Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft (2025) 19:313–338
https://doi.org/10.1007/s12286-025-00645-y

ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR VERGLEICHENDE POLITIKWISSENSCHAFT

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Rule of law backsliding across regime types: a comparative analysis of the role of party cohesion in shaping backsliding dynamics

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Received: 8 March 2024 / Revised: 11 May 2025 / Accepted: 14 July 2025 / Published online: 11 August 2025

Abstract The rule of law around the world has increasingly been eroded by elected governments seeking to expand their power. A traditional mechanism against rule of law backsliding is the horizontal and vertical separation of powers, as it creates veto points across the political system. Yet, endogenous erosion of the rule of law is progressing in consolidated democracies across regime types and despite institutional and contextual variation. We argue that this warrants a broadening of perspective beyond static formal institutions and encompassing cases on both sides of the 'transatlantic divide.' In order to increase our understanding of the functioning, effectiveness, and limits of these mechanisms, we systematically compare the backsliding dynamics at play across six exploratory cases in Europe and the Americas. We argue that the effectiveness of veto players critically depends on partisan cohesion around rule of law backsliding. Using the cases of Brazil, Hungary, Poland, Romania, the U.K., and the U.S., we illustrate how leaders commanding cohesive national(ized) parties are able to subvert institutional checks as well as underlying norms supporting the rule of law and liberal-democratic principles like judicial independence and legitimate political opposition and dissent across levels of government in the pursuit of their backsliding agenda.

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Keywords Executive aggrandizement · Autocratization · Absorbing veto players · Hungary · Poland · United States

1 Introduction

The rule of law in liberal democracies has been increasingly eroded as part of a broader trend of democratic backsliding, carried out by incumbent national governments to maintain their foothold on power (Pech and Scheppele 2017). The pressure on the relevant institutions and norms is exerted both through enacting legislation that targets the formal rule of law architecture and through informal pressure on and public delegitimizations of judges, public administration, and institutionalized journalism as a public accountability mechanism (Jee et al. 2022; Moynihan 2022; Scheppele 2018; Van Dalen 2021). Recognizing that the phenomenon is largely driven by incumbent executives, the emerging literature has identified several rule of law-backsliding resisters (Laebens and Lührmann 2021). Constitutionally, the work of the executive is dependent on three kinds of interrelationships: executive-legislative, intra-executive, and vertical (between national and subnational governments). Each of these relationships involves veto players (Tsebelis 2002) who may potentially resist executive actions that erode the rule of law.

This article explores the potential of party cohesion across branches and levels of government to contribute to our understanding of rule of law backsliding. Elected veto players such as parliamentarians, state presidents in double-headed executives, and office-holders in state and regional governments are usually political party nominees[1], who might either aid or inhibit executive agents pursuing rule of law backsliding. To map the effect of party cohesion on rule of law backsliding across different democratic systems (parliamentary, semi-presidential, and presidential, respectively) and state organization types (unitary and federal), this article examines instances of democratically elected executives attempting to undermine the rule of law in Brazil, Hungary, Poland, Romania, the United Kingdom (U.K.), and the United States (U.S.).

The article contributes to the extant literature in four major ways. First, it explores the relevant mechanisms by employing a configurational analysis of institutional setting and actor constellations. We find that in cases of rule of law backsliding, incumbent parties were able to engineer and maintain cohesion and to coordinate across different office-holders in horizontal and vertical separation-of-power institutions, rendering these accountability arrangements largely ineffective. This complements the emerging body of quantitative studies that successfully isolate the effect of a single variable but largely miss their interactions (Boese et al. 2021; Kellam and Benasaglio Berlucchi 2023). Second, we include the full variation of relevant institutional arrangements in our analysis and find the same mechanisms across all six country cases. We thereby bridge the "transatlantic divide" in the existing qualitative literature on rule of law backsliding, where the focus is either on the U.S. (e.g. Huq and Ginsburg 2018; Kalb and Bannon 2018; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018) *or*

[1] In some cases, this may even extend to party-nominated judges and civil servants.

Central and Eastern Europe (e.g., Bakke and Sitter 2022; Pirro and Stanley 2022). Third, we contribute to the emerging literature that emphasizes the relevance of all levels of government in (countering) rule of law backsliding (e.g., Grumbach 2022; O'Dwyer and Stenberg 2022). Finally, our study offers a key conceptual contribution: it proposes to shift or expand our perspective from rather static structural and institutional factors on which the extant backsliding literature focuses to include backsliding *dynamics* related to party cohesion.

2 The conditional effect of party cohesion on rule of law backsliding

Across regime types, modern constitutional democracies provide protections for the rule of law against self-aggrandizing or autocratic inclinations of incumbents. Most fundamentally, they shape three relationships that are essential for the operation of democratic government: *Executive-legislative relations* universally grant legislatures the law-making and control functions vis-à-vis the executive. Executives seeking to unduly expand their powers must ensure legislative support for any act that targets the formal rule of law framework. *Intra-executive relations* are based on the fact that executives are not unitary actors but rather are functionally differentiated between various portfolios. Some systems feature a dual executive with separate heads of state and government. This creates the possibility that some actors within the executive may oppose the attacks on the rule of law pursued by another part of the executive. Finally, *vertical relations* highlight the interrelations between national executives and subnational governments. National executives rely on regional and local levels to ensure equal application of their aggrandizing measures across the entire jurisdiction.

Undermining the rule of law—targeting effective judicial and legislative control as well as pillars of public scrutiny and accountability safeguarded by independent media and civil society—is among the first steps of illiberal-minded parties in government (Bochsler and Juon 2020; Diamond 2021; Lacey 2019). Seeking legalist cover, they "deliberately implement governmental blueprints which aim to systematically weaken, annihilate or capture internal checks on power with the view of dismantling the liberal democratic state and entrenching the long-term rule of the dominant party" (Pech and Scheppele 2017, p. 10).

