

## **Electoral dynamics during democratic backsliding: parties, voters and changing lines of conflict**

Across a significant number of democracies in the developing world as well as in the West, we have seen democratically elected incumbents using their electoral legitimacy to centralize power and weaken democratic constraints. How, and under what conditions incumbents can take down democratic institutions remains a puzzle despite an increasing amount of scholarship on the subject. We know that sustaining strong electoral support for several electoral cycles is essential for incumbents' ability to subvert democratic institutions by "aggrandizing", i.e. gradually extending their powers through institutional processes and plebiscites or by breaking informal norms of restraint. However, we do not fully understand why some incumbents who attack democratic institutions are able to sustain support from voters for long periods of time despite their increasingly visible violations of democratic principles.

Existing explanations have emphasized how polarization, perceptions of the democratic legitimacy of the incumbent, and economic growth or redistribution help incumbents retain electoral support. However, most studies rely on static and partial models of political behavior that do not account for the dynamic interaction between incumbent and opposition parties, or between voters and parties, over multiple electoral cycles. This is an important shortcoming, because most incumbents whose power-grabs have caused serious damage to democratic institutions have accumulated power gradually, over several electoral cycles. Furthermore, despite the fact that protests and mobilization against executive aggrandizement often happen around issues such as women's or minorities' rights, we currently do not have a framework to understand how the *substance* of politics – the specific policies, rights and issues that dominate political contention and electoral competition – changes over time and shapes the possibilities for electoral opposition against incumbents.

The proposed research aims to develop a dynamic model of how new political conflicts and identities emerge in the process of executive aggrandizement and democratic backsliding. Such a model will help us identify the conditions under which opportunities for challenging the incumbent in the electoral arena emerge. Because elections are a repeated kind of interaction and not a one-shot game (even in the context of executive aggrandizement) taking the content of electoral competition seriously requires analyzing *interactions* between government policies and performance, opposition actors' electoral strategies, and voters' attitudes, policy preferences and partisan attachments. To observe such interactions, the project proposes longitudinal analysis of voter attitudes and identities as well as parties' policy positions and electoral strategies over time.

The proposed research will focus on the cases of Poland under the United Right government and Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Justice and Development Party. Both countries have dynamic multi-party systems, and despite experiencing high polarization, have seen political conflicts and divisions transform over time. The research conducted in Poland will involve re-analyzing existing survey data from 2010 to the present in order to expose changes in voters' attitudes and policy preferences. In parallel, we will collect data, on the basis of selected campaign speeches, on major parties' policy positions as well as the changing salience of different policy issues in parties' messaging over this period. These data will allow us to estimate the spatial distribution over time of policy positions for both voters and parties. To better understand the observed changes, we will interview regional party leaders in three regions in Poland about how their parties' electoral strategies take shape. The case of Turkey, in turn, provides the opportunity to observe attitudinal and behavioral changes among voters under increasingly authoritarian conditions. There, we will conduct a nationally representative survey in 2026, where we will re-interview participants first interviewed in a survey planned for Spring 2023 (i.e. a panel wave). Thanks to its focus on both voters and parties, its mixed-method approach, and the analysis of within-country changes over time, the project will contribute to the literature on democratic backsliding through novel methodological and theoretical perspectives incorporating the substantive content of political conflicts, as well as new data on party positions in Poland and voter attitudes in Turkey.