The End of Autocratic Norm Adaptation? US Retrenchment and Liberal Norms in Illiberal Regimes

Sarah Sunn Bush,[a] Daniela Donno,[b]* Jon C.W. Pevehouse,[c] and Christina J. Schneider[d]

[a]Department of Political Science, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, USA
[b]Department of Political Science, The University of Oklahoma, Norman, USA
[c]Department of Political Science, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, USA
[d]Department of Political Science, University of California, San Diego, USA
*Corresponding author. Email: daniela.donno@ou.edu

Abstract In the post–Cold War era, many authoritarian regimes engaged in strategic liberalization in response to international norms promoted by Western powers. As US support for democracy and human rights recedes, will this retreat prompt a global rollback of liberal reforms? While pessimistic accounts predict a return to overt repression, we argue that liberal norm adaptation within autocracies is likely to prove more resilient. We highlight two sources of continuity. First, autocrats' domestic control strategies create incentives to retain certain liberal practices—such as elections, gender reforms, or limited media openness—that bolster legitimacy, co-opt dissent, and help manage opposition. Second, reforms anchored in treaties, international organizations, and domestic bureaucracies have generated expectations and mobilizational platforms, making wholesale reversals politically costly and prone to backlash. Our analysis illustrates how reforms, even when adopted instrumentally, have become sufficiently embedded in domestic politics to persist in the absence of strong external enforcement.

The end of the Cold War marked a turning point in how autocrats related to liberal norms. Prior to this moment, authoritarian regimes typically relied on overt repression and the absolute exclusion of political competition.[1] Elections, when they occurred at all, were devoid of credibility. Many regimes maintained power through a combination of terror, censorship, and isolation from liberal international institutions. When the Soviet Union collapsed, however, American unipolarity, combined with Europe's economic power and the normative dominance of liberal ideals, created powerful pressures on authoritarian regimes to alter their practices. Indeed, the post–Cold war period witnessed a significant expansion of the post–World War II liberal

1. Guriev and Treisman 2019.

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international order (LIO) grounded in the mutually reinforcing ideals of human rights, democracy, free markets, and multilateralism.[2] The "end of history" thesis captured the moment: liberal democracy had become the only legitimate political model.[3]

While the United States had long professed to promote democracy in the 1990s and early 2000s, it became a more central objective shaping American diplomacy, foreign economic policy, and even military interventions.[4] Meanwhile, the European Union used its considerable economic leverage to promote liberalization abroad, both through conditional membership and association agreements that required alignment with democratic norms.[5] These strategies were reinforced by the embedding of democracy promotion within regional organizations, such as the Organization of American States, African Union, and North Atlantic Treaty Organization.[6] Foreign aid flows were conditioned on human rights or democratic reforms,[7] and institutions like the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development explicitly limited operations to states committed to democracy.[8] In short, US and European leadership along with the Western liberal consensus produced not just material inducements but also a global normative hierarchy; one in which democracy was the only game in town, and all regimes, democratic or not, were expected to play along.

Of course, international efforts to advance liberal norms did not always succeed.[9] Initiatives were often constrained by competing geopolitical priorities[10] and by the strategic behavior of authoritarian governments that selectively implemented or co-opted reforms.[11] Yet even when reforms were insincere, selective, or manipulated, they left an institutional and normative imprint. By elevating the appearance of compliance and by embedding liberal practices, these efforts helped establish a global environment in which authoritarian regimes came under mounting pressure to at least gesture toward democracy.

Increased international democracy promotion unfolded alongside a broader transformation known as the third wave of democracy.[12] Beginning in the early 1970s and intensifying after the Cold War, this global shift produced an unprecedented wave of regime transitions. Multiparty elections, independent judiciaries, and protections for civil liberties became increasingly common, even if many regimes did not fully democratize. A new class of more open authoritarian regimes held competitive (if not entirely free or fair) elections; allowed limited space for opposition parties and civil society; and implemented legal protections that, although unevenly enforced, opened

2. Lake, Martin, and Risse 2021.
3. Fukuyama 1989; Franck 1992.
4. McFaul 2004; Bouchet 2013.
5. Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2002; Schimmelfennig and Scholtz 2008; Vachudová 2005; Börzel and Risse 2009; Schneider 2009.
6. Pevehouse 2002; Donno 2010; von Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2019.
7. Crawford 2000; Dunning 2004; Wright 2009; Bermeo 2011; Ferry, Hafner-Burton, and Schneider 2020.
8. Guriev and Treisman 2022.
9. Smith 2000.
10. Olson 1998; Donno 2010; Bermeo 2016.
11. Bush 2015; Snider 2018; Hafner-Burton, Pevehouse, and Schneider 2025.
12. Huntington 1991.

