

# From Democratic Backsliding to Illiberal Democracy: Representation, Governance, and Institutional Erosion (2000–2023)

Javier González Gómez<sup>1</sup>, Ribka Espinoza Palacios<sup>2</sup>  
**Ethos, Innovation in Public Policy**<sup>3</sup>

## Abstract:

This article examines recent processes of democratic erosion from the hypothesis that the phenomenon of backsliding does not predominantly lead to transitions toward autocratic regimes, but rather to the consolidation of forms of illiberal democracy that preserve electoral institutions and formal representative structures while substantially weakening fundamental rights, institutional checks and balances, and mechanisms of accountability.

Based on a quantitative-comparative design, the study combines V-Dem<sup>4</sup> indicators on democratic quality, civil liberties, and institutional backsliding with measures of government quality and corruption from the Quality of Government (QoG) Institute<sup>5</sup>, as well as data on political representation, parliamentary functioning, and party systems from REPDEM<sup>6</sup>.

The analysis relies on the comparison of national and regional trajectories between 2000 and 2023, using standardized scores, time series, and comparative visualizations to identify differentiated patterns of democratic erosion. It empirically confirms the hypothesis that state capacity and government performance explain democratic resilience only to a limited extent, in contrast to explanations centered on the degradation of political representation.

The findings allow us to distinguish different types of backsliding associated both with governance crises and with structural regime changes, contributing to the contemporary debate on the institutional mechanisms that mediate the relationship between democracy, governance, and political stability.

## Key Words:

Democratic backsliding; electoral democracy; liberal democracy; institutional erosion; illiberal democracy; state capacity; political corruption; executive constraints; horizontal accountability; parliamentary control; institutional checks and balances; comparative politics; V-Dem; QoG; REPDEM.

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<sup>1</sup>Director of Institutional Development at Ethos, Mexico. He has a background in Public Administration from El Colegio de México (COLMEX) and a Master's degree in Public Policy and Administration from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE).

<sup>2</sup>Research Assistant at Ethos, Mexico. Political scientist from Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Xochimilco (UAM-X), with an LL.M. in Public International Law from Universidad de Alcalá.

<sup>3</sup>Ethos Innovación en Políticas Públicas is a Mexico-based think tank focused on producing policy recommendations and concrete public policy actions for development challenges in Mexico.

<sup>4</sup>V-Dem (*Varieties of Democracy*) measures dimensions of democracy in country-year format (Coppedge et al., 2026).

<sup>5</sup>QoG (*Quality of Government*) compiles comparative indicators on government quality, state capacity, corruption, and institutional performance (Teorell et al., 2025).

<sup>6</sup>REPDEM (*Representative Democracy Data Archive*) provides data on cabinets, coalitions, parliamentary strength, and party bargaining power in representative democracies (Hellström et al., 2026).

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## **General Introduction**

Recent democratic backsliding does not usually lead to an immediate collapse into authoritarianism. In many cases, erosion advances gradually: elections remain in place, representative institutions continue to operate, and the constitutional order keeps its formal shape, while rights, checks and balances, and accountability lose effective force. The result is not always the open disappearance of democracy, but the formation of regimes with increasingly illiberal features.

This article examines democratic backsliding as a process of institutional illiberalization. Its central argument is that democratic erosion cannot be explained only by low state capacity, poor government performance, or political corruption. These factors matter, but they are not sufficient. Democratic decline is better understood through the relationship between persistent electoral competition, the loss of liberal guarantees, weaker horizontal control, and the weakening of political representation.

The analysis uses a quantitative-comparative design based on country-year data from V-Dem, QoG, and REPDEM. V-Dem indicators make it possible to compare electoral democracy, liberal democracy, electoral integrity, judicial and legislative constraints on the executive, political corruption, and horizontal accountability. QoG indicators allow the analysis to evaluate the relationship between government effectiveness, control of corruption, and democratic quality. REPDEM data make it possible to examine cabinet seat share, broader legislative support, government type, and party bargaining power.

The article is organized into four analytical sections. The first examines trajectories of illiberalization by comparing electoral democracy, liberal democracy, and institutional constraints. The second evaluates the relationship between state capacity and democratic maintenance. The third analyzes the link between institutional erosion, political corruption, and anti-institutional leadership. The fourth focuses on parliamentary control and on the conditions under which the legislature stops operating as an effective counterweight to the executive.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that democratic backsliding rarely takes the form of a single rupture. More often, it appears as a cumulative process in which electoral continuity coexists with liberal deterioration, weaker institutional controls, and weakened representative mediation. This perspective makes it possible to distinguish between the formal persistence of democracy and the substantive erosion of its institutional conditions.

## Democratic Backsliding and Trajectories of Illiberalization

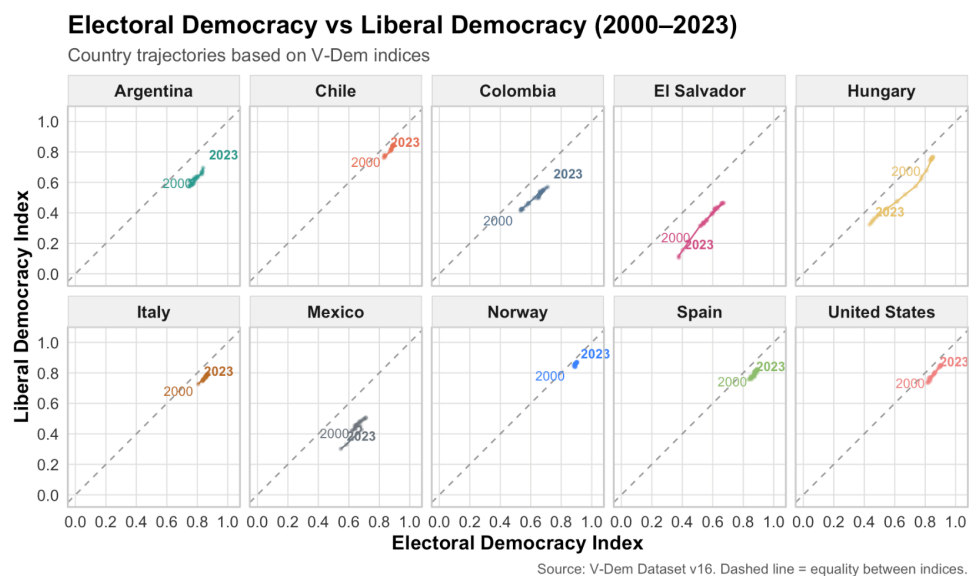
Among the available definitions, Schumpeter's offers a useful starting point for this study. Its value is not to exhaust the meaning of democracy, but to delimit its procedural dimension: an institutional method through which individuals gain decision-making power through competition for the popular vote (Schumpeter, 1942, chap. XXII). This clarity frames the central problem of the chapter: a democracy can preserve electoral competition while losing liberal content.

Przeworski develops this point by understanding democracy as rule-bound competition, uncertainty over outcomes, and the possibility of alternation in power (Przeworski, 1991, chap. 1). From this perspective, democratic deterioration does not necessarily lead to immediate autocratization. The critical point may not be the disappearance of elections, but the formation of regimes that preserve basic democratic procedures while weakening liberties, rights, and constraints on power.

This distinction is central to the literature on backsliding. Bermeo argues that democratic backsliding does not take a single form: it can advance through gradual changes that weaken competition and controls without immediately canceling representative institutions (Bermeo, 2016, pp. 5–19). In this framework, illiberal democracy describes systems where elections, parties, and formal separation of powers remain, but power becomes less constrained and less respectful of fundamental guarantees (Zakaria, 1997, pp. 22–43).

Methodologically, this strategy relies on internal comparisons within the V-Dem series. `v2x_polyarchy` and `v2x_libdem` contrast electoral and liberal democracy, while `v2xel_frefair`, `v2x_jucon`, and `v2xlg_legcon` capture clean elections, judicial constraints, and legislative constraints on the executive (Coppedge et al., 2026, secs. 2.1–2.2). This combination identifies differentiated trajectories of democratic erosion: not only whether democracy declines, but which institutional dimension weakens first.

### 1. Electoral Democracy Index vs Liberal Democracy Index



#### Variables:

Electoral Democracy Index (`v2x_polyarchy`) and Liberal Democracy Index (`v2x_libdem`).

**Analytical object**

This comparison identifies the distance between the electoral and liberal dimensions of democracy. It offers a first approximation to illiberalization.