Beyond the manifest legal structure, rule of law-backsliders increasingly question the *norm* of governmental self-restraint that is at the heart of liberal democracy (Diamond 2021; Lacey 2019). They legitimize executive power expansion and even an overhaul of the liberal-democratic regime as such by citing citizen dissatisfaction with an "ineffective" and "unresponsive" system of representation and a self-serving "establishment" (Caramani 2017). This lowers the reputational and electoral costs of changing the rules of the game (Laebens and Lührmann 2021). Besides normative (populist) arguments, some leaders may pressure democratic institutions and norms to avoid criminal inquiries or to protect clientelist networks.

However, do institutional veto players share the preference of incumbents for undermining rule of law institutions and norms? Specifically, are the veto players willing to oppose the intentions of aggrandizing executives or to join their efforts to undermine the rule of law? The study of democratic backsliding in selected country

cases points to partisan alignment or absorption of veto actors as a key condition in the process. For instance, disciplined parliamentary political parties serve as the vehicle of the incumbent executives to pass illiberal legislative acts and control appointments to influential positions within judiciary and public administration (Enyedi 2016; Nalepa 2019; Vaishnav 2024). Sometimes the backsliding coalition includes other parliamentary parties with an interest to close off the competition to potential outsider challengers (Mietzner 2024). In other cases, parliamentary opposition parties could unite into a common front to halt the backsliding efforts of the incumbent government (Gherghina and Bankov 2023). Nevertheless, the extant literature rarely explores this effect in a comparative perspective, which would contribute to systematic understanding of how dynamics of party cohesion interact with institutional and contextual characteristics of different countries.

We explore the impact of (lacking) party cohesion on rule of law backsliding across various horizontal and vertical separation-of-power arrangements. Horizontally, political power is separated between the executive and the legislature. In parliamentary systems, the executive and legislature are formally connected through the parliamentary no-confidence vote, whereas in presidential systems, the executive and legislature are independent (Barber et al. 2019). In semi-presidential systems, executive power is divided between a Prime Minister (PM) and a popularly elected president (Elgie 2010). Compared to parliamentary systems, where party cohesion is a matter of government survival, political parties and coalitions in presidential democracies do not have the same motivation to act in unitary fashion (Carey 2007). Therefore, presidential systems provide more freedom for intra-party voices critical of the government pressures on rule of law, particularly among the legislators. In semi-presidential systems, directly elected presidents may use their popular legitimacy to counteract the backsliding tendencies of the PM and her cabinet. In a parliamentary system, the structural tensions between the executive and legislative branches are minimized. Yet coalitional bargaining among parties provides an important check on a PM's ability to exercise unfettered power (Müller et al. 2008).

Party cohesion, however, is partially exogenous to the horizontal separation of powers, which implies an interaction between the two factors in the process of rule of law backsliding. Most prominently, party cohesion depends on the electoral system, as proportional representation rules motivate MPs to toe the party line (Olivella and Tavits 2013). The loyalty of veto actors to the ruling party might also be established through career ambitions and patronage appointments (Bersch et al. 2023; Høyland et al. 2019). Moreover, recent years have seen a significant increase in party polarization, resulting in partisan sorting within presidential legislatures (Thomsen 2014). Hence, in presidential systems, party cohesion tends to be high in different legislatures despite the independence between the executive and legislature (Calvo 2007; Sinclair 2003). In semi-presidential systems, directly elected presidents are often selected or supported by political parties and rely on their campaign finances to get elected. This triggers partisan behavior of presidents, even including support for the measures that undermine the rule of law, which contradicts their image as neutral arbiters in the political system (Bucur and Cheibub 2017). In parliamentary systems, resistance to rule of law backsliding might arise from the frequent occur-

rence of coalition governments. In such cases, not all government partners may be equally willing to pursue system-altering reforms (Müller et al. 2008).

Vertically, constitutions distinguish between federal and unitary states, as well as between decentralized and centralized states (Rodden 2004). Federal states grant autonomy to subnational units (regions), and decentralization confers broad competencies to local governments. The concepts of federalism and decentralization imply that subnational units possess significant self-rule competencies and participate in the decision-making process at the national level (shared rule) (Benz 2018). While vertical separation of powers might weaken political parties, there is also evidence that national incumbent parties can forge cross-level support for pressure on the rule of law (Simon 2024), which may be willingly provided by local and regional elites with national ambitions (Kukec 2019). High and rising levels of party system nationalization can be observed across regime types in Europe and beyond (Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Harbers 2010; Tiemann 2012). The resilience potential of a vertical separation of power to rule of law backsliding also depends on the alignment of sub-national party actors around these measures. Lastly, executive aggrandizement and rule of law backsliding can also occur subnationally and potentially dovetail with broader national trends (e.g. Grumbach 2022; Stenberg et al. 2022).

3 Research design and case selection

To explore the role of party cohesion around rule of law backsliding in different institutional settings, we conduct case studies. This design is particularly suitable for analyzing the complex relationships between executives and their institutional and political context. Our focus is on instances where democratically elected governments have attempted to expand their powers or ensure their survival in office by undermining the rule of law. Our case selection is based on the typical case strategy (Seawright and Gerring 2008), as we explore those cases where the presence (absence) of party cohesion correlates with more (less) successful rule of law backsliding attempts.[2] Within these cases, we analyze the dynamics of party cohesion across different degrees of separation of power. Horizontally, our cases include parliamentary, semi-presidential and presidential regimes. Vertically, our selection covers federal and unitary (centralized and decentralized) countries.

The selected episodes of "successful" rule of law backsliding occurred in Hungary (parliamentary and unitary system), Poland (semi-presidential and unitary system), and the U.S. (presidential and federal system). We contrast these cases with examples of similar regime types in which veto players more strongly resisted the executive attempts to undermine the rule of law, as party cohesion (around rule of law backsliding) was lower or less consistent across branches and levels of government in these countries. The contrasting cases selected are the U.K. (parliamentary

[2] See Geddes (2025) for the importance of examining successful and unsuccessful cases of backsliding. An additional set of cases could be examined where a party leader otherwise interested in backsliding fails to implement policies due to immediate residence or perceived failure. In these cases, institutional resilience exists but can be harder to analyze given the lack of a substantive attempt to backslide.