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up political life.[13] While such regimes did not become liberal democracies, they increasingly resembled them in form, adopting institutions and practices associated with liberal governance in response to both external pressure and internal incentives. Egregious forms of repression—such as violent crackdowns, political imprisonment, and disappearances—declined.[14] Autocracies introduced national human rights institutions,[15] invited experts to monitor their elections,[16] joined the International Criminal Court,[17] and engaged in international human rights forums such as the Universal Periodic Review[18] and the United Nations (UN) Convention Against Torture.[19] Many of the reforms favored by autocrats reflected an expansive notion of what "democracy" encompassed that included egalitarian protections and good governance. This is exemplified by autocracies' embrace of women's political representation (via mechanisms such as gender quotas) as well as progress in women's social, economic, and family rights.[20]

Today, however, the international supply of liberal norms is in visible decline. Most notably, the United States has deprioritized support for human rights and democratic governance abroad. The first Trump presidency slashed funding for democracy promotion and withdrew from key international institutions and agreements that had long served as vehicles for liberal norm diffusion like the UN Human Rights Council. While the subsequent Biden administration reversed some of these moves, Trump's second term in office has doubled down on slashing support for democracy abroad, most notably via the complete dismantling of the US Agency for International Development as well as the State Department's democracy programs.[21] In place of these structures, US foreign policy is reorienting toward a different set of values centered on free speech absolutism, a conservative agenda on women and gender, and a nativist defense of Western civilization.[22] The lack of effective domestic resistance to these moves suggests a deeper and more durable retraction of America's international liberal project, not simply the result of shifting presidential preferences. Economic pressures at home—including growing fiscal constraints, rising inequality, and political polarization—have weakened domestic support for costly international commitments.[23] Europe is also changing. Sweden, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom have scaled back their foreign aid commitments in the governance sector. Budget constraints and shifting priorities in Europe have reduced the appetite for democracy promotion.[24] At the same time, the internal cohesion of the liberal international order has been strained by signs of democratic backsliding within some

13. Levitsky and Way 2010.
14. Fariss 2014.
15. Hafner–Burton and Tsutsui 2005; Koo and Ramirez 2009.
16. Kelley 2008; Hyde 2011.
17. Hashimoto 2020.
18. Meyerrose and Nooruddin 2025.
19. Vreeland 2008.
20. Krook 2006; Bush 2011; Hughes, Krook, and Paxton 2015; Tripp 2020; Donno et al. 2022.
21. Posner 2025.
22. Samet 2025.
23. Myrick 2022.
24. Börzel 2023; Koval and Vachudova 2024.

Western democracies themselves.[25] These developments make it harder for liberal states to credibly advocate for democracy abroad.[26] Meanwhile, China and Russia are expanding their geopolitical influence.[27] Through their economic and diplomatic partnerships, these regimes hold out a vision of international order that eschews liberal norms in favor of state sovereignty and regime security.[28]

These changes raise a pressing question: will the erosion of Western normative leadership lead to a rollback of liberal reform and a reversion to Cold War-style authoritarianism marked by more overt repression and tightly closed political systems? Many offer pessimistic answers to this question. Matthew Cebul and Sharan Grewal point to the abrupt rupture in US support for democracy and human rights overseas as having already "facilitat[ed] an uptick in global repression" in countries including Georgia, Hungary, and Turkey.[29] According to Brian Klaas, "despots and human-rights abusers can rest easy now that America has gotten out of their way."[30]