**Theoretical relevance**

The contrast between both indices evaluates whether electoral competition is preserved more than the regime's liberal guarantees. This distinction is central because backsliding does not always begin with cancelled elections or the disappearance of party pluralism. In many cases, deterioration first appears through reduced rights, weaker limits on power, and erosion of the rule of law.

**Interpretive criterion**

The diagonal marks equivalence between both indices. When a trajectory falls below that line, the liberal index lags behind the electoral index. Electoral competition may persist, but the regime loses capacity to limit power and protect rights.

The pattern of illiberalization appears most clearly in Hungary. Between 2000 and 2023, it moves from high levels to a much lower position in liberal democracy, with a visible decline in electoral democracy. The key point is the sharper loss of the liberal component.

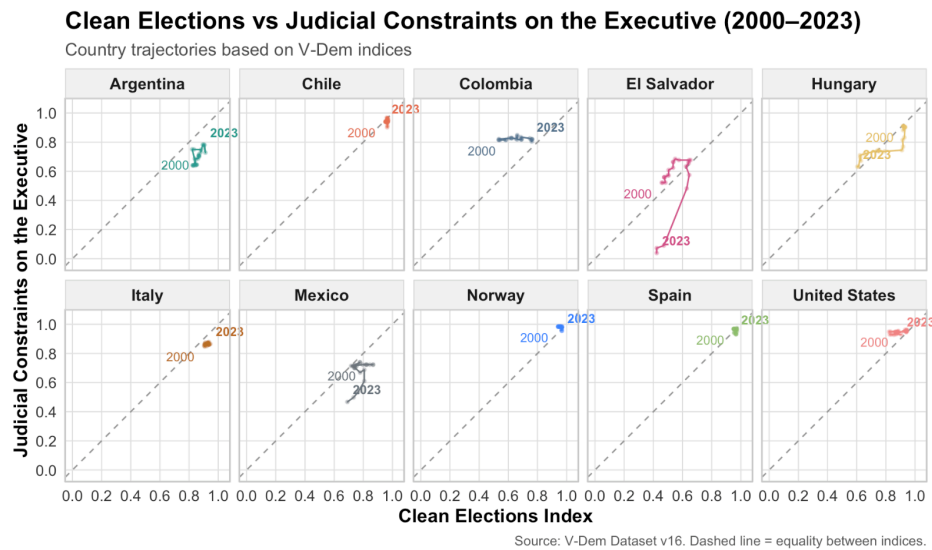
El Salvador presents a more severe trajectory. By 2023, it ends at low levels on both indices and far from the diagonal. Deterioration affects not only the liberal dimension, but also electoral quality. Unlike Hungary, erosion here compromises broader democratic functioning. Mexico remains in an intermediate zone and below the diagonal. It does not decline as abruptly as Hungary or El Salvador, but it shows a persistent gap between electoral and liberal democracy. The case points to ongoing electoral competition with weaker liberal limits. The data's temporal scope does not capture recent institutional changes, such as the abolition of autonomous constitutional bodies and the popular election of judges and magistrates. However, these developments would likely deepen the erosion of democracy's liberal components.

Argentina and Colombia follow a different path. Both improved between 2000 and 2023. Argentina moves toward higher levels on both indices and remains close to the diagonal. Again, the temporal scope of the data does not capture the effects of the electoral shift to the right produced by the most recent presidential election. Colombia also improves, although it remains at medium levels. Their trajectories contrast with the cases of decline.

Chile, Italy, Norway, Spain, and the United States show greater stability. Their trajectories remain at high levels and close to the diagonal. Norway and Spain show the strongest correspondence between electoral and liberal democracy. Chile and Italy maintain high levels with minor variation. The United States also remains high, although below the best-positioned cases, perhaps reflecting polarization and internal divisions over the legitimacy and neutrality of representative institutions.

Overall, the figure distinguishes liberal stability, relative improvement, and democratic erosion. Its main contribution is to show that contemporary deterioration does not require the immediate disappearance of electoral competition. It can first advance as loss of liberal content, with elections still operating but with less capacity to protect rights and contain power.

## 2. Clean Elections Index vs Judicial Constraints on the Executive



### Variables:

Clean Elections Index ( $v2xel\_ffair$ ) and Judicial Constraints on the Executive ( $v2x\_jucon$ ).

### Analytical object

This comparison examines a specific mechanism of backsliding: the loss of judicial capacity to limit the executive, even when elections retain some integrity.

### Theoretical relevance

Its importance lies in moving from a general comparison between democratic dimensions to a concrete mechanism of institutional erosion. Backsliding can develop without immediate electoral collapse: elections continue, but the executive faces fewer judicial constraints. This pattern is characteristic of power concentration from within the regime.

### Interpretive criterion

When judicial constraints fall more sharply than clean elections, deterioration does not first pass through the destruction of the electoral process, but through the weakening of judicial controls.

The central pattern appears most clearly in El Salvador and Mexico. El Salvador offers the most drastic case: the electoral index declines, but the decisive fall occurs in judicial control, which ends at very low levels. Mexico presents a more moderate version: the electoral dimension remains in a medium range, while judicial control declines.

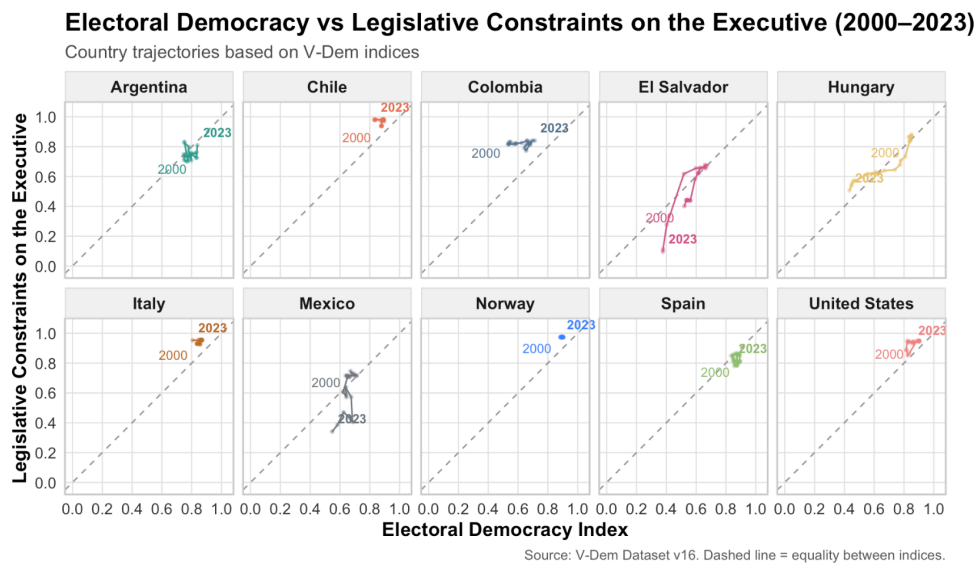
Hungary occupies a related but different position. It retains a relatively high level of clean elections and maintains a gap with judicial constraints. Its trajectory shows tension between electoral integrity and judicial control, not a collapse equivalent to El Salvador's.

Argentina and Chile move in the opposite direction. Both improve in the two dimensions and strengthen judicial control. Italy, Norway, and Spain remain in a zone of high stability, with minor variation or limited improvement near the diagonal. The United States maintains high values and improves in both dimensions.

Colombia occupies a distinct position. Its main change occurs in clean elections, which rise clearly, while judicial constraints remain high and almost stable. The figure therefore distinguishes deterioration, stability, and improvement. Its main contribution is to show that

democratic erosion can advance through loss of judicial capacity before it decisively compromises electoral integrity.

### 3. Electoral Democracy Index vs Legislative Constraints on the Executive



#### Variables:

Electoral Democracy Index ([v2x\\_polyarchy](#)) and Legislative Constraints on the Executive ([v2xlg\\_legcon](#)).

#### Analytical object

This comparison examines the relationship between persistent electoral competition and the deterioration of legislative capacity to act as a counterweight to the executive.

#### Theoretical relevance

The comparison identifies another institutional route of backsliding. A regime may preserve periodic and competitive elections while weakening legislative oversight, reducing congressional autonomy, or limiting control capacity. In these contexts, electoral legitimacy coexists with an effective decline in separation of powers.