Table 1 The analyzed episodes of attempted rule of law backsliding in the order they are studied below.

Country	Period	(Main) Government party	Regime type	State organization
Hungary	2010–	Fidesz	Parliamentary	Unitary
U.K.	2019–2022	Conservative Party	Parliamentary	Unitary
Poland	2015–2023	Law and Justice (PiS)	Semipresidential	Decentralized
Romania	2017–2019	Social Democratic Party (PSD); Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE)	Semipresidential	Centralized
U.S.	2017–2021, 2025–[1]	Republican Party (GOP)	Presidential	Federal
Brazil	2019–2022	Changing affiliations, no major government party	Presidential	Federal

[1] Donald Trump was in office between 2017 and 2021 and returned in 2025. In the interim period he remained the uncontested unofficial leader of his party that, where it was in power (e.g. in the House of Representatives and state legislatures), continued on the path of backsliding, often in direct connection to Trump's personal concerns, allegations, and legal issues.

and unitary system), Romania (semi-presidential and unitary system), and Brazil (presidential and federal system) (Table 1).

The case studies systematically trace executive efforts to undermine the rule of law and the reaction by the relevant veto players at the national and subnational levels. They are guided by three questions: (1) What formal and informal measures did the executive take to undermine the existing rule of law framework? (2) What were the partisan constellations and dynamics between the government and other veto players? (3) What were the actions of veto players who agreed or did not agree with the rule of law backsliding by the government?

4 Parliamentary systems: Hungary and the United Kingdom

4.1 Hungary

Hungary is structured as a parliamentary democracy, with power concentrated in the PM and their ruling coalition. In Hungary, the right-wing Fidesz party came to power in 2010 with a parliamentary supermajority.[3] This has been aided by a striking lack of intra-party division (Enyedi 2016), a lesson learned from its failed reelection following its time in government between 1998 and 2002 (Lánczi 2005). This cohesion has been well-maintained over time, with even new parties formed by prominent Fidesz defectors primarily relying on votes from the fractured opposition (Kovarek 2025). Over the past fifteen years, Fidesz has taken advantage of the limited institutional constraints in parliamentary systems and used its fairly consistent constitutional supermajority to make wide-ranging changes to governing institutions, electoral rules, and the rule of law, all designed to ease access to government resources and to do away with obstacles to unfettered policymaking and future electoral risks. At the same time, Fidesz has made careful steps to maintain the formal legality of their changes (at least within the realm of national law) (Scheppele 2018), using this as a defense against charges of democratic backsliding and rule of law violations. Moreover, PM Viktor Orbán rhetorically emphasizes his governing philosophy of illiberal democracy, which provides a legitimating vision for eroding the rule of law institutions that govern liberal democracy. This series of reforms makes it nearly impossible for the opposition to dislodge Fidesz from power.

Even prior to Fidesz's consolidation after 2010, institutional rules and political trends in the Hungarian Parliament shifted the balance of power in favor of the PM and the government versus members of parliament (MPs) (Ilonszki 2007; Schiemann 2004). One particular institutional feature, the bonus allocation of seats to the largest party following an election, proved especially critical (Bánkuti et al. 2012). The bonus gave Fidesz a legislative supermajority, removing coalitional dynamics as a factor in Hungarian politics. Typically, coalition politics can be a de facto limiting factor on policymaking in parliamentary systems due to the complex negotiations and compromises needed to maintain a legislative majority (e.g., Müller and Strøm

[3] Fidesz is nominally in a coalition with the Christian Democratic Party (KDNP), but in practice KDNP is entirely subordinate to Fidesz and has no independent agenda.

2000). With a single party supermajority, as opposed to a supermajority formed via a coalition of independent parties, parliamentary systems offer very limited checks on prime-ministerial power (Pozsár-Szentmiklósy 2017). Another theoretical veto player exists: in addition to the power invested in the PM, there is an indirectly-elected state president with the power to veto legislation. In the first twenty years of Hungarian democracy, we did see presidents use this veto and sometimes contentious relationships between PMs and presidents during periods of cohabitation (see Köker 2017, pp. 137–155). However, since they are elected by parliament, presidents are disincentivized from blocking significant amounts of legislation to consider their own re-election prospects. The possibilities of veto use are further reduced when a dominant party is in office, as presidents cannot create a separate partisan base of support.

This existing tendency toward majoritarianism only accelerated with Fidesz in power. PM Orbán has used this power to limit the ability of the opposition to fairly contest elections in the future, helping to ensure Fidesz's continued electoral dominance. After taking power, the Fidesz-led government changed electoral rules, shrunk the size of the parliament, and gerrymandered electoral districts in their favor (Bánkuti et al. 2012; Scheppele 2022). Orbán's government also instituted a series of laws to selectively tailor the composition of the electorate in their favor (Scheppele 2022), a less obvious means of influencing contestation that help to ensure their continual hold on power. Aside from gaining fairly unfettered policymaking authority and ensuring their continued electoral victories, Fidesz has also used its authority to assert control over a wide range of other societal institutions, and corruption—an existential threat for successful maintenance of the rule of law (Magyar 2016)—is critical in their hold on power by trying to ensure broader loyalty, not only party cohesion. Fidesz leverages their control of governmental resources to reward supporters in the business community (Rogers 2020) and has reduced oversight of the government (Jakli and Stenberg 2021).

But while Fidesz has asserted control over a huge range of independent institutions in society, their increased control over the judiciary has proven to be both most salient for its impact on the rule of law as well as its removal of another theoretical check on majoritarian power impulses. First by amending the existing constitution, and then in the new constitution that went into effect in January 2012, Fidesz asserted partisan control of the judiciary by formally limiting the scope of the courts, reducing their informal power, and changing appointment and administrative procedures over judges (Aydin-Cakir 2023). Fidesz expanded the Constitutional Court, appointing four new justices with strong party links (Vincze 2014). Furthermore, reducing the retirement age for judges forced large numbers to retire, similarly allowing Fidesz to appoint replacements throughout the court system (Scheppele and Kovács 2018, p. 192).