Drawing on insights from International Relations theory and the literature on comparative authoritarianism, we argue that norm adaptation among autocracies is likely to prove more resilient, even in an era of reduced international support for liberal norms. Most autocrats are unlikely to fully revert to overtly violent or closed models of control. We identify two key forces sustaining autocratic engagement with liberal norms and practices even amid declining external pressure. First, autocrats' own strategies of political control generate strong domestic incentives to preserve certain liberal practices. Institutions such as multiparty elections, gender equality reforms, or selective media openness not only project legitimacy abroad but also help rulers manage dissent, gather information, co-opt opposition elites, and channel citizen demands into less threatening forms. These liberal practices, once adopted, become valuable tools of authoritarian survival in their own right. Second, institutional reforms tied to treaties, international organizations, and domestic bureaucracies have generated public expectations and empowered civil society, making efforts at wholesale rollback costly and politically risky. Even when adopted for instrumental or insincere reasons, these institutions now serve as platforms for mobilization that regimes cannot easily dismantle.

From Concessions to Control: Autocrats' Incentives for Liberal Practices

A central reason that autocracies continue to engage selectively with liberal norms is their utility as instruments of domestic co-optation and control. In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, liberal reforms were often reactive, defensive, and

25. Bermeo 2016; Kelemen 2017; Meyerrose 2020; Winzen 2025.
26. Hyde 2020; Samuels 2023.
27. Kurlantzik 2013; Diamond, Plattner, and Walker 2016; Tansey 2016; Mattingly et al. 2025.
28. Libman and Obydenkova 2018; Debre 2022; Cottiero 2023; Cooley and Dukalskis 2025; Cottiero et al. 2025.
29. Cebul and Grewal 2025.
30. Klaas 2025.

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compatible with an international script. Many autocrats adopted de jure reforms to placate donors, meet aid and trade conditionalities, or gain access to Western-led institutions.[31] Often, the impetus for these reforms was insincere, pursued to reap reputational benefits while sidestepping genuine de facto compliance.[32] Regimes also gamed monitoring and aid systems—restricting credible election observers, shifting to less verifiable forms of manipulation, deploying low-quality monitors, or using aid flows to shore up coalitions and signal compliance without substantive change.[33] This learning process has given rise to a now-familiar repertoire of managed reform: multiparty elections, selective media freedom, gender equality reforms, and bureaucratic mechanisms that simulate responsiveness.[34] These strategies reflected a broader pattern of tactical concession, role-playing, and rhetorical engagement that is characteristic of the early stages of norm socialization, when external pressure is the primary motive for action.[35]

Over time, leaders discovered that these very institutions could be repurposed to serve domestic political goals: enhancing legitimacy, dividing or co-opting the opposition, and channeling discontent into manageable forms.[36] For example, autocrats have used elections to provide them with information and legitimacy, and to facilitate the co-optation of elites and wider groups.[37] Elections can be manipulated in ways that aid regime survival in the long run, even as they introduce short-term risks.[38] Anticorruption drives can boost public approval.[39] Research on the spread of gender equality reforms in autocracies emphasizes how well these reforms can serve autocrats' needs for domestic legitimacy and support, for example, by helping them build coalitions, maintain legislative dominance, and co-opt feminist movements.[40] Partially liberalizing reforms, once a defensive concession to foreign demands, have become instruments of domestic rule.

Today, even as international democracy promotion declines, these institutional innovations continue to serve autocrats' domestic political ends. They help rulers co-opt societal actors, deter mobilization, and govern with a degree of popular consent that reduces the risks (and significant costs) of overt indiscriminate coercion. Repression imposes heavy domestic costs: it not only undermines legitimacy and risks fueling protest, but also requires substantial investments in security forces, surveillance, and patronage networks that strain state resources