#### Interpretive criterion

When electoral democracy remains above legislative constraints on the executive, the representative dimension does not disappear, but the legislature loses strength as a control mechanism. Electoral continuity does not, by itself, imply institutional balance.

The central pattern appears most clearly in El Salvador and Mexico, and less sharply in Hungary. El Salvador offers the strongest case: legislative control drops abruptly and falls well below the electoral component. Mexico presents a similar but less extreme gap: the electoral dimension remains in a medium range, while legislative constraints decline more sharply. Hungary shows an imbalanced relationship, closer to tension between electoral base and legislative control than to severe legislative hollowing-out.

Argentina and Spain occupy an intermediate position. Argentina improves on both indices and ends with a limited gap in favor of electoral democracy. Spain remains high and close to the diagonal, with a more balanced relationship between both dimensions.

Chile, Colombia, Italy, Norway, and the United States follow a different pattern. Legislative constraints remain similar to or higher than electoral democracy. Chile and Italy combine high values with stable or improving trajectories. Norway holds the strongest position. The United States remains high and close to the diagonal. Colombia improves on both indicators and maintains strong legislative control relative to its electoral level.

The figure separates two patterns. In El Salvador and Mexico, with Hungary nearby, the electoral dimension persists more strongly than legislative control. In Chile, Colombia, Italy, Norway, and the United States, the legislature retains control capacity and matches or exceeds electoral democracy. Argentina and Spain remain intermediate. The figure supports the idea that electoral continuity is not enough to secure institutional balance: a regime can preserve elections and lose legislative counterweights.

### **Analytical Articulation of the Three Figures**

Taken together, the three comparisons organize the empirical argument as a pattern of institutional decomposition. The section shows that democratic backsliding should not be understood only as open regime rupture. The observed trajectories point to a gradual process: elections continue, but the executive faces fewer limits. Illiberalization does not immediately eliminate electoral democracy; it first reduces the institutional conditions that give it liberal content. The result is a regime that preserves competitive procedures but loses capacity to contain power and protect rights.

### **State Capacity and the Maintenance of Democracy**

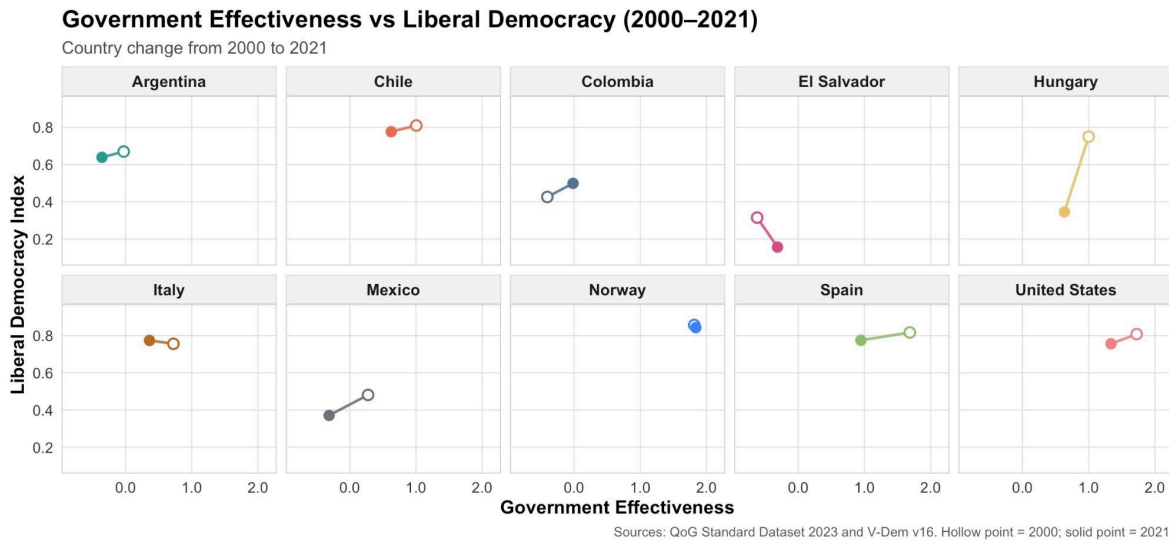
A common argument in comparative literature holds that democratic stability depends, in part, on the state's capacity to respond effectively to public problems. Under this expectation, sustained deterioration in state capacity should translate into democratic weakening, while an effective state should favor its preservation.

The approach of this section is more limited. State capacity does not operate as a direct or sufficient determinant of democratic maintenance. From an institutionalist reading, North helps understand that institutions are not only formal rules or administrative capacities, but arrangements that structure incentives, constraints, and political practices (North, 1990). For this reason, a state can preserve tools of implementation and coordination without necessarily preserving the liberal limits of the regime.

The central question, then, is not whether greater state capacity produces more democracy, but when both dimensions separate. State deterioration does not automatically equal democratic collapse. In the same way, electoral continuity does not depend mechanically on good government performance. Democratic erosion can also occur in contexts where the state preserves reasonable levels of administrative functioning.

Methodologically, the combination of V-Dem and QoG is consistent. V-Dem organizes its information with central country-year identifiers, including `country_name` and `year`. QoG datasets, both in the Standard and OECD versions, define their time series with country-year units of analysis. This compatibility allows longitudinal comparisons between democratic indicators and variables of state performance. In this case, the main figure reaches 2021.

# 1. Government Effectiveness vs Liberal Democracy Index



## Variables:

Liberal Democracy Index (`v2x_libdem`) and Government Effectiveness (WGI/QoG).

## Analytical object and relevance

This comparison evaluates the relationship between the liberal quality of the regime and government effectiveness. It is central to the section because it does not focus on the existence of elections, but on the substantive dimension of liberal democracy. Its purpose is to observe whether democratic degradation necessarily accompanies an equivalent decline in the state's administrative capacity.

## Interpretive criterion

The most relevant evidence appears when a country records a clear decline in liberal democracy without an equivalent contraction in government effectiveness. This pattern indicates that the state can preserve implementation, administration, and coordination capacity without preventing a deterioration of liberties, guarantees, and limits on power.

The central pattern appears in El Salvador. Between 2000 and 2021, it records a sharp decline in liberal democracy, while government effectiveness does not decrease; on the contrary, the trajectory moves to the right on the effectiveness axis. Liberal deterioration, therefore, does not occur through a parallel loss of state capacity.

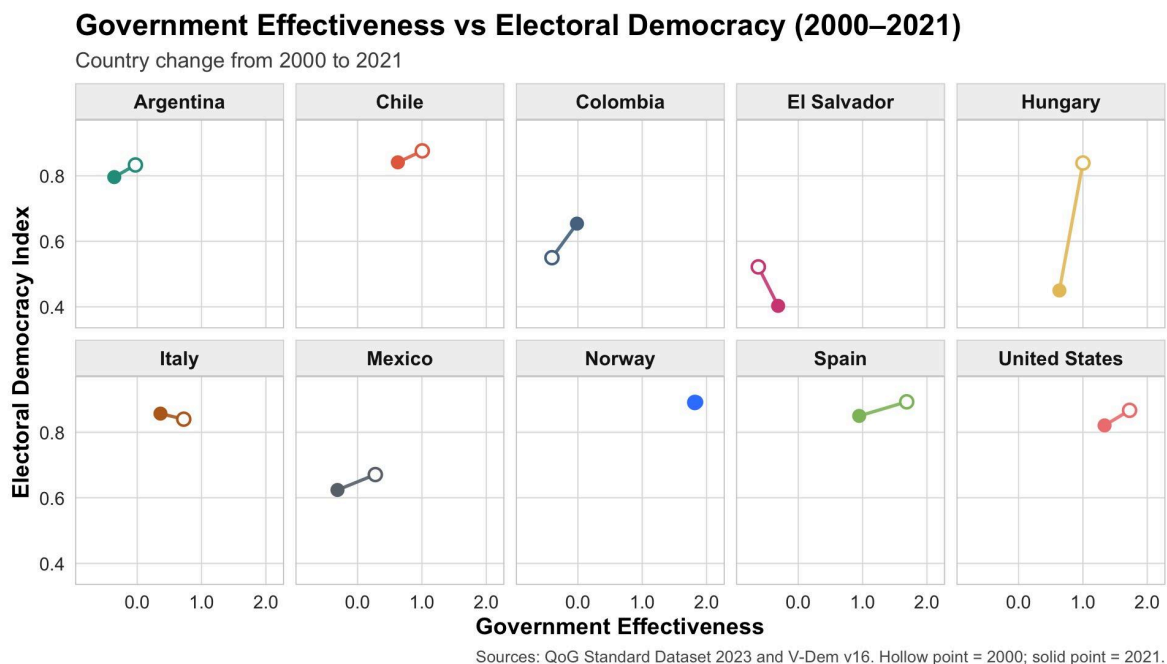
Hungary and Mexico show deterioration in both dimensions, although in different ways. Hungary combines a severe decline in liberal democracy with a visible reduction in government effectiveness; Mexico moves backward on both axes from medium levels. In neither case does the figure allow a simple causal relationship between state capacity and liberal democracy.