Fidesz weakened the parliament's formal power, reducing its threat as a veto player by instituting a new committee, the Committee on Legislation, which has wide powers to revise and amend decisions made in other legislative committees (Ilonszki and Vajda 2021). In practice, this functionally subordinates other committees and the plenary to the new committee controlled directly by Fidesz, giving them full policymaking authority. The government also increasingly relies on wide-ranging

omnibus legislation, reducing the ability of opposition MPs to object to individual components. Moreover, Fidesz has maintained a high degree of cohesion within its parliamentary party group concerning the measures against the rule of law. As one of the most dramatic examples, the Hungarian parliament self-abrogated their right to rule during the COVID-19 pandemic, on two separate occasions, by giving the PM the right to rule by decree for periods of several months (Stenberg et al. 2022, p. 6). In doing so, they bypassed any theoretical check that the institution could provide and demonstrated a considerable intrinsic threat to the rule of law.

Hungary is a strongly centralized state, and decentralization plays a fairly limited role in limiting Fidesz's exercise of power. A regional tier of government has mostly administrative competencies, is politically very weak, and garners little public attention (Dobos and Várnagy 2017), limiting the capacity of the opposition to develop experience governing in regional administration. Local governments are directly elected and do have some substantive policy responsibilities, but Fidesz has exerted considerable pressure to limit local independence, which has only increased with the COVID-19 pandemic (Stenberg et al. 2022). And while there have been some high-profile successes for opposition candidates in local elections (Kovarek and Littvay 2022), on the whole Fidesz has continued to dominate local politics around the country (Stenberg 2022).

4.2 The United Kingdom

The United Kingdom is a Westminster parliamentary system, in which the largest party provides the PM. MPs are elected in single member districts wherein parties field single candidates. This in practice has led to a system dominated by two parties—and to a system in which typically party cohesion is lower (Quinn et al. 2024). Historically—though there are recent prominent exceptions—the ruling party has not required a coalition partner, meaning coalitional politics provide a minimal check on the exercise of power. As such, the structural conditions are present in the U.K. where a single ruling party could potentially have the opportunity to pursue democratic backsliding to stay in power. None of this led to any serious concerns about democratic backsliding, though, until Boris Johnson, the third consecutive Conservative (Tory) PM since 2010, took power in 2019.

Johnson moved quickly to pursue his political agenda, and endeavored to overcome resistance from both members of his party as well as from other institutional bodies. This was most apparent with his fall 2019 efforts to prorogue (functionally suspend) parliament for five weeks in September and October. Johnson sought a prorogation in response to crossbench parliamentary efforts to delay the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union to avert a No Deal Brexit. The prorogation was overturned by the U.K. Supreme Court, stating that the decision had unlawful effects on the U.K.'s constitutional principles (Feldman 2020), and Parliament was allowed back in session. Johnson did not bear any immediate price for this within the party or among the electorate, and the Tories won handily in the December 2019 general election.

While the party remained in power, it was bitterly divided by factionalism, especially stemming from the 2015 Brexit vote. As such, despite their long continuous

period of rule, party cohesion among the Tories in parliament has been quite low (see Xu and Lu 2022; Heppell 2023). Following the December 2019 election, Johnson expelled 21 MPs from the Conservative Party who had strong pro-Remain stances, in order to reduce internal party opposition (Alexandre-Collier 2022). Although the Conservatives enjoyed a considerable majority, Johnson was unable to entirely bend the Tories in parliament to his will. The party lacked the internal unity to look the other way during the various ethics concerns raised against the Johnson administration. The Partygate scandal (resulting from members of the Johnson administration violating COVID protocols and then lying to Parliament about it) weakened his control. Ultimately a rebellion among party members in cabinet forced him out of Tory leadership and his resignation as PM (Walker 2023). Johnson resigned as an MP as well in June 2023, after the Conservative-majority Privileges Committee within Parliament found him guilty of lying to the body (Bowman and Roe-Crines 2023)—and thus of norm-violation in the checks-and-balances system. The Johnson tenure suggests that the institutions in the U.K. have held to protect the rule of law, even aided by some members of Johnson's party. Although some scholars still point to backsliding during the period (Ward and Ward 2023; Young 2024), some of the more concrete efforts to consolidate authority were restricted or at least limited in scope (Young 2024, p. 197). Johnson may have failed to push institutions past the brink regardless of party cohesion, but doing so without the unified support of the Conservative Party was certainly impossible.

5 Semi-presidential systems: Poland and Romania

5.1 Poland

Poland is a semi-presidential system, where the government is responsible to parliament (Sejm), but shares executive power with a popularly elected president. The latter is one of the most institutionally powerful presidents among the premier-presidential systems of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) (Bairett 2015). In particular, Polish presidents have the authority to veto all non-budgetary bills, which the parliament can override only with a three-fifths majority of MPs. At the same time, the parliamentary procedure grants considerable bill initiation and amendment power to individual MPs (Nalepa 2016). Vertical separation of power in Poland is characterized by a unitary-decentralized state structure with a three-tier system of government (regions, counties, and municipalities). The regionalization of Poland affected the internal organization of some Polish parties, as they are characterized by the existence of powerful regional party leaders or "barons" (Sokołowski 2012).

The rule of law in Poland came under pressure in 2015, when the Law and Justice Party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) entered government with the support of an absolute parliamentary majority. Aiming to resolve the meta-political issues left open since the transition period (Bill and Stanley 2020, p. 379), the PiS government undertook a carefully planned campaign to dismantle the fundamental pillars of liberal constitutionalism. For instance, the government placed the National Council of Judiciary under the control of the PiS-led parliamentary majority, granting itself

influence over the selection and disciplining of judges (Pirro and Stanley 2022). In addition, the Ministry of Justice was given the power to appoint court presidents (Gajda-Roszczynialska and Markiewicz 2020). In the Constitutional Tribunal, the government reduced the mandatory retirement age and appointed its loyalists. Procedurally, the government introduced a 2/3 majority decision rule, making it more difficult for the constitutional judges to invalidate unconstitutional government bills (Pirro and Stanley 2022).