31. Vreeland 2008; Conrad 2014; Dietrich and Wright 2015; Escriba–Folch and Wright 2015; Schoner 2025.
32. Levitsky and Way 2010; Guriev and Treisman 2022.
33. Dunning 2004; Wright 2009; Simpser and Donno 2012; Dietrich and Wright 2015; Cruz and Schneider 2017; Debre and Morgenbesser 2018; Farrell and Newman 2021; Bush, Cottiero, and Prather 2025; Morrison et al. 2025.
34. Ginsburg and Moustafa 2008; Morgenbesser 2020; Khalil 2024.
35. Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999; Checkel 2005.
36. Guriev and Treisman 2019, 2022; Farrell and Newman 2021.
37. Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Gandhi 2008; Magaloni 2008; Blaydes 2010.
38. Knutsen, Nygård, and Wig 2017.
39. Stockmann and Gallagher 2011.
40. Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2016; Donno and Kreft 2019; Tripp 2019; Bush and Zetterberg 2021; Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2022.

and can strengthen actors that become political threats. In an era where violent repression is more visible and risky, liberal norms and practices—once encouraged from the outside—have become embedded tools of authoritarian governance. These incentives are likely to remain despite shifts in the international environment.

It is tempting to dismiss liberal norm adaptation in authoritarian regimes as little more than lip service that does not alter the fundamental logic of autocratic rule. And in many cases, these reforms were initially intended to be cosmetic.[41] Even so, the diffusion of liberal norms brought about real—if circumscribed—gains for political competition, civic participation, and citizen welfare. Women's representation in government and participation in the economy saw meaningful increases.[42] Elections, though unfair, became more competitive than in the past, with positive effects for citizens' health, education, and well-being.[43] Opposition parties, while marginalized, were able to contest power and sometimes gain a foothold in legislatures or local government, leading to greater policy transparency and improved economic outcomes.[44] Civil society organizations expanded their reach.[45] Independent media, where permitted, created spaces for debate and held at least some officials to account. These reforms disrupted the monopoly of power and information that characterized Cold War-era autocracies.[46]

For citizens in electoral autocracies, the result was greater voice, improved access to politics, and more responsive governance in some domains. In certain cases, most famously the Color Revolutions, electoral autocrats miscalculated and lost power due to protests following stolen elections.[47] In other cases, liberalization did not lead to regime change, but did mark a notable departure from past practices. Crucially, liberal reforms raised public expectations for rights, accountability, and participation, making it costly for leaders to return wholesale to more closed forms of rule.

From Commitments to Constraints: Public Demands and the Risks of Reversal

These rising expectations highlight a second source of resilience: once liberal reforms are introduced, they generate constituencies and mobilizational opportunities that make reversal costly. International commitments are an important part of this story. Even if adopted for instrumental reasons, they can become embedded in domestic law and institutions, shifting the locus of pressure from external actors to citizens and civil society. International commitments change the contours of domestic political contestation, providing activists with new channels for making rights claims.[48]

41. Hendley 2022.
42. Htun 2003; Tamayo, Koettl, Rivera 2021.
43. Levitsky and Way 2010; Miller 2015a, 2015b.
44. Gehlbach and Keefer 2010; Williamson and Magaloni 2020.
45. Giersdorf and Croissant 2011; Tripp 2019.
46. Thomas 2001.
47. Bunce and Wolchik 2011.
48. Simmons 2009; Conrad 2011; Conrad and Ritter 2019.

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Membership in international institutions is notoriously sticky: outright withdrawal from IOs and treaties is costly, and autocracies tend not to leave frequently.[49] As Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink observe, "governments entangle themselves in an international and domestic legal process which they subsequently find harder and harder to escape."[50]

For example, now that most states meet minimal standards related to multiparty elections, departing from them represents a major break that is likely to cause domestic backlash. This is so for at least two reasons. First, popular support for democracy is high. Across global regions and regime types, citizens share many ideas about the value of democracy and the essential meanings of "free and fair elections," which suggests that radically altering domestic practices may be viewed as inappropriate.[51] Second, fully repressing civil society is difficult. State agents may refuse to crack down on civil society using violence, which exposes them to criminal liability and violates international treaties, among other risks like galvanizing greater opposition.[52] Because of this, states increasingly use legal means to undermine, rather than eliminate, civil society organizations. But that strategy also has downsides; such organizations often "fund and implement valuable development, health, and humanitarian aid programs" that states do not want to sacrifice.[53]