Italy and Spain work as inverse contrasts: they lose government effectiveness without a proportional decline in liberal democracy. Argentina, Chile, and the United States show more limited setbacks in both dimensions, while Colombia improves on both indicators and Norway preserves high stability.

Overall, the figure distinguishes four behaviors: central decoupling in El Salvador, combined deterioration in Hungary and Mexico, loss of effectiveness without proportional liberal deterioration in Italy and Spain, and contrasting trajectories in Colombia and Norway. The

conclusion is that government effectiveness does not determine the preservation of liberal democracy in a linear way.

## 2. Government Effectiveness vs Electoral Democracy Index



### Variables:

Electoral Democracy Index ([v2x\\_polyarchy](#)) and Government Effectiveness (WGI/QoG).

### Analytical object and relevance

This comparison examines the relationship between state performance and continuity of the electoral dimension of democracy. While the first figure focuses on the liberal quality of the regime, this second one isolates the electoral dimension. The contrast allows us to evaluate whether the persistence of elections and formal competition depends directly on state performance.

### Interpretive criterion

The figure is useful in two types of cases: when a country loses state effectiveness but preserves a relatively stable electoral dimension, and when it records electoral deterioration without equivalent administrative collapse. Both patterns weaken the idea of a mechanical relationship between state performance and electoral survival.

Italy shows the first pattern most clearly: between 2000 and 2021, it loses government effectiveness, while electoral democracy remains practically stable. Spain, Mexico, Argentina, Chile, and the United States show more moderate variants: they decline on both indicators, but the loss in effectiveness is more visible than the electoral decline. In these cases, the electoral dimension preserves greater relative stability against administrative deterioration.

El Salvador shows the second pattern: it declines in electoral democracy while improving in government effectiveness. This movement indicates that electoral deterioration can advance without administrative collapse. Hungary presents a more severe but less clean version,

because electoral democracy declines sharply and effectiveness also falls, although not in the same proportion.

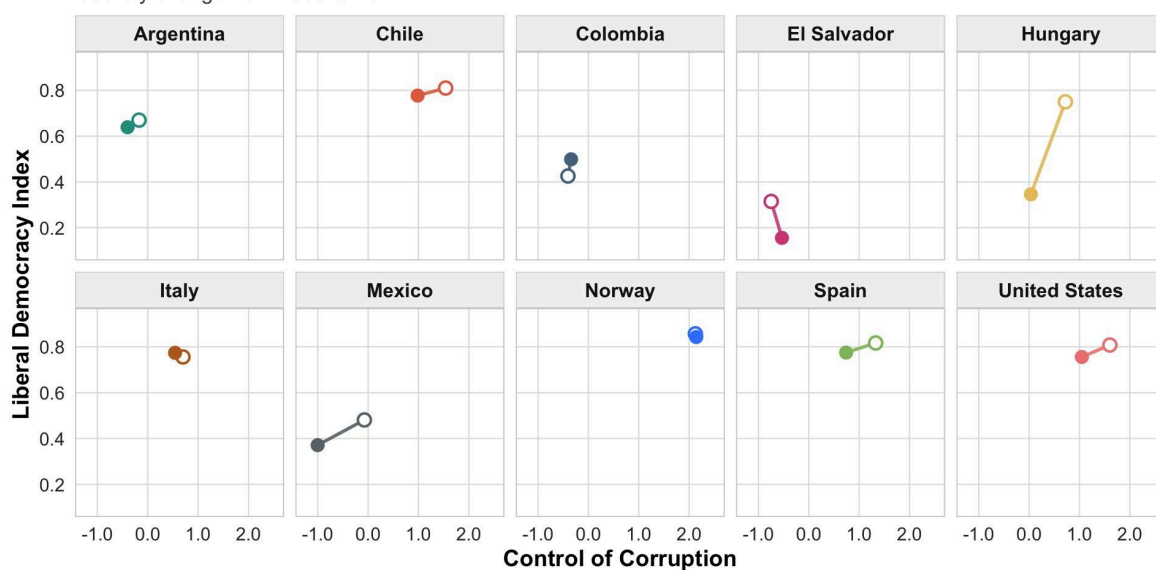
Colombia and Norway work as contrasts. Colombia improves in electoral democracy with almost stable or slightly higher effectiveness. Norway preserves high levels on both indicators, with minimal change.

Overall, the figure shows that government effectiveness does not mechanically determine electoral survival. A country can lose state capacity without destroying its electoral dimension; it can also lose electoral quality without a proportional decline in government effectiveness.

### 3. Control of Corruption vs Liberal Democracy Index

#### Control of Corruption vs Liberal Democracy (2000–2021)

Country change from 2000 to 2021



Sources: QoG Standard Dataset 2023 and V-Dem v16. Hollow point = 2000; solid point = 2021.

#### Variables:

Liberal Democracy Index ([v2x\\_libdem](#)) and Control of Corruption (WGI/QoG).

#### Analytical object and relevance

This comparison examines the relationship between liberal democracy and control of corruption as a specific dimension of government quality. Its value is to extend the argument beyond administrative capacity: it allows us to evaluate whether better relative control of corruption necessarily translates into greater democratic solidity, or whether both dimensions can decouple.

#### Interpretive criterion

The figure gains strength when it shows two trajectories: countries with worsening corruption without immediate democratic collapse, and countries that preserve or improve control of corruption while suffering liberal deterioration. In both cases, control of corruption does not by itself offer a sufficient explanation of democratic maintenance.

Italy shows the first pattern most clearly: its control of corruption worsens, while liberal democracy remains practically stable. Mexico, Argentina, Chile, Spain, and the United States show moderate variants: control of corruption worsens and liberal democracy declines, but

not as immediate collapse. Chile and Spain preserve high levels of liberal democracy; Mexico shows greater deterioration in corruption than in liberal quality.

El Salvador shows the second pattern: it improves in control of corruption but records a sharp decline in liberal democracy. This case is central because it shows that a better relative position in control of corruption does not, by itself, prevent liberal deterioration. Hungary represents combined deterioration: it falls sharply in liberal democracy and also declines in control of corruption.

Colombia and Norway work as contrasts. Colombia improves on both indicators; Norway preserves very high levels and almost full stability.

Overall, the figure distinguishes four relevant behaviors: worsening corruption without liberal collapse in Italy, moderate deterioration in Mexico, Argentina, Chile, Spain, and the United States, liberal deterioration despite improvement in control of corruption in El Salvador, and combined deterioration in Hungary. The conclusion is that control of corruption does not determine the preservation of liberal democracy in a linear way.

### **Analytical Articulation of the Three Figures**

Taken together, the three comparisons organize the argument of this section. The general result is consistent: democratic erosion cannot be read as an automatic effect of state deterioration, nor administrative capacity as a guarantee of democratic preservation. El Salvador offers the clearest case of decoupling, because it combines democratic deterioration with improvement or relative stability in state performance. Italy and Spain show the inverse pattern: setbacks in effectiveness or control of corruption without proportional democratic collapse. Hungary represents combined deterioration, while Colombia and Norway function as contrasts of improvement and high stability.

The substantive conclusion is that democratic backsliding does not depend only on how much capacity the state has, but on how that capacity is linked to institutional limits, rights, and political competition. A state can preserve tools of implementation without preserving the liberal quality of the regime; it can also face administrative deterioration without immediately losing its democratic quality.

### **Institutional Erosion, Political Corruption, and Anti-Institutional Leadership**

The literature on democratic erosion has shown that anti-institutional leadership does not require a sudden regime collapse. Deterioration can advance within formally democratic institutions through the gradual reduction of controls that limit and channel power. From this perspective, the problem is not only electoral continuity, but the way competition can persist while horizontal controls weaken, power concentrates in the executive, and political corruption increases (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Levitsky and Way, 2010).