The far-reaching overhaul of the Polish judiciary was carried out by a highly cohesive PiS party headed by Jarosław Kaczyński. Not only did the PiS faction in the Sejm vote in unified fashion on the relevant legislation, but it also expedited the legislative process to meet the government's legislative ambitions (Joński and Rogowski 2020). The streamlining of the legislative process was made possible by the appointment of a loyal speaker of the Sejm (Marszałek) with extensive positive and negative agenda-setting powers (Nalepa 2019). Another route for the government was to disguise its own bills as personal member bills, as these are processed according to a simplified legislative procedure (Pirro and Stanley 2022). Thus, PiS has taken control of the relatively broad collective and individual powers of parliamentarians to create a rubber-stamp parliament that serves its illiberal agenda (Nalepa 2020).

Party loyalty also prevented the Polish president from obstructing the government's rule of law backsliding. Andrzej Duda was elected as the head of state just a few months before the 2015 parliamentary elections. A member of the PiS until the election, President Duda quickly fell in line with the party on reforms that undermine the rule of law. Commenting on the right of the parliamentary majority to introduce sweeping reforms, he delegitimized the norm of restraint and the institutional guardrails safeguarding it: "... the right of the victorious majority to implement its program cannot be denied. [...] Undermining these principles runs counter to the very foundations of representative democracy" (Duda 2018). In the legislative process, the president signed the vast majority of "illiberal" bills into law with unusual urgency (Joński and Rogowski 2020, p. 3). In one of the most controversial appointments, he used his power of appointment of Constitutional Tribunal judges to block three judges legally selected by the outgoing Civic Platform (PO) government from taking office (Aydin-Cakir 2023). An exceptional presidential veto in July 2017 of a government legislation to replace all Supreme Court judges and allow political control of the National Council of Judiciary did not derail the overall rule of law backsliding. In September of the same year, the PiS-controlled parliamentary majority passed slightly amended versions of these bills, which Duda signed into law without objection (Grzymala-Busse 2019; Matczak 2020).

Although the PiS and its leader Kaczyński dominated national politics, they did not have a complete control of the key subnational governments. The existence of large urban centers has created liberal pockets in subnational governments. As a result, subnational governments provided the most effective, albeit limited, resistance to the PiS government's rule of law backsliding (Przybylski 2018). Under the leadership of Warsaw's mayor Rafał Trzaskowski, a member of the opposition PO, Polish cities increasingly demanded direct EU funding that would bypass the then-national government (Zalan 2020). The bottom-up resistance was made more likely

by the incomplete party politicization of local government, as many mayors are non-partisans (O'Dwyer and Stenberg 2022). Despite the strongly centralized party organization of PiS (Pytlas 2021), the party has not been able to establish dominance in Polish city halls.

5.2 Romania

In Romania, the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and its junior coalition partner the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE) began to weaken the rule of law following their electoral victory in December 2016. Unlike in Poland, where PiS acted based on a genuinely conservative ideology, the Romanian government aimed to impede anti-corruption investigations and trials involving numerous politicians from the ruling parties, and most prominently, the PSD leader Liviu Dragnea (Stan and Zaharia 2017). The measures included formal amendments to judicial procedures, the recruitment and control of judges and prosecutors, and the reduction of penalties for certain offences (Dumbrava 2021, p. 447; Stan and Zaharia 2017, p. 252). Similarly to Kaczyński in Poland, Dragnea dominated the PSD and its parliamentary group. In addition to voting in favor of the relevant bills and amendments, the PSD parliamentary group expedited legislative procedures for these acts (Moraru and Bercea 2022) and tolerated the government's bypassing of parliament by the use of Government Emergency Ordinances (Venice Commission 2019).

Romanian semi-presidentialism features an institutionally powerful directly elected president in addition to the parliament where party coalitions are the norm (Ștefan 2021). These executive and legislative veto points were not under the control of PSD and they exercised considerable resistance. As the coalition partner of PSD, ALDE initially supported the government attacks on the judiciary. However, what finally halted rule of law backsliding in Romania was the breakup of the coalition over the disagreement over the nomination of ALDE chairman Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu as a joint presidential candidate of the coalition. Another obstacle to rule of law backsliding was the cohabitation between the PSD-ALDE government and President Klaus Iohannis, who was affiliated with the oppositional National Liberal Party (PNL). Although Iohannis was compelled to sign many of the backsliding bills into law, he effectively used his power to refer legislation to the Constitutional Court to slow down the pace of the reforms (Pech et al. 2019). He also exercised his power to initiate a non-binding referendum on the government's rule of law agenda (Kiss and Székely 2022).

At the local level, PSD maintained partisan control of sub-national governments. In contrast to Poland, this prevented much of the bottom-up resistance to rule of law backsliding. In addition to partisan loyalty, numerous local and regional officials were themselves being prosecuted for corruption. For instance, in 2015 alone, the National Anti-Corruption Directorate (DNA) opened corruption cases against over 100 local officials, including mayors and their deputies (Marica 2016), many of whom were paradoxically re-elected in 2016 (Bågenholm and Charron 2020). This motivated the complicit mayors and other local government officials to support the efforts of the central government to sidetrack the anti-corruption campaign.

6 Presidential systems: the United States and Brazil

6.1 The United States

Although presidential systems are generally considered to be more vulnerable to backsliding than parliamentary ones, the political system of the U.S.—famously designed precisely to avoid quasi-monarchical or absolute rule—provides robust rule of law protections (Lee 2020). Horizontally, these protections are grounded in the separation of powers and the checks and balances between the branches of government. Vertically, they rely on the high degree of autonomy guaranteed to the individual states in U.S. federalism. The existence of strong subnational actors, however, cannot by implication be presumed to per se counter threats to liberal democracy. Indeed, historically, they themselves have in many cases championed illiberal, undemocratic rule and in particular racial hierarchies (Mickey 2015). Yet, with a view to democratic stability on the national level, the way U.S. federalism has historically translated into federalized parties with low levels of political and ideological cohesion (Epstein 1982) has been highlighted as an "exceptional" (Linz 1990, p. 53) potential to secure constitutional stability.