International commitments magnify these domestic sources of demand for liberalism. Countries' IO memberships leave governments vulnerable to enforcement in the wake of flawed elections.[54] The presence of credible observers—which many IOs require of their member states—can inform the public and galvanize citizen mobilization when fraud occurs.[55] Indeed, civil society actors often borrow tactics used by groups to protest flawed elections elsewhere.[56]

Numerous additional mechanisms have been argued to "domesticate" international pressures, including the incorporation of treaties into domestic law,[57] the creation of national human rights institutions and feminist agencies,[58] and the empowerment of nongovernmental actors through transnational advocacy networks.[59] Indeed, previous scholarship suggested that internationally inspired human rights reforms during the Cold War laid the foundations for future liberalization even in Communist regimes.[60] In the realm of women's rights, when domestic laws for gender equality are strengthened, it tends to produce shifts in societal attitudes and norms which lead,

49. von Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2019, 2025.
50. Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999, 248.
51. Norris 2013; Chu, Williamson, and Yeung 2024.
52. Chaudhry 2022.
53. Bush and Hadden 2025.
54. Donno 2010.
55. Lean 2012; Hyde and Marinov 2014; Bush and Prather 2017; Grömping 2021.
56. Beissinger 2007.
57. Simmons 2009.
58. Kim 2013; Welch, DeMeritt, and Conrad 2021; Goetz 2023.
59. Keck and Sikkink 1998.
60. Thomas 2001.

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over time, to increased enforcement and compliance.[61] Activists can use the benchmarks created by international legal commitments as mobilizational tools.[62]

Overall, decades of research on international law and institutions underscores that autocratic adaptation to liberal norms was never driven solely by the policies of outside powers. IO membership and treaty commitments are sticky even as democracy promotion diminishes. Transnational advocacy networks and domestic civil society remain key protagonists that can draw from broad popular support for democracy the world over. There is potential for the continued magnification of "bottom-up" demand for liberal values, as long as the institutional platforms for action—in the form of treaty commitments, monitoring bodies, regional institutions' democracy clauses, and domestic bureaucratic structures—remain. This perspective echoes Robert O. Keohane's analysis for the prospects of continued global economic cooperation after the decline of US hegemony: "Although hegemony helps to explain the creation of contemporary international regimes, the decline of hegemony does not necessarily lead symmetrically to their decay."[63]

The Persistence of Liberal Practices in Illiberal Regimes

This discussion underscores that autocratic regimes face persistent incentives and pressures to preserve the more open stance that many adopted during the post–Cold War period. As Figure 1 shows using data from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project,[64] average physical violence scores for both closed and electoral autocracies have remained relatively stable even through 2024. While closed autocracies have recently experienced lower respect for physical integrity rights (noted by lower index scores), those scores have not returned to their average levels during the Cold War period of the 1980s. Similarly in electoral autocracies, while recent years have shown more variation, the gains from the post–Cold War era appear to remain sticky. We observe these trends even though the number of autocracies increased in the past decade; those regimes have not shifted toward a totalitarian governance model that is characteristic of "fear" dictatorships.[65] Autocrats have not thus far rejected liberal practices and institutions wholesale.

Examples of autocracies that have resisted or rebounded from backsliding include Zambia (2022), Armenia (2019), Honduras (2022–23), Guatemala (2023), and Philippines (2022), where law-flouting and increasingly repressive incumbents were replaced in elections fueled by a surge in citizen opposition. The Philippines has not fully democratized, but it has reversed a slide toward a more oppressive and closed form of rule under former president Rodrigo Duterte. In March 2025, the Filipino government handed Duterte over to the International Criminal Court (ICC), in a

61. Htun and Jensenius 2022.
62. Kelley and Simmons 2019.
63. Keohane 1984, 50–51.
64. Coppedge et al. 2025.
65. Guriev and Treisman 2022.