Olson allows for an institutional reading of corruption: certain political arrangements can favor the protection of benefits, the capture of resources, and resistance to reforms that would affect organized interests (Olson, 1982). This section, however, does not treat corruption as the sole explanation of democratic deterioration, but as a dimension that can accompany the loss of controls and the liberal degradation of the regime.

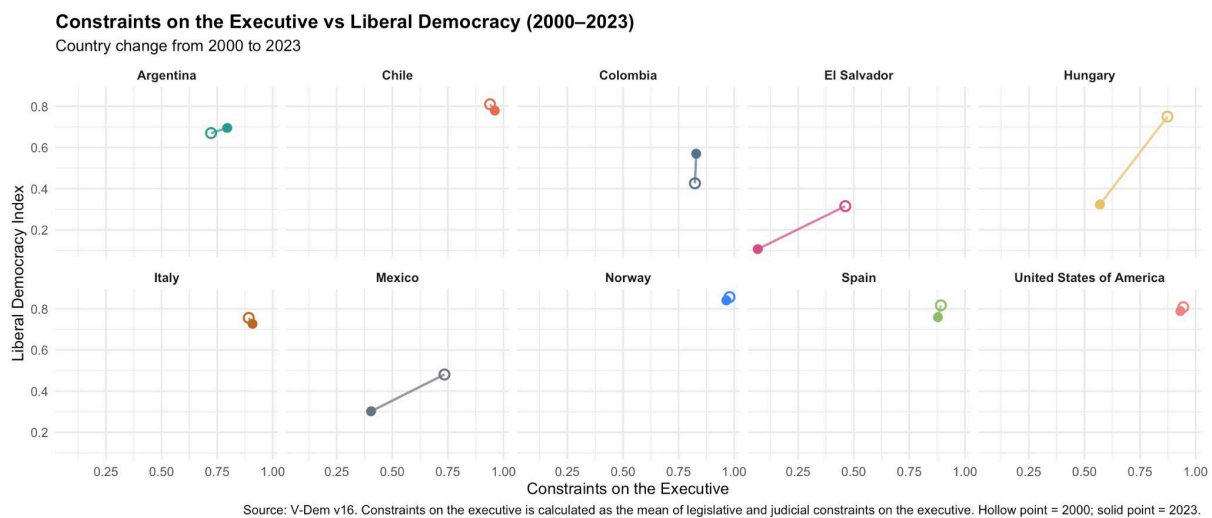
The approach is consistent with V-Dem's conceptual architecture. The dataset distinguishes between electoral democracy and liberal democracy, and organizes observations in

country-year format, with identifiers such as `country_name` and `year`. This allows indicators of electoral competition, executive constraints, political corruption, and liberal democracy to be compared in equivalent units.

Methodologically, the section is read as an institutional sequence: weakening of executive constraints, relative persistence of the electoral dimension, liberal deterioration, and possible expansion of political corruption. All trajectories are presented between 2000 and 2023 to maintain comparability.

The hypothesis is that democratic erosion can advance without immediate electoral collapse, that political corruption can coexist with weaker horizontal accountability, and that anti-institutional leadership emerges within accumulated institutional degradation, not only as the product of an abrupt regime rupture.

## 1. Constraints on the Executive vs Liberal Democracy Index



### Variables:

Constraints on the Executive, built as the average of Legislative Constraints on the Executive (`v2xlg_legcon`) and Judicial Constraints on the Executive (`v2x_jucon`), and Liberal Democracy Index (`v2x_libdem`).

### Analytical object and relevance

This comparison examines the relationship between institutional capacity to contain the executive and the liberal quality of the regime. It is the most precise figure to open the section because it does not focus on electoral persistence, but on the structure of limits to power. It allows us to assess whether the decline in liberal democracy coincides with a loss of institutional containment over the executive.

### Interpretive criterion

The figure gains strength when a trajectory falls both in executive constraints and in liberal democracy. This pattern suggests that democratic erosion is not only expressed as general regime deterioration, but as the weakening of institutional brakes on power. Anti-institutional leadership does not appear as a directly observed variable, but the figure identifies a relevant condition for its advance: the gradual loss of mechanisms of control over the executive.

The central pattern appears in Hungary and El Salvador. In both cases, liberal democracy and executive constraints decline. Hungary starts from high levels and records strong

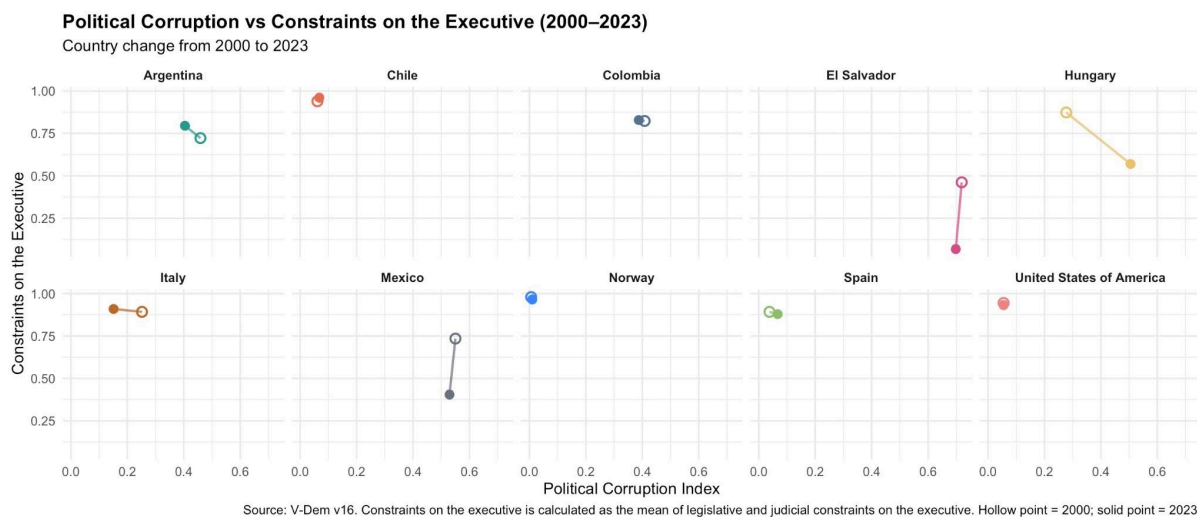
deterioration in both dimensions; El Salvador ends in the most critical zone of the set, with very low levels of control and a marked loss of liberal content.

Mexico occupies a lateral position: liberal democracy declines, while executive constraints change little. It does not strongly support the pattern of joint deterioration, but it shows that liberal quality can weaken without a compensatory improvement in limits to power.

Spain, the United States, Chile, Italy, and Norway maintain high levels, with minor variation. Norway remains the most stable case; Chile preserves very high constraints; Spain and the United States record slight setbacks; Italy remains at high levels. Argentina and Colombia work as contrasts of improvement or favorable stability.

Overall, the figure distinguishes joint deterioration in Hungary and El Salvador, liberal decline without equivalent change in Mexico, high stability in Spain, the United States, Chile, Italy, and Norway, and improvement or favorable stability in Argentina and Colombia. The conclusion rests mainly on Hungary and El Salvador: democratic erosion becomes more visible when liberal decline coincides with the loss of limits on the executive. We consider this one of the strongest findings of our analysis.

## 2. Political Corruption Index vs Constraints on the Executive



### Variables:

Political Corruption Index ([v2x\\_corr](#)) and Constraints on the Executive, built as the average of [v2xlg\\_legcon](#) and [v2x\\_jucon](#).

### Analytical object and relevance

This comparison examines the relationship between political corruption and institutional capacity to contain the executive. The figure completes the institutional core of the argument because it does not treat corruption as an isolated moral problem, but as part of a structure of deterioration. The contrast allows us to assess whether increased corruption coincides with lower containment capacity.

### Interpretive criterion

The figure gains strength when a trajectory shows more political corruption and fewer executive constraints at the same time. This pattern suggests deterioration on two levels: incentives for discretionary use of power increase, and the brakes that could limit it decrease.