During the past decades, however, the built-in backsliding resilience of the decentralized party system has been significantly weakened by interlinked trends of nationalization and polarization. While the former describes increased party cohesion, homogenization of political agendas, and interest group alignment around each of the two major parties, the latter encompasses, among others, growing ideological distance, "radical partisanship," and outright hostility among partisans (Hopkins 2018; Kalmoe and Mason 2018; Mason 2018; Pierson and Schickler 2020). Importantly, polarization has been asymmetrically propelled by the Republican Party (GOP) (Grossman and Hopkins 2016; Hacker and Pierson 2015; McCarty 2019).

During Donald Trump's first term (Trump-45), two interfused backsliding dynamics could be identified. They have continued and drastically intensified under Trump-47. The first dynamic legitimizes, entrenches, and nationalizes already ongoing (coordinated) backsliding in the federal-level separation of powers and on the state level (Grumbach 2022; Hertel-Fernandez 2019; Stenberg et al. 2022)[4]. The second backsliding dynamic is characterized by an often flaunting populist-type executive aggrandizement and, importantly, a personalization of the GOP that has driven party cohesion and discipline to an extreme.

The first dynamic has become especially relevant regarding elections and the judiciary: In 2017, Trump-45 employed the "Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity" to rationalize and promote restrictive state-level election laws that tilt the democratic playing field by disproportionately disadvantaging demographic groups who likely support the Democratic Party (Mettler and Lieberman 2020). His post-2020 Big Lie of election fraud has served as a justification for Republican state-level allies to weaken and delegitimize the vertical dispersal of authority in the form of independent election administration (Jacobs and Choate 2022). This has resulted in a wave of state-level reform initiatives that reduce professional nonpartisan

[4] This clearly already calls into question a general assumption of state-level veto players in this case.

administrative autonomy and "increase the risk of election subversion directly or indirectly" (States United Democracy Center 2023, p. 8). Trump-47's—partially stayed at the time of publication—Executive Order 14248 now directly seeks to overhaul, control, and place restrictions on election processes (that are in the purview of the states and congress) and to use the Election Assistance Commission to financially pressure states to comply.

Regarding separation-of-powers backsliding, Republican engineering of Supreme Court majorities was already ongoing when Trump first took office. In several states, this included efforts to pack the respective state Supreme Courts and to change selection procedures and long-established underlying norms (Keck 2022, pp. 155–156). On federal level, Senate Republicans blatantly broke institutional norms to preserve over 100 federal-level judicial vacancies for Trump and to secure the highly controversial life-time confirmation of three Trump-nominated, unusually partisan Supreme Court justices (Hollis-Brusky and Parry 2021; Keck 2022). In 2024, the three Trump Supreme Court appointees joined the sitting Republican-nominated justices to inscribe into the Constitution a broad presidential immunity from criminal prosecution in a case relating to Trump's efforts to overturn his 2020 election loss. In another of Trump's criminal cases, a newly Trump-appointed federal judge presided (instead of recusing herself). Her decisions were repeatedly reversed by the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals who ruled that she "improperly exercised equitable jurisdiction" and her interpretation of the law 'would violate bedrock separation-of-powers limitations' (USCA11 2022, 21). On the day she suddenly dismissed the case before it could go to trial, Congressman Matt Gaetz, later Trump-47's first pick for attorney general, presented her as "Future Supreme Court Justice Cannon" on X[5]. These episodes are consistent with—even publicly emphasized—expectations of gratitude or loyalty from Supreme Court appointees (Pengelly 2024) and with documented attempts by Trump-45 to secure a personalized loyalty pledge from the FBI director (Schmidt 2017).

Notably, they also underline how effective Trump was in disciplining "his" party even during a period when he held no national office or formal role in the GOP: While Trump's multi-pronged campaign to overturn the 2020 election—which culminated in the violent attack on the Capitol—was ultimately rejected in the court system and by enough officials of both parties in key positions in the administration and certification of elections, it had also been promoted and legitimized by many Republican office-holders on state and national level (Simon 2024). With their support and allegiance, Trump utilized the Big Lie underlying his attempted coup to maintain party control and cohesion. By the 2022 midterms this party cohesion was, strikingly, most strongly formed and enforced around Trump—now a private citizen—and his election denialism instead of traditional policy positions, state-level concerns, or traditional conservative philosophy (Simon and Sonnicksen 2024).

Since then, Trump and high-ranking GOP members have even woven his indictments and convictions in several civil and criminal cases into a conspiracist narrative

[5] See https://x.com/mattgaetz/status/1812850083269845272. Gaetz ultimately withdrew his name from contention amidst a controversy over the release of a House Ethics report that confirmed sexual misconduct allegations against him.

of a "witch hunt" and a "weaponized" justice system. This dovetailed with Trump-45's frequent discrediting attacks on courts that had asserted legal limits to his executive orders and administrative actions (Kalb and Bannon 2018; Lee 2020). He increasingly inscribed the delegitimization of judges (except the Trump-appointed ones mentioned above), courts, and the rule of law more broadly into the official party line. Currently, there is no noteworthy intra-party dissent to either Trump-47 initiatives that directly challenge the constitution (e.g., due process rights or birthright citizenship) or to selective compliance, inaccurate public reinterpretation, or insults and threats of impeachment leveled against judges as the administration's reaction to negative court rulings (e.g., Raymond 2025).[6] Even the unconstitutional push for a third term that Trump openly entertains (Welker and Lebowitz 2025) has not had any negative effect on his command of the party.