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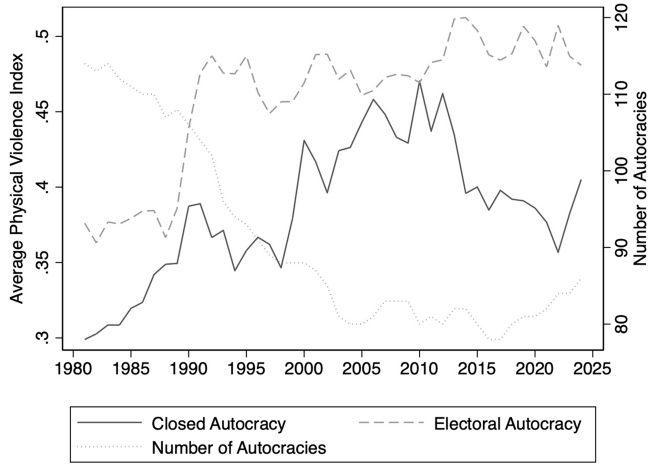
noteworthy show of support for the Court—and the LIO writ large—during a time when its legitimacy was under attack.[66] Notably, Duterte is only the second head of state to be transferred into ICC custody. In Zambia, Armenia, Guatemala, and Honduras, incumbent removal ushered in more democratic models in which rule of law and civil liberties were accorded greater respect. When this fragile equilibrium was challenged in Honduras by a power grab during President Xiomara Castro's first year in office, civil society mobilized to defend democracy.[67]



Source: V-Dem

FIGURE 1. *Average physical violence scores in closed and electoral autocracies*

Malaysia's experience over three decades exemplifies a more gradual path from hegemonic authoritarianism toward greater political competition, spurred by the "Reformasi" democracy movement that formed in response to opposition leader Anwar Ibraham's imprisonment in 1998. Malaysia's opposition parties had long competed in open but unfair elections. Reflecting shifting popular support, breakthrough electoral victories occurred in 2018 and 2022, in a contest that brought Ibraham to power after decades in opposition. That the Malaysian government did not repress its way to political survival reflects both the role of civil society activism[68] and the perceived legitimacy costs of abandoning competitive elections.[69]

66. Zvogbo 2025.
67. Palencia 2023.
68. Weiss 2009.
69. Levitsky and Way 2020.

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To be sure, these examples of persistent or deepening liberal features contrast with other authoritarian regimes, such as Russia, Turkey, and Cambodia, that have moved toward more complete political closure. Yet closed autocracies remain far fewer in number than electoral autocracies. And while they do not embrace electoral competition, many do possess mechanisms for consultation and responsiveness to citizens.[70]

That there are few examples of autocracies fully abandoning liberal façades underscores how costly repression is and how strong the incentives remain to uphold at least some liberalizing reforms. One could argue the constraints of the liberalizing norms have forced autocrats to turn to less violent means of preserving power, such as the use of courts.[71] Indeed, research has found that the repertoire of repressive tactics has become increasingly narrow.[72] When autocrats do turn to harsher repression, it is usually under conditions of acute political or economic pressure, in regimes where an already weak civil society or passive populace reduce the need for a liberal façade.[73] Russia illustrates this pattern clearly. While its democracy scores eroded gradually from the 1990s onward, it remained within the category of electoral autocracy and did not adopt sweeping repressive measures until the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. At that point, facing unprecedented domestic and international pressure, the regime passed draconian "fake news" and "discrediting the army" laws, shut down nearly all independent media, and detained thousands of protesters—an escalation designed to secure regime survival in wartime conditions.

Conclusion

How resilient is liberal norm adaptation in autocracies in the context of declining Western support for democracy and human rights? While much of the existing literature has focused on how international incentives encouraged reforms after the Cold War, we argue that the retrenchment of these incentives does not foretell a wholesale reversal of norm adoption. Our central claim is that autocratic engagement with liberal norms—though often insincere or strategically instrumental—has become embedded and even politically advantageous in ways that make full reversion to overtly repressive models costly and difficult. As significant scholarship has argued in our field, institutions, and the behaviors that they incentivize, are sticky. While the golden age of liberal international norm promotion may have passed, its legacies persist in surprising and sometimes paradoxical ways. Authoritarian adaptation was never purely the product of international pressure, and its future will depend as much on domestic political incentives and institutional inertia as on the evolving balance of global power.