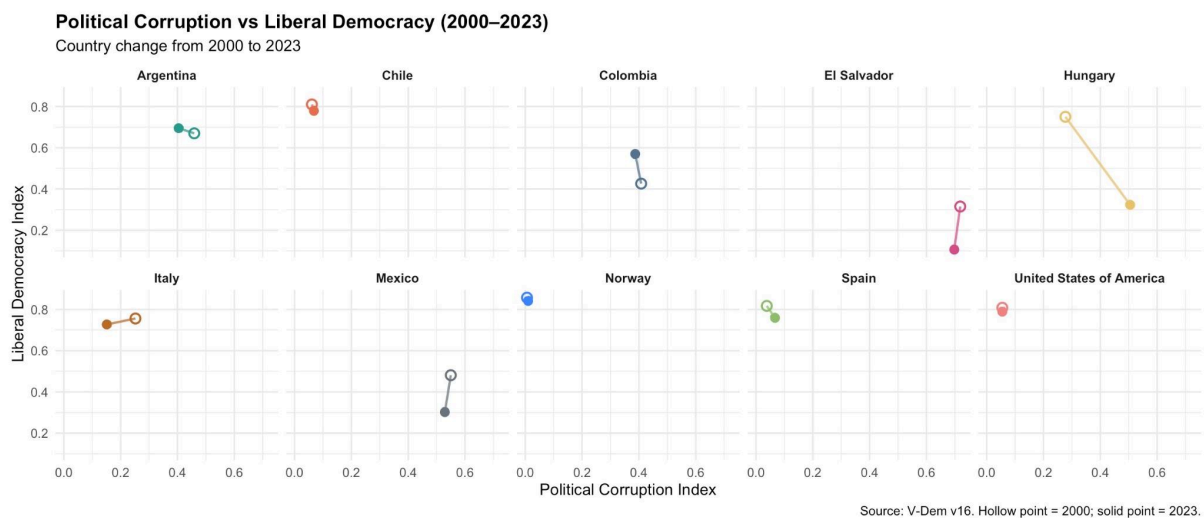
Hungary shows the central pattern. Between 2000 and 2023, it records a visible increase in political corruption and a clear decline in executive constraints. It is the most important case for this figure because both dimensions move in the critical direction: more political corruption and fewer limits on executive power.

El Salvador and Mexico show a different pattern. In both cases, executive constraints fall sharply, but the Political Corruption Index does not increase equivalently. El Salvador presents the most severe decline in constraints and ends at very low levels of control; Mexico also records an important loss, although less critical. These cases prevent the claim that corruption alone explains the loss of controls.

Spain appears as a lateral case, with a slight increase in political corruption and a minor decline in executive constraints, but within high levels of control. Argentina and Italy move in the opposite direction, with lower political corruption and stable or slightly improved constraints. Chile, Colombia, Norway, and the United States remain at high levels of constraints, with minor variation in corruption.

Overall, the figure distinguishes increased corruption with falling controls in Hungary, strong loss of controls without equivalent increase in corruption in El Salvador and Mexico, lateral variation in Spain, and stability or improvement in Argentina, Italy, Chile, Colombia, Norway, and the United States. The conclusion is that political corruption matters, but it does not exhaust the explanation of institutional deterioration. A plausible explanation is that corruption is linked to institutions of oversight and control, but also to other variables, such as transparency, social tolerance toward corrupt behavior, and each country's level of social cohesion and interpersonal trust.

### 3. Political Corruption Index vs Liberal Democracy Index



#### Variables:

Political Corruption Index ( $v2x\_corr$ ) and Liberal Democracy Index ( $v2x\_libdem$ ).

#### Analytical object and relevance

This comparison examines the relationship between political corruption and deterioration in the liberal quality of the regime. It closes the sequence because it moves the analysis from institutional mechanisms to a broader result: the degradation of liberal democracy. It allows

us to observe whether a more corrupt environment coincides with loss of liberties, weakening of the rule of law, and deterioration of checks and balances.

### **Interpretive criterion**

The substantive reading becomes clear when a country moves toward higher levels of political corruption while losing liberal democracy. This movement shows institutional deterioration, without assuming that corruption alone explains democratic decline.

Hungary shows the central pattern: between 2000 and 2023, political corruption increases and liberal democracy falls sharply. Its trajectory moves in the critical direction of the argument: more political corruption and lower liberal quality.

El Salvador and Mexico show a different but relevant pattern. In both cases, liberal democracy declines sharply, while political corruption does not increase equivalently. El Salvador ends at very low levels of liberal democracy, but its movement in corruption is smaller; Mexico also loses liberal quality without a parallel increase in the corruption indicator.

Spain appears as a lateral case, with a slight increase in political corruption and a minor decline in liberal democracy, but with high levels of liberal quality. Argentina, Colombia, and Italy work as contrasts: Argentina improves slightly in liberal democracy and reduces corruption; Colombia improves in liberal democracy with almost stable or slightly lower corruption; Italy reduces corruption and preserves high levels. Chile, Norway, and the United States remain at high levels, with minor variation.

Overall, the figure distinguishes increased corruption with liberal decline in Hungary, liberal decline without equivalent corruption increase in El Salvador and Mexico, lateral variation in Spain, and stability or improvement in Argentina, Colombia, Italy, Chile, Norway, and the United States. The conclusion is that political corruption can accompany liberal erosion, but it does not explain it by itself, it is a multi-causal phenomenon.

### **Analytical Articulation of the Three Figures**

Taken together, the three comparisons organize the argument as a sequence of institutional erosion. The general result points in the same direction: democratic erosion does not require immediate electoral collapse. It can advance through the loss of limits on the executive, the decline of the liberal component relative to the electoral one, and a variable relationship between political corruption and democratic deterioration. Hungary shows the clearest combined deterioration: more political corruption, less institutional control, and liberal decline. El Salvador and Mexico show another pattern: loss of liberal democracy or executive constraints without an equivalent increase in the corruption indicator.

The contribution of the section is to show that democratic deterioration operates through institutional decouplings. Elections can persist while liberal democracy loses density. Limits on the executive can weaken without all corruption indicators moving in the same direction. Under this logic, anti-institutional leadership should not be read as an isolated event, but as the result of a more vulnerable environment: less institutional containment, lower liberal density, and, in some cases, higher political corruption.

## **Parliamentary Capacity to Activate Control**

Democratic erosion does not depend only on the expansion of executive power or on the social support a government retains. It also depends on whether bodies with formal control capacity effectively activate available checks. At this point, parliament plays a central role as a space of oversight, investigation, and accountability before the executive.

From an institutionalist reading, this activation does not depend only on formal rules. As noted earlier, North helps show that institutions also operate through incentives, practices, and informal constraints that condition actors' behavior (North, 1990). Coase helps specify the point: activating parliamentary control involves costs of coordination and political negotiation (Coase, 1937; Coase, 1960). For this reason, the formal existence of parliament does not guarantee its effectiveness as a counterweight.

Control capacity also depends on the parliamentary structure that supports the government: coalition size, cabinet legislative strength, formal support from external parties, and bargaining power of the dominant party. When that structure favors subordination, coalition discipline, or partisan calculation, parliament can preserve its institutional form and lose effective oversight capacity.

From this perspective, the deterioration of liberal democracy can be read, in part, as a failure to activate parliamentary control. The problem is not only whether a legislature exists, but whether the parliamentary configuration allows it to act as a real limit on the executive.