In Congress itself, the strict policing of party cohesion around Trump personally also further increased after he left office having been impeached for incitement of insurrection. Once Trump was rehabilitated by Congressional GOP leaders—potential veto players—only weeks later, the prospects for future accountability under constitutional checks and balances were thwarted. Just like after Trump's first impeachment for abuse of power and obstruction of Congress in 2019, Republican Senate leadership prevented a conviction and discredited a comprehensive congressional investigation. Even more, the assault on the Capitol was whitewashed, and Republicans who resisted backsliding were ostracized, primaried, and formally censured by the national and state parties (Blake 2023; Republican National Committee 2021). Trump-47 then mass-pardoned or converted the sentences of incarcerated January 6 convicts, some of whom had been convicted of seditious conspiracy.

While some Republicans for instance recently signaled support for a Democratic-led legislative initiative to limit Trump-47's unilateral imposition of tariffs (Scott et al. 2025), the Republican-led Congress by no means fulfills its oversight function or effectively rebukes presidential overreach into competencies constitutionally vested in Congress, such as the power of the purse (explicitly encompassing the power to lay tariffs) or the power to (dis-)establish government agencies. Instead, the Republican House majority seems to limit itself to acclamation. During the 118th Congress (when Trump was out of office) Republican Congressional leaders even leveled congressional investigatory and budgetary powers as threats against officials involved in the criminal prosecution of Trump at the state level (Beitsch 2024; Steakin and Faulders 2023). Republican-led state legislatures also failed to act as veto players. Legislative reforms politicizing law enforcement rather echoed the national-level approach to protect Trump legally in states where criminal proceedings were ongoing (Amy 2023).

The national leadership and the Republican National Committee (RNC) have become entirely interwoven with Trump personally (Galvin 2020; Heersink 2018)—he

[6] Given the extraordinary level of party cohesion in the Republican congressional conference (see below), the judiciary seems to be the most promising branch to enforce its constitutional prerogatives and uphold the rule of law despite the limits described above. Two federal judges have already raised the possibility of holding members of the Trump-47 administration in contempt for failing to abide by court orders (e.g., Beitsch and Schonfeld 2025).

even installed his daughter-in-law as a national RNC co-chair in 2025. State parties have also continued a close alignment with Trump (e.g., Luscombe 2024), which further decreased their capacity to act independently. This ever-growing cohesiveness has been driven and policed also by harassment, threats, and intimidation targeting resisting Republican office-holders, members of the judiciary, and local election officials (Brennan Center 2021; So et al. 2022; Martin and Haberman 2019; Eisler and Parker 2024). Under Trump-47, intimidating and retaliatory action against law firms, universities, the media, and even individuals (including Trump-45 officials) has become official government policy (e.g., Presidential Memorandum April 9, 2025; Executive Order 14237; Vile 2025). Even seasoned Republican lawmakers, such as Alaska Senator Lisa Murkowski, perceive dissent against the sweeping changes and cuts aggressively promoted by Trump-47 and his advisors as dangerous: "We are all afraid. [...] I am oftentimes very anxious myself about using my voice, because retaliation is real" (in Hughes 2025).

The first months of Trump-47 have furthermore cast light on an underresearched backsliding feature that has also gotten more relevant: extra-government and extra-party actors (but see e.g. Hertel-Fernandez 2019) like Elon Musk. Building on Trump-45 initiatives (Bauer and Becker 2020; Moynihan 2022), Musk pursued and personified the objective of weakening and politically controlling the public administration—a bulwark against backsliding that has become discredited as the "deep state"—with unprecedented and indiscriminate force.[7] Beyond the transformations and separation-of-powers violations Musk spearheaded through the so-called Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE)[8], he was also key in enforcing party cohesion: drawing on his mega-platform X and virtually unlimited resources, he threatened senators who objected to Trump's controversial nominees or initiatives to transform the federal government (Beaumont et al. 2024; Bolton 2025). In the midst of a very public split in early summer 2025 that ultimately centered around Trump's major legislative project, the "One Big Beautiful Bill," Musk again publicly threatened and discredited Republican lawmakers, this time to deter them from supporting the bill (Siddiqui and Sands 2025). However, party loyalty, spurred also by counter-threats issued by the president (Kilander et al. 2025), seems to have prevailed.

Trump and his personal and partisan allies thus continue to very visibly and forcefully escalate the backsliding dynamics that erode the foundational legitimacy of horizontal and vertical precautions guaranteeing political and legal accountability, judicial and administrative independence, and the rule of law.

6.2 Brazil

After military dictatorship ended in 1985, Brazil gave itself a new democratic constitution in 1988 that codified a division of powers arrangement with accountability checks. It accorded the president "sweeping constitutional powers" which, however,

[7] See the assessments by several scholars at https://www.hks.harvard.edu/faculty-research/policy-topics/democracy-governance/analyzing-doge-actions-one-month-trumps-second.

[8] DOGE is not legally a department as it was not created by Congress, and its head did not go through a Senate confirmation process, a key element of constitutional checks and balances.

are moderated in practice by his "weak partisan powers" (Mainwaring 2012, p. 59). The resulting "coalitional" presidentialism (Power 2010; cf. Abranches 1988) is shaped by a highly fragmented party system with low levels of discipline and ideological consistency within the parties and low party loyalty of candidates and office-holders, including presidents (Desposato 2006; Mainwaring 2012). Moreover, Brazil's decentralized federalism accords significant autonomy and political clout to governors (and even some mayors) and it introduces state loyalties into the already heterogenous parties. In order to avoid gridlock between executive and legislative (Linz 1994), presidents thus "trade" access to appointments and resources for legislative support for their agenda (Mainwaring 2012).

In the past decade, this system has come under serious stress as the ideological distance between parties and between Congress and presidents has considerably increased (Zucco and Power 2024). Furthermore, a dubious impeachment of former President Rousseff and the findings and circumstances of the large-scale anti-corruption investigation "Car Wash" (*Lava Jato*) are major episodes in a trajectory of declining rule of law and democratic stability (Hunter and Power 2019; Neto and Alves Pimenta 2020). Jair Bolsonaro, who held the Brazilian presidency between 2019 and 2022, built on and exacerbated this trend. Even as president, he glorified the military dictatorship and the political violence exercised under it, he openly expressed disdain for women and ethnic and sexual minorities, and he consistently delegitimized institutions like Congress, the Supreme Court, the free press and public administration that sustain democratic deliberation, participation, accountability, and independency (Daly 2020; Duque and Smith 2019).

