the average score of the inflation from 2006 to 2019 for each country. This will help me see the general pattern of inflation in the countries I am studying over these years.

Analyses

Bivariate Regression Analyses

Table 1. Univariate Regression Results of Change in Electoral and Deliberative Democracy on Affective Polarization

	Dependent variable:	
	Electoral	Deliberative
	(1)	(2)
Affective Polarization	-0.024***	-0.030***
	(0.007)	(0.010)
Constant	-0.047***	-0.066***
	(0.011)	(0.014)
Observations	68	68
R2	0.143	0.128
Adjusted R2	0.130	0.115
Residual Std. Error (df = 66)	0.077	0.102
F Statistic (df = 1; 66)	11.027***	9.677***

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

The regression analyses examine the impact of Affective Polarization on changes in Electoral and Deliberative Democracy from 2006 to 2019 (Table 1). In both models, Affective Polarization has

a significant negative effect, with the model for Electoral Democracy (Model 1) showing a β of -0.024 ($p < .01$) and explaining 14.3% of the variance ($R^2 = .143$). This suggests that increased polarization leads to a decline in Electoral Democracy, signaling democratic backsliding.

Similarly, in the model for Deliberative Democracy (Model 2), Affective Polarization has a β of -0.030 ($p < .01$), explaining 12.8% of the variance ($R^2 = .128$). In both models, more polarized countries are associated with greater democratic backsliding, with declines observed in both Electoral and Deliberative Democracy as polarization increases.

Multivariate Regression Analyses

Table 2. Multivariate Regression Results of Change in Electoral, Liberal, Deliberative, Egalitarian, and Participatory Democracy on Affective Polarization and Inflation

	Dependent variable:				
	Deliberative	Egalitarian	Participatory	Liberal	Electoral
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Affective Polarization	-0.031*** (0.010)	-0.007* (0.004)	-0.005 (0.005)	-0.013*** (0.005)	-0.024*** (0.007)
Inflation	0.003 (0.004)	-0.001 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.002)	0.0003 (0.002)	0.0001 (0.003)
Constant	-0.080*** (0.020)	-0.020** (0.009)	-0.009 (0.010)	-0.026** (0.010)	-0.048*** (0.016)
Observations	68	68	68	68	68
R2	0.140	0.056	0.028	0.105	0.143
Adjusted R2	0.113	0.027	-0.002	0.077	0.117
Residual Std. Error (df = 65)	0.102	0.044	0.049	0.050	0.078
F Statistic (df = 2; 65)	5.275***	1.923	0.933	3.793**	5.431***

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

The multivariate regression analyses examine the impact of Affective Polarization and Inflation on five dimensions of democracy: Deliberative, Egalitarian, Participatory, Liberal, and Electoral Democracy (Table 2). Affective Polarization has a significant negative effect on Deliberative ($\beta = -0.031$, $p < .01$), Liberal ($\beta = -0.013$, $p < .01$), and Electoral Democracy ($\beta = -0.024$, $p < .01$), indicating that higher polarization is associated with democratic decline in these types of democracies. Inflation, however, does not significantly affect any of these democratic dimensions.

In the case of Egalitarian Democracy, the model is not statistically significant at conventional levels, and neither Affective Polarization ($\beta = -0.007$, $p < .1$) nor Inflation has a substantial impact. Similarly, for Participatory Democracy, neither predictor shows a significant effect. Overall, the results highlight the important impact of Affective Polarization on key democratic aspects, while Inflation does not play a significant role.

Discussion

The findings from the regression analyses highlight the critical role that Affective Polarization plays in shaping democratic outcomes. Across various models, Affective Polarization consistently emerges as a significant factor contributing to democratic backsliding, particularly in Electoral, Deliberative, and Liberal Democracies. As countries become more polarized, these key democratic dimensions suffer, reflecting a decline in the quality of democratic governance and institutions. This suggests that polarization is not just a societal or political issue but one that fundamentally erodes the pillars of democracy itself. The consistent negative impact of

polarization across different types of democracies emphasizes the need for strategies to reduce polarization in order to safeguard democratic health.

Interestingly, the analyses also show that Inflation, another potential destabilizing factor, does not have a significant impact on these democratic dimensions. This finding suggests that while economic factors like inflation are often thought to influence political stability and democratic quality, it is the deepening divides in society—represented by Affective Polarization—that pose a more direct and significant threat to democracy. The lack of significant effects for Inflation also underscores the unique and potent danger that polarization presents, as it drives democratic backsliding independently of economic conditions. This highlights the importance of addressing polarization as a priority for preserving democratic systems worldwide.

Conclusion

This article investigates the impact of affective polarization and inflation on democratic backsliding using data from 2006 to 2019 across 68 "Free" countries. The findings reveal that affective polarization significantly contributes to democratic decline, particularly affecting Electoral, Deliberative, and Liberal Democracies. Increased polarization correlates with degradations in these democratic dimensions, highlighting the harmful effects of deep societal divides on democratic governance.

In contrast, the quality of democracy is not much influenced by Inflation, suggesting that economic factors, while important, may not be as critical as affective polarization in driving democratic backsliding. This highlights the urgent need to address polarization to safeguard democratic integrity, as it poses a more immediate and severe threat to democratic systems than economic instability. Overall, the findings demonstrate how crucial it is to implement strategies aimed at reducing polarization in order to protect democratic institutions. It is clear that addressing affective polarization is essential to maintaining the quality of democracies around the world.