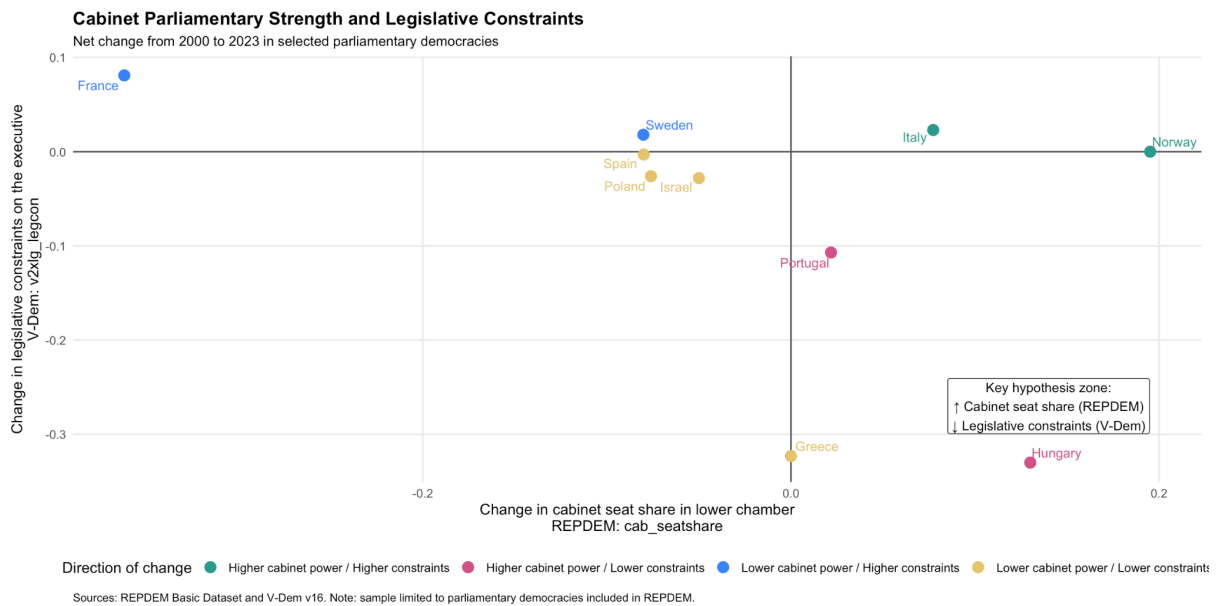
### **Methodological Note and Case Selection**

In contrast to the previous graphs, this analysis is limited to parliamentary democracies, because the mechanism evaluated can only be observed directly in systems where the executive depends on legislative majorities. The interest is not the formal existence of parliament, but its effective capacity to activate controls within a parliamentary government structure.

The case selection introduces variation in democratic trajectories and parliamentary configurations. Hungary, Poland, and Israel appear as cases of erosion or institutional tension. Italy, Spain, Greece, and Portugal function as intermediate or unstable cases. Norway and Sweden operate as references of greater democratic stability. France serves as an institutional contrast, although it does not belong to the same type of pure parliamentary regime as the rest of the cases.

From this approach, the following figures examine the association between parliamentary concentration of government, weakening of legislative counterweights, reduction of horizontal accountability, and failure to activate control. The goal is not to prove an automatic relationship between parliamentary majority and democratic erosion, but to identify when the legislative structure of government can turn parliament into support for the executive rather than an effective counterweight.

# 1. Cabinet Seat Share vs Legislative Constraints on the Executive



## Variables:

$X = \text{cab\_seatshare}$  (REPDEM)

$Y = \text{v2xlg\_legcon}$  (V-Dem)

## Analytical object and relevance

This comparison examines the relationship between the cabinet’s legislative strength and the legislature’s capacity to restrict the executive. It is the most direct comparison for testing the central parliamentary mechanism: it does not work with “elites” in the abstract, but with the cabinet’s concrete legislative strength. It does not prove causality by itself, but it allows us to assess whether the parliamentary strengthening of the government coexists with the internal neutralization of control.

## Interpretive criterion

If  $\text{cab\_seatshare}$  increases while  $\text{v2xlg\_legcon}$  falls, the case is compatible with the hypothesis of weakened legislative control from within the parliamentary majority. If both variables increase, parliamentary support does not by itself imply a reduction of counterweights.

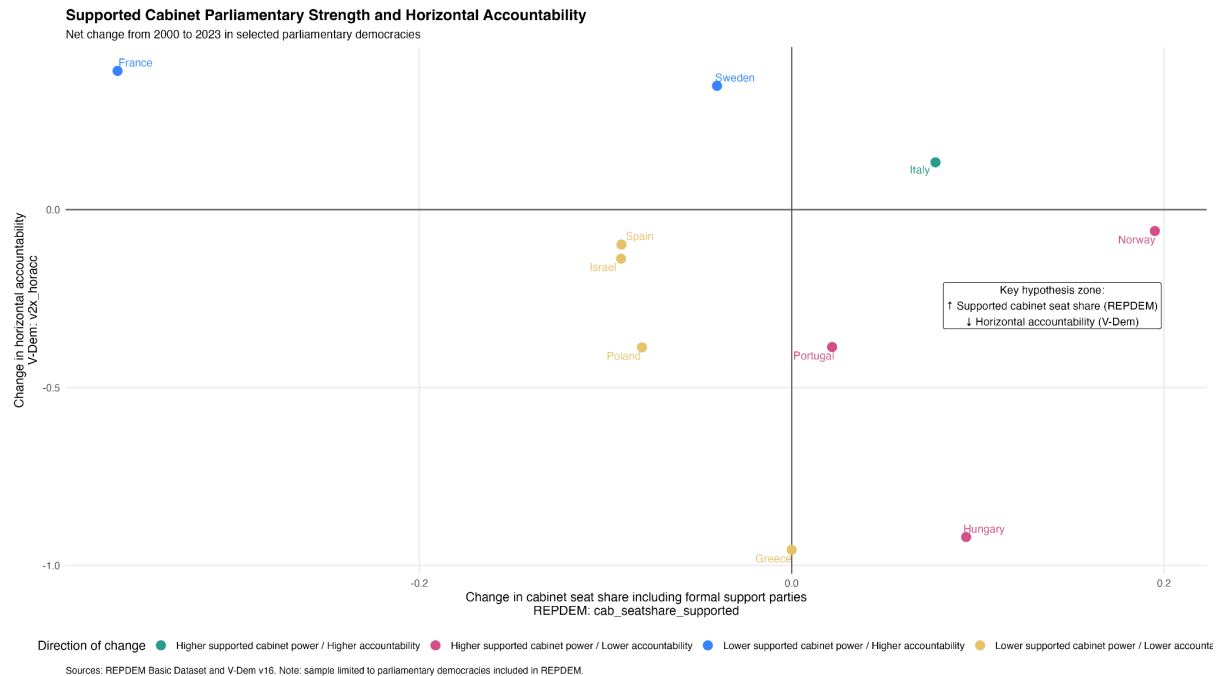
The compatible pattern appears most clearly in Hungary and, more moderately, in Portugal. Hungary records an increase in the cabinet’s parliamentary strength and a sharp decline in legislative constraints on the executive. Portugal follows the same direction, although with less intensity. Both cases make the mechanism plausible, without proving causality.

Greece occupies a critical lateral position: it records strong deterioration in legislative constraints, but without a clear increase in the cabinet’s parliamentary strength. Poland and Israel also do not support the expected mechanism, because both  $\text{cab\_seatshare}$  and  $\text{v2xlg\_legcon}$  fall. Spain shows minimal variation.

France, Sweden, Italy, and Norway work as contrasts. France and Sweden combine lower cabinet parliamentary strength with higher legislative constraints. Italy and Norway show increased parliamentary strength without a fall in legislative control. Overall, the figure provides evidence compatible with the mechanism only in some cases, especially Hungary and Portugal. It is reasonable to expect that political competition, expressed through greater

pluralism, would lead to a more meticulous exercise of institutional checks on the executive. By contrast, when parliamentary majorities support the executive, the observance of those checks tends to relax.

## 2. Cabinet Seat Share Supported vs Horizontal Accountability



### Variables:

$X = \text{cab\_seatshare\_supported}$  (REPDEM)

$Y = \text{v2x\_horacc}$  (V-Dem)

### Analytical object and relevance

This comparison examines whether the government's expanded parliamentary support, including external parties with formal support, coincides with changes in horizontal accountability. Its value lies in extending the mechanism from the strictly legislative level to the broader control system. What matters is not only the cabinet's strength, but also the network of formal support that can shield it from oversight and accountability mechanisms.

### Interpretive criterion

If  $\text{cab\_seatshare\_supported}$  increases while  $\text{v2x\_horacc}$  falls, deterioration is not limited to parliament and reaches the broader system of horizontal accountability. If expanded support grows and accountability also improves, there is no evidence of systemic institutional hollowing-out.