His radical, minoritarian agenda, however, also consistently translated into a minoritarian strategy (Neto and Alves Pimenta 2020, p. 192) that failed to build durable (cross-)partisan coherence around ideological tenets or backsliding efforts. Devoid of party loyalty himself, Bolsonaro won the presidency after joining the minor, weakly institutionalized Social Liberal Party. The latter gained 10% in the Chamber of Deputies and 5% in the Senate in 2018 but never played a significant role in Bolsonaro's campaign or government (Hunter and Power 2019, p. 81; Neto and Piementa 2020, pp. 188–189). Bolsonaro refused to engage in bargaining with congressional party leaders to build a cabinet supported by a traditional majority coalition. His cabinet was instead shaped by interest groups, congressional caucuses, and most importantly the military, none of which command the constitutional prerogatives undergirding legislative work (Duque and Smith 2019; Peci 2021). Besides being comparatively unproductive in terms of legislative proposals, the resulting minority government also encountered institutional obstacles to bills, decrees, and even vetoes it issued (Almeida in Neto and Alves Pimenta 2020, p. 190).

Several immediate attacks on the rule of law related to Bolsonaro and his politically active sons were parried by cabinet members. For instance, Minister of Justice Sergio Moro resigned, publicly accusing Bolsonaro of having interfered in police investigations into his son (Zimmermann 2021). After defying court orders in another corruption investigation, Jair Bolsonaro inflamed protests and threatened to deploy the military, only to be rebuked by his own Defense Minister (Zimmermann 2021). While Bolsonaro's closest alliance was with the military, as a 'partisan' coherence around rule of law backsliding it thus had important limits. Becoming concerned with

the publicly displayed pro-Bolsonaro politicization of active-duty military personnel, the army commander himself established rules to curb their online activism (Neto and Alves Pimenta 2020, p. 197). Bolsonaro's attempts to bring the largely tenure-based public administration under his political control by massively expanding the presence and norms (hierarchy, obedience, loyalty) of the military on all levels of the civil service clearly eroded liberal norms and democratic governance (Bauer et al. 2025); however, this form of backsliding also faced internal resistance in the bureaucracy (Guedes-Neto and Peters 2021; Peci 2021). Lastly, Bolsonaro also triggered federalist veto players by alienating several—even ideologically close—governors (Neto and Alves Pimenta 2020, p. 193). In the field of public health, state and municipal governments, backed by the Supreme Court, hampered Bolsonaro's mismanagement and attempted overreach during the pandemic (Barberia and Gómez 2020).

Even before the election in October 2022, Bolsonaro had spread false allegations of irregularities in the electronic election infrastructure for months publicly and vis-à-vis foreign ambassadors. After his defeat, Bolsonaro's supporters violently attacked government buildings January 6-style (Picheta 2023). He has faced legal accountability in both cases: In 2023 he was barred from running for office until 2030 for abuse of power and casting unfounded doubts on Brazil's electronic voting system (Savarese and Jeantet 2023). Recently, he was ordered to stand trial for what investigators describe as a conspiratorial campaign to keep him in power and "eliminate the democratic rule of law" after his election loss (Buschschlüter 2025). While he has maintained some political clout and loyal (online) supporters and still holds a 'ceremonial leadership role' in the Liberal Party, he is no longer widely considered the central opposition leader (Savarese and Jeantet 2023).

7 Conclusion

Elected governments seeking to expand and solidify their power by undermining constitutional rule of law protections have become a phenomenon that can be identified across regions and democratic regime types. In this article, we have studied six cases representing a variety of horizontal and vertical separation-of-powers configurations to explore the functioning of the mechanism of party cohesion in processes of rule of law backsliding. We find that during the time under consideration in Hungary, Poland, and the U.S., a (strictly policed) cohesion of the parties in government enabled and strengthened self-aggrandizing illiberal party leaders in their efforts to annex the powers of other institutional actors to pursue their backsliding agenda. In the U.S. case in particular, this party cohesion around rule of law backsliding has been nationalized and markedly increased since Trump-45. The cohesion of these parties extends to subnational level, where loyal party members in regional and state institutions translate the backsliding agenda within their purview or have already (independently or in a coordinated manner) pursued backsliding efforts on their own. In our other cases—Romania, Brazil, and the U.K.—these enabling factors were not present and the scope and medium-term effects of rule of law backsliding were more limited.

These findings have important implications. First, the democratic resilience function of separation-of-power arrangements depends on the limited partisan coordination and cohesion around the transformational agenda between the occupants of the respective offices. At the same time, such partisan coordination works largely independently of the regime-specific differences of horizontal and vertical separation-of-power designs (as seen in Poland and the U.S.). Rather, it is actively promoted against the backdrop of longer-term trends such as polarization and nationalization of politics and parties—and by further exacerbating them. Moreover, it is driven by the elevation of the delegitimization of underlying liberal-democratic norms and conventions including governmental restraint or judicial and administrative independence as the official party line. Second, the potential of subnational levels to constrain or further rule of law backsliding, separately or in connection with the national level, should receive greater attention by scholars and defenders of liberal democracy alike. Lastly, our exploratory study demonstrates why it is critical to take into account not only rather static, structural factors and formal institutions but also the dynamic interactions between institutional and actor configurations. More analytical and empirical work will be necessary to further flesh out and systematize the specific dynamics through which party cohesion around a backsliding agenda can be created, entrenched, and enforced. Further research should also consider the methodological challenges associated with detecting cases of backsliding which do not just fail (as in the cases we analyze here) but are deterred or aborted at such an early stage as to be difficult to analyze.[9] Finally, more research is necessary to better understand the ways that political actors can encourage intra-party dynamics and incentives that prevent a full consolidation of a party in support of backsliding and autocratization.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

Conflict of interest M. Kukec, J. Simon, and M. Stenberg declare that they have no competing interests.

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[9] We thank an anonymous reviewer for this point.

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