We advance this argument in two steps. First, we show how autocrats' strategies of political control create enduring incentives to retain liberal practices. Institutions such as elections, gender reforms, and limited media openness, even when introduced

70. Truex 2016; Malesky, Todd, and Tran 2023.
71. Shen-Bayh 2018.
72. Bagozzi, Berliner, and Welch 2021.
73. Chaudhry 2022.

under external pressure, have become valuable tools for legitimacy and co-optation. Second, we emphasize how these reforms generate citizen expectations, empower civil society, and create mobilizational opportunities that make wholesale reversal politically costly and prone to backlash. What began as tactical concessions has evolved into embedded practices that continue to shape authoritarian rule, even in the absence of strong external enforcement.

We would be remiss not to acknowledge that many of the domestic reforms we highlight are modest in scope and fall short of genuine democratization. Yet the relevant comparison is not with liberal democracies, but with the more repressive authoritarian models of the Cold War, marked by political violence, mass censorship, and the complete exclusion of opposition. From this perspective, even selective concessions to liberal norms marked a significant opening that brought benefits for citizens in terms of sounder economic policy, growth, and better performance on education and health.[74]

Our analysis focuses on the implications of diminished Western democracy support—not on the scenario in which it is replaced by an assertive alternative. The possibility of coordinated autocracy promotion, particularly by China and Russia, raises new questions. While scholars debate the robustness of these efforts,[75] recent developments suggest that some illiberal powers are actively promoting alternative norms. These include not only sovereignty and regime security, but also normative alternatives to liberalism—emphasizing traditional values, state-led development, and geopolitical nonalignment.[76] The literature analyzed here implies that the success of these efforts will depend not only on the extent of external pressure for illiberal counternorms but also on whether these norms become embedded within IOs, align with the political interests of domestic elites, and have an underlying resonance with global publics. Together, these are high bars for aspiring autocracy promoters to clear. Building on the burgeoning research on autocratic international institutions,[77] more research could explore the conditions under which illiberal norms gain societal support,[78] when leaders are more likely to embed themselves in illiberal international institutions, and when leaders need the support of those institutions to promote their survival.[79]

While our analysis has focused primarily on the domestic political implications of weakening Western support for liberal norms, it also offers insights into the future of the LIO. On a positive note, new opportunities may arise for other states to assume greater ownership. Philippines' recent show of support for the ICC, South Africa's litigation of the Genocide Convention at the International Court of Justice, and the Economic Community of African States' creation of a new human rights tribunal[80] all exemplify developing-country leadership on human rights—small but important

74. Gandhi 2008; Gehlbach and Keefer 2010; Miller 2015b.
75. Tansey 2016; Weyland 2017; Yakouchyk 2019; Kneuer et al. 2019; Palestini et al. 2025.
76. Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Hofmann 2020; Ginsberg 2020; Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024.
77. Cottiero et al. 2025 provide a summary of this research.
78. Mattingly et al. 2025.
79. Debre 2022; Cottiero 2023; Cottiero et al. 2025; Cottiero and Schneider 2025.
80. John 2024.

signs that the LIO still enjoys their support. What is likely to emerge is thus not a wholesale subsumption of liberalism, but rather fragmentation in norm promotion: liberal IOs will continue to reinforce standards, perhaps even with the renewed support of developing countries, while autocratic regimes and their allies promote alternative variants. Our analysis suggests that the dimensions of the LIO to most robustly endure will be those more compatible with liberalized authoritarianism, such as multiparty elections and women's rights. Some aspects of the liberal order will survive while others recede—just as the "end of Bretton Woods" left core arrangements intact but repurposed, the decline of international liberalism is more likely to produce selective retreats and institutional adaptations than a complete collapse. If we are wrong and liberal values significantly erode across the board, it suggests that International Relations theory has underappreciated the reliance of institutions and norms on Western political support.

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Authors

Sarah Sunn Bush is Professor of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania. She can be reached at ssbush@upenn.edu.

Daniela Donno is Professor of Political Science at the University of Oklahoma. She can be reached at daniela.donno@ou.edu.

Jon C.W. Pevehouse is Mary Herman Rubinstein Professor of Political Science and Public Policy at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He can be reached at jcpevehouse@wisc.edu.

Christina J. Schneider is Professor of Political Science at the University of California. She can be reached at cjschneider@ucsd.edu.

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