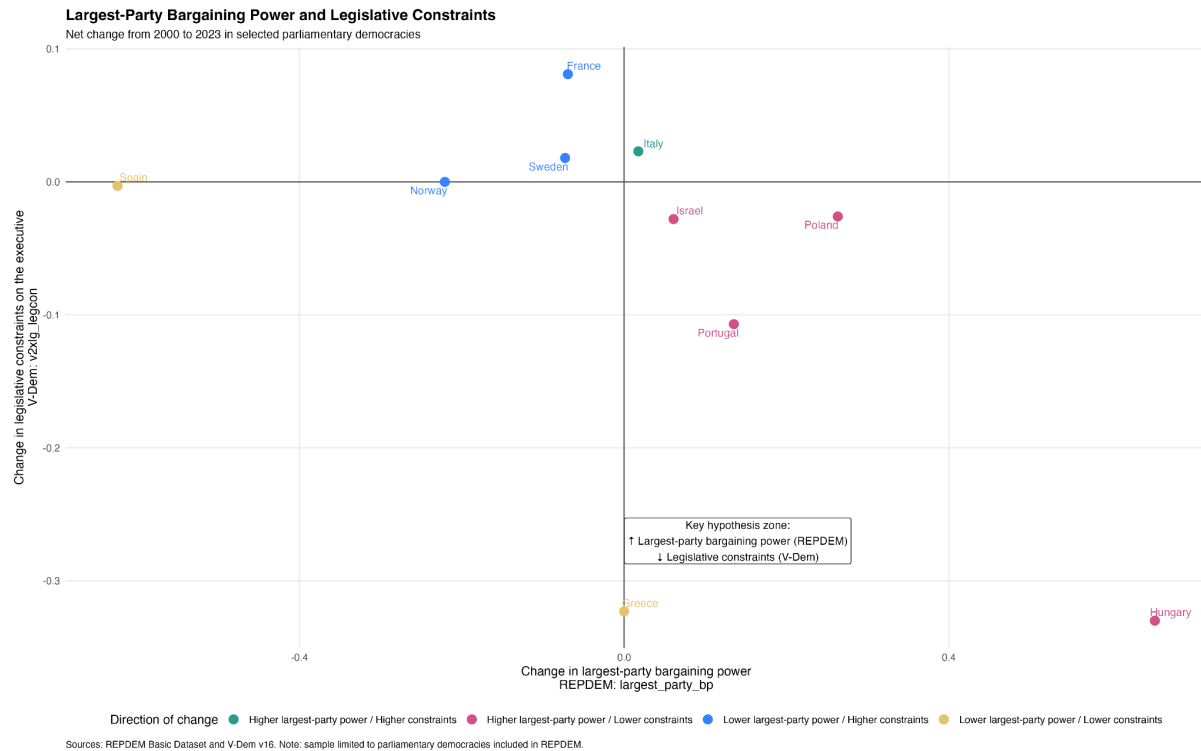
The compatible pattern appears most clearly in Hungary and, more moderately, in Portugal. Hungary records increased expanded parliamentary support and a very sharp decline in horizontal accountability. Portugal follows the same direction, although with less intensity. Norway enters the expected zone, but with a minimal decline in accountability, so it does not constitute strong evidence.

Greece shows severe horizontal deterioration without a clear increase in expanded parliamentary support. Poland, Israel, and Spain record a fall in both expanded support and horizontal accountability, so they also do not support the expected mechanism. France,

Sweden, and Italy function as contrasts: France and Sweden combine lower parliamentary support with higher horizontal accountability, while Italy increases expanded support along with improved accountability.

Overall, the figure provides evidence compatible with the mechanism only in some cases. Hungary supports the hypothesis most strongly; Portugal does so with less intensity. The remaining cases show that the relationship between expanded parliamentary support and horizontal accountability is not mechanical.

### 3. Largest Party Bargaining Power vs Legislative Constraints on the Executive



#### Variables:

X = largest\_party\_bp (REPDEM)

Y = v2xlg\_legcon (V-Dem)

#### Analytical object and relevance

This comparison examines the relationship between the strategic power of the largest party in parliament and the legislature’s capacity to restrict the executive. Its value lies in refining the mechanism of parliamentary concentration: it does not focus on the cabinet’s aggregate size, but on the bargaining power of the dominant party actor.

#### Interpretive criterion

If largest\_party\_bp increases while v2xlg\_legcon falls, the case is compatible with the hypothesis of parliamentary concentration and weakened legislative control. If bargaining power grows, but constraints remain stable or increase, partisan concentration does not by itself imply institutional hollowing-out.

The compatible pattern appears most clearly in Hungary and Portugal. Hungary records the strongest case: the bargaining power of the largest party increases markedly and legislative constraints fall sharply. Portugal follows the same direction, although with less intensity.

Poland and Israel offer secondary evidence: `largest_party_bp` increases and `v2xlg_legcon` falls, but the decline in constraints is limited.

Greece occupies a critical lateral position: it records a sharp fall in legislative constraints, but the bargaining power of the largest party remains almost stable. Spain and Norway do not support the mechanism, because the power of the largest party decreases without a substantial loss of legislative constraints. France, Sweden, and Italy function as contrasts: France and Sweden combine lower power of the largest party with higher constraints, while Italy increases partisan power and also legislative constraints.

Overall, the figure shows that the bargaining power of the largest party can coincide with lower legislative control, but does not explain it by itself. Hungary supports the hypothesis most strongly; Portugal follows; Poland and Israel provide secondary evidence; the remaining cases require the relationship to be qualified.

### **Analytical Articulation of the Comparisons**

Taken together, these comparisons organize the argument as a parliamentary pattern of institutional deterioration. The evidence does not support an automatic relationship between parliamentary majority and democratic erosion. The pattern appears most clearly in Hungary and, more limitedly, in Portugal: greater parliamentary strength of the government or greater strategic power of the largest party coincides with reduced legislative or horizontal controls. Italy and Norway show that increased parliamentary support does not necessarily imply falling constraints. France and Sweden point in the opposite direction. Greece requires qualification, because it records strong deterioration in controls without a clear increase in parliamentary support.

The contribution of the section is to shift the analysis from the formal existence of parliament to its real capacity for activation. The question is not only whether there is a legislature, but whether the parliamentary configuration allows it to act as a counterweight. The evidence supports this reading in some cases and qualifies it in others: not every increase in parliamentary strength produces deterioration, but the critical trajectories show that democratic weakening can pass through the conversion of parliament into support for the executive rather than through its formal elimination.

### **General Conclusion**

From an institutionalist perspective, the results should not be read as mechanical relationships between variables, but as trajectories shaped by specific institutional arrangements. Cross-country comparison remains useful, but it cannot assume that elections, parliaments, courts, state capacity, or corruption have the same effects in every context. North helps explain why formally similar rules can lead to different outcomes: institutions work not only through written rules, but also through expectations and informal constraints.

This reading clarifies the scope of the findings. Schumpeter and Przeworski offer a procedural starting point for understanding democracy as electoral competition. Yet the comparisons show that this dimension does not exhaust the democratic quality of a regime. A democracy can preserve elections and lose liberal density when judicial or legislative controls weaken. The analysis does not contradict an electoral definition of democracy; it shows its

limits for the study of backsliding. The issue is not only that elections exist, but that they can coexist with institutions increasingly unable to limit the power they produce.

State capacity also does not operate as a democratic guarantee. Olson helps show that institutional erosion does not always come from administrative weakness or state collapse. It can also emerge from arrangements in which organized actors protect benefits or capture public capacities. Under this logic, a state can preserve tools of implementation without preserving liberal limits. An effective state is not necessarily a democratic state; it can also be effective at concentrating power.

Coase adds a complementary dimension: institutions structure the costs of political coordination. Activating parliamentary or judicial control does not depend only on the existence of formal bodies. It depends on the incentives actors face and on the costs of confronting the executive. This connects with the parliamentary section: parliament can exist formally and still lose control capacity when the legislative structure reduces incentives to oversee the government. The key question is not whether parliament is present, but whether it still has political reasons to inconvenience the executive.

From this perspective, Levitsky helps locate backsliding as a form of deterioration from within the regime. The problem is not only the open cancellation of democracy, but the gradual transformation of active institutions into mechanisms less capable of limiting power. This reading fits the evidence presented: elections can persist, state capacity can remain, corruption can vary non-linearly, and parliament can preserve its institutional form. Deterioration appears when these dimensions stop sustaining effective limits on the executive. The evidence also calls for caution toward the most superficial institutionalist comfort: the fact that a democracy preserves elections, parliaments, or courts means little if those institutions survive more as constitutional scenery than as real limits on power.

The general conclusion is not that each democracy is incomparable. It is that comparison must pay attention to the institutional conditions under which rules operate. Democratic backsliding does not take a single form. It can move through judicial weakening, executive concentration, parliamentary capture, electoral persistence with liberal decline, or state capacity without democratic containment. The relevant common point is the progressive loss of effective limits on power